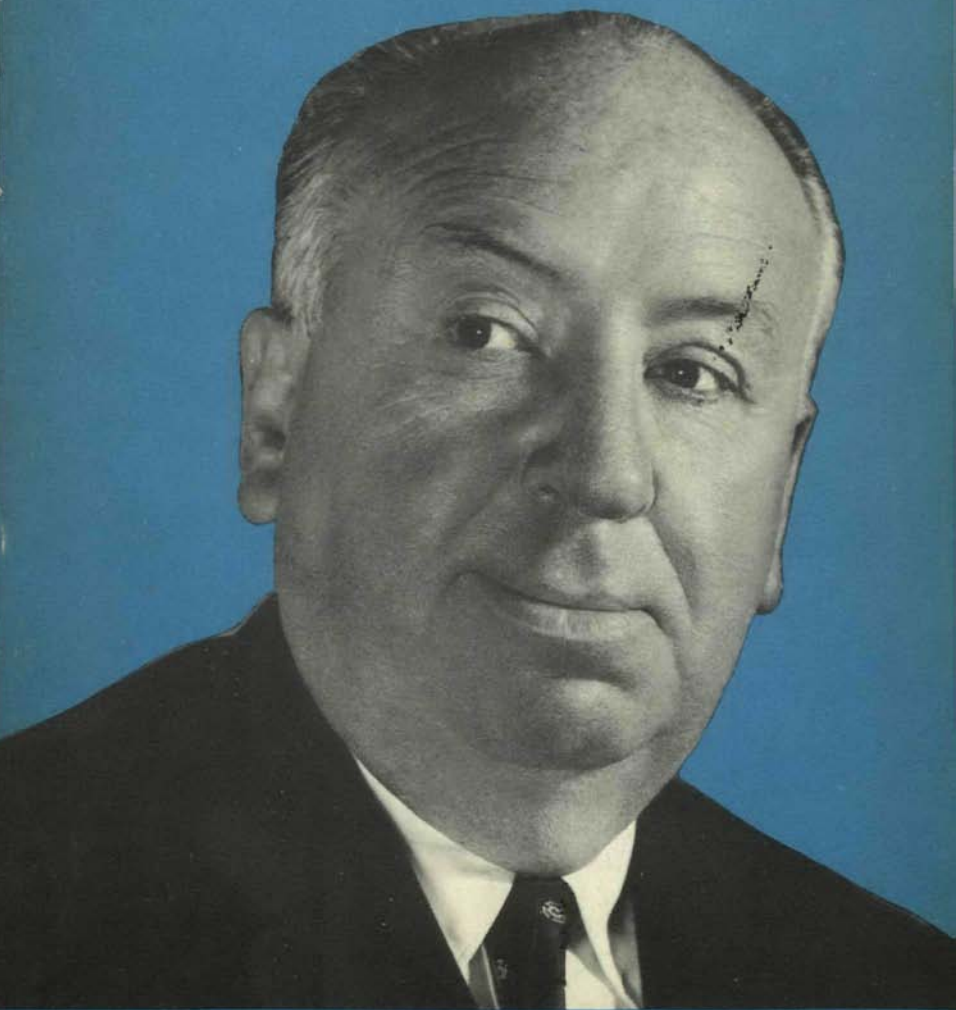


ALFRED

DECEMBER 50¢ K

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



December 1969



Dear Reader:

While not wishing to do mischief to the great tradition of turkey and cranberry sauce, I herewith serve a banquet of holiday dishes and treats and trimmings fit for a king or queen—you.

The contents are an artful blend of new mystery and suspense and related singular offerings by literary chefs de cuisine, many of them your favorites. All cook up plots to please, and I trust you will send your compliments, as have I, to their bizarre kitchens.

Despite the number of courses, all of this sumptuousness comes packaged in just over four ounces of paper and ink, but as I have indicated it does go a long way. Simply add eyes, read and enjoy.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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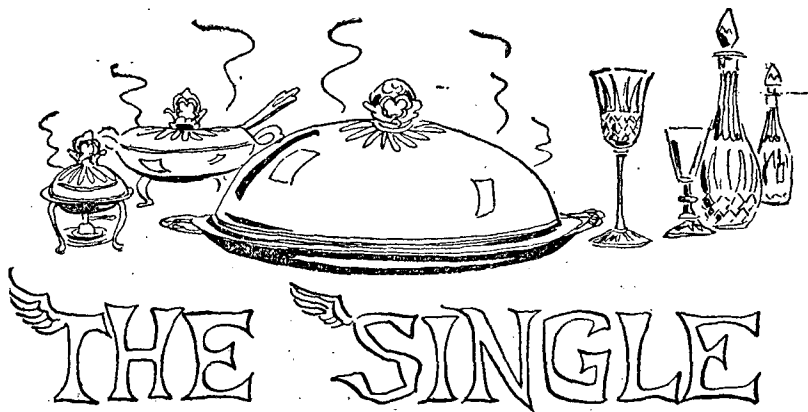
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A man of demanding tastes may risk finding them all-consuming.



THE NAME of my place is La Maison d'être. Mr. Seagrave first patronized us only five months ago. It was, I well recall, a rainy Tuesday evening. He was accompanied on that occasion by the blonde young lady named Bessie Schacter. Also present, invariably as it developed, was the dusky little man called Darius.

I'm unable to regard Darius as either a general factotum or a body servant and yet he was a bit of both and then something else. It was Darius who phoned to make the reservations. The diphthong *th*

and the letter *s* came off his tongue as a *z* sound and this is how I knew in the evening that he had been the man on the phone that afternoon.

He began by saying, "I zpeak for Mizder Zeagrave—Mizder Nicholaz Zeagrave. Yez?"

The name was totally unknown to me, but I made the good restaurateur's response. "We're delighted to hear from him again."

"Again? I zink you miztaken. Mizder Zeagrave never zeen you houze before."

"I'm most sorry. I was sure he

had visited us in the past," I said.

"Not zo. But he vizit you to-night maybe. But he very fuzzy man."

For a moment I visualized a man adorned with a riot of hair and then realized the word was 'fussy'. Well, Tuesday is never a good day for restaurants in this city and the rain had already begun. A fussy customer was better than none. "How may I accommodate Mister Seagrave?"

"You got zmall private dining room?"

"Yes, it seats ten quite comfort-

finement to such plebeian fare. An artist with few equals, he often yearns to show off the depth and breadth of his talent. Blanquette of young rabbit would be the merest soupçon from the reservoir. "No trouble there," I said. "Rabbit for three."

"Not for zree. For two."

"I understood you to say there'd be three in the party."

"Zat is right. But two only will eat. Now next, a zchrimp or lobzder zoup can you make zick?"

Zick, that baffled me. "Repeat that, please."

WING EPICURE

by Frank Sisk

ably," I hastened to convince him.

"Tonight it zits zree."

"Will you repeat that, please?"

"Zree. One, two, zree."

"That can be arranged. What time shall we set it up for?"

"Not yet. I muzt azk more queztionz."

"Of course."

"Can you prepare a blanquette of young rabbit?"

Many people consider us strictly a steak and chop house. We serve these items superbly, if I do say so myself, but our chef François suffers spells of frustration from con-

"Zick like gravy. You make it?"

"A velouté? But of course. Either shrimp or lobster. They are standards with us."

"And zoze zmall éclairz, can you fill zem wiz zweet creamz, all different flavor?"

"Profiteroles, yes. What flavors would Mister Seagrave like?"

"Vanilla, chocolate, maple, almond, cherry, banana, peach. Zoze okay."

Seagrave was beginning to take shape in my mind as a man of flamboyant tastes, but I knew he was going to make François happy.

"Now next, za winez."

"Our cellar is one of the finest."

"I name zem, you zay if you ain't got zem."

"As you wish."

"Champagne Pol Roger, 1959."

"Yes."

"Red Bordeaux Château Lafite, 1955."

"Yes."

"Red Burgundy Pommard, 1959."

"Yes."

"White Bordeaux Château d'Yquem, 1957." His French pronunciation was superior to his English.

"Yes."

"White Burgundy Montrachet, 1959."

"Yes."

"Rhône Ermitage, 1947."

"There you have me. It was the last truly excellent year. I don't believe you'd find more than a few dozen bottles in the entire United States. And those privately owned."

"Zo?"

"The 1960 Ermitage is very good and available here."

"Okay. Zeven-zirty tonight we be zere."

"I'll await you with every inter-

est." And I meant it. No matter how bizarre were Seagrave's tastes in food, his knowledge of wines was exceptionally high.

The trio arrived at precisely 7:30. Without any exaggeration, I think I may say they were the strangest trio ever to enter La Maison d'être in its twenty years of operation.

They were all wearing raincoats. The small dark man I came to know as Darius was in the forefront. The bright orange slicker reached to his ankles. Immediately behind him stood a stocky man of medium height who bore himself like a hard-tempered ramrod. He wore an expensive-looking silken raincoat draped over his shoulders. His blunt head was protected, if that is the word, by a dove-colored beret which emphasized the crimson suffusion of his face. The whites of his protruding green eyes were flecked with dots of blood. This was, of course, Mr. Nicholas Seagrave. Beside him was a thin girl with a deep pallor suggestive of anemia. She was perhaps 22. Her expression was one of bovine blankness. She was chewing something methodically—gum, I soon learned—but it could have been cud.

Oscar, our maitre d', met them at the cloak room and assisted in the divestment of rainwear. Darius was dressed in a tuxedo. Seagrave

wore a tweed sport coat and gray flannel slacks. The girl's spindle-like figure was somewhat concealed in a sleeveless pink mini-dress.

From an alcove I watched Oscar escort them to their private dining room, then I presented myself. Though I'm American as barbecue, my last name is French and right off Seagrave insisted on calling me Monsieur.

"I thirst, Monsieur," he said. "Two bottles of chilled Pol Roger immediately."

I noticed now for the first time that his left arm was missing. The empty sleeve was secured inside the coat pocket by a black safety pin.

Snapping my fingers, I summoned Bob, our best waiter, whom I addressed as Robert, Francophil-ing the pronunciation, and instructed him to fetch the champagne. To Seagrave I said, "It's my hope you may find our house to your liking, sir."

"If I do I shall return often. Count on it. Bessie," he turned his bloodshot eyes on the masticating female, "you are about to have your first taste of something other than rum cola and pepper pizza. So kindly dispose of that gum. Monsieur, this is Miss Schacter, a recently acquired protégée."

Miss Schacter acknowledged the

introduction, along with Seagrave's order, by dropping her wad of gum in an ash tray. Ugh.

"Darius, my shoulders, please."

The dusky man, standing ready behind Seagrave's chair, began expertly to massage neck and shoulder muscles.

"Tell me, Monsieur," Seagrave purred, eyes partly shut, "how does your chef manage a blanquette of young rabbit?"

"My observations, though frequent, are generally casual. He cuts the rabbit into uniform pieces and soaks it in cold water for perhaps forty minutes. Next he blanches the pieces in brown butter, and then again soaks them in cold water—"

"The proper preliminaries I am acquainted with. The sauce is what interests me."

"I'm not privy to certain of the chef's secrets."

Seagrave didn't answer. He closed his eyes entirely. Darius, massaging, was the one who finally spoke. "What goez into zauce, zat is what he wish to know, Monsieur."

"Well, let's see. I know this much. He prepares a liaison of egg yolks, heavy cream, grated lemon peel and a pinch of nutmeg. This he keeps hot in a white stock—"

Seagrave's eyes opened a slit. "Nutmeg? Are you sure?"



"Quite so. His individual touch."

"Ah, that may make the difference, Darius."

"It could."

"A bit lower down, my boy. Favor that left shoulder if you will. Well, Bessie, even your innocent palate may discover a new subtlety in rabbit tonight."

"Rabbit?" Miss Schacter said, surprised.

Later, curiosity prompted me to check the parking lot. Only eight cars stood there in the cold drizzle. One was a Rolls. It figured.

Starting with shrimp velouté and ending with cognac, the Seagrave repast lasted well over three hours. Of course Darius was the one who didn't eat. He cut certain foods, when required, into portions his one-armed master could handle. He poured the wine, which was almost a full-time job. He buttered rolls. He lit the after-dinner cigar. He even paid the check and dispensed generous tips from a large wallet handed to him by Seagrave.

It was, by the way, the largest check we rang up that evening and among the largest ever incurred in our place by a pair of diners alone.

Bob brought word to my office around 11 o'clock that the 'single-winger,' as he and eventually all the help called Seagrave, was pre-

paring to depart but first wanted a word with me. Hastening to the small dining room, I found my epicurean guest none the worse for all he had eaten and drunk. His face no redder than earlier, his eyes no more bloodshot or protrusive, he was smiling now and that was the only difference.

"Was the dinner to your satisfaction, sir?" I asked.

"Very much so, Monsieur." A cloud of cigar smoke rose slowly from his mouth and temporarily veiled his face. "Is this room available again tomorrow, same time?"

I was certain it was but I said I was not certain until I could check my records.

"Then check your records immediately."

I walked quickly to my office. A private dining room for ten is not much used. Most people dine in pairs or in groups no larger than six. When groups do get larger, they tend to number twenty-five or more and these we accommodate in our banquet room downstairs. Hence, this little room ninety percent of the time was a waste of space. After a minute I returned to Seagrave, whose bald scalp was being vigorously manipulated by Darius, and said we could take care of him the following evening.

"Good," he said. "That will do, Darius."

"Real bunny rabbit," Miss Schacter said, slurring the words. "Can't believe we been eating little old bunny rabbit tonight. Poor little bunnies."

"With a good quantity of vintage wine," Seagrave said to me as if in mild apology for the girl's condition. "These civilized habits must be acquired. Now as to woodcock, have you any of them hanging?"

"No, sir, but I know others who have."

"I don't like them too high, you understand."

"Of course. I know of several brace that have been hanging just under a month."

"Perfect. What is your chef's way with them?"

"An appetizing way, I assure you. With truffles and brandy and a forcemeat of trail. If you like trail."

"I insist on it. Anyone who would gut a baccivorous bird like the woodcock is a barbarian."

"The great Brillat-Savarin agrees. But we do remove the gizzard."

"Naturally. And you serve it in a demi-glace?"

"As a rule. Thickened with a puree of foie gras, butter and gently sieved intestines."

Seagrave got to his feet. "I bow to you, Monsieur." And he did just that. "Expect us tomorrow evening. Darius will phone in the

afternoon with any further details."

So began a five-month association that ended only yesterday. La salle petite, as Seagrave soon christened the private room, became exclusively his. Night after night, nearly always at 7:30, he appeared with Miss Schacter and Darius. Each dinner was sumptuous, each different from the other. The only constant was the choice of wines, and they remained the same: superb vintages that he had selected the first night.

During the period after the first week I kept a record of some of the gastronomical miracles Seagrave asked François to perform. In the simple category of soups, for instance, we served him cream of artichoke, cream of endive, cream of lobster with madeira, cream of young nettles, crayfish bisque, frog legs purée (which he ordered on six occasions), a velouté comprised of breast fillets of partridge, pheasant and hazel-grouse, hochepot à la flamande (which he roundly condemned and deservedly so), potage à la tortue, mulligatawny, and oxtail.

I made a note midway of this list that "Mr. S displays a special interest in all foods made from the extremities of animals: legs, wings, tails, ears, heads, snouts, flippers. Strange."

Strange indeed, as it turned out.

Bear paws are on the list. One day Seagrave commissioned us to find these, the front paws only, because he had just read in *Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine* that Alexandre Dumas pronounced them irresistible. It took us two weeks to locate a pair. They came from a small game-meat packer in Montreal. Seagrave personally gave François the recipe for their preparation. I still have it here on my desk.

Remove skin. Wash thoroughly, salt, place in crock, cover with red wine vinegar marinade. Let stand 4 days. To cook, line bottom of pot with chopped bacon, ham, onions, celery, grape leaves, tomatoes, mushrooms. Arrange paws, pads up, on this bed and then inundate with marinade, adding cup of beef bouillon. Cook over low heat 8 hours. Permit paws to cool in liquid. Drain, wipe, slice lengthwise about an inch thick. Sprinkle liberally with fresh-ground pepper (white) and lightly with garlic salt. Dip slices in mixture of melted butter and bread crumbs. Grill 30 minutes on slowly rotating skewers. Serve with sauce piquante and currant jelly.

Well, I endorse the Dumas pronouncement on bear paws, for Seagrave insisted that I try a mouthful. Succulent in a woodsy way

they were. François, who had not tackled this dish before, smiled self-congratulations the rest of the week.

It was on this occasion that Seagrave first discussed (with me at least) his theory of becoming what you consume. I forget how the subject came up, but I remember clearly, today of all days, exactly what he said.

"The primate began to develop a strong underjaw when he came out of the trees, grabbed a club and slaughtered his first antelope. Ever think of that, Monsieur? That if our ancestors had continued on a diet of roots and fruits we would today possess somewhat the same chinless physiognomy of the baboon?"

The question required no answer, so I sat, faintly smiling, at the end of the table where a moment earlier I'd tried bear paw. That I was at the table at all was due to my having sent over a bottle of Palo Cortado which I was sure Seagrave would like in spite of his bias against fortified wines and hard liquor. He had insisted I join in the tasting.

"Man the meat eater got his mandibles by aeons of mastication," Seagrave continued. "As long as he ate meat raw, he had the tearing canines of a wolf. Then he learned about fire, and another

dozen millenia passed. And where are your canines and mine, Monsieur? Or those of Miss Schacter and Darius? Still in our heads, of course, but reduced in size and biting power to about the same level as a pair of pinking shears. All primates but man have fighting teeth even in these modern times because man is the only primate who cooks his meat. If this bear paw had not been cooked for eight hours, we may have found it nearly unchewable. Feed ten generations of tigers on warm bran mash and you couldn't tell their teeth from a horse's. The average man, even in the fleeting moment of his lifetime, subtly emits the essence of what he eats and drinks. Long years ago, when I was a collegian, there was a classmate named Rodriguez whose misguided parents had educated him to enjoy nothing except goat milk and leguminous vegetables. His hair was the color of whey. Under the skin of his face, in certain slants of sunlight, one could discern a pallid pigmentation of green. This was all of thirty years ago. But I wager that if Rodriguez is alive today and pursuing the same narrow course of nutriment, he has a complexion the color of chlorophyll-chewing gum and hair and eyebrows of albino hue.

"This sherry is unique, Mon-

sieur," he added after pausing to take a second sip of the Palo Cortado.

"Favorably unique, I trust."

Seagrave shuttered one bulging eye and aimed its bloodshot associate an uncertain distance over my right shoulder. "The deep-dipped alcoholic," he said thoughtfully. "Have you ever had a whiff of his flesh?"

"Not deliberately," I replied, rather startled.

"Have you smelled the emanations from the pores of a four-pack-a-day cigarette man? Or woman, for that matter?"

I said nothing. A whispering intimation began to inform me that Seagrave might not be quite sane.

"Fetid," he said stressfully. "Mephitic. Rank."

"I suppose so," I said.

"Garlic," he said, suddenly opening the closed eye.

I sat in fascinated silence.

"Pick up a towel that has been recently used by a compulsive garlic eater. Hold it a few inches from your nose. Inhale, but not too deeply. The reek will send you reeling." He took another swallow of the sherry. "You do have impeccable taste, Monsieur. I really must hand it to you."

The word 'hand' involuntarily drew my eyes to Seagrave's empty sleeve and of course he noticed.

"Oh, *that* interests you, does it?" he asked with a benign smile. "Don't be embarrassed. Your curiosity is most natural. I too am provoked to inquisitiveness by the absence of some integral part of the human body. Once, briefly, I knew a woman with a glass eye. Knew her in the biblical sense, that is, and only in order to learn where she'd lost the real optic. On another occasion I saw a man on skid row in Scranton, with both his ears missing as if planed down by a carpenter, and I bought him breakfast, lunch and dinner, with drinks and ten-dollar bills tendered in between, until he told me a garbled story of what had happened to him. Always behind each missing segment of a human being lies a story, Monsieur, but not always are they worth listening to. In my case, however, I think the yarn goes hand in glove, if you'll excuse the expression, with the subject we have under discussion. Would you so concur, Darius?"

"Indeed yez."

"Would you like to hear my strange little tale, Monsieur?"

"I shall be enchanted, sir." This is the approved way of responding to a regular customer who never bothers to glance at the grand total of his dinner check.

"And you, Bessie?" He turned his florid face to Miss Schacter

whose eyes were brilliantly out of focus behind a fine wine haze. "You too may find this story of a convivial truncation a little bit edifying."

"Eddie who?" she asked, blonde head tilting.

You must continually bear in mind, Seagrave began from behind a large unlighted cigar, that the staple diet of the jungle Indians along the upper reaches of the Rio Negro is farinha . . .

(This gratuitous observation descended inside my skull like two layers of mildewed cobweb.)

. . . Farinha, if you don't already know, is a granular flour somewhat the color and texture of cornmeal. It is derived from a yam, the mandioca yam to be precise, which in and of itself is a deadly poison. The average mandioca yam contains enough hydrocyanic acid to fell an oversize Percheron. Fortunately for the Indian and everyone else in Brazil, the acid is volatile and rapidly yields its potency to heat, and much heat is used in decocting farinha from the yam.

An Indian can thrive for two or three weeks on an exclusive diet of this meal while paddling his dug-out canoe ten hours a day. He swallows the farinha dry, washing it down with a gourdful of water. The liquid quadruples the solid.

As a result, all the Indians, who came within my purview were supporting outlandish potbellies utterly alien to the admirable musculature of their arms, legs, et cetera.

Now what was I doing on the Rio Negro?

And *when* was I there?

(These questions had been on the tip of my tongue.)

The time: twelve or thirteen or maybe all of fourteen years ago, wasn't it, Darius? Zirteen. Then zirteen it is.

Darius was with me, of course, as was an elderly Brazilian botanist. Noddleman, Benito Noddleman. He specialized in barks. Not the canine kind, Monsieur, the barks of trees. For like the legendary Ponce de Leon, I was searching for something wildly rumored in the delirium of dreamers to exist hidden from the world. In this case it was a nameless tree. A bite of its bark, the tiniest chew, was supposed to impart an instant sense of divine peace, of eternal well-being. Needless to say, I never found it. But I did come across the *Cusparia febrifuga*, if you are interested, and chewed some of its bark, thinking for a few wondrous moments that I had found what I was looking for. Noddleman put me straight. What I had in my mouth was the basic substance from which the

Wuppermanns have been distilling their Angostura Bitters since 1830.

If you should ever think of journeying to the upper reaches of the Rio Negro, I'd be the first to advise firmly against it. The vegetation is thick and steamy. The palms that line the banks like sentinels have thorns like sabers. Li-ana vines, Tarzan's cinematic trapeze, are rife and grow so fast that they could quite possibly encircle you in your sleep and constrict you to death. The river itself is perfectly named; it is black as ink. And during the rainy season, which covers six months of the year, this inky stream spreads out in the gloom under the endless ceiling of trees for mile upon mile. In some places, Noddleman told us, the Rio Negro is fifty miles wide.

Well, so much for that. And so much for Noddleman also. We lost him to a tropical ague a few days beyond Santa Isabel and buried him in the spongy ground with a dugout canoe as a coffin. This event was seemingly interpreted by our native paddlers as an evil omen. That night, while Darius and I slept, the entire gang decamped. They left us a montería, which is twice as long as the average dugout canoe and three times harder to handle. As for provender, we found the invariable fa-

rinha, forty pounds of it, six slabs of baccalhau, which is a dried and salted codfish that can make you hate codfish the rest of your life, two bottles of cane-sugar alcohol known with great respect in those parts as caxiri, and my precious mahogany humidor containing a dozen first-class cigars.

Any rational man would have promptly returned to Santa Isabel, but in those days I was savagely driven. My heart kept misinforming me that the peace-giving bark was to be found around the next bend of the river.

Eight days later we were down to the last several handfuls of farinha and the last few pounds of baccalhau and were seriously considering a trip back to civilization. We were squatting on the river bank. It was dusk. We had just lit a small fire and were about to open one of our two bottles of caxiri, the better to come to a decision, when there rose up around us a dozen naked shadows all armed with long blowguns. Instantly I sensed they were more curious than hostile. I addressed them in Portuguese, Spanish, English. They quacked back in a tongue neither Darius nor I had ever heard. I offered them the freshly opened bottle of caxiri and they came smilingly, into the ring of our little fire.

I noticed then that several of our guests were missing an arm and that one of them, who appeared to be the chief, was armless. This armless one was given the first drink of caxiri by one of his companions who respectfully held the bottle for him.

After that, sociability abounded. Some of the Indians went into the jungle and brought back more wood for the fire. A signal must have gone out because presently four native women appeared with a dozen or so children. When the caxiri was finished, our guests produced from somewhere two large gourds of a liquor that tasted a bit like hard cider that had been overly infused with a minty mouthwash. It packed an authoritative jolt. Dancing and chanting began. Soon we broke out our small store of farinha and baccalhau. The Indians politely declined the meal but were hugely obliged for the fish. They distributed it bite by bite, each member of the tribe from the armless chief to the smallest child having an equal share. I was so impressed, and probably very drunk in the bargain, that I finally opened the humidor and took out a precious cigar. Lighting it from an ember, I passed it to the young Indian who acted as the chief's body servant and he in turn held it to the chief's lips. From there the ex-

cellent cigar made the rounds among the men much in the manner of the North American peace pipe. Perfect amity existed.

I was reminded at that hour, as I am now, of Epicurus' sage counsel: *We should look for somebody to eat and drink with rather than looking for something to eat and drink, for dining alone is leading the life of a jackal.* These savages, if you will, epitomized that aspect of the Epicurean philosophy. Barely subsisting on an endless diet of farinha, they found us and cheerfully sat down to make a banquet of a few cups of untamed beverage and a few bits of salted fish. With a single cigar they created a ritual of comradeship. A second cigar bound us all together in a cabbala against the dark night and the specter of death always lurking within it.

Because of the seasonal expansion and contraction of the Rio Negro, game is almost nonexistent in that country and yet by dawn these friendly people were reciprocating our hospitality by cooking a stew that contained sizeable pieces of meat. It was subtly different from any stew I ever tasted before or since. But we ate with good appetite, didn't we, Darius? Then they served Darius and me exclusively a sort of l'issue de la table, which was a whitish gumlike sub-

stance not unlike a nougat. One licked it from a stick. Within five minutes of swallowing a few ounces of it, I was overcome by a wonderfully pleasant lethargy and soon fell into deep sleep of gentle dreams.

Upon waking, I thought only a few minutes had passed. It was still dark, though, and I pondered over dawn's failure to bring daylight. I learned later that my sleep had lasted fourteen or fifteen hours. I might have known, I had never felt so completely rested and relaxed in my life.

Gradually orienting myself, I noticed I was the center of attention. The Indians were crouched in a semicircle facing me, their brown bodies shining like oiled teak. Behind them the fire danced brightly. The hanging liana vines seemed to shimmy in the shadows. Darius was sitting to my left but I was not conscious of him at the moment. I kept looking at the faces of the Indians. A soft chant was coming from their closed lips and they were rocking slightly to and fro, as if in common mourning.

I presently realized that I was sitting slightly elevated on a cushion of something soft with my back against a heavily mossed tree. (The cushion, I learned later, was fashioned from multi-layers of a spinach-like leaf called manisawa,

a basic ingredient of all native stews. What I also learned later was the symbolism involved.) When the chief saw my open eyes questing, he came erect from his crouch and then the tribal dirge changed tempo—fast and joyful—and the unified swaying was converted into a forward movement, a repetitive obeisance.

The chief uttered a series of staccato commands. The body servant leaped to his feet. The tribal ranks parted to allow the body servant to approach the fire. With a long flat stone used like a shovel, he lifted an earthenware pot from the coals and carried it to the chief, placing it at his feet. The armless one began to crank out an incantation to the accompaniment of a mesmeric rotation of his head on his spindly neck. The performance must have lasted a good fifteen minutes—long enough at least to let the contents of the pot go from boiling to simply hot. Then the body servant dipped a hand in the scalding stew and quickly came up with what I first thought was a third-degree burn—the phalanges covered with painfully swollen flesh as gray as boiled veal—which he raised to the chief's waiting lips. In another moment, though, my eyes told an incredulous brain that the offering was not the body servant's hand but somebody else's.

It was then, Monsieur, that my gaze began to wander in a frantic search for the good Darius. I found him six feet away to my left, propped like me against a tree, though not elevated, and he was regarding me with ineluctable compassion. A few seconds later I noticed that my left arm was missing.

It took me a couple of long minutes to return with Mr. Nicholas Seagrave from the Rio Negro to La Maison d'être.

Darius had used the interval to light the large cigar and Miss Schacter was replenishing her glass from the bottle of Palo Cortado. Her arms, so meager several months ago, were now plump and firm—and redolent, I guessed, of the excellent food she had been eating. *Delicious arms*, I thought, and the thought stunned me.

I looked at Seagrave's green eyes. They expressed an insane satisfaction with himself. "They had partaken of me," he was saying, "as I had partaken of them."

"They were cannibals," I said.

"In the narrowest definition of the term, yes. But they were not true anthropophagi. No more than I. They did not *kill* a man to eat him. They simply *partook* of a joint and they ritualized the sharing. When the diet of farinha be-

came unendurable, when the high waters of the rainy season dispersed even the monkeys and the macaws, when the human body could no longer tolerate the lack of protein, then a member of the tribe, always a volunteer, contributed an arm to the stew pot. Women were ineligible for this honor, but male children were permitted to give as many as, but no more than, three fingers. It had been a finger stew, by the way, which Darius and I had unknowingly consumed with such relish. The chief had attained his rank by giving both arms to the tribe, and no other warrior could make this supreme contribution until that chief died."

Not knowing what else to say, I said, "Did you eat any part of, uh, your, uh—"

"No, I regret to say. I fainted upon discovering what was cooking."

At a trade-association meeting a few days later I was having a cocktail with John Vallancourt, the proprietor of the best seafood restaurant in the state, when he said passingly, "Oh, I understand the wealthy Mister Seagrave is now an habitué of your place."

"Every day except Monday, when we are closed. Do you know him?"

"Indeed I do. I know him well."

"I don't quite like the way you say that, John."

"A small altercation, nothing more."

"Tell me about it."

"I'd have forgotten about it long ago except for its bizarre nature."

"I'm listening."

"To the best of my knowledge, he was the first customer in the history of Vallancourt's who challenged us to serve sturgeon braised in champagne and garnished with broiled truffles and cucumbers. As he waited for Henry to produce the dish, he whetted his appetite with large quantities of beluga caviar and Pol Roger."

"Nineteen fifty-nine."

"Right. He had a lady with him, a very young lady, and that little dark-complexioned man of his—"

"Darius."

"Right again. At any rate, they came night after night and spent most liberally until the matter of the lady's fingers terminated in the worst brawl our place has ever witnessed."

"The lady's fingers?"

"Yes, well, it appears that this young lady had the most exquisite fingers. You know, long and delicate. I never really noticed them myself, but the waiter later assured me they were something to behold. Seagrave seemed to worship them,

referred to them often, often touched them during the dinner. Then one night, according to the waiter, he offered the young lady twenty thousand dollars for the index finger of her left hand. Said she was right-handed anyway and had little real use for that particular digit. Simply say the word and he would present the young lady a certified check when the banks opened in the morning. The waiter leaned over backwards to hear, of course."

"Of course."

"At first the young lady thought he was joking. Then it slowly dawned on her that he was in dead earnest. Darius, he said, was an expert with a scalpel, having studied surgery at one time, and the Seagrave residence was stocked with the necessary anesthetics. The operation could be performed in five minutes. The twenty thousand dollars would be payable in advance. Well, the young lady was a bit horrified now but she had the guts to ask what in hell he would do with her finger if he ever got it. And he told her, without blinking an eye, that he would simmer it in a special chicken stock, serve it with caper sauce and eat it. Well, the kindest thing she called him was a crazy creep and the least of the objects she hurled at him was an ash tray, and then she left. Un-

hit and quite imperturbable, Seagrave left a half hour later. Neither has ever returned, thank God."

Yesterday afternoon Darius phoned to cancel the standing reservation for the private dining room: As if this were not ominous enough, he requested that François prepare a quart of sauce bontemps and send it in a vacuum bottle to the Seagrave residence at 7:45.

"Is Mister Seagrave temporarily incapacitated?" I asked.

"Not at all."

"Miss Schacter then?" Her firm round arms were on my mind.

"Not at all."

That was that.

At seven o'clock I suddenly decided to deliver the sauce in person.

It took longer than I figured to find the house, which was situated on a good deal of rural acreage covered with hundreds of tall pines, and so it was a few minutes after eight when I rang the doorbell. The door was opened immediately by Darius as though he had been waiting impatiently just inside. He *was* impatient and, for the first time in my observation, visibly disturbed.

"Come in, Monsieur, come in," he said, much to my surprise.

"I'm sorry to be late."

"Zat is okay."

"The sauce is still hot."

"Zo. Enough zat you come yourself. Not zend mezzenger boy."

"Is something amiss?" I inquired, following him into a vast hall.

"A matter of loyalty," he said. "You zolve za problem maybe. Take it out of my handz maybe."

"Maybe," I said, following him along the hall. "Exactly what *is* the problem, Darius?"

"Mizder Zeagrave azk me to do a zing I cannot do."

As we proceeded down the hall the faint but distinct odor of chloroform reached my nostrils. "Don't tell me that Mister Seagrave has dismembered Miss Schacter," I heard myself saying in a shocked voice.

Darius looked at me in puzzlement, then shook his head. "No, Monsieur. Mizder Zeagrave would not do zat. He inzigt alway it be voluntary. Bezidez, he did not care for her aroma. Zo he dizmizzed her from hiz employ ziz morning."

We had arrived at a closed door near a telephone table. The smell of chloroform was strong now. "If not Miss Schacter, then *who*?"

"Zee for yourself," Darius said, opening the door.

Inside, on an operating table, lay Nicholas Seagrave. He was wearing pajama pants of blue silk. His formidable torso was covered by a mat of graying hair. His eyes were closed, thereby transmitting to the rest of the face an uncharacteristic expression of profound peace. His remaining arm was flung out in harness on a right-angle extension of the table that also held an enamel tray filled with an assortment of scalpels, surgical saws, sutures and clips.

"Holy God!" I said softly.

"I pledge myzself to do it," Darius was saying, "but now, no."

"He must be absolutely mad," I said.

"I zuppoze zo."

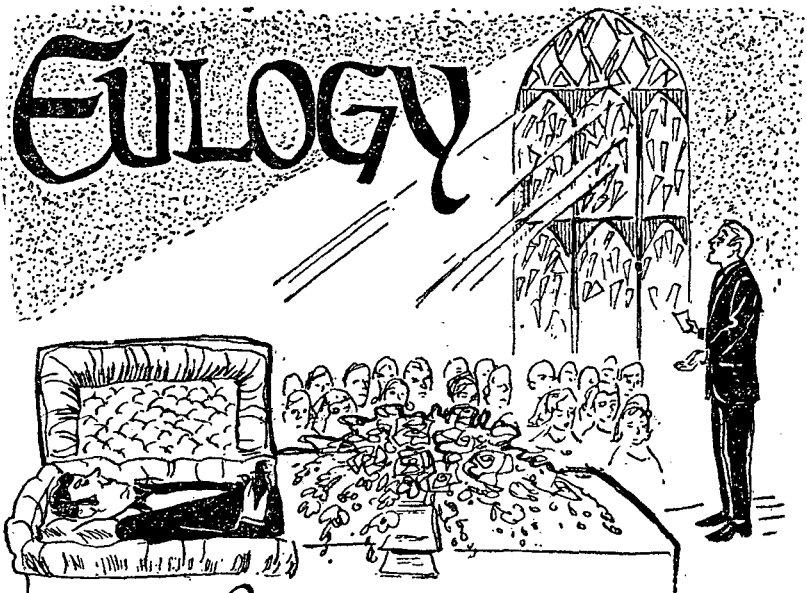
"The bontemps sauce was for *this*?"

"Yez. At my zide he ztood while I order it. Za firzd ztep in my zolemn promize to help him partake of himzself."

I relieved Darius of his dreadful obligation by going to the telephone.



There is some good to be found in everyone; at least the ability to die.



by Pauline C. Smith

WE THINK you ought to give Eddie Caravel's eulogy, Frank. You were his best friend and director. We think you know more about him than anyone else."

That was true. I knew enough about Eddie Caravel to hang him if he hadn't been dead already. I

knew more about him than he had known. I knew.

"What'll I say?" I asked.

"You'll figure out something."

I looked down at Eddie on his white satin pillow, admiring the way they'd even managed to mold his lips in that lopsided smile he'd cultivated for his trademark. Eddie would have liked that. He looked great, as good as the best of his

carefully planned publicity shots.

"They did a good job on him, didn't they?" I remarked.

"Well, he wasn't in the water long enough to do him any harm except drown him."

The crowd was outside the chapel, straining, pushing and pointing as limousines drove up to disgorge the mourners. The crowd, mostly women, loved Eddie Caramel, and now that he was dead, they owned him at last.

Inside, the chapel wasn't exactly stuffed. There were the three former wives who didn't know his estate had already been inherited by the government for back taxes; studio executives along with their wives, sitting stiffly equal yet separate from each other; the crew, which formed a tight, expressionless, obedient group, here for publicity reasons only, all except for the writers who were probably huddled on the dark set, killing off Eddie again so we could begin shooting a new story line around him as soon as the funeral was over.

Organ music flowed in mellifluous sound with an occasional stentorian note for solemn accent. Whoever rigged the ceremony knew what he was doing.

It was a bright day, with the sun shining through stained glass

windows, casting triangles of colored light on all the upturned faces, except for Eddie's, resting there against his white satin pillow in the casket—his was clear and unshadowed, haloed with gold. He would have liked that, too.

As the organ music faded, I stood to deliver the eulogy, glancing only briefly at the notes in the palm of my hand. "Dear friends, we are gathered here together to pay final tribute to a man we have known in life, so let us now remember him in death.

"A great man," I waved toward the casket, "mourned by many—but we, only we here in this chapel today, can truly mourn, for only we truly knew him." I waited for the small sound of restless movement to pass. "Some of us knew Eddie as far back as when he began his career as a prop man with aspirations. We all have aspirations. Eddie Caramel had his . . ."

Eddie's aspirations were big, bold and well-defined. They were to rise to the top of the heap by climbing the shoulders of the men above him and over the breasts of the women who could help. There had been many women—wives and girlfriends, secretaries and script girls, actresses and producers' daughters. During his first aspirational years on his first step upward, Eddie stole Carl Haven's lopsided

smile and Carl Haven's luscious wife to get where he wanted.

There she is, right down there, center-right, Carl Haven's former wife and Eddie Caravel's former wife too, dabbing her dry eyes with the wisp of a handkerchief. Pudgy now. Give her another two years on 'the sauce and she'll be a slob. Carl isn't around anymore; last I heard, he was up north selling cars on commission. Too bad, he was a steady-working small-parts actor who thought he had it made until Eddie decided he was the guy to make what Carl had and Carl's wife too.

"Will we ever forget the bright young star who meteorically rose from a name on the crawl to The Name in 'The Name of the Hour'?" I asked the congregation, and to a man-and-woman, every head shook in negative agreement. None of them would forget.

Especially, Melanie and Herm Fielding. I searched them out in the congregation. There was Melanie, a mask of sorrow, to mask the bitterness, to mask the mask of bright vivacity; one of the ex-wives of Eddie Caravel who, before being the wife of Eddie was the wife of Herm—and where was Herm? In the back, sitting alone in the center of a pool of empty seats.

I wouldn't forget either, the night Herm beat against the front door

of my beach house, then fell inside, so hysterical I hardly knew him, with that fantastic tale of attempted murder and being taken off the hook by the victim!

"All right now . . ." I poured a glass of brandy and he belted it like water. "Make sense. What's all this about shooting and killing, the ambulance, police, and a statement?" He was talking garbled nonsense until he got hold of himself and made sensible nonsense out of the babble.

He had suspected Melanie and Eddie—and why not? Everybody else on the studio lot knew the score. But then, Herm was busy casting "The Name of the Hour", producing it on a shoestring. "I was in that damn picture with both feet," he explained that night, "right up to my neck. If I could get the right lead I figured I might make a killing." He winced at his own poor choice of words. "If not, I was dead," and he winced again. "Then Melanie came up with this Eddie Caravel . . ."

"Came up with him?" I asked.

"She suggested him. For the *lead*, yet! I told her she was out of her skull, I needed a *name* for the picture . . ." Melanie scratched at him about it until he finally woke up and began to ask himself what was her percentage, and came up with a figure he didn't like . . .

"I worked at the office until late and when I got home—no Melanie. Where would she be? I had a good idea. So I found out where this clown lives, grabbed my gun and took off for the beach . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake, Herm," I groaned and poured out another couple of belts for both of us.

Well, he caught them, all right, and crashed in shooting. I guess there was a lot of screaming and a scuffle, with Melanie getting the gun away and screaming murder-police over the phone and Herm in catatonic shock at what he'd done, staring glazed-eyed at Eddie, white as a sheet except for the big red stain spreading from his left shoulder down his left side. "Frank!" Herm yelled at me. "All that blood on his left side! I think I hit his heart!"

"Wasn't that what you meant to do?" I asked coldly, not that I gave a damn at that point whether Eddie Caravel lived or died. It wasn't *my* wife he was playing around with—not yet, anyway.

"Yes, I meant to do it," yelled Herm, "but after I did it, I wished I hadn't. I'm no killer, Frank," and Herm's voice broke plaintively.

"Don't tell *me* that," I said, "explain it to your lawyer."

"I won't have to." Herm shook his head, dazed. "He told the police it was prowlers and he routed

them, single-handed, and got shot in the bargain—not by me, by the prowlers."

"He did?" I said hoarsely. Then I pulled myself together, trying to bring order out of chaos. "You mean he could *talk*? He was dead and he could *talk*?"

"He isn't dead. At least he wasn't then. He told the police, 'Don't involve my friends,' meaning me, I guess, and Melanie."

"Well, he sure as hell couldn't talk if he had a bullet in his heart," I observed, having read plenty of authoritative scripts on the subject. "Where's the gun?"

Herm didn't know where the gun was after Melanie had wrested it from him. It wasn't hard to figure out, though, after the whole crummy scene was over. All Eddie Caravel had was a slug in his shoulder, enough to make him lose about a quart of blood and send him to the hospital with Melanie in fond attendance, but not enough to keep his brain from working. During that moment of truth, Eddie had enough wits about him to take Herm off the hook and keep the gun as evidence in case Herm didn't give him the lead in "The Name of the Hour" . . .

I looked at Melanie in the congregation, thinking: *It was a hell of a short and miserable marriage you came up with out of the mess,*

wasn't it, kid? And she looked back at me, one of Eddie Caravel's ex-wives, and the beautiful face, so cynical now, so bitter, said right back at me: *It was a short and miserable marriage.*

Then I looked at Herm, all alone in the middle of all those empty seats, and thought: *And you came out on the short end of the stick, settling for giving your wife away, giving Eddie the part that made him, and getting stuck with the image of a producer who builds stars out of nothing—on the skids now because another nothing like Eddie never came along.* Herm's face was no longer bitter, but lost.

I glanced at the notes in the palm of my hand. "It has been said," I continued the eulogy, "that Eddie Caravel was an opportunist." I looked at the congregation, attentive, yet not wanting to be attentive because attention made each remember a personal incident of opportunism. "But all Eddie did was find opportunity and use it first."

All the women, I thought, *and the men through the women,* while searching for the third and last ex-wife in that congregation, also ex-wife of one of the academy judges. She got what she wanted, which was Eddie. Eddie got what he wanted, which was an Oscar. But the academy judge got nothing. There is always one who loses.

They all lose, I thought, *finally.* The ex-wife's face was empty, for she had lost Eddie, and Eddie's face was dead, for he had lost his life.

"Yes, Eddie Caravel was a great man," I continued. "A great man is one who wins fame no matter how he gets there, so Eddie was great. Now, in television, we have lost him; and we who have so recently worked with him on his weekly series, do mourn."

I looked at the crew then, that expressionless, obedient nucleus of opposition. Every one of them hated Eddie Caravel's guts.

"It is we of television, Eddie's latest medium of greatness, we who have worked with him these last years, who were with him at the last, who will miss him the most."

With him at the last, I thought, and I could see that last party on every face of the crew turned up to me. I, the director, gave the party at my home; I and my wife, Jennifer. Where was Jennifer? I had forced her to come to the funeral. Then I saw her. She looked as she had when I married her years ago, young and scared. The party was on her face too. The party would forever be there . . .

The week before the party had been grueling. There was a water scene. Eddie was to jump in and save a young girl. "Not me," he

said, "get the double to do the scene."

"Why a double?" I asked. "That's a stretch of water just five feet across, just wide enough to get in a camera shot."

"Not me," he repeated. "Shoot from a distance and get a double."

"I don't want a double," I said. "I want a close shot. Have you got a thing about water?"

"Yes," he yelled, "I've got a thing about water."

I remembered, then, his beach house and what had happened there to give him stardom. "You live on the beach," I said, "so how come?"

"Used to." He'd turned his back on me. "When I lived there I never stepped any closer to the water than the porch." He walked off and I saw for sure he really had a thing about water. How about that? This lopsided smiler slashing his way through life, scared of a little water! Well, it was too late for a scene rewrite, so we worked out a distance shot, flattened the climax, and I announced the party.

At the end of each season, I threw a party—Jennifer and I—for the cast and crew. This was that party.

I repeated the last words of the eulogy, "We, the television cast and crew, were with Eddie Caravel that last night of his life. It was at a party, so he died as he had lived,

a strong, lusty man, playing games."

The eyes of the crew were upon me. I searched their faces which told me nothing. Each of them knew exactly what happened. If they didn't see it from the beginning, they saw its ending.

My hands had begun to shake and the eulogy notes were damp in my palm. "We, his television friends," I said, "knew his strength and we knew his weaknesses . . ."

His strength was his lusty virility, and his weaknesses were women and water. The pool lights were on in the patio. The house was brilliant with noise and lights. The party was swinging, with liquor, laughter and lights—lights everywhere except for that one bedroom. That one was dark. The crew and the cast were milling around, having fun—everyone except Eddie. Then I looked for my wife, Jennifer . . .

I found them together in the dark bedroom.

I knew then how Herm Fielding had felt, blasting his way into the beach house; how Carl Haven had felt; the academy judge; all the husbands of all the wives, and the boyfriends of the girlfriends.

I yanked my wife free and she screamed like Melanie must have screamed. I had only one blazing thought in my mind: to rid the world of Eddie Caravel. I jerked him from that dark room, into the

lights of the house, and out to the lights of the patio. I shoved. He splashed.

The party people surged from the house. Jennifer's screams had turned to moans. The noise and revelry were hushed as the guests clustered around the pool. Eddie was floundering, reaching out a hand, fingers clutching for the pool's rim. He almost made it. I reached out a foot and kicked him back. He splashed a moment or two. Then he sank.

"Well," I said, "I guess we'd better call the police or fire department or whoever it is you call at a time like this. They can get him out. It will be too late then, of course, to revive him. But they'll try."

"But, Frank," I heard, and offers to jump in.

"No," I said. "No. We'll wait."

It was I who told the police that Eddie Caravel must have fallen into the pool, and not a voice rose in protest.

I looked again at my obedient, expressionless crew, still not knowing if they would keep the secret

or tell the thing that each and every one of them knew.

"His strength and his weakness," I repeated the words of the eulogy. "Which shall we mourn? And which shall we rejoice?" And I saw by their expressions that the crew was with me to a man-and-woman. They would mourn Eddie Caravel's strength for its destruction and rejoice his weakness which brought about his destruction.

Their faces told me, to a man-and-woman, that I was not a murderer but an executioner.

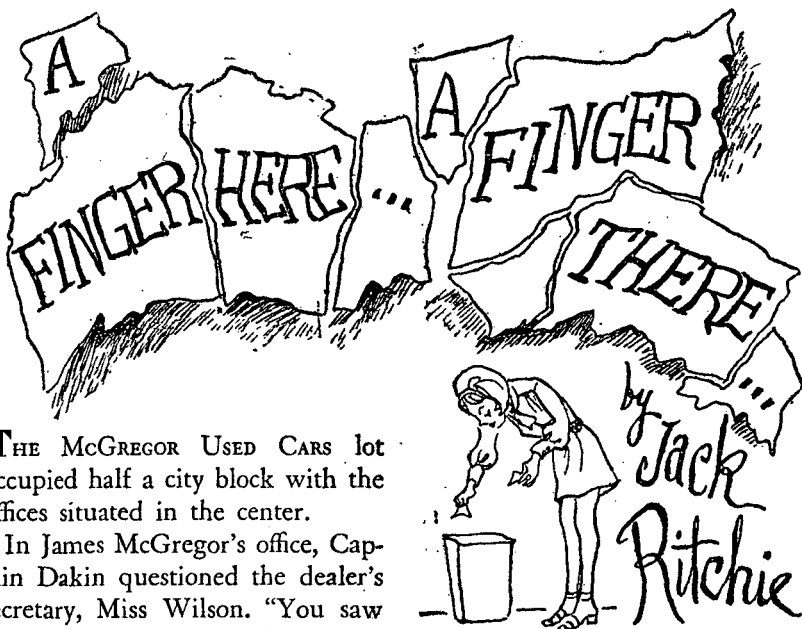
"So," I finished the eulogy, "we say good-bye to Eddie Caravel and turn again to the living."

I was very tired. I would get my wife now, and take her home. Then, tomorrow, I would see what the writers had come up with—see if they had, as successfully as I, killed off Eddie, and what they had put in his place.

The sun had slanted now so that the faces of the congregation were in the clear light and Eddie Caravel's, resting against his satin pillow, was mottled with green and violet.



It requires more than frugality to scotch a kidnapping.



THE MCGREGOR USED CARS lot occupied half a city block with the offices situated in the center.

In James McGregor's office, Captain Dakin questioned the dealer's secretary, Miss Wilson. "You saw Mr. McGregor tear up the note?"

"Yes. Though he wasn't aware that I was watching him at the time."

"And when he left the office, you went to the wastepaper basket, took out the pieces, and put them together again, jigsaw fashion?"

"Yes. Just feminine curiosity, I guess."

"Snoopiness," McGregor growled. Dakin ignored him. "And then

you telephoned the department?"

"Not right away," Miss Wilson said. "First I confronted Mr. McGregor with the reconstructed note."

"What was his reaction?"

"He said, 'Bah! Humbug!'"

The pieces of the note had been pasted to a sheet of paper. Dakin studied it again. "It says here, Mr. McGregor, that if you do not pay

the kidnappers \$200,000, your nephew will be returned to you in installments. A finger here, a toe there."

McGregor shrugged.

Dakin frowned. "Just how old is your nephew?"

"Thirty. Thirty-one. Something like that."

"Twenty-nine," Miss Wilson said.

"When did you see him last?"

"About ten days ago," McGregor said.

"Ten days ago?"

McGregor colored slightly. "So he's been gone for a while. I don't keep tabs on everything my nephew does."

"Isn't he also one of your salesmen?"

McGregor looked pained. "Salesman? He doesn't know a thing about cars. Look at that lemon he drives."

Dakin blinked. "You sold your own nephew a lemon?"

McGregor drew himself up. "He didn't buy the car from this lot."

Miss Wilson explained. "Albert—Mr. McGregor's nephew—doesn't trust his uncle. Especially when it comes to cars."

Dakin put the note into a brown envelope. "I'd like to mention that it is the official policy of our department to discourage the payment of ransoms. Once these kid-

nappers get it through their heads that they're never going to get ransoms, they're going to stop kidnapping people and turn to something else."

McGregor agreed. "I won't pay a cent."

Captain Dakin smiled confidentially. "I also think it's only fair to tell you that this is only the *official* stand of the department. *Unofficially*, of course, it is preferable that the ransom be paid and the victim released. That way we are free to swing into action without fear of the victim being harmed."

McGregor reiterated his position. "They won't get a penny out of me."

Dakin tried again. "What I mean is that, after all, there is a human life at stake."

"They're bluffing."

"A possibility," Dakin conceded, "but on the other hand, suppose they aren't?"

"They *are*," McGregor insisted. "I ignored the first two notes and nothing happened."

There was a silence and then Dakin took a deep breath. "There were *two* other notes?"

McGregor shifted uncomfortably. "I guess I forgot to mention that."

"Where are they now?"

"Incinerated long ago. I tore them up. Evidently when my secretary wasn't at the keyhole." Mc-

Gregor tried a smile of reason. "After all, Captain, the kidnappers didn't say that they were going to kill Albert right off—in one piece, so to speak—now, did they? Suppose we wait until we get a few toes or something before we get rash with \$200,000. I'm sure that even my nephew would see the fairness of that."

Dakin's eyes went to the plate glass windows and the lot beyond. "I understand that you have one of the most successful used car lots in the state."

McGregor almost smiled, but then controlled himself. "Exaggeration by people who don't know the business." He watched one of his salesmen descend upon a prospective customer. "I couldn't possibly raise \$200,000. It's absolutely impossible."

"How much *could* you raise?" Miss Wilson asked.

He scowled at her. "None of your business."

But Dakin saw possibilities in that. "After all, \$200,000 is just their asking price. Perhaps you could negotiate? Would it do any real harm to offer \$50,000?"

"No," McGregor said firmly. "I will not negotiate."

At seven-thirty that evening, Nora Wilson switched to the channel carrying her parents' favorite

television program and retired to the kitchen.

She made two salami sandwiches, wrapped them in waxed paper, and went back to the doorway. Her parents were completely engrossed in their program.

Nora carried the sandwiches and a quart of milk down to the basement. She stopped at the door of the fruit cellar and knocked softly.

Albert McGregor opened the door. "It gets lonely down here. I haven't heard or seen anybody but you in ten days."

Nora put the food on the small wooden table. "Mother hasn't needed the fruit cellar in years and Dad hasn't been down here either since we converted from coal to natural gas."

Albert took a bite from a sandwich. "I *know* Uncle James can afford at least two hundred thousand. He has at least double that safely tucked away. Why doesn't he pay? After all, I *am* a relative, even though we don't really get along at all."

"Some people are like that, dear," Nora said. "They have no respect for family ties. If only we had some fingers to send him—just one would probably do the trick." She sighed. "If only I were a medical intern or technician or something like that, I'm sure I

could pick up a finger or two."

Albert looked doubtful. "When you get right down to it, that probably wouldn't work anyway. If we sent a stranger's finger, undoubtedly the police would immediately compare it with the fingerprints in my army file and discover that nothing matched."

"How about a toe?"

Albert rubbed his jaw. "I don't think that would work either. There's my hospital birth record. The police could check the toe with the hospital where I was born."

"But they take only one footprint, Albert. We could get a toe from the other foot."

Albert frowned. "Yes, but *which* footprint was taken when I was born? Right or left? I don't remember."

Miss Wilson entered the office and put a small package on McGregor's desk. "This was just delivered."

Captain Dakin and McGregor stared at the package. It was approximately four inches long and wrapped in brown paper.

McGregor leaned forward cautiously. "There doesn't seem to be a return address. Just my name."

Dakin agreed.

Neither of them made a move to touch the package.

Dakin turned to Miss Wilson. "The mailman brought this?"

"No," she said. "A messenger."

"A *uniformed* messenger?"

"Why, no," Miss Wilson said. "He wore an ordinary jacket. He just gave me the package and left."

Dakin rushed to the office door and pulled it open. "Sergeant Halloway!"

Halloway had been reading a magazine. "Yes, chief?"

"Did you see who delivered a small package to Miss Wilson just now?"

Halloway nodded. "Sure. He's gone now."

"Well, go after him and bring him back," Dakin ordered. "And don't take any chances."

Dakin reentered the inner office and looked at the package. "Aren't you going to open it, McGregor?"

McGregor licked his lips. "I think you'd better do it, Captain. I consider this to be police business, more or less."

Dakin did not appear to relish the assignment, but he opened a pocketknife. "We'll keep the knot intact. A lot of cases have been solved because of knots, though I can't think of any at the moment."

He cut the string.

"There might be fingerprints," Dakin said. He wrapped a handkerchief around each one of his



hands and then slowly and clumsily unfolded the wrapper. He exposed a small cardboard box. He held it to his ear and shook it several times. "I guess they got it wrapped in cotton."

Carefully he pulled off the cover and they stared at the contents.

After fifteen seconds, McGregor spoke up meekly. "It's my wrist-watch. I left it over at Moorhead's Jewelry Shop for repairs, and asked them to deliver it when it was done. I forgot all about it."

Sergeant Halloway appeared in the doorway, service revolver in

one hand and the other grasping the collar of a frightened teen-ager. "He gave me some kind of song and dance about being just a messenger boy for a jewelry store, Captain. Do I take him to headquarters?"

Captain Dakin rubbed the back of his neck and sighed.

The next morning, McGregor and Dakin met again in McGregor's office.

McGregor was furious. "I thought it was police policy to keep these affairs secret? Reporters have been hounding me ever since noon yesterday."

"I'm sorry," Dakin said, "but there's nothing I can do about it. Every newspaper in the city got a note from the kidnappers. I checked them out. Same typewriter, same kind of notepaper."

McGregor's hand swept over the newspapers scattered over his desk. "Just what do the kidnappers expect to accomplish by all of this publicity?"

Dakin cleared his throat. "I think their strategy is to shame you into making the ransom payment."

McGregor drew himself up. "Shame me? I refuse to be shamed just as much as I refuse to be intimidated."

Miss Wilson made a few doodle marks in her stenographic notebook. "Why don't you hold a raf-

fle? Now that this case has gotten a lot of publicity, you shouldn't have any trouble getting rid of tickets."

McGregor frowned, but he was listening.

"You could charge two dollars or something like that for tickets. And the entire proceeds ought to be tax deductible, considering that it would go to charity of a sort. I mean ransoming somebody before they're dismembered is certainly a work of charity, isn't it?"

McGregor's eyes clouded thoughtfully.

"And you could offer one of your automobiles as first prize," Miss Wilson said.

McGregor went along with that. "How about that four-door sedan at the end of aisle B. Air-conditioning. One owner. Power steering. Stereo. Champagne with matching interior. Like new."

Miss Wilson glanced out of the window. "Is that the one you said would lose its transmission in a couple of months?"

McGregor glared at her. "There's nothing wrong with that car. I give a full thirty-day warranty with every car I sell. Or give away. All defective parts will be replaced free. The labor is something else, of course."

Captain Dakin vetoed the project. "I'm afraid a raffle is out. They're

against the law in this state, even if they are for charity."

After Dakin left, McGregor began pacing the office. "Now suppose, just *suppose* that I *were* able to raise the \$200,000? Do you really think that would be the end of it?"

"You mean the kidnapper wouldn't be satisfied?" Miss Wilson asked. "But I assure you that . . . I mean, it seems only *reasonable*—"

"To hell with the kidnappers!" McGregor roared. "And my nephew too, for that matter. What I'm talking about is the IRS."

"IRS?"

"The Internal Revenue Service, you idiot! The tax people."

"Oh," Miss Wilson said, indicating plainly that she still did not understand.

"Suppose I *did* raise \$200,000 and paid off the kidnappers? The tax people would want to know *how* I managed to accumulate that much money."

"But . . ." Miss Wilson gestured. "The lot has been prospering."

McGregor smiled with acute pain. "Actually, business has been terrible. You don't see the *whole* picture, Miss Wilson. There are a lot of expenses you don't know about. Anyone examining my tax returns—to take a random example—would see immediately that over the past fifteen years I've barely managed to eke out a living. So how

could I possibly have \$200,000 so readily handy to pay off some kidnapper?"

Miss Wilson made a few more marks on her pad. "Just how much do you think you could *safely* raise?"

McGregor shrugged absently. "Twenty thousand." Then he stiffened. "But, no. On principle, I refuse to pay a dime."

"But if you *don't* raise the money—or a reasonable portion of it—the kidnappers will surely dismember your nephew."

McGregor's jaw firmed. "I've seen no evidence of that yet."

He was a compact man with a pink-skulled crew cut and a firm handshake. "The name is Jones," he said. "Amos Jones. I'm president of the Used Car Dealers Association of this county."

McGregor nodded. "I've seen your picture in the trade magazine."

Jones came immediately to the point. "Mr. McGregor, you are giving the entire business a bad name."

McGregor frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that our collective image with the general public is already pretty . . . Well, there are all kinds of vicious jokes about us and you aren't making things any pleasanter. People consider you—and by inference, *all* of us—to be heartless, un-

thinking, unscrupulous, et cetera."

Miss Wilson nodded absently.

Jones regarded her coldly for a moment and then resumed. "We used car dealers are doing a job—a dirty job at times—but one that must be done. No one seems to appreciate that fact."

McGregor agreed. "There are times I could cry."

Jones returned to the point. "For the sake of the business and public relations, the association thinks you ought to pay the ransom."

"But the kidnappers are bluffing," McGregor protested. "We haven't gotten one toe, one finger."

Jones acknowledged that. "But there is still the overall hardhearted aspect of it—deliberately running the risk of seriously handicapping your nephew before you consent to pay the ransom."

McGregor ran a handkerchief over his forehead. "I am not hardhearted. The point is that I don't dare—couldn't *possibly* raise \$200,000. Even if I wanted to."

"The best he can do is \$20,000," Miss Wilson said.

McGregor glared at her and then turned back to Jones. "Suppose I did raise the money and ransom my nephew. Naturally the IRS would want to know where I got it. And suppose the IRS finds—" He corrected that. "Suppose the IRS decides—for some insidious reason of

its own—to frame me for income tax evasion? Suppose I was found guilty? Suppose I draw a sentence of ten years? I don't think I would be at all happy with that."

Jones was inclined to agree.

McGregor showed shark's teeth. "I might be so unhappy that I'd blow the whistle. I'd tell everything I know about the ins and outs of evading . . ."

Jones felt obliged to defend the industry. "Ninety-five percent of all used car dealers are honest. Or nearly so. They have nothing to fear from the IRS."

McGregor chuckled significantly. "But what about the remaining five percent?"

Jones rose. "Don't do a thing until you hear from me again."

Amos Jones returned two days later. "I've been in touch with members of the association and I've explained the delicate nature of your situation. We've decided that if you put up \$20,000, we will lend you the difference—\$180,000."

McGregor raised an eyebrow suspiciously. "The association has some kind of a special fund?"

"Well, no," Jones said. "It's just that we felt that we ought to help out a fellow dealer in his hour of need. We're spreading the tab around the association so that nobody gets the bite too hard. And when you get right down to it, it's

not bad publicity either. It shows that we have heart."

McGregor smiled tightly. "You used the word *lend*?"

Jones nodded. "With absolutely no interest. Not even a carrying charge and, believe me, that's restraint."

McGregor rejected the deal. "There's just one basic trouble with borrowing money. You have to pay it back." He shook his head. "In order to pay *back* \$180,000, I'd have to *get* \$180,000. And the IRS people would be watching how I did that with a great deal of interest. They'd be on my back." He sat back in his swivel chair. "As far as I can see, we're right back where we started."

There was a silence and then Miss Wilson spoke up. "Wouldn't it be simpler if the association *donated* the money to the noble cause of freeing Mr. McGregor's nephew? As you mentioned, it wouldn't be putting the bite too much on anybody. And just think how much more favorable the publicity would be."

Jones chewed on his cigar. "I'll take it up with the board."

He returned twenty-four hours later with a large package. "Well, here it is, \$180,000. I suppose you got your \$20,000?"

McGregor moved reluctantly to the wall safe.

Miss Wilson smiled. "I'll make a

list of the serial numbers of the bills. Captain Dakin will want them, you know."

Albert ran a pencil down their check list. "I don't think it will do any good to ask the police to stay away from the pickup point."

"It's just form," Nora said. "And our final note will also insist that I act as the intermediary and carry the money. It will direct that I arrive at the bus stop at 120th and Hillcrest at 2:45 a.m."

"The police will undoubtedly have the area staked out before you get there."

"Of course. But they won't interfere with anything as long as they think you are still in the hands of the kidnappers." She poured milk for Albert. "The note will direct me to turn over a brick just behind the bench at the bus stop. There I will find another note further instructing me to drive on two blocks to the public phone booth at 122nd and Hillcrest. At exactly three, the phone will ring and I will answer it."

"Is it necessary that I make the phone call at all?" Albert asked. "Couldn't you just *pretend* the phone rang?"

"No. There's always the possibility that the police might make an effort to find out if there really was a phone call to that booth at that

particular time. What with everything being computerized and stored these days, they just might be able to do that."

Albert conceded. "All right. I'll make the call from a booth at the university. I won't say a word, but I'll keep the line open until you hang up, which should be in about a minute."

"Be sure to wear your false beard," Nora said. "Now that your picture's appeared in the newspapers, we wouldn't want you to be recognized. After I hang up I will drive to the undeveloped section of Wellington Park where there are no street lights."

"The police will follow?"

"Very likely. But at a considerable distance. They will be extremely cautious so as not to ruin the transaction. I will park the car and shut off the lights. Considering that there will be no moonlight, that puts me in total darkness. I will sit there fifteen minutes, turn on the car lights, and drive back to McGregor and Dakin. I will tell them that while I sat there—as instructed by phone—a shadowy figure approached and demanded the money, which I gave him, and he told me that you would be released later in the day."

Albert's pencil hovered over another item on the sheet. "And the money?"

"I will have it stowed away in that little compartment we created under the front seat of my car."

Albert nodded. "What about the serial numbers of the bills?"

Nora smiled. "Captain Dakin has a list of numbers, but I don't think they'll do him any good."

Albert put down the pencil. "At five o'clock, I'll remove the beard and stagger into the nearest police station looking bewildered."

In his apartment later that week, Albert unwrapped the ransom package.

Amos Jones lit a fresh cigar. "What made you turn to me for help?"

"We were stymied," Nora said. "Albert's uncle wouldn't pay a cent to redeem him, we had no source of fingers or toes, and even publicity didn't seem to be working. That's why I came to you. We needed something different."

Jones watched Albert divide the stack into three even piles. "I could have gone to the police. What made you think I wouldn't?"

Albert smiled thinly. "You personally sold me that red convertible I drive. I figured that anybody who'd deliberately stick a fellow used-car salesman with a lemon like that would do anything for a buck."

Amos Jones smiled and began counting his money.

One may meet a witness here or there who would be adjudged immaterial in any case.

EARLY SUNDAY MORNING

THE FEELING that someone was behind him, staring at him, was so sudden, so strong, that Ralph Yeager felt the hair rise at the nape of his neck. He had heard no sound, but there was someone there; he was certain of it.

He was close to panic, but he forced himself to remain completely motionless, a gaunt young man in prison denim, gazing straight ahead into the early-morning mist that shrouded the scrub oak and boulders here on the hillside where he had spent the night. Then, very slowly, he began to inch his hand toward the handle of the knife in the waistband of his pants.

"You won't be needing that, mister," a girl's voice said.

He whirled toward her, incredu-



by
**Jonathan
Craig**

lous that he'd been discovered.

She was about twenty, he judged, a beautiful girl with long auburn hair and slightly slanted blue eyes as dark as cobalt. She stood smiling at him, head tilted a little to one side, as if amused by his alarm.

"I sure didn't mean to scare you," she said.

He swore softly, eyes straining

into the mist that swirled behind her. She might be alone, and she might not; there was no way to tell.

"Who's with you?" he said.

"Nobody."

"You'd better be telling the truth, girl. Why'd you sneak up on me?"

"I didn't. It's just that us mountain folks don't make much noise. We're like Indians, sort of."

"What're you doing here?"

She laughed. "You're the most nervous man I ever saw. You're not scared of a girl, are you?"

"I'm not scared of anyone alive. I asked what you were doing here."

"You've got a right to be nervous, though, I admit. In fact, you've got more right than anybody."

He felt his hand start toward the knife again, the knife it had taken him so long to fashion from the tablespoon stolen from the penitentiary mess hall. "What's that supposed to mean?" he said.

"You're that Yeager fella, aren't you? I saw your picture in the paper. They said a guard was taking you somewhere and you killed him and got away."

He moistened his lips, studying her face, listening for the scrape of a shoe or the snap of a twig out there in the mist.

"They also said you was the meanest man they'd ever had in the pen," she said. "The most dangerous."

"That so? They did say that?"

"That's what they said."

"Then it'd seem you'd be a little nervous yourself."

"Shoot," she said, "there's meaner men than you right here in the hills. Lots meaner." She sat down on a rock and crossed her legs and smiled at him. "I'm not scared of you one bit."

"You're not here just for your health, either," he said. "Just what is it you're up to, girl?"

"I don't like you to call me that. My name's Dreama Mae."

"They must go for wacky names around here. Dreama Mae. You've got to be kidding."

"Folks around here always thought it was real pretty."

"Well, Dreama Mae, let's hear it. You're after something. What is it?"

"I'll bet you're hungry. You've been on the run four days now. And you haven't got any money either, most likely."

"Never mind all that. Tell me what you—"

"And you sure can't get very far with those jailhouse clothes on, can you?"

"I'm telling you, girl. You'd better—"

"Dreama Mae. Can't you remember? I was going to say I know where you can get something to eat. All you want. And all the clothes you want, too." She leaned

forward. "And money, Mr. Yeager. Lots of money. Maybe almost two thousand dollars."

"Sure," he said.

"I'm telling you the truth."

"You're beautiful, but nuts. Get out of here."

"With food and clothes and money, you could get away."

"And I suppose all these goodies are just lying there, waiting for me to take them. Right?"

"Yes."

"I hate to say this, Dreama Mae, but I think you're trying to set me up for something."

"It's only a mile from here."

"What is?"

"This cabin."

"Where all the goodies are?"

"Yes."

"And you want to take me there?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to do something for me."

"I see. And just exactly what is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to kill somebody."

"Very good. Now I know you're nuts."

"He deserves to die. He did something awful to me. Something terrible." Her eyes narrowed a little. "You've got to kill him for me, Mr. Yeager. It'll be easy for a man like you."

He held her gaze for a long moment, then sank down on a rock, facing her. "You're serious about this, aren't you?"

"I sure am. I want that man dead the worst way, Mr. Yeager."

"This man—does he go with the cabin and the clothes and the money and all?"

She nodded. "His clothes will fit you fine, and there's two thousand dollars in a sugar sack under his mattress."

"How do we split it?"

"The money? I don't want it. All I want is to see him dead."

"This guy wouldn't be your husband, by any chance?"

"No."

"Who, then?"

"He was my fella—once."

"And he did this terrible thing to you, whatever it was, and now you want revenge. Is that it?"

"Us mountain folks are that way," she said quietly.

"So I've heard." He got to his feet. "All right, Dreama Mae. If this is a trap, you'll be the first to get the knife. If it isn't, you've made yourself a deal."

She jumped up quickly, eyes bright. "You'll really do it?"

"Why not? As you say, for a man like me, it'll be easy."

"It really will be," she said over her shoulder as she moved off into the mist. "He's sleeping off a

drunk. He'll be asleep for ages."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind. All you have to do is walk in and do it."

"How far did you say it was?"

"Only a little over a mile. Stay close behind me."

"That's the one thing you don't have to worry about," he said.

She was more sure-footed than he, and she hurried ahead eagerly, pausing impatiently now and then to wait for him to catch up. But the twisting mountain trail was hard going, even for her, and the trip took almost an hour.

Suddenly she stopped and gestured toward a small, ramshackle cabin looming dimly ahead in the mist.

"That's it," she said. "Oh, let's hurry, Mr. Yeager."

"Relax," he said. "And by the way—not that I don't trust you, but you're going inside with me."

She seemed surprised. "Why, sure I am. I want to see you do it."

I'll just bet you do, he thought as they moved silently toward the cabin. *But it'll be the last thing you ever see, Dreama Mae. It's a shame, a pretty girl like you, but I'm sure as hell not leaving any live witnesses.*

She eased the door open carefully and they stepped inside. There was just the one small room, heavy with the stored smell of fried food and

whiskey. A man, full clothed, lay face down on a cot, snoring softly.

"The money's under the mattress," Dreama Mae whispered.

"I know," he said, and drew the knife from his belt.

It was only two paces to the bed, four thrusts of the knife, and it was over.

He put the knife on the floor, rolled the body off the bed, and reached beneath the mattress. It was there, just as she had said it would be: a white cloth bag almost completely filled with paper money.

Holding the bag in his left hand, he glanced at the clothing hanging on nails along the wall, and then bent down to pick up the knife. It was a pity, he reflected, but little Dreama Mae's time had come.

He turned toward the spot where she had been standing only seconds ago, and then froze.

She was no longer there. She was nowhere in the cabin. Yet she hadn't left while he was killing her friend, of that he was certain.

Cold sweat studded his forehead and the skin across his shoulders grew chill. The bag of money seemed suddenly too heavy to hold.

He had taken only one stumbling step toward the door when it jerked open and two men came in. Both were tall and lean, both wore uniforms, and both held revolvers aimed directly at Ralph.

"Easy, fella," the older of the men said. "Just kind of drop that knife and put your hands on top of your head."

Ralph, stunned by the girl's disappearance and the arrival of the officers, hesitated.

"Better do what the sheriff says, sonny," the younger officer said easily. "And do it now, before I blow your fool head off."

Ralph dropped the knife and then the bag, and put his hands on top of his head. "That girl," he heard himself say inanely. "Where'd she go?"

"What girl?" the sheriff said. "You see any girl, Harv?"

"Not me," Harv said. "Walt! You know who this is? It's the con that killed the guard. Ralph Yeager, his name is."

"Well, now," the sheriff said. "Ain't that nice? We was sitting out there in the scrub, waiting for the mist to lift enough to rush the place, and all the time you was in here with the joker we come to arrest." He turned to Harv. "Looks like we won't have to trouble none with Jud after all. He's done for,

thanks to our new friend here. And it looks like we've caught ourself a real prize to take his place."

"Still," Harv said, "I was kind of looking forward to giving old Jud a few lumps for my own sake. After what he done to that poor girl, I'd of purely enjoyed it."

"Can't say I blame you much," the sheriff said. "A man that gets a nice little girl in a family way, and then murders her to solve his problem . . ." He shook his head and turned to spit in the corner. "A man like that deserves to be killed, is how I feel."

Ralph Yeager stared at the sheriff's face. He tried twice to speak before the words would come.

"He murdered her?" he said. "You say he murdered her?"

The sheriff nodded. "Did it last night."

"What was her name?"

"Your face is whiter than that sugar sack," Harv said.

"Please," Ralph said. "Please tell me—what was her name?"

"Dreama Mae Harris," the sheriff said. "What's it to you?"



With an 'eye' such as this, one cannot have too much vision.



THE LITTLE MAN cut through the Miami racetrack crowd with ease. He just seemed to flow through hurrying knots of fans, slipping in and out of places where a bigger man would have to bull his way.

That's exactly what the two men chasing him were doing. They were both too big to move easily in a press, and too much in a hurry to try. They were hard-faced, hard-nosed hoods, and trampling a few assorted citizens didn't bother either of them.

Jimmy Brooklyn was the little

man's name to the trade. He was a professional thief, and a good one who could pick a pocket or a lock with equal facility. He was well up in his sixties though, and the word was that arthritis had slowed him down.

He recognized me just about the time I saw him. His eyes widened a bit, and he slanted toward me through the crowd. I could smell trouble in the way the hoods bored after him, but I didn't move. Jimmy

Brooklyn had never done me any harm. If he wanted to use Johnny Hawk as a tree to dodge behind, it was okay by me.

Neither of us showed any sign of recognition. He came on straight as an arrow, then swerved to carom off my left side. Though I'd begun to suspect what was coming, I swear I never felt his hand in my jacket pocket. Then he was past me, but his two bloodhounds were gaining on Jimmy by brute strength. I made my second mistake of the afternoon by letting myself get in their way. It didn't really slow them down, but it did give them a good look at me. The bigger one was Turkey Wills. I hoped he hadn't recognized me. Then they, too, were gone by.

I felt inside my pocket. There was a soft leather, drawstring pouch that had no business there. I left it where it was and headed for the exit gate and the parking lot where I'd left my car.

Halfway down the exit ramp from the stands I spotted Turkey Wills coming after me. They must have caught Jimmy Brooklyn and found him clean of whatever he'd slipped me. That had brought me back to Turkey's mind, and he'd headed for the exit to box me in. I was already ahead of him, but not far enough. He was coming fast with his hand curled around a gun

in the pocket of his suit coat.

Because of a prejudice on the part of track Security, I don't wear a gun when I go to the races. All I had was a teakwood cane with a fancy stirrup handle that opened out to form a seat. There were only the two of us on the ramp, and the crowd was whooping as the action of the fifth race swung into the far turn. Nobody would hear either a yell for help or a shot.

Trying to look as innocent as possible, I waited for Turkey. He came fast because of his own impatience and the downhill grade. When he was almost up to me I flipped the cane between his legs. He started to fall forward, let go of the gun and threw both hands out to break the fall. I sidestepped fast and kicked him right at the hinge of the jaw as he fell. He skidded downhill a few feet on his face and then didn't even twitch. Turkey was out for the long count. I must have just about torn his head off.

When the track was a couple of miles behind me, I pulled off onto a quiet residential street and parked for a look at whatever Jimmy Brooklyn had fed me. I pulled the drawstring of the pouch and dumped something out in my hand. The effect was like stepping under a cold shower with no advance warning.

It lay there in the palm of my hand and the slanting rays of the afternoon sun made it blaze like a lighthouse beacon. This wasn't quite the world's largest diamond, but it might very well have been the best. In my hand it looked as big as an egg, and the blue-white fires leaped and danced out of its flawless bulk like a genuine flickering flame.

I was scared. I knew that stone. I'd seen its picture on the front page of half a dozen papers just a week before, and it was hotter than the inside of Krakatoa just before the mountain blew.

This was the 'All-Seeing Eye.' Originally it came out of the stone forehead of a heathen goddess in a lost temple somewhere in the Cambodian jungle. It should have been left there.

The last empress of China had worn it inside the Forbidden City. Then a Russian grand duke had it in his money belt when his ex-peasants impaled him on a birch stump in 1917. The one who found it was one of the commissars purged in '32. Somehow the Eye was smuggled into France and sold. It had had four owners since—and all four were dead.

A week ago, the last one interrupted whoever had blown his private safe, and the thieves had put enough lead in his body to weight

a good sized cast-net. They had also killed a couple of guards while getting out of his walled estate.

I couldn't figure how a small-time bum like Jimmy Brooklyn had got his hands on a rock like that, but it didn't really matter right then. I just wished he'd kept it in his own pocket. I'd thought I was helping an old pal who'd sticky-fingered some hood's wallet by mistake. Instead, I was a carrier pigeon with no place to perch but a naked high-tension wire with the power on. I had at least half a million dollars in my hand. I couldn't either keep it or sell it. I couldn't even throw it away.

A stone like that is too big and easily identified to fence. Jimmy's people must have had a market ready before the heist. It was probably an eminently 'respectable' rich collector. I had no idea who.

If the Law found it in my possession, they'd never believe I hadn't engineered the heist. They'd lock me up till hell froze. Even if I tried to turn the stone in, they'd likely just think I lost my nerve. I'd go on trial for murder anyhow.

I could run or hide for a while, but one mob or the other would find me. When that happened I had to have the stone or be killed out of hand.

There was one possible way out. I'd try it because there was literally

nothing better I could think of.

First I drove north about fifty miles along the highway and took a motel suite under another name. Then I phoned a man I knew in the insurance business in Palm Beach.

"I understand there's an iceberg floating someplace along shore here," I said after the preliminary chit-chat.

He caught the point. "That's one way to say it, Johnny. Except it's a real *hot* iceberg. Hot enough to burn even you, if you let yourself get mixed up in it. You haven't, have you?"

"Of course not," I said. "You know I don't go for robbery and murder. I just wondered who has the policy on the merchandise. Just in case I should get a lead on who does have it."

"We don't, Johnny. I can find out who does fast enough. We all work together on a half-million-dollar loss. I'm sure there'd be plenty for you, if you could help us."

"I might. Not sure yet, but I might. If so, I'd rather deal direct with you. Can you get authority?"

"I'll try. Tell you what—come to my office about eight tonight. I'll have some details then."

"Okay," I said. "Eight o'clock. But no stake-out. And if we make a deal I want the cops kept off my back. Otherwise I can't do a thing.

You understand that clearly now?"

"Sure, Johnny. You trust me."

I didn't trust him too far. During the afternoon I put the stone in one of those little 'snack pack' cereal boxes and padded it with some tissue. Then I made a real wrapping job of brown paper, plastic tape and twine.

It was four blocks to the nearest branch post office. I walked over and addressed the package to myself, care of General Delivery in Miami. I used my right name. The post office receipt went into my wallet—I'd insured the package for twenty-five dollars—and the wallet into my right rear trouser pocket.

I had already gotten a gun, a .38, out of the trunk of my car and belt-holstered it. Just having it made me feel better. Then I had dinner in a restaurant near the motel.

In winter the sun goes down early even this far south. It was dark when I picked up my car to drive to Palm Beach. My friend Sam's office was close to Phipps Plaza, so I took the middle bridge over Lake Worth. The season was on, and lights blazed in hotels and private homes and shimmered on the water.

I parked a couple of blocks away and walked to his office. As far as I could tell I wasn't followed—and I usually can tell. A leggy, mini-

skirted, red-haired secretary with a healthy surfer's tan let me in. Sam introduced her as Sally Porter and told her to run along. Our talk was private.

"First of all," I said, "you've got to believe me. I wasn't in on this caper, Sam. Not at all."

"I believe you," he said. "It's not your style."

"So?" I said.

"I've made some calls. I have the authority to deal with you. We all work together on something like this."

"All right, Sam. What's the deal?"

"If the stone is recovered through you, there's a commission of fifty thousand dollars in unmarked bills to cover your effort and the risks you take."

I didn't say anything right away. He misunderstood. "They won't go a dime higher, Johnny. That's generous as it is."

"I know that," I said. "I just want to know exactly what I have to do."

"You don't even have to bring in the stone," he said. "If you tell us where to go, and we find it, you get paid anyway."

"I can't do that," I said. "Right now I'm not sure exactly where it is." That was true enough. "I'll have to get it first myself. I want a promise of immunity for whatever

I have to do to get that stone."

"You have it. Just how much *do* you know?"

"I'll level with you, Sam. I lucked onto some information and followed it up. Two and two added up to four. I *think* the crowd that pulled this heist has run into trouble making delivery to the buyer. The merchandise is so hot they don't want to hold it long. *If* I'm right, and *if* I talk to the right party, there's just a chance they'll let me sell it to you. That part will come on top of the fifty thousand though."

"I expected that, Johnny. Can you quote me a price now?"

"No. Not right now. There are still too many things I don't know for sure. All I can promise to do now is follow up what I've guessed, and play things off the cuff." I knew I had to be careful. What I actually intended to do was 'recover' the stone and turn it over for the reward. I'd claim I had stolen or heisted it from the real thieves. That would be close to the truth and at the same time keep the insurance people off my back.

I left Sam's office with the understanding that I'd call him in a day or so when I had some news.

My car was on a shaded side street a couple of blocks away, parked at the side of one of the big estates in the shadow of a

flowering tulip tree. When I opened the door, somebody came out of the shrubbery fast. I glimpsed him when he moved and I tried to swing around, but he was too fast. A blackjack hit me on the right temple, and the lights went out, but I had seen that he was big, young, and wore expensive slacks and alligator shoes. He hit harder than was needed—which marked him as an amateur. He might have killed me.

When I came around, I saw I had been dragged into the heavy shrubbery bordering the estate. My wallet was gone. That meant he had the post office insurance receipt and my driver's license and other identification. My gun was gone, but my car was still there. He hadn't taken the keys in my side pocket.

I had another gun and a wallet cached under the spare tire in the trunk. The amateur had missed them.

Yet how would an amateur know where I'd be and what to look for?

I wasn't seriously worried yet. Amateurs don't scare Johnny Hawk. All I had to do was watch the general delivery window in the Miami post office where the package was addressed. If anyone showed up with my I.D., I had him. Or I could use other identifi-

cation of my own and make the pickup first.

It all sounded simple, but things were beginning to get complicated. The game had five players now besides myself. There were Jimmy Brooklyn's friends and Turkey Wills' people. They'd kill without a thought. There was the insurance security team and the regular Law. And now the X-factor, the big kid with the sap. That made a real crowd for me to try and keep track of.

It turned out to be just a bit too much of a crowd.

I went back to the motel on the mainland. I was trying to be careful. If an amateur could find me, so could the hoods. I parked across the street from the motel instead of in the slot by my suite. I circled around behind the row of efficiencies to get to the back window and try to spot anyone who might've gotten in while I was out.

This crowd was smart. They had two men watching the back of my place. They stepped out quietly with guns in their hands. I put my own hands shoulder high. One of them rapped a code on the back door, and somebody inside opened up.

So far nobody'd said a word. When they turned the light on, I saw there'd been two more waiting inside. Turkey Wills, with his face

wrapped in bandages, was one of them. The leader was a smaller man with a black mustache and a homburg hat.

"Well," I said, "it's kind of you all to worry about me."

"Shut up, Hawk," Homburg said in easy tones. "Frisk him, boys."

In a couple of minutes I'd lost wallet and gun for the second time that night.

"Now you know I don't have it on me," I said.

Turkey hauled back and belted me with a roundhouse right. A chair went over on the floor with me. "Where is it?" he yelled at me.

I got back up, picked up the chair and sat down. "You don't learn, do you, Turkey? I took you once today, and I'll take you again when I'm ready. Next time I'll break your neck instead of your fool jaw."

He snarled through his bandages and reversed the gun in his hand.

I looked at Homburg. "You tell him, pop," I said.

"Back up and sit down, Wills," the man said. "Right now we need him alive." To me he said, "Do you know who I am?"

"I never saw you before, but you fit the description of a little fink who ramrods for Ace Dansko." I could see that I'd guessed right. "Does it make any difference who

you happen to think you are?"

"Not really. The only thing makes a difference to you right now is how fast you tell us where you've got it."

"We all know the rules," I said. "Just for laughs—how did you find me?"

"The word went up and down the coast this afternoon, Hawk. Every pimp, hustler, tout and small-time heist-man knows you're hot by now. The waitress where you ate turned you in to her bookie. We got a better grapevine than the Law. Now tell us what you did with the big rock Jimmy Brooklyn slipped you. We know it had to be you. He wasn't near anybody else he knew once we started to close in."

"I gave it to Uncle Sam to hold for me."

Wills drew back his hand to let me have it again. I brought up my foot and kicked him, hard, in the groin. He went chalk white and folded onto the floor.

At exactly that moment there was a knock on the door.

We all froze. This time Homburg pulled a gun himself and got over to the side of the door. He motioned to one of his hoods to open it.

Jimmy Brooklyn was standing there with his hands up. "Evening, gents," he said. "Don't nobody do

nothing rash. There's guns all around this joint. Let's us all just have a nice talk." He came in.

"Welcome aboard, Jimmy," I said. "I'm happy to see you."

"You still got the package, Johnny?"

"Not exactly, friend, but these dumb hoods haven't got it," I said. "How did *you* find me?"

"The grapevine sells to anybody, Johnny. Some dame around here spotted you. You ready to do business with us?"

"First of all—who's 'us,' Jimmy? I've got a right to know what gives."

"He's a bigmouth," Homburg said.

Jimmy paid no attention. He went back to the door and opened it. Three men came in. Two were just gunsels. The third was Fat Max Cronin.

"Meet the boss," Jimmy said.

Fat Max was five-foot-four and 180 pounds of meat and muscle. He was rough. He came up, way up, with his feet and hands and teeth and a gun. He used them all—interchangeably—for weapons. He was the kind who would have been happiest back in the crude old days.

Dansko and his boys were slicked-up, miracle-fabric-and-plastic type modern hoods. Fat Max was gorilla-with-the-fur-off. They

don't come any tougher than that.

"Hello, Max," I said.

"You got my rock." He came right to the point. "I want it back. You know I'll get it back."

"Sure, Max," I said. "I know how tough you are. Every time you take a breath, a Chinaman dies."

I heard Homburg suck in his breath, and I watched Max get red in the face. He looked like he didn't believe his ears. "Whatsa-matta?" he said. "You outta your head? Try an' make jokes with me, Hawk, an' you're dead."

"I know that, Max," I said. "I don't joke any more than you do. I'm scared of you. Sure I am, but you better be scared of me too. You can't kill me till you know where the stone is. But there's nothing to stop me from killing you."

He put his head back and laughed. "Nothing? Nothing but my boys here. Are they nothing?"

"You said it, Max," I told the roomful of them. "Your boys are strictly nothing. Don't tempt me to prove it." I was partly bluffing, of course, but I couldn't show weakness.

"You're nuts," he said. "Tell him what he wants to know, Jimmy."

"You tell me, Max," I said. "Any deal we make will be you and me. We deal—we talk."



I got up and walked over to the chair in front of the writing desk and sat down. Before going out I'd taped my last hold-out gun, a two-shot .44 derringer, under the

seat of that chair. I was gambling it was still there.

Max took a minute to think over what I'd said. With a wave of his thumb he cleared Homburg out of

the one comfortable chair and took it for himself.

"Okay, Johnny," he said. "You'n me talk. My boys an' me done the heist. It was supposed to be clean, but the old bum come downstairs with a popgun and we hadda plug him. That waked up the guards so all hell was poppin' for a while. After that, the buyer got jumpy. We couldn't go to his house to make delivery like we planned, and I didn't want to hold a rock that hot any longer'n we had to."

I nodded.

"We fixed it up so he was to take delivery at the track today. I hired Jimmy Brooklyn special because he ain't one of my regulars. As a fingers man he could slip the merchandise right into the buyer's pocket. The money was to be in a briefcase he could pick up at the same time. All smooth and easy like."

One of his hoods brought him a glass of water and laced it with whiskey from a pint bottle.

"Everything was going smooth just like I planned—till Jimmy spots them bums tailing him. One of my boys musta sold out to Dansko. I'll find out. So, Jimmy plants the rock on you and figures to come back later and pick it up when—"

"Not 'pick it up', Max," I said. "Say, 'buy it back'. There'll be a

slight charge for storage and incidentals."

A new expression showed in Max's eyes. This he could understand. "Well, well," he said. "I should've known that was it. You're a fox, Johnny, a fox. How much you want?"

"Whatever you think is right, Max. Considering the risk involved, of course. I'll take you to the stone. Then you pay off whatever you think is right."

Dansko's boys made their play then. For them it was all or nothing and no time to waste. It was four to four, and they were under the gun, but Jimmy Brooklyn is no killer and Max's gun was still holstered. Homburg's signal started the action.

Max's boys weren't real smart. They both shot at the same man, the first to draw. He died fast. His partner shot one of Max's boys in the face and the other in the shoulder. Then he went down with a slug in his throat.

Homburg and his third boy were slower getting their guns out. They just about made it a dead heat with Max. Jimmy Brooklyn hit the floor and tried to wriggle under the bed.

I groped under the chair and found my .44 where I'd left it. My first shot hit Homburg in the back of the head.

The fourth man tried to run. Max let him get to the window and then broke his back with one shot.

The room was full of noise and powder stink. The rug was soaking up blood. Jimmy Brooklyn, half under the bed, squealed like a stuck pig. Max's wounded hood suddenly buckled at the knees and went down on the floor with the rest. What I'd thought was just a shoulder wound had cut a major artery.

That left Max and Jimmy and me in a room with six dead or dying men. Outside, doors were banging open and yells sounding as the other motel guests reacted. The cops would be along any minute.

"Them bums," Max said heatedly. "Them bums never shoulda started that."

"They thought they had to," I said, "as soon as they knew I'd do business with you. Ace Dansko isn't an easy man to alibi to."

"You're smart, Johnny," Max said. "Ain't you worried about getting too smart for your own good?"

"Maybe tomorrow," I said. "And haven't you noticed, Max, that it's always today." I'd been helping myself to a .45 auto from one of the dead hoods. I also found a couple of spare clips and dropped them in a jacket pocket.

Then we heard the thin wail of a police siren. It was getting louder fast.

"Your car out front?" I asked. He nodded. "Then we better take mine. We can get to it out the back way."

"Yeah," he said. "They'll be looking for mine anyway."

"When they get a make on the bodies," I said, "you and I and Dansko and everybody who's ever heard of us will be hotter than a bowl of burned chili. Come on."

"I ain't going with you," Jimmy Brooklyn said at the door. "I didn't kill nobody. I ain't part of your regular bunch. The cops won't be lookin' for me. I want out."

Max gave him a disgusted look. "Suit yourself, punk. Just remember what I'll sure do to you if you talk."

Jimmy Brooklyn slid away into the shadows. He could move like a snake when he wanted to.

We got to my car without any trouble. By the time the sirens converged on the motel we were four blocks away and picking up speed. It'd be a while yet before they knew who to look for and got out their all-points bulletin.

"Where do we go?" I asked.

"Wherever you got the Eye," Max said. "Don't forget about that."

I told him what I'd done with the stone. It was logical enough so he'd believe it and not bother me the rest of the night while we holed up. All I held out was one little detail—the name of the branch post office to which it was addressed.

He gave me a location on the edge of downtown West Palm Beach and said, "A friend of mine owns the house. He uses it for a private game. He'll put us up okay."

His friend agreed. He didn't want to, even overnight—he'd been listening to the late news—but he was scared not to.

Coming in, I'd noticed a public phone booth on the corner. After an hour I told Max I was going to make a call.

"Why not make it here?" he said.

"Oh, come off it, Max," I said. "I want to call my girl. A call from a private house can be traced if anybody picked it up. I won't cross you. It wouldn't even do me any good. The cops will have my prints off that motel furniture by now, and I'm just as hot as you are."

He accepted that.

I went down to the public booth, knowing perfectly well he'd be watching out the window. The call I actually put through was to Sam at his home.

"My God, Johnny," he said,

"can you tell me what's going on?"

"Just fun and games."

"That's not what Lieutenant Brown called it when he phoned me from headquarters. I think the word he used was *massacre*."

"Oh, that," I said. "Just small fry. None of them will be missed."

"Did you get the stone, Johnny?"

"The cops can stop tearing the motel apart," I said. "It's not there, and never was. I'm closer to it than I was though. That's where you come in, Sam. You call those cop friends of yours. I want a back road left open so I can go south in the morning." I told him which road.

"I can't tell the police what to do."

"Sure you can. At least your insurance association can. I've got somebody with me who can lead me right to the stone, but he can't if we're bottled up in a hideout."

"I'll do what I can, Johnny. You just deliver the stone and you'll be all square with the law. We'll have a celebration."

"When we do that," I said, "I want a date with that red-haired secretary of yours."

"Sally? I guess that can be managed."

"What do you mean, guess? She has a steady boyfriend?"

He laughed. "Yep, and a husband too. She doesn't work at the

marriage though, and the boyfriend's got no monopoly. At least that's what I hear. I never dated her myself."

"Sounds interesting," I said. "But first you keep that road clear in the morning."

"I'll try," he said. "And by the way, Johnny . . ."

"Yes?"

"Give my regards to Fat Max Cronin."

"I never heard of him," I said, and hung up.

I slept most of the rest of the night. Fat Max sat up playing two-handed gin with our host and listening to a police-band radio. We were getting plenty of publicity.

We made an early start, but not before other traffic was moving, or we would have been too conspicuous. That cut our margin of time.

On the way I finally told Max the real facts of the trip. When I told about the sapping, the big bum actually laughed.

"You'd better get it back," was all he said.

"I'll get it," I said. "Even if I have to strong-arm the postal clerk, I'll get it."

The road was in worse condition than I'd figured. Sam had kept the cops off it, but he couldn't do anything about mud holes, washouts and deep ruts. To top everything

off, we had a flat tire. Max wouldn't even get out of the car to help change it.

We were a good forty minutes behind schedule, and the branch post office in Miami had been open for a half hour when we finally arrived. There were two cop cars parked in front, so I went down two blocks and around a corner to park. Max and I put on dark glasses and walked back. I was pretty sure it was too late, but we had to try.

There was a news-butcher on the corner a block from the post office. I bought a paper. "What's going on down there?" I asked, looking at the post office.

"Nothing now." He sounded disgusted. "Some hood on the wanted list come in and picked up mail. The clerk didn't recognize him until after he left. Then he thinks he remembers the name and sure enough, when he looks at the notice board, there's a brand new sheet with this hood's name on it. Imagine him having the nerve to use his own name. Then they call the Law."

"Them hoods," I said, "have got the nerve, okay."

Max and I started back for the car. The flat tire had done us in. I said as much.

"You're supposed to be smart, Hawk," Max said. "This punk

with the sap has made a monkey outta you. It ain't doing nothing for your image."

"We'll still nail him."

"You will—not me. Now gimme your car keys. I ain't riding no bus downtown. When you get the rock, call my Miami mouthpiece. And mind you get it or I'll send some boys for a chat with you."

I'd rather have slugged him, but I gave him the keys. I couldn't start a fight, with cops only a block away. I watched him walk to the next block, climb in, and turn the key. The ignition whined for a fraction of a second before the bomb blew.

The sap artist must have stuck around out of sight till I drove by, watched where I parked, then booby-trapped the car while we were around the corner talking to the newsy. It wouldn't take long. He didn't even have to stay and watch. The explosion could be heard for blocks. I left before the crowd gathered.

Three blocks away I found a car with the key in the ignition and drove it back to Palm Beach. By now I thought I knew who to look for. The clue was that somebody'd had to tip the man who to sap. Only a person who knew about the stone and suspected I might already have it would know enough to do that. So the field narrowed

down. There weren't many eligible suspects.

I'd just about decided it had to be Sally. She was the only one with both knowledge and the opportunity to set up the last twenty-four hours. A good confidential secretary knows her boss' business. She'd have the details of my call to Sam. She could have told her boyfriend to wait for me at my car and blackjack me there. She could also tell him approximately what to look for, since I'd already told Sam I wouldn't have the stone with me.

The only chance she'd had to take at that point was that I'd lied when I said I didn't already have the Eye. Even that wasn't too much of a chance. If I'd told the truth, all she and lover-boy had to do was tail me. If and when I got the rock, I could then be hit. Besides, like Sam, she was probably smart enough to figure I wouldn't have phoned in the first place unless I either had the diamond or was sure I could put my hand on it. Of course, she could figure the score as soon as they went through my wallet.

I dialed her number. I didn't expect any answer and so I wasn't disappointed. I ditched my stolen car in downtown West Palm. It took ten minutes to find another with the key left in.

Her apartment door was locked. I got the bolt back with a plastic calendar card inserted through the crack where door and jamb didn't quite meet. There was no dead-bolt.

Once inside I cased the apartment quickly. The furnishings were expensive, and so were the clothes in her closet. There was a 'hidden' wall safe back of a picture, but I left it alone. I made sure she'd bolted the back door from inside, and then waited in the spare room where I could watch through the slightly open door.

I didn't have long to wait. Only by pounding the car on the back road and missing traffic all the way had I managed to beat them back. If they hadn't avoided the turnpike just as I had for fear of police spotters at entrance and exit booths, I'd never have made it.

The lock must have been oiled. I saw the door opening before I heard a thing. Sally came in first, then a man. Both wore expensive slacks and conservative sport shirts.

"We made it," she said when the door closed. "We made it, Bob."

Bob just crossed to a window and looked down at the street to be sure they hadn't been tailed. It was the act of a pro. He had a snub-nosed .38 inside his waistband under the loose shirt tails. The way Sally's bag sagged from its handle,

there was a heavy gun inside that too.

"Let me see it again," he said.

She reached into her bag and came up with a familiar leather bag. She loosened the drawstring and spilled the big diamond out on the table where the sunlight hit it. The stone soaked in the sunlight and blazed it back, multiplied a hundred times, through every perfect facet.

"The All-Seeing Eye," she said with awe. "Look at it, Bob. I swear it's alive and enjoying itself."

The stone flashed like a distilled drop of all the world's treasure and all the world's tears. I think Sally had forgotten what it was doing there.

Bob hadn't. "Come on," he said. "We gotta get this show on the road before somebody wises up. The cruiser's ready, and we can be in Bimini in a few hours, but not if we stand here gawking."

I could see Sally pull herself together. Then she surprised us both. Her hand went into the big leather bag again. This time it came out with a short-barreled Luger, aimed rock-steady at Bob's stomach.

"You're right," she said. "It's time to get the show on the road. Only—you're not going, Bob."

His mouth opened, and his eyes grew wide with shock. His hands were nowhere near the gun in his

belt. He wouldn't stand a chance.

I was getting sick of killing. "You shouldn't try it alone, Sally. Take me instead," I said, as I stepped into the open. I didn't even draw, but they could see my hand close to the big .45 in my belt.

It was her turn for shock, and it cost her the split second when she might still have tried to turn and fire.

"Just freeze," I said. "Now open your hand and let that cannon hit the rug."

She dropped the gun. "Johnny Hawk."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but that wasn't me in my car. Things are tough all over today, honey. You don't get to kill me or your boyfriend."

"I'm not her boyfriend," Bob said suddenly. "It's worse than that. I'm her husband."

Sheer instinct started the alarm bell inside my skull. That was the wrong answer—*wrong!* I tried to step back and draw at one and the same moment, but this time I was the one a fraction late.

I hadn't heard the slick lock move. The door was opening as I turned and a man with a gun stepped through. My hand froze inches away from the butt of my automatic.

"That's right," he said. "Just hold everything, Johnny."

Sally bent down and picked up her gun from the floor. "He scared me," she said. "Let me kill him myself. Let me kill them both, Sam."

Now I knew who the boyfriend was, and how the job had been set up. I knew why he'd risk everything for a fortune and a chance to run away with her. I knew what I should have known before.

Nobody in the world can be quite as dangerous as a trigger-happy amateur who's already got the drop on you. Any little thing can jolt him into firing. I had to do something fast.

"I can still draw and kill you both," I said.

He did what I'd hoped he would. "Don't try," he said, and stepped closer to take my gun with his left hand. His own gun was held out in front of him, cocked and ready. Naturally he figured I wouldn't dare buck a rod that close to my vitals.

He forgot about judo.

I knocked his gun hand off to my left with a fast chop to the wrist that numbed his fingers. As he swung a little to the right I stepped in. My own right hand caught his left elbow and my right leg hooked behind his. He was off balance then, and my fingers hit the elbow pressure-point and sent pain screaming down to his toes. I yanked and rolled him

over my hip to slam, face first, onto the floor. By then he'd dropped his gun.

My own gun was out before he hit the floor.

Sally took one look at my face and dropped the Luger for the second time. "What," she said, "are you going to do?"

"If you were me, what would *you* do?" I asked. Her eyes widened and she flinched.

"You're lucky I'm still me," I said, and laughed at the hatred in her face.

Sam had managed to sit up on the rug. "You might as well shoot, Johnny," he said. "The way I've fouled up, I'm not worth keeping."

"You are to me, Sam," I said. "You are to me. Now all of you listen close. If you do what I say, maybe nobody has to get killed. It's up to you."

"What do you mean?" Sam said.

"I mean *I'm* not stupid enough to think I could run far with a diamond that size, or stay alive for long. Instead, I'll settle for the fifty thousand dollar commission as promised."

They looked at me dumbfoundedly.

"You're going to get on the phone, Sam," I said, "and phone the cops and the F.B.I. You'll tell them I recovered the diamond and that I've been working for you all the time. I brought it here on your orders for security reasons. You see that no charges are pressed against me. Then you fetch me a cashier's check for fifty grand, and put the stone in a bank vault."

"But—" Sam started.

"What about the three of you?" I finished for him. "Nothing, Sam; nothing at all. I'm not the Law. You all go about your business, and I say nothing. As far as anybody knows from me, this was all a straight business deal and no complications. You have my word, and you know it's good."

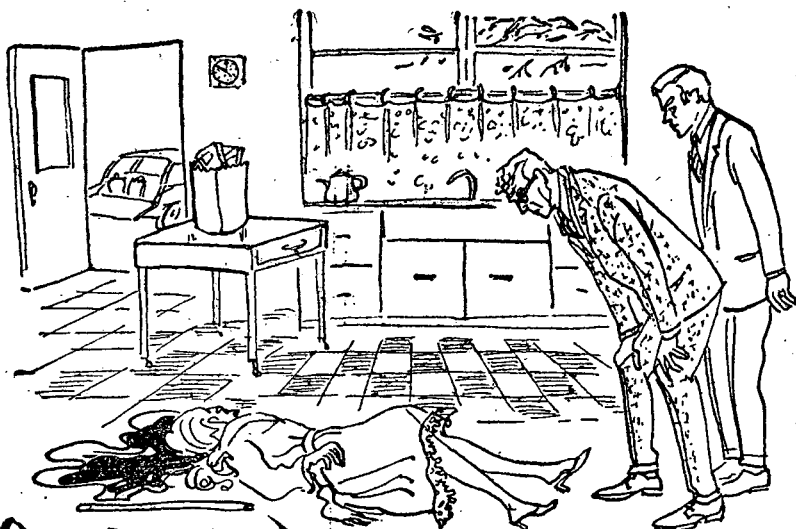
"Yes," he said, "I know it's good. But why, Johnny?"

"I don't hate anybody," I said. "I have the money and a clear ticket with the cops. Why should I bother about you all?"

So that's the way we did it. I'm glad I'm not Sam.



Every day it becomes more evident that the universe is a progression of interrelated phenomena.



NOTHING BUT

CAPTAIN of Detectives Mike Galton, or "the old man" as he was known to his underlings, looked down at the woman's body. It was dressed in a nightgown and a blue flannel robe and lay on the kitchen floor in a crumpled heap. The woman was a brunette, thirty-three years old, and perhaps twenty

pounds overweight. Whether she was pretty or not was hard to tell from the way her head was smashed. The instrument that did the damage, a length of lead pipe, lay beside her. There was a bag of groceries on the kitchen table, and the back door was open.

"Photo been called?" the old

man asked William Dennis, the young detective beside him.

"Yes, sir, and the M.E."

The old man turned and went back to the little front parlor where Joseph Eldridge, the dead woman's husband, sat twisting his hands between his knees. A policeman stood nearby, trying to look invisible.

"That piece of pipe," the old man said to the husband. "Did that come from somewhere in the house?"

Joseph Eldridge focused on the detective's face. He was a lean, handsome man in his mid-thirties though now he looked harrowed and white. "No," he said, shaking his head. "I never saw it before."

"You want to tell it again—ex-

by Hillary
Waugh



HUMAN NATURE

actly what happened this a.m.?"

"I went to do the marketing, same as every Saturday morning—"

"You do the marketing?"

"My wife teaches school all week. I want—wanted her to relax on weekends."

"You work, Mr. Eldridge?"

"Me?" He looked startled.

"Yeah. I sell insurance." Then he said, "I didn't touch her money, if that's what you mean. We lived on what I make."

"But she taught?"

Joseph Eldridge nodded. "She taught because she loved teaching. She didn't want to give it up when we married, and I didn't make

her," he said, sighing deeply.

Mike Galton nodded. "And you do the marketing Saturday mornings. Tell me about this morning."

Eldridge shrugged and looked down at the floor. He spoke in a choked voice. "There's nothing to tell, really. I went to the supermarket, I bought the week's groceries, I drove home, came in the back door and—and found her."

"Any idea who did it?"

He shook his head slowly. "I can't imagine."

Detective Dennis said, "Did you go into the bedroom?"

Eldridge nodded. "When I called you. The phone's in there."

"You touch anything?"

"No."

Dennis said to the old man, "The bedroom's been ransacked, Captain. The bureau drawers, the closets."

Galton said, "You have valuables in the house, Mr. Eldridge?"

"Not anything much. A few dollars maybe, and May had a couple of rings that might have been worth a little—a hundred bucks or so."

The photographer arrived and Galton and Dennis took him out to the kitchen. Then the medical examiner came and was also shown the scene.

Galton returned to the husband. "What time did you go to the

store, Mr. Eldridge, and what time did you get back?"

"I left the house around nine o'clock, give or take ten minutes. I wasn't noticing the time."

"Somewhere between eight-fifty and nine-ten, then?"

"That sounds about right."

"And you got home?"

"I didn't notice. I came in. I saw her. I guess after that I just stopped thinking."

"Can you give me a rough idea what the time was?"

Eldridge tried to think. "About half an hour ago, I suppose. I phoned the police, and then—" He looked up. "Wait, I do remember. The clock in the store said twenty of eleven when I was checking out. Five minutes to load the car and five minutes to get home here—Call it about ten minutes of eleven when I found her."

"How long have you been married, Mr. Eldridge?"

"Ten years in June."

"No children?"

"No."

"Did she have any enemies that you know of?"

"She couldn't have. Everybody loved her."

"Any relatives?"

"Her mother, two brothers and a sister. But they live on the west coast."

The old man went back to the

kitchen. The medical examiner told him the woman had been beaten to death with the pipe. The photographer said he'd got his pictures, and did the captain want him to dust for fingerprints?

"See if you can get anything off the pipe," the old man said. "And drawers in the bedroom. I understand the bureaus have been ransacked."

Dennis said, "Do you believe the burglar theory?"

The old man shrugged. "It's possible there was a burglar. It's possible Eldridge killed her and faked the burglary. It's possible someone else killed her and faked the burglary." He said to the doctor, "Do you think she was beaten unnecessarily—by someone who hated her rather than someone who wanted to rob her?"

The doctor said he couldn't venture an opinion. He sat down at the kitchen table to fill out his papers.

The body was lying face up now, and Captain Galton said to Dennis, "See if you can find a sheet or something and cover her."

Policewoman Jenny Galton came through from the livingroom. She was a young and pretty redhead, but poised and experienced despite her youth, for she was Mike Galton's daughter. "Hi, Pops," she said. "I hear I'm to

search a body." Then she saw the dead woman and she sobered. "That's not very pretty," she said. "It's a homicide, then?"

Galton said, "It's a homicide, pet, and a nasty one."

While Jenny searched the apparel on the body, Galton went outside for a look around. The house was a tiny brick bungalow in an area of tiny brick bungalows, packed together on midget lots with one-car garages in back and just room for a driveway between. Joseph Eldridge's station wagon was standing in front of the garage and two steps from the stoop. In the back were two more bags of groceries like the one on the kitchen table.

Detective Dennis came out to join him. "No fingerprints on the pipe," he said, "and it doesn't look like there's going to be anything on the bureau knobs either." He smiled wryly. "We aren't left with much."

"We never are when there are no witnesses." Galton sighed and turned to the porch steps. "Well, I guess the next step is to canvass the neighborhood, see if there've been any strangers around—salesmen, vagrants, and the like—and see if anybody can tell us anything about the Eldridges. I'd like to know whether his grief is as real as it looks."

A sheet was over the body when

they came back in, and Jenny told them the woman was missing her wedding and engagement rings. Otherwise there was nothing to report.

"You get any ideas when you examined the body, kitten? Any female intuition?"

She said, "If you mean, do I think Mr. Eldridge is telling the truth, I don't know. Nothing I found is inconsistent with his story. It could have happened like that."

The captain went on into the little bedroom. The police photographer was putting away his fingerprint equipment and shaking his head. "Just smudges," he said. "One partial on the bureau top but it looks like the woman's."

The old man and Dennis brought Mr. Eldridge into the bedroom then to make a search. He looked through the drawers and his wife's purse. He found there was no money in the purse and her jewelry box was missing from the drawers.

"You got any insurance on the jewelry?" Dennis asked him.

Eldridge shook his head. "It wasn't worth that much."

The old man showed him a note on the telephone pad. It said: "Membership comm. Tues. at 4:00."

"May wrote that," Eldridge told him. "They usually meet at the

church on Mondays. I guess it got changed."

"Do you know when she received the call?"

"I don't have any idea. It wasn't when I was around."

"Do you know who would have made the call?"

Eldridge said it was probably the committee chairman. Her name was Mrs. Bertha Crump, and the old man found her number in the address book on the phone table.

Dennis took Eldridge back to the livingroom while Galton got the woman on the line. Yes, she told him, she was the one who called May Eldridge about the change. She'd called her just that morning, in fact.

"Do you know what time this morning, Mrs. Crump?"

"About quarter past nine. Why, is something the matter?"

"Yes, something is the matter. But can you say for sure that you made the call at quarter past nine?"

"Well," Mrs. Crump said hesitantly, "I wouldn't want to swear to it. But I do know that I don't make phone calls before nine o'clock, and Mrs. Eldridge was the fourth person I talked to about the change. It couldn't have been before quarter past nine. Of that I'm sure."

"It was Mrs. Eldridge who an-

swered the phone?" Galton said.

"Yes."

"How long did the two of you talk?"

"Oh, perhaps two minutes. Usually I'd talk longer but I had five others to call so I didn't want to dally."

"Did she mention her husband at all?"

Mrs. Crump said no, and asked again what the trouble was.

Galton told her, helped her over her shock, and questioned her some more, but the answers didn't change.

When he hung up, Galton went back to Eldridge and had him tell the story over again two more times. It came out the same way, but with two additions. He knew nothing of Mrs. Crump's phone call, for he had already left. He knew of nobody who could support his alibi.

The hearse pulled into the drive and two morgue attendants came through the back door with a stretcher. Galton watched them lift the body onto it with practiced precision and take it out. He sent the patrolman back to his beat and, with Detective Dennis, started a canvass of the neighborhood to see what they could learn.

The brick bungalow abutting the Eldridges' driveway was their first stop and the door was an-

swered by a trim, young, bottled blonde in shorts and halter. Galton showed his badge, apologized for the intrusion, and explained about the death next door.

"Yeah," the woman said. "I saw the hearse. You say she was killed, huh? Gee, that's terrible."

"Did you know them well, Mrs. —ah—"

"Jenks. Mimi Jenks. No, I didn't know them except to say hello to."

"What about Mr. Jenks?"

The woman laughed. "Mr. Jenks sends me an alimony check once a month. That's all I know about him, or care."

Galton said, "Oh." Then he said, "Can you tell me anything about this morning? Did you see anything or hear anything next door?"

Mrs. Jenks frowned in thought. Then she said, "I heard their car go out at nine o'clock. I can't think of anything else."

"Did you say nine o'clock?"

She shrugged. "Well, it might not have been exactly nine o'clock. It might have been two or three minutes after."

"How do you remember the time so well?"

She laughed. "That's easy. I got up at nine. I looked at the clock. And I had just got out of bed when I heard their car start up."

"And you saw or heard nothing else?"

"Nothing else. Until the hearse."

"You didn't hear his car return?"

She shook her head. "I only heard it go out because the bedroom's on that side of the house and the window was open."

"I see." Galton pursed his lips. "One more question. You know anything about what kind of a marriage they had? They get along, they fight, or what?"

Mrs. Jenks said she didn't have any idea. All she knew was, she never heard them fight. She never heard anything from them at all.

"I see. Now, one last thing. It's very important. Are you absolutely sure it was nine o'clock when he drove away?"

"Absolutely, because I looked at the clock when I got up and then I did my exercises by the window for fifteen minutes and I remember the car wasn't there. Why is that so important?"

"Because it supports his own story that that's when he went shopping."

"I see. I'm his alibi, in other words?"

"Yes, you could call it that."

"I'm glad I can help."

"So are we. You'll be asked to testify, of course."

She smiled. "Any time."

Galton and Dennis tried the family on the other side of the Eldridges' but they could not help at

all, nor could anyone else in the neighborhood. No one had noticed suspicious strangers around. No one had seen Eldridge go to the supermarket.

The old man and his youthful companion returned to police headquarters at half past twelve. The chief was there and so was Jenny.

"We're up a tree," Dennis told the chief. "Absolutely no clues." He went on to explain the problem. Mr. Eldridge left the house between nine and nine-five. Mrs. Eldridge received a phone call from Mrs. Crump between nine-fifteen and nine-twenty. Between nine-twenty, when she hung up, and ten-fifty, when Mr. Eldridge returned, someone came in the back door, beat Mrs. Eldridge to death with a pipe, ransacked the bureau in the bedroom, and made off with a box of inexpensive jewelry and the few dollars in Mrs. Eldridge's purse.

The chief said, "Is that how you see it?" to the old man, but Galton's attention was on his daughter.

"You're a right pretty girl, kitten," he said. "Now that I notice, I'm struck by that fact."

She laughed and told him he was dotty.

"No, I'm not dotty, I'm serious. What are your measurements, thir-

ty-eight, twenty-three, thirty-six?"

"That's reasonably close. Why?"

"Because when we go home for lunch, you're going to change into your prettiest dress. Then we're going to see what kind of an actress you are."

Jenny, the chief, and William Dennis all were curious, but the old man merely said very mysteriously, "Wait and see."

At half past two that afternoon, the old man rang Mrs. Jenks' doorbell again. He smiled and said he was sorry to trouble her but could she come down to headquarters so they could take her statement? She said she'd be glad to oblige and got her coat.

On the way he told her how much he appreciated her cooperation and she said she was only doing her duty. As an innocent man's only alibi, she had to testify.

"Yes," the old man said, "except, you will be pleased to learn, the burden is no longer solely on your own shoulders. We've found someone else to verify his alibi."

"Oh?" she said, and turned to look at him. "Who?"

"A young woman he knows. She's come forward to testify that she saw him enter the supermarket at ten minutes past nine."

Mrs. Jenks said, "Oh," again, in a very strange voice.

The chief and William Dennis

were in the squad room when the old man brought Mrs. Jenks in. He introduced her and told her that they'd take her statement in just a few minutes, and if she'd wait in the other room . . . He took her to the door and there was Jenny, sitting on the couch in her prettiest dress, her hair just so, looking as luscious as chocolate cake. "This is Miss Murphy, Mrs. Jenks," the old man said. "She's the one I was telling you about, the one who saw Mr. Eldridge in the supermarket. Isn't that right, Miss Murphy?"

Mrs. Jenks stopped dead in the doorway but "Miss Murphy" didn't seem to notice. "That's right," she said brightly. "Joe came in at exactly ten minutes past nine. I know because I was looking at my watch."

Captain Galton smiled with approval, but Mrs. Jenks didn't smile at all. "She's a liar," she said.

Miss Murphy put her nose in the air. "I ought to know when Joe came in," she said. "I'm the one who was looking at my watch."

"She's a liar," Mrs. Jenks repeated in a louder voice. "Because Joe Eldridge didn't leave his house until half past nine."

"Half past nine?" the captain said.

"Half past nine," she told him. "Because that's how long it took that two-timing cheat to bash in

his wife's head. And he didn't go to the store for five more minutes after that because he got blood on his shirt and had to change it. I know, because the bloody one is in the bottom of my laundry bag, wrapped around her jewelry box."

Captain Galton said, "Is that right?" but Mrs. Jenks wasn't paying any attention to him.

She was pointing at "Miss Murphy" and saying, "So if you think you're going to run off with him to the Virgin Islands while I'm left holding the bag, forget it. He's going to jail. And I'm going to put him there."

She told it all to the detectives and a tape recorder, how Eldridge promised her marriage and a life of Caribbean luxury in return for a murder alibi. Then they got the district attorney in and she went over it again. After that, they sent two policemen out with a warrant for Mr. Eldridge's arrest.

In the squad room, Detective William Dennis and the chief of police looked at Captain Galton and shook their heads. "Absolutely amazing," they said.

"It's nothing but human nature," the old man replied. "I figured the moment she thought a younger and prettier girl was also lying to save Eldridge's neck, she'd blow his alibi to kingdom come."

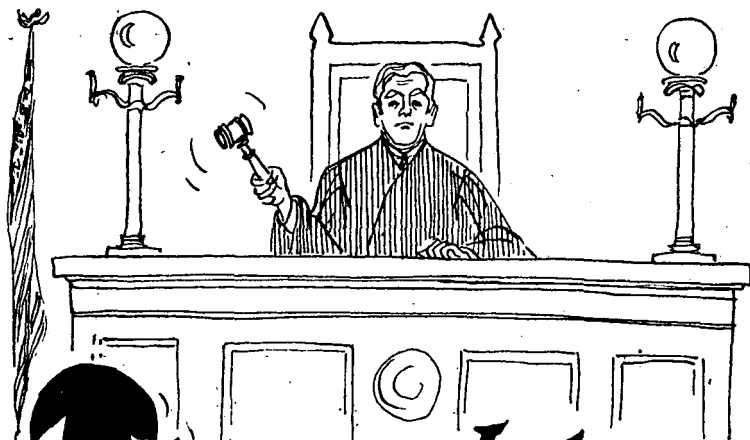
Dennis said, "That, I understand. But how did you know she and Eldridge were a twosome to begin with? That's what amazes me. What tipped you off?"

The old man said, "Human nature again, Bill. Put a sexy young grass widow next door to a handsome free-lance insurance agent whose wife is away at work all day and you can expect there's going to be a situation. And when the wife has ten years' worth of teaching salary lying around unspent, you know the answer to that situation isn't going to be divorce, it's going to be murder.

"We had the murder, so one look at the woman next door was all I needed to know the whole story. It wasn't the piece of pipe or the missing jewelry or the stories they told that gave it away. It was her shorts, her halter, and her bleached blonde hair."



Those who sit in judgment must, indeed, be flexible within reason—and sometimes beyond.



Who Sits in Judgment

by Michael Zuroy

JUDGE FRISBIE, Court of Special Sessions, was favorably known to defense attorneys as an open-minded judge, flexible within reason, understanding of the pressures and twists of fate that might drive men to crime.

Now, before passing sentence, he was interrogating a defendant who had pleaded guilty to a jewelry store larceny. Hands clasped, frowning at the commonplace man

below, Judge Frisbie said, "Ronald Meggs, this court was not born yesterday. Crime becomes chronic. Your record suggests that it has so become for you, though you are being judged today on only the single felony. Still, I see a conflict of character, a history of steady, legiti-

mate employment and a decent family life, as your attorney has shown. This is not a typical criminal pattern. Why, then, the excursions into crime? Do you have a lawless drive? Is it the excitement? Or do you find crime a handy sideline? Speak frankly. This court wishes to help, as well as penalize."

"Judge, I'd like nothing better than to be a respectable citizen," the man said, "but I couldn't afford it."

"How's that?"

"Expenses, Judge. They kept getting ahead of me. Doctor bills, taxes, insurance, rent, car costs, food, and all the time the value of the dollar shrinking. I knew it was wrong, Judge, but I had to do something."

"We all face the problem of mounting costs, Meggs," Judge Frisbie said gravely. "Suppose everybody turned to crime?"

"I know, Judge, I know."

"I understand your hardships, but you must resist desperation. The criminal impulse must be fought."

"I kept telling myself that, Judge. This was going to be absolutely my last job, only I got caught."

"So crime didn't pay, did it, Meggs? You lose income in jail and come out with even worse financial problems."

"I was a fool. If I only could go

back, Judge. If I only could go—"

"How often that sentiment is voiced," Judge Frisbie said sadly. "No one goes back, Meggs, but we learn. I hope that you have. I'm giving you a light sentence this time—six months. If I see you here again, it won't be light."

"Thank you, Judge," Meggs said earnestly. "I won't be back."

Next on the calendar was a wife-beating case. This plea, too, was guilty.

"How could you beat a woman?" Judge Frisbie asked the stocky defendant, in a tone both reproving and humanely interested.

"It wasn't easy, Your Honor," the defendant, a Mr. Rothbuck, said. "Eleanor was no pushover."

The judge looked stern. "This court deplores brutality. Especially to a woman."

"I'm no animal, Your Honor. For almost twenty years, I never laid a finger on her. Finally I lost patience."

"With what?"

"She was a nag. Know what I mean?"

"Tell me."

"Harry, get up, get up, get up, Harry, go to bed, go to bed, Harry, I want you home by six, Harry, don't spill ashes on the carpet, Harry, when are you going to fix the ceiling, Harry, mow the lawn, kill those flies, Harry, I don't want

you bowling with those bums, Harry, I saw you looking at that girl, Harry, Harry, Harry—until the time I let her have it.”

“I hope you are at least sorry.”

“No, Your Honor,” Mr. Rothbuck said firmly. “I should have done it years ago; would have gotten her off my back. This taught her a lesson.”

“Did it?”

The prosecuting attorney came forward and spoke to the judge.

“I see,” Judge Frisbie said thoughtfully. “Mrs. Rothbuck wants to drop the complaint.” He looked at Mrs. Rothbuck, sitting at the front of the full courtroom, eyes fixed on her husband with obvious love. Catching the judge’s glance, she nodded vigorously. “Hm,” the judge said. “Case dismissed.”

Divested of the dignity of bench and court, out on the street Grover Frisbie was an ordinary looking man in his forties, not a type to be remembered or to stand out in a crowd. On his way home after court, clacking along on the Long Island Railroad, looking out at the shifting dwellings and commercial areas, he reflected again on the range of human problems he encountered in court and how illuminating they were of life. Well, all humans had their weaknesses . . .

At the Hickoryville station, he left the train and walked over the

graded gravel to the spot where his shining, luxurious car was parked. He had to admit the pleasure it gave him, but a compact would have been more practical, only Roxanne didn’t think an inexpensive car suited the standing of a judge. Driving through the select, broad-lawned area, he arrived at his own considerable white-bricked home and turned up the curving driveway into the three-car garage wing.

He found Roxanne in the front sitting room. She was a handsome woman who somewhat outweighed him. She kissed him briskly. “Have a good day, dear, that’s nice. Try to be fresh for the soiree we’re giving tonight; take a little nap, perhaps. I want you to stay out of the way of the caterers anyway. Also, remember, Grover, stay away from onions.”

“Right,” Judge Frisbie said to his wife. “No onions.”

“Have you spoken to a contractor yet about the game-room alterations?”

“Not yet. I will.”

“Please do. Must I keep reminding you? And yes, my car has developed palpitations. I don’t want to be embarrassed by being stuck in public traffic.”

“I’ll have it checked.”

“Why spend money on repairs? I’d rather trade it in on a new one.

Since Susan is old enough now to have her own car, perhaps you can get a good deal on two cars."

"I'll think about it."

"You have mail from Morton's school. It has the appearance of a bill."

"It must be a bill."

"I hope you keep these things up-to-date. It doesn't look right, otherwise, especially for a judge. Nor does ragged shrubbery. Our landscaping hasn't been too good lately."

"I hadn't noticed."

"People do. I want you to change our landscaping service. Pay a little more for better service if necessary. By the way, something nice happened today. I was able to pick up a Minton majolica vase for only seventy-six dollars."

Judge Frisbie looked at his wife. He sighed heavily, opened his mouth, then closed it again. Long ago he had learned that vocally he was outclassed. "Think I'll wash up," he said.

"Don't take any drinks before the party," she called after him. "And drink very lightly during the party, if at all. Even a suggestion of intoxication does not set well on a judge, particularly if he is the host."

"All right," Judge Frisbie said.

In his study, afterwards, he did some of his desk work before dressing for the party. There was an-

other crop of bills in the mail besides the large school bill; insurance bills, property taxes—painful enough last year, raised outrageously this year—credit card charges, department store invoices . . . Too discouraging to examine them further; he tossed them into a desk tray, thinking about all his other outstanding obligations—car payments, mortgage payments, medical, plumbing, painting, seemingly without end. He was keenly aware of his unfinished income tax return waiting in a drawer, which would take another big chunk of money. There was that confounded party tonight; no telling what that would come to, but it would be huge. Roxanne's eternal expenditures, interest on his debt . . . He didn't have the nerve to total the money he'd need, but he did know that it was more than he could possibly raise through regular channels. Bills seemed to breed and multiply like live things, overwhelming his income.

He was just plain over his head, again.

Judge Frisbie drummed his fingers on the desk, trying to put off the decision, but knowing that he would have to do it again, soon. He didn't want to, but no other way could he find. He had to.

The affair was sumptuous. Judge Frisbie himself felt dazzled.

Streamers of lights strung on house and grounds, wine flowing from fountains in the form of cherubs, mountains of delicacies covering the great tables, unlimited cocktails and drinks, professional musicians, pert waitresses in plum-colored uniforms flitting about, main courses served at tables scintillating with fine silver and crystal, a fantastic centerpiece—the caterer had gone all out. Judge Frisbie would have appreciated it if he hadn't been paying for it.

People everywhere, all invited by Roxanne, and the place was swarming. He felt his facial muscles fixing themselves into an expression that he hoped was gracious. Conversation surged in floods and torrents, a few drops occasionally directed at him. "Judge, why can't something be done about this increasing crime?" "What are the real causes of crime?" "Do you believe in capital punishment?" "What about rehabilitation?"

"It's a shame they can't catch this Hooded Bandit," a stout woman remarked.

"He seems to strike at will," a man named Runnle said. "Then lies low until people forget and—whammo! Another big robbery."

"I think it's terribly sinister the way he wears this hood," a Mrs. Pennster said. "This black hood. Do you suppose his face is too hor-

rible to behold, like the Phantom of the Opera?"

"I'd say it's a psychological device as much as a mask—to terrorize his victims," another man named Kolby said.

"It makes me nervous to know he's lurking somewhere," the stout woman said. "Are the police on his trail, Judge?"

"I really don't know," Judge Frisbie answered. "Let's hope he'll be brought to justice."

Mrs. Pennster said, "He's robbed so many places on the Island, people will stop keeping valuables on their premises."

Mr. Kolby laughed. "That, dear lady, would go against human nature. Women enjoy having their jewels on hand, don't they? Many wealthy men like plenty of cash around, regarding it as an advantage of wealth. Some need it. Some hide cash at home to avoid paying higher taxes. It's also human nature for people to feel that *they* won't be robbed, the odds being against it. Furthermore, consider that most valuables are insured. Dear lady, I fear that the affluent neighborhoods will always provide rich spoils for the enterprising robber."

"I'll go along there," Mr. Runnle said. "Take just the people at this party. I'll bet there's enough in their homes right now to pay the national debt. Eh, Judge?"

"Well, a good part of it." Judge Frisbie laughed, politely.

A corporation director, a Mr. Slade, said, "I know people who think nothing of keeping forty or fifty thousand on hand. Don't see that. Ten, fifteen thousand is plenty."

Mr. Kolby said, "To my mind, guarding valuables is not the solution to crime, anyway. Education is the solution. When enough people are educated and conditioned to hold the law sacred—well, like Judge Frisbie—crime will cease to be a problem."

"Thank you," Judge Frisbie said.

The conversation faded and the group broke up. Following dinner, the party picked up noise and warmth. Judge Frisbie found himself apart, watching the milling throngs. Nobody was paying attention to him anymore, which was often the case at Roxanne's affairs: he was no social lion with this kind of crowd. Roxanne, handsome, formidable, was absorbed within a glittering, chattering group. He watched the dancers on the floor. *The invisible man*, he thought. *A ghost in his own home.*

It struck him; since it was so, *why not? Why not now, right now?* They'd be here for hours, away from their homes, on ice.

It was a setup, an opportunity. No one would miss him. No one

would entertain the thought that he hadn't been at the party all night. He could slip away, be back soon, as though he'd never left.

Speculatively, his eyes roved over the throng, touching here, there, settling at last on the Bronchards. They were wealthy. She could only be wearing a small part of her jewelry. Tom Bronchard liked to flash cash around. Their home was within easy driving range.

He faded from the gathering, away from the hubbub, up to the isolation and comparative quiet of his study, picking up an inconspicuous business suit from his wardrobe on the way. Behind the locked door of his study he changed from evening wear into the suit. He unlocked a lower drawer of his filing cabinet, rolled it out and removed a glinting, blued-steel automatic, pocketed it. Then he took out the dead-black hood and, finally, the black sack he used for the loot.

Grimly, he smiled. Might shock a few people to know the identity of the Hooded Bandit, but this must be the last time, he told himself. He had to stop before the law of averages got him. The scandal would rock the Island if he were ever caught. Roxanne must never find out; it would ruin her; the kids, too. Besides, the guilt bothered him, especially sitting in court. Yes, this would be absolutely the

last time, just a little help over this latest financial bind.

The last time. Where had he heard those words? In court, this morning; the Ronald Meggs case. Meggs had said, "*. . . was going to be absolutely my last job, only I got caught.*"

Judge Frisbie hesitated. Then he shook off the foreboding. He had to get out of this money bind. *Then*—though he flinched at the thought—he'd pull the reins in on Roxanne, do some drastic economizing, live within his income.

He went down the deserted back stairs, opened the rear door of the garage and drove out, away from the massed parked cars around his home.

A twenty-minute drive over the good highways of the Island and he was in the exclusive neighborhood where the Bronchard residence was. The homes were secluded by their extensive grounds here, a help. The Bronchards' street was in genteel, deserted, dim repose.

He parked a few hundred feet away and strolled casually to the bulking house, slipped around it to the rear and waited, listening. No barking, no growling; no dog. Good.

There was a lighted lower window in the servants' quarters, but he'd expected the servants might be home. He never had trouble cow-

ing the servants. He didn't blame them. Why risk their skins protecting someone else's property?

He stole to the window and looked in. A middle-aged couple was sitting at a table, playing cards, partly filled beer glasses at their elbows.

Judge Frisbie took the black hood from his pocket and put it over his head. The bottom window was partly open for air; he flung it up the rest of the way and leaned into the room, presenting his automatic.

The man's mouth fell open, his face went ashen. The woman gave a little scream and stared. "The Hooded Bandit!" the man cried.

"Just do what you're told and you won't get hurt," Judge Frisbie said, keeping his voice calm and reassuring. He climbed into the room, pulled the shade down behind him. "We'll start with the master bedroom. I want the money and the jewels. Cooperate and you'll be all right, don't and I'll shoot. Got that straight?"

"Yes, sir," the man quavered.

"Get up."

They rose shakily.

"Lead the way and flick on the lights," Frisbie ordered the woman. "I'll have the gun on your husband, so behave."

In the master bedroom, Judge Frisbie looked around. Most people

didn't have safes. They stored valuables in unoriginal places. "Where's the stuff?" he asked. Save time if he could get them to show him what they knew; otherwise he'd ransack each likely room systematically, forcing them to help.

"I believe there are some jewels in this drawer, sir," the man said.

"Open it."

The man obeyed, snatched something out and whirled around. "Now you just get your hands up!" he ordered shakily. He was holding a revolver that trembled violently.

The surprise paralyzed Judge Frisbie for an instant. This, he'd never encountered. Since when did they come this loyal? The man was an idiot for nerve.

"Hands up," the man repeated.

"Drop that gun," Judge Frisbie said.

There was a thunderous clap as the man fired. For a few seconds afterwards the two men stood staring at each other. Judge Frisbie had a detached realization that he had not been hit. So it had come to this, actual shooting. The first time this had happened. He could easily shoot the man down, but of course that was out of the question. He couldn't shoot anybody.

Judge Frisbie turned and ran.

He tore downstairs and out of the house, hearing another shot be-

hind him. He ran to the street and toward his car and more shots followed him. Starting the car, he made a screeching takeoff, a glimpse over his shoulder showing that the man was still running toward him. The glimpse also showed something else, a revolving blue light was swinging in from a crossroad; a police car, attracted by the shots.

In the rear-view mirror, Judge Frisbie saw it slow briefly where the servant must have shouted something, then leap ahead.

Now he was in for it, he knew.

Fingers seemed to snap in apprehension within his head. He couldn't afford even to let them get close enough to read his license plate. That would be the end. He tromped down harder on the accelerator, though he was already traveling at a speed for which this winding residential street was never designed. Pebbles tore loose from the road under his tires and went skittering. He slammed full tilt into curves, braking and gunning desperately, skidding, sliding broadside, pulling out with roaring motor. Glances into his rear-view mirror showed the blue roof light still tied to him, even somewhat closer.

Up ahead and higher, streamers of lights pushed by bright beads were moving in opposed directions on the main highway. Perhaps he

could lose them there. He swung into the highway entrance when it appeared out of the night; the car heeled around the approach, tires screaming. He shot into the highway, praying he wouldn't collide with anybody; no time to check. A blasting horn told him he'd come close, his side mirror showing him a wildly swerving car just behind. Sorry, Judge Frisbie thought, and streaked ahead.

His mirror showed the blue police light again, on his tail, still closer, but the road was good now. He floored the pedal. Wind gobbled and trilled in the window glass, the engine climbed to a high whine. Lights flashed past, blurring. Cars slid past as though on conveyor belts. Keyed up to the precision of a computer, he controlled the wheel, hurtling in and out of traffic.

The rotating blue light was still there, closer. He realized that the doleful wailing of the police siren was in his ears.

There would be only one end to this, Judge Frisbie reflected. They'd get him. They'd overhaul him, he'd end up in a wreck or other police cars would soon close in. Something different had to be done.

Hardly understanding his own mind, he swerved to the side of the road, braking hard. Tires screamed in tortured protest until

the car slowed. Then he turned right, off the highway, across the shoulder, into the grass and brush, heading cross-country.

Vaguely he heard a screeching of brakes back on the highway, the police car trying not to overshoot. He went bumping down a grassy dip, then bumped up a rise, scraping branches, dodging boulders and trees. Past the top, the ground fell sharply. The car went skidding and sliding down, turning sideways, turning backward, turning in slow, complete circles as it descended. At the bottom, he straightened and drove, twisting and angling, through the underbrush of the uneven ground. He splashed through a small brook, hoping the wheels wouldn't bog down. He drove up a gentle swell, then into a series of meandering, undulating hills, and found himself overlooking the lights of the back windows of a row of houses. He drove down into the open back area and roared behind the line of homes until he found a clear driveway, conscious that people were coming to their windows; but once he gained the street, he pulled rapidly out of the section.

No blue light behind him now. He'd lost them. Judge Frisbie let out a deep sigh. Never again. No, never, never again.

He drove slowly and carefully

home, keeping to the secondary roads and streets. He garaged his car, skirted behind the lights and noise of the party and took the quiet back stairs up to his study. He secreted again the gun, sack and hood. Then he sank down upon the couch, feeling that he needed a few minutes to rest.

Finally, he washed, changed back into evening clothes and went down to the party. Nothing much seemed to have changed, Judge Frisbie noted, standing on the side, watching the ebb and flow of the affair. Hadn't been gone too much over an hour anyway.

Roxanne came by. "For heaven's sake, talk to somebody," she hissed. "You've been standing practically by yourself all evening. You might show some interest, after the work and planning I've put into this." She stalked off.

He looked after her, nodding, thinking of what he'd just gone through. So he could have the privilege of paying. He circulated a bit more, waiting for the party to be over.

When the door had closed behind the last guest and the last of the help had gone, he stood looking over the great waste that was left, nodding again.

"The caterers' people will be here tomorrow and clear it all up," Roxanne said. "It was lovely. Several

people told me they thought so. However, I have some different ideas for the next one . . ."

He must talk to her now, Judge Frisbie told himself, before his resolution slipped away. It was as good a time as any, alone in the house and the children off at school. "There won't be any more of these affairs, Roxy," he said.

Her head whipped around. "What's that?"

"Come into the sitting room, out of this mess," he said. "I want to talk to you." He walked off, hearing her follow him. "Now," he said, "I must tell you, Roxy, that we are going to have to cut our expenses to the bone. We can't live on this scale anymore. I can't afford it. No more big parties, no automobiles for the children, no new car for you, mine will have to be traded for something cheaper, no game-room alteration, no expensive landscapers, and as for clothes, nothing—"

"Just one moment, Grover," Roxanne burst out, face swelling, eyes narrowing, "I don't care to hear another of your economy talks. We have a position to maintain; we are not going to sink to money-pinching. I abhor meanness. When we are invited to the affairs of others, the least we can do—"

She was off, Judge Frisbie thought, wearily. He was no match

for her in one of her tirades. His resolution would weaken, it always did.

That other case this morning, the Rothbuck case, the wife-beating case . . . *Yes, Judge Frisbie thought. Yes, Rothbuck might have had something there. Too much was too much. One did lose patience. One did feel a certain wrath. And if it had worked for Rothbuck—*

Judge Frisbie walked over to his wife and slapped her deliberately in the face. Then he said, "You'll do as I tell you, woman. I'll have no more of your nagging, either."

Staggered, she stared at him with wide, incredulous eyes. Then fury convulsed her features and she struck back with all her weight. Judge Frisbie went reeling along the room and down.

He was up in an instant, charging.

She caught him again with a right to the side of the head that half-turned him and set him up for her left to the midsection. He folded. She landed a crashing blow to the chin that slammed him against the wall.

He came off the wall, shaking his head. His eyes focused again. Doggedly, he charged back. She swung a roundhouse right. He ducked this one and caught her high on the cheekbone with a left

jab. He followed up with a rapid tattoo of punches that snapped her head from side to side. She clinched. He sunk one into her middle. She grunted and pulled back. They stood toe-to-toe, trading blows.

She sent another long right. He slid under that, but as he did so she kneed him in the chin. He went whiplashing up and over, landing heavily on his back.

Dizzily, Judge Frisbie hauled himself up. "Now I'm getting mad," he said.

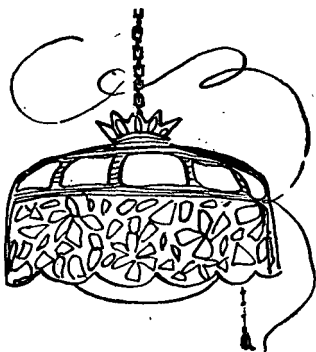
Warily, the two stalked each other, circling with crooked arms. Suddenly, Judge Frisbie delivered a hard chop to the side of the neck. She sagged and began to whimper.

"I give up," she sobbed. She lay weeping for a while, then at last sat up, tears rolling down her face. She looked at him. There was a light that Judge Frisbie realized he hadn't seen for many years, an awed, submissive light. "Oh, Grover," she said. "I love you."

Judge Frisbie knew that everything was going to work out.

Yes, Judge Frisbie of the Court of Special Sessions was known as an open-minded judge, understanding of the pressures and twists of fate that might drive men to crime, a judge, who, in a word, seemed to understand human weaknesses.

The true essence of a gift is inevitably resolved by the volatility of the donor.



lence the human mind could conceive, and prior to the murder of one of the elderly twins, he believed that he could handle any case with detachment.

Perhaps it was the quiet bravery of Miss Nettie, the surviving twin, that got through to him; or maybe in her gracious and fragile personage he glimpsed the last fragments

STRANGER'S GIFT



DETECTIVE SHAPIRO took a personal interest in the case from the start. He was mildly surprised by his reaction. A man doesn't stay on the police force for twenty-five years without developing the inner armor necessary for the protection of his own spirit. He had dealt with just about every act of vio-

of a genteel world that existed only in memory or storybooks.

Be that as it may, he was not altogether the tough cop when he escorted Miss Nettie home from the hospital, where emergency measures had failed to keep life from leaking from her sister's broken skull.

The headlights of his unmarked car picked through a neighborhood of large, once-fine homes now suffering the blight of urban decay. The present dreary reality was one of converted apartment and rooming houses, a junky fill-

proud with paint, limousines and roadsters in the driveways, people enjoying the evening cool in porch swings; here or there a house blazing with light and the activity of a party, with Gene Austin crooning from a Gramophone.

*By
Talmage
Powell*



ing station on a corner, faded signs offering rooms to let, a gloomy little grocery store secured for the night with iron-grille shutters.

With Miss Nettie's tea-and-crum-pets presence beside him, it was easy for Shapiro to imagine the street as it had been in forgotten days: well-trimmed hedges, houses

Shapiro could see in his mind's eye a Sunday morning with two little twin girls ready for church in the rambling house halfway down the block, bright-faced and scrubbed in their starched crinolines, white gloves, Mary Jane shoes, and white sailor straws with ribbons spilling down their backs.

Now one was dead, beaten to death by a mugger who might occupy the very house across the street, dismal as the neighborhood had become.

"This is our driveway, Mr. Shapiro," Miss Nettie instructed politely.

As Shapiro turned, the headlights swept a two-story frame house with a long front porch. The grounds and structure were in better repair and upkeep than their surroundings. Shapiro's sharp instincts painted in history. He guessed it was the only home the twins had ever known. It had been theirs after the demise of their parents. Dr. Cooksey, whom Shapiro vaguely remembered by repute from his boyhood, had left his maiden daughters modestly fixed, and they had continued on until one day it was too late for them to move, to change, to shed the tiny habits of endless days.

Shapiro braked the car in the shadows of the porte cochere, got out with an energy that denied his bulk, his sleepy-looking, rough-hewn face, his forty-nine years. He hurried around and opened the door for Miss Nettie. She was a soft, decorous rustling as she got out and laid a slender, waxen hand on the beefy arm he offered. He escorted her to a pair of French doors that glinted in the darkness,

and followed as she unlocked and went inside.

She turned on a light and Shapiro glanced about a parlor straight out of a yellowed issue of *Better Homes*; velour, velvet, and mohair, heavy, overstuffed couches and chairs, lamps with tassels and stained-glass shades, tables with clawed feet resting on glass balls.

Miss Nettie, trim and girlish as a seventy-five-year-old woman could be imagined, brushed a wisp from her forehead. Her eyes were blue pools of grief in a delicately boned face cobwebbed with fine wrinkles, but her control was superb. She remembered the proprieties. "May I take your hat, Mr. Shapiro? Do sit down and make yourself comfortable. Would you care for some tea?"

Shapiro was a coffee drinker, with a cold beer when he was off duty, but he was suddenly aware of the silence and emptiness of the slightly musty house, and of this little woman's determination to bear up, to hold life on a normal keel. "Some tea would go nicely, Miss Cooksey."

She seemed to be grateful for the chance to be doing something. Shapiro sank into a chair as she hurried out. He pulled a package of cigarettes from his suit coat pocket, but his glance didn't locate any ash trays, and he put the

smokes back, patted his pocket.

Miss Nettie came in carrying an old and ornate tea service. Shapiro stood up. Miss Nettie placed the tea things on a table before the couch.

As she busied her hands with teapot and cups, she said, "I know there are questions you must ask. Please do so, freely. I'm quite prepared and now in control of myself, Mr. Shapiro."

His preliminary questions established what he had already guessed. Yes, she and Miss Lettie, her twin, had lived here all alone, except for a yardman who came one day every other week. They entertained rarely, a small tea or game of bridge with the two or three old friends they had left.

"Most of the girls with whom we grew up," she explained, "have either passed away, yielded to the care of nursing homes, or live a world away from the old neighborhood. Sugar, Mr. Shapiro? One lump or two?"

When he sipped, his distaste for tea was pleasantly soothed. "I didn't know it could be brewed like this."

"Thank you, Mr. Shapiro."

He cleared his throat. "Now about the events of this evening . . ."

"It all hardly seems real, Mr. Shapiro. Lettie was so kind . . . so

harmless . . . How could anyone be so bestial as to . . ." Her cup rattled on its saucer. Perched on the edge of the overstuffed couch, her back stiffened. She looked at her hand as if daring it be unsteady again.

"Nothing that happened during the day warned of what the evening would hold," she resumed, her sweet maidenly-aunt voice only slightly off-key. "In the afternoon I made a batch of coconut bonbons, with freshly grated coconut. Making the bonbons is a now-and-again hobby with me, Mr. Shapiro. Specialty of the house, you might say."

She drew in a shallow breath. "A very poor family lives a couple of blocks west, on the same side of the street. A young mother whose husband deserted her and four children. Two of them twin girls, strangely enough . . . like Lettie and me."

Shapiro nodded his understanding that an affinity might develop between two little twins and two old ones.

"We became acquainted with the family," Miss Cooksey said, "through the twins, whom we saw now and then in the grocery store or playing along the street. During the past year or so, Lettie and I had the privilege of doing little things for the children, assisting

the family in some small way."

"That was kind of you," Shapiro remarked.

The eyes in their shadows of translucent blue lifted to his. "Kind? Not at all, Mr. Shapiro. The rewards were ours. We enjoyed the children. And today, when we heard that one of the twins had come down with a little flu bug, I dropped over to make sure a doctor had come. The child was doing nicely, but I noticed an expectancy and then a disappointment in her manner. She was too polite to tell me what was on her mind, but I wormed it out of her. When I'd arrived, she'd thought I was surely bringing her some bon-bons."

"So you returned home and made her some," Shapiro said.

"Why, of course. I regretted not having thought of it sooner."

"And Lettie was taking the bon-bons to the child this evening?"

She nodded, her slender throat working. The first hint of tears glinted in her eyes. "Lettie never reached her destination, Mr. Shapiro. She intended to deliver the candy, visit briefly, and return right away. Her lengthening absence didn't upset me right away. I assumed she'd got talking with the little girl and forgot the time. But finally I grew uneasy. I called the building super and asked him to

step to the apartment and have my sister come to the phone. When he returned, he reported that she wasn't there, hadn't been there."

She lapsed from the present for a moment, her soft mouth drawing into a thin, tortured line.

Shapiro quickly envisioned it, the chill that must have come to the silent vacancy of the house as she'd hung up the phone. She'd probably sat a moment, a cold pulse beginning deep within her, telling herself it didn't mean too much, Lettie was all right and would have an explanation that would make her sister's fears seem silly.

"You went out to look for her and found her . . . in the darkness of the alley beside the grocery store," Shapiro reprised gently.

"Yes, that's right." The teacup began rattling again. This time she had to set it on the table and clasp her hands hard in her lap. They continued to tremble slightly. "I might have gone past without knowing she was there, Mr. Shapiro, but I heard the faint sound of her moan. It was almost the last sound she made. I stopped, listened, edged into the alley. Then I saw the pale shadow of her lying there . . . He had smashed her head, dragged her off the street . . . and gorged on the coconut bon-bons while he rifled her purse . . ."

A hard shiver went through her. "What sort of beast, Mr. Shapiro?" The words dropped to a whisper, "Eating candy while his victim dies at his feet."

"Maybe a drug addict," Shapiro said. "Maybe the craving for sweets suggests a hard-drug user."

"He was young, rather tall and skinny, with a scar on his cheek shaped like a W. Lettie managed to tell me that, Mr. Shapiro. And then she said, 'I won't be able to dust my rose garden tomorrow, sis.' Her last words . . ." She struggled and was very pale.

Shapiro reached and touched the thin shoulder. It made him think of the soft wing of a bird. "Miss Cooksey, let me arrange for you to stay someplace else tonight."

"Thank you, Mr. Shapiro. But no. This is my house and I've no intention of running from it."

"Then at least have someone here. We have police matrons who are quite good company."

"I'm sure they are." She moved a little, as if not to hurt his feelings in casting off the support of his hand. "But I'll make do. The quicker I accept the . . . the silence, the better it will be."

"All right," Shapiro slumped back. "But I must warn you. This is the fourth reported mugging in this general area in the past six weeks. There might have been oth-

ers we don't know about. Your sister was the first fatality."

A quick touch of color splashed Miss Nettie's cheeks. "All by the same young man?"

Shapiro lifted and dropped his shoulders, standing up as he did so. "We can't be sure. One other woman got a look at his face before she was slugged unconscious. She gave us the same description—including the W-shaped scar on his cheek."

Her eyes reflected the way she was twisting and turning it all in her mind. "Then you've been trying to stop this pathological beast for some time—without much luck."

"Without any luck," Shapiro admitted. He hesitated. "But we try, Miss Cooksey. I want you to believe that."

Her eyes met his. She seemed to sense something of his job, the dirtiness and thanklessness of it, the frustrations that were all too much a part of it.

"The public doesn't always understand," he said. "I'm not complaining, but we're under-manned, always facing a job that grows more impossibly big every day. We can't blanket the city looking for a single mugger. We just have to do the best we can with what we've got."

She touched his hand, gently

comforting him. *Even in her own extremity*, he thought.

"Good night, Mr. Shapiro; and thank you for your kindness. You've made it easier for me."

Shapiro drove back to headquarters with the thought of her haunting him, piercing the armor of twenty-five-years of being a cop, of seeing it all.

On his way through the corridor to Communications, Shapiro bumped into Captain Ramey. Ramey's eyes widened as he took in the cast of Shapiro's face.

"Wow! Who licked the red off your candy?"

Shapiro steamed a breath. "Don't mention candy to me, Cap! Not right now. And don't ever mention coconut bonbons!"

Ramey scratched his head and stared as Shapiro continued his stormy way to the radio room.

In the den of electronic gear, Shapiro had the order put on the air: Pick up slender man probably in his twenties, W-shaped scar on cheek, wanted on suspicion of murder committed during course of forcible robbery.

He was afraid it wouldn't do any good—and it didn't. He went off duty at midnight, and when he got home and sacked in he kept his wife awake grumbling in his sleep.

Between calls to knifings, shootings, and sluggings, Shapiro's un-

marked car cruised the Cooksey neighborhood nightly for more than a week.

His trained eye picked out details, the young girl who was peddling herself; the strident woman who beat up her day-laborer husband when he came home drunk; the broad-shouldered teen-ager who undoubtedly was gang chief of the block; the old grouch who chased dogs and kids from his yard with sticks and rocks.

Shapiro liked least of all the actions of Miss Nettie. Each evening right after dark she came out of the ghostly old house and walked west, past the steel-shuttered grocery, across the intersection, the full length of the next block. Then she turned and went back the way she had come, a fragile, helpless figure. She would pause at her front walk and look back at the long, dark sidewalk she had traversed. Then she would slip into her house, and a dim light would turn on behind a curtained window upstairs, and Miss Nettie would be in for the night.

She started the excursions the night after her sister was buried. Nothing discouraged her. She walked if it rained, if the wind blew, if the moon shone. It was as if the void of grief had filled her with a compulsion to retrace the steps and feel the same feelings

suffered by that other twin image of herself.

In a corner of his mind, Shapiro knew he was making a cardinal mistake in police work. He'd let Miss Nettie become an entity, someone very personal. She was the memory of the grandmother he'd known in childhood, the echo of lost days buried in the smogs of time when cookies had tasted of a never-again sweetness and a tree house in a back-yard oak had soared over a world without ugliness.

The unseen observer in the shadows of a tree or dark, deserted doorway, Shapiro fretted about her. Her newly developed quirk, he told himself, was the result of her sudden bereavement. It was temporary. It would wear itself out. But if not . . . then he would take an off-duty hour to talk with the department psychiatrist about her.

Three weeks passed before Miss Nettie varied what had come to be her norm. Staked out in the concealment of a peeling billboard, Shapiro watched the opposite sidewalk. The night was gloomy, with low gray clouds. He looked at the luminous dial of his watch. She was ten minutes behind schedule, then twenty, with no sign of her coming shadow-like along the street.

Shapiro drew a deep breath, but held it suddenly. The familiar, slight figure with the short, graceful steps seemed to flow out of the darkness. Shapiro watched as she neared the shadows of the grocery store across the street. His face drooped with sadness. As much as he disliked the thought of her subjected to psychiatric probing, he knew it must be. He couldn't let her continue this way.

Out of habit, his gaze swept the street as he started to move out and cross diagonally to intercept her. His reluctant journey toward a face-to-face confrontation with her suddenly became a charge. He saw the slender figure of a tall, crouching man resolve from the alleyway darkness and slip up behind her. Unreal and dream-like, the shadow seemed to fold about her as the mugger crooked an arm about her neck and snatched her purse.

"Hold it!" Shapiro shouted the order savagely.

The man threw Miss Nettie to the sidewalk and lunged into the well of darkness alongside the grocery.

Miss Nettie scrambled to her feet, rearing in Shapiro's path.

"Mr. Shapiro!"

She grabbed his arm and fell against him. Her weight, even as slight as it was, and his momentum threw him off balance. He

twisted and almost fell, banging his shoulder against the corner of the building.

"You're not hurt, obviously," he said, short-breathed. "Just sit tight. That rat won't find a hole big enough to hold him."

She hung onto him. "I didn't know you there, Mr. Shapiro."

Her thin hands were talons, clutching his clothing. He tried to brush them away. "For heaven's sake, Miss Cooksey, let go! That guy's getting away."

"Don't risk yourself for me, Mr. Shapiro. He may be armed."

"My worry," he bit out, "if you'll let me do my job."

He grabbed her wrist, discovering a surprising strength. The ever-lurking hunting instinct was aware that the fleeing feet had departed the farther end of the alley.

"Miss Nettie!" he snarled in exasperation. He let his hands apply enough pressure to break her grip and shove him free. She stumbled backward and collapsed with a small outcry. Shapiro threw a despairing look down the empty alley as he dropped to one knee beside her.

Her face was a pale, soft etching in white.

"Miss Nettie, I didn't mean . . ." He slipped a hand behind her shoulder to help her up.

"I know you didn't, Mr. Sha-

piro." She got up with but little assistance, brushed a wispy spill of white hair from her forehead with her fingertips. "Don't blame yourself. Really, I tripped over my own feet, but I'm quite all right."

"Did you get a look at the mugger?"

Her eyes glinted, blue candles in the faintest haze of street glow. "Not clearly—but enough. He was young, tall, skinny, with the tell-tale W-shaped scar on his cheek."

Shapiro dropped his hand from her shoulder, muttering an ungentelemanly word under his breath. "Well," he sighed bitterly, "the bird seems to have flown the coop. The best I can do now is put him on the air and hope for a pickup."

"Do you think it will work?"

"I doubt it. He's managed to hole up pretty well so far."

She dropped her eyes, making Shapiro think of a chastised child. "I'm glad you didn't get hurt, Mr. Shapiro."

"You took care of that, Miss Cooksey, delaying me as you did."

She sighed softly. "Please don't be angry with me. Even if you had caught him at the risk of your life, would it have done any good? The court decisions nowadays, the parole system—wouldn't he have been back on the streets in a few years?"

"Maybe so," Shapiro admitted,

"but he would have been off of them for a few, too."

Her eyes inched back to his. "Yes, I guess you have to think of it that way, or your lifework would be for nothing."

The words were a gentle mirror held up to him. She had sized up the policeman's one excuse for being with uncomfortable accuracy. By the time he was ready to sign out at midnight, he had a case of heartburn, bloodshot eyes, and a headache that would do for the whole department.

He had showered (without relieving his symptoms) and dressed, and was slamming his locker door when Browne from Communications called his name from the doorway.

"Yeah?" Shapiro growled, glancing briefly across his shoulder.

"Bounced down hoping I'd catch you," Browne, robust and dark and an enviable twenty-seven, said. "The call just came in. I think we've turned up your mugger-killer. Young, skinny—with the cheek scar."

Shapiro whirled toward Browne, his headache dissolving. "Where?"

"Fleabag rooming house. One-one-four River Street. His girlfriend, a late-working waitress, breezed in for an after-work date and came out squalling. She found lover boy on the floor. Dead."

A uniformed patrolman had cleared the curious from the scabby, odorous hall and stairway. Adams and McJunkin had arrived to take charge of the investigation. The lab men and photographer had taken their pictures and samples, and Doc Jefferson, the medical examiner, was snapping his black bag closed when Shapiro's rough-hewn and iron-gray presence loomed in the doorway.

Shapiro nodded at the departing lab men, said hello to his fellow detectives, and crossed the dreary, stifling room to the figure sprawled beside the grimy, swaybacked bed.

"Who is he?" Shapiro looked down at the bony face with its scar and bonnet of wild, long, brownish hair.

"One Pete Farlow," Adams said. "Or maybe it's an alias."

"Whoever, he must be our boy," McJunkin added. He was a stocky, freckled redhead, ambling toward Shapiro's side. "That scar is just too unique. Odds are a million to one against its duplicate in a city this size."

"Drifter?" Shapiro suggested.

"I wouldn't bet against you," McJunkin said, "the way he showed up and took the room, according to the building super. Same old pattern. He works a town until it gets too hot and then drifts on to another room, girl, way of life just

like the one he left behind him."

"He seems to be the solution—in addition to the murder of Lettie Cooksey—to a string of muggings, drunk-rollings, and strong-arm robberies we've had," Adams said. He was the tallest man in the room, dark and ramrod straight. He motioned with his hand toward the narrow closet, where the door stood open. "He's stashed enough purses and wallets in there to open a counter in a secondhand store."

"Maybe in his private moments," Doc Jefferson said, "he liked to look in on them, touch them, sort of relive the big-man moment when he had taken this one or that one." Doc shook a fine head of silver hair. "You never know about these guys."

Shapiro drifted to the closet. Which was hers? He tried to remember; a flash of white when the mugger had grabbed it there at the steel-shuttered grocery, but not all white; not large, either—relatively small handbag, black or brown, trimmed in white.

On top of the jumble at his feet, just a little to the left of the door-jamb, lay a woman's purse with its dark blue relieved by a diagonal band of white; a rather old-fashioned purse.

Shapiro hunkered and picked it up. Its clasp was broken. He pulled it open, and stopped breathing for a

second. In one corner was a tissue-wrapped ball of candy. As if fearfully, his forefinger inched and pushed the tissue aside to expose the tempting creaminess of a coconut bonbon.

"Doc," Shapiro said in a far-off voice, his broad, bent back toward the room, "what did our killer pigeon die of?"

"I won't have a complete report until after the autopsy," Jefferson said.

"But you could give me a very educated guess right now."

"You birds always want your forensic medicine instant," Doc said. "Okay, for what it's worth, I'll wager McJunkin's freckles against Adams' eyeteeth that the autopsy will back up the symptoms. Our vulture died of poisoning. Arsenic, I'd say. He gulped a walloping dose of arsenic."

"The lab boys found little tissues scattered all over the floor," McJunkin said, "the kind they used to use in the old-fashioned candy stores."

Shapiro mumbled to himself.

McJunkin said, "What'd you say, Shappy?"

"I said," Shapiro bit out angrily, "that I'm never surprised at anything the lab boys find."

Wearing a flannel robe, felt slippers, and a net about her soft white

hair, Miss Nettie ushered Shapiro into her parlor.

"I'm very sorry to rouse you at this hour," Shapiro said, "but it was necessary."

"I'm sure it must have been, for you to have done so. Would you like some tea?"

Shapiro gave her a stare and sigh. "Not this go-round. Sit down, please."

She sank to the edge of an overstuffed chair and clasped her hands quietly in her lap.

Shapiro faced her with his hands cocked on his hips. "Was your purse a dark blue, with a white band across it?"

"Yes it was, Mr. Shapiro. And I assume from your question that you have found it."

"In the room of a dead man. A young, skinny dead man with a W-shaped scar on his cheek."

He thought he saw the faintest of smiles on her soft lips.

His hands came loose from his sides. He banged a fist into a palm. "Miss Cooksey, blast you, you've made a total fool of me!"

"Oh, no, Mr. Shapiro! I'm much too fond of you to do anything like that."

Shapiro snorted, kicked a table leg, spun on her again with the mien of a grizzly. "You made bait of yourself, Miss Cooksey. I had told you about the previous mug-

gings he'd pulled around here. You saw a pattern. You hoped he'd return—and take the bait."

"Mr. Shapiro—"

He silenced her with a stern finger wagging in her face. "Don't you open your gentle little peep to me one more time until I'm finished. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Shapiro."

"You took those nightly walks, waiting for him to return, wanting him to, hoping he would strike again. And when he struck, you threw a veritable body-block at me so he could get away with your purse and everything it contained—maybe a little cash, and a batch of bonbons loaded with arsenic!"

"Where would I get—"

"Don't play innocent with me!"

Shapiro almost popped a vein across his forehead. "You have a yardman. Your sister grew roses. Anybody can get arsenic, in plant sprays, insecticides." His teeth made a sound like fingernails scraping across sandpaper. "You pegged him to a T, Miss Cooksey. He gulped the arsenic-loaded candy. Almost all of it."

"Almost, Mr. Shapiro?"

He reached in his side pocket and brought out the tissue-wrapped bonbon he had taken from the rooming house closet.

With exaggerated care, he peeled back the tissue and extended his

palm. "It's the one that stuck in the corner of the purse when he dumped it on his bed or dresser. It's the one he didn't eat. Do you deny making it?"

She rose slowly. "It's a lovely bonbon, Mr. Shapiro, although a bit squashed from so much handling."

She peered, lifted a dainty forefinger to touch the candy. She picked it up. Then she popped it in her mouth and swallowed before Shapiro had the first inkling of what she was up to.

Flat-footed and with a dumb look on his face, Shapiro received her soft smile.

"Mr. Shapiro, would I eat poisoned candy?"

He shook off a faintly trance-like state. "Yes," he said. "Faced with a situation of sufficient urgency, I'm beginning to believe you'd have the courage to do anything, Miss Cooksey. I think your question is rhetorical. I think you have already, just now, eaten a piece of poisoned candy. I'm also certain that the amount contained in a single piece is not enough to

kill you." He shook his head hopelessly. "Whatever am I going to do with you, Miss Nettie?"

"Arrest me for destroying evidence?" she suggested.

"I doubt that I could make it—or any other charge—stick," Shapiro said. "Even if we could prove you made some poisoned candy, you didn't offer it to anyone. The only shred of evidence we have that involves you, come to think of it, is the purse—evidence of a crime *against* you."

She strolled with him to the front door. "Will you come some afternoon for tea, Mr. Shapiro?"

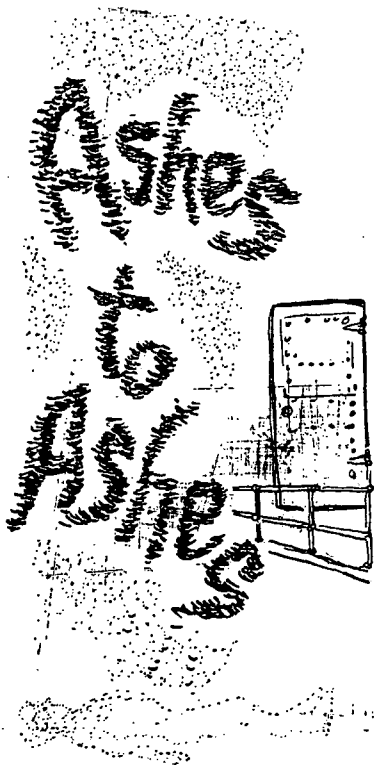
He studied her a moment. "No, Miss Nettie—I think I never want to see you again."

She nodded and patted his hand with a touch of gentle understanding. Then she turned a little in the dark front doorway, looking from his face to a point far along the sidewalk.

"Given the chance," she said almost in a whisper, "I'd have been the first to warn the young man to mend his ways in time—and never to take candy from strangers."



As everyone is good for something, so does everything have a use.



THE weather-beaten, slab-sided old house and Herkimer Bébber had lived together so long they had begun to resemble each other in certain respects. The house was actually a bit older, for Herk was born there. Now, sixty years later,

each sagged a little and creaked here and there in the joints.

Herk Bébber had remained a bachelor through all the years and lived alone.

In the early darkness of a winter evening the house stood dark and gaunt when Herk limped home from work and let himself through the back door, into the kitchen. He lighted the oven and left its door open. He never attempted to heat the rest of the house during the winter months.

"It ain't fair," the tall man said as he held his hands up to the stove.

Herk started to prepare his evening meal after some of the warmth had soaked into his body. He placed a few dishes on the kitchen table and sat down.

"It ain't fair," he muttered as



he crushed a fistful of crackers into his canned soup. "Mr. Thayer don't have the right to order me to come back to the plant tonight."

Mr. Thayer had the right, because Mr. Thayer was the boss' nephew. Preston Thayer had been at Koopens Pottery Company for only a year now, was less than half Herk's age and held no official title as yet, but the young upstart would become general manager next Monday.

The plant foreman had relayed the order to Herk just before quitting time. "The boss' nephew said for you to come back tonight. He wants you here at eight, to check the temperature in that new kiln they fired up this morning, write up the reading in the record book."

Herk had not dared to protest, but he did offer a timid suggestion. The tunnel kiln would be operating all night, so wouldn't it be possible for one of the crew to slip over and take the reading?

The foreman shook his head. "Thayer asked for you personally. He said for me to get that stooped old handyman with a limp. Thayer's got his eye on you, Herk. Maybe when his uncle makes him general manager next Monday, he'll take you on as his assistant." The foreman almost choked on his own humor.

Herk Bebbber drained the last of his soup and wiped his chin. There would be no promotion for him, he was more apt to be fired. Preston Thayer had already said he meant to clean out all the decrepit dead-wood and cripples when he took over. This was Friday. Herk had until Monday morning to wait.

Herk read the evening paper, then with a groan he struggled into his overcoat, his fur cap and gloves, and started out.

The night appeared about as bleak as Herkimer Bebbber's future at Koopens Pottery. He had trudged the mile between home and plant twice a day for forty years. Herk could judge his arrival to the second, and tonight he had allowed two extra minutes for the slowing effect of the weather on his bad leg.

Herk wondered what he would do if Thayer did fire him next Monday. Herk had a part-time job doing odd jobs at the Pyramid Club, but this didn't pay enough to live on. He couldn't apply for Social Security for two years yet, and he had no savings to tide him over. Herk's nest egg had been wiped out by medical bills and funeral expenses when his mother had died.

"It ain't fair," Herk muttered into his coat collar. "Adam Koopens wouldn't let me go like this." Mr.

Koopens had been a good boss, a kind man who had sent flowers to the hospital after the gas explosion in number two kiln had mangled Herk's leg. Adam Koopens had even made the handyman job for Herk when he got out of the hospital.

Herk had long dreamed of being able to retire in Florida. Now he would have a job trying to stay alive here.

Herk arrived at the plant and unlocked the gate. He snapped the lock closed behind him, but turned his head away from the foundation of the new building that would rise here. It was another of Preston Thayer's brainstorms, and it was here that the young man would be made general manager, at the cornerstone laying ceremony Monday.

The low tunnel kiln building was lighted, but Herk headed for the dark plant. He walked around the old, brick building to the back, where he let himself into what had been the original kiln room of the pottery company.

A single, shaded light bulb glowed over a desk. Beyond the circle of light the gloomy shadows blended into total blackness. A blower's howl filled the air, helped along by the roar of fire jets. A wave of warm air swept over Herk when he closed the door. He spread

his coat to absorb the heat. He closed his eyes and for a moment imagined he had actually reached Florida.

Herk slipped out of his overcoat, picked up the record book and walked back into the gloom. He approached the new kiln cautiously; the monster was not of his era. This super-heated, howling, fire-breathing dragon had been created for Preston Thayer and built to his order.

Preston Thayer had big plans for this kiln. He had boasted that this was the device that would take Koopens Pottery out of dishes and ash trays and launch the company into the space age, where there was a demand for rocket motor ceramics.

Herk made his pyrometer reading. He peered into the eyepiece of the instrument and increased the current flow through a fine wire inside the telescopic device. When the wire glowed as white hot as the kiln interior, Herk wrote the dial reading in the book.

This was all he had been ordered to do. Now the job was completed and Herk would have to walk back home again. He had reached for his coat when a voice called out over the noise of the blower.

"Hey, you. You down there."

Herk walked out of the circle of light and looked up. He had

recognized Preston Thayer's voice, and now he could make out the young man's form on the catwalk, high up against the brick wall. Thayer had come out of the fire door that led back into the office building. "Yes, Mr. Thayer?"

"Come up here."

Herk hesitated as he looked at the iron steps that zigzagged up the wall, from the floor to the catwalk. His bad leg throbbed as he trudged over to the steps.

Thayer waited impatiently on the catwalk. Though not yet thirty, his hair had thinned out considerably. He looked pudgy, even in a well-tailored suit, and had a florid complexion. His full lips curled up slightly, as though he were offended at something he thought he smelled.

Herk pulled himself up on the catwalk.

"You have quite a bit of trouble getting around, Pops."

"I get by fine, Mr. Thayer," Herk gasped.

"Did you write down the time and the temperature reading?"

Herk nodded.

"Come with me, then." Thayer pulled the metal-clad fire door open and walked through. Herk followed and the door closed slowly, the action controlled by the air check valve. Herk looked up. He had repaired that valve and for-

gotten to replace the loose pin. He'd do that come Monday.

Thayer had taken out a flashlight and now poked the beam ahead of him as he walked down the dark corridor. Herk followed him down the hallway and through the main office doorway. Inside, Herk stopped and looked around uneasily. It wasn't right that the office had been left open, with the lights on. He felt even more nervous when he saw the open safe door.

Thayer walked between the desks to the safe. He took out a brown leather satchel and placed it on one of the desks. "I suppose you've wondered why I ordered you to come back here tonight, Pops."

Herk shuffled his feet. "I reckon you had your reasons, Mr. Thayer."

"I did." Thayer swung a pudgy leg up over the corner of the desk and studied him from under lowered eyelids. "You moonlight out at the Pyramid Club. I've seen you out there."

"I just work out there weekends," Herk said hastily. "It doesn't interfere with my work here at the plant."

"You know the setup out there. You've heard rumors—rumors about me."

Herk knew about the gambling at the Pyramid, and he'd heard that Preston Thayer was a heavy

loser. "I don't pay attention to rumors, Mr. Thayer."

Thayer lit a cigarette and dropped the dead match into his jacket pocket. He made a fat-lipped circle and blew out a cloud of smoke. "I'm going to become a respectable businessman next Monday. As you know, I've run into bad luck lately. I've had to take some drastic steps to straighten things out before I take this new job." Thayer studied the trail of smoke. "You wrote the temperature and the time down in the book?"

Herk nodded. "That's what I was told to do."

"Exactly, so now we have a written record that you were here at the plant at eight o'clock tonight. Now suppose when you left the gate, two men jumped you. These men had guns and they forced you to let them into the plant, and into this office."

Herk swallowed, but his throat still felt choked up and dry. "Even if some men with guns did force me to let them in here, I couldn't open the safe for them. I don't know the combination."

"This safe is older than you are, Pops," Thayer said. "It's antiquated, like everything else around this place. It's a wonder to me some smart safe man hasn't tapped it before this."

Herk's stomach twisted into such

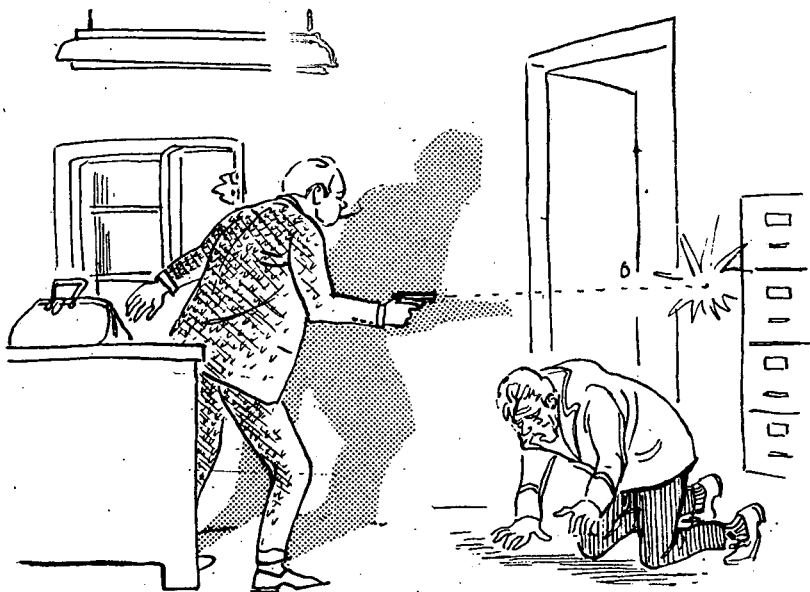
a knot it made him sick. "Please, Mr. Thayer, I don't want anything to do with whatever you're doing here. I can't tell the police that two men made me let them into the office. I can't lie like that."

Thayer dropped his leg off the desk and stood up straight. "You won't have to lie, Pops. You're a stumbling block to me. You know about the gambling losses and you're nothing but deadwood here at the plant. You're expendable, old man. Alive, you're a nuisance, but if the police find you shot to death here in the office, they'll go out looking for gunmen." Thayer pulled a gun from his pocket.

Herk had been frozen with terror, unable to move. Now the sight of a gun triggered a panic that exploded him into action. He gave a yelp and leaped for the door.

Thayer aimed and fired. It was a good shot, but Herk's bad leg gave way when he leaped, and he fell to his knees. The bullet crashed into the wall, and Herk scrambled through the doorway. He slammed the door and twisted the key in the lock, then fled across the hallway and down the corridor as another bullet smashed through the wood panel.

Herk knew Thayer would leave the office by the other door, but that led out to the opposite side



of the building. Then Herk's heart sank when he realized the corridor led into a trap. The only escape for Herk was down the iron steps and across the room below. From the catwalk Thayer would have a clear shot at him all the way.

Herk remembered the loose pin in the air check valve just as he reached the fire door. He reached up, lifted the pin out and swept the arm to one side. Now the door swung free, with no restraint. Herk pushed down on the crossbar and slipped out on the catwalk. He closed the door and flattened his body against the bricks.

Herk's heart banged until he thought it might burst through

his rib cage. He could feel the blood pound in his temples and he thought he would collapse when he heard footsteps pounding down the corridor toward him.

The door burst open and Preston Thayer hurled through the opening. He struck the rail and was catapulted into empty air. A long, despairing scream came from the pudgy form as it described a slow arc out into the darkness.

Herk closed his eyes and held his breath. Then he dashed down the steps, grabbing at the rail to keep from pitching to the floor below. He reached the bottom and hobbled out until he almost stumbled over the body. A long, search-

ing look told him that young Preston Thayer would never become general manager of Koopens Pottery.

Herk stumbled over to the desk and sank into the chair. His mind refused to function. He could only feel relief, relief that he would not be killed. After a time he could think well enough to wonder if his story would be believed. Even Herk could realize it would sound ridiculous.

Herk shook his head and stood up. "I'll tell them the truth," he said grimly. "I'll tell the police that Mr. Thayer went over to the safe and took out the satchel. He—" Herk sat down again. He had completely forgotten the brown leather satchel, a satchel that probably held enough money to buy a Florida retirement.

Herk was panting by the time he had the office door unlocked. The satchel was still on the desk. Herk unfastened the catch, plunged both hands in and lifted. All timidity and terror disappeared as the handyman watched the bundles of currency tumble from his hands, back into the satchel.

He knew that in one way or another he had found his retirement.

Herk closed the safe door, twisted the dial and wiped it clean. He turned off the office lights,

locked the door and carried the satchel back downstairs. Herk sat down to ponder his next move.

The money had disappeared from a locked safe. Preston Thayer knew the combination, so if Thayer disappeared, then they would be forced to suspect the young man, even if he was the boss' nephew. But how to make Thayer disappear? The form still lay out there on the floor, pudgy and solid. The ground was frozen and Herk had no means to carry a body out of the plant.

All of this reasoning had taken time, so the wall clock said it was well past midnight. Herk did not fear that he would be disturbed, for this section of the old plant had been abandoned when they had built the new tunnel kiln building. It had remained unused until Thayer's new kiln had been constructed in here. At the thought of the new kiln, the sound of the blower penetrated Herk's brain. He thought for a moment, then nodded with satisfaction. The kiln would make a fine crematory. It was added justice that Preston Thayer would be consumed by the monster he had created.

Herkimer Bebbler, in his forty years at the plant, had learned several tricks on how to prepare bulky and unwieldy objects for the kiln. He wheeled out a flatbed

hand truck and placed a fireproof tray on it. After considerable effort he got the body up on the tray. Herk wheeled the hand truck around the desk and over to the kiln. He used a floor hoist to lift the burden up onto the loading rack, and then he pushed the rack over until it stood directly in front of the oven.

The door operated by remote control. Herk pulled back the lever, and when the door opened, he gave a tremendous heave that sent the tray across the rollers and on into the inferno.

It was early morning when Herkimer Bebbler let himself through the plant gate. The air was cold and crisp, the moon a silver disk in the sky. Herk noticed none of these things. He didn't even shiver, for the brown leather satchel he hugged against his body kept him as warm as though it were a chunk of Florida sunshine.

The next day was Saturday, and Herk made his usual weekend trip out to the Pyramid Club. He performed his customary odd jobs and returned home that evening. He ate his evening meal and then walked to the plant. He saw no one in the darkness.

The light bulb still glowed. The blower howled and the fire jets roared. Herk pulled on a pair of gloves and shut off the valves on

the fuel lines. He next pulled the lever on the switch box. The blower's howl trailed off into a wail and then into silence. Herk left without looking into the kiln.

Monday morning Herk rose an hour earlier than usual. It was black outside when he ate his breakfast, and was only dawn when he arrived at the pottery plant. The parking lot was deserted, except for a few cars over by the tunnel kiln building. He walked around the old plant and unlocked the back door. The room inside was strangely silent, but still warm. The first ray of sunshine hit the dirty and streaked windows. It was going to be a fine day, Herk thought as he slipped out of his coat.

He opened the kiln door and pulled the tray out onto the loading rack with a pair of long-handled tongs. All that remained of Preston Thayer was a layer of gray ashes.

Herk sat at the desk and waited half an hour, and when the tray had cooled, he carefully brushed up the ashes and swept them into a dustpan. Once again he was faced with the problem of having to dispose of Preston Thayer. Herk had not liked the young man in life, but he felt that any man, no matter how mean, deserved a better resting place than a trash bin.

Herk had come to no conclusion

about the ashes when he noticed the time. He slid the dustpan under the desk and hurried off to punch the time clock.

The sun continued to shine and it turned out to be a lovely day, weatherwise, for a cornerstone ceremony. The plant foreman kept Herk busy, right up to the minute the employees started out of the plant and on to the parking lot.

The cornerstone hung in a sling over the foundation. Herk had erected a tiny speaker's stand, complete with bunting. He had mixed a bucket of cement and had set it beside the stand, with the trowel placed across the top of the bucket.

The last of the employees had gathered by the foundation, when Adam Koopens himself came out of the plant. The old man stepped up on the speaker's stand and looked around anxiously. He peered at his watch, then around again. The crowd grew restless.

Adam Koopens cleared his throat and spoke. First, he apologized because the guest of honor was absent. "I am sure Preston Thayer is here with us in spirit," the plant owner

said, and then he launched into his prepared speech.

Herk did not hear the words. He stood back at the edge of the crowd while he composed his speech of resignation. After he had accepted the gold watch from the company, Herk intended to put the old house up for sale and buy a ticket for Florida.

The crowd applauded. Herk looked up and politely clapped his hands.

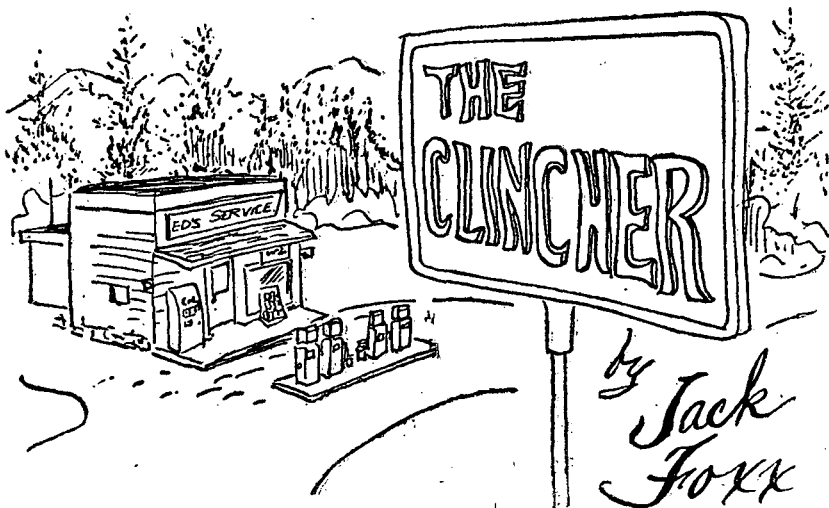
Adam Koopens dipped the trowel into the bucket of cement and held the trowel aloft. "And so with this ceremony, I bring my nephew, Preston Thayer, into the Koopens Pottery Company." The plant owner plopped a blob of cement on the cornerstone and smeared it around.

Herk nodded his approval. He felt sure now he had done the right thing when he had emptied the dustpan into the cement bucket.

Adam Koopens plopped another trowelful of Preston Thayer on the cornerstone. This time Herkimer Bebbler applauded louder than any of the others.



With service, it is the unexpected extras that count.



THEY WERE some forty-five minutes from the Oregon-California border when Cord noticed that the red needle on the fuel gauge hovered close to *Empty*. He glanced over at Tyler. "Almost out of gas," he told him.

Tyler grinned. "So am I. I could sure use something to eat."

In the rear seat, Fallon and Brenner sat shackled close together with double cuffs. Fallon's eyes were cold and black and watchful—waiting.

"There you go," Tyler said suddenly, touching Cord's arm and pointing.

Cord squinted against the late afternoon sun, and then saw the small white building a hundred yards to the right of the freeway. Across the front was a paved area and a single row of gasoline pumps. A large white sign, lettered in faded red and mounted on a tall metal pole, stood between the building and the highway. It read: *Ed's Service—Open 24 Hours.*

"Okay," Cord said. A half-mile farther on was an exit ramp, and he turned there. He doubled back along a blacktopped county road that paralleled the freeway, and took the car in alongside the pumps. He shut off the engine.

Presently, an old man with tousled silver hair and a weather-eroded face, and dressed in tattered coveralls, came out of a cubbyhole office and approached them. He bent at the window. "Help you?"

"Fill 'er up," Cord said. "High octane."

"Yes, sir," the old man answered. Then he saw Fallon and Brenner. He moistened his lips, staring at them with bright blue eyes.

"Don't worry," Cord told him. "They're not going anywhere."

"You fellas peace officers?"

Tyler smiled, nodding.

Cord said, "I'm a United States marshal, and this is my guard. We're transporting these two down to San Francisco for federal court appearances."

"They from McNeil Island, up in Washington?"

"That's right."

The old man made a soft whistling sound with his lips.

Fallon said from the back seat, "Say, pop—"

"Shut up, Fallon," Tyler said sharply, watching him.

"Where's the rest rooms?" Fallon

asked the old man. "Out back?"

"Never mind that now," Cord said. "Just keep quiet back there, Fallon. You understand that?"

"Sure," Fallon replied softly. "Sure, I understand."

The old man went to the rear of the car and busied himself at the pumps. After a moment, he took a paper towel and a squeeze bottle of liquid from a pocket of his coveralls. He came up to the front of the car again, leaned across the hood, and began to clean the windshield. In the front seat, Tyler yawned hugely. Cord took a package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and put one of the cylinders in his lips, watching Fallon in the rear-view mirror. The old man's eyes lingered over the four men as he rubbed at the windshield glass, as if he were fascinated by what he saw.

When he had finished, the old man put the squeeze bottle and the soiled towel back into his pocket. There was a sharp click as the pump hose shut off automatically, indicating that the tank was full. Returning to the rear of the car, the old man replaced the hose, screwed the gas cap back on, and took a metal clipboard that held credit slips from a shelf beside the pumps. He stepped up to the window. "That'll be six even," he said. "Credit card, I reckon."

Cord shook his head, taking the wallet from his rear pocket. He extracted two bills and gave them to the old man. Shrugging lightly, the old man took the bills inside his office. He unlocked the cash box, deposited the bills inside, and removed another slip of paper which he put on his clipboard. He wrote on the slip, chewing at his lower lip and frowning. Then, shielding his actions with his body, he took the .44 caliber pistol from the bottom of the cash box and slipped it inside his coveralls. Slowly, he ventured back out to the car.

"Here's your receipt," he said to Cord.

Cord was still watching Fallon in the rear-view mirror. "Oh," he said perfunctorily. "Thanks." He wadded the slip of paper and put it into the open ash tray.

Tyler said to the old man. "You have anything to eat here?"

"Sandwich machine in the garage."

"Where's the garage?"

"Around on the other side. I'll show you."

"It's better than nothing, I suppose," Tyler looked at Cord. "Any preference?"

Cord shook his head.

"I'll take ham on rye," Fallon said from the rear seat.

"I thought I told you to shut

up back there," Tyler snapped.

"Whatever you say."

"You'd better believe that, Fallon."

"Come on, come on," Cord said. "Get the sandwiches, will you, Johnny? We've got a long way to go yet."

Tyler stepped out of the car and followed the old man across the paved area and around the side of the white building. Cord swiveled on the seat and looked back at Fallon. "Why don't you wise up?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"Easy, Art," Brenner said to him.

"The hell with that," Fallon said. "This—"

"You keep pushing and pushing, don't you, Fallon?" Cord asked him. "You can't keep that fat mouth of yours closed."

Fallon's black eyes bored into Cord's, and they stared at each other unblinkingly. It grew very quiet. Brenner fidgeted finally. "Art . . ."

"Listen to Brenner here," Cord said to Fallon. "He's got the right idea."

Fallon remained silent, but his big hands clenched and unclenched inside the steel handcuffs.

Cord turned then, looking out of the open window. The old man was ambling back across the paved area, and he was carrying a square of rough, grease-stained cloth over

one hand. He approached the window.

"What's keeping my guard?" Cord asked him. "We're in kind of a hurry."

"I guess you are," the old man said, and flicked the cloth away with his left hand. Cord froze. In the old man's right hand was the .44 he had taken from the cash box. It was pointing directly at Cord's temple. "You make a move, mister, and I reckon you're dead."

Fallon sucked in his breath sharply in the back seat. Cord sat looking at the gun, not moving. One of the old man's eyes darted briefly to the back. "Where's the key?"

"On the ignition ring," Fallon told him. "Watch out he doesn't try for the gun."

The old man reached down with one hand, never taking his eyes from Cord, and pulled open the door. "Keep your hands where I can see 'em and step out here."

Slowly, Cord obeyed. He stood holding his hands out in front of him, watching the old man's hand. The gun did not waver. The old man said, "Turn around."

Cord did that. The old man pressed the .44 against his spine, then removed the automatic from the holster at Cord's belt. "Walk ahead a few steps," he said. "And don't look around."

Cord made three forward steps and halted. Behind him, the old man found the key and unlocked the handcuffs on Fallon and Brenner. Fallon took the automatic immediately.

"The other one's in back," the old man said. "I tapped him with my gun here as soon as he had his back turned."

"Check him," Fallon said to Brenner. Brenner nodded, and he and the old man went around the side of the building. Then, "You can turn around now, Cord."

Cord pivoted slowly. Fallon told him, "Face the car, hands on the roof, legs spread. You know the position, don't you?"

Wordlessly, Cord complied. Fallon passed his free hand over him quickly. Satisfied that Cord had no other weapon, he dipped his hand into Cord's rear pocket and removed the wallet from there. He put it into his own trousers, and then said, "All right. Put your hands behind you now."

He snapped the cuffs over Cord's wrists, and caught his shoulder and turned him. Brenner and the old man came back then, shoving Tyler ahead of them. There was a smear of blood on the side of Tyler's head where the old man had hit him, and he was still groggy. His hands also were cuffed behind him now.

Fallon saw the two of them into the rear seat of the car and locked the door. He put the automatic in his belt, and looked at the old man. "What can we say? You just saved our lives."

"That's a fact," Brenner said. He looked immensely relieved. "All they talked about, coming down from Washington, was shooting us and putting our bodies in the trunk."

"What happened up there?"

"We got careless," Fallon admitted. "We stopped this morning for coffee, and made the mistake of letting them have some. The next thing we knew, we had hot coffee in our faces and Cord there had my gun."

"I told you," Tyler hissed to Cord in the back seat. "I told you we should have finished them off."

Cord stared straight ahead. "Maybe," he said softly. "But if I'd let you have your way, we'd be a hell of a lot worse off than we are now. Would you rather put in twenty years for bank robbery and attempted escape, or do life for murder?"

Fallon asked the old man, "How did you know? They didn't give us the chance to say anything, to tip you off. How did you know?"

The old man put the .44 inside his coveralls and rubbed the back of his neck. "Well," he said, "it was

a number of things. By themselves, they didn't mean much, but when you put 'em all together they could only spell one thing. I was county sheriff here for twenty-five years, before I retired and opened up this here station two summers ago. I seen a lot of federal marshals transporting prisoners to and from McNeil in my time. And I seen a lot of prisoners, too; used to house 'em in my jail when an overnight stop was needed. I know a few things about both breeds."

"Go on," Fallon encouraged.

"Well, first off, neither of you lads had those plastic identity bands all prisoners have to wear on their wrists. I never seen one yet who had his off outside, no matter what."

Brenner nodded. "They broke the ones they were wearing, and there was no way to get them on us."

"Another thing," the old man said, "was when the fella you call Cord had himself a cigarette while I was washing the windshield. I had a good look at the pack when he took it out of his pocket."

Fallon frowned. "Yes?"

"It was opened at the bottom."

Fallon's frown switched to a smile. "An old habit of prison inmates, coast to coast," he said. "Sure."

The old man nodded. "They like

to set themselves apart. I suppose there're honest folks who open smokes that way, too, but sure not a federal marshal." He tugged at his ear. "And then there was the gasoline."

"Gasoline?" Brenner asked.

"He paid me in cash. Ain't never seen a marshal in recent years who paid for gasoline 'cept with a credit card. 'Specially when he's got one peeking out of his wallet, like the one I glimpsed when the Cord fella give me the bills." He looked at Fallon. "Am I right?"

"As rain," Fallon said with some admiration.

"And you get reimbursed for mileage, don't you?"

"That's right."

"That was the clincher," the old man said. "With the other things, I was sure enough to slip my old

.44 into my coveralls when I went into the office. But when I give the Cord fella his receipt, that made me positive what I was seein' in this here car wasn't what it seemed to be. He crumpled it right up and stuck it in the ash tray. Hell, no man on the federal payroll is going to crumple six bucks and put it in the ash tray, and that's a fact."

The old man passed a hand through his silver hair. "I'm gettin' on in years, but I ain't senile yet; and I used to be a pretty fair sheriff in my day, if I do say it myself. Takin' these two really wasn't much of a sweat. No offense, you understand."

Fallon looked in at Cord and Tyler, both now sullen and quiet. "No," he said, taking the old man's hand respectfully. "No offense at all, sir."



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Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:

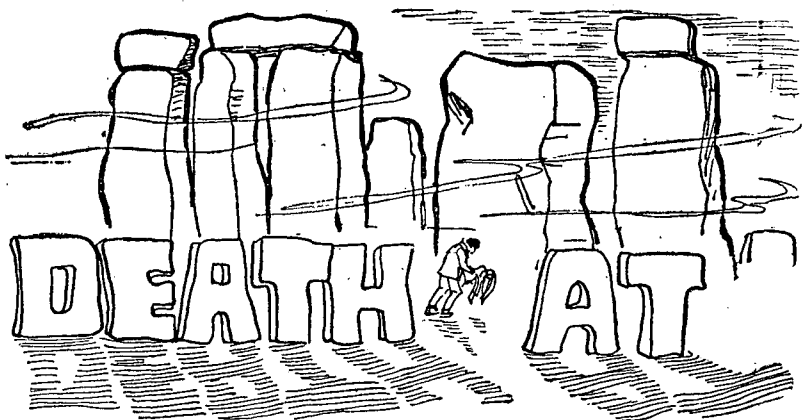
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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

It is supposedly a lofty trait to cling to one's beliefs.



HE FOUND them disturbing, those great hulking shapes. The brilliance of the moon etched them sharply. He had been so pleased, it had gone so smoothly—but those stones! In daylight Stonehenge struck him as fusty, a few crumbling relics of a bygone age, but the moonlight breathed a terrifying life into the great forms, and in spite of himself his mind conjured primeval watchers lurking in silent disapproval.

The stones threw giant shadows in thick black bars across his path. He staggered slightly under his burden as he walked—through the

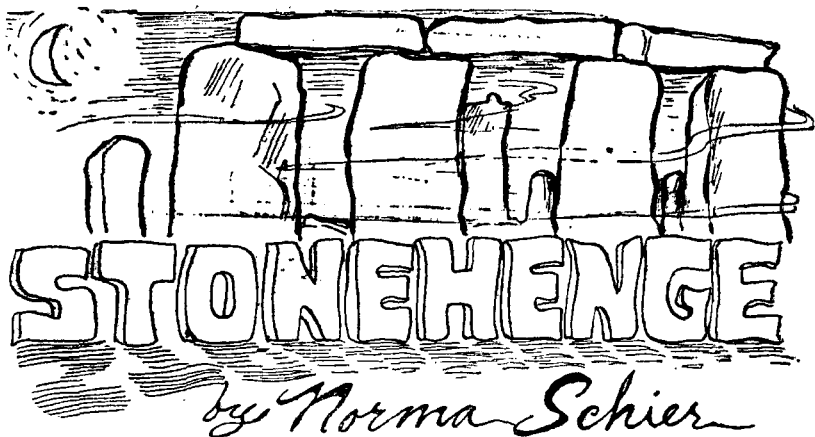
Sarsen Circle, the Bluestone Circle, between a monolith and a trilithon, on through the Bluestone Horse-shoe, and so to the Altar Stone. The flattish boulder came about to his waist, and none too gently he laid her on its uneven surface. The winds swept howling across the Salisbury Plain, stirring her long yellow hair. He wiped wet palms on his trouser legs. Only the wind would stir it ever again . . .

Her hair was blowing next morning too, when Chief Inspector Harlan Faulkner stood over the corpse. His long, agile hands were

thrust into his pockets, and his tall, lean body was braced to resist the chilly, screeching wind that gusted in and out of the titanic trilithons. He felt at home in this odd place, having forsaken a career in archaeology only when he realized that

which this woman had been sacrificed.

"Which is as great a nonsense as you'll ever think of," he grumbled to himself. "There never were sacrifices here, and this is the work of a more than somewhat cracked



he could not afford a doctorate. He had turned to detection of the criminal present as a substitute for the historic past, and seldom regretted it, for he found in police work unexpected human satisfactions.

With Stonehenge empty of reminders of the mundane present—the sightseers with their everlasting cameras had been turned away, and his men were still in the car park collecting their gear—time here seemed to have slipped its moorings, and one could imagine that the ancient stones, looming as high as twenty feet over him, were imbued with the primitive spirits to

brain. Or," he amended, "someone who wants me to think so."

He felt profoundly sorry for the woman, baldly abandoned to the winds of that ancient place. Her coat was open, and an unusual-looking dagger protruded starkly from her blue silk dress. She looked about thirty, with delicate, pretty features and, even in death, a wistful look. What, he wondered, had led her to this bizarre end?

On impulse, he brushed the hair back from her face, and started. It moved oddly under his hand. He shook his head to clear it of primitive vapors and returned to the



twentieth century. She was wearing what he knew was called a fall, and he pulled it off. She looked quite different, somehow more interesting and at the same time less pretty, her face now framed with short, wispy locks.

The others came straggling up and set to work, following their usual routines. Faulkner, too, became businesslike. He picked up the purse that was lying on the ground and went swiftly through it. The only noteworthy item was a telegram addressed to Mrs. Alexander Carmichael at 21 Upper King Street, Salisbury. It read, "Meet me nine tonight car park Stonehenge. Urgent." It was unsigned.

"So that's it!" he whistled to himself. "Cherchez l'homme, after all." It fit with the silk dress and fancy hairpiece.

"Hugh," he said to his sergeant, a chunky, fresh-faced man who looked younger than he was, "take this stuff back to the station and we'll look it over later." He handed him the purse and the fall. "But have the weapon checked out now. I want it."

While he waited, the police doctor made a quick examination and report. The dagger had apparently killed her, probably instantly, between nine and twelve the previous evening, at a rough estimate.

The sergeant returned with the

dagger. "No fingerprints, sir."

He nodded, slipping it into his coat pocket. "I'm going to pay a call. Check out this telegram and see what you can find out about the Carmichaels—and what she did yesterday. See you later at the station." He headed briskly across the ground, through the circles of stones—or what was left of them after nearly four thousand years—and on to the road, swinging along in an easy stride.

Dr. Alexander Carmichael was a quiet, shaggy-haired professor of mathematics, retired, with sad, nervous eyes. His face became tragic when Faulkner broke the news to him. They were in the small living-room of the Carmichael home. Books and papers were lying around in casual disorder, many overlaid with a fine coating of dust. Some nondescript plants drooped on the windowsill, and badly fitting slipcovers sagged on two or three pieces of furniture. Whatever the dead woman had been, she hadn't been a zealous housekeeper.

Dr. Carmichael spent most of his time pursuing esoteric researches and writing them up for learned journals. Of medium height, he had to crane his neck to meet the eyes of the lanky inspector. He looked considerably older than his wife.

"Felicity dead?" he said dazedly

in a high, thin voice. "Murdered? You're sure there's no mistake?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to identify her, sir," Faulkner said, "and then we'll know for sure."

There was no mistake, and when he saw the woman lying on the impersonal morgue slab, he wept. Faulkner took him back home and gave him brandy.

"Have you any idea, Doctor," he asked quietly, "who might have done this?"

"Oh, yes," Carmichael said dully. "How could he do this to me? It was bad enough before, but now—now I'll never get her back."

He struggled for control, and then it came out. His cherished, adored Felicity—a sweet and gentle soul, according to him—was having an affair with an archaeologist in London. The man had come down to study Stonehenge the year before, and Mrs. Carmichael, a knowledgeable astronomer, had worked with him.

"At first I couldn't believe it, Inspector. Not Felicity. She insisted she had just met him and their association was professional, and I tried to accept that. But they were so close. I often thought that they previously knew each other and cooked up the 'professional investigation' for my benefit. I suppose she couldn't help herself," he added wistfully. "But there's no doubt

what developed afterward. She's been going up to London every week to see him. It's been horrible."

"How do you know?"

"She'd go out, and lie about where she was going. Only yesterday she did that. Many times—you may think this strange behavior for a professor, Faulkner, but I *had* to know—I followed her. On three occasions I saw her go into his house."

"But why would he kill her?"

"Why indeed?" Carmichael echoed hollowly. "Perhaps he'd found someone else and she was in his way. He's an evil man, Inspector."

Faulkner reached into his pocket and brought out the dagger.

"Is that what did it?" Carmichael's voice was harsh. "It's his—Donat's! He showed it to us not long ago. That proves it, doesn't it?"

"We'll soon find out," Faulkner promised grimly.

On the eighty mile drive to London, Faulkner went over the case with Hugh Preddie, his sergeant. The other man's enthusiasm entertained him, for Preddie still managed to find in crime investigation a fulfillment of boyhood dreams that had been nurtured by the detective magazines. This did not,

however, prevent him from being an able investigator.

"Let's not forget, Hugh," Faulkner said now, "there are two Stonehenges—the scientific one of archaeologists and astronomers, and the superstitious, romantic one of Druid temples and blood sacrifices. Pure nonsense, of course. No evidence the Druids had anything to do with the place, which was about fifteen centuries before their time. The scientific makes much more sense, naturally, and besides, we're dealing with scientists. But still, you do hear of queer cults from time to time, and I've always thought scientists are more credulous than they like to admit—as if a secret yearning to believe in the mystic attracts a lot of 'em to science in the first place. Not hope of finding disproofs, but an unconscious hope they won't. I noticed a sizeable collection of books on ancient cultism at the Carmichaels'. I don't know if they're his or hers, but there again the interest may or may not be purely scientific."

"Yes, sir," Preddie agreed dutifully. He himself leaned toward the Druid-temple-and-blood-sacrifice Stonehenge, and not unconsciously either, but he would have died rather than admit it to his chief.

"So we don't know," Faulkner said, "whether we can rule out

some kind of cultist nonsense behind the murder, though the simplest explanation is that they used Stonehenge as a meeting place. They may have done so often, this time having a lovers' quarrel, or he having planned to murder her, maybe for some such reason as the husband suggests. Having the dagger with him looks like premeditation."

Preddie cleared his throat self-consciously. "It strikes me, sir, that the dagger points to this Donat *very* clearly. For a learned and, I should think, intelligent man, he's left a pretty obvious trail. Do you suppose he's being framed?"

Faulkner laughed. "You know very well that crimes are usually more obvious than your fiction writers make them out to be. Still, it could be. We're a long way yet from knowing all about it. I'll give you odds Donat will tell us the dagger was stolen. It might have been, Hugh, it might have been. But the rendezvous—and Stonehenge at that—sounds like another man."

"By the way, what did you find out about the telegram?"

"Came from London," replied Preddie. "They phoned it and got no answer, so they delivered it. It turns out she was at her hairdresser's in Salisbury—getting that fall thing, in fact. That's the only time

she did go out, far as I could learn. No visitors, either, that anyone saw. And no one saw her go out last night."

"Which we know she did," Faulkner observed. "Her own car, too. It was still in the car park."

"It was the husband," Preddie doggedly pursued his original thought, "that put you on to Donat, wasn't it?"

"I see what you mean, but I'll swear he was really broken up. You can tell, you know. And crushed about the affair."

"Of which we have his word for its existence."

"He went up to London yesterday morning, and got back by the early morning train today—he says. We'll check after we see Donat. What did you find out about them?"

"Lived quietly. No one seems to have thought she was playing around. A devoted couple, I'm told. Him worshiping the ground she walked on and her very solicitous of him. No close friends, though, or anyone that really knew them well. Kept to themselves."

"What if it wasn't an assignation," Faulkner mused, "but a meeting to check out an astronomical position at firsthand?"

"How would that lead to murder?" Preddie was skeptical. "I've never understood," he added irre-

levantly, "all the recent excitement over Stonehenge. Astronomers have said for years that the stones were aligned to show the position of the sun at the—uh—solstices, isn't it? To celebrate the sun god," he added in a welter of uncertainty.

"Ah, but a chap named Hawkins made quite an addition." Faulkner galloped happily away on his hobbyhorse. "The stones *do* show positions, like the sun rising right over the heelstone on Midsummer Day, and setting, if you're looking from the right place, within the framework of one of the trilithons at the Winter Solstice. Someone—Sir Arthur Evans, I think—pointed out it would look like the sun going into a tomb, which fits with a primitive religion, but Hawkins found more astronomical alignments than the earlier fellows dreamed of—sun *and* moon. However, the big thing he proved was that these supposedly primitive ancients could *predict* important astronomical events—especially eclipses, which terrified them—for all the years to come, with a little resetting of their computer every three centuries."

"Sounds fantastic." Preddie was impressed in spite of himself. "How did they do it?"

"You know the Aubrey holes that circle the stones. The scientists haven't really been able to ex-

plain them, and Hawkins worked out that they were a digital computing machine, that all eclipses could be predicted in a fifty-six year cycle, and there are fifty-six Aubrey holes! They could have been used to track the years. If six rocks are placed at certain intervals and moved one hole per year, when certain rocks are at certain holes, eclipses occur. He proved it in one minute on a modern computer by feeding his data into it. They used to think the Aubrey holes were intended for more stones, or some ritual purpose. There were cremations in them, but that must have been secondary."

Preddie felt a twinge for the ritual cremations, but arrival at an impressive Georgian house in Mayfair bearing Donat's address forestalled further archaeological discussion. They parked and alighted, coattails flapping, though the winds were distinctly tamer in London than on the Salisbury Plain.

When they got inside, they learned that the house had been made into flats. They had no trouble locating Donat's, and he himself opened the door to them. He was a dark, handsome man with an athletic build and weathered face to be expected in a working archaeologist—or a big game hunter, Faulkner thought. He professed a courteous willingness to be help-

ful, combined with polite doubt that he could.

"The Carmichaels? Oh, yes, they were here recently," he said, ushering them into a livingroom in which the odors of leather and antiquity mingled. "Brilliant couple. She was invaluable on the Stonehenge thing. We were working on one of Hawkins' unanswered questions, the Bluestone Circle of Stonehenge II. It's been written up, if you'd like to see."

"I would, later," Faulkner said sincerely. "At present we're investigating Mrs. Carmichael's murder."

"Good lord! I knew she was unstable, but—murder!"

"How do you mean, unstable?"

"Well, overemotional. Fearful. And terribly hipped on cultism. Unnerved me at times. She was seeing a psychiatrist, you know. Friend of mine, actually. Felicity met her here. Shall I call her?"

"In good time," Faulkner said, crossing his long legs. "I'd like to ask *you* some questions first."

"Of course," Donat said easily, leaning back in his black leather easy chair. "Background and so on, I suppose. I don't think I can shed much light, however."

Faulkner hesitated. Donat was putting on a good act—if it *was* an act. "She was attractive, wasn't she?" he began tentatively.

"Y-e-es, if you like the type. Rath-

er too much the perennial sweet young thing for my taste," Donat answered coolly.

"You weren't interested in her—personally?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" he asked sardonically. "Don't tell me old Alex Carmichael had some such notion!" He chuckled. "No, Inspector, forget that tack. Not my style at all."

He's acting, Faulkner thought. He asked, "Where were you last night?"

"You sound serious." Donat was still amused. "With a lady friend, as a matter of fact. She'll vouch for it."

"They usually do." Faulkner's tone was dry. "Have you seen this before?" Once again he displayed the distinctive dagger.

Donat was silent for a time, and the tension increased. "Faulkner," he said at last, "my apologies. I underestimated you. I thought this was plain silly, but I see I was mistaken. You won't believe that was stolen from me, and I can't prove it. You really should talk to my lady friend. She happens to be the psychoanalyst I mentioned, and she lives just across the hall."

As if on cue, there was a tap at the door, and without waiting, a tall, beautiful woman with sleek, dark blonde hair came in.

"Gary, I—oh, I'm sorry. I didn't

know you were busy." Her voice was soft and faintly accented. Vienna, thought Faulkner. He wondered if she'd been listening.

"As a matter of fact, I was just going to get you," Donat said quickly. "Inspector Faulkner and Sergeant Freddie are from the Wiltshire police, and they're looking into Felicity Carmichael's murder. Gentlemen, Dr. Amalie Angel."



What a lot of doctors in this case, thought Freddie, and not one that could cure a hangnail. (In which he was mistaken, for Dr. Angel, like most psychoanalysts, had a medical degree.)

Meantime, she was saying to Faulkner, "But this is terrible! Yes, she *was* my patient, but I cannot tell you anything about her without violating professional confidence."

"Since she is dead—murdered—don't you think you could best help her by letting us know what was

the matter with her?" Faulkner wondered just how ethical would be a psychoanalyst in love.

"Perhaps, but I would have to think about it. I do have an idea where you should look."

"That's a help," Faulkner said coldly. "Did her husband know she was seeing you?"

"Yes, though he didn't approve."

Since there was little more that either doctor was willing to say, Faulkner requested that they remain available till further notice, and he left with Preddie.

"One for you, Hugh," Faulkner conceded on the way back to Salisbury, shifting his long legs with difficulty in the small English car. "Carmichael was certainly in London all afternoon, and got back by the early train this morning as he said, but he could just have nipped out of his meeting unnoticed, come down in a fast car, and gotten back in time to be seen at his club later. We can't rule him out on his alibi."

"But," said Preddie, "if he knew she was seeing Dr. Angel, why did he think she went there to see Donat?"

"We only have their word for that," Faulkner reminded him. "If she *did* have a mental ailment, I'd certainly like to know what it was."

Just beyond Wheat Sheaf Inn, Faulkner directed Preddie to bypass the turn that would take them

directly to Salisbury. "I've an urge to revisit the scene of the crime," he explained.

He never failed to be stirred by the approach to the old stones. One minute you were rushing down a long straight road with flat unbroken plains stretching as far ahead as the eye could see, and the next, small humps appeared on the horizon, growing steadily larger till they dominated the landscape.

They left their car in the now-crowded car park, crossed the road and bought two tickets. Walking through the crowds of sightseers milling, gaping, and taking pictures, they headed for the Altar Stone. A plump, giggling girl was posing on the spot where the corpse had lain such a short time ago, while her companion busily adjusted his camera.

"Why *here*, Hugh?" Faulkner mused. "Did that poor woman have some kind of craziness that turned her into a sacrificial victim? A sick relationship with Donat—or someone else?" He shrugged. "Let's go see Carmichael. I want to know what he has to say about his wife's need for a psychiatrist."

"Surely you don't believe that, Inspector?" was what he did say, in a condescending tone, when they asked him. "Felicity told me she was seeing this Dr. Angel, but it

was a blind to cover her going there so often. I assure you she was perfectly sane and happy. I don't doubt that everyone who knows us will say the same."

They had, Faulkner thought, with the exception of the London pair. "She wasn't—ah—carried away by cultism?" Faulkner pursued.

"My dear man," Carmichael said with asperity, "I am sometimes 'carried away' by ancient mathematics. Does that make *me* crazy? No," he said, reverting to his earlier manner of listless misery, "I *know* she was seeing him. I have reasons . . . For one thing, she had a disguise which transformed her appearance."

Abruptly the mathematician buried his shaggy head in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he apologized after a moment, "I can't discuss it without breaking down. She was very dear to me. I wanted her back, Inspector. I would have cherished her all the more for her transgression. It just showed her human frailty."

Faulkner murmured something, and they left.

"Back to the station, Hugh," Faulkner said when they were outside. "I'm almost sure, but I want to think it through. I've a good idea, too, what Dr. Angel can tell me, and I want to talk to her."

"You've solved the thing, sir?"

"We'll see." But in his long thin bones he knew he had. The data was all there for the answer, and he was finally reading it right.

It came to a head that night.

The moon was more fitful than it had been the previous evening, for dark heavy clouds were drifting across it.

She was sitting on the Altar Stone, waiting, long slim legs dangling over the side, when *he* arrived, a dim form at first, striding through the intermittent shadows cast by those giant hulks.

"You came," he said in a low voice, when he was close enough.

"I thought you needed my help," she said in her soft accent.

"You said you know everything. This is a fitting place to meet. Do you know why?"

"You wanted to return to the scene of your crime."

"I want to commit another," he corrected in a conversational tone. The moon appeared full in time to glint on the kitchen knife he had produced. Suddenly he jerked his head.

"What's the matter?" she asked tranquilly.

"These stones," he muttered. "It's absurd, but sometimes they seem—alive. Have you felt it?"

"You're not far wrong, Doctor. Drop that knife!" Faulkner spoke

briskly from the shadows, which came swarmingly to life as police poured from behind the stones. The circles seethed with them, converging on the Altar Stone.

The moon emerged brilliantly again to illumine the grey, shaggy head of the man the policemen were holding firmly.

"Got you, Carmichael!" Faulkner was jubilant.

"Amalie, you idiot." Donat was holding the analyst as firmly, and a good deal more tenderly, than the police were holding their captive. "Darling," he breathed, "I don't hold with my women taking my risks, but you were marvelous."

"I was terrified," she said, burrowing into Donat's arms.

"Damn you all!" snarled Carmichael. "You're all in it together to cuckold me, but I'll kill every one of you!"

But the police had already disarmed him, and now two burly constables led him away.

"Inspector," Donat said, "when I was working on Stonehenge, I stayed at a nice old inn in Devizes called the Bear. Could you meet us there and fill us in?"

"With pleasure," Faulkner said. "I owe the lady a lot for the risk she took, though I have a few well-chosen words to say about her taking it—calling him and telling him she knew, and agreeing to meet

him. A headstrong woman, if ever I saw one."

"Amalie says you had it all figured out," a curious Donat was saying to a complacent Faulkner a short time later, around a table in the Bear's private bar.

"A lot of things didn't make sense until Carmichael gave himself away," Faulkner said. "When I reviewed everything in the light of that, it all fell into place. I thought Dr. Angel's conscience might let her corroborate what I was already prepared to act on. Especially," he grinned, "as it would clear you. I thought she might not be completely disinterested in that."

"If there was an affair," he went on, "motive was no problem. But if you and Dr. Angel were telling the truth, I couldn't see at first why either you *or* Carmichael would want to kill her—unless her mental problem were involved in some unknown way. But once he gave me reason to think *he* had killed her, I realized there was another alternative—that *she* wasn't mentally ill, but *he was*, with a jealousy that wasn't rational, and she was getting help to cope with it. I wanted Dr. Angel's confirmation. So he really thought he was being cuckolded—and you knew it, by the way. You put on quite an act."

"It seemed prudent," Donat said.

"He sent his wife a telegram making the rendezvous at Stonehenge," Faulkner continued. "He told us later what I finally realized—though he didn't sign it, he expected her to think it came from you. When she came, that constituted the final 'proof' to his crazed mind."

"He didn't seem crazy to me," offered Preddie.

"That's true paranoia," Dr. Angel explained. "Logical within the frame of the delusion, and sane outside it. The paranoid schizophrenic thinks the world plots against him because he is Napoleon or a lost prince, but the true paranoid is most apt to think his spouse is unfaithful and weave a chain of 'proof' to support his delusion."

"Like the hairdresser," Preddie suddenly realized. "She really did have an appointment."

"That," said Faulkner, "was the giveaway. She got that fall yesterday, *after* he went to London, and she wasn't wearing it when he identified her, yet he referred to how different she looked in disguise. So he must have *seen* her in

the new fall when he killed her."

"Why Stonehenge?" Dr. Angel wondered. "He wasn't mad in a way to believe in sacrifices."

"Purely practical," said Faulkner. "His alibi required her to be found soon enough to establish time of death, and he also needed a private place to kill her. At home he risked being seen in the neighborhood when he was supposed to be in London. Stonehenge was ideal—private but accessible by night and public by day. Besides, it was another pointer to Donat. He wanted to punish him, too."

"I have a question for *you*, Dr. Angel," he added. "You believed your patient utterly. Wasn't it within the realm of possibility that she was the sick one weaving a false story?"

"Not in this case, Inspector," smiled the pretty analyst. "I *knew* Gary wasn't carrying on with her because I don't give him time. You must come to our wedding, which will be soon."

And, having drunk amply to the solution of the case, they drank to that.





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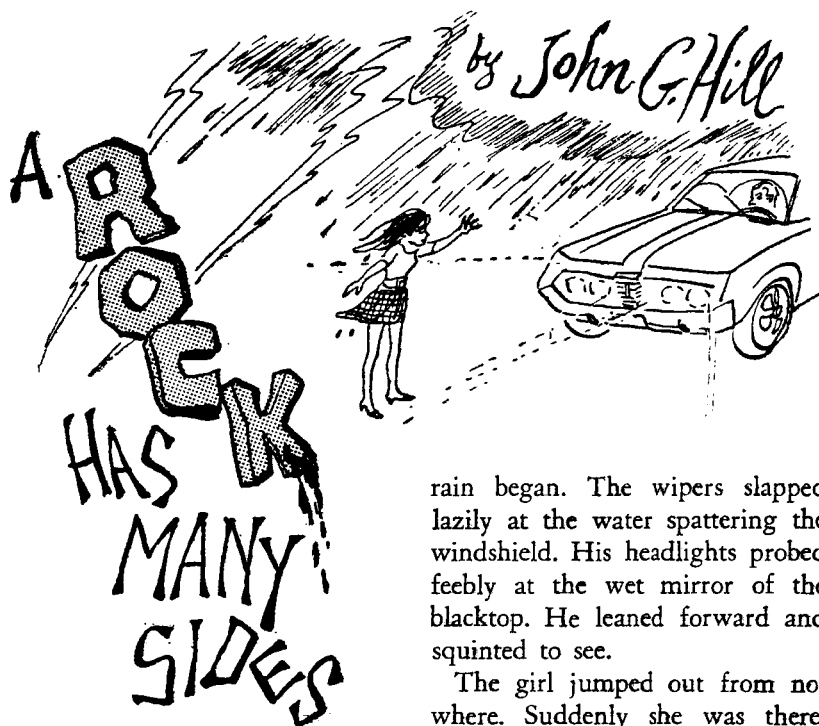
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One knows least that person whom he should know best.



rain began. The wipers slapped lazily at the water spattering the windshield. His headlights probed feebly at the wet mirror of the blacktop. He leaned forward and squinted to see.

The girl jumped out from nowhere. Suddenly she was there, waving from the right side of the road. Clayton Black had been raised to respect older people and women in distress so he pressed down on the brake pedal and brought the car to a stop just a few feet beyond the girl. The door opened and the girl quickly climbed in beside him. "Gee, thanks

THE SECONDARY road which Clayton Black hoped would soon lead him to Meadville wound dark and lonely through a long stretch of state reforestation land. The last farmhouse he'd passed had been miles back. He slowed the four-year-old car to about forty as the

a lot, mister," she said breezily.

In the moment the dome light had been on, Black had a glance of a very young, pretty girl, long black hair wet and straight now, wearing a green blouse, matching skirt, and high heels. He could smell the dampness of her clothes. She wiped water from her forehead with one hand.

Black said, "I didn't see your car. Of course—"

"I don't have a car. Gee, am I ever glad you came along. It'd be a long walk home."

"You live in Meadsville?"

"No. A farm about four miles this side of it. About five miles up this road."

Black had the car moving again. "And you just went for a walk and got caught in the rain?"

"Of course not. Same old story. I had a date with a guy who turned out to be a bum. Gee, what a creep. Buys me a dinner and thinks that entitles him to—well, you know. Gee, was he ever mad? I was lucky to get away. I had to jump out of the car and hide in the woods. He was taking me to his house whether I wanted to go or not. Wait'll I tell my dad. My dad's a part-time deputy sheriff."

Black didn't know whether to believe her or not. He wondered if he were being set up for some kind of con game, but she looked too

young, too innocent to be involved in something illegal. "What kind of man is this creep?" he asked.

The girl hugged her arms about her and shivered. "He's an animal. I think he's a little crazy. His name's Arnie. And you know what? I think—well, never mind."

"That's nice. He's an animal and you think he's a little crazy, so you go out on a date with him."

"Oh, the other time he wasn't like this," the girl protested. "Tonight he just seemed different. He wasn't drunk, but he kept saying how tough he is, that he could get anything he wanted. He'll be sorry. My dad will have him arrested. I told him so, too. You didn't tell me your name. I'm Joanne Cabot."

"Clay Black."

"Where are you from, Clay? I'm sure glad you stopped for me."

"Ohio. A small town near Columbus."

"You're a long way from home."

"I'll be living in Meadsville, at least for a while. I'll be teaching in the high school. When I—"

"There it is," Joanne Cabot interrupted, pointing. "There's the lane to our house. On the left."

Black slowed the car. A narrow muddy rut angled into trees off to the left. "Where's the house?"

"It's about a hundred yards back. You can't see it from here. Don't try to turn in. It's too muddy.

I can get out here and walk in."

"It's not that bad. I'll drive you in." He turned the wheel and nosed the car into the slippery ruts of the lane. The rain had stopped. Black stared at the ruts in front of him, constantly twisting the wheel to follow the most solid portion of the lane. Finally the road curved behind a stand of trees and he could see the house.

"There's a light in the kitchen," Joanne said. "Dad's waiting up for me."

Black pulled the car out of the lane and faced it toward the house, up on the grass of the yard where it would be easier for him to turn around. The farmhouse was a scabby white, boxlike structure like a thousand other farmhouses in this part of the country.

"Wait'll I tell him what happened," the girl said. "Thanks again, Clay."

"Perhaps I'll see you in town."

The girl seemed reluctant to leave him. Looking at the house she said, "It's funny he hasn't come to the door yet."

"I'll walk you to the door," Black said. He got out, circled the car and took the girl's hand and walked with her toward the house. The rain came down again and they hurried up to the porch. Lightning flashed and crackled nearby, lighting up the house, the yard and

the car for an instant. The thunder followed quickly, rumbling and growling.

"Come inside for a minute and I'll get you a cup of coffee. I want you to meet my dad." Joanne opened the door and held it for Black, and he entered a large, dark livingroom.

"He must be in the kitchen," Joanne said. "Just a minute."

Black, left standing in the darkness of the livingroom, felt an odd uneasiness. Outside, lightning again crackled through the atmosphere, making square panes of light at each of the windows. The sudden piercing scream froze him into complete immobility momentarily. Then Black rushed across the unfamiliar room and down the hallway where Joanne had gone, the prolonged scream growing in volume as he approached its source.

Joanne was standing just inside the kitchen door, her back braced against the wall, her hands at her ears as if to blot out the sound of her own screaming. Her eyes bulged in riveted fascination at a lump of a man on the floor, sprawled with outflung arms in the middle of a red stream of blood which flowed from his lower trunk across the sloping old linoleum and disappeared beneath the kitchen table.

Black's muscles tightened, mak-

ing every move an effort consciously thought of and then forced, like a robot whose actions must first be programmed by an outside source before the correct button is pushed. He should go to the man to see if he were still alive, and he should do something to stop Joanne's screams; yet another part of him wanted to search the rest of the room to be sure they were safe from whatever had attacked the man on the floor. For a moment he did nothing except stand there, the weight of making a decision holding him motionless.

Joanne's screaming slowed into choking sobs and her body relaxed, her knees bending so that she be-

gan to sink limply to the floor.

Black moved to her and led her to a chair at the other side of the table, out of sight of the man on the floor. With Joanne in the chair, he went around the table and bent down. The blood and the wounds nauseated him, but he swallowed and forced himself to feel for a heartbeat. There was none.

Cabot was a big man, his leathery, lined face pale now, the lips pulled back in a snarl. His thick hair was almost totally white. Black looked at the rest of him. The overall pants were ripped and tattered below the waist where a knife had slashed at him, and the blood must have spurled out at his attacker.



Probably each one of the knife wounds would have been fatal, but he had been stabbed time after time. A long, wickedly sharp butcher knife lay near his head, as if the killer had thrown it at his victim as he died.

Black stood up, sweating and shivering simultaneously. He started to speak to Joanne and was interrupted by a crack of thunder. Suddenly it seemed to him he had lived all his life with the sound of hard, pelting rain in his ears. He waited patiently for the thunder to pass.

"Joanne," he said, going to her.

Joanne's head rested on her arms on the table and her body still shook with the gasps of her weeping.

Black raised her head with his hands, looking down into her red and swollen fear-drenched eyes. "Joanne, we've got to get out of here."

"My daddy. That's my daddy. He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes."

She tried to hide her head again in her arms.

Black pulled her out of the chair. "It wasn't long ago. He may still be here."

It took an instant for his words to penetrate to her, but when they did she raised her head and tried to scream again. The sound she ut-

tered came out only a hoarse moan. "It's Arnie," she croaked. "I know it was. He's crazy." Her shoulders and hands began to shake as if she had suddenly developed palsy.

Black said, "Do you have a telephone?"

Joanne nodded. Deliberately avoiding looking at her father's body, she stumbled into the living-room with Black following her. She went to a wall phone, spun the crank and then raised the receiver to her ear. She waited a moment, hung up, then tried again. The second time she replaced the phone she shook her head. "It's dead. Maybe the lines."

"Yes," Black said. He wanted to comfort the girl, to reassure her, tell her they would be all right, but he only stood there, feeling blank and empty, drained of thought. He found himself simply listening to the steady downpour of the rain, drumming loudly on the porch roof.

"Clay, are you all right?" Joanne grasped his arms and tried to shake him.

Black pushed her away. "I'm okay. I'm okay. But we can't go out to the car."

"Why not? We can't stay here, not with—"

"Joanne, the blood—" He swallowed. "The blood. It was still—well, it was warm. It hadn't even

started to coagulate," he told her.

"What are you talking about?"

"It was just a few minutes ago. It couldn't have been more than five minutes before we came in. He might be waiting for us out there."

He was afraid she was going to scream again, but she whispered so low he had to bend toward her to make out the words. "Then maybe he's still in the house. That's all the more reason why we've got to get away."

"How far is it to town?"

"Four miles. Maybe four and a half."

Black took a deep breath. He had to think. He could not understand why they'd been given this much time. Joanne's father must have been killed about the time they were driving down the lane to the house. The killer probably heard them and had no way of telling who it might be. So what would he do? He'd leave the house. Then he'd either use whatever lead time he had to escape, to run from the place of his killing, or he could wait and see who was in the car, watch them go in the house, perhaps feeling he was not in any danger at all. He could afford to take his time, allowing them to find the body while he planned what he would do to them. Or would he? If he were really crazy, how would you anticipate his actions?

"Clay, what are we going to do?"

"We can't go out to the car. He'll be waiting for us."

Joanne looked over her shoulder before she said, "You're making me more frightened the more you talk."

"I'm scared, too. Maybe we can slip out the back way while he's waiting and watching the car."

"Through the kitchen? I can't go back in there again."

"You'll have to."

Lightning cracked again, lighting the earth for an instant with a noonday brightness and then was gone, and thunder and the hum of the rain filled the air. The lights in the house flickered and blinked out. Joanne ran to Black, throwing herself into his arms.

She cried, "He put the lights out. He's like a devil."

Black held her close to him. "Listen, Joanne. We're going out the back. I hope we can get away, but if he comes at us, don't hesitate. Don't try to stop him. Run, but not to the car. Run into the woods and hide. Have you got that?"

"And what about you?"

"Never mind about me. You do as I've said."

"All right, Clay."

Holding hands, they started toward the kitchen, walking on tip-toe as if the rain did not smother any sound their steps might make. They were halfway across the liv-

ingroom when they heard the muffled slam of a car door.

Joanne hissed, "Did you hear that?"

"He must have been waiting for us right in the car."

They groped into the kitchen. Black tried to recall the location of the table and the door. Above all, they had to avoid stumbling over the body lying on the floor.

They heard the front door flung open with a great crash. Joanne was guiding Black silently through the kitchen. They were at the door. Black glanced back as Joanne opened the door and slipped out. He saw nothing and followed the girl down off the low stoop and out into the mud of the yard, the rain pouring down on them. Fifty yards away loomed the black shadow of the barn. They began to run toward it.

"Hurry," Joanne was saying. "Hurry. Hurry." She recited it over and over like the chant of a prayer.

Behind them, Black heard another door slam open, and he pounded harder for the barn, fighting the slippery, slowing suction of the mud. Joanne raced beside him, still mumbling her chant for speed.

Someone started to laugh. It came from the house, a loud, mocking, weirdly wild laugh. It went on and on. It was laughter of the insane.

Black took Joanne's hand and led

her along a corral fence. It was a wooden plank fence, once painted white. The darkness of the night engulfed them, the rain soaking into their clothes. Ahead of them, bordering a pasture, was a row of tall pine trees running in a straight line as far as Black could see. The trees were fifty yards from the house and the barn. Without a word to each other, the two began running, their feet slipping and sliding in the muddy turf. They gained the trees and halted briefly.

"Did he see us?" Joanne said. "Is he coming? I can't see."

"I can't either," Black said. "We've got to keep going." He pushed on through the pines and walked directly into a barbed wire fence. He resisted the impulse to curse and extricated himself from the barbs, tearing at those parts of his clothes which would not easily pull away.

Black dropped to the ground and wormed his way under the lower strand of wire. His clothes were now nothing but a thin outer skin, molded to his body by the water and the mud. He held two of the strands apart and motioned for Joanne to climb between them. Her skirt tore as she struggled through.

"You said the town's about four miles," Black whispered. "That's only an hour or hour and a half walk if we keep right at it."

Joanne was looking over her shoulder. "All right. All right. Only let's go. If he saw us—"

The open field before them slanted upward. Black took Joanne's hand and began walking rapidly. He would have felt safer if they were going through some type of cover, but the cave-like blackness of the night swallowed everything. Perhaps it was better this way. Trees would only slow their progress, perhaps confuse their sense of direction.

Miraculously the rain stopped.

"I'm so tired," Joanne panted.

"We'll be at the top soon. It'll be easier then." They stumbled on, chests heaving, concentrating on sucking in the chill moist air and expelling it again almost before it had entered their lungs.

Sometime later they almost stumbled into a creek, which was now a rapidly rushing river. There was no steep and abrupt bank, merely a gently sloping grade. They heard the gurgling of the water, and only then did Black realize his numbed feet were under water. White tufts of water cascaded off rocks, speckling the river, the only color visible to them.

"I've never seen it so wide," Joanne said.

Black took a few tentative steps farther into the stream. As soon as the water reached his knees the cur-

rent was whipping at him with enough force to unbalance him. He retreated quickly to the edge where Joanne stood. He shook his head. "I don't think we could make it."

"The only place we'll be able to cross this tonight is over the bridge at the road." She started wading back out of the ankle-deep water, moving in the direction of the flow.

Black followed her. He marveled for a moment at the girl's stamina. He himself ached in every bone, and an uncontrollable trembling racked him periodically. Perhaps it was true that women were basically stronger than men, at least in the sense of accepting punishment, enduring hardship.

In a few minutes Joanne exclaimed, "We're there! The road must be just ahead. This is the right-of-way fence."

Across the fence the land slanted down into a drainage ditch, and then abruptly they were on the shoulder of the road. Black had begun visualizing the road as a highway ablaze with the headlights of many cars traveling in both directions over its surface, but in reality it was still a macadam country road, as deserted now as the woods from which they had just emerged.

The bridge was actually just a wide section of road over a huge culvert, with concrete railings lining both sides. It would have been

invisible except for the whiteness of the concrete.

"We might as well keep walking toward town," Black said.

"I suppose so," murmured Joanne.

The sky rumbled, a noise familiar to them by now and yet frightening. The rain did not resume gently. Great drops of water beat down as if turned loose by a cosmic faucet. They plodded on, ignoring the downpour.

"It was a dirty trick getting you into this, Clay. I'm sorry. And my father . . . He must have killed my father just because I said I'd tell him about tonight and daddy would throw him in jail." Her voice choked.

Black put an arm around her waist. "Don't think about it now. Just think about getting to town and getting warm and dry again—seeing lights and getting out of this damn rain. I never saw such country."

"You're good, Clay," Joanne said. "You're a good man."

A swift scent of danger caused Black to glance back over his shoulder. Through the slashing rain he thought he saw movement, a blur of a man trotting after them. He grabbed Joanne's hand and, breaking into a run, pulled her after him off the road.

They scrambled through the

brush. Black turned and saw the hulk crashing after them, gaining on them rapidly.

Joanne whimpered like a burned infant when she ran into the fence. Black skidded to a stop. Her clothes were snagged on the barbs. He yanked at her, pulling her from the fence, and threw her to his left. She fell on her knees and remained there, sobbing. Behind them, the snapping of breaking branches drowned out the sound of the rain and deadened the cries of the girl. Their pursuer was so close, they could hear his panting.

Black spun away from the girl and braced himself. He could see Arnie quite clearly now, as if his fear had so heightened his vision that he could see through darkness and rain. He was surprised at how slow the big man's progress seemed. He was no more than a few feet away, yet to Black he seemed distant enough that he could still turn and elude him. Certainly it would be possible. Glide to his right, dodge in among the denser stand of trees and he would lose him, he felt sure. He'd be deserting Joanne. Sure, but what comfort could he be to her simply accompanying her in death? She was dead now. She couldn't possibly escape when Arnie was this close. Get out. Survival was the first law. You can't take all night deciding.

Then it was done. With the decision made, a calm settled over him, relaxing his muscles, and he wondered how this could be, whether this was what spitting in death's eye bought a man. He felt almost confident.

He hurled himself at Arnie's legs like a football player hitting below the knees, rolling his shoulder into the attacking form. He kept on rolling, feeling the ground tremble as the heavy man went down, grunting.

Black sprang to his feet. Arnie had already recovered his balance and was erect, turning toward him. To Black it was like facing a bear. He could not discern the face but saw only the wide, blocky silhouette. The bear lunged at him. Black stepped back, trying to sidestep at the same time. A paw reached out and grasped his forearm and he was pulled close to Arnie. Black pounded at the stomach with his free right hand. He felt the man give ground slightly, but the grip on his arm did not lessen.

He kept pounding at the stomach, kicked at the shins, but there was no reaction from the blows. Arnie still had not spoken. The only sounds from him were his heavy breathing and occasional grunts. Now the other arm circled Black and squeezed him against Arnie's chest. He could hear the

booming of his heartbeat. Now he could not get leverage to hit at the stomach. He dug his knuckles into Arnie's ribs. Again and again he slammed his fists into the side of the ribs. It was like hitting a tree.

The arms pressed him closer against the chest. Clay squirmed and tried to slide out from under them. He could barely draw breath into his lungs. He had time to wonder why the man did not simply hit him, knock him unconscious, and then finish the job without resistance.

This was death. It was gliding in and sweeping him up in this lonely thicket on a stormy summer night. It was so different than he'd imagined. No swift flashes from out of his past life blazed through his mind. He was in great pain and wanted to live. He could not defeat death, and its inevitability angered him. Orange streaks knifed into his eyes, and then his mind seemed to explode.

The sum total of power in each cell in his body revolted against the pressure squeezing his back into his chest, and in an instinctive cataclysm of energy he lifted his feet from the ground, wrapped them around the knees and calves of Arnie and used the full power of his weight to swing the man to his left.

Arnie tripped and fell, still hold-

ing onto Black, landing beside him on the ground. The fall loosened his grip momentarily and Black fell back against the muddy earth. Arnie dug his hands into Black's shoulders and lifted him from the ground.

"Arnie," Joanne screamed, "leave him alone! You hear? Leave him alone!" She clutched at Arnie's thick mass of hair and tugged back.

Growling deep in his throat, Arnie let Black drop back into the thick mud and whirled on Joanne. He slapped her backhanded and sent her slipping and sprawling to the ground. He seemed to have forgotten Black altogether as he plodded after Joanne.

Black pushed himself out of the mud, slid and fell again, and his hand scraped against the edge of a rock. He dug his hands into the mud and pulled it out, an irregular-shaped piece of shale about ten inches in diameter and an inch or two thick. On one side it tapered to a narrow edge. He hoped he'd have time. Arnie was about to kick or stomp on Joanne. Black would have perhaps one blow. If one blow didn't do it, he would at least direct attention to himself and maybe the girl would have sense enough this time to flee.

Directly behind Arnie now, Black swung the rock in a wild lunging arc and slashed it into the

back of Arnie's head. He felt the rock hit and heard the pop of the splitting skull. For a moment he imagined he had failed, as Arnie started a slow turn. Black swung again and the rock caught Arnie above the temple, just at the hairline. He crashed forward, face down in the mud, part of his legs draped across Joanne.

Joanne scrambled out from the legs and jumped to her feet. "Run," she cried. "Run. You knocked him out. Let's get out of here."

Black stood still, holding the bloody rock in his right hand, staring down at the form on the ground. His breath still came in short, grating gasps. "I think he's dead."

"What? You couldn't kill him. Let's don't wait."

Black slowly bent over Arnie's body and looked at the back of his head. It was opened like a partly cut orange. Black squeezed his eyes shut, then rose and turned away.

Joanne took a closer look and nudged the body with her foot. "You did," she said. "You did kill him." Awe was in her voice.

Black had dropped the rock and now staggered away toward the road. He drew in the sweet, moist air as he walked and exhaled it gratefully. *Self-defense*, he was saying to himself. *Self-defense. He was going to kill me. He'd have killed*

Joanne, too, but instead I killed him. I didn't want to kill him. Oh, yes, I did. I wanted to kill him. I was scared and mad and I damn well wanted to kill him.

He came to the ditch bordering the road and stopped. He noted several rocks of varying sizes on the ground. If Arnie had slammed Black's head into the ground, sooner or later it would have struck a rock and then it would have been himself who had the cracked skull. He'd killed to keep from being killed. Self-defense.

Joanne came up beside him. She touched his arm. "Gee, Clay, you were brave. You could have run away when he was beating me."

Black looked at her. "You had plenty of time yourself."

"Yes, but that wasn't the same. I couldn't have got far. He'd have come right after me and caught me. You could have got away."

Black turned his eyes toward the road. What was bothering him? Why did he feel so strange, so changed? What if he hadn't swung so hard? He could have knocked Arnie out without killing him if

he'd used less force in the swing. The truth was that he had hated the man at the time with such vehemence he wanted to kill him. Nothing short of death would satisfy the hatred. So now he was a killer. The odd part was, he would have no trouble justifying the slaying to others. He might well be commended for it by the police, become a sort of hero. They wouldn't know about the nagging doubt pricking his conscience. Only he could say whether murder had been necessary, or whether it could have been avoided.

"Clay?"

"Yes?"

"We can't just stand here."

"No. We'll go back to your house. Get my car."

"Do you think we should?"

"What?"

"I mean go back to the house." She shuddered.

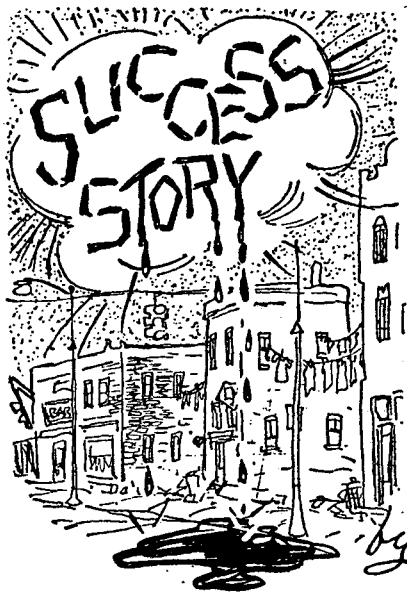
"It's closer than walking into town. I don't think a car is ever going to come along this road."

"Well, whatever you say."

They started back along the road. The rain had stopped.



There is nothing more uncertain in its success, Machiavelli tells us, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.



could relax. I surely could use it.

"Don't you start in on me, Frank," I said wearily.

"Captain Mason to you."

I shrugged. "Okay. But what's your beef? You went along with the plan."

"One helluva lot of choice I had." He leaned forward in his chair, his pale blue eyes watching me across his desk. "Don't try to shovel any of this mess onto me, or the department. It's all yours, brother. You and that lousy com-

Richard M. Ellis

THE POLICE captain looked at me with a mixture of disgust and anger. He snapped, "Well, Professor? Satisfied?"

He and I were alone now, in his shabby office at the precinct house. The reporters were gone. The various and assorted police and civilian officials concerned were gone. There would be more hell to pay tomorrow, and for many days thereafter, but for the moment I

mittee did it all by yourselves!"

His large nose wrinkled as if at a very bad smell.

I shrugged again. I didn't want to argue. All I wanted was to get out of there; out of the office, out of the precinct house, out of the moldering neighborhood that surrounded it, but I'd wait a few more minutes until, hopefully, the last of the reporters had left the area. I'd had more than enough

attention for one day, at least.

"We did what we thought would work," I said, as much to myself as to Mason. I tried to find solace in the words.

The captain breathed fervently, "God deliver us from people with good intentions . . ."

I didn't even bother to groan.

When the governor had first called me some months before, asking me to head the crime-prevention study committee he was appointing, I hadn't wanted any part of it.

I'd long since had my try at improving the world, and had retired, sadder and perhaps wiser, into the more congenial atmosphere of the college campus to teach American History. Over the years I had gained a modest amount of renown for a series of semi-factual historical novels, but what did I know about contemporary crime, and the conditions that bred it?

"Nothing," I had told the governor.

"Exactly," he said. "That's why I want you, old boy. You and the others I'm appointing to this committee all have two things in common: you've been successful in your chosen fields, and you cheerfully admit you have no idea what to do about controlling crime."

"But—"

"We've had enough of self-styled

experts, with their charts and graphs, and high-blown theories that, when it gets down to the nitty-gritty, don't amount to a thing. I want new ideas. When can you start?"

I sighed. "You're still the same con artist, I see. But really, Tom—" "Really."

Tom O'Hara and I went back a long way—since we'd been kids together—growing up in a neighborhood not a great deal better than the slum presently sweltering in the summer night outside the precinct house.

I joined Governor O'Hara's committee, and soon found that Tom wasn't kidding. He not only wanted new ideas, he had some of his own. His particular interest was the problem of youth in the city slums; hardly surprising, considering his own background, and the fact that ours is a highly urbanized state, much of our population being centered in two or three huge city-complexes.

Naturally enough, then, the committee soon concentrated upon this special area in the overall picture of crime.

"The slum gang. That's our target," said Tom, in one of the frequent informal confabs we had during this formative period. "These gangs are directly and indirectly responsible for at least

fifty percent of the crime in the cities."

"What else is new?" I asked sardonically.

"I know, I know. People ranging from hard-boiled cops to dew-eyed social workers, and all degrees in between, have tried for years to do something about the gangs, with no luck. Yet something must be done . . ."

I took a puff from my pipe and said, "How about sticking to something easy, like putting the syndicate out of business?"

Tom gave me a sample of his famous boyish grin. Then he sobered. "Where do you think the syndicate and like organizations get the new blood that keeps them in business? From these same street gangs in these same city slums. Right?"

I agreed.

Time went by. The committee met and, in both open and closed sessions, worried at the problem like so many bears at a bee tree—but without the bear's comfortable assumption that he could reach the honey without being badly stung.

We finally decided to zero in on one particular gang, to make it a sort of pilot project. Reasonable enough, as what would work with one representative gang might work with most.

After some research, and with

the governor's approval, we settled on a group in the slums of the capital, a gang of young toughs calling themselves the "Blood Angels."

At this point Tom told us precisely what he had in mind. I listened with a certain amount of surprise, not because of the nature of his plan, but because I had been formulating a similar plan myself.

"It's about the only avenue of approach that, as far as I know, hasn't been previously explored," Tom finished. "What do you say, gentlemen?"

He looked around at the half-dozen or so of us, gathered in his study at the governor's mansion; for a moment the only sound was the muted whir of the air-conditioner in the window beyond Tom's desk.

"Well, it is an original idea," said Frazier, a rather hard-bitten industrialist.

Someone else chided, "But to use public funds—"

"If it works, even partially, the savings will far outweigh the expenditures," Tom argued.

"If it works . . . A mighty big 'if,'" Frazier grunted.

When the others had left, after more or less agreeing to go along with the plan, Tom poured two strong shots of bourbon, handed me one, and said, "That's it. Almost."

I had an idea what was coming. "Now the governor makes a gracious but firm withdrawal from the field."

"Right. From now on, it's strictly your baby. Any success, or failure, will attach itself to the committee."

"Which is why you appointed a committee in the first place," I said.

"Of course," Tom said blandly. "You want out?"

"Yes. However—"

Tom nodded, satisfied. He lifted his glass in a toast.

The next day, after preliminary arrangements by phone, I drove into the city. I found the dingy brick precinct house in the heart of the dingy slum area that was the literal, as well as figurative, stomping-grounds of the Blood Angels.

The police captain in charge at the precinct, Captain Frank Mason, was not overcome by joy at my advent.

"Let me get this straight," Mason said. "You want to meet the leaders of this gang?"

I nodded. "Preferably at their—er—headquarters."

"Why?"

"To offer them a job," I said.

Mason threw up his hands in disgust, but he had little choice in the matter. I met with the more prominent members of the gang that same afternoon; the rest was

easy. I was on the right track.

By the end of the week almost the entire membership—some thirty youths, ranging in age between fourteen and twenty—were on the state payroll. Not directly, of course; the funds involved had been transferred from the public treasury to the committee and the committee, through me, did the disbursing.

In return for their services, the Blood Angels were to receive \$75 to \$125 a week, depending on individual need.

Their "services" were purely nominal, the main one being the refurbishing of an empty loft building in the neighborhood, to serve as a recreation center.

"What it amounts to, you're paying those punks blackmail," Captain Mason said angrily.

"Not at all," I retorted. "The main thing holding this gang, or any such gang, together is poverty, and the bitter frustrations that arise—"

"Go hire a hall," Mason snapped.

Yet as the weeks passed, and the crime rate in the precinct steadily declined to an all-time low, Mason began to change his tune—up to a point. "It's still no better than blackmail," he said.

"The point is, it's working. It's a start," I told him.

Later, the somewhat unpleasant

rumors began to seep in that a large percentage of the money being paid to the Blood Angels was finding its way into the hands of a few of the members, the hard-core element, and that the money was being used to build up a "war chest" and even for the wholesale purchase of firearms.

"Absolute nonsense," I said. "If anything like that were going on, I'd have heard about it from some of the boys. As I've told you, I have established genuine communication with—"

"Yeah. You've told me," the captain said.

Yet the rumors persisted.

Naturally, the operation so far had been conducted in secrecy, but now hints of it began to appear in the local press. The governor denied all knowledge, and I—speaking for the committee—said nothing at great length.

Then, suddenly, the lid blew off. To put it in simple terms, the Blood Angels tried to take over the city's underworld establishment, or at least a sizable portion of it. They tried by the direct method of attempting to murder the racketeers then in power, and they tried to do it all in one bloody day. However, the Blood Angels found they were badly overmatched.

"God deliver us from people

with good intentions," the captain repeated, as he and I sat alone in his office that sweltering summer evening. "You start out with some harebrained scheme to 'rescue' a bunch of punks who don't want to be rescued in the first place, and—"

"Please," I said, lifting a weary hand.

"—And now four of those punks are dead, another three or four aren't expected to live out the night, several are critically hurt, and the rest will be on the run and looking back over their shoulders from now on."

Mason shook his head in something like awe.

I got up from my chair. I was going home. To hell with it. "I won't be seeing you again."

"I hope not," the captain said. Then he relented a bit. "Oh, well, I guess you people were sincere; at least you tried. For what it's worth, Professor, for a while there I thought it just might work out. You know, that you might actually reach a few of those punks . . . I should've known better."

In silence I headed for the door.

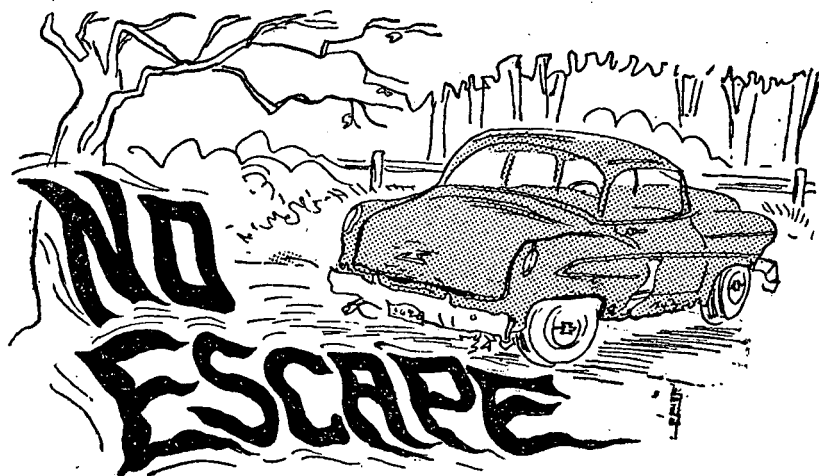
The captain spoke again. "So long. Off the record, I'm sorry you failed."

I paused. "Off the record—"

"Yeah?"

I allowed myself a smile. "*What makes you think we failed?*"

Those who would look to nature for relief should be apprised of the wild creatures that do likewise.



PATROLMAN PETE KREBS had an easy job on a day like this. He was alone on duty in the County Park, but then he was alone most days. Today, however, he would really be alone. People never came out to the park in bad weather. There was a complete overcast, dull gray and threatening rain, and a chilly wind gusting now and then across the open spaces and even seeping into the wooded areas. Pete Krebs sampled this wind several times as he dutifully checked restroom buildings, then gladly retreated to the shelter of

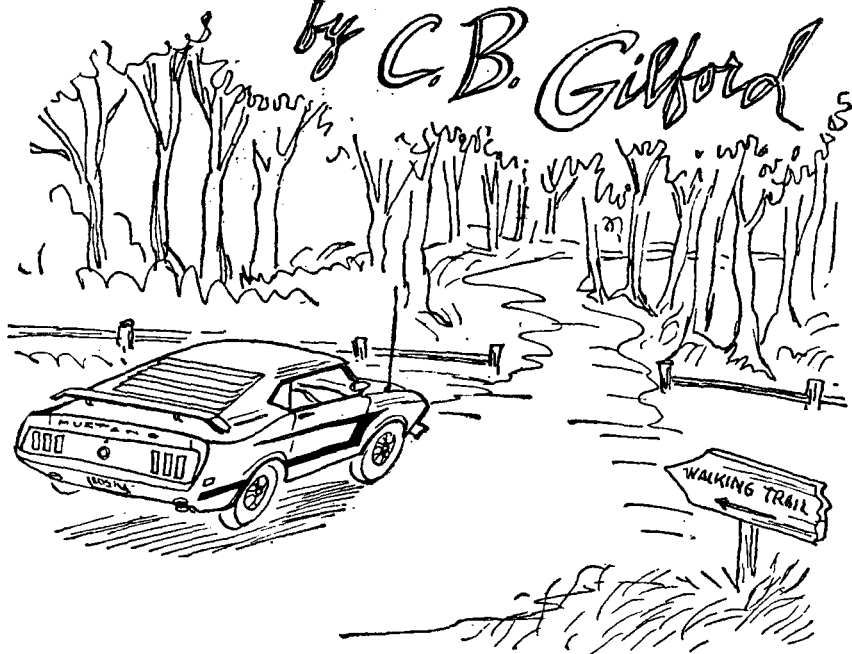
the comfortably warm patrol car.

At noon he ate his sack lunch and reported in by radio. The park was empty, he said. Pete Krebs had to stay on nevertheless. Both park gates would remain open till dark. The taxpayers of the county expected their park to be available for use whatever the weather.

A car did enter, as a matter of fact, shortly before one o'clock. Krebs spotted it from a distant hilltop, trained his binoculars on

A NOVELETTE

by C.B. Gilford



it. The car came only a hundred yards or so inside the park, stopped, and disgorged its occupants, a man and a woman. Who else? Krebs watched them for a while. Hand in hand they hiked across the still lush green autumn grass. Nutty. Pete Krebs would have preferred a cozy warm little bar.

He continued on his rounds. There was plenty of park to patrol, over seven thousand acres. On a summer weekend, there were usually about that many people, and at least three cops on duty. Today, however, his job was just

to drive around the maze of roads, show his uniform and his marked car, and let people know they were being protected, even though one cop couldn't be everywhere at once.

That was why the second car was able to sneak up on him. He found it parked and empty in one of the graveled areas just off the road, at one end of the Walking Trail.

Again Pete Krebs shook his head in mystification. Another pair of romancers, no doubt, only this pair wanted to hike on the trail that went off through the woods. There

were three winding miles of that trail, plenty of privacy on a day like this.

He noted the car. It was a thing he did automatically. In-state, in-county license. The car itself wasn't worth much more than the license plate. A beat-up, rusted-out old Chevy, the kind of car that on a busy weekend would be crammed full of the kind of kids who were potential troublemakers. Today, however, there was probably just one pair, a boy and a girl, hiking on the trail for no good purpose, but it wasn't up to Pete Krebs to shadow them. He wasn't paid to snoop, nor was it his job to walk the trail and be a chaperone. He made a mental note of the car, and drove on.

It was nearly an hour later before he returned to the spot. He had stopped and chatted with that first couple whom he had watched with the binoculars. They were a middle-aged pair, actually—married, lovers of the outdoors, but they'd had enough of the chilly wind. They'd talked about the new trees and shrubs which had been planted.

The old red Chevy was still in the little parking area at the far end of the Walking Trail, but it was no longer alone. Nearby was a shiny little yellow Mustang. No sign of the drivers or passengers from either of the cars, however.

Pete Krebs was just slightly disturbed, but also somewhat amused at the coincidence of the only two cars in the park here, together. Maybe there'd been only one person in each car, and the trail was their planned meeting place. That didn't seem likely, though. The two cars didn't match. No, the people in the Mustang were strangers to the people in the Chevy. The question was, would the Mustang people interrupt the privacy of the Chevy people? Might be an interesting scene, Krebs thought, but not really his business either.

They'd meet in there, though, he was sure of that. He grinned a little as he drove on. Such a dull, lonely day, he had to find something to grin about.

Beryl wanted to be alone. She wanted to think. So when she'd seen the old red Chevy parked there near the entrance to the Walking Trail, she had hesitated. Apparently there was somebody else already hiking on the trail. Perhaps she should try another area in the park, but she was partial to the trail. It was one of her favorite places. So she'd decided that even if she should meet that other person, or those persons, they would pass quickly, and she could be alone once more.

In the beginning she had kept an eye out for the interlopers, but when she didn't see anyone for the first several hundred yards she forgot that she might not have the trail completely to herself. The woods and their quiet closed around her, like salve over a wound. She relaxed, slowed her walk, began to look at the foliage rather than to search through it for signs of other human presence. Some of the leaves had begun to turn. On this very autumn-like, almost wintry day, the trees, surprised in their summer finery, seemed to be trying to catch up with the rest of nature. Their colors appeared to be changing almost as she gazed on them.

See, she told herself, the trees are adjusting to the new season. Why can't you adjust, Beryl?

Why not indeed? There were seasons in human lives, ebbing and flowing. That morning she had wanted to kill herself. She had been confronted with a truth which she had previously tried to ignore, but which she could ignore no longer. He didn't love her. Perhaps he never had. He loved instead another girl, a beautiful girl, and Beryl was not beautiful. It was as simple as that. Simple but painful. She had wanted to flee from the pain into oblivion.

Instead, she had fled here, to be

alone with a place she loved, and which, she hoped, loved her in return. And surely it did. The colors, the silence, caressed her senses. Even that first faint smell of onrushing autumn decay, she liked that too.

She became so engrossed in the sensual impressions close about her that she did not at first notice the foreign movement and sounds farther up the trail, beyond several twists and turns, flashes of gaudy red and blue amid the natural greens and yellows and browns; snapping of twigs crushed under feet heavier than those of a squirrel or a rabbit or a bird.

She was totally startled, therefore, when at one particularly sharp bend in the path she nearly walked straight into them; the strangers, two men, or boys, one in a red wool shirt, the other in a phosphorescent blue jacket; above the bright garments, pimply faces and shaggy hair.

In that first moment of the encounter, it was her first reaction, being so startled that her initial impulse was toward fear, toward panic, like a timid woodland creature suddenly coming face-to-face with some fierce predator, which perhaps set into motion all that followed.

The trail was narrow, but it was well-trod, and there was ample

room to pass a hiker coming from the opposite direction. Yet she shrank to one side, into the undergrowth, off the beaten path, as if the trail belonged entirely to the strangers and not at all to herself, and hurried past them, almost running.

Her curious behavior was indeed fear. Not fear of the strangers themselves. They were only that—strangers. But it was the fear she felt of all humankind at that moment. Humanity had rejected her. She was not loved. Nobody could ever love her again. So she fled foolishly from these two men, these two boys, whose names she did not even know.

She walked as fast as she could, now and then breaking stride and running for a few steps, hoping to find solitude again. Finally she slowed, and had courage to glance back over her shoulder.

What she saw startled her even more than the first encounter. They were there, the red wool shirt and the phosphorescent blue jacket, with the pimply faces and shaggy hair above them. The pimply faces were both grinning, not more than fifty feet behind her on the trail.

She walked on, not daring to run now, the pounding of her pulse signaling a different kind of fear, a more immediate, particular, primitive kind; not in her psyche,

but in her blood, in the prickling of her skin.

They had been returning to their car, but had reversed directions and were following her. Following *her* on this chilly day when the park was practically empty, in the depths of these woods, out of sight of all other humanity and almost surely out of hearing too.

What could she do? Turn back and try to pass by them again? Walk right into them? Would they let her go by? Or try to run, farther and deeper into the woods? Or try to be calm, just keep on walking, ignore their teasing? Teasing! That's what it was, of course. They'd seen she was frightened of them, and were amusing themselves. They could have caught up with her by this time, but they'd chosen just to follow her. Teasing. Enjoying her fear.

She walked on. She didn't have to glance back. Her anxiously straining ears told her the pursuit continued. They hadn't tired of the game yet. The other end of the trail was far distant, more than two miles. Surely they would tire. Or even if they followed her to the end of the trail, she wouldn't be frightened any longer once they broke out of the woods.

What did they want? To tease her, she assured herself again. Two boys finding a female alone here

... it was just an irresistible temptation to throw a scare into her. If she chose to report the incident later to a park patrolman, they could say, quite truthfully, that they hadn't done a thing.

Yet it was only through a great effort of will that she restrained the impulse to run. She could feel their eyes upon her, upon her legs, her hips. She had dressed for this walk, in slacks and a short jacket. The slacks were tight. She tried not to think of how they might be watching. Perhaps they might be looking at the purse hanging at her side from its shoulder strap. She would gladly surrender it right now if they would stop following her.

She was thinking of that, considering whether to drop the purse there on the trail and start to run again. She quickened her steps. The fear and panic rose in her. She made the mistake of glancing backward, not watching the path. She fell.

Her foot caught on a protruding root, and she sprawled on her back in the middle of the trail. The pursuers stopped too, automatically, but they had already narrowed the gap between her and them. They stood frozen, staring at her. Their grins were frozen on their faces. An open-mouthed look of terror was frozen on hers.

Seconds passed. She could not tear her gaze from those grinning faces, but her mind raced, suggesting a new alternative. They had gained on her. They had dared to come closer. She could not possibly outrun them on the trail, and she dared not scream, even if she could manage one. A scream would not be heard, not from here, in the very middle of the woods, and it might frighten them into action. No, she must remain calm—and brave.

She picked herself slowly off the ground, then spoke to them. "What do you want?"

They didn't stop grinning, nor did they answer. They looked at each other and shrugged.

"You're following me." A little more courageous.

One of them, the one in the blue jacket, emitted a sound. It was a kind of laugh. A giggle. Mindless.

She saw their faces better now. They were eighteen or twenty, neither in school nor employed, or they wouldn't be out here today. Why were they here? Looking for someone as alone and defenseless as she was? She was correct in feeling afraid of them. They were punks. Hoodlums. Idlers, not very bright, and dangerous.

"Please stop following me," she said, halfway between a request

and a demand, but firmly spoken.

The giggle came again from the one in the blue jacket. The one in the red shirt said, "It's a public park, lady."

So they would continue to follow her. The alternative clamored for attention in her mind again. Run! Not down the trail—they can catch you too easily there—but straight into the woods! Drop your purse right here, and take to the woods! They might not bother to follow and risk snagging and tearing their clothes.

The red wool shirt took one step toward her. Just one.

In a single motion, instinctive and automatic, she dropped the purse and plunged headlong into the undergrowth beside the trail.

Instantly the woods, which once had been her soothing companion, her friend, became a vicious enemy. Branches and twigs grabbed at her long hair, now flying loose. Wrenching free was painful, but more important, cost time. The branches whipped and stung her face too. They snared her jacket and slacks, sought to entwine her body and hold her fast. They didn't succeed, for she staggered and stumbled on, but her pace was slow, as in a dream, wherein the dreamer knows he must run fast, but is somehow held back, his legs and feet made of lead, only

grudgingly obeying his mind's command.

Over the sound of her own sobbing, she heard another sound—heavy bodies crashing through the woods behind her.

She ran on, terrified, both her strength and her courage dwindling, the clutching branches more fiendish, malevolent. But she had to run. The instinct of the flesh for survival drove her on, reeling, half falling, being grasped and tearing loose, and the sounds of pursuit ever closer.

Downhill suddenly, and there, just below her, the weave of green branches ceased. Beyond them, a flat, dark glaze somberly reflected the gray sky. The pond!

She had forgotten the pond was here. In the summer, with the trees in full foliage, it was invisible from the trail. In winter, though, with the trees bare, the cold glint of the water beckoned one to leave the path and walk the muddy banks. She had once spied a family of muskrats here, had watched the winter birds come for a drink, and the rim ice form around the edges. And here it was now . . . her special pond . . . her special friend!

Never before, of course, had she more than dabbled her fingers in this cold spring water. Park rules had forbidden swimming, and one doesn't swim in a woodland pond



unless one is prepared to share it with the other creatures, including snakes. Yet she didn't hesitate now.

Beryl was a very good swimmer, so the water held no terrors for her. Even if she hadn't been a swimmer, with the pond more than a hundred feet across and of unknown depth, any terror of it would have been infinitely less than her terror of those grinning pursuers close behind her.

She leaped in, like a water animal returning to its proper habitat. Her face submerged, she struck out strongly with both arms and legs. She never felt the muddy bottom at all, but swam straight to the very middle.

She'd had no plan beyond this. Perhaps the red shirt and the blue jacket were as good swimmers as she. She'd acted from instinct and desperation, nothing more, but now she turned to look back.

They'd halted at the muddy bank. They were staring at her with grins of amusement. She shook moisture from her face, moved her legs lazily, and waited for some sign of their new intentions.

They glanced away from her and at each other. Their lips moved, but they spoke softly and she couldn't hear any words. Cautiously and slowly she propelled herself a bit farther away from

them. She hoped they would climb back up to the trail, and then she would exit from the pond at the opposite shore and try to cut through the woods toward the nearest road. Or perhaps even hide in the woods, maybe till dark, not taking any chances of their finding her on the road. The sudden cold bath had cleared her brain. The familiar feel of water gave her a new feeling of security and hope. With gentle kicks and hand movements she edged still farther from them.

Oh no! The red shirt had separated from his companion, and was trotting around to the other side of the pond. She hadn't escaped at all. She was trapped!

For the first time, then, she screamed. It was a loud burst of terror and despair, but the woods, her beautiful friendly woods, wall upon wall of trees, bounced her scream back to her, kept the sound echoing and reechoing within the little cup-like depression containing the pond. She screamed until her lungs were emptied of every atom of air. Her body sank, the water closed over her mouth, and she had to paddle back to the surface to breathe again. She didn't waste energy trying to scream again.

Her problem was to stay afloat. It didn't appear that her tormen-

tors had any notions of entering the water. They didn't seem the swimmer-athlete sort. The day was cold, and the water even colder. Since there were two of them, they could easily imprison her there in the pond until she became exhausted and willing to surrender. There was really no need for them to get wet.

But how long could she remain afloat? Under the best conditions, in a warm pool or lake, she could tread water almost indefinitely. Now, however, she could already feel this frigid bath sucking the energy out of her body. Would she be any better off if she could find a place where her feet could touch bottom? Not much, probably. She would still be immersed in cold water.

Pivoting slowly, she tried to keep track of the two men. They were standing directly opposite each other, hands thrust into their pockets, their shoulders hunched against the chill. They both were still grinning. How easy it was for them to keep her prisoner here. All they had to do was to stand there and wait. They hadn't even touched her, or said a threatening word. They'd only followed her and grinned, but she was completely in their power.

Nothing seemed to change for a long time. One on either side of

the pond, they watched her placidly, in no hurry. Overhead the sky was gray, flecked with black scud. There was a chance of rain. Would rain make the two men uncomfortable enough that they might go away? Possibly. But the sky only threatened, and down here in the hollow overhung with trees, there wasn't even any wind to discourage girl-swimmer-watching. Beryl was freezing in her icy bath. Her body shook and trembled in the grasp of the cold. She had to keep moving her arms and legs as much to maintain circulation as to stay afloat.

"Hey." It was the red shirt speaking. She looked at his grinning face, and noticed his eyes for the first time. They were the same color as the water, alive but without human expression. "Come out," he said.

She made no reply.

"You gotta come out sometime," he went on.

Her mind refused to concede that argument.

He stooped, dipped one finger into the water. "Kinda cold, ain't it?" he asked.

She wouldn't admit it.

"What are we going to do?" the red shirt called across the pond.

"Wait," said the blue jacket.

Wait, yes. If they had nothing more interesting to do, they could

wait here at least until dark. The park closed at dark. A park patrolman would look for cars. If he saw two cars parked at the end of the Walking Trail, he would investigate. But it was hours yet until dark. Long before then she would freeze or drown, or both.

The red shirt, the impatient one, squatted down on his heels on the muddy bank and stared at her. He was still grinning, but she knew that his grin meant nothing, neither friendliness nor mirth. He was merely curious, as a cruel boy might be toward a bug he has impaled on a pin. Did he mean her harm? No more than the boy means harm to the bug. He is only amused by its futile struggles. Yet if the bug should escape briefly, would the boy squash it?

The red wool shirt, impatient, restless, dabbed with his fingers in the soft black mud of the bank. Then, however, the mindless occupation appeared to give him an idea. He dug into the mud purposefully. In a moment he had what he wanted, rolled it between his palms, a small mud ball. In another moment he had drawn back his right arm and thrown it.

She was too startled even to consider dodging. The projectile fell short by a yard or so, but its impact splashed a drop of water into her face, and she blinked. The red

wool shirt laughed, a coarse, braying laugh.

He stood up and called across to his companion. "Hey, target practice."

Both of them, boys with a new game, went into action then, gouging out clumps of mud from the bank, rolling them round, throwing them at her head. They giggled while they played, shouting challenges across the pond, and slurs at each other's marksmanship. They weren't very good at the game. They weren't the sort of boys who had spent their street time playing softball. Usually they missed by wide margins. By giving them her profile, she could watch both of them at the same time, and thus be ready to dodge. They countered this strategy by synchronizing their throws, forcing her to watch out for two missiles at once. Finally, to avoid one, she had to duck underwater. When she surfaced again, both boys were roaring with laughter.

"One point for me," the blue shirt kept insisting.

Now the game began to be played in greater earnest. Boys don't try merely to hit paper boats or bottles in the water, they try to *sink* them. More care was taken in the rolling of the mud balls now, and the balls grew progressively larger. Throws became less fre-

quent but more accurate. Then, inevitably—the law of averages decreed it—one of those more carefully engineered projectiles found its mark.

Soft black mud splattered into her face, into both her eyes. She was blinded, and her nose and mouth were filled with the goeey stink of the stuff. She plunged underwater and washed it off with both hands. When she came up, they were howling their glee.

She didn't have to scream, she thought, they were making more noise than she could. The thought was small comfort. Those same trees which sheltered the pond area from the stiff wind, also threw back sounds, insulating this spot from the rest of the park.

She was exhausted now, but knowing it rather than feeling it. Her body had grown numb. Her legs, she sensed faintly, still pedaled, her hands still pawed the water, but these were automatic, instinctive movements. Whenever the final ounce of energy drained away, the movements would just as automatically cease.

For the first time her mind was forced to consider what she would do if any warning came of that cessation. Would she use her last mite of strength to paddle toward shore, choose surrender before death? She wanted to cry out

against the injustice. Either surrender or death, so needless, at the hands of these punks, these animals, either choice was unthinkable.

The game was escalating. Perhaps those two moronic brains had short attention spans, required constant novelty for their entertainment. Or perhaps their success with the mud balls urged them on to playing games for higher stakes.

"Hey, got rocks here!" the blue jacket yelled.

He was digging into a rock ledge imbedded in the steep hillside. Several big pieces crumbled into his hands. He chose one, hefted it, considered its aerodynamic properties, then let fly. He missed by two yards, but was far from discouraged. He had plenty of ammunition, and he fired it as quickly as he mined it from the ground.

Beryl's numb body was galvanized into frantic movement. This new threat was lethal. She could not judge the trajectory of the rocks, or did not trust her judgment. Some flew straight. Others sailed. From a range of not much more than fifty feet, there was no time to make decisions when one's head was the target. Each time that the blue jacket threw, she ducked for cover underwater.

Blue jacket adjusted his tactics accordingly. Now he picked up

two rocks at once. When Beryl surfaced from trying to escape the first, the second was already flying toward her face. She panicked, swallowed water, felt even the last desperate strength ebbing out of her body.

It had to happen. The law of averages again. The second of a pair of rocks, not larger than a silver dollar, slammed against her right temple just as her face emerged. The blow was like the cut of a hatchet. Multicolored sparks exploded inside her head. Stunned, she lifted a hand to the place, and it came away with a splotch of blood.

Demoniac laughter echoed and reechoed inside the cup-like depression containing the pond. "I'm the champ!" the blue jacket shouted again and again. He had drawn blood. He was pleased.

Beryl knew now . . . if she hadn't known before . . . if she had tried to pretend she didn't know . . . that unless she surrendered . . . unless she came out of the water . . . she would die . . .

"Stop . . . please . . ." It was a scarcely audible gasp. "I'm . . ."

She started to swim toward where the blue jacket waited for her. She dog-paddled. Her movements were slow and laborious. She had difficulty keeping her mouth and nose above water. Dim-

ly, on the periphery of her vision, she saw the red shirt running around the pond to join the blue jacket. Then they stood together at the water's edge.

Her feet touched bottom. She commenced to walk, even more slowly than she swam. She would have fallen had not the water held her up. Finally, when the water was only waist-high, she did fall. She floundered, crawled on her knees, then on her hands and knees in the mud. The blood from the cut on her forehead dripped into her right eye. She tried to wipe it away with a muddy hand.

At the water's edge, they stopped and lifted her, the red shirt and the blue jacket each putting a hand in one of her armpits and hauling her upward.

"She ain't very pretty," one of them said.

Patrolman Pete Krebs drove by the parking area at one end of the Walking Trail once again, and saw that the red Chevy and the yellow Mustang were still there. His wrist-watch said four-thirty. Those two cars had been there for a while—but then the trail was three miles long. If the owners of the cars had by any chance hiked to the other end of the trail, then had to return to their cars, the round trip would take a couple of hours. He won-

dered if the two parties had met.

He was aware of feeling vaguely disturbed. He stopped his own car, climbed out, and walked around the two parked vehicles. They were both unoccupied. Nothing unusual about the visible contents of either. Why was he disturbed? He didn't know. He glanced again at the license plates. Both local. Coincidence or a planned meeting? Lousy day for lovers to go hiking. Lousy day for anybody to go hiking. Krebs lighted a cigarette, leaned against the Mustang and smoked. All around him the park was silent. The woods which swallowed the trail were silent, except for the sigh of the wind through the leafy branches. He hoped those people knew the park closed at dusk. He didn't want to have to yell for them to come out, or go in after them.

He ground his cigarette butt into the gravel, climbed back into his own car, and drove on.

"Hey, Duke, what's the matter with her?"

Duke took a while to answer. He wasn't grinning any more. Without the grin his face looked younger, soft, the color and texture of lumpy oatmeal. Out of it his eyes stared in a curiously lifeless way, like two pieces of gray-green glass. "I think she's dead," he said

at last. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Dead! What do you mean?"

"You know what dead means. She ain't breathing."

They stood facing each other across the inert body that lay between them in the mud. They were a bit wet and muddy themselves.

"How come she's dead, Duke?"

"'Cause she stopped breathing."

"I mean why. Why did she stop breathing?"

"'Cause she was killed."

"What killed her?"

There was a silence. They looked down at the body. There was no movement in it, no rise and fall of breasts. The eyes were closed, the lips slightly parted. On the forehead the bright red gash had stopped bleeding.

"You don't think the rock killed her?" The question came in an awed whisper.

Another silence.

"That little old rock couldn't kill her!" He went down on his knees in the mud, grabbed the body by the shoulders and shook it. "Wake up . . . wake up . . . you're faking . . . you ain't dead."

"Shut up, Rollo. She's dead."

Rollo stayed down on his knees, letting his hips sink back on his heels, wiping his muddy hands on his bright blue jacket. "What else could have killed her?" he asked softly. "I mean . . . what else did

we do to her . . . that could kill her, I mean?"

"Nothing. It was an accident." Duke hunkered down on the other side of the body. His gray oatmeal face twitched. His lifeless green eyes gave no indication that he was thinking, but he was thinking. "Who knows? Maybe she had heart failure."

"Or maybe it was the cold water." Rollo's deeply pitted face suddenly grinned again, a narrow, lopsided grin. "She was in the water a long time . . ."

Duke grinned back. "Sure," he said. "She died from pneumonia." "Don't make jokes."

"I ain't making jokes. What difference does it make why she's dead? She's dead."

Rollo's grin faded. "It was your idea to come to this place . . ."

"So I happen to like fresh air. I like to stretch my legs. Get out of our crummy neighborhood once in a while. What's wrong with that? And I said we might find something wandering around. Well, we did find something, didn't we?"

"Not much."

"Complain, complain. You want your money back?"

Rollo stood up and glanced around nervously. "Let's get out of here," he said.

"What about her?" Duke reminded him.

Rollo fidgeted. "What do you mean?"

"Just going to leave her here?"

"What else are we supposed to do?"

"Somebody'll find her, stupid."

"So what?"

"You know what cops do when they find a dead body. They start looking for who did it."

"So what? Who's going to look down here in this weather? Maybe they won't find her till next spring. We'll be gone. Who's going to pin it on us?"

It was a fairly convincing argument. Duke stood up too, and seemed about to accept the argument and follow his companion back up to the trail. But he didn't. "Suppose they do find her?" he asked.

Rollo grinned. "We'll take her car and leave it someplace. So maybe the sun shines tomorrow, or over the weekend. They find her. We'll be gone."

"There's always cops in these parks," Duke said.

"So what?"

"Maybe a cop saw our car parked back there. Her car, too. Cops have good memories. They're always looking at cars. You know the way it is with hot cars. Cops are always looking for certain cars. And they memorize license numbers. It's the only thing cops are

smart about, don't you know that?"

Rollo nudged the body with his toe, hoping it would wake up, but it didn't. He was left with the problem. "Okay, what do we do?" he asked.

"We don't want 'em to find her," Duke said. "We gotta hide her."

"Where?" The gray oatmeal face, glistening with sweat, was contorted into a questioning frown. Then the frown became a grin. "In the pond maybe, huh?"

Duke nodded. "That's the general idea."

They discussed the details. Cops maybe have photographic memories for things like license numbers and car descriptions, but those memories don't hang on forever. There are always new and different numbers and descriptions to think about. The old ones get forgotten eventually. So they had to hide the body until the park cop, in case he'd noticed their car, would forget about it.

Maybe a week. Better a month or a year. But a body on the bottom of this pond, if nobody thinks there might be one there, might *never* be found. So you have to see to it that the body goes to the bottom and stays there. Maybe there are fish or turtles in the pond. Maybe the body gets eaten, *so there isn't any body*. You can't prove murder without a body even if you

do remember a license number.

"Murder?" Rollo echoed the word in a low voice.

"That's what they'd call it," Duke assured him.

There were rocks available from the same ledge in the hillside where Rollo had dug for missiles. It took time. They needed big rocks, or lots of small ones. Weight. Enough weight to make sure, absolutely sure, that the body would stay under instead of getting bloated and floating to the top.

They dug with a certain haste and urgency, for the day was growing darker. Dirt congealed under their fingernails and their hands were rubbed raw before they had mined enough of the rocks.

Then they stuffed them into the girl's pockets, and inside her clothes, until she bulged and became fat. Rollo, sweating in the chilly air, asked if it was enough.

"It's all she'll hold," Duke said.

Next came the problem of placing the corpse in the water. "She's got to go deep," Duke pointed out.

"How deep?"

"Five or six feet, don't you figure?"

Neither of them could swim. Both were afraid of the water. They realized that just by standing on the bank and throwing the body into the pond, they wouldn't

be able to get it out far enough. So they would have to carry it in, which meant that they had to take off their clothes. In wet clothes they might freeze to death, and wet, muddy clothes would be suspicious. So they stripped. Naked just in the air they shivered. The cold of the water set their teeth chattering.

Rollo gripped the body under the armpits and Duke had the legs. Beneath their feet the pond bottom was muddy, soft, slimy, slippery, horribly and unexpectedly steep. Under the burden of the rock-stuffed corpse they staggered and stumbled.

"She's going to drown both of us," Rollo gasped.

"A little farther out," Duke insisted.

They weren't more than ten feet from the bank, but they'd already sunk to their knees in slime and the water was chest high. The corpse was already immersed. The water was supporting some of its weight, but the rocks were pulling it down. They had no choice. They let go, then scrambled in near terror back to the bank.

They tried to dry a bit then, but the chill air offered little help. They dragged clothes over their wet skin. Underwear and socks blotted up moisture and became soggy, but trousers, jackets and

shoes provided some insulation from the frosty bite of the air. They continued to quiver and tremble nevertheless.

There were other problems too. Footprints were some. They debated whether to try to rub them all out.

"Hell," Duke said finally, "footprints don't mean nothing. Some of 'em ain't even ours. It's going to rain any minute. That'll wash 'em out."

Then there was the girl's purse. They found it up on the trail where she had dropped it hoping to discourage pursuit. It was a big thing that yawned wide when they undid the catch. They found the car keys, which they needed. Inside a wallet was sixteen dollars, which they decided ought not go to waste. The rest was junk, nothing useful, stuff to be gotten rid of, like combs, cosmetics, eyebrow things, pencils and brushes, lipsticks.

"She wasn't very good-looking, but she sure tried," Rollo said. He was back to giggling, now that the worst of the job was over.

There was a gold compact that he wanted to give to somebody. "Forget it," Duke said.

They crammed it all back inside, the wallet included, minus its sixteen dollars, of course. Duke took charge. Down on the bank again,

he grasped the purse by its long leather handle and heaved it toward the center of the pond.

At the top of the arc the catch gave way, and some of the contents tumbled out, like sparks out of a Roman candle, but it all landed together in the middle of the pond, and sank like a hail of stones. Except for a yellow facial tissue that floated . . . like a daisy on a grave.

Duke and Rollo watched it for a moment. Then they hustled up to the trail again and jogged toward the cars.

It was almost six, winter closing-time, and fast darkening. Pete Krebs lounged against his cruiser, scowling at the old Chevy and the bright little Mustang, and wondering whether he'd have to go into the woods and haul those people out.

So he was relieved when he heard footsteps on the trail and saw bright splashes of color flitting closer through the foliage; two colors, red and blue. He waited impatiently till the colors emerged.

A couple of young punks, just as he'd guessed earlier. The kind of guys who'd drive that old Chevy. Troublemakers. Unusual for guys like these to come out to the park on a day like this. Looking for privacy very likely. His mind avoid-

ed trying to guess what they wanted the privacy for. At least they accounted for half his problem, the Chevy.

They seemed to hesitate when they saw him, but it wasn't surprising. Cops—any kind of cops—are enemies to punks, and vice versa. What did surprise him, however, was their separating. Only one of them, the guy in the red shirt, went toward the Chevy. The blue jacket went straight to the Mustang. He started to open the door on the driver's side, couldn't, poked a key into the lock.

Something in Pete Krebs' mind rebelled. It just wasn't the combination he had expected. Two guys like these in the Chevy, yes, but not two guys like these meeting at the park, arriving in separate cars—and not a guy like the blue jacket driving an almost new car.

The blue jacket was slow in making the key work in the lock. Krebs sidled over. "Enjoy your hike?" he asked, for lack of a more direct question.

The kid spun around. His eyes were blank, but there was a grin on his face. "Huh?"

"I asked you if you enjoyed your hike."

"Oh . . . sure . . . yeah." Little words. Monosyllables, but they came out in a curious stutter.

The kid was shaking. Scared? Scared of being questioned by a cop? Guilty conscience? Maybe yes. But something else besides. Krebs glanced at the hand maneuvering the key. Red with cold. But it wasn't that cold. The hand was wet. Sweat? Not if the kid was shaking like this. Wet with water? Water from the pond maybe? In weather like this?

The kid was damp all over, in fact. Faint stains of moisture showed on his trousers. His socks, a couple of inches of them visible between trousers and shoe tops, were almost soggy.

Krebs hesitated. A wild idea skidded through his brain. Arrest him! No swimming was allowed in any body of water, lake or pond, inside this park. This kid must have been swimming in the pond.

Krebs made no move, however. He had no proof. It would be a lot of trouble besides. Yet the wild idea continued to ricochet inside his head.

The kid had the door of the Mustang open now, and was easing down behind the wheel. His left hand searched for the adjusting lever under the seat, found it, pushed the seat back to give himself more room. He glanced up, still grinning, and shut the door.

Krebs' brain was in turmoil. Nothing fitted! What had these

punks been doing in the pond? Punks! That's all they were! What kind of a job did this one have to make enough to buy this Mustang? Why wasn't he at that job now?

The Chevy, engine roaring, had already backed out. The Mustang's engine came alive, barely audible beneath the louder noise. The Chevy started off. Not too fast though, not with a cop standing watching. The Mustang backed too, then followed the Chevy. Krebs continued to stand and watch. The two cars disappeared. The sound of the Chevy engine trailed off toward the main gate.

It was only then that Krebs realized what he had seen a moment before. *The punk had pushed the car seat back.*

Like what was occurring in the blackening sky overhead, dark things were coming together inside Krebs' mind now. Why did the punk push the seat back? Wasn't the Mustang his car? Hadn't he arrived in it? Who had? Was somebody still in the woods? Somebody with shorter legs than the punk's? A girl?

Krebs started for his own car, then stopped. Adjusting a car seat wasn't proof of anything, any more than wet socks were proof of swimming . . .

But what if there was somebody . . . some girl . . . back there in the woods? Tied up, maybe knocked unconscious, or bleeding to death. He couldn't leave the park, lock up for the night, with the possibility that there was somebody!

Pete Krebs started down the trail, running. Fifty yards later, he stopped and yelled, "Anybody here?" No answer came. The woods mocked him with silence.

He ran on. Several more times he halted and shouted his question. Still no response. He went on. Krebs wasn't a young man, and he was too stout for this sort of thing, but he couldn't stop.

The pond! Very suddenly he remembered the wet socks. He left the trail, crashed down the slope through the trees and brush. The pond was somewhere right around here. He changed directions, then reversed again, and finally he blundered upon it.

Pete Krebs couldn't help seeing what certainly looked like fresh footprints in the muddy bank. Those two punks had been here, all right. Who else?

The footprints were all over the place, prints of shoes in men's sizes, but no women's. Then, mingled with the rest, prints of big bare feet. Those two *had* been swimming—or wading. Crazy, on a day like this. Swimming or wad-

ing in icy water made no sense at all.

Trembling himself, from his exertions and from the strange excitement seething inside him, Krebs with some difficulty lit a cigarette, tried to think calmly. There was no evidence of a girl's having been here. Just two crazy punks. Maybe they'd dared each other to a swim. Kids will do anything. But what about the car seat?

Puffing at his cigarette, Krebs gazed across the unrippled surface of the pond. There was something there, now that he looked more closely. It seemed to be wet facial tissue, or paper towel. Nothing unusual or suspicious about that. People always threw junk around.

Then, squinting in the deepening twilight, he saw something else. A tiny, dark thing was floating on the water. A twig? Probably.

Pete Krebs had run a long way for a man his age. He was tired, but his mind wasn't satisfied. He was the crazy one now. He flipped his cigarette into the water, started searching through the nearby brush. In a moment he'd found what he needed, a severed tree branch about fifteen feet long. With it he probed for the twig, unsuccessfully. The branch wasn't long enough.

He was really crazy. He was

only a park cop, but a cop nevertheless, with a good cop's wary suspicion of the human race in general, and especially of young punks, troublemakers. He hated punks. So Pete Krebs took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trousers, and waded into the water.

He had to go in to his waist before he could reach the twig with the branch, but at last he coaxed his prize toward the shore. When he got it in his hand he saw what it really was: an eyebrow pencil.

He stood there, his legs in the water, for a long moment. An eyebrow pencil floating in the middle of a lonely pond. Such an item could belong to a boy, of course, but those two didn't appear to be that kind. So this pencil must have belonged to a girl. It was wooden,

it floated—and it hadn't been floating there very long.

Back in his own car, talking with the sheriff's deputy on the radio, Pete Krebs didn't know exactly how to say it. How could he explain? He wasn't doing too well.

"Maybe you'd first better check the Mustang," he suggested. "License JO-15788. I'd be interested to see who it belongs to. Then there's this beat-up, rusty red Chevy, fifty-nine. License WY-203354—"

"Pete," the deputy interrupted, "what's the crime?"

"Swimming in the park."

"Swimming?"

"That's the charge!" Pete roared. "Pick those guys up, will you, before they get too nervous. Hold 'em for swimming, till I drag the pond."

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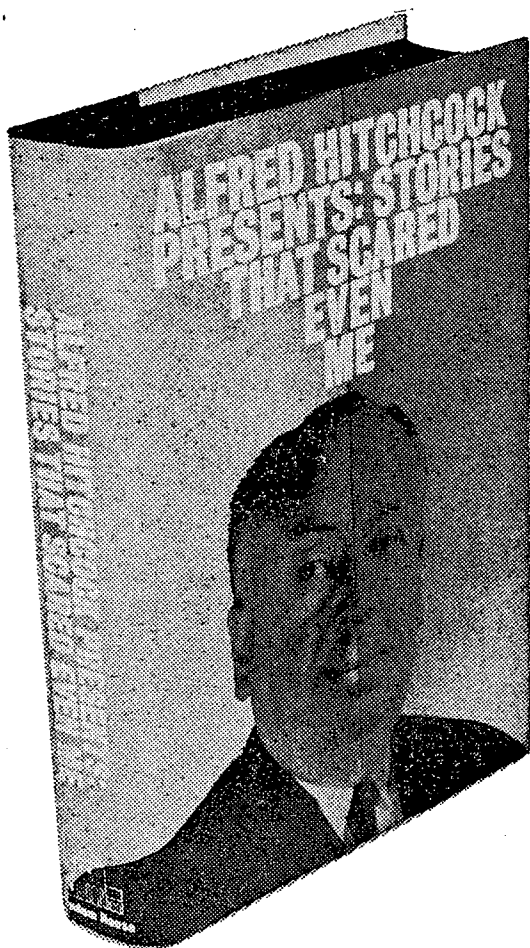
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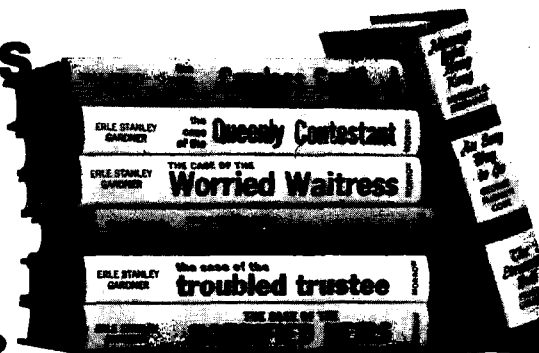
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