

ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories
presented by
the MASTER
of SUSPENSE

March 1970



Dear Reader:

All manner of new and macabre diversions await you within to purge you of the winter blues, though my surprises do involve, in a majority of cases, chills of quite different origin. You may attempt insulation by moving your chair closer to the fire, but it should prove

entirely futile.

However, so that the outdoor temperature is not too heavily abetted, some of the following (mis)adventures take you to such places as Coney Island, the Southwest desert country and a Florida beach.

Observe how a detective handles a former classmate, what a spy does on vacation, the ways of a freak-show barker, and the investment of a lifetime. These will but start you off on this month's selections, wrought by a host of outstanding names in the field of mystery and suspense. I am sure they will capture your heart, to preclude the threat engendered by Valentine's Day.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Concern for the guilt of others may find easement in the theory that the future enters into each of us before it happens.

THE UTTERING MAN

THE UTTERING MAN had a name, and it was Roger Nova. That's how Leopold got involved in it, even before the murder. He and Nova had gone to school together, a long time before, and he recognized the name and photograph almost as soon as the WANTED circular crossed his desk.

"Roger Nova . . ."

"You know him, Captain?" Sergeant Fletcher asked.

"Went to grammar school with him, more years ago than I care to remember. We were especially friendly in the eighth grade. Used to do crazy things together."



Fletcher grinned. "With girls?"

"Nothing like that. We hardly knew they existed till high school. No, Roger was a wild kid. I remember once he broke into a department store to steal a collar for his dog. He stopped by to show it to me on his way home. Another time he stole a gross of hunting knives from a hardware store. I never did figure out what he wanted them all for."

Fletcher studied the arrest record

by
**Edward
D. Hoch**

as given on the circular. "And in high school he graduated to stealing cars."

"Yes," Captain Leopold agreed with a sigh. "In later years I often thought I could have influenced him toward something better. He always asked me to go along on these little adventures, and while I never took part in his robberies, I did nothing much to talk him out of them, or report him to the police. Maybe in a sense I made him what he is today."

"The Uttering Man? I doubt that, Captain."

Roger Nova had become quite

adept at a particular crime which he'd made all his own. It was the crime of uttering—the act of knowingly tendering or showing a forged instrument or counterfeit money to another with intent to defraud. In a broad sense he was a swindler, but a very special sort of swindler. He would walk into a bank, or loan company, or investment office, and flash a roll of bills, a forged check, or, on one occasion, even a fake diamond necklace. The important thing about Nova's technique was that the fake items never left his possession. They were used only to impress, to persuade, as collateral of a sort for the money he would get from his victims.

If Roger Nova believed that he was committing no crime as long as he did not allow the forged or counterfeit documents out of his possession, he had not heard of the crime of uttering—but he found out soon enough. One bank manager phoned the police, and he spent the next several months in jail. However, that was far from enough to discourage Nova. He was never arrested again, but his technique had become so familiar throughout the suburbs of New York and southern New England that he'd been dubbed with the nickname of the Uttering Man.

Leopold's business was homicide, so the WANTED circular passed

quickly across his desk and on to another department. He would have given it no more thought if it hadn't been for something which happened that night on the way to his apartment.

He was driving past a liquor store on Grand Street when he recognized Madge Perklin coming out with a package. Madge had gone to school with Leopold and Nova, and after graduation she'd even been married to Nova for three brief, stormy years.

He pulled up alongside her and reached across to open the window. "Hello, Madge. Can I give you a lift home?"

She came closer, squinting into the dark interior of his car. "Who . . . ? Leopold! It is you, isn't it?"

"It's me. Climb in."

"Well, I guess I'm safe enough riding with a cop." She opened the door and slid into the front seat next to him.

"How've you been, Madge? Haven't seen you in years."

"It's been a long time," she agreed. "What are you now—captain?"

He nodded in the darkness. "Captain of Homicide."

"Do you like it?"

He shrugged. "It's a job, just like any other. Where are you living now?"

"Up on Brentwood. Right at the next traffic light and then about two blocks over." She took out a cigarette and fumbled in the dark for his dashboard lighter. "You still married?"

"Not for years," he told her.

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "The usual things, I guess. She's living somewhere out west now. Married a rancher."

"I've got two of them behind me."

"Who besides Roger Nova?"

"A used car salesman you never knew. Now when I think of him I get sick to my stomach."

He turned at the traffic light and headed up Brentwood. "Ever see Nova around?"

"Not lately. He came up to my place one night, drunk, and wanted to stay a while. I tossed him out. Told him he had his chance once before."

"He's gotten quite a reputation lately," Leopold told her.

"He's hot? Anything serious? Murder?"

"No, nothing like that. Why'd you think so?"

"No reason. But you are Homicide. That's what you told me."

"I just happened to see a WANTED circular. Con games, swindles mostly."

"This is my place. Here on the right."

Leopold pulled up before a little cottage that set back some fifty feet from the street. "Nice quiet street, anyway."

"This was my second husband's place. I got that much away from him, at least." She opened the door to get out, and by the overhead light he saw that her face was still youthful. She took good care of herself. No one would have guessed she was—what? Forty-one or two?

Leopold slid out of his seat to escort her to the door. It was a long walk, and dark.

The bottles clinked in her bag. "You don't need to," she said. "I can make it all right."

"No trouble at all."

She hesitated on the sidewalk. "I'd invite you in, but I've got company."

"I figured that."

"Oh? How?" She glanced up at the darkened house.

"You bought more than one bottle. This late at night that means a gentleman caller."

She snorted with something like pleasure. "Always the detective, aren't you?"

He took her arm and helped her up three steps, then walked at her side toward the porch of the little house. They were perhaps halfway there when the first shot came. Leopold saw the flash from the doorway and heard Madge scream

at his side. He pushed her aside.

"You crazy fool!" she shouted. "He's only—"

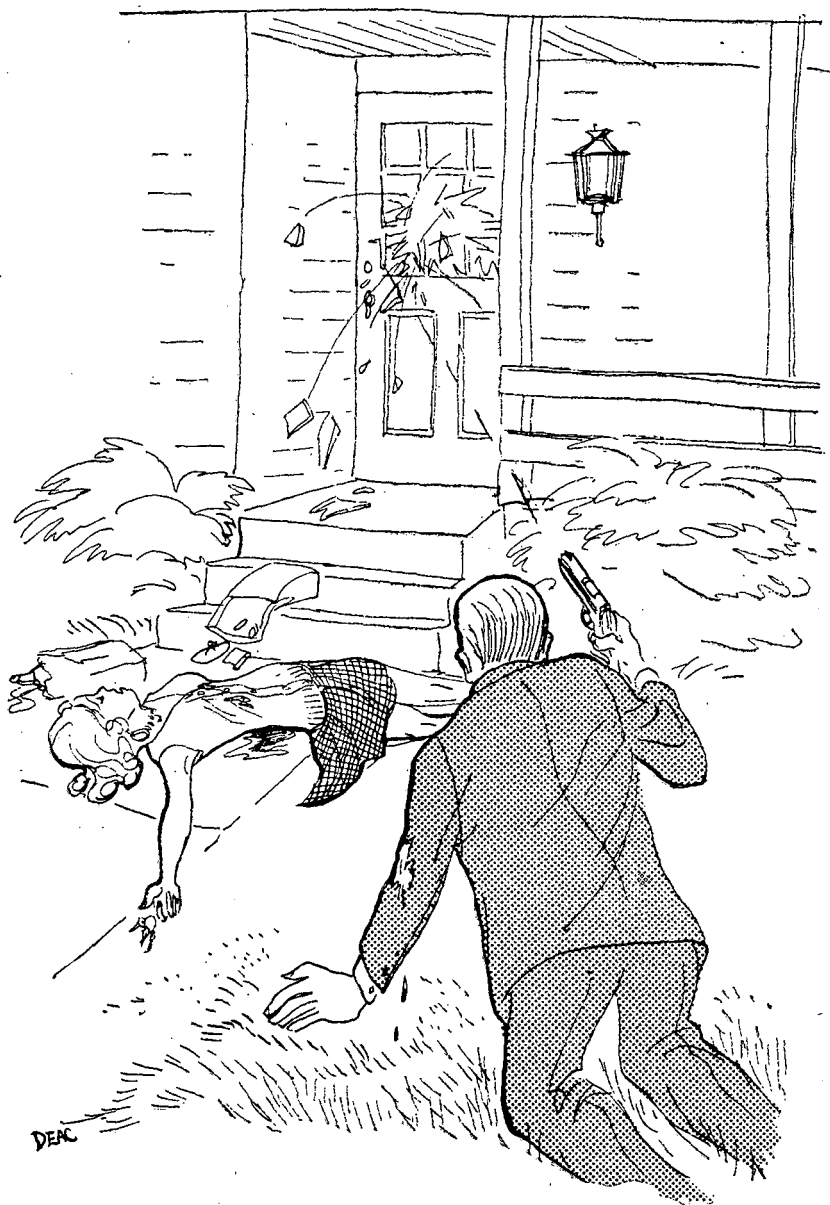
Then two more shots, and Leopold was rolling over on the ground, pulling his own gun free. He fired once at the doorway, realizing in the same instant that his left arm was burning with pain.

He ran a few feet to the cover of some bushes and fired again. There was no answering shot from the house. He glanced over his shoulder to see Madge sprawled on the sidewalk, then hopped the porch railing and fired once more at the doorway.

As he went in through the front he heard a door slam in the back of the house. He made a window in time to see a car parked on the side street spring into life. There was no chance to get back to his own car in time to give chase. He picked up the phone and barked orders to headquarters. "Send an ambulance, watch for a speeding car in the area. Dark color, late model, possibly a Ford."

He hung up the phone and hurried back to the sidewalk. Madge Perklin hadn't moved. The ambulance wouldn't do her any good. Leopold went back and leaned against the porch and felt sick.

Sergeant Fletcher came with the first group from headquarters.



He walked into the growing circle of neighbors and the curious attracted by the shots. "What happened, Captain?"

Leopold shook his head. "I don't really know. She was an old school chum, Roger Nova's ex-wife. I gave her a lift home and was walking her to the door when somebody started shooting."

"You're wounded!" Fletcher exclaimed, noticing Leopold's bloody arm for the first time.

"I don't think it's bad, but it hurts like hell."

An ambulance intern came over and started cutting away Leopold's shirt sleeve to get at the wound. "Did you see who it was, Captain?" Fletcher asked.

"Not a thing. It was a man, and he fired, I think, three shots. The first one must have missed, but he got her right through the heart with the second, and nicked my arm with the third. I fired three times, but didn't hit a thing."

They were taking pictures now, and someone picked up the soggy package of whiskey. "The gin's okay, but the Scotch busted. Dirty shame."

"She won't need it," Fletcher remarked.

The intern finished bandaging Leopold's arm. "Better see your own doctor, Captain. It's not too bad, but you never know. It could

probably use a couple of stitches."

"Sure," Leopold said, dismissing the advice. His arm still throbbed, but there were other things on his mind now. "Let's go in and look around," he said to Fletcher.

The house was small and fairly neat until they reached the kitchen. There, scattered-across the formica tabletop, were the remains of a gin rummy game. The two glasses both held a bit of tinted water—melted ice cubes and the remains of drinks. "No lipstick," Fletcher noted.

"She wasn't wearing any." Leopold clawed through the wastebasket, pulling out an empty Scotch bottle. "They finished off the Scotch and the gin was getting low, so she went for more while he waited. Only she ran into me, and he thought she'd sold him out to the cops. She shouted at him, but it was too late. He shot to kill us both and ran."

"Fine," Fletcher agreed. "But who?"

"Someone who knew Madge, and who could recognize me even in the dim light outside. There's only a single street light for illumination."

"Who does that make it? Nova, her ex-husband?"

"I can't imagine him hanging around, but it's got to be a possibility."

"Here's something," a detective

called from the next room, and they went into a small bedroom where a double bed remained unmade. The detective was holding up a brown leather briefcase.

Leopold opened it carefully. "Stock certificates," he said, pulling out a few.

Fletcher whistled. "They must be worth a fortune."

"Or nothing at all. Have somebody check on it. And get a fingerprint man in here. He left so fast, he couldn't have had time to wipe off all his prints."

They spent some time going through Madge Perklin's effects, but there was nothing Leopold wouldn't have expected to find; an album of pictures of her first marriage, to Roger Nova; a lesser and more disorganized album for her second marriage. There was even a faded grammar school photograph, mounted on cardboard, showing the entire graduating class standing in front of the school. It had been a gray and cloudy day, and the picture was somehow depressing. Leopold spotted Nova and himself standing together in the back row, with Madge over on the girls' side, smiling into the camera. That had been so long ago, back in those early days of the war; a war they didn't fully understand even when their older brothers went off to fight and

die in it. Maybe not so long ago.

Leopold put back the photograph and the albums and went to find Fletcher. He couldn't help thinking Madge would probably still be alive if he hadn't stopped the car and offered her a ride home.

The next morning Sergeant Fletcher brought him coffee as soon as he reached the office. "We've got the Perklin killing all wrapped up, Captain."

"Oh?"

"Or at least we know who did it. Roger Nova's fingerprints are all over the place."

Leopold should have been satisfied, but he wasn't. The news merely heightened his sense of depression. "What about the stock certificates?"

"Clever counterfeits. The boys from the Securities and Exchange Commission think they're part of a batch printed in Canada a few years ago."

"That sounds like Nova," Leopold had to admit. "Better alert banks and brokerage houses in the area."

"He wouldn't try the same con after a murder!"

Leopold turned to stare out the window at the dull November morning. "You don't know Roger Nova like I do—or did. He always had a tremendous amount of nerve. He could talk his way out of any-

thing, take chances you wouldn't believe. This is just the time he'd try another con, especially if he needed money to get away. Only . . ."

"Only what, Captain?"

"Only I don't like it, fingerprints or not. Con men don't shoot cops. They don't even kill their ex-wives, as a rule. Nova would have faced me in Madge's house and tried to talk his way out of it. Or else just hopped out the back window. It's not in character for him to see us coming up the front walk and start blazing away with his gun. Nova's never even carried a gun before, as far as we know."

"We've got the stock certificates, the fingerprints . . ."

"I know, I know," Leopold agreed, swinging back in his chair to face Fletcher. "Put out an alarm for him. Suspicion of murder," he said, but he still didn't like it.

Roger Nova had an older brother, Frank, who lived on the north side of the city, in a middle-class residential section where the streets were wide and shady, and children played in piles of fallen leaves. Frank Nova's house was neat and freshly painted, with a line of rose bushes along one side that still showed a few blossoms even after an evening of light frost.

Leopold had met Frank on a few occasions when they'd both

been younger, and he remembered still the night he got drunk at Frank's wedding reception, an event he'd been invited to because of his friendship with Roger. Now, walking up the front walk, he could see Frank in the back yard, raking up the last of the dead, fallen leaves.

"Hello, Frank," he said, and the man looked up from his task, startled. He was in his mid-forties, gray at the temples, with tired eyes that seemed to reflect all the world's troubles. Leopold knew he worked nights as a bartender at an exclusive downtown club, a job that brought him enough money to keep up the house and send two daughters to college. Perhaps he took a few bets on the side, or did other favors for members. That was not Leopold's concern now.

"Leopold, isn't it?" The graying man did not seem especially pleased to see him. "Or do I call you 'captain' now?"

"Call me whatever you like, Frank," Leopold told him. "How are you? How's the family?"

"Fine. The girls are away at school. They'll be home for Thanksgiving. Ann is well."

"Glad to hear it."

Frank Nova leaned on the rake. "Is this business, or were you just driving by?"

"We're looking for your brother,

Frank. Seen anything of him lately?"

"We never see anything of Roger. He's the black sheep, I suppose. He phoned me last Christmas and wanted to borrow some money."

"Did you give it to him?"

"Hell, no! I'm putting two girls through college. Ann would have killed me if I gave him anything!"

"And you haven't heard from him since then?"

"Not a word."

A breeze had come up, bringing with it a scattering of leaves that had still been clinging to the trees above them. "What about his ex-wife?" Leopold asked. "Have you seen Madge lately?"

Frank Nova's eyes sharpened. "I read about her getting killed in the morning paper. Were you the detective who was with her? They didn't have your name."

"I was the one," Leopold said. "Sometimes I don't like my name in the papers."

"If you think my brother did that, you're crazy! He hasn't even seen her in years."

"His fingerprints were all over her house, Frank."

"What? I don't believe it!"

"It's the truth, nevertheless. Maybe he can explain it. Maybe he just stopped in to borrow some money from her. But we have to find him before we can ask him."

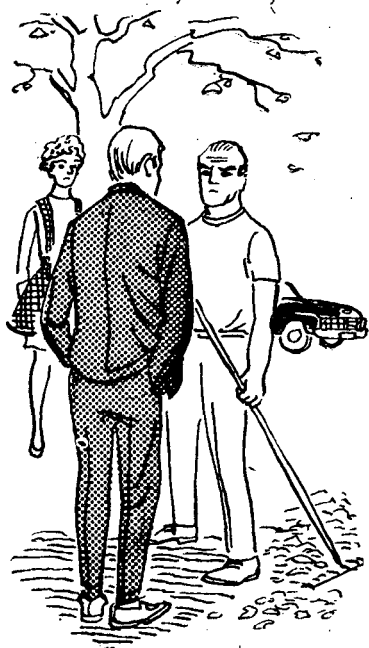
"Well, I can't help you." He glanced nervously toward the house. "I haven't heard a word from Roger since last Christmas. And I haven't seen Madge in years."

"No idea where he might be? Who some of his friends are?"

"You know his friends as well as I do. Better, probably."

"Not anymore," Leopold said. "That was a long time ago."

The back door opened and Ann Nova came down the steps and across the back yard to join them.



Leopold remembered her as a shapely blonde whom all the boys had admired at a distance. Now,

just over forty, the years were beginning to show on her. The hair was frazzled from too much bleaching, the lines about her mouth hard and unsmiling. Instead of the high school beauty, there was only the middle-aged housewife.

"Hello, Leopold," she said. "We haven't seen you for a long time."

"Passing by," he told her, catching the beginnings of panic in Frank Nova's face. "Saw your husband raking leaves and decided to stop."

She wasn't buying it. "You came about that woman's murder. Madge Perklin. I read about it. How's your arm?"

"I'll live," Leopold told her. "But you're right, it is about that. We're looking for Roger."

"Roger! That bum! He should have been locked up years ago."

"Perhaps," Leopold conceded.

"Do you think he killed her?"

"We're investigating all the possibilities." Leopold shifted his feet on the damp grass and studied the dark blue Ford in the driveway. A neighbor's cat was climbing across the hood. "What about Madge's second husband? The one who owned the house."

Frank Nova frowned. "Fellow named Bates. He was a merchant seaman and he went back to his ship after the divorce."

"Well, thank you, both of you," Leopold said. "You've been a great help. If you hear from Roger . . ."

"We won't," Ann Nova said firmly.

"If you do, let me know." The cat jumped down from the car and vanished behind the garage.

"We will," Frank said, laying down the rake. "I have to get ready for work now."

Leopold glanced at his watch. He hadn't realized it was nearly four. "Still at the Forum Club?"

Frank nodded. "It's a living."

"And a good one, from the looks of things." He said good-bye and walked out to the car. The air had turned chilly, but it didn't seem to bother the children who played among the leaves down the street. He paused at one point to warn them out of the street, and then drove on downtown.

Toward evening, Leopold's arm began to bother him and he went to see the police doctor. After listening to the usual lecture about the danger of even minor wounds, the doctor put some stitches in it and gave him an injection against possible infection. He was feeling grumpy when he went back to the office that night.

"Fletcher," he demanded, "where the hell is the autopsy report on Madge Perklin?"

"Right in front of you, Captain."

"If it was right in front of me, I'd see it."

Fletcher produced it from under a departmental memo on police courtesy. Then he hovered in the doorway. "If you don't need me any more tonight, Captain, I was thinking I might get on home. It's the wife's birthday . . ."

"We're on a murder case, Fletcher."

"I know, Captain . . ."

Leopold rubbed a hand over his eyes. "You haven't come up with one good idea yet for finding Roger Nova."

"We have the banks and the brokers alerted."

"Nothing else?"

Fletcher shifted his feet. "One thing. You said you picked her up at the liquor store, and she had the Scotch and gin in the bag."

"So?"

"So why should she go out alone at night and walk several blocks, nearly a half-mile, to buy booze?"

"Because she needed it."

Fletcher shook his head. "That's just the point, Captain. She didn't need it. She had three bottles of Scotch and one of gin in the cupboard. The same brand she bought."

Leopold thought about that. Then he said, "Go home, Fletcher. Wish her a happy birthday for me."

"Thanks, Captain."

When he was alone, Leopold read over the autopsy report. It contained nothing of great interest. The bullets had been fired from a .32 caliber gun, probably a revolver, since they'd found no ejected cartridges. Madge had a fair alcohol content in her bloodstream, but not enough to make her drunk.

Leopold went down to the files and started going through the old arrest records. There was someone he was trying to remember from long ago, a friend of Roger's who had once gotten into trouble with him. Finally he found it—Tommy Legg. He remembered Tommy vaguely, a little guy with a weasel face and swift, darting eyes. Leopold had never trusted him.

Tommy Legg was still in town, and it took only three phone calls to discover that he was living at the Mason Hotel, a third-rate place on the edge of downtown that catered to transient construction workers and neighborhood ladies of shaded virtue. Leopold drove down and entered the lobby casually, immediately causing two girls to make a hasty exit.

"Tommy Legg up in his room?" he asked the room clerk.

"We don't want no trouble here."

"You won't get any. Tommy in?"

"He's probably in bed."

"At ten-thirty? I doubt it. What

room is he in?" he barked at him.

The room clerk scratched his bald head. "Number twenty-five."

Leopold nodded. "Stay away from that phone."

He went up to the second floor and found the room he wanted. The hotel was small and dim and dirty, with an odor about it he couldn't quite identify. He knocked on the door. "Tommy?"

There was no answer for a minute. Then, "Who wants me?"

"Open up, Tommy."

The door opened a crack and Leopold forced it open the rest of the way. Tommy Legg stood there in his shorts, holding a black revolver. Leopold swung his hand to catch the gun, knocking it aside, and Legg quickly dropped it. "I didn't recognize you, Captain. I didn't know who it was."

Leopold picked the gun off the bed. It was a .38, larger than the weapon which had killed Madge and wounded him. "You got a permit for this, Tommy?"

"Sure, sure. I thought you were a burglar."

He studied the little man with the weasel face, taking in the rumpled bed and the closed bathroom door. "Who'd give you a permit with your record?"

"I never been convicted of a felony, Captain. I'm straight! Honest!"

"Tell the girl to come out of the bathroom."

"What? Oh, sure. Sue, come on out."

She was very young, with long bleached hair and heavily made-up eyes. A light raincoat was wrapped around her shoulders. "What's all this?" she demanded.

"Go back to your room," Tommy Legg told her. "I'll call you." When she was gone, he sat on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette. "What's the angle, Leopold? I've been clean for years."

"I want an old friend of yours. The Uttering Man."

"The Uttering . . . Oh, you mean Roger."

"That's right."

"I saw in the papers his ex-wife got herself killed."

"That's right. Where is he?"

"Golly, I wouldn't know."

"I can have you behind bars for pulling that gun on me, Tommy."

"I didn't pull any gun!"

"It sure looked like it to me."

"Hell, I thought you and Roger were friends."

"That was a long time ago. Was he seeing Madge again?"

Legg stared hard at the tip of his cigarette. "Sure, I guess so. Since her second husband beat it. He used to go over there when he was in town."

"Was he in town last night?"

"I don't know." Then, "Yeah, I guess maybe he was."

"What's he been up to lately, Tommy? Besides the usual con, I mean."

"Nothing I know of."

"Nothing to make him want to kill a cop?"

"Hell, no!"

"All right," Leopold sighed. "What kind of car is he driving?"

"An Olds station wagon."

"Oh? Is he gone again? Out of town?"

Legg dropped his voice. "He needs money bad. He can't leave till he gets some."

"Where is he holed up?"

"That I don't know. Honest!"

"Does he have a gun?"

"I don't know that either."

"All right," Leopold told him. "Keep your nose clean."

He left the room and went back downstairs. The room clerk was standing near the door, watching the street. "Told you he'd gone to bed, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Leopold said, and went out.

The next morning Sergeant Fletcher brought him the usual cup of coffee. "See how it tastes, Captain," he cautioned. "The machine's making funny noises."

Leopold sipped it. "Bad as ever, no worse."

"Find out anything after I left

last night, about Nova?" he asked.

"Yeah. Roger Nova's still in town, and he needs money. That means he'll probably try something, no matter how risky it is."

They didn't have to wait long. The call came at a little after one, from a large suburban branch bank located in a shopping center. The call was switched immediately to Leopold's desk. "Captain," the voice said, speaking quietly but with obvious tension, "this is Reynolds out at Brentwood Plaza Branch. There's a man here who answers the description of your Uttering Man. He has some stock certificates and he wants to use them as collateral on a \$5000 loan."

"Can you keep him there?"

"I'll try."

Leopold hung up and issued instructions to Fletcher. "Have a patrol car go to the bank and stand by in case he tries to leave. Tell them we'll be there in fifteen minutes."

They made it in twelve minutes, using the siren until they were only a few blocks away. Fletcher pulled into the massive shopping center parking lot and drove slowly down the lines of cars toward the squat, modernistic bank building. Next to him, Captain Leopold had taken out his gun.

"You're finally convinced he killed her?" Fletcher asked, notic-

ing the gun in Leopold's hand.
"No, but it's foolish to take chances."

The patrol car was already there, parked around the back of the bank where it could not be seen from inside. The officer signaled to Leopold. "He's still inside, Captain. At the manager's desk."

"Right."

Leopold and Fletcher went in through the back door, down a passageway that led onto the main banking floor. The man in the chair had his back to them, but he knew at once it was Nova.

"Easy," he cautioned Fletcher.

Nova seemed restless as he talked with the bank's manager. He must have caught something in the man's eyes, because he stood suddenly and turned toward them.

"Hello, Roger," Leopold said.

Somewhere a woman teller screamed at the sight of the gun, but Fletcher was already holding up his badge.

"Leopold! What's the gun for? What—"

Then he broke and ran. It must have been a moment of blind panic for him, or else he realized in that instant that they'd come to arrest him for Madge's murder. He was almost to the bank's front entrance, ignoring Leopold's shouted command to stop, when Fletcher brought up his gun.

"No!" Leopold shouted, and hit Fletcher's hand just as he fired.

The bullet hit Roger Nova in the side and sent him toppling through the glass door of the bank.

Leopold ran up and bent over the fallen man. "Roger! Roger, you shouldn't have run . . ."

Nova looked up, feeling of his bloodied side. He seemed surprised, surprised at life. "Damn it," he mumbled. "What'd you have to shoot me for?" Then his eyes closed in unconsciousness.

"Get an ambulance," Leopold told Fletcher.

"I thought he had a gun, Captain," Fletcher said. "He tried to kill you once."

"I don't think so," Leopold said. "I don't think he did at all. Come on, let's get back to headquarters."

Leopold stormed into his office, shouting commands at everyone in sight. "I want to know the instant I can question Nova. I want a full report on the car he was driving. And, Fletcher, I want to see those bottles of whiskey you told me you found at Madge Perklin's house."

"I've got them in a carton, Captain, if the boys haven't stolen them."

Leopold paced his office like a caged tiger, pausing only to issue some new order. His arm was beginning to throb again, but the

pain of it only drove him on. Fletcher returned in a moment, carrying a cardboard carton. "By the way, his car is a three-year-old Olds station wagon. That what you wanted to know, Captain?"

"Yeah. That wasn't the car the killer drove."

"So he stole one. You said he did it in high school."

"I know, I know." Leopold opened the carton. "Let's see these bottles."

"What is it you're looking for?" Leopold lifted up the first gin bottle and turned it around. On the back was a small gummed sticker with fancy scrollwork and the initials "FC" on it. Leopold checked the others. They were all the same. "I thought so," he said. "It was the only logical explanation."

"Explanation for what?"

"Look, Fletcher, you pointed out yourself that she walked a half-mile after dark to buy Scotch and gin. Why? Roger Nova's fingerprints were all over the glass and bottle on the table, so we can safely assume he was drinking with Madge just before she left for the store. Then what happened?"

"He waited for her to come back, I suppose."

"But did he? We saw this afternoon that he's more likely to run at the sight of police than try to

shoot it out. Is there any logical way in which he could have left Madge's house the other night and been replaced by someone else? There is, if he *drove her to the liquor store!*"

Fletcher was frowning at that. "I'll admit it's likely that he did, especially since it was quite a distance and after dark. But what was to prevent him from driving back to the house and being there when you and Madge arrived?"

"That's what I want to ask him as soon as I can. Because something did, you know. If Roger Nova had been returning to Madge's house immediately, he would have waited at the liquor store and driven her back with him."

"That makes sense," Fletcher admitted. The phone buzzed and he answered it. "The hospital. Nova's conscious. They say he'll pull through."

Leopold was back on his feet. "Let's go!"

The hospital room was bright and antiseptic, with the rustle of starched nurses everywhere. "He's a very sick man," one of them said to Leopold. "Keep it brief."

Leopold nodded, wondering if "sick" was exactly the right word for a gunshot wound. He bent over the raised bed and said, "Hello, Roger."

"You . . . you shot me, Leopold."

"Not me, Roger. One of the men. You didn't stop running."

"I—"

"We've been looking for you. The Uttering Man has become quite well known."

"Yeah."

"It's a long time since grammar school." Then, because the nurse was growing impatient, he asked, "You were back with Madge, weren't you?"

"Yes. Somebody killed her."

"You were with her that night, drinking at her house."

"Yes."

"She ran out of liquor, and you drove her to the store."

He nodded. "Yes."

"Then what did you do?"

"I went downtown to see a guy. At the Mason Hotel."

"Tommy Legg."

"How'd you know?"

"I knew. Were you going back to Madge's place?"

"Yeah, later."

The nurse was signaling an end to the interview. Leopold straightened up. "Come on, Fletcher," he said. "Let's visit a murderer."

Frank Nova was just backing his car out of the driveway when they pulled up. He stopped, got out, and came over to meet them. "Leo-

pold, you always come around just when it's time for me to go to work. What is it now?"

"Thought you might want to know, your brother was shot while resisting arrest. He's at Parkside Hospital."

There was an instant's concern, replaced by cold indifference. "How bad is he?"

"He'll live. Bullet in the side, but nothing fatal."

"I can't waste my sympathy on a criminal, even my own brother."

Leopold cleared his throat. "We wanted to talk about Madge Perklin's murder."

"Did he confess to it?"

Leopold ignored the question. "You were having an affair with Madge Perklin, weren't you?"

"That's a crazy ideal"

Leopold reached into the back seat of his car and pulled out one of the bottles. "Three Scotch and one gin, all with the initials 'FC' on the back. 'FC' for Forum Club, Frank. You took a few bottles from behind the bar and brought them to Madge. Private clubs often identify their liquor in some manner, especially if they sell it to members by the bottle."

"So I saw her and gave her a few bottles. What does that prove?"

Fletcher had moved around to Frank Nova's side. He seemed to sense what was coming. Now he

spoke up. "We found these bottles at her place after she was killed. But she'd just gone out to buy gin and Scotch. That means the bottles were brought there after she left—by you, Frank. You were in the house when Madge and Captain Leopold drove up. You shot at them and killed Madge."

Leopold held up his hand. "Not so fast, Sergeant. You're misreading the evidence."

"He sure is," Nova grumbled. "You two go talk to my brother about Madge. She was his ex-wife. I'm late for work."

"Work will have to wait a while longer," Leopold said. It had clouded up overhead, and a few drops of light rain were beginning to fall. "Could we go into your house to finish these questions?" he asked.

Frank Nova led them inside reluctantly. His wife Ann was standing by the door, "What is all this?" she demanded.

"It will all be clear in a moment," Leopold assured her. "You see, Fletcher, Frank here would have no possible motive for shooting Madge and me. You don't bring someone four bottles of whiskey if you're planning to kill them—especially not bottles that can be traced to you. No, those bottles were there all the time, but Madge couldn't bring them out because

she was afraid Roger would notice the 'FC' label and realize they'd come from Frank. She didn't want her ex-husband to know she was having an affair with his brother, so she pretended to be out of Scotch and gin and had Roger drop her at the liquor store on his way downtown."

"Then Frank wasn't at her house that night?" Fletcher asked, puzzled.

"Of course I wasn't!" Frank insisted. "I was at work, at the Forum Club, where I am every night. And I've got twenty witnesses to prove it! Now buzz off, you two!"

"Not so fast," Leopold said softly. "We came to make an arrest."

"But I told you I was—"

"Not you, Frank. Your wife."

Ann Nova stared at him and started to scream. She kept on screaming, even after they'd taken her away.

Leopold was depressed. He didn't like cases to end this way. He'd been at her wedding, and he knew her daughters. Seeing what had happened to her, he almost wished it had been Roger Nova after all.

"How'd you know, Captain?" Fletcher asked him later.

"Motive, mainly. Roger didn't have one, and neither did Frank, especially if he was having an affair with Madge. My mistake was in assuming that my presence at

Madge's house caused the shooting. Actually, it was only chance that I was with her. Madge Perklin was the intended victim all along. Ann Nova had learned somehow of her husband's affair with Madge, and she went there to kill her. Probably she'd found a key to the house that she used to get in. She waited in the house until she saw us arrive and start up the walk. The confrontation she'd wanted was out of the question, but in her sick mind she couldn't leave without carrying out her mission. So she fired three wild shots at Madge, killing her and wounding me."

"She must have been nuts to shoot at a cop."

"I'm sure she didn't recognize me when she fired. I was only another man that Madge was bringing home, and Madge must have thought it was Roger come back sooner than expected. When I drew my gun and returned the shots, Ann must have realized who I was."

"But how'd you tumble to all this, Captain?"

"Frank Nova's car was the same

make, a dark Ford, as the one I'd seen pull away from Madge's. Ann must have driven him to work that night. And then yesterday she asked me how my arm was, even though the paper hadn't mentioned my name--and she was still in the house when Frank and I were discussing it. There were other things. Frank's nervousness at my questions about Madge, his worried glance toward the house. It hinted at an affair he was trying to keep secret from Ann. He didn't realize she already knew about it and had killed her rival."

"Is any of this evidence for a jury?"

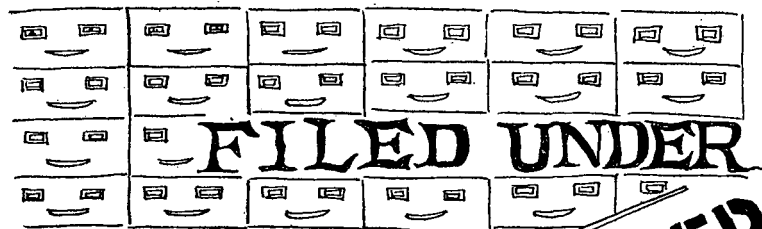
"The gun will be. It probably belongs to Frank and is still in the house. He's alibied, so that'll pin it on her. We can prove motive and opportunity. But from the looks of her, there'll never be a trial." He got up from the desk and slipped into his raincoat.

"Where are you going now, Captain?"

"I thought I'd stop by the hospital to see Roger Nova. After all, we went to school together."



It is noteworthy, and fortunate, that man has a resolute prepossession of his own life span, despite dicta to the contrary.



ONE INCH LOWER and that slug you took in Athens would have made you a microfilm record filed under deceased," said Hatfield. "You'll need at least another month to recover. Where do you want to spend it?"

The streets of Washington shimmered in the summer sun. "Home," said Morrison. "Nothing better than the peace and quiet of the mountains."

Connors, a puffy-eyed six-footer who was Morrison's immediate superior and who had escorted him back to headquarters, shifted in his chair. "Good idea," he murmured.

If this idiot thinks it's a good idea, it probably isn't, thought Morrison. He turned at the door. "I'll see you in about a month?"

The old man knew what the question meant. "We'll have him,

Alec," he said quietly. "We don't like someone trying to kill you for no apparent reason any more than you do. We can't use you until we find out why."

One side of Morrison's mouth lifted slightly. "If you don't find him, I will."

Hatfield's thin fingers drummed softly on the desk. Morrison was the best he had, partly because his mother had endowed him with her straight black hair, high-cheeked Slavic face and her gift for languages, and partly because of Morrison's own ability to blend as if he belonged, his steady nerves, fast re-

actions, and analytical, computer-quick brain.

"Just take care," Hatfield said. "We practically smuggled you home, but there is no guarantee someone couldn't follow and try again. Until we know more, you're

mountain and into the river valley on the other side, noting the only visible change in the town below was the addition of a large shopping center. Halfway down, the trees hid his father's house and he wondered if the old man had



still just a free-lance photographer, even to your parents."

"Parents? Father only. My mother died five years ago. Never did get to her funeral because you had me in East Germany at the time, remember?" He closed the door behind him.

"Getting edgy," said Connors.

"Happens to all the good ones," Hatfield said. "Espionage agent syndrome."

Connors' eyebrows went up.

"Wondering if it's worth it," explained Hatfield.

Morrison thrust the car up the

headed for his office by this time.

As sole owner, editor and publisher of the weekly, he liked to work early, keeping his afternoons free for hunting and fishing, a schedule that had developed Morrison's boyhood instinct for the hunt and survival, making the forest work with him and for him, summer and winter. Two hundred years earlier, the Indians would have accepted him as a blood brother. Today, Hatfield had recognized, refined, and put to use his hard independence and lone-wolf capability.

He turned into his father's road

and pulled up in front of the big frame house, wondered when he saw the shattered window and the scorched lawn surrounding the broken bottle.

Finishing breakfast when he walked in, his father smiled and jerked the still handsome white-haired head toward a chair. "Just in time."

Morrison grinned. He'd learned early his father wasn't a demonstrative man. Worried about it for a long time, he one day realized his father's actions had nothing to do with his love for his son.

"To whom do we owe the homecoming decorations?"

"Punk kids." His father turned his head. "Mrs. Abernathy!"

Expecting the stout, motherly neighbor of his boyhood, Morrison's eyes widened when the young blonde appeared in the kitchen door, sunlight reflected from the polished floor highlighting the shoulder-length hair. Beautiful women were no novelty. He'd photographed hundreds in various stages of dress and undress in settings from Scandinavia to South Africa, but finding one in his father's house . . .

"This is my son Alec," said his father. "He probably wants some breakfast. Looks like he could use a square meal."

Morrison told her coffee would

be sufficient, waited until she was in the kitchen and whispered, "Who is she?"

"Daughter-in-law. Married Joe Abernathy." His father leaned forward. "Captain in the Marines. Killed in Vietnam. She came here from California and has been living with Mrs. Abernathy ever since."

"Why bury herself in this place?"

"Mrs. Abernathy is pretty old now, you know. She needs a little help."

"So you end up with the most beautiful housekeeper this side of the Mississippi." Morrison smiled his thanks at young Mrs. Abernathy when she brought his coffee. "Tell me about the young punks."

"Three of them here for the summer. Wealthy delinquents. Father rented a place for one of them outside of town to get rid of him, I guess. He brought two of his friends. Been harassing people and making themselves a general nuisance. Last night was their first venture at vandalism."

"Why you?"

"Wrote an editorial suggesting the best way to get rid of them was to rap them with a nightstick and escort them to the county line."

"In this day and age? That went out when I was a kid. They'd be back the next morning with a lawyer, charging police brutality. Did

you report the bottle business?"

"Yes, but no one saw them, so there's nothing the sheriff can do. But if someone doesn't do something, they're going to cause real trouble." His father folded his napkin. "Well, world traveler, you must have been up early to drive in at this hour. Why don't you take a nap and meet me later? There's a new spot downriver I want you to try. Bring a rod?"

"No. Borrow one of yours."

The old eyes didn't miss much. "You look like a big bass might pull you in. Sure you're all right?"

Morrison nodded. "Go ahead. I'll see you later." He finished his coffee slowly, thinking of the unexpected bonus of Mrs. Abernathy in the kitchen. He picked up his cup and stood in the doorway, admiring the finely chiseled features and superb figure. She took the cup from him, conscious of his head-to-toe examination, her face amused.

"I forgot to tell my father I admired his choice in housekeepers," he said.

She flashed a smile. "He's talked about you. You're a photographer."

"Free-lance. No fixed base, no fixed income. I could also be called a bum."

"I doubt that. He showed me some of your work in the national magazines."

"Too few and far between to

give me any claim to fame. You wouldn't object to my taking some of you?"

"Your father suggested a nap. You look tired."

"In other words, get lost, Morrison."

She laughed. "I do have work to do."

Morrison bowed. "I'll get out of your way."

In his room he stripped to the waist, the bullet wound showing red and angry against the skin. His lips tightened as he looked at it, and he was reaching for a pajama top when the knock came. Without thinking, he swung the door open. Mrs. Abernathy started to say something, saw the mark and let the words die. Morrison deplored his stupidity.

The deep brown eyes drifted over his body. The bullet wound was relatively fresh, the other scars were not. Too, the corded muscles didn't come from lifting cameras, and Morrison knew her quick mind was probing for an answer. She reached out and touched his chest tenderly and Morrison felt the compassion flowing through her soft fingertips and the sudden desire behind it that matched his own. "Some things you don't ask about," he warned her.

She nodded. "I'll be driving into town after lunch and I'll be happy

to drop you off at your father's office."

Morrison smiled. "I'll make it a point to be awake."

Even before the incident in Athens, Morrison found restful sleep beyond him, lingering just under the edge of consciousness, too tense to relax, afraid someone or something was waiting for him to become defenseless and vulnerable. His mind dredged up continuous memories of broken bodies and faces alive and dead; the cool whisper of death in the night and the warm murmur of a loving woman; and overriding everything, the sometimes uselessness of it all and the certainty it could end for him in only one way. A microfilm record filed under deceased, Hatfield had said. An administrative formality. Morrison felt he had died a long time ago, that somehow he had failed.

After a time, he rolled over to sit on the edge of the bed, head heavy in his hands. Coming home should have made a difference, but perhaps he was expecting too much too soon. There was a dry, brassy taste in his mouth and he automatically reached for a cigarette. Slipping into slacks and a sport shirt, he went downstairs to find Mrs. Abernathy.

"Lunch?" she asked.

"You and my father seem to think I need home cooking."

She looked at him steadily. "It would probably help. You can't be out of the hospital for more than a week."

Morrison smiled. "Eight days."

"I don't suppose you would tell me about it."

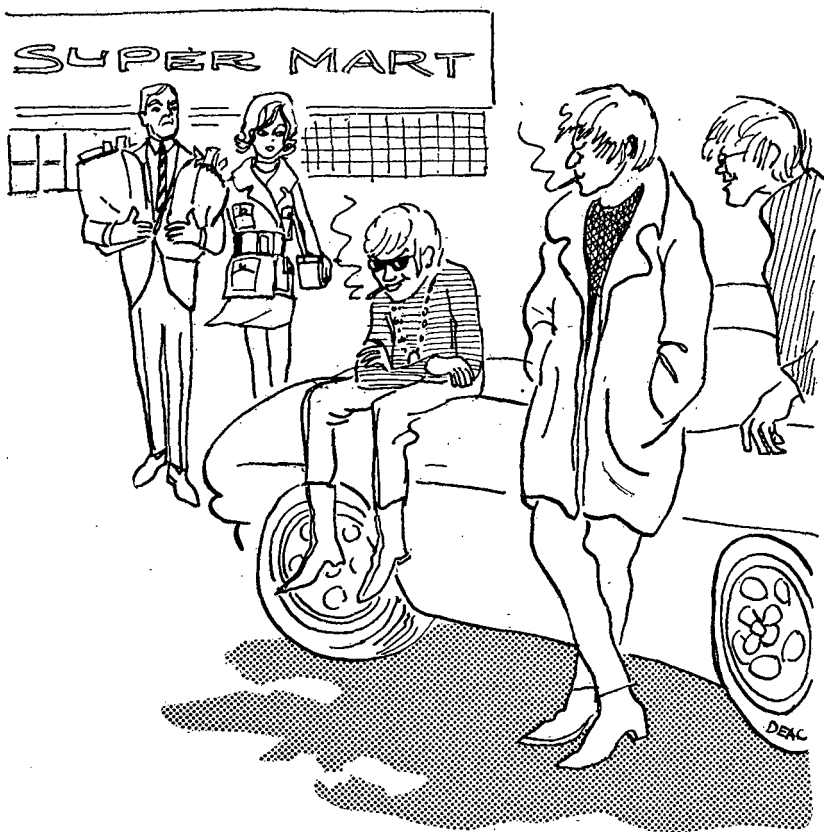
"No, but I'll carry your packages at the supermarket or wherever you're going."

"Think you're strong enough?"

He leered at her. "Try me, lady."

She laughed. By the time they pulled into the parking lot, he was calling her Ann, and by the time he was through pushing her cart like any domesticated male, Morrison was thinking this was a facet of life he should try before it was too late.

Arms loaded with groceries, grinning at something she said, he was at the car before he saw them, one sitting on the hood, the other two leaning against the driver's side. Punk kids, his father had said, a poor choice of words for a newspaperman. Morrison had seen their counterparts in every big city. Arrogant, in their late teens or early twenties, their faces already marked from having been allowed to see and do everything by sixteen, they had created their own world, their own set of morals and values. The one in the center, three inches taller and forty pounds heavier than Morrison's five-ten and hun-



dred and sixty pounds, was obviously the leader, the others almost faceless, long-haired nonentities by contrast.

"Hi, honey," he said to Mrs. Abernathy. "Need a man to help?"

The smug, confident face irritated Morrison. He shoved the packages against the kid's chest hard, letting go so that, surprised, he

automatically grabbed them. "Sure she does," Morrison said. "Put them in the rear seat."

The kid deliberately opened his arms, the bags bursting as they hit the pavement, groceries rolling.

Morrison's eyes narrowed. "Pick everything up."

The other two circled Morrison. The kid smiled. "What happens if

I just don't pick up anything?"

Morrison softly called him a name Ann couldn't hear, one he knew the kid wouldn't take. Then he stepped back, slapped aside the first punch, caught the wrist on the next and spun him around, locking the kid's hand up between his shoulder blades and clamping his forearm across the kid's throat. "If one of your friends moves, I'll take your arm off at the shoulder," he said into the kid's ear. "Now tell them to get two new bags, pick up the stuff and put it in the car."

The kid clawed feebly at Morrison with his free arm. Morrison cruelly tightened his grip. "Kid, the next step is to kick you in the Achilles tendon. Even if I don't break it, I guarantee you'll hop on one leg for a week. *Tell them!*"

When they finished, Morrison jerked the kid's arm. "The house you messed up last night is my father's. Don't come back to it." The kid dropped to his knees, hand nursing his shoulder. Morrison challenged the others with a hard look, received no reaction, motioned Ann into the car and glanced down at the kid. "Next time, call her Mrs. Abernathy," he told him.

The sheriff's deputy who stepped through the crowd, a worried look on his face, wasn't much older than the kid on the ground. "Any

trouble here?" he asked Morrison.

"No trouble," said Morrison cheerfully. He nudged the kid with his foot. "Is there?"

The kid shook his head.

Morrison waved at the gathered crowd and stepped into the car.

Ann slanted her eyes at him. "You provoked him deliberately."

"Certainly. If I had swung at him first, I would have been guilty of assault on the poor boy. As it was, I was merely defending myself. What's his name, anyway?"

"Danzo. I don't know the others."

"He annoy you much?"

"Every chance he gets."

That explained his father's editorial. "He would. You're the most attractive woman in town, and he considers himself irresistible."

She laughed. "He's a boy."

"Don't make that mistake," he said quietly. "He can be dangerous. I hope he isn't egotistical or foolish enough to try to even the score." Morrison was sure he was both.

Instead of fishing, he repaired the broken window and cleaned the lawn, using his visit to the hardware store for a new pane of glass to pick up two coils of quarter-inch rope which he kept out of his father's sight, and spent the evening talking to him until the old man went to bed.

The dark was filled with the

sounds of a summer night when Morrison, wearing black turtleneck pullover and trousers, rubber-soled across the lawn with his coils of rope over his shoulder and lifted himself into one of the elm trees lining the road. He wasn't sure Danzo would try anything tonight, but he couldn't sleep anyway, so it did no harm to be ready.

A car with lights out inched forward an hour later to stop a few feet from Morrison's tree. Expecting another hit-run bottle tossing, Morrison made ready to jump, but the three of them whispered on the sidewalk, then one returned to the wheel of the car, the other two moving toward the house through the deeper shadows under the trees, the big bulk of one identifying him as Danzo. There would be more than hit-run tactics tonight.

Morrison lowered himself silently. The kid behind the wheel never knew what hit him. Tied and gagged, a piece of rope looped around his neck and the doorpost, when he recovered the kid would find he couldn't move without choking.

Moving fast, following the sudden smell of spilled gasoline on the night air, Morrison caught them at the side of the house, dropped Danzo with a vicious kick to the stomach and the other with a thrust to the throat.

Working quickly, he roped them upright to the twin trees in front of the house, gagged them, checked the kid in the car, threw the half-empty gasoline can into the rear seat, softly crossed the lawn and stood in front of Danzo, a dull anger burning. Was it for people like this he'd been risking his life? He lifted his hand, found it trembling and realized what an effort it had been to keep from taking his frustration out on the figure roped to the tree.

"Kid," he said wearily, "this better be the end of it. You have the rest of the night to think it over. Come up with the right answer."

Morrison's sleep was no better, no more restful than before. He snapped awake once, bathed in perspiration, back in Athens, feeling the shock of the bullet knocking him off his feet and trying to remember something—something important—until his head ached and he closed his eyes again.

The murmur of voices woke him. He got up and stood in the window, wondering where so many people could come from at that hour on a road that held only four widely spaced homes. He dressed and joined them. Typical of crowds, they stood grinning and milling around, making no attempt to cut the three loose. A police car pulled up and a young deputy

spoke to Morrison's father, released the punks, and put two of them in the police car, allowing the other to follow in their own, and drove off.

Morrison's father and Ann came up. "The side of the house smells like a filling station," he said quietly. "The roses are already dying. I don't understand who or how, but someone kept those maniacs from burning the house last night."

"If we find him, we'll thank him," said Morrison, avoiding Ann's eyes.

"I wish I knew who it was. It's very strange."

"Forget it and count your blessings," advised Morrison. "Are you going to prosecute?"

"I can't because there are no witnesses. The thing that concerns me is that they might come back."

"I doubt it. If anything else happens here, they'll be the first ones picked up and they know it."

Ann shuddered. "That Danzo. He was just a nuisance before, but after this and the way he looked at me . . ."

Morrison firmly turned her toward the house. "If it will make you feel better, I'll go along with you whenever you go out."

The rain started at mid-morning as a wind-driven downpour, tapering off into a fine mist that could stay around for days. Morrison was

standing at the window when he saw Ann, hooded against the rain, dash for her car and drive off, her fear of Danzo evidently gone. The sharp ringings of the phone cut off his thoughts of following.

Hatfield's voice was guarded. "Can you talk?"

"If you hold on, I'll get the blonde off my lap, the brunette out of the kitchen, the redhead out of the bedroom and put them out in the rain."

"This is serious, Alec. We have trouble. One of the men you worked with in Spain a couple of months ago took it on himself to track you down, and then sold out."

"Why? Am I worth that much?"

"You remember your opposition?"

Morrison remembered him well, a short, stocky man named Gorodinsky, from whose hotel room he had lifted an important list on its way from South America. "He's hard to forget."

"Turns out he was a big man who decided it was a good assignment to show his boys how things are done. It also happened to be a good excuse for a junket at government expense. No need to tell you they have those, too. You made him look so bad they almost broke him for it, so you're number one on his list."

"Who pulled the trigger on me?"

"We don't know yet. Neither does our Spanish friend. All he did was pass on the information."

Morrison didn't like it. He considered personal vendettas a waste of time. There might be a few on the other side you wouldn't mind meeting again, but there was too much to do to worry about it. "How much does he know?"

"He has your real name. That's enough."

Morrison knew no security was so tight that Gorodinsky wouldn't have a file on him all the way back to the first grade by this time. All he really had to do was fill in a few gaps. Morrison had been around a long time.

It was the personal angle that worried him. He'd brought it all home with him, to the one place and to the people he'd always kept in the clear. "Any suggestions?"

"Connors thinks you should stay where you are."

"Connors is stupid. You're not going to believe it until he gets somebody killed. This is a resort town, filled with strange faces. I couldn't possibly watch them all. My best bet is to get out, bury myself somewhere."

"Where?"

"I'll call you. Right now, only you and Connors know where I am. That's two too many to suit

me." He hung up and reached for a cigarette, turning it over in his fingers. The longer he stayed the more dangerous it became. His bags were almost packed when the phone rang again.

"Morrison? Want to see your woman again?" Danzo asked.

One thing he didn't need right now was this crazy, stubborn kid. "Say what you have to say."

"I really owe you something, man. You want her, you come after her."

"Where?"

Danzo laughed. "Tell you over the phone so you can bring help? I tell you where to pick up a message. I watch. If you're alone, fine. If not, we're long gone before you get to us."

"Where will the message be?"

Morrison listened to Danzo's directions and cradled the phone with an ominous slowness. Danzo would leave the message in an RFD box on what Morrison knew was the old Fairchild farm, then watch him from the hillside above, because in the misty rain he'd have to be fairly close even with field glasses.

His mind reviewed the area as he slipped on a well-worn shoulder holster with its silenced revolver, rolled up a shirt sleeve to strap a long thin knife to his arm, the sheath spring-loaded to drop the

stiletto into his hand, hilt first, if he flexed his wrist. The weapons were a precaution he didn't expect to use, but the odds were three to one and the kids were young and strong.

Morrison didn't leave the car but reached into the mailbox through the lowered car window. *Five miles down the road to an old wagon track on the right, up the wagon track to the top of the ridge and along a footpath to a cabin.*

The corner of his mouth lifted. If he went Danzo's way, he'd cover three sides of a rectangle and end up no more than a mile above where he was. Danzo must be crouched on the hillside now. When he pulled away, Danzo would have only a half mile climb to the cabin. *If he went Danzo's way...*

He rolled the car down the road until it was out of sight, parked it, found the watercourse he was looking for and started up the side of the hill through the trees, moving fast in spite of the stones slipping underfoot and the water pouring over his shoes. He forced himself to stop at the crest until the chest wound stopped throbbing, then moved quietly through the underbrush, arriving at the cabin in time to see Danzo send one of the gang down the path they expected him to take.

Ann had to be in the cabin with Danzo and the other one. Danzo would want that. He'd want her to see them work Morrison over.

Morrison slipped up the blind side of the cabin, moved to the front, took a deep breath, slammed through the door and kept moving. He broke the jaw of Danzo's friend with a kick and spun to face Danzo. The kid had a gun, a snub-nosed revolver he was now lining up on Morrison. Morrison lunged, thrust out a hand, deflected the muzzle just as Danzo fired, pivoted and slammed down on his forearm with a vicious chop that snapped the bone, then smashed his ribs with short, powerful punches; deliberately punishing him as if he were practicing on a padded board, feeling bones crack; enjoying it, imagining that Danzo was Gorodinsky; and he might have killed him if he hadn't heard Ann screaming. He stepped back, leaving Danzo to crumple slowly.

Morrison slipped the knife from his sleeve and cut her loose from the chair. "Are you all right?" His voice had an edge.

She nodded, rubbing her wrists.

He touched a bruise on her cheek. "Are you sure?"

Her eyes snapped. "He was using me to get to you. What he would have done later, I don't know."

The one Danzo had sent down the path came charging through the door, stopped short and retreated from Morrison, eyes saying he wanted no part of him.

"Pick them up and get out now. If you want to complain to the police, you're welcome to try," he said coldly. "Otherwise, head for the nearest hospital and don't come back. Tonight. Tomorrow. Not ever."

Almost to the car, Morrison growled, "How did he get you? Didn't you have enough sense to avoid him?"

She whirled on him angrily. "I was walking down the street when they stopped, opened the door and pulled me into the car. It was so fast and easy, it was frightening. I didn't even have a chance to scream."

"Didn't anyone see?"

"I think not. Perhaps someone looking out a window."

In the car, her face was still flushed, her mouth tight.

"I apologize," he said. "You can smile now. You've been rescued."

"Very efficiently," she said in a low voice. "You could have killed them. They weren't people at all, just something in your way. And what you did to Danzo . . ."

"He earned it. Pushes people around because he enjoys it. Gets away with it because they don't

like violence. Then the gun. Always wants an edge. A man who pulls a gun deserves what he gets."

"No," she said. "Not like that."

Irritated by her attitude, he pressed down on the accelerator.

Back in his room, he changed, replacing the knife in the suitcase but strapping the shoulder holster on again. He'd stayed alive by trusting no one and he wasn't going to change now. Smoking a cigarette he didn't enjoy, watching the rain drip from the trees, his mood matched the late afternoon grayness.

Danzo and Gorodinsky. No matter where you went, there were people like Danzo and Gorodinsky, wanting things their way and no other; both forcing themselves on others, their motives different but the results the same. Morrison was very tired of men like Danzo and Gorodinsky.

Below, the door slammed. Morrison ground out his cigarette, slipped into his raincoat and went down. His father looked at the bags in surprise.

"I've been offered an assignment I can't refuse," Morrison lied. "No more vacation."

His father seemed to shrink a little. "I was counting on having you home for a while, Alec." He waved. "The house is big and empty."

And you're old and lonely, thought Morrison. He squeezed his father's shoulder gently. "I wish I could stay. Say good-bye to Ann for me."

He was stowing the bags in the car's trunk, collar turned up against the rain, when Ann came quietly through the wet grass. Morrison looked down at her and smiled crookedly. "Doesn't look like I'll ever take those pictures of you."

"It isn't because of what I said?"

"No. You were right. Danzo was an excuse to even the score with someone else."

She shook her head. "It was shock talking. Something had to be done and you did it." She stood close. "You don't know any other way, do you? It's the way you've been trained. To stay alive." She tapped him lightly on the chest and Morrison remembered the quick flood of desire when she had done it before. "Their people are very efficient, too. Sometimes you lose."

"Sometimes you lose," he admitted.

She smiled and the afternoon was brighter. "Then I think you're entitled to a few weeks when you can lose nothing."

There was a softness in her voice and a promise in her eyes, and Morrison told himself a man would be a fool to leave a woman

like this without thinking twice. He grinned at the rain-wet face and bent and kissed her. Somewhere along the line he had forgotten that whatever he did, it was for women like her and the old man in the house and others who asked the world for nothing, and it all made sense again. His sense of failure was gone.

He heard the soft pop of the silenced gun at the instant he saw the hole appear magically in Ann's raincoat shoulder, spinning her around. He caught her and pulled her behind the car, his mind frantically reassuring him the small hole was too high to be very dangerous. The gun in his hand, he peered around the car, seeing nothing except the trees that surrounded the cleared lawn.

Ann moaned, her eyes shocked and wondering in her white face, and Morrison felt the familiar surge of anger. He had to get her to a hospital, but first . . .

He reached up, opened the car door and slipped inside. Lying across the front seat, he started the car, threw it into gear and, head lifted just enough to see where he was going, steered the car toward the trees.

The windshield splintered above his head and he caught a glimpse of movement. Twisting the wheel, he headed toward the spot. He

could see the raincoated figure retreating, hat pulled low and face turned toward him. Morrison braked, straightened, and threw himself out of the car, rolling on the ground, stopping on his stomach with the gun thrust before him as he fired. The figure bent and sank.

Morrison lifted himself to his feet and walked slowly toward the crumpled figure, knowing who it was before turning the body over because the half-remembered thought that had kept him awake came back, crystal clear now, telling him only one man had known where he was going that night in Athens, a man who was now supposed to be in Washington but who had found it very easy to slip away for a few hours to come up here and kill him.

Morrison wondered how much Gorodinsky had paid. A great deal, probably. The man, like Morrison, had many opportunities to pick up money from the other side during his long career and he wouldn't have sold out for a small sum.

Morrison stood looking down at

Connors. Whatever reason he may have had besides money, they would never know.

He started back across the lawn at a fast walk, seeing his father running toward the figure lying alongside the road. He would have to call Hatfield to have him straighten things out with the police but, first, he'd take Ann to the hospital and to hell with everything else.

"Get your car," he told his father, waving away his questions and scooping Ann up in his arms.

"Alec," she whispered. "You'll stay now? I need you."

"I'll stay."

She winced as he placed her on the seat, lifting her face to his. "Is it over?"

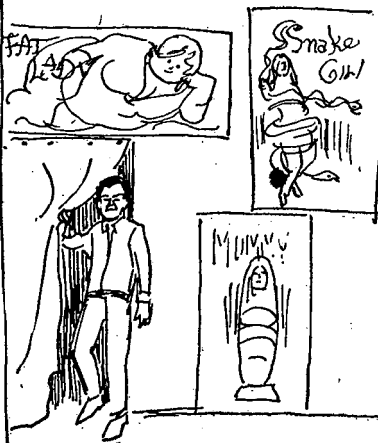
"Yes," he said. "It's over."

It was never over, but he couldn't tell her that. There was always a Danzo or a Gorodinsky or a Connors somewhere and never time for someone like Morrison to rest long.

A microfilm record filed under deceased, Hatfield had said. *Not mine*, Morrison thought, *not this time, not for a while yet.*



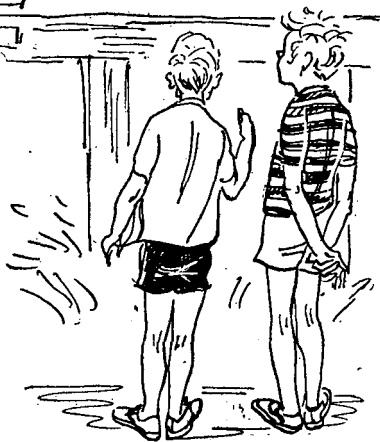
It is said there is no memory with less satisfaction in it than the memory of some temptation resisted.



← TICKETS →

IT'S BEEN WITH ME so long now, I can hardly remember a time that it wasn't. I guess that's how it is with most people. They get scars in their childhood and if they live long enough, they think they were born with them.

My father, alas, is gone and he might have made short work of the "mystery" with that hard-boiled cynicism of his. My mother? All she ever did was cry over me, may



she rest in peace, and she wouldn't have been much of a help. As for my brother David—gone now, too—he shared it with me when we were twelve and ten respectively, and though you might say he was to blame, being the older, I loved him far too much ever to hold it against him.

So here I am, left holding the bag, in a manner of speaking, and this is the first time I've ever mentioned it to anyone, even to my darling wife who is certain to think me a fool because she probably thinks of me as one anyway.

I have to take you back then, forty-odd years, to New York City, where every Sunday in the summer, weather permitting, my whole family—father, mother, brother, baby sister and I—would board a subway train and ride two hours, all the way from the Bronx to Coney Island. Ah, those precious times! We brought with us satchels of sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, cookies, fruit—food for a week, it seemed—as well as towels, blankets, sunburn lotions and, of course, our

bathing suits, which we wore underneath our street clothes in order to save the expense of a bathhouse. Evenings, for the long journey home, we were able to change those wet suits in a public comfort station!

How we loved Coney Island! Nothing that came later on in life—the French Riviera, Lido, Costa del Sol—could compare with it. Steeplechase! Luna Park! Feltmans! The boardwalk! The rides!

There was one thing that excited my brother and me more than all those attractions—the freak shows on Surf Avenue, a block from the beach. Just looking at the pictures of those oddities on the way to and from the subway gave us goosepimples.

However, my father frowned on such exhibitions and refused to let us patronize them on the grounds that they were fakes. "The sign painters make them look like that," he said of the more gruesome monstrosities, the alligator lady, the limbless wonder, the two-headed man . . . Oh, well, evenings when we were heading back to the subway, we could at least hear the barkers . . . "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Only ten cents, a dime, the tenth part of a dollar . . ." and see the sample attraction, usually a hula dancer . . . "She quakes, she shakes, she shivers, she quiv-

by Syd Hoff

ers . . . See the little lady . . .”

One attraction they never revealed for free, and the one David and I wished hardest they would, was The Human Fly, whose picture outside one of the freak shows showed a man's face set on the body of a gigantic hairy insect. “Terrifying, awe-inspiring, blood-curdling, revolting, horrifying,” was the way the barker at that place described him. We'd tarry behind to hear the rest until Papa prevailed on us with threats of violence to continue the march to the subway. Then my brother and I would sit by ourselves all the way home, wishing we had almost anybody else in the world for a father.

“Money doesn't grow on trees,” Papa tried explaining to us. Well, he stood over a hot pressing machine six days a week, tailoring, and those dimes, “the tenth part of a dollar,” didn't come easily.

So perhaps there was good reason for the absence of generosity in our lives, and my brother and I tried to rationalize our expensive taste in entertainment. The bird-man simply happened to have a tiny head, the fat lady ate too much, the skeleton man ate too little, the midgets had something wrong with their glands, the rubber man was *triple*-jointed . . . Those other more horrible freaks? Even if they

made a living from it, it wouldn't be polite to stare at them. And so forth.

But how could we rationalize The Human Fly? That picture of him kept haunting us all week, at home, in the streets, the playground, even when we went to sleep,

We caught flies, David and I, imprisoned them in jars, studied them with a magnifying glass for some trace of a resemblance to our own specie. There was none.

Then how did the one at Coney Island get that way?

“Wise up,” Papa said when we sought his opinion since he was still the Supreme Intelligence. “A fly is a fly, a human is a human. There can't be half of one and half of the other.”

Pure logic; but who wanted to be logical? Scaring ourselves gave us a special kind of pleasure, an enjoyment we couldn't resist. We went on thinking about The Human Fly all week, hoping that some Sunday Papa would relent and let us see him.

Even Mama tried interceding in our behalf several times when passing that freak show, perhaps because she thought it bad for our minds to harbor such a frustration. “Let them see him,” she pleaded. “Let them go in already.”

Her remonstrations were to no

avail. Papa ran the family with an iron hand, or a closed fist. "They don't need such nonsense," he said. "They have to start learning the value of money."

Money! Money! Money!

"At least let us *listen*," my brother insisted as though we might run away from home otherwise.

It was a concession not easily won. We were allowed to hear the barker's whole spiel. ". . . See him crawl on the wall, see him beat his wings, see him land on the ceiling, see him crush food with his powerful mandibles . . ."

One Sunday, back at the beach, my brother and I were playing in the sand, watching Papa, Mama and the baby disport themselves in the water with an inflated tire tube we also brought along from home.

"Let's go over to Surf Avenue," my brother said suddenly.

I hesitated, knowing Papa's temper and how Mama would worry if she saw us missing.

"Today is Labor Day and we'll never be coming here again," David reasoned.

Before I knew it I was racing after him, under the boardwalk, up the block and around the corner to that one particular freak show that haunted us.

It was a bright sunny day and Surf Avenue sparkled with gayety, but even at this hour—perhaps high

noon—the picture of The Human Fly looked down on us, more ominous than ever.

We drew close to the building, drinking in the vacant platform, the doorway with a cloth curtain hanging over it, the empty cashier's cage, thrilled just to be near *him*.

Then we heard voices inside, loud, angry voices. It was terrible to eavesdrop. Hadn't Mama, with all her problems raising us, carefully explained that this was one of the Vices? Shamelessly, my brother and I stood there listening.

Can you remember exact voices after forty-odd years? I can remember one.

"You filthy thing . . . you diseased creature . . . you loathsome scavenger . . . I could crush you . . . I could squash you . . . you contaminate everything you touch . . ."

The other's wasn't really a voice. It was unintelligible, low and mumbling, more of a humming-buzzing.

Then the curtain over that doorway lifted and a man stepped out on the platform, the barker who always stood there at night with the hula girl, only this time he wasn't wearing the checked coat or derby hat and didn't have his cane.

At first, David and I thought he was going to yell at us, order

us to scat, but he didn't. He crooked a finger at us and beckoned us to come closer, leaned over when we did.

"You kids wanna earn a nickel apiece?" he whispered. "Run over to Mermaid Avenue on the next block and tell the man in the hardware store that Marty at the freak show wants a can of—"

He mentioned some trade name insecticide that slips my mind for the moment.

A nickel apiece was a real wind-fall for us. My brother and I went sprinting up the street in our bare feet, about a block and a half, to the hardware store where a clerk behind the counter sprang into action when we mentioned the barker's name, and wrapped up a package of the insecticide for us.

Marty was standing there on the platform waiting when we returned. He grabbed the package out of David's hand, gave us each a nickel and vanished behind that curtain.

Almost immediately the voices resumed; that is, the one voice and the humming-buzzing, but my brother and I didn't wait around to hear any more. We went bouncing back to the beach, clutching our nickels.

I guess we were halfway back to the spot where Papa had planted our rented sun umbrella when it

hit us—hit my brother first, to be exact. He stopped running and I almost went into him.

"Hey, that stuff we just brought Marty," he said. "Wasn't that a fly killer?"

We stood there looking at each other, the nickel in my hand, and the one in his, I suppose, feeling like hot lead.

"I'm scared," I said.

"Aw, what's there to be scared about?" David laughed, but I could see he was scared, too.

"Maybe they just wanted to kill some real flies in that freak show," he said. "Flies are everywhere, aren't they? Zillions and zillions of them. I'll bet there's ten zillion flies right here in Coney Island this second."

He was trying to convince himself but the same picture was forming in his mind as in mine; Marty the barker, back there with The Human Fly, chasing after him with that insecticide, spraying it all over him, on the walls, the ceiling . . .

"They killed him," I said, and suddenly I was sitting there in the sand, crying over a freak I had never seen, a freak that was half fly and half human.

My brother took the nickel out of my hand, went over to a nearby refreshment stand and came back with two candy bars. Papa, Mama

and the baby were still out there in the water, enjoying themselves.

"Come on in for a swim," David said after a while, or maybe he said, "Last one in is a so-and-so." Anyway, we went plunging into the surf.

With the swimming, the crowds, the myriad colored umbrellas and the delicious food Mama had brought along, plus the extra bonuses of hot dogs, jelly apples, cotton candy and ice cream, it wasn't until hours later, after the sun had gone down and we had gotten into dry clothes, passing that freak show on our way back to the subway, that my brother and I remembered The Human Fly.

Marty the barker, now resplendent in his usual garb, was on the platform with the inevitable hula girl. We stopped and listened. "... Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! ... she shakes, she quakes, she shivers, she quivers ... ten cents, a dime, the tenth part of a dollar ..."

My baby sister was asleep in Mama's arms. Papa was getting impatient, picking up the satchels, putting them down. Marty was coming now to the main part, the part that made our flesh crawl.

"... that great phenomenon, that miracle of sex, that most baffling quirk of Mother Nature, ladies and gentlemen, direct from Paris, France—Bernard Bernice,

half man, half woman! See it!"

People were queuing up, buying tickets. Papa had the satchels in his hands, waiting for us to start moving.

"Where's The Human Fly?" my brother shouted.

Everybody turned around and stared at us, but the barker kept right on talking about that other freak.

"He killed The Human Fly!" David shouted again, pointing his finger this time, and I added my own high-pitched voice to his, all in the cause of justice.

Papa reached in and hauled us away, drove us ahead of him and Mama with sharp prodding of the satchels and promises of our extinction if we delayed a second more. Once again David and I sat huddled together in a subway car, hating Papa, wondering how to explain what we knew (or thought we knew) without divulging the fact that we had left the beach without permission.

"Do you think Marty killed The Human Fly?" I kept asking my brother. "Do you really think he's dead?"

"Maybe he's not really dead," David said after a while with the wisdom that came of being two years older. "Maybe he got away. Maybe he saw Marty coming at him with that insect spray and flew

right on out of the freak show."

It seemed plausible.

"Maybe he flew to the subway. Maybe he's on the same train as us right now, going to the Bronx."

I stared at the other passengers.

"Bzzz . . . bzzz . . . bzzz . . ." said David. "All aboard! Hey, fly! Put a coin in the turnstile if you wanna go to the Bronx!"

He started laughing and Mama glared at him. "Stop teasing your brother," she called out as loud as she dared without waking my sister.

So the rest of the way home David and I sat quietly, not discussing our secret, just looking at the subway ads and one another. Once we got home and were alone in our room, ready to get into our beds, he said, "Better make sure the screens are in the window. We don't want that Human Fly coming in here tonight."

I don't know how long I was asleep when something awoke me, a humming-buzzing.

"David!" I whispered.

My brother didn't answer.

"David! David!"

"Whaddya want?" he grumbled.

"Did you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"The Human Fly. He's in here."

I started to get out of my bed, to turn on the light.

"Don't move," said David. "It

might make him attack us. Sh-h."

I lay very still.

"Pray," my brother whispered. "Pray like you never prayed before. Pray that he goes away, that he leaves us alone."

I prayed. The minutes passed. Something was brushing my face, something light and sticky. I didn't dare reach out and touch it.

"Did you feel something just now?" David whispered.

"Yes," I answered.

"Something sticky?"

"Yes."

"His legs. I felt them, too. Keep praying, Seymour."

I pulled the blanket over my head, heard that dreadful humming-buzzing coming closer and closer. Then the sound faded away.

Was it a temporary retreat? I waited, the cover still pulled tightly over my head.

" . . . See him crawl on the wall . . . see him beat his wings . . . see him land on the ceiling . . . see him crush food with his powerful mandibles . . . "

Was The Human Fly on the ceiling now, waiting to land on me, crush me with those terrible things of his?

The humming-buzzing was commencing again, growing louder and louder, so loud I thought it would break my eardrums. Now I felt those legs crawling on me, on

my stomach, my chest, my neck . . .

Insanely, I lunged out with my blanket, locked my arms around something and held on for dear life.

"David!" I screamed. "David! David!"

No one came to my assistance.

"Help me, David! Help me!"

It was no use. I had to handle the creature alone, had to kill or be killed. I felt for a vulnerable spot, a throat perhaps, squeezed as hard as I could—harder, harder . . .

Papa and Mama came bursting into the room and turned on the light. They tore the blanket out of my hands. David lay there on my bed, his face blue, not even breathing.

"You crazy fool," Papa said. "What have you done to your brother?"

Mama was crying, rubbing David's throat, bringing him a glass of water, making him smell witch hazel. "You bad boy," she kept saying to me. "You bad, bad boy."

Then David was all right, explaining everything, and Papa and Mama were talking nicely to me again. "Only babies believe in a Human Fly," they said.

They kept saying it to me for a long time afterward, every time they saw me sitting in the house while David and the other children on our street were outside

playing in the sunshine, sitting there with a fly swatter, just looking at the walls and ceiling.

Sure, it was only a joke my brother played on me that night; but the joke was on him, because even after he fell asleep, *really* fell asleep, I still heard The Human Fly and felt him touching me with his sticky legs, have gone on hearing and feeling him every night of my life since.

As I said before, he's gone now, my brother David, as are Papa and Mama. My little baby sister is a big married woman with a family of her own, living about three thousand miles away on the other side of the country.

Yet I'm still here and so is The Human Fly, and one night I just know that while I'm lying there in the darkness listening to that humming-buzzing, he will swoop down and crush me with his powerful mandibles. My poor wife? She just doesn't understand why I always sleep with my head under the covers.

You see, that's the real joke on my brother. He took after Papa, and years later didn't believe in The Human Fly either, but I've gone right on believing. That's why, even while I'm sitting here writing this with a pen in one hand, I've got a fly swatter in the other.

Herein is proffered one man's viewpoint—but one which is, perhaps, not entirely foreign to the distaff mind.



THERE IS NO investment without risk," Ed Vaughan said.

"As a stockbroker, you should know," George Putney commented. George was a doctor, interested in employing his surplus. "But it's the conservative, minimum risk kind I'd like."

"Utilities would seem suitable," put in Harry Renshaw, an attorney.

The three close friends were at ease in the butternut-paneled smoking room of Vaughan's sumptuous home, leisurely chatting.

"Risk is difficult to determine," Vaughan went on. "For example, it often happens that what seems to

be a low risk security lags so far behind an advancing market as to end up a poor investment. Also, there is always a risk in human emotions."

"Emotions?" Putney said. "In securities?"

Vaughan smiled. "More so than in most other fields. Investors are subject to fear, greed, anticipation, nervousness, vanity, content, exuberance, despair—the whole gamut. Turned into action, you can see what this can do to security values."

Vaughan's wife walked into the room, and the three men looked at

her with open pleasure. She was a score of years younger than Vaughan, with deeply gleaming russet hair, the face of a beautiful child and a breathtaking body. Smiling, she asked, "Everybody comfortable?" She looked around and poured more coffee from the electric warmer into their cups. "I'm going out, Ed. Back in a few hours."

"Have fun," Vaughan said.

She looked at him fondly, leaned on his chubby shoulder, over the fringed horseshoe of his bulbous,

Renshaw turned in his low reclining chair. "Look, financier, is everything an investment to you? Even your wife?"

"I wouldn't put it that way to everybody," Vaughan said, "but yes, she is."

"Then how can you be so sure of her?" Renshaw asked, with the quickness of a lawyer. "You just finished saying there is no investment without risk."

"That's so. But my risks with Beth are in the past." Vaughan clamped his mouth shut, but the

by Michael Zuroy

truncated head and kissed him on the temple. Then she was gone.

"I'll say it again, Ed," Renshaw said. "You're a lucky dog."

Putney said, "If I had a wife like that, I wouldn't let her out of my sight. Somebody might grab her."

"Not a chance," Vaughan said, with quiet confidence. "She wouldn't look at another man."

Putney regarded him curiously, and with the privilege of ancient intimacy, said, "What makes you so sure? What does she see in an ape like you, anyway?"

"Enough. I'd say Beth is one of my most successful investments."

two men kept looking at him expectantly. "Oh, all right," Vaughan finally said. "I've got to talk about it sometime. Better with you two than anybody else." Then he fell silent again.

"She was actually a deliberate investment?" Putney encouraged.

"Deliberate and calculated," Vaughan admitted. "You know that I never deceive myself. I see things straight and clear, which is why I've made out in my business. The fact is, I'm no beauty, and never was. Worse, I've no charm for women at all. So I stayed unmarried—until I met Beth, a few

years back, and decided to invest.

"I met her working in a client's office. From the first, I wanted her more than casually. Love? No. I'd wanted many girls. Sometimes I'd be sick with the frustration of all the lovely girls I couldn't have. But Beth I wanted more than most, as though she were a symbol of all of them.

"I could have married before. I had money. I didn't want to buy a wife. That wasn't so with Beth. I wanted her on any terms.

"Look on it as an investment, I told myself. A high-grade investment. This lovely, lovely girl on tap, mine for keeps, a continuing return in pleasure, and release for my money.

"As in any investment, I evaluated the risks. I have said that risk is hard to determine. A smart investor does not always seek what seem to be the lowest risks. In this case, they were not low. A stunning girl like Beth, with the human vanity and selfishness in her character that I discerned, might easily be unfaithful. She might weary of her older, homely husband, she might divorce me, but I decided the risks would be worth assuming. I prevailed upon Beth to marry me, or I should say, me and my money.

"She was, at first, quite satisfactory as an investment. She had a

sort of ethics and some kindness for me, if not love. I indulged her whims and her moods; I tolerated her orders and her demands and tried not to annoy her, and she gave me in return moments of affection and surrender and even happiness.

"Other men made passes at her, I knew. I'd anticipated it. I was not concerned with their attitude, only hers.

"It wasn't until she met Tony Manning that I had cause to worry, but then it was bad. Manning was a TV actor someone had brought to one of the parties Beth gave, a curly-haired, handsome brute with a deep, mellow voice. As I am sensitive to the turns in the market, I was sensitive to the change in Beth the moment he looked into her eyes and spoke to her.

"I knew when they began their clandestine meetings. I knew when they began playing. I felt her growing coldness toward me. It was simple to have a private agency check on them.

"I did nothing for a while, hoping it would be a small affair, soon over. It did not prove so.

"Then Beth invited Manning for a few days' stay at our home. This was too much gall for me. Did they think I was completely blind? Or totally complaisant? I could hear the mocking story Manning would make of it for his friends.

"When an investment goes down, we in the market do one of two things—get out and take our losses, or buy in deeper, assuming more risks, anticipating higher future gains. In this case, I decided that further risks were warranted.

"The planning was elementary. I induced them to come for a ride with me one fine morning. Driving along the broad, straight turnpike, almost empty of traffic at this hour, feeling my wife's thigh, part of my legal and rightful investment, soft and warm against my own as it had not been for a long time, only because of the room Manning took up on her other side

—big favor—I steeled myself for the approaching short-term ordeal that might bring long-term benefits. I pushed the accelerator harder. Rapidly, we overhauled the few cars ahead. I veered around them and back into the lane on squealing tires. The road was clear ahead.

"In a hurry?" Manning asked coolly.

"Slow down, Ed," Beth said sharply. "You don't usually drive this way."

"She was quite right. She was used to a safe, conservative husband, and perhaps that was part of the trouble. Well, I decided I'd better let them have it, and I said



evenly, 'A shame to die on such a nice, sunny day.'

"As the turnpike came streaking under our wheels, from the corner of my eye, I saw Manning's head swivel. Beth stared. 'What do you mean?' Manning asked.

"Simply that this morning we're going to have an accounting.'

"Oh, slow down, Ed,' Beth said. 'Stop talking nonsense.'

"Ordinarily, I obeyed her little orders. Now, I said, 'I know about you two. Do you think I'm a door-mat?'

"Manning said, 'I don't follow.'

"You've been making love to my wife. Plain enough?'

"Manning's laugh was rich and sincere. He was a good actor. 'That's mad,' he said.

"I said, 'I made sure, Manning. I've had detectives on you two, so you can drop the pretense.'

"Beth gasped. I tramped harder on the gas pedal. The engine's quiet humming rose, the roadside flew by more quickly. Manning said, 'All right. What do you propose to do?'

"I want you to jump from this car. Probably be instant death at this speed,' I said. 'You shouldn't suffer.'

"You're off your rocker.'

"That's right,' I said deliberately. 'I want you dead.'

"Why don't you just go home

and have a good cry instead? Ed, the murderer. Nobody's afraid of you, chum.'

"It wouldn't be called murder,' I said. 'There's no physical violence against you on my part, and in any case Beth couldn't testify against her husband, even if she wanted her adultery made public, which I doubt. No, Manning, they'd count it an accident; the door came open and you fell out.'

"Smart thinking,' Manning said. 'But I'm a little curious about one thing. What's going to make me jump?'

"I said quietly, though my heart was now pounding and my fingers shaking on the wheel, 'If you don't, I kill us all. Crack us up. A turn of the wheel will do it.'

"I felt Beth looking at me as though I were a total stranger.

"Who are you trying to kid?' Manning said.

"I'm prepared to die,' I said. 'I've no interest in a life without Beth, and this score's got to be paid. If you'll pay the score now, that will save Beth.'

"This is bluff. I'm not buying it.'

"I swung the wheel. The car sur-rendered its stability. It lurched, hurtled across the road, skidded back and forth, heeling and swiveling. Tires screeched. The countryside went jumbled. I kept playing

the wheel and pedals, keeping a thread of control. Ordinarily a careful driver, I have a reserve of skill. Adequate reserves are always important. Gradually, I allowed the car to straighten.

"Beth was moaning, involuntarily. Manning said, in a voice in which I now detected a small flaw, 'Don't carry this too far, you fool!'

"I intend to,' I said, over the thudding in my chest. 'Next time, we'll have a sociable death. Unless you care enough about Beth to save her. Act fast.'

"Bluff, I say.'

"I never bluff,' I lied. 'I'll give you another minute. You were eager enough for Beth up to now. You don't seem too eager to die for her.'

"I could sense his thoughts now. Should he make a try at shutting off the ignition? No, a wrestle at this speed would mean sure death, and I'd still have time to crack up the car. I could be bluffing, all right. He said, but nervously now, 'I'm calling your bluff.'

"Beth said suddenly, 'He's not bluffing, Tony. He means this.'

"The hell he does.'

"He would die for me. He would.'

"I had been waiting for this. I knew my self-centered, vain wife. I knew that in her mind it would not only be flattering but entirely

reasonable that her loss could drive a man to suicide. One should be familiar with one's investments.

"Beth said, 'Don't let me die, Tony. You can save me.'

"Manning said angrily, 'It's all right if I die, is it? What kind of a patsy do you think I am?'

"Beth looked at him. I felt her growing cold toward him, totally cold, as only a passionate woman can grow cold. She said, 'Never mind.'

"You don't give a damn about me, do you?' Manning said.

"Never mind,' Beth said. 'I see how you feel about me. Naturally, your skin is more precious to you.'

"The tires blubbered under us.

"Time's up. It will be that tree. Good-bye, Beth, my darling,' I said with nice calculation. I swung the wheel. The tree moved into the windshield. It enlarged. Its bark grew in swift detail, roughening, opening. Tires whined. A deadly wind wailed. The world wailed and we rushed at death.

"Wait!' Beth screamed.

"I wrenched the wheel. We slewed, careened past the tree. Across the road we sheered, burning tires. With small reflexes, I gentled the missile we rode and the skidding eased. Tires gripped. We straightened.

"Give me . . . another chance, Ed. Please,' Beth begged.

"'Bluff, I tell you, bluff,' Manning mouthed.

"'Please, Ed,' Beth said.

"'Why? To save your life?'

"'To save ours. It could be good. I never knew how much I meant to you. Can't we try again?'

"'For keeps, Beth?'

"'For keeps.'

"'All right.' I eased up on the gas pedal.

"When we pulled up before the house, Manning leaped out, fuming, 'I ought to beat you to a pulp.'

"'You'd regret it,' I said, confidently and quietly. He looked at me. I understood my limits, but he did not. He strode away.

"Beth came into my arms, shivering, clutching, her magnificent body abandoned to me. I saw that my investment was secure again.

"'You'd have done it,' she said, eyes searching my face.

"'Yes,' I said. I knew that I had now achieved the right image with her. She believed me desperately in love with her, capable of doing anything to hold her. She would always respond passionately, always

tremble for me, always be a bit afraid of me. It had been worth carrying to the very brink, as I had—"

"You *are* a shrewd dog, Ed," Harry Renshaw said. "The way you set it up, no matter how it went, Manning had to lose and you had to win. But tell me, suppose he'd decided to jump?"

"Then he would have jumped," Vaughan said calmly.

"You'd have let him die?"

"He tried to pirate my investment. Certainly."

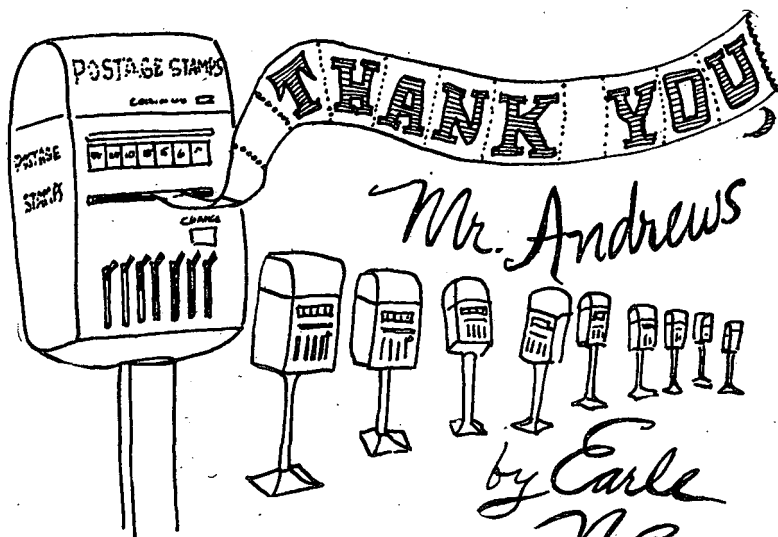
"You are completely ruthless, Ed. But wait a minute, suppose Beth hadn't cried out? Avoiding the crash, your bluff would have been exposed, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," Putney said. "I was wondering about that point."

"I'll repeat," Vaughan said, "when it comes to investments, there is always an emotional risk. In my case, it happened to pay off. You see, friends, in that last split second, rushing at death, facing ultimate truth, understanding myself for the first time, I realized that I was not bluffing."



There are two sides to many things, among them stamps, faces and wars.



I NEVER THOUGHT I was going to be a war hero when I was drafted right out of my first teaching job, after spending five long years in college getting ready to teach. When I was dragged in, my sympathies leaned more toward the enemy than the American Army, but six months of basic training and friendship with Johnny Rich changed things for me. When the Viet Cong grenade sailed out of a bamboo thicket and landed in

front of John and me, I moved first. I didn't jump on it and muffle its blast with my body. For that you get the Congressional Medal of Honor and a military funeral. Mine was a simple Bronze Star and Purple Heart job. I kicked the damn, hissing thing with the same force and verve as I had once kicked conversions in high school

football. Then I whirled and tackled John, and we went down in a heap. My rear end must have been somewhat elevated as I performed this heroic deed because that is where three pieces of shrapnel got me and got me good. I spent the next month lying on my stomach in a base hospital. I may have been a hero by army regulations, but with a broken big toe and a grievously wounded derriere, I certainly never felt like one, not for one minute.

Johnny visited me at the hospital several times to express his undying gratitude and cosmic amusement. He'd come out of combat without a scratch. A tall, dark, and extremely handsome character with a whimsical sense of humor, he had spent much of his combat time worrying about being disfigured by bullets, booby traps, or pieces of hand grenades or mortar shells. I didn't have as much to worry about, so I spent my time razzing him about his fears.

John looked down at me with his great big brown movie-star eyes and spoke with much feeling.

"I appreciate what you did for me, Marty. I would have got it right in the kisser."

"And that would have saved the women of Southern California one hell of a lot of trouble," I replied. "Knock it off, John. Nobody is go-

ing to mess up that beautiful kisser of yours. They wouldn't dare. The females of the world would never allow it."

"You look me up if I get out of this hell-hole alive. I'll make it up to you." John had told me he was in the insurance business in Southern California and, from the money he'd blown during training, it must have been a prosperous one. He used to buy drinks not just for the platoon but for the company.

I grinned at him. "I look you up and you'll probably nick me for a policy I couldn't afford. I got all the insurance I need right now."

He didn't smile, but frowned, and it was funny to see such a serious expression on his face. "I'm not kidding, Marty. I pay all my debts, and I owe you. My family has a lot of influence. They'll feel the same way I do."

I said okay just to turn him off. I was getting embarrassed. After all, I had managed to save my own life in the process of booting that grenade out of the paddy, but I didn't feel like arguing with him at the time. Lying on my stomach with one itching foot in plaster, sweating in that Turkish bath atmosphere that passes for air in Vietnam, I just felt like going home.

I was home on sick leave just one week later. Two months later, I was all the way out of the army

and a bona fide civilian. Instead of going back to my old job out in the desert boondocks, I was able to land a teaching post in a plush L.A. suburb which had a brand new high school crammed with bright, intelligent kids who wanted to learn something. I asked a girl to marry me, and she accepted with enthusiasm, to my undying amazement. This wounded-war-hero-with-decorations stuff had some definite advantages!

After two years at the high school and some graduate summer work at U.S.C., I became head of the history department at Center City High School and was on the verge of becoming a proud father. I was also on the verge of becoming bankrupt, with a new home to pay for and with paychecks coming in only nine months a year. I began looking around for another source of income like every other red-blooded American male schoolteacher. I found no great commercial demand for a man whose primary skills were those of teaching history or shooting people, so I began looking at what the papers optimistically label as "investment opportunities". I found most of them to be out-and-out swindles, but one was so good on the surface, I found it hard to believe.

It consisted of a string of coin-operated stamp vending machines,

about \$15,000 worth of them, in choice locations in Center City. The owner was asking only \$7,000 in cash for them. I looked at his books and checked them out by touring the locations and talking to the store owners. I couldn't believe what I saw. After deducting all costs, including depreciation, payments to store owners, insurance and 8% on the \$7,000 investment, I could still clear over \$200 a month on the deal. It would require only about ten hours monthly of my time to handle the whole setup. I went over the entire deal ten times and couldn't find the catch, so I put up a \$500 deposit and agreed to buy the package if my bank would approve the loan. I figured the bank would find the catch for me if there was one, and I practically dared the loan officer to spot it for me. He phoned me three days later and said the bank would lend me an extra three thousand any time I wanted to expand. That was enough for me. I purchased the business.

The catch arrived at the end of my first month's operation, in the form of a man. He made an appointment with me during my conference hour at the school. At first I thought I had a routine parent conference. I did not recognize the man's name, but some of our kids have stepfathers with names differ-

ent from theirs. When I saw him walk into my office, I threw that idea out the window. He was a small, olive-skinned guy, dapper in a \$300 suit and a pencil-thin moustache, and he could not have been more than twenty-five.

He smiled pleasantly at me and sat down carefully in the chair beside my desk. "I'm Tony Ricci, Mr. Andrews," he said with a pleasant, well-modulated voice. "I've come for your first payment."

I looked blank. "Payment on what?"

"Payment on your franchise to operate stamp machines in Center City," he said smoothly as he consulted a small leather notebook. "It's easy for you to figure. It's fifty percent of your net in cash. We have the right to inspect your books, so no funny business, please."

"Why should I pay you one lousy nickle, likewise over a hundred dollars?" My temperature began to rise.

He stopped smiling and looked very concerned. "Do you mean to say that Mr. Najarian did not tell you about our arrangement? That was highly unethical of him, to say the least."

Mr. Najarian was the bird who unloaded the machines on me, and this with it. He had not mentioned any partnership arrangements.

I guess I was in a small daze, so Ricci went on. "You pay us fifty percent of your net because we are full partners with you in this enterprise of ours. We are partners with anyone who operates a coin-operated vending machine in Center City."

"Who is we, Mr. Ricci?"

He pulled out a small black leather case, extracted a card and handed it to me with a flourish. He had the trace of a smile on his lips that was calling me a big, fat, naive sucker, and my blood pressure was now joining my temperature in its ascent.

The card said, "Ricci, Incorporated: Investment Opportunities".

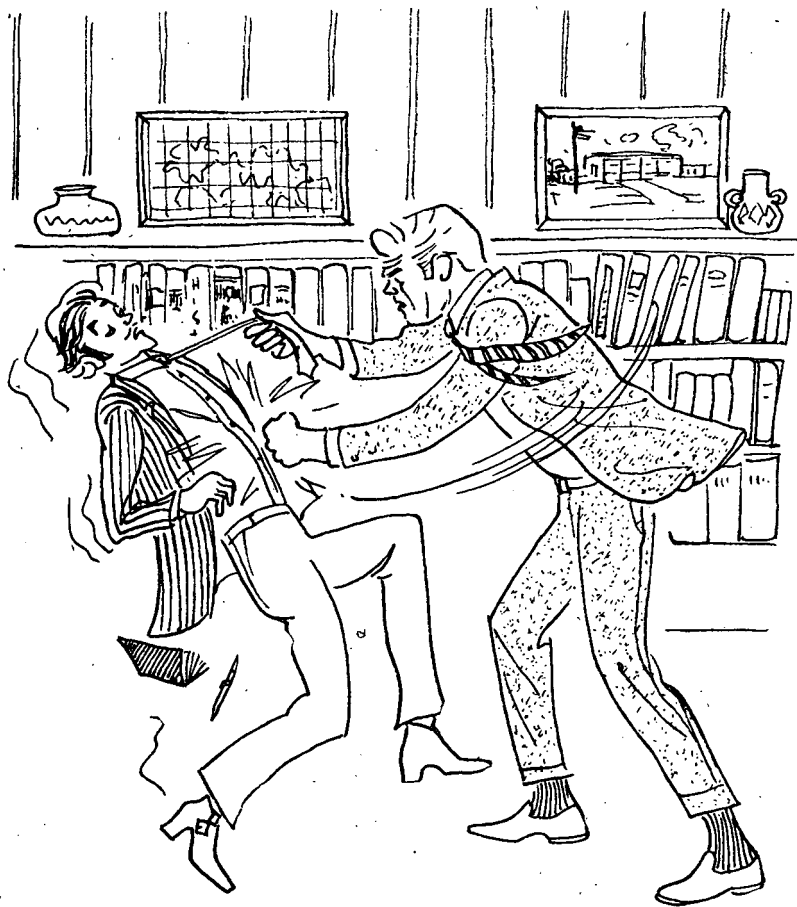
"Just what does your company contribute to our partnership?"

"We protect your machines, see that none of them get busted up, see that you don't have any cut-throat competition. We make sure that you don't ever get muscled around by anyone and that nobody in your family gets hurt."

"Like my wife," I said.

"Like your pregnant wife," he said.

I think it was the word, pregnant, that did it. I reached out and grabbed Mr. Ricci by his narrow black tie, lifted him up out of his chair with my right hand, then belted him in the solar plexus with my left. We went down on the floor



with me riding him and I cinched up the tie. When Ricci began to turn blue, I loosened the tie and he opened his big brown eyes and began to cry great big wet tears.

"You threaten my wife again, little man," I said, "and I'll cinch this thing up permanently. You trot back to Ricci, Incorporated and

tell them that I just dissolved our partnership."

He jumped up and scurried out, and I sat back in my chair and felt properly ashamed of myself. One of my subjects was Civics, and I was not too proud of my civic behavior in this case. That afternoon, after school was out, I tried to make

up for it. I drove down to police headquarters and reported the whole affair. I swore out a formal complaint against Tony Ricci. The police, in the person of a Lieutenant Sam Nelson, were sympathetic and promised immediate action. I heard a pick-up order go out over the air as I left the station.

I drove home and waited for further events, but nothing happened during the next week. Nothing happened to any of my stamp machines. The police called and said they couldn't find Tony Ricci. I forgot the dirty business and concentrated on my classes and expanding the route. I found an excellent location in an independent market, but I couldn't talk the owner into letting me place the machine. I couldn't understand why he would pass up a good profit for himself, and asked him if anyone from Ricci, Incorporated had talked to him. He angrily asked me to leave his store as if I had said something obscene. I guess I had.

Next month, right after I had made all of my collections and paid off the shopkeepers, Ricci made an appointment at nine to see me at eleven, my regular conference hour. When I was notified about it at ten, I called the police. They did not come, but a smiling Ricci arrived with a friend.

I'd been pretty brave with Tony Ricci. He weighed perhaps 140 and stood about five-seven if he stretched. I weigh about 180 and stand about five-eleven. His friend was about six-three and probably sent the scales to about 230, and it was evidently all solid bone and muscle. I did not feel very brave with this new man. He had a mean look that said he never felt pain. I thought maybe I could take him, but only if I had an automatic weapon and lots more distance between us.

"I've phoned the police, Mr. Ricci. I swore out a complaint against you after your last visit."

Mr. Ricci took out his little notebook and consulted it thoughtfully. "Mr. Andrews, you now owe us for two months, and there is a twenty percent monthly interest penalty for overdue payments."

"I will not pay you anything. What is your friend's name? I want to add him to the complaint."

Ricci glanced back at the gorilla who had remained standing and was staring at me like I was a mouse that had just come out of his little hole. Ricci looked back at me and grinned broadly. "We all call him 'Mule,' Mr. Andrews. Don't worry about him. He's only here to protect me from bullies."

"I said I wouldn't pay. Now what, little man? Are you going

to threaten my dear wife again?"

Ricci stood up, briskly placing the notebook back in his jacket. "No threats this time, Mr. Andrews. We don't have to operate that way. Sooner or later you will have to pay your bills. It's costing you twenty percent a month now. You are foolish not to pay when due."

I wanted to throw the little bum out, but the bigger bum stepped in the way and I don't think I could have managed him without a bulldozer and a crane. When they left, I followed them out to the parking lot and got their license number, then called the police again. After work I went back to the station and spoke to Lieutenant Nelson. He was very pleasant and extremely apologetic. He told me that the police had not been able to get a unit out to the school in time because all of them had urgent business elsewhere or were being repaired. The police just did not seem to be able to find Tony Ricci in Center City or elsewhere. I finally got the message. The police were never going to be able to find him.

"Lieutenant Nelson," I said, carefully choosing my words, "suppose I make a citizen's arrest of this elusive person? Will you lock him up for me?"

"Certainly, Mr. Andrews. You

bring him in and we'll lock him up for you."

"Then what will happen?"

A film seemed to pass over the officer's eyes and the room temperature dropped several degrees. Nelson cleared his throat and looked out the window. He was choosing his words carefully, too.

"A lawyer from Ricci, Incorporated will have him out on the street about an hour after you bring him in, if it takes that long. When the complaint gets to hearing, the case will probably be dropped for lack of evidence."

"Or lack of a complaining witness?"

Nelson looked at me. His face was blank and composed, like a good poker player with a pat hand. "You said that, Mr. Andrews. I didn't."

"You've just been polite to me, haven't you, Lieutenant? We've been going through the motions."

"We have to be courteous to war heroes, Mr. Andrews. We don't have very many in Center City."

"What would have happened if I hadn't been a war hero?"

"You would have gotten the message much faster than you have. Much faster."

"I had one of your daughters in a civics class last year. Does she know that the cops in this city are on the take?"

That was hitting below the belt, but Lieutenant Nelson didn't flinch. His expression became flat and cold. "Don't push too much, war hero. You have a lot to lose."

We stared at one another for a time. Then I stood up. "I admire your forbearance, Lieutenant. You've been very patient with me, and I have been a little dense. I just couldn't believe that this kind of crap could exist in Center City."

Lieutenant Nelson started looking out the window again, and I left. On the way out I stopped at the front desk and withdrew my complaint against Tony Ricci. I didn't like being absurd in writing.

A week later the exodus began. One by one, all of my store owners phoned and told me to remove my machines by the end of the month. I tried arguing with a few of them in person, appealing to their sense of civic duty and telling them not to take orders from hoodlums, but it was useless. Only one of them would even discuss the matter, and he stopped me cold.

"Young man," he said, "you are talking about \$200 a month for you. You're talking about a sideline. For me, it's my whole livelihood. I have a wife and three teenage daughters. They are all fair game to those sharks. Leave me alone. I will do exactly what they tell me to do and thank God they

don't ask for more," he told me.

I stopped arguing and left him alone. Instead, I took a trip down to the offices of Ricci, Incorporated. The outfit wasn't in Center City. It was much too big for that. It occupied the entire eighth floor of the Hildreth Building up on the Sunset Strip, a big, plush operation that evidently went far beyond anything in Center City. As a matter of fact, the first receptionist I talked to had never even heard of Center City. She almost fainted when I said I wanted to talk to the president of the firm, and told me that no one ever talked to him without an appointment—and they never made any appointments for him. Tony Ricci she had not heard of, either.

I was waiting in the outer chambers for an appointment with a Mr. Brennan, who apparently had heard of Center City, when a powerful hand grabbed me by the shoulder. I thought the Mule had been summoned to exterminate me, and I went into a defensive crouch, then stood up again. It was Johnny Rich, and he hugged me like a long lost brother.

"What are you doing here, kid?" he bellowed, pounding me on the back with his attaché case.

I stepped back and stared at him. "Do you work here, Johnny?"

"I peddle some insurance to these

bums, Marty. It's a big account. My offices are in Beverly Hills. You got a beef with this outfit?"

We ducked out to the nearest bar, and I described my beef in detail over a couple of beers. He told me he was amazed to hear it, that he knew Ricci, Incorporated was a legitimate organization. He rattled off a long list of businesses they operated, some of which I had heard of. They ranged from hotels to hamburger stands to supermarkets. We had another beer, then he went on his way, and I went back to the eighth floor to get absolutely nowhere.

I had my appointment with Mr. Brennan, who informed me that he had never heard of Tony Ricci and that their only investment in Center City was a supermarket they were in the process of selling. He was very frosty on the subject of coin-operated vending machines, and said his company never dabbled in penny-ante operations.

I left, completely discouraged, and drove home convinced that I was now the unhappy owner of \$15,000 worth of vending machines that I was going to have to store in a garage until I unloaded them.

Two days later, the phone calls began again. My store owners all said they had reconsidered and were going to keep my machines after all, and that in the future they

wanted only ten percent of my gross instead of the former twenty percent. When I asked who had called them, they all dummied up. They were extremely respectful and treated me as if I were some kind of a large bomb that was about to go off.

I settled back and began raking in the extra profits, waiting for the ax to fall, but Tony Ricci never made any more calls on me. Then the ground dropped out from under me when I received a phone call from Mr. Martindale, the owner of the independent market who had refused to place one of my machines on his premises. He told me the answer was still no, and that he did not do business with gangsters.

"Neither do I, Mr. Martindale," I said brightly. "Who asked you to?"

He ignored my question and went on with his tirade. "I think it a crime that our children should have as a teacher a member of that filthy mob, and I want to warn you I intend to expose you at the next meeting of the Board of Education. I've already been to the police, and I will go to the Board on Thursday. If they won't do anything about you, I'll go to Sacramento and complain to the State Board of Education. Children should not be exposed to vermin like you."

I guess I was being naïve again, if not just plain stupid. I thought Martindale was imagining things and that he was just an old crackpot whom I'd rubbed the wrong way. If I had sat down and thought it through, I should have realized that when he went to the police in Center City with a complaint against me, he was walking on paper-thin ice.

Mr. Martindale went for a walk that evening with his dog, a large German shepherd. The dog was found later in a ditch on the outskirts of town, shot through the head, but Mr. Martindale was never seen again.

That was the first mistake they made. They should have kept it a simple, local murder. Their buddies on the police force could have handled that nicely for them. As it was, when the dawn finally came to Simple Marty and I realized that Johnny Rich had practically inducted me into the syndicate, I went to the F.B.I., and nobody handles those boys except J. Edgar and perhaps the President.

They were interested in my case. I was turned over to two agents, Theodore Wilson and Anthony Ricco. I commented on the coincidence of names.

"It's not as big a coincidence as it may seem, Andrews," Ricco replied. "My specialty is the brother-

hood, and I particularly enjoy putting compadres like Tony Ricci into federal penitentiaries. I usually get to be the arresting officer when that good time comes. My name goes out on the news releases."

The two agents went over the entire case meticulously with me. They decided that when Martindale had been missing for seven days that federal jurisdiction would be established and they would be able to intervene openly. They were absolutely ecstatic at my mention of Johnny Rich. All Johnny was, it seems, was the son of the capo, or chieftain, of the entire California operation.

"What was he doing in the American Army?" I blurted.

"They serve their time just like anyone else," Ricco said. "I believe John Rich volunteered; that is, he asked the draft board to draft him. I guess those boys figure they have to protect their investment in this country. They have a big one. They like the G.I. benefits, too. It's good business for them."

I was warned that, even though I saved the life of the son of a capo, when I started talking to the F.B.I. the brotherhood's gratitude began dissolving. The two agents wanted to take me out into the desert and bury me, but I couldn't agree to that. I went back to work and nothing happened to me.

Nothing happened for a week, that is. Then, one balmy spring afternoon, I hopped into my beat-up old Chevy and started home after school, and felt something ice cold at the base of my skull.

"Don't look back, chum," a voice said behind me. "Keep your eyes on the road. Get on the San Diego Freeway and head for Bakersfield. Don't try anything desperate. A man just wants to talk to you. This time, that's all it is, just talk. You're being handled with kid gloves."

I drove onto the Freeway and headed north. When we passed San Fernando, I was told to leave the Freeway and drive west. When the road became very deserted, I was ordered to stop. A car which had been following closely swung in and stopped behind us, and the Mule stepped out to join the party. The two blindfolded me and transferred me to the back seat of the other car. We drove a few miles more on the highway, then swung off to the right on a gravel road. After a few minutes of smelling horses and listening to the tires crunch on gravel, the car stopped. I was hustled inside an air-conditioned house and the blindfold was removed.

I found myself inside a large airy livingroom furnished like a ranch house should be if the owner raises horses as a hobby. I was brought

before a seated dignitary who looked like my idea of a Latin American diplomat. He also looked like an old, gray and somber Johnny Rich.

"I am Salvatore Ricci," he said. The name was foreign but the accent was as American as blueberry pie, the kind they make in the Bronx.

Behind him and to his left was Tony Ricci, smiling brightly at me, like a shark at a mackerel.

"This is my nephew, Anthony," the old man said.

"We've met," I said tersely, deciding to play the war hero to the hilt. I glanced over to the right of Mr. Ricci, and there was my old army buddy, Johnny. "I met him, too," I said. Johnny had a glass in his hand and he raised it to me with a hearty grin. I didn't feel like smiling back at him.

"You have met him. You saved his life with a very brave action, young man, and for that my family is grateful to you. For that reason you are alive today."

"Well, I'm glad that being a war hero has some advantages, Mr. Ricci. It didn't seem to help me very much when I tried to earn an honest dollar in one of your fiefdoms."

He only blinked, as if at a gnat, but the two goons behind me grabbed me. I had just spoken disrespectfully to a man who never

heard people talk to him in anything but hushed tones.

He shook his head slightly. "Let him go, boys. He does not know any better."

"Thank you, Mr. Ricci," I said, and looked over at Johnny. "Hello, old buddy. How's the insurance business?"

Mr. Ricci, senior, frowned. "My son has an excellent and legitimate agency," he said stiffly.

"I'll bet he has, especially with the sales force he can throw at a customer."

"I did not bring you here to have you insult my son in my presence. You were brought here to be warned. You deserve this courtesy because of your previous service to my family. You must leave the United States for at least a year until the federal authorities drop this Martindale business. You can leave today and send for your family later. All of you will be provided for generously."

"What's the alternative, Mr. Ricci?"

"Don't be silly, Mr. Andrews," he snapped.

"There is only one alternative, isn't there?"

"Don't be a fool, young man."

"Even though I saved the life of a capo's son?"

"Our organization will protect itself."

"And who gets to do the honors if I don't decide to go along with you?"

"That is why my son is here. You are his responsibility."

I glanced again at Johnny. He toasted me again with a little half smile.

"This is what we were fighting for in Vietnam, isn't it, old buddy, so that your father and his relatives could continue to operate his little criminal kingdom back home in the States. You know what the commies would do with a crook like him. There'd be no hiding behind the Fifth Amendment. They'd line him up in front of a firing squad."

That was too much for them. The Mule spun me around and slapped me with a hand full of knuckles. I tasted blood. The other gorilla grabbed me and spun me back in his direction. He tried to knee me, but forgot he had a gun in his hands. While we were playing footsie, I grabbed it and turned it on Mr. Ricci.

The old man blinked again. I said nothing, just made sure the safety was off on the big forty-five. He got the message.

"We will have to let Mr. Andrews go now, gentlemen. Let him back out the door and take a car."

"Johnny goes with me as a hostage, old man. You know how that

works, don't you? They probably covered that in your Mafia basic training course."

We suffered through a long, slow pause, then the old man caved in and nodded. John and I walked out of the door and he drove me away in about eight thousand dollars' worth of automobile.

When we got out of artillery range, Johnny threw me a cold, bitter glance and spoke. "All bets are off, now, Marty. You and I are square. We're even."

"Which means I'm just another lousy American square to you."

"That's right. Just another sucker."

"And to get what you want, you'll go after me and my family?"

"You just said it, buster. You figured it out all by yourself."

I started to laugh. I couldn't help myself, and this really bugged him.

"What the hell is cracking you up?"

"I just don't understand you people. I don't get you at all. You don't expect anyone to fight back. You're like the Nazis in World War II. You think you have some sort of monopoly on aggression."

"I don't get you," he snapped.

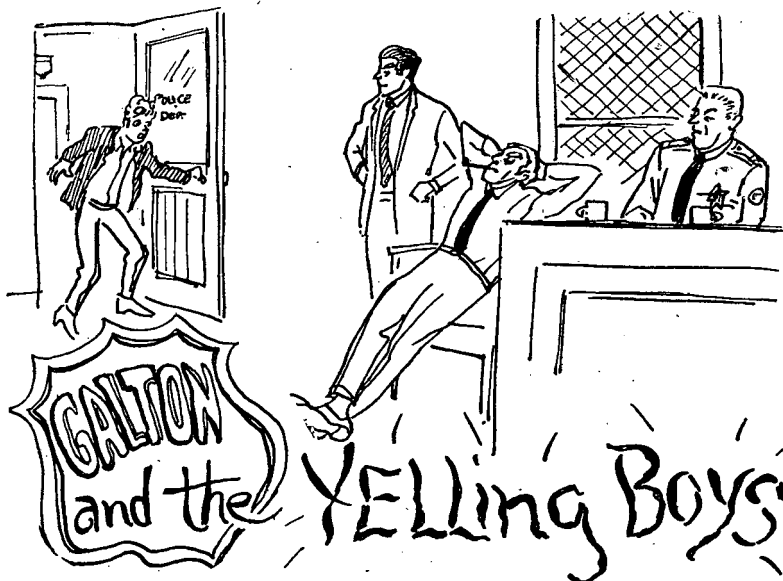
He really didn't get me. He thought I was going to let him drive me home to wait for the goons to hunt me down. I took him instead into the Rampart Street Di-

vision headquarters of the L.A.P.D. When they heard my story they sent for the F.B.I., who transferred Johnny to a federal jail. They moved me and my family to a small town in Arizona until his trial. I left my job, my new home, and my string of stamp machines behind and never saw any of them again.

I testified at several trials the federal prosecutors set up during the next year. Ricci, senior, was sent back to his home country, where he was not wanted and was locked up. Johnny was packed off to Folsom Penitentiary for fifteen years, along with several of his business associates. With the help of the government, I went to live in another state under a new name so the vultures couldn't avenge themselves on me, my wife, or my little boy.

So I'm not the local war hero anymore, but I don't miss it a bit. What I did to Johnny and his organization on that balmy spring day in smoggy Southern California was a far, far better thing than kicking a hand grenade out of a Vietnam rice paddy. I never got a medal for it, just a short thank-you note from J. Edgar, himself. I sent Johnny a photocopy of it and a carton of cigarettes on the first anniversary of his conviction. I plan to do this every year.

Human nature being what it is, the quiet that comes to a policeman is a bubble.



HUMAN NATURE," said Mike Galton, the captain of detectives, "is the key to man's universe. And," the old man went on, "if you want my opinion, a good, experienced cop knows more about human nature than a good, experienced psychiatrist."

Detective Bill Dennis, his young sidekick, said, "Oh, come on, Cap. That's stretching it a little."

They were having coffee with the

desk sergeant and it was a mild May night with a full moon up. "I think he's right, Bill," the sergeant said.

"Given equal mentalities, of course," the old man cautioned. "But the reason I say that is because the opportunities are so great. We routinely encounter examples of human behavior the average man couldn't imagine, and psychiatrists have only read about."

The others couldn't gainsay that and were silent a moment, reflecting on personal experiences. Galton lighted his pipe and sat back enjoying the night. It had been a quiet one, with the citizens, for the most part, behaving themselves. There'd been a complaint of a fight over in the east end of town, but it was a husband and wife, and the appearance of a patrolman stopped it. There'd been a complaint south of City Park about a car full of boys telling it up, yelling and honking, but they were gone by the time the radio car went by. Even the missing child, reported by a frantic mother at six o'clock, had turned up fifteen minutes later. Violence had not gone abroad that night. The natives

by Hillary Waugh

weren't restless and the police on duty could relax over their coffee, talk about non-cop things, and let the softness of the night steal through the open doors.

Then there was a screech of brakes, the slamming of a car door, and the clatter of racing feet on the outside steps. Galton sighed with regret, for the sounds told him peace was at an end even before the youth burst through the door-

way and rushed up to the desk.

He was about nineteen, tall, with curly hair and good quality clothes. The clothes, however, were a mess, and so was his face. He was panting, and he looked in shock.

"Help me," he said, looking first at the detectives, then to the uniformed sergeant behind the big desk. "You gotta help me."

"That's what we're here for," the sergeant said easily. "What's the problem?"

"Three men!" the boy panted. "They kidnapped my girl."

"Whereabouts?"

"City Park. Hurry, hurry."

"We will," the sergeant said. "Relax, young fella. Calm down and tell us your name."

"But she's in trouble."

"And when we hear your story we'll know what to do about it. What's your name?"

The boy said impatiently, "Lawrence Wainwright."

"Where do you live?"

"Is that important? My girl—"

"You're wasting time, fella. What's your address?"

The boy told him, giving an address in one of the best sections of town.

"Now tell us what happened," the sergeant went on, writing in the blotter, keeping his manner calm.

"We were parked in the park,

minding our own business, when all of a sudden three men appeared and dragged us out of the car. I tried to fight them, but they ganged up and knocked me out. And when I came to, they were gone and she was gone."

"When did this take place?"

"About twenty minutes ago. About quarter of eleven."

"What's the girl's name and address?"

"What does it matter?" the boy cried. "We've got to save her."

"We'll save her just as soon as we know she needs saving. What's her name and where does she live?"

"Her name is Helen MacKenzie and she lives over on Wells Street. Thirty-one Wells."

Galton moved behind the desk and thumbed through the phone book as the sergeant recorded the information and asked where the youth had seen the girl last.

"In City Park. I told you."

"It's a big park, Mr. Wainwright. Just where in City Park?"

"Near the pond."

"That doesn't help much. It's a big pond."

"I've got my car outside. I'll show you."

Galton dialed a number and while he waited, said, "Did you know any of the men, Mr. Wainwright?"

"No. Of course not. Please, we're

wasting time. Can't we go now?"

Galton said into the phone, "Mrs. MacKenzie? This is Captain Galton of the police department. I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour. Is your daughter Helen there, please?" He listened briefly, his face becoming still more sober. "What's the name of the boy she's out with?" he asked, and then, "Do you know where they went?" He listened for a bit and said, "When she comes in, would you have her call the police department? The moment she comes in. It doesn't matter what time." What he spoke again, it was to say, reassuringly, "No, she's not in trouble with the police, Mrs. MacKenzie. She hasn't done anything wrong. We just want to get in touch with her."

He put down the phone and said to Dennis and the sergeant, "It checks out and she's not home yet." To the boy, he said, "These men. What did they look like?"

"Two were dark and one was blond. They were my height but heavier."

"How old?"

"Maybe twenty."

"What were they wearing?"

"Sport clothes. Dark sport clothes. No jackets."

Galton's manner was brisk now. He took out a notebook. "Tell us exactly what happened."

The boy touched the blood on his

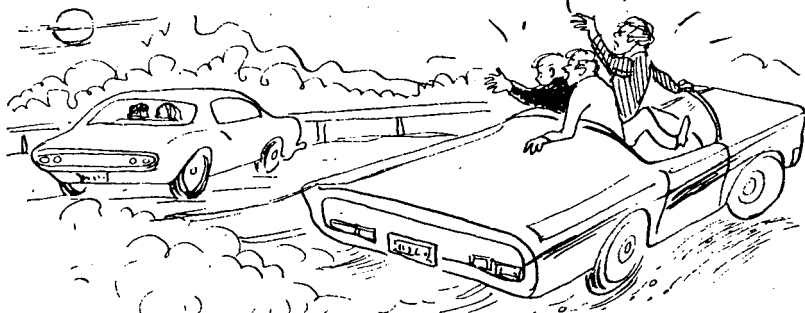
cheek and absently wiped it on his shirt. "We were parked in the park doing a little—you know—smooching. All of a sudden I looked up and two men were staring at us through her window. Then, before I could do anything, they opened her door and at the same time the third man opened my door. He grabbed me and the others grabbed Helen. I fought with the one who grabbed me, but one of the others

racing past us with three boys in it yelling and screaming. I think they were the same ones."

The desk sergeant said, "Say, that's the car we got a call on, Captain."

Galton turned. "When? What about?"

"We got a complaint." The sergeant looked back on the blotter. "Nine forty-two. Call from a Mrs. Stanley Turner on Westlake Ave-



came and hit me and they both jumped on me and knocked me down and kicked me unconscious."

"What did Helen do? She scream?"

"No. I think they had a hand over her mouth. I heard her say, 'Stop it! Don't!' but that's all."

"You know if they had a car?"

"I think they did. I think they're the same men we saw when we went into the park."

The old man arched an eyebrow. "Tell us about that."

"Just when we were driving in, this cream-colored convertible went

nue about a light-colored convertible with three boys in it driving around her neighborhood yelling and honking and raising hell. I sent Charlie car to respond, but they were gone."

Galton nodded. "Better alert all units." He said to the boy, "You didn't make the license plate, did you? Or notice what make of car?"

"No, sir. I just saw the three boys in it. Two dark and one blond."

Galton took a last swallow from his cup. "All right, we'll go out and take a look around. You feel up to it, son? Would you like some cof-

fee?" he asked the boy solicitously.

"No, thanks. I'm all right."

"You'd better have a doctor look at your face."

"Later. Right now I want to find my girl."

Dennis finished—his own coffee and tucked away his notebook. He and Galton led the way outside. A shiny new hardtop was against the curb with the lights on and the boy started toward it, but Galton stopped him. "We'll go in ours. It's got a radio."

They climbed into a black, unmarked cruiser, the detectives in front, the boy in back. They headed for the park, watching for convertibles. Dennis, driving, said, "What were you and the girl doing in the car?"

Wainwright hesitated and said, "A little necking."

"How were you making out with her?"

"Believe me, it's not what you think."

Galton said, "What was it?"

"We were kissing. That's all."

The detectives slid knowing looks at each other. Galton said, "You pick her up and take her out in the park and all you do is kiss?"

Wainwright swallowed. "No," he said. "We also talk. We sit and we talk and sometimes we kiss. When those men looked in the window, we were kissing."

"What kind of a girl is she?"

"A nice girl."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Well—what do you mean? I date her."

"What I mean is, she comes from another part of town. She comes from a different social station than you do. I'm not saying it's this way in your case, but usually when men date girls below their social class, it's for only one reason."

Wainwright said heatedly, "I'm not a snob. We happen to like each other. We've talked about marriage, if you really want to know. I mean, we aren't formally engaged and we haven't said anything to our folks, but we're serious."

Galton didn't push it. "Any chance she knew the boys? She call any of them by name?"

Wainwright said no, nor had her abductors used names. They hadn't said a word.

Dennis turned into the park and followed its winding roads. He looked at the moon and said, "If a bunch of boys want to raid neckers, Cap, this is the night to find them."

When they drove past the pond, Wainwright pointed to a stand of trees, black against the moonlit sky. "That's where we were," he said.

Dennis pulled off the road and crossed the fields some fifty yards to the trees. They got out and the detectives looked around by flashlight.

Some grass had been flattened by wheels, but that was all.

Galton said, "You didn't see or hear anything before you saw them at the window? No car headlights? No motor?"

Wainwright shook his head. Dennis said, "They must have seen a girl in the car and doubled back with their lights off."

Galton agreed. He said, "In what direction did they drag her?"

Wainwright pointed toward black woods a hundred yards distant. "That way. At least, the last I saw."

"You see or hear a car any time after they slugged you?"

"No, sir."

Dennis said to the old man, "You think they might still be around?"

"It doesn't look like it. They probably took off after he did." Galton got back into the cruiser and picked up the microphone.

"Headquarters from Galton. The girl been heard from yet?"

The sergeant came on. "Negative."

"Anything on that convertible?"

"No, sir."

Galton depressed the mike button again and said, "Send all available units and all available men to City Park, the field opposite the pond. I want search parties prepared to go through the woods."

"Affirmative, Captain. All units.

Calling all units—" in a monotone.

When Galton got out of the car, the youth said, "You think she's in the woods?"

Galton's tone was heavier, his voice distracted. "I don't know where she is, son, but you say that's where she was dragged, so that's the first place to look."

The two detectives and the boy reconnoitered the nearby areas while waiting and then, shortly after midnight, the squad cars began arriving and men poured out. By quarter past twelve, thirty policemen were on hand with flashlights and hand lamps, and the headlights of the cars gave a daylight look to the fields.

The men spread out and broke into the woods in a row, tramping through, throwing the beams of the lights in all the shadowy areas, calling the girl's name at intervals, looking for signs of her passing. The youth hunted with Galton and Dennis, but they made him stay in back of them lest his inexperienced bumbling destroy a clue.

They pushed through briars and bushes and trees for a long five minutes and then, from far on the left, there came a shout. Galton, Dennis and the boy started in that direction following the others.

When they reached the spot, the other men were clustered and mumbling, heads and shoulders

bowed. The air was black and electric.

"You find her?" the old man said, pushing through.

"We found her."

They stepped aside so Galton, Dennis and the youth could see.

It was a sad and ugly sight. The young girl lay dead and cold under a tree. Her pants were down, her skirt was up and her blouse and bra were off. Her once-pretty head was bloody and broken, and a red-stained rock, wrenched from the nearby earth, lay beside her.

The boy said, "No! Oh, God, no!" and turned away moaning. Dennis muttered a prayer under his breath, the captain shook his head and sighed.

"I was afraid of that," the old man muttered. "When she still wasn't home, I was afraid." He turned away and, with head down, started back. Dennis, the distraught youth and the searchers followed.

At the car they gathered around as Galton radioed in. The girl was dead, he reported heavily. The medical examiner was to be notified, the photo lab and the morgue. He got out of the car again, closed the door and leaned an elbow on the roof. He shook his head once, straightened a little and took a breath. "All right," he said wearily to the boy, "tell us what happened."

The boy said, "I did tell you."

The old mouth tightened and the tone grew firmer. "Tell it again, son. But this time tell it right."

The youth, glancing nervously at the large group of encircling men, said querulously, "What do you mean by right?"

"Tell it the way it really happened."

"I don't get you."

"You know, like this. You brought the girl into the park and a car with three yelling boys went by. You pulled off and parked under these trees. You took the girl down into the woods and started to pitch woo. Only she didn't want to go as far as you did and she tried to fight you off. But you were determined and you hit her with a rock to quiet her down, only, when it was all over, you found out you'd hit her too hard and she was dead. So you remembered the car full of boys and then you came in and told us the boys had kidnapped her." The old man turned his light on the youth's face. "That's pretty close to what happened, isn't it?"

The stunned boy blinked in the glare. "No," he whispered, his face white. "It's like I told you. They grabbed her. They hit me . . ." He looked around desperately, but all the faces were cold and disbelieving.

The old man shook his head impatiently. "Do you think you're the first person who's ever tried to sell

the police a phony story? Do you think we can that easy? We get it all the time. All of us. I've heard so many phonies I could smell this one the moment you came in tonight. I hoped like hell you were telling the truth, but when she wasn't in by midnight, I was afraid you weren't."

The boy said heatedly, "You're crazy. I am telling the truth! I don't know what you've heard before, but this time you're wrong."

The old man snorted. "Are you kidding? All I have to do is look at her and look at you and I know the story's a lie. We all do."

"I defy you. What's not true about it? Show me what's not true!"

"The fact that you're alive and she's dead makes it not true."

He stopped and blinked in astonishment. "What's that got to do with it?"

Galton glanced helplessly at his grim-faced crew. "That's got everything to do with it," he explained to the boy. "Three guys, right? That's your story. There were three guys?"

"Yes."

"So what did they want? Did they want to kill people? Then why didn't they kill you both? That answer won't do. Did they just want to rape a girl? Then they'd mess you up to keep you from interfering. That's all right. But then they wouldn't kill the girl. They wouldn't do anything to her at all—outside of the rape, that is. She'd have gotten home alive."

"But she resisted! They hit her with the rock to subdue her!"

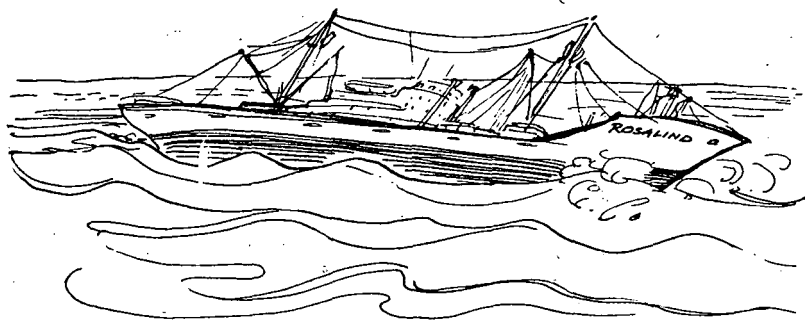
"Uh uh." Mike Galton shook his head. "One man, maybe. You, alone, might have to use a rock to have your way with her. But three men? What would they need rocks for? Two could hold her for the third so tight she couldn't move a muscle." The old man, studying the boy's face in the light, dropped the bitterness and said quietly, "Forget the fancy tales, son. That girl's body is going to be examined very, very carefully for physical evidence."

The boy's face crinkled suddenly and he started to sob.



The quality of glassiness is not necessarily affected by tempestuousness.

DEAD MARINE



WHEN the chief mate came down from his evening watch on the bridge, he knocked on the captain's door and stood holding it open by the knob. Captain Gerdir was sprawled in the easy chair at the after end of the cabin. On the little table at elbow level beside him were, along with odds and ends, a bottle and a glass half filled with whiskey, wedged by his portable radio.

"No increase in the wind, or the water in number two hold, Cap'n. The weather's still holding up."

"Fine!" Captain Gerdir lifted the glass and swallowed a mouthful of the liquor. He was a powerfully built man of sixty, with shaggy white hair and bushy eyebrows, his broad forehead creased with the tracks of past troubles.

"Cap'n, it won't be fine if we run into another gale."

"The weather forecasts are good, Mister."

"You can't always depend on them. We've got more than a week to go yet to Rotterdam. Another blow like the last one would about

finish this *Rosalind* ship—fast.”

“Then just hope we don’t get one.”

“What if we do?”

“We’ll pile off her. I’m keeping the Line advised on conditions. The *Florence* is only a few hours astern. She could soon reach us.”

“By the time she did, it might be too rough to put the boats over.”

Captain Gerdir stared up at the chief mate. Sloames was short and thin-faced, with a crooked nose and black darting eyes. He wore wrin-

by
Patrick
O’Keeffe

kled wash-and-wear khakis, without collar rank insignia.

“So?” demanded the captain.

“So why don’t you abandon ship now? She’s no longer seaworthy. Twelve feet of water in the fore peak, and it’s getting into number one; almost a twenty-degree list from shifted railway-iron cargo in number two and leaking from damaged hull plates; a shaky steering engine, which the chief said we’ll be lucky if it doesn’t break down again in another storm; the rudder—” The chief mate broke

off then, as if he need say no more.

“Go on,” snapped the captain.

“So why go on risking our lives for nothing, Cap’n?”

The captain’s big hand tightened around the whiskey glass. “For nothing, Mister?”

“For nothing,” repeated the chief mate. “If we’re lucky and don’t get another blow, we get ship and cargo to port and save the Line money, at the risk of our lives. What’ll we get out of it? What’ll you get out of it? A pat on the back, maybe.”

The captain’s steel-gray eyes flashed. “I’ll tell you what you’ll get, Mister, what we’ll all get. We’ll get our pay at the end of the voyage. That’s what you and the rest signed on for—in return for getting ship and cargo to any port within the limits set by the Articles. That’s what’s in it for all of us—pay for doing the job we signed on for.”

“With the understanding that safety of life comes first.”

“That still stands, Mister.”

“You wouldn’t be the first captain who waited too long and lost his ship with all hands.”

“I don’t intend to be another captain who didn’t wait long enough and had his abandoned ship towed in for a heavy salvage bill for the owners.”

“You should worry about that.

It would be a way of getting even."

The captain stared up at Sloames uncomprehendingly. "Me, getting even?"

"Why not? The Line has sold your ship from under you to the Aegean Shipping Syndicate, along with the rest of its ships. The first thing the Syndicate will do when this ship gets back to the home port is put her under a foreign flag. So after forty years with the Line, you'll be kicked out on the street, unless you want to stay on at one-third your present pay. Is that what you want to go on risking your life for—to watch a foreign flag run up on the stern?"

"Mister," said the captain tightly, "there's no foreign flag flying on this ship yet, and I'm not going to drag the one she now flies down into the bilges. I wouldn't do what you're wanting under any flag. Now get to hell out of my cabin and take your rotten stink with you."

The chief mate stood for a moment, unruffled. He glanced at the whiskey bottle on the little table, both aslant with the list, and seemed about to comment on it, but apparently decided not to. He turned in silence, and pulled the door shut behind him.

Captain Gerdir emptied the glass in one gulp. "Good Lord in Heaven!" he muttered, setting down the

glass. "What are they teaching them in school-ships in this day and age? To scuttle off the ship like rats before she's even started to sink?"

He had felt an instant dislike for his new chief mate when Sloames had joined the *Rosalind* a few days prior to sailing. Sloames had replaced the former chief mate, who had taken advantage of a berth with another steamship line, knowing that the *Rosalind* was to be sold to the Syndicate. Sloames, who was in his early thirties, had last been second mate of a tanker. Captain Gerdir judged him to be the kind of deck officer who shifted from one company to another, getting fired or else moving over to a line where more money was to be made, above-board or under. His first concern on reporting to Captain Gerdir had been the prospects of making plenty of overtime.

"Mister, you'll get every penny that's coming to you, but don't count on padding the overtime sheets here."

When Sloames should have been making himself familiar with the ship and her fittings, or keeping an eye on the loading and studying the stability tables, he had lounged in his cabin with a magazine or attended to personal correspondence. More than once Captain Gerdir had chased him out, telling him to get down the holds and see that the

stevedores were stowing those heavy tractors right and not pilfering the liquor shipments.

"So Crooked Nose thinks I should desert the ship to get even," muttered Captain Gerdir. "I wouldn't mind betting he thought up some little scheme to go along with it."

Captain Gerdir poured another drink. He regretted that Sloames had caught him in that weak moment during the first night out. Maybe that was what had given Sloames the notion he'd be willing to abandon ship. At the time, he'd been filled with the bitterness of knowing that the Line was selling out to the Syndicate. The words of the Marine Superintendent had still been searing his mind:

"It's either the Syndicate or running the ships into bankruptcy and the creditors taking a licking," the superintendent had said. "The Line can't compete with foreign-flag ships without a Government subsidy, and we don't qualify for one. It's a matter of stark economics."

It was tough on captains like him, the superintendent had continued; men who had served their cadetship with the Line, and especially since the pension plan for captains would be another casualty. Of course, after all these years, he had no doubt put a little aside . . .

Of course he'd put a little aside,

Captain Gerdir had reminded himself mournfully. But there had been two boys to put through college, both of them now dead in Vietnam; keeping his wife alive, first in a hospital and then in a private nursing home for terminal cases, with nurses around the clock to the end. Now he was alone and down to bare salary, soon to end unless he accepted a two-thirds cut.

It was in that depressed and melancholy mood on the first night out that he had taken the loaded pistol from his desk drawer and was raising it to his head when Sloames had suddenly knocked and opened the door.

Sloames had stood silent for a moment, staring at the gun, and then casually reported that the barometer was dropping and the wind veering. After receiving a nod in acknowledgement, he had withdrawn without a word. Sloames must surely have shut the door in hope of hearing a shot that would have raised him to command of the *Rosalind*.

Captain Gerdir gulped down his drink and picked up the bottle again. There was barely another mouthful left. He drained it into the glass and then held the oblong-sided bottle of his favored brand at arm's length, speculating. How many was that he'd killed since sailing day? Almost a carton maybe—

much more than usual—but the liquor had helped to keep him from brooding and perhaps blowing his brains out. Still, he'd better go easy. If anything went wrong, Crooked Nose was sure to say the captain was drunk all the time; if Sloames found him drunk, he might tell the crew the captain was incapable and he was taking over and ordering the ship abandoned.

The captain ponderously raised his huge form out of the easy chair and crossed the sloping deck to an open porthole. The ship was rising and falling gently in the dying ground swell left by the storm. He heaved the bottle across the narrow deck outside and into the sea.

Another dead marine, he mused, gazing out at the undulating surface. He wondered idly how empty liquor bottles floating in the sea came to be known as dead marines—and why only by seafarers? Nobody finding one washed ashore ever reported it as a dead marine.

The mild spring weather of variable easterly winds and dull skies continued; the smooth mounds of the ground swell leveled out to a leaden sea. When Captain Gerdir appeared on the bridge early one morning, the chief mate spoke resentfully of the weather.

"The Line's pretty lucky it's holding up."

"And luckier still that you weren't in command, Mister."

"It would have been a lot luckier for all hands if I had been. I could have made a big thing out of this half-wrecked ship."

"I'll bet you could. Scuttling off the ship with a suitcase full of gold wristwatches and other loot from the special-cargo locker."

"Chicken feed!" sniffed Sloames. "This is the biggest chance I've ever missed out on. You could have pulled it off and still got ship and cargo to port, if that's all that bothers you."

The captain's bushy eyebrows lowered in a sidewise glance at the chief mate. "Maybe I'm stupid, Mister. Suppose you tell me."

"Simple. When the gale eased up enough, you could have ordered the ship abandoned, saying you were afraid she'd capsize. So we stuck around in the boats, waiting to be picked up. The ship doesn't capsize. The weather gets better, instead of rough again as you'd expected. So you order all hands back aboard. We'd have been entitled to full salvage, because you'd abandoned ship with no intention of going back. We'd all have been sitting pretty now."

Captain Gerdir, staring out beyond the foc'sle head, its rails bent and twisted like lead pipes from the recent gale, did not reply.

Sloames, mistaking the silence for interest, continued.

"So as to boost the amount of the salvage award, you could have written up a pretty strong log report to make it seem we had a tough time getting her back into shape and keeping her afloat. I figure from the worth of this ship with cargo and freight, you could have cleaned up as much as five to ten thousand dollars for your cut of the award. Maybe," Sloames hinted cautiously, "it could still be put over."

Captain Gerdir turned furiously on the chief mate. "So that's what was at the back of your sleazy mind the other evening. Let me tell you, Mister, that kind of money would stink worse than bilge sewage. People like you, scheming to make a fast buck—graft, bribes, kickbacks, payola—you're rotten, the whole stinking crowd of you."

"Cap'n," said the chief mate sorrowfully, "you're out of the swim. Everybody does it. Everybody gets what he can while the going's good. Get yours now, before the Line folds and dumps you on the beach. What you got to lose?"

The captain's eyes blazed. "So that's your alibi—everybody does it. That makes it right. Well, let me tell you, Mister, everybody doesn't do it. I, for one, don't do it. I never sold ship's stores. I never took a cut on slop-chest sales to the crew. I

never took kickbacks. I never signed for ship's stores not delivered. I never signed a false statement for some shyster lawyer with a phony claim against the Line for some crew member who fell off the gangway because he was drunk. And I'm not going to start now to fill your slimy pockets."

The captain paused for breath. The chief mate stared out over the smooth sea and shrugged.

"You want to know what I've got to lose, Mister?" the captain said. "I could name it with a single word, but you wouldn't get it. You'd be able to spell it. You'd be able to pronounce it. You'd be able to find it in any dictionary. But that's as far as it would get with you. That word could be honesty, or integrity, or honor. They're just a bunch of letters to you and the whole stinking lot of your kind. But I'm going to show you what honesty means. I've been looking through your overtime sheets. I tore them up. Now put in honest ones."

While insults had run off Sloames like rain from an oilskin coat, the attack on his payoff roused him to fury. "You can't do that. I'll take it up with the Shipping Commissioner, with the Union. That's all legitimate overtime. I put in plenty of hours during that gale."

"Much of it not allowable as

emergency work. You want overtime for helping to save your own skin, Mister? You want pay for the time you spent in your bunk?"

"I worked long hours to save ship and cargo," shouted Sloames. "Taking soundings, rigging life-lines, lashing deck cargo, hammering back washed-out hatch wedges, shoring the railway iron. If you try to stop a single hour of that overtime, you whiskey-guzzling old robber, I'll—"

"You'll what, Mister?"

"You'll see."

The chief mate strode angrily toward the other wing of the bridge, a patchwork of lumber where it had been carried away during the storm. The captain turned and went through the wheelhouse and down to his cabin. The helmsman glanced curiously at his flushed face as he passed. Charging into his cabin, Captain Gerdir flung himself into the easy chair and half filled the whiskey glass at his side. He tossed off a mouthful and set the glass down with almost enough force to shatter it.

"Whiskey-guzzling old robber!" he fumed. "I'm going to make him remember that."

From among the odds and ends on the little table, Captain Gerdir picked up the pad and pencil he had been using when checking the chief mate's overtime sheets. For

later reference he had marked on the pad a number of hours that were clearly not payable as overtime, but which he had decided to allow, and to argue for them with the Line's payroll office if necessary. He crossed out the entire list.

"We'll see what he'll do about that," he muttered.

Two days later, the radio officer delivered a special storm warning. A disturbance was moving down from Iceland, and winds of full gale force were forecast for the Eastern North Atlantic. The ship's barometer was falling, the wind freshening. Captain Gerdir gave the radio officer a message addressed to the Line, and another to the sister ship *Florence*. He then summoned the chief mate and the chief engineer to his cabin. He read out the weather report, underscored by the moan of the rising wind audible through an open porthole.

"You're both of you well aware of the ship's condition," the captain said gravely. "Listing almost twenty degrees and taking water, steering engine undependable, rudder jamming. I think the ship's got a good chance to weather the storm, but I'm not going to gamble lives on it. If the steering engine broke down again and she broached to, a further shift of cargo could capsize her. The *Florence* is the nearest ship. I've radioed her. She ought

to be in sight shortly after noon. I've also advised the Line."

"The ship is to be abandoned and left a derelict?" queried the chief mate.

"That's right, Mister."

Sloames glanced significantly at the bespectacled chief engineer before replying. "Maybe she'll weather the storm, as you say, Cap'n. So maybe you'll radio the Line when we're aboard the *Florence* and say we'd all be willing to be put back here if she did. It would pay the Line to order the *Florence* to ride out the gale hove to and put us back aboard instead of leaving her wide open for some other ship to salvage."

"That would be right up your alley, wouldn't it, Mister? You wouldn't be risking your skin for nothing."

"I figure there won't be much risk aboard this ship if she comes through the gale unmanned. She'll show she's more seaworthy than I think now. All the rest of the hands would figure that too. Also," Sloames added viciously, "what we'd get out of it would be decided by an admiralty court, not by over-time sheets approved by the master."

"That's what you think, Mister."

The *Florence* appeared on the horizon shortly after one o'clock. The wind had increased, and an

occasional whitecap spilled over. Captain Gerdir stood on the bridge watching the crew gather abreast the two starboard lifeboats, coming along the tilted deck clutching small handbags or bundles containing valuables or treasured possessions.

The second mate's crowded boat was the first lowered and under way. Captain Gerdir watched it pulling downwind toward the gray-funneled *Florence*, swaying gently in the light chop about a quarter of a mile distant. When the chief mate's boat was almost ready to leave, Captain Gerdir went down to his cabin and sank into the easy chair, his legs tired and aching from long standing. He poured a drink of whiskey and sat waiting expectantly. Presently footsteps sounded through the open porthole from the deck outside. The chief mate, wearing a khaki-covered uniform cap and an orange-colored lifejacket, opened the door and looked in. His thin face filled with annoyance at the sight of the captain seemingly taking his time and relaxed with a drink beside him.

"The boat's ready, Cap'n."

"Shove off, then." The captain nodded toward a briefcase lying beside the door. "Take that along. All ship's papers are in it."

The chief mate stared. "What

about you? What are you up to?"

"I'm staying, Mister."

Sloames looked dumbfounded.

"Are you crazy?"

"Maybe I am—by your way of thinking."

"You mean to go down with the ship? That damn-fool idea?"

"I don't mean to, Mister. I figure she's got a fair chance of coming through, even with the pumps stopped, if there isn't another shift in cargo. If she capsizes, tell the captain of the *Florence* I hope to be on a raft. If she doesn't, I'll be waiting to welcome you back—on my terms."

"So that's it!" Sloames cried in sudden fury. "Just for the satisfaction of spoiling me from picking up a little extra gravy, you'll risk your whiskey-soaked old neck."

"You've got me wrong, Mister. I'm staying because it's the duty of a ship's master to protect the interests of the ship's owners to the utmost. This is what I figure to be my utmost. As long as I'm aboard, even a whiskey-guzzling old robber like me, she's not strictly abandoned. No one can board her for salvage except on my terms. The Line knows I'm staying, so the *Florence* is sure to be ordered to stand by, riding out the storm. There'll be some gravy in it for you and all others who are willing to be put back aboard if this ship stays

afloat, but not the dishful you're aiming for. Not while I'm still here."

Sloames' narrow face contorted with rage. "You fanatical old fool! You'll be here, but with a difference. You'll be dead. The ship will be totally abandoned. I'll do what you didn't have the guts to do yourself."

Sloames rushed across to the captain's desk and whipped open a drawer. He whirled about, gripping the pistol. Captain Gerdir had risen ponderously, half turned toward Sloames. Sloames fired blindly in his rage. In the next instant the third mate's voice floated through the porthole.

"Mr. Sloames, what happened—what's keeping you?"

Some nine months later, when the oil tanker *Ord Queen* tied up alongside the oil pier in Bayonne, two men boarded her and asked for the chief mate. Mr. Sloames, they were told, was still busy up forward seeing to the bow lines, and were shown to his cabin. When Sloames returned amidships several minutes later, he stopped short in the doorway. The two men rose from the settee, and one, a slim dark man, smiled and said, "You probably remember us—Jackson and Faber," indicating his light-haired companion.



"Sure. I remember you both," said Sloames, shaking off surprise and tossing a pair of work gloves onto the bunk. He dropped into a chair. The two men sank back on the settee.

"I hope you brought me some good news about the salvage award," Sloames said eagerly. "It's high time the admiralty court settled the claim."

"We came about Captain Gerdir's death," said Jackson.

"I thought that was all settled."

"Not quite. There's a little tidying up to be done."

Sloames grinned. "You FBI boys don't like to leave any Irish pennants hanging in a case, I suppose."

Jackson smiled. "That's a neat way of putting it nautically. I've picked up a few such sayings while on this case. However, to get on with the matter, you stated at the inquiry that Captain Gerdir had been depressed over the sale of his ship to the Syndicate, and had been drinking heavily from the start of

the voyage. Also that on the first evening out, you came upon him at his desk with a gun in his hand, as though contemplating shooting himself. Next morning you expressed a fear to the second mate that the captain would kill himself before the end of the voyage."

Sloames nodded. "And the second mate wondered what we could do to stop him. 'Not much,' I told him. If we'd hidden his gun, he could have jumped overboard."

"Quite so. You stated that when you went to the captain's cabin at the time of abandoning ship, the captain was again standing with the gun in his hand. Also that he told you he had intended to shoot himself after he'd got ship and cargo safely to port, but now she was being abandoned, he wasn't going to delay any longer. You tried to dissuade him, but when he heard the third mate's footsteps, he shot himself, as if afraid the two of you might overpower him. The third mate met you as you were coming out. You closed the door and told him sadly that the captain had just shot himself. You led him back to the lifeboat, saying that there was nothing to be done except give the captain a decent burial if the ship didn't sink."

Sloames nodded again. "That's exactly as I remember it."

"At the inquiry the chief engi-

neer stated that Captain Gerdir, when he called you and the engineer to his cabin to say he would abandon ship, gave no hint that he intended to kill himself, but did show some rancor toward you."

Sloames shrugged. "I told you why. I'd found him hard to get along with. I had a row with him about my overtime. When I told him I'd be willing to be put back aboard the *Rosalind* if she didn't go under, he got sarcastic about not risking my skin except for what there would be in it for me."

"When you boarded the *Rosalind* three days later, you went into the captain's cabin alone, while the other officers and crew went about clearing decks of wreckage and getting up steam. You took a bolt of canvas with you and sewed up the captain's body, ready for burial later in the day. You found the captain's body lying under the open porthole, although when you left the ship, it was lying in the chair where it had fallen."

"That's right. The chair had skidded along the deck during the storm and tipped over. You remember what a mess I told you the cabin was in, with shoes and seaboots, chairs, clothing from drawers that had shot out from under the bunk, scattered all over the place; the radio smashed, papers and books strewn about, and all

sopping wet from rain and seawater that had come through the porthole and flooded out the cabin."

"We now believe that Captain Gerdir's body didn't skid with the chair to where you found it. We believe he managed to walk as far as the porthole."

"Walk! With a bullet in his head?"

"Not all who are shot in the head die at once. There have been cases where the victim retained consciousness for a while, or recovered it, without being totally incapacitated. However, the bullet may have been in another part of the captain's body, a part unlikely to have been chosen for suicide, or into which it could have been fired only by another hand. No one but you ever saw the wound. You led the third mate away from the cabin after the shooting, and you went into it alone to sew up the body."

"Now you're talking crazy," said Sloames, paling. "You're as good as saying I shot Captain Gerdir."

"We have a note charging that you did."

"A note?" Sloames' eyes darted from Jackson to Faber, who was

following the exchanges in silence.

"Before we go any further," said Jackson, "I wish to inform you of your rights. You—"

"Stow it. I know my rights. Tell me about the note."

"It was on the kind of paper used in note pads supplied to the *Rosalind*. There was a bloodstain on it. Scrawled in pencil were five words: 'Sloames shot me—Captain Gerdir.'"

Sloames jumped up. "It's a joke, a sick joke by someone with a twisted mind."

"The scrawl matches Captain Gerdir's handwriting. A thumbprint and a fingerprint compare with those on file with the Coast Guard."

"It was planted," shouted Sloames. "It was planted by the Syndicate. They're out to rob me of the salvage." Sloames stared down at the special agent. "Where did you find it?"

"It was found by a fisherman off the south coast of Ireland about six weeks ago. It was sealed inside an oblong-shaped whiskey bottle." Jackson smiled up at Sloames. "A dead marine."



Patience is said to compass anything and, presumptively, it does.



PROMISSORY NOTE

No. 2 \$ 14,000.00 value received,
J. Palmer 6 mo. of G. Long DOLLARS.
do promise to pay
Fourteen thousand and 00/100 Florida
at 1313 Lake Ave Miami Interest payable semi-
with interest thereon at the rate of 30 per cent. per annum and in case suit shall
annually. The maker and endorser of this note further agree to pay attorney's fees for
be brought for the collection hereof, or the same has to be collected annually, payable semi-
making such collection. Deferred interest payments to bear interest
annually. Palmer (Seal)
Due September 13 1920 (Seal)

THE OFFICE DOOR opened suddenly, which rather surprised Long since his secretary never entered without first checking on the intercom.

She closed the door and then stood against it, as though trying to hold it single-handedly against the Hun invasion. "I'm sorry, Mr. Long. It's Mr. Palmer again. He's

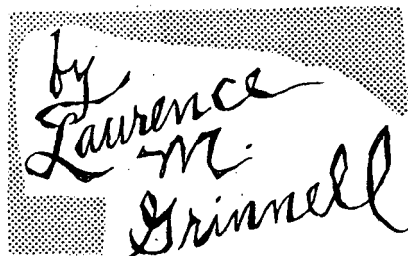
in the waiting room. I told him you were out for the day, but he said he was staying until you got back. He even brought a Thermos of coffee this time."

Before Long could answer, the door was suddenly thrust open and his secretary tumbled forward. The Huns had crossed the threshold.

"I knew your secretary must be mistaken," Palmer said. "Not only patience, but perseverance is its own reward." He stood tall and straight, with the door half open so the secretary could escape. He appeared older than when Long had last seen him, yet younger than one might expect of a man who had spent two years in prison.

"What do you want?" Long tried to control his voice to give the appearance of a man in command of the situation, while hiding his fear. There was no way of knowing exactly what Palmer had in mind.

"Only a business proposition," Palmer said, settling himself in a



chair facing Long across the desk. "I need a loan, a business loan."

"I'm a businessman, not a banker," Long snapped.

"You have the same sideline you had a couple of years ago, when you so kindly arranged a stake for me, and then so rashly demanded repayment."

"Your note came due at the end

of sixty days," Long answered defensively. "When you couldn't pay, we had to turn it over for collection."

"Yeah, to Tyson. Just when I stumbled across a job that would have meant real money, you wouldn't give me the time I needed to set it up." Palmer shrugged away the irritation that seemed to be building up. "I'm not here to discuss the past. It's the present and future that concern me."

Long relaxed slightly in his chair. Greed and curiosity were slowly winning the battle with caution. "What's your proposition?"

"There is an office for rent on the eleventh floor of the Shoreham Building. I checked again today and it is still available. I told the manager I would be back with the first month's rent."

"What's that got to do with me?"

Palmer smiled. "I thought I might go into the mail-order business, or maybe develop a line of advertising specialties, or something."

"Fine. I'm always happy to see an ex-convict go straight. Try one of the local banks, not me." Long had regained his composure and was firmly in command.

"An ex-con? You know the an-

swer to that one yourself. Your finance charges are a little stiff, but I appreciate your special relationship with Denning at the bank."

"All right, but you haven't interested me yet. Why should we want to invest in a mail-order business?"

"The office is located next to one occupied by a diamond cutter named Reising. Several times a year he receives a shipment from South Africa—diamonds, worth from fifty to a hundred thousand dollars."

"Jewelry again?"

"It's what I know best. It's the job I had in mind two years ago when you cut me short. I need seven, eight thousand to establish myself and I need it for six months. No sixty-day notes this time. I don't know how long it will take."

"And?"

"I thought you never wanted to know details," Palmer commented. "You said the last time that if the police ever came asking questions, you wouldn't know anything."

Long tried to play the role of a man seriously weighing a proposition. "I have my doubts about this, but I'll think about it. How can I reach you?"

"You won't have to. You and Denning are too greedy to turn down anything that smells of big

money. I will be back tomorrow."

Long sat silently, studying his fingernails closely after Palmer had left. Finally, he reached for the phone and signaled his secretary. "Please call Mr. Denning at the First National Bank, Alice."

Denning leaned back in his swivel chair and tugged at his earlobe, considering what Long had just told him. It reminded Long, watching from across the desk, of something out of an old Humphrey Bogart movie which, he thought, is probably where Denning picked up the mannerism.

"And what kind of a job is Palmer going to pull?" Denning asked.

"Well, I didn't—"

"You didn't ask?"

"You are always the one who says we're better off not knowing anything," Long protested. "If the police ask, we just loaned out some money and don't know anything."

"Yes, but I still would like to know what Palmer has up his sleeve."

"Why?" asked Long. "I borrow eight thousand from your bank for my business at six percent, and then loan it to Palmer at twenty-five or thirty percent, plus a percentage of his take. We're not even risking our own money."

"You aren't using your head,"

Denning said. "Think for a minute. Two years ago, Palmer came to us for money. We lent it to him, but before he could pull the job, the deal fell through. We asked him to pay, but he couldn't."

"Yes," Long interrupted, "but we sold his note to Tyson at fifty percent, which was still enough to cover my loan from the bank. We even made a slight profit."

"That's what I mean. Tyson sent some of his goons from the Domino Club to collect from Palmer, so Palmer planned a quick job, paid Tyson off, and a few days later got picked up by the police. He blamed us for forcing him into pulling a poorly planned job just to save himself from Tyson. Now he's out of prison a couple of weeks, and what does he do? He heads straight for us to try it all over again. Doesn't that strike you as curious?"

"He's an ex-con, but he still has to eat. What else is he going to do?"

"Maybe," Denning reflected. "What if he doesn't pay up?"

"Then we sell the note to Tyson again."

"And if he doesn't pay Tyson?"

"Then that's his problem."

"Have you ever thought he might have something else in mind? Some plan for getting back

at us? We better think about it."

Long stared at Denning. He had regarded Palmer as a threat when he first walked into the office, but had brushed the notion aside when Palmer started talking business. Now the idea was blooming again. "Well, if you think we shouldn't . . ."

Denning, however, was lost in his own thoughts. Finally, he came to a decision. "All right, we will give him seven thousand, but he signs a note for fourteen. After all, we're protected. I'm just giving you a loan for your business, and you're just helping an ex-con get a fresh start. You still had better keep an eye on him. I want to know what he is planning."

Thirty days after Palmer and Long had concluded their business, the latter called at the Shoreham Building and found Palmer Enterprises, next door to Reising's office on the eleventh floor. He learned little after entering, except that there was a receptionist named Ruth, a few pieces of office furniture, and that Palmer was out of the office on business for the rest of the afternoon. He looked into Palmer's private office, and at the wall which separated it from Reising's office. It looked too sturdy to break through, if that were Palmer's plan.

During the next four months,

he gathered one more fact, which he dutifully passed along to Denning. Palmer had been in contact with a man named Marchi, who was an expert in making fake jewelry. He'd had several arrests, but no convictions, and he had suddenly gone back into business.

"Interesting," was Denning's one-word reply.

"So what do we do now?" asked Long.

"Nothing. We just sit tight and wait, like Palmer is doing. And protect ourselves should it become necessary."

The waiting ended and the protecting began on the one hundred eightieth day of the life of the note. Palmer refused Long's demand to pay, or more precisely, asked for an extension, explaining that Reising had not received a delivery. Long was noncommittal.

On the one hundred eighty-first day, Long sold the note to Tyson for seven thousand dollars even. It would cover the principal of the loan he had taken with Denning's bank, but not the interest. Most of all, however, Long was glad to be done with it.

It was dark, on the evening of the hundred eighty-third day, when Long left his office building. Two men were waiting outside and they blocked his way.

"Mr. Tyson wants to see you,"

the taller of the two informed him.

"What's the matter?" Panic had raised the level of Long's voice.

Their only answer was to close in on either side of him and walk him to their car. They rode in silence a half dozen blocks and parked near the Shoreham Building. The elevator emptied them at the door of Palmer Enterprises.

Long, looking in, was surprised to see Tyson there with two of his men, along with Denning and, of course, Palmer. The latter greeted Long and motioned him to a chair.

"Okay," Tyson said to Palmer. "I've brought Denning and Long here, like you wanted. Now I want my money."

Palmer's answer was to lay out three packets of hundred-dollar bills. "Fourteen thousand, I believe, is what the note calls for." Palmer looked up at the others in the room.

"I could have paid you off a couple of days ago," Palmer said to Long and Denning, "but it seemed fitting to let you lose the profit on this deal, by selling the note to Tyson. It makes up a little for two years ago."

Tyson seemed confused but, with the money by his side, showed no concern. Long and Denning were both confused and concerned.

"Where did the money come from? You couldn't have pulled the job yet or we obviously wouldn't be sitting here."

"Oh, but I have." Palmer had been waiting for this moment for some time. "When I first got to prison, all I could think of was getting even with you two. It took time, but I finally cooled off. Why kill you and go right back to prison? Then I started thinking about the Reising job. I had some ideas but no plan."

"I needed an angle and I was playing around with the idea of substituting fake jewelry for the real stuff, but I didn't know how to make it work. A fellow I knew named Joe Marchi could make good stuff and fast. So I started reading everything I could find about jewelry, both real and fake."

"The more I read, the more a different plan began to take shape. It seemed to have less risk, and more money in the long run. I'm happy to say, I was right."

With that, Palmer pulled a check from his wallet and handed it to Long. "I promised you five per cent of the profit on the job

when the note came due. I'm afraid it's only a couple hundred dollars. Our expenses ran a little high during the first six months," he said, nodding toward Tyson.

"But you still haven't said where this money came from," Denning said.

"From Palmer Enterprises. Like I told you in the beginning, I wanted money to start a mail-order business. If I had shown up at your office, Denning, asking for a loan to start a business, you would have laughed me out of the bank. I knew I couldn't count on your warmheartedness, but I was confident about your greed," Palmer said.

"Actually, we've been doing pretty well. Marchi makes the imitation jewelry in his shop and we sell it by mail. In fact, we're thinking of expanding."

Palmer turned to Denning. "Which brings me to another point. We're going to need some more capital for the expansion. I want to talk to you about it tomorrow. In the bank, of course. I don't think we need a middleman anymore."



An opportunist needs no persuasion that everything is worth what its purchaser will pay for it.



YOU MIGHT SAY the turkeys started it, but on the other hand a turkey hasn't got enough brains to start anything, let alone a series of UFO sightings. These birds did get themselves sold in the city market, that sale giving Alex Freeble a pocketful of change and Alex, being what he was, went out and got himself soused before he started for

home. In fact, he was blind drunk.

Shortly after midnight the high-way patrol found Alex Freeble's pickup outside of Bedford, nose down in the ditch. They also found Alex Freeble, nose up in a field. Alex claimed he hadn't passed out but was merely unconscious, and had been rendered into that condition when his truck was buzzed

by a spaceship and the little men inside cold-cocked him with ray guns.

This story didn't go over too big in Bedford. For one thing, we all knew Alex Freeble, and for another, most of us remembered how he had sold a calf in the city last year. That time Alex had seen a sea monster in Priddle's Pond. Priddle's Pond is around udder deep to a cow, which could somewhat explain the sea monster yarn,



but Alex didn't have a leg to stand on with the spaceship story.

We would have forgotten it except that somebody here wrote an out-of-state relative, and in passing happened to mention that a local citizen had got himself waylaid and knocked unconscious by a spaceship. The relative gave the account to a newspaper, the wire services

picked it up, and in no time Bedford was back on the map again.

This was the first notice the outside world had given Bedford in the past two years, ever since the Interstate Highway went through and missed us by eighteen miles. We are now so far out of touch, the train doesn't bother to whistle at us anymore.

The new highway route hurt most of the Bedford citizens, but it liked to ruin Mort Owens, who owned a filling station outside of town. He had modernized and built new cabins and waited for the Interstate to arrive. When it bypassed us, Mort boarded up the cabins, closed the filling station and let me go. Since then I've scabbled out a living by raising stuff on my two acres of ground and fighting Alex Freeble for what odd-job work I can get. It's been rough, for Bedford ain't big enough to support two handymen.

I was some surprised when Mort Owens called me out to the filling station the day after the story came out in the papers. I found him wheezing alongside the gas pumps. Mort always looked short, even as a kid, but now that middle age has hit him with a round stomach, he looks even shorter. His bald head is round, too, so it looks like a melon with a pair of pale blue eyes in the center. Mort wheezes, even

when he ain't actually breathing.

"I want you to go to work, Homer," Mort said.

"Doing what?"

"Operating the station again. I figure that newspaper story will bring in enough people to make it worthwhile to open up."

"People ain't going to actual believe that Alex Freeble saw a spaceship."

"It's the out-of-town people who read newspapers, and out-of-town people don't know Alex Freeble, Homer. Besides, there are plenty of folks that take their UFO sightings so serious they'll travel miles on the chance it might be real. If one of those fellows comes into the station and asks what Alex saw, I ain't going to argue that Alex didn't see nothing." Mort wiped his bald head with a red bandanna. "Believing in flying saucers is something like believing in the hereafter, Homer. You believe, not because you've actually seen it, but because somebody convinced you it was there."

"Maybe," I said, "but if it took Alex Freeble to convince me there was a hereafter, I'd die a heathen."

"You keep your beliefs to yourself during working hours. Now bring out my chair and you can go to work."

I brought out the old captain's chair and set it in front of the

office. Mort sank down with a big wheeze and a sigh of relief. He filled the chair from arm to arm, and sat there like a toad in a hole and directed operations. It's always been that way; I'm the legs and Mort is the brains.

We had light traffic out on the highway, which was more than there was before. Some of the cars stopped in, and all of them asked about the spaceship. I'd try to sell them gas, then direct them on into town, to Pop's Beer Palace where I knew they'd find Alex Freeble.

A little after noon Mort called me over. "This ain't working out like I hoped," he said. "The main flaw is that people come here to learn about the spaceship, and we have to send them on to somebody else. Besides that, this business is built on a shaky foundation."

"Meaning Alex Freeble?"

"Meaning Alex Freeble. He operates in a beer joint, which don't do much to help the status symbol of the deal. He also tells his story for free drinks, instead of for cash." Mort closed his eyes and shook his head sadly. "And along in the afternoon, with all them free drinks under his belt, Alex creates a credibility gap you could back a truck through."

I nodded glumly. "Yeah, his stories must get pretty wild. I reckon the whole idea was a bust,

eh? It sure sounds like it was."

Mort sat with his fat hands clasped over his paunch, his eyes closed. "No, Homer, I still think the spaceship idea was a good gimmick. It was just handled wrong. What we need to do is to put it on a sound, businesslike basis."

A car drove into the station then. I hustled over, checked the fellow's air, oil and water, and sent him on down to Pop's Beer Palace. When I walked back I found Mort sitting straight up in the chair, his eyes wide open. "We still got that weed-killing gun in the back room, Homer?"

It took me a full minute to gather what Mort was talking about; then I remembered that around four years ago he had traded a couple of used tires to a salesman for a weed gun. I had used the contraption a couple of times and then forgot it. "I reckon it is," I said.

"Go fetch it out."

I found the gadget under a pile of junk and brought it outside. The thing is a small version of one of those army flame throwers you see in old war movies, with a tank, a hose, and a tube with a nozzle on the end. I put kerosine in the tank, pumped it up and started to slip my arms through the loops.

Mort pushed himself up out of the chair. "I'll handle that, Homer."

I helped him hoist the little tank

up on his shoulders, lighted the pilot light, then watched Mort waddle out into the field he owns next to the station. "Watch it," I called. "One blast will kill the weeds. You hold the flame in one place too long and it will bake the ground as hard as a brick."

Mort didn't seem much concerned about killing weeds. He pointed the nozzle out to right angles, pressed the trigger and sent a sheet of flame out. Then he turned the nozzle up, gave the trigger a short squeeze, and a ball of fire shot high into the air and disappeared in a puff of smoke. Mort played around with the weed gun for a time, then he brought it back and put it away himself.

When I closed up the station that evening, I didn't know whether Mort meant to continue in business or not.

Then the next morning I heard how there had been another spaceship seen the night before. I heard the story twice before I got to the post office. This time it wasn't an Alex Freeble story. This time the spaceship had been seen by two different men, Harvey Bivins and Mort Owens, and you couldn't find a more solid, honest citizen than Harvey Bivins. Harvey is a well-to-do farmer who serves on the school board.

According to the stories I heard,

Harvey Bivins' dogs raised a ruckus and when Harvey got outside he saw a sheet of flame some distance down the road from the house. While he watched, a ball of fire shot up into the air and disappeared. Harvey ran back into the house, got his shotgun and by the time he got down the road, Mort Owens had arrived on the scene. Mort said he had seen the same thing and, sure enough, the men found a spot in the pasture where the grass had been burnt off in a circle.

Mort was waiting when I got out to the station to open up. He waddled along behind me and explained how the spaceship business was now on a solid footing.

"I reckon you don't want me to send any more customers down to Pop's Beer Palace," I said.

"You reckon right. We're going to keep all the business in one spot, right here in the station. I'm going to tell the story dignified and honest," Mort said as he tagged after me. "I'm not trying to foist off any of this little green men stuff on the public. This will be believable and scientific." Mort pulled a book from his pocket. "I dug up this old joke book so I could put a little humor into my talk and jolly it up some."

Mort followed me into the rest rooms, and stood by while I

cleaned up. He told me how he had called the city paper and how they said they would send a reporter over to get his story. He followed me around some more, so by the time I got his chair set up, Mort fell into it, tuckered out.

When I had the station open for business, Mort told me to get a paint brush, a can of paint and a board. He said he wanted me to make a sign, and after some thought he told me what to print:

FLYING SAUCER
INFORMATION
EXCITING, EYEWITNESS
ACCOUNT
\$3.00

Once I had the sign finished, I carried it down the road and nailed it up on a pole.

The reporter from the paper showed up a few minutes later and he brought a photographer with him. They took a picture of Mort Owens in his captain's chair, pointing up into the sky. The reporter wrote down what Mort said, then the newspapermen went to town to talk to Harvey Bivins and to look at the burned spot in the pasture.

We had a smattering of business that day, mostly farmers from around Bedford who wouldn't pay three bucks to hear an eyewitness account of the ending of the world. Mort wasn't a mite discouraged,

though. He sat in his chair, rubbing his fat hands and with a grin on his fat face.

"Wait until the morning paper comes out," Mort said. "We should have cars stacked up, with customers waiting to hear my story. Try to sell them an oil change or a lube job while they're waiting, Homer."

Things didn't turn out exactly as Mort figured. I opened up the next morning and Mort sat down with his joke book in his pocket, but nobody stopped in.

Mort watched the cars whizz by for a while, then he called me over. "Run down the road and check on our sign, Homer. Something's wrong."

The sign was still there, and it wasn't until a fellow drove in with a boiling radiator that I got the answer. The fellow handed me the morning paper before he drove out. I looked through the newspaper, then carried it over to Mort and dropped it into his lap.

Mort grabbed it up and started going through the pages. "Where is my picture?"

"They didn't print your picture, they didn't print Harvey Bivins' picture, or one of his dogs, or of the burned spot in his pasture. It looks like the reporter left here, went into Bedford and ran into Alex Freeble, and Alex gave him a better story than you did."

Mort read the headline out loud. "Spaceship returns to small town." He shuddered and went on. "For the second time within a week, a Bedford resident reported an encounter with a flying saucer. According to Alex Freeble, the spaceship last night made a deliberate attempt to contact him, and perhaps to do him bodily harm. Freeble stated that—" Mort threw the paper to the ground. "Blast Freeble," he howled. "The public won't swallow a story like that. Alex has ruined everything!" Mort yelled until his face turned red. "That reporter didn't even mention the spaceship I told him about!"

"Yes, he did, down here at the bottom. It says that Freeble's spaceship may have been the same one that was reported by two other Bedford men, a Harvey Bivins and Mort Cowens." I handed over the paper. "They spelled your name wrong, Mort."

"Gawk," Mort said, and he sounded like he was choking. He looked like he was, too, with his eyes rolled up into his head.

"You've got to admit that Alex' story was more exciting than yours was, especially the part where the spaceship chased him home, and how he saw the little green men in the windows before he dived into the root cellar, and where—"

"Gawk—gawk," Mort said, turn-

ing a horrible deep purple color.

"I wonder why those spacemen are laying for Alex like that? Why do they want to grab him?"

"Gawk—gawk—gawk!"

"Oh, I forgot something, Mort. That fellow who gave me the newspaper told me that Alex has put up a sign ahead of ours down the road. And Alex is only charging two bucks to tell his story." I didn't say anything more when I saw Mort's face. I reckon if I had handed him a gun right then, he'd of shot himself.

I walked away and stayed pretty much to myself after that. Mort sat and stared straight ahead like he had been beaten with a club. I stood around doing nothing, waiting mainly for Mort to tell me to close up the station for good. Around three o'clock he called me over.

"Homer, I have made a very serious error of judgment," Mort said in a calm voice. "I have watched the cars drive by here on their way to town, and I realize now I sorely underestimated the public's gullibility."

"You want me to close up the station?"

Mort acted as if he hadn't heard me. "I counted heavily on this space-ship deal. It was my last chance to get out from under this station—"

"I could start putting the stuff inside."

"—the cabins and all the rest." Mort sighed deeply and shook his head. "I can't give up now." He turned and looked at me. "What do you suppose Alex Freeble would rather have than anything else in the world?"

"His own beer joint," I said without stopping to think.

Mort nodded slowly. "Knowing Alex, I would say that was right logical. Homer, I want you to go into town and tell Alex Freeble I'm willing to set up a beer joint out here, and put him in charge."

"That would be like putting a fat kid in charge of a candy store."

"Yes," Mort said thoughtfully as he rubbed his head. "I think that would do the trick. What time does Alex leave that place at night?"

"He leaves when Pop closes the joint, at midnight."

"Good. You tell Alex to come out here after Pop closes tonight. Tell him that my proposition will be out of this world."

It took considerable effort on my part even to talk to Alex. For two years we've been battling for odd jobs, and some of the battles have been hot, but I swallowed my pride and went into Pop's place. When Alex was free we swapped a few insults, then I gave him Mort's message. He was interested, of course, and told me to tell Mort he would be out after Pop closed.

I didn't go back out to tell Mort. I had done what I had been told to do, so I went home with a clear conscience.

The next morning I saw there were cars in the filling station when I was still half a mile away. I drove in and saw two highway patrol cars along with the rest. There was a crowd of people over in the field next to the station.

I walked over to where Mort stood in the middle of a circle, talking to the reporter from the city paper.

"Poor Alex," Mort said and dabbed at one eye with his red bandanna. "In a way I feel responsible for what happened. After all, the man did come out here to see me."

"Did you talk to Mister Freeble last night?" the reporter asked.

Mort shook his head and dabbed at both eyes. "No, Alex must have been a bit early. I was still some distance down the highway when I first saw this eerie, purplish ball of fire glide down from the sky and hang over the filling station. Then it began to settle lower-lower-lower-lower—"

"Go on, Mister Cowens."

"Owens," Mort said sharply and spelled the name out. "Now, I found I couldn't move. The purplish light had spread out until it was everywhere, and a strange,

heavy odor engulfed me. I found I was paralyzed. I couldn't even twitch a muscle. So I watched helplessly as these little green men appeared at the windows as the ship settled down behind the building. Then a moment later, there was this brilliant flash and a ball of fire shot up into the air and disappeared."

"How long were you paralyzed?"

"I'm not sure, but as soon as I could move I leaped into my car and drove on here, but I found I was too late." Mort covered his face with the bandanna. "All that was left was Alex' old pickup truck over there, with the paint blistered off one side." Mort pointed to the ground in front of him. "And this round spot, where everything had been burnt off and the earth baked as hard as a brick."

The reporter closed his notebook. "I won't bother you anymore right now, Mister Owens."

Mort lowered the bandanna, threw his head back and stared up into the sky. "Who knows," he said in a quavery voice, "who knows but that at this very instant, poor Alex Freeble may be hurtling through space, out there somewhere, headed for who knows what." Mort lowered his head and saw me. "Get the station open, Homer. There must be people here

who want to buy gas. Set my chair up so I can elaborate on my story, furnish details and answer questions for all those who see fit to make a purchase at the station."

The crowd built up all day, and when the newspapers carried the story on how Alex had disappeared, we were swamped. There were cars stacked up halfway back to the Interstate, and Mort had to hire two men from the city to help me run the station.

The police asked questions. It seems even a man like Alex Freeble can't disappear without them wondering what happened to him. The police were wary, they weren't sure there had been a crime committed. They were afraid it might be a hoax, so to be on the safe side they let the case die on the vine.

It seemed everybody knew what had happened to Alex Freeble. A bunch of newspapermen, scientists, UFO experts, armed forces officials, politicians, and general nuts swarmed into Bedford, and each one of them had a different theory.

Mort didn't say anything much, but he worked every angle in the book. He roped off the field and charged admission to view the spot where the spaceship landed. Customers had to pay another dollar to get into the tent to see Alex Freeble's old pickup truck with the blistered paint. The filling station

ran full blast, while Mort sat in his chair and told what happened that night, for three dollars a throw. Business was unbelievable.

One morning I was checking supplies with Mort when a car came in like the driver's pants was on fire. He jumped out and I saw it was the reporter from the city paper. "They found Alex Freeble," he yelled before he got to us. "The police are holding him out in Seattle on a drunk charge. Freeble claims you paid him to disappear. The paper out there called us to get a statement from you."

I figured I knew how I'd feel when somebody told me I was dead. I looked at Mort.

He sat there grinning and twiddling his thumbs on his stomach. "The man in Seattle is obviously an impostor."

"Oh, no, it's Freeble all right. Freeble was in the Army once and they had his fingerprints on file. The police checked the identity." The reporter took out his notebook. "Now, could I have your statement, Mister Cowens?"

"Owens," Mort said and spelled it out. "I will be most happy to make a statement, but before I can speak, I must clear my story with the high officials that are involved." Mort nodded thoughtfully. "I promise you will get the story first, young man. Be patient."

I watched the reporter drive out. "I reckon the balloon is busted," I said. "I'll go let the extra help go and try to get rid of all the stuff we have on hand before they print the story about Alex."

Mort shook his head sadly. "You have failed to gain much from the events of the past few days, Homer. It should be clear to you now that when your opposition tops your story, you must come back with a bigger one than his. Now get to work. This time I'll have to concoct a real whopper."

Mort came up with a whopper all right; he claimed he had managed to tune in on the wavelength of the spacemen, and that he had learned they meant to assume the identity of high officials and seize the government. To prevent their plan from being discovered, the spacemen had kidnapped Alex Freeble. Now they were using Alex Freeble's body in an effort to discredit Mort's story.

The city paper printed the whole thing, as did most of the other papers, and the crowds continued to come to Bedford. Mort rebuilt

the place to resemble a spaceship. He built some new cabins to look like flying saucers and installed a huge neon sign.

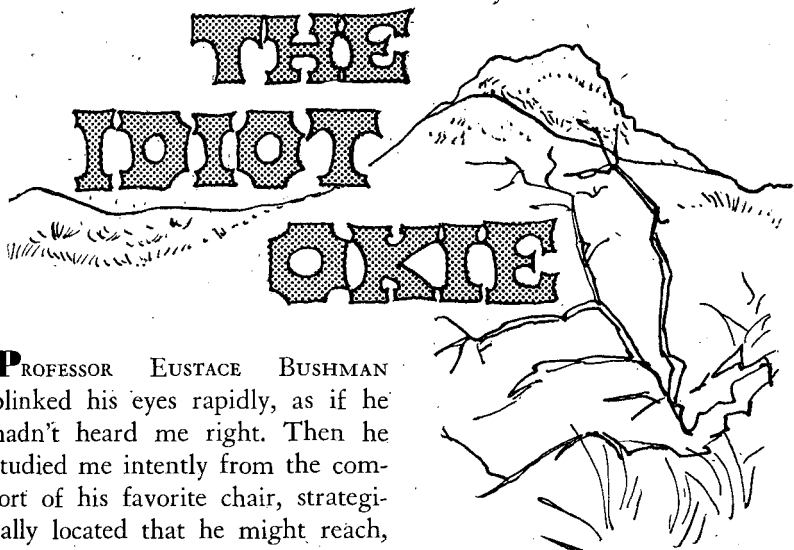
All this happened three years ago, but we still get a steady trickle of tourists who have read about Mort and the station. For the most part they are just curious; they kid about the little green men, but they still buy the plastic spaceships and the postcards we sell. Mort plays it straight; he tells the story of what happened for three dollars, and if a customer doesn't go for that, Mort will sell him a booklet of the same thing for a buck.

We have a set routine. I burn off the ground with the weed-killing gun every few nights, and Mort tells the customers that not a blade of grass has ever grown on the spot where the spaceship blasted off.

Business has settled down to a steady pace and we both make a good living. It bugs me sometimes that I have to run around in a hot space suit, while Mort sits in the shade, but that's the way it always has been here at the station—I'm the legs and Mort is the brains.



Not all labels render a fair and accurate description of contents.



PROFESSOR EUSTACE BUSHMAN blinked his eyes rapidly, as if he hadn't heard me right. Then he studied me intently from the comfort of his favorite chair, strategically located that he might reach, in no more than two strides, any of the several hundred volumes lining the walls of his small study.

"You actually think you can pull it off, Lassiter?" he asked skeptically. "Tackling unsolved mysteries is best left to the experts. As I pointed out in class some time ago, an inquiring mind is a prerequisite for any good writer; however, I didn't mean to imply that a journalistic Everest should be essayed by members of the senior class. Perhaps if you started off with some-

thing a little less demanding . . ."

I shook my head. The case had intrigued me for years, and others had been chipping away at the mystery for nearly a decade. Through a fluke, I had come across my first lead, vague though it was, and I was going to run it down or else. I'd stopped at the professor's for his official approval because, undertaken as part of my schoolwork, a story based on the

mystery would bolster my grades—and they needed bolstering.

I unfolded a large poster advertising a wild west show and placed it on the professor's desk. "I lived in West Texas at the time the phantom horseman opened season on

tographer's subject. What connection does this man supposedly have with the topic under discussion?"

I took a deep breath. "I'm convinced he is the man who walked into my hometown, Robinson, just before the robberies began. Unless



the banks and loan companies. In looking back, and giving all facets of the case a fair evaluation, I think the man in the poster is the mysterious robber."

The professor studied the poster. "But the man pictured here is little more than a blur. Identification based on this picture would be impossible. This animal leaping through a ring of fire in the foreground seems to have been the pho-

I'm completely off base he, the man we knew as the Idiot Okie, was the mysterious robber."

Professor Bushman, tall, spare and fiftyish with a suntanned pate, had been studying me all the while from behind pyramided fingertips, elbows resting on his desk. His brow arched quizzically. "The Idiot Okie?"

"That's what they called him," I said, "Nobody ever figured out

where he came from. He just walked out of the desert and into town one morning, a great rucksack on his back, and filled it with a hundred pounds of staples—rice, beans, bacon and flour and such—at the general store. Like all twelve-year-old kids, I was hanging around the store with a group of men, trying to act grown up. When the stranger mentioned that he was going to prospect the area known as the Basin, the local wags had a field day. There's nothing out there but sand and sun and wind and rocks and distance. Worse, there isn't any water, and the Basin is roughly fifty miles across and a hundred and fifty miles around. When somebody asked the stranger what he figured on doing for water, he said he wasn't very worried; he had spent considerable time over in the Oklahoma panhandle, and getting water would be no problem. He said he had a pet steer that he'd left out in the desert, and that the steer would smell out water if he, the man, kept him supplied with chewing tobacco."

The professor's hands dropped to the desk. "Chewing tobacco for a steer?"

"The wags in Robinson reacted the same way, Professor. Even when the stranger ordered five pounds of cut plug and put it in his pack. In summation: everything

the man said or did indicated he was shy a few of his marbles. He was going to prospect the most unlikely country in the Southwest; he claimed to have a pet steer that ate chewing tobacco and smelled out water; and he'd walked through thirty miles of desert in 110-degree heat to buy a supply of groceries and tobacco. It was then and there that somebody remarked that the Okie was something of an idiot, and since he never offered his real name in all the times he came to town, even when some folks pried, they called him the Idiot Okie. To his face, he was just plain Okie."

The professor rubbed his chin reflectively. "And you think the man and steer pictured in this poster are the Idiot Okie and his water-sniffing pet?" At my affirmative nod, ripples of doubt gathered across his brow. "And you're basing your opinion on this vague picture of the man?"

"On the steer, sir," I corrected him.

"You mean there really was such a beast, and that you actually saw him?" The professor was showing genuine interest for the first time.

"I did," I said. "And that's what makes my position unique. To my knowledge, nobody else around the Basin ever saw the steer. It was only by chance that I saw him. It happened right after the last robbery,

the one at the loan company in Ranchester. If you recall, the robber tied up the two secretaries, then counted out the money very carefully, leaving \$10,000 in plain sight in the safe, sort of like he had all the money he wanted. Most folks figured the robber was either sick or going blind, leaving that kind of money behind. I was a typical ranch kid, all freckles and feet and stupidity, and the thought of my mysterious hero lying sick and possibly dying out in the desert was more than I could bear. I borrowed a mule from a friend of my father's and set out in search of him. I never found the outlaw, but I did stumble into the Okie's camp. He wasn't there at the time, but I recognized his rucksack from the times he'd been in the store in Robinson. I shaded up under the green tarpaulin he called home and began browsing through some books he had in a box while I waited for him to return. I wondered at the time why he had so many books on Australia. He even had some folders on emigration to Australia."

The professor jumped one step ahead of me. "And it's your opinion, based on a childhood experience almost ten years ago, that this man called the Idiot Okie perpetrated the crimes and then fled to Australia?" He sounded something less than encouraging.

"That's my opinion," I continued. "I was thumbing through a book called *The Outback* when the Okie came walking into camp. He seemed surprised to see me. While we were talking and he was fixing dinner, the steer came wandering in from the desert. He was a big rangy dun, almost yellow in color, just like the steer in the poster, even to the black stripes running down his neck and shoulders. The Okie even gave him a bite of tobacco while I was there, just to prove the animal really liked the stuff. I never mentioned seeing the Okie when I got back home because my dad had threatened to warm my bottom if I went into the desert. At the time I thought he was just being mean, but looking back I can see his point. The desert was no place for a kid to explore."

The professor pondered the matter for a bit. "Where did you get the poster?"

"I stumbled across it down at the local import-export store. Not wanting any of the usual pictures of movie stars, Swiss chalets or mod scenes with which to decorate my room, I went through the whole pile. And just like that, there it was."

"Then you're really not certain this is a picture of the animal you saw so many years ago," the professor said wearily. "It could be an-

other steer altogether, possibly."

"It's the same one," I insisted doggedly. "I was raised in ranching country and I've never seen an animal colored like that. Not before and not since. It's got to be him."

Professor Bushman pursed his lips thoughtfully. "If I remember correctly, one of the more mystifying aspects of the case was how the hooded robber managed to dismount from the stolen horses he used for all his getaways into the desert without betraying himself."

"It still is mystifying," I said. "Even bloodhounds failed to come up with the answer to that one. Using horses stolen from local ranchers for his getaways indicated the robber knew a lot about animals. Ride a horse into the wilds and turn him loose and he'll head for home every time. The sheriff spent most of his time following tracks that were made *after* the robber had parted from the horse—however he did it." I reached for a cigarette. "I don't expect it to be easy. If it was, somebody else would have done the job long ago. However, it will be an excellent chance to indulge in some of the research and imagination you find indispensable in salable scripts."

The professor stared unseeing at his desk. "Oh, your idea is imaginative, all right, to say the very least. It is also fraught with disappoint-

ment, but I'm sure you're aware of that. The questions that must be answered would give a less stubborn person pause to stop and reconsider: the robber's real name; his method of abandoning his stolen mounts; how he managed to disappear; where he disappeared to. And don't overlook his odd behavior during the last robbery; how he counted out a specific sum, as though he were collecting a debt, then left considerable money behind."

"Then I have your permission to give it a try?" I started to tell the professor I'd already written several letters and made a series of long-distance telephone calls regarding the matter, but I held my tongue. Eustace Bushman has a thing about being pushed into a corner.

"Neither of us is at this institution simply to waste his time," the professor said pointedly. "Future decisions on the matter will depend solely on the results you produce during spring vacation. And since it began five hours ago, I suggest you begin moving. Good night, Lassiter."

As the plane carried me northward to Calgary, my mind slipped back over the years. I remembered the Okie I had known; tall and quiet, somber brown eyes, curly black hair and skin like saddle

leather. I'd liked him instinctively. Only when I realized the statute of limitations had expired had I decided to dig into the case. If I proved the Okie was indeed the robber, no harm would be done.

I had written to the company that produced the poster and was referred to another printing company, now defunct. Three letters and two long-distance telephone calls later, I'd located the former president of the defunct company. Two weeks later, after considerable research on his part, I had a name: Benny Redtree. According to my informant, Benny was a retired half-breed Chinook Indian who had turned professional rodeo photographer after a Brahma bull had gored him out of the competitive events. Benny was, supposedly, the man who'd snapped the picture of the steer leaping through the circle of fire.

A cab hauled me from the airport and through Calgary and delivered me to a small log cabin on the outskirts of town. The man tending a vegetable garden beside the cabin dropped his hoe and came to greet me. He was small, coffee-colored, and walked with a pronounced limp. The eyes beneath the floppy hat brim were dark and intent.

"Benny Redtree?" I asked.

His smile was a fifty-fifty affair; half gold, half enamel. The Brah-

ma bull had done more than just louse up his leg. "I'm Benny Redtree. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Mark Lassiter from Los Angeles and—"

"Los Angeles, huh?" Benny broke in. "Great town, L.A. I was with a show there in '36 . . . or was it '37."

I unfolded the poster and explained the purpose of my mission. "Do you remember when and where you took this?"

Benny studied the poster intently for some time, then shook his head. "That's not my work."

"Not yours?" I grunted. I could feel my heart plummeting into my stomach. "Are you certain?"

Benny limped to a woven willow settee on the shaded porch. "I'm certain. Whit Ritter's the man you want. Only he's dead. Cancer. About four, maybe five years ago. He was a good photographer, Whit was. I've got some of his work inside, sort of a scrapbook I put together over the years. My work, his, others, from here in Calgary, Cheyenne, Pendleton . . . Rodeo classics, so to speak. Tell me, why would a young fellow like you come all the way from L.A. to Calgary just to find the man who snapped that picture of Teedee and Lucifer? It's not much of a picture as pictures go . . ."

I could feel the goosebumps

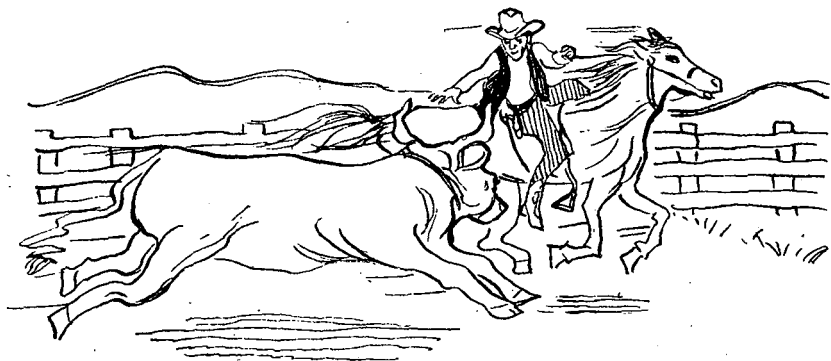
crawling out of my skin. "T.D. and Lucifer? You mean you *knew* this act?" My knees began shaking.

Benny nodded matter-of-factly. "Anybody who was around the Canadian rodeo circuit back in the early '50s knew that act. And it isn't the initials T.D., it's *Teedee*. It was T.D. at first, but like M.C. it got changed. That's the way they billed the act for three or four years: Tee-dee and Lucifer. The name sure fit

yellow brute down. You could sense the bond between them, like a pair of outcasts. Before it was over, Tom bought the steer. He always did have a soft spot in his heart for the weary and downtrodden."

I was almost afraid to breathe. "Tom . . . ?"

"Tom Dunbar." Benny rose from the settee. "Wait here a minute." He gimped into the cabin and returned with a great dog-eared



that big ol' steer. He was the very devil himself when he got riled.

"He was being trucked to a packing house early one morning over in Saskatchewan when he threwed a fit and smashed his way out of the truck right in the middle of the highway. Tom came along about then, dragging his trailer and roping horse behind his car, trying to make it to the next show before the entries closed. He couldn't pass the truck, so he got out to help, and darned if he didn't calm that big

scrapbook. Thumbing through it, he found what he was looking for. "That was Tom and Lucifer in a wild west skit that drove the audiences crazy. He was the army scout being chased by a bunch of nasty old Indians. Around and around the arena he'd go, his horse at a dead run and the Indians right behind him screaming for blood. And then, just as his horse began to falter, in through the gate would come Lucifer. That steer could spot Tom in all the hubbub and yelling every

time. He'd run up alongside Tom's horse and then, when Tom leaped onto his back, he'd head out the gate like his tail was on fire. And he could really run, believe me."

I could feel the goosebumps popping out again. Tom Dunbar and Lucifer had been a team, all right, but I wasn't thinking of their wild west act in the arena. I could see the phantom robber racing his stolen horse into the desert dusk—he always struck late in the day—only to vanish like a wraith . . . For sheer guts, daring, and originality, Dunbar's *modus operandi* was a bit of all right. Small wonder he'd taken such good care of the yellow steer!

Benny was still speaking. "Tom was with the Crockett shows at the time, but they had some real bad seasons. Rained out most of two years, and then a real bad fire. It was a truck wreck that finished the show off. Lawsuits, attachments and all that. Both Tom and the steer got pretty badly banged up in the wreck. That was when Tom called it quits. He prospected around some, worked in a few logging camps, herded cows, and then in '57, '58, he disappeared. I heard later he'd headed down into the States."

I could have kissed the Indian. Instead, I gave him fifty dollars for three pictures of Tom Dunbar and Lucifer, proof positive that Tom

and the Idiot Okie were one and the same. Benny tried to refuse the money, but I insisted. His arguments ended when I explained how my dad had traded his West Texas ranch for one up toward Oklahoma that had sprouted a couple of dozen oil wells. Besides, if I could complete my project, the magazine industry would see that I was well rewarded.

As the plane carried me from Calgary to Great Falls, Montana, I tried to fathom the motive behind the Okie's depredations on the banks and loan companies of West Texas, but it wasn't my night for inspiration. Nothing in Dunbar's past so much as hinted he might be criminally inclined. Still, he had made away with considerable swag: \$81,850 to be exact.

I wrestled with the name for a couple of hours, and then gave up. Dunbar didn't mean a thing to me. When the plane landed, I decided what all college students decide when they encounter something they can't handle. I put in a call to Pop.

"You're in Montana?" he growled in mock anger. "What the hell you doin', prospectin' for snowballs?"

The lean years before Pop traded for the oil land had forged a strong bond between us. He respected my

decisions and pretty much let me do as I pleased. I could almost see the gathering of his brow as I explained the matter to him.

"Tom Dunbar? Nope. There was a Happy Dunbar down toward San Angelo..."

"No, Pop," I pleaded. "There has to be a connection between Dunbar and the towns around the Basin. Maybe he was avenging a friend or relative with an entirely different name, but whatever the name, I can't help feeling Tom Dunbar was out to settle some kind of grudge."

Pop's breathing came clearly through the receiver. "Find Tolly Jessup in Robinson," he said finally. "The last I heard, he still had his service station there. He's got a fair to middlin' memory and he hasn't missed a daily paper or a bit of gossip since the year one. If he can't help you, you're dead."

Thirty-six hours later I stepped out of a rental car onto the main street of Robinson, the town where I'd grown up. It was just as paintless, weatherbeaten and bleak as I remembered it, surrounded by the desert and eternally persecuted by a relentless sun.

I found Tolly Jessup, fat and unkempt, shaded up under the slanted roof that reached out over his gas pumps, a toothpick imprisoned between his fat lips. He'd been sitting there, just like that, the last time I'd

seen him. After I told him who I was, and he'd allowed as how I'd growed some, I asked him if the name Dunbar was familiar. Tom Dunbar.

He worked the toothpick back and forth, eyes squinted. "Don't recall no Tom Dunbar right off. There was a Rance Dunbar up t'other side of the county seat, but that was before your time. A bronc fell over on him and smashed the life out of him back in..."

"I need a Tom Dunbar," I growled pointedly, but Tolly was off into the musty realm of history.

"Rance had been a pretty fair rodeo hand, but his wife took bad sick and he quit the circuit and bought a little farm. I still had my service station up at the county seat and used to see him every once in a while. His wife died, leaving him all alone with his boy, and then he got into that hassle with Sheriff Pickett and his brothers."

A thought hit me between the eyes like a well swung hammer. I remembered the sheriff and his brothers, Sam and Adolph. As the principal stockholders in the banks and loan companies, they'd borne the brunt of the robber's depredations. And Rance Dunbar had once followed the rodeos... I eased down on a soft-drink crate.

"Tell me about Rance Dunbar's hassle with the Picketts," I invited Tolly softly.

He excused himself long enough to pump five gallons of nourishment into a rattling Model A. "As I recall, the sheriff showed up in the county seat with a mail sack full of stocks and bonds and securities and such that had fell off a train. Or been kicked off. Nobody ever did figure out which. Well, it was worth \$600,000 and the insurance company had put up a ten percent reward for its return. The story was in all the papers. Then Rance came to town and said he'd been the one who found the mail sack, and that he'd been on his way to town to turn it in when he met the sheriff and gave the sack to him, not knowing what it was worth or that there was a reward involved. The sheriff swore on a four-foot high stack of Bibles that he was the one who found the mail sack, and his brothers backed his story up.

"It turned into quite a squabble, and the case was in and out of the courts for a couple of years. Dunbar even ended up mortgaging his farm to pay his lawyer fees. And then, just as the case came to court for the last time, the horse fell on Rance and killed him. His death blew the case right out the window. You might say the sheriff

got the reward money by default . . . \$60,000 . . ."

I was hot, sticky, tired and dirty, but my spirits were rising. It was a long way from \$60,000 to \$81,850, but it was a start.

Tolly opened two bottles of pop and handed one to me. "Funny thing about Dunbar's boy. He was all alone out on the farm when his dad got killed, but when the sheriff went out to bring him in as a ward of the court, there wasn't a sign of him. A posse searched that whole end of the county for two weeks and never found a trace of him. It was just like he'd evaporated. The bank foreclosed on the mortgage a few years later. Darned shame too. It had been appraised at \$25,000 before it was left to run down and be picked over and the fields to burn up, and the mortgage was only \$5,000."

I almost choked on a swallow of root beer, for \$25,000 minus \$5,000 put another \$20,000 into the argument. I was within \$1,850 of proving my point . . .

Rance Dunbar's missing son intrigued me. "How old was the boy at the time, Tolly?"

He scratched his chins thoughtfully, all three of them. "Fourteen, fifteen—and big for his age. A real quiet kid, as I remember."

"How long before the robber hit the Basin did all this happen?"

"Quite a spell," Tolly said, massaging the toothpick thoughtfully. "Eleven, twelve years."

That put one more aspect of the case in its true perspective. The Okie had been somewhere between twenty-five and thirty when he first walked into Robinson. "Do you remember the boy's name, Tolly?"

"He didn't have a real name, not like you and me. Leastwise, none that I ever heard. P.G., his folks called him, or D.J., or something like that."

I didn't bother to enlighten Tolly. I needed the answer to the unaccounted-for \$1,850, and time was running out. I'd brilliantly deduced that the solution might be found in the pages of the past, in the archives at the county courthouse. I thanked Tolly and headed for the car.

"Sorry I couldn't help you out with Tom Dunbar," Tolly called after me.

Three days later I'd gone through records and files and musty tomes until my eyes burned and my head throbbed. I had a complete outline of the county's legal history tucked into the back of my cranium, but I hadn't found a thing in the records, civil or criminal, that had to do with Rance Dunbar and \$1,850. I'd found proof that everything Tolly

had told me was true, and that was all. It was time to head back to Los Angeles.

"You've done an excellent job thus far, Lassiter," Professor Bushman said after he'd seen my evidence and listened to what I had to say. It was late evening again and we were back in his study. "You've established motive and identity, and you've placed Tom Dunbar very much on the scene at the time of the robberies, not to mention coming up with a sound explanation of how he managed to abandon his stolen getaway horses without betraying himself. It would not be at all unreasonable to assume that Tom Dunbar was, indeed, the mysterious West Texas bandit. But what about the \$1,850 'overcharge'? And you have yet to *prove* that he really was bound for Australia."

"I can't account for the money," I said. "I've tried, but it's beyond me. As for the Okie heading for Australia, I still think he did just that. When he'd collected his bundle of swag, he cut out and never stopped clocking mileage until he was down under. And since Los Angeles is the logical jumping-off place for anybody bound from West Texas to Australia, I'm going to start checking the airlines records right here in town. Dunbar

would have had to produce proof of birth in order to get his passport and visa, so it's a fair assumption he was traveling under his right name."

The professor nodded approval. "Your accomplishments thus far are both surprising and heartening. Stay with it."

The days that followed turned slowly into a frustrating nightmare. I visited airlines and more airlines. I stated my case and wheedled permission to check the records. Some were in dank basements, some were in dusty back rooms, and once I spent three hours going through a mountain of boxes in a sunblasted hangar loft. I drove, I walked, I crawled and I snooped, and I never found so much as a hint of what I was looking for.

Pop tried to con me into slowing down, but I wouldn't do it. Finding Tom Dunbar's route of departure from the country had become a near-obsession with me. Then he must have put in a call to Eustace Bushman because the professor was surprisingly well informed on my total lack of progress when he dropped in to see me one evening. I didn't feel like talking about it, but there was no graceful way I could avoid it.

"You've already done far better than anybody else, Lassiter. If you

were to prepare an article now on the basis of your discoveries, it would surpass all former works by far. That in itself is quite an accomplishment. Think about it."

I shook my head doggedly. "I've got a feeling about this case. I'm so close to the answer I can almost taste it. I've put myself in Tom Dunbar's place and tried to move like I think he would have, right from the day I stumbled into his camp. He knew when I found him that others could do the same, and since he already had what he wanted, it was time to head out of the country. It's my belief he walked away from the Basin; for days, possibly weeks, until he was well clear of the area. And right there is where I lose him. It's possible he migrated from San Diego or San Francisco, or even Old Mexico. In any case, he'll be damned hard to trace."

After the professor left I decided to heed at least a part of his advice. I took the next day off, shutting my mind completely to the Idiot Okie, the West Texas robberies . . . the whole package. I was flaked out in the hammock in the back yard, enjoying the shade and a frosty Tom Collins, when a plane droned through the distant smog. Just like that my thoughts were back to Tom Dunbar. I envisioned him moving up the ramp

to the plane, and pausing for one final look back—and then it hit me like a mule kick. For a long minute I was afraid to move. Then I lurched to my feet, knocking over my drink, and sprinted for my car.

It was well after dark when I reached the campus and knocked on the professor's door. He was in his robe, ready for bed, but he admitted me anyway. I tried to conceal the victorious gleam in my eyes, but I didn't make it.

Silently I handed him my latest photocopies.

He led the way to his study, turned on the desk lamp and studied them critically. "Well I'll be damned. You've done it, Lassiter. You've *really* done it. I don't mind telling you now I had strong doubts. What caused you to abandon the airlines and begin a check of the shipping lines?"

I was tired clear to the marrow in my bones, but I was also happy. "The steer, Lucifer. I'd overlooked him completely. When I remembered him, the rest was easy.

The Okie wouldn't have left him behind under any circumstances. He just wouldn't have. Since he couldn't take the steer on a plane, it *had* to be a ship." I stretched luxuriously. "It seems we've finally come to the last chapter in the tale of the Idiot Okie—who really wasn't such an idiot after all."

The professor ran his eyes over the photocopies again; passport, visa, ship's manifest. "But taking the steer with him was sheer insanity under the circumstances. It slowed him down drastically when speed was of an essence. If just one small clue had pointed toward Dunbar he'd never have gotten away, not with the steer slowing him down. Surely, taking such an unnecessary risk marks the Okie as something of an idiot." A humorous gleam lit the professor's eye. "Don't you agree?"

"Could be you've got a point, sir," I said. "With the number of steers they've already got in Australia, who but an Idiot Okie would ship another one down there—for the outrageous sum of \$1,850."

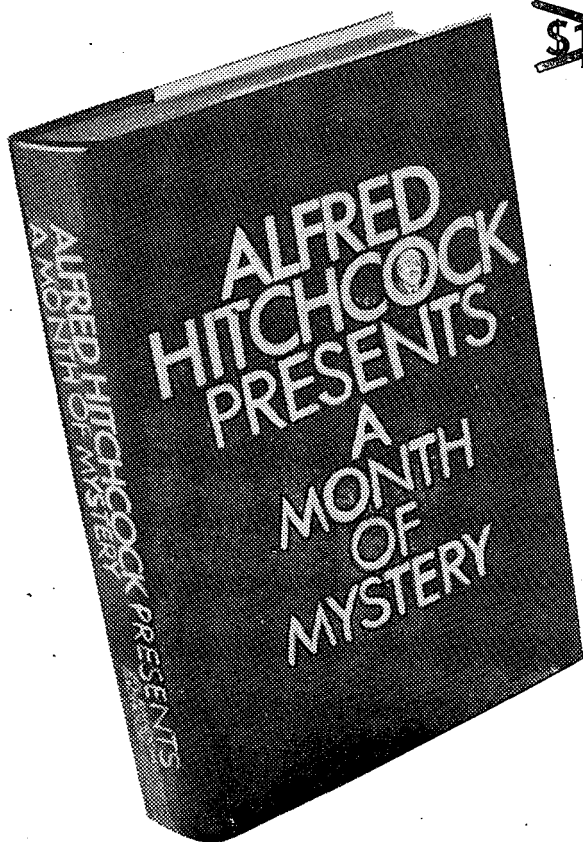


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The Dawn that purportedly dispenses nocturnal fears is an undeniable adjunct of prudent judgment.



*by Talmage
Powell*

MARILYN SPEEDED UP, and so did the souped-up yellow and black striped hot rod behind her. Straining, she watched a lonely, twilight half mile sweep past. She took her sandaled foot from the gas pedal, slowing to a crawl. Her gaze inched to the rear-view mirror. Instead of swinging out to pass, the hot-rodder applied brakes, matching her own pace.

A shallow pulse of panic raced through Marilyn's throat. The steering wheel began to feel slimy beneath her long, tapering, hard-curved fingers. No doubt of it now,

the cats in the hot rod had cast her in the role of mouse.

She looked at her surroundings for some sign of life. The emptiness of interior Florida threatened her, endless acres of greasy-green palmetto broken by patches of saw grass. Here and there reared a lonely, twisted pine tree or desolate, heat-blasted cypress in funereal shrouds of gray Spanish moss. The narrow state road was a vacant needle point in the grimly darkening

distance, not a light in sight.

Marilyn drew a breath, clinging to calm. *Please, she thought, be a pair of harmless kooks getting bored with the game, ready to break it off . . .*

A college junior, Marilyn had worked most of the summer in her father's modest real estate and insurance company. Five days ago, his hearty, benign presence had loomed beside her desk.

"You're fired," he'd said, grinning. "Take that house guest invitation from your classmate in Sarasota. Go and get your water skis wet before you have to go back to school."

It had been a dreamy time, with an assortment of healthy young males vying for the attention of a glowing, lovely raven-haired girl with large, dark eyes and a sense of fun and humor.

Marilyn had stretched out the final day with the gang on the beach, her packed bags stowed in her car. Shouted good-byes, an impromptu snake dance, promises of a reunion when the new semester opened in Gainesville had marked her departure.

She hadn't noticed the disappearance of the two shaggy youths who had loitered some distance away and watched the beach party disdaintfully. She'd seen them again briefly in the parking area, lean,

tanned, tawny-maned as young lions, their bell-bottoms garish splashes of color below open-fronted shirts. They'd lounged beside the zebra-striped rod. The taller had tossed a blue pill in the air, like a peanut, and dropped his head back to catch it in his open mouth. The action had caused an uncomfortable squirm of distaste in Marilyn. She'd got in her car and quickly driven away. By taking the shortcut on the state road she could be in her small home town in north-central Florida and having dinner with Mom and Dad in less than two hours.

With a sudden whine of racing cams and squeal of rubber, the hot rod was a yellow-black blur swinging out and roaring past. It snarled its twin chrome exhausts at her, catapulting half a mile ahead in a matter of seconds.

Marilyn drew her first deep breath since the rod had revealed itself a few miles back. They'd been very clever and deceptive following her through city traffic and deciding which road she would take. Now they had lost interest, and her fears—

She broke the thought with a gasp. In a grayish cloud from smoking tires the rod had slammed to a stop, reversed. It was a returning projectile.

Drenched with icy feeling, Mari-

lyn saw the driver looking back over his shoulder as he steered. His companion was on his knees in the seat, facing rearward, half crouched on the turtleback of the open-topped rod. He seemed to be yowling something in wild excitement.

"Crazy pillheads . . . goofballs . . ." Marilyn choked. She twisted the wheel, taking to the outside lane, giving the rod room. In the rear-view mirror she saw it again screech to a stop, almost lifting the front wheels from the rough, graveled macadam.

She mashed the gas to the floor, gaining a bare quarter-mile lead while the rod was meshed into forward gear.

Spidery prickles swept over Marilyn as she heard it coming, a high keening in the turgid silence. Her thoughts tumbled desperately. *Can't outrun them . . . Narrow road . . . Tricky, sandy shoulders . . . Don't give them room!*

Her heart matched the laboring of the two-door's engine as it hurtled along the very middle of the road. She watched the intermittent white lines come slashing at the center of the windshield.

The rod rocked from one side to the other, the driver not quite taking the chance of trying to pass with two wheels on the shoulder.

An image of coiled tension, Mari-

lyn flicked a glance in the rear-view as the rod beeped a horn that played a raucous how-dry-I-am.

The highway was surging at her with terrifying speed, but she kept those center-line marks streaking under the hood.

Then a hard thump and shattering of broken glass on the roof jarred the sedan. In the small mirror, Marilyn glimpsed the other car close on her rear bumper. The driver's companion was standing crouched, holding the top edge of the windshield, drawing his arm back to throw another empty beer bottle.

A wave of fear left Marilyn feeling faint at the thought of mangled wreckage, bloody human forms.

She shivered, fighting the faintness. Ahead, the road made a long bend through a lovely area of banyan trees and vine-trellised cabbage palms, and fifty yards to the left of the highway in the shady clearing stood one of those out-of-the-way country stores. It was an ugly, unpainted, rambling wooden building with a long ramshackle porch and rusty tin roof, but a dim light glowed from one of the dusty windows, warmly beautiful to Marilyn.

She did nothing to telegraph her intention to the other driver. When she was almost abreast of the store, she slammed down the brake and pulled the steering wheel over hard.

The sedan pitched and slewed in a sickening half-spin. She fed gas, and the tires took hold. The building and lacy banyan trees swam at Marilyn. She mashed the brake pedal and the sedan slithered to a stop in a shower of sand, dust, and dead pine needles.

She was out of the car before it stopped rocking. From the highway came the sounds of screaming rubber, the rise and fall of an angry engine, the crash of changing gears.

Marilyn raced across the gritty planking of the gallery and threw herself against the front door. The latch was an old-fashioned metal lever which rattled as she depressed it. The door yielded perhaps half an inch. She shook it and banged on it with her fist.

"Please . . . whoever's in there . . . open up!"

Her efforts created sepulchral echoes. She drew back a little. The iron hasp and heavy padlock securing the door loomed in her vision.

A soft whimper fell from Marilyn's lips. She slipped a glance over her shoulder. The zebra-stripe had skidded to rest near her sedan. Both youths had got out, a little hesitantly at first.

Marilyn was chilled to inaction for a moment. Then she forced herself to move. A glance through the iron-barred window beside the stout door revealed a gloomy inte-

rior of shelves cluttered with a few canned goods, a plank counter bearing a small glass showcase, a table near the rear stacked with work clothing. There was no movement, no sign of life. A single small naked bulb dangled over the rear counter, a night light, Marilyn realized dimly, required by the county sheriff's department.

Her cheek pressed against the rough planking, her nails dug in as voices rose behind her.

"The babe has found an empty pad, Rajah."

"How about that, Zeno?"

Footsteps softly crushed across the blanket of dry pine needles on the yard, voices in the dusk . . .

"She sure turns me on, Rajah."

"From the sec I glom her on the beach, Zeno."

Marilyn broke free of her paralysis, peeling away from the wall and dashing toward the end of the porch.

"We got a hunt, Rajah."

"My bag, Zeno!"

Marilyn jumped from the open end of the porch, half stumbled, darted toward the rear corner of the building.

She heard them yelling instructions to each other. They were splitting up.

Beyond the store, the landscape was indistinct in the twilight pall but she had an impression of

swampiness, tall grasses, and a tangle of trees in the distance. Her running feet were renewed with faint hope.

She angled away from the one who seemed nearer. She could hear his running feet directly behind her. Then she saw the shadow of the other one, flowing across the clearing to cut her off.

She tried to change directions. Her toe caught in a tough root. She pitched to her knees, flinging out her left hand to break her fall.

She was scrambling up when she felt his presence flowing over her. She heard his breathing, glimpsed the white savage mask of a face in its growth of heavy beard.

"No!" The word was a crazed mingle of snarl and scream. "You won't . . . I won't let you . . . Let me go!"

Her left arm felt as if it were being torn from the shoulder socket. She thrashed wildly in his grip. Her mind seemed to burst. Nothing was real. Nothing mattered right then, except the sanctity of her person.

She felt the hands of the second youth grabbing at her free arm, her shoulder, her throat. They grunted soft, vicious curses, almost no match for her transformation in this insane moment. She fought bitterly, clawing, kicking, biting.

Then her face exploded. One of them had struck hard with his fist. The back of her head struck the stone-like bole of a wild palm as she hurtled backward and down.

The pain lasted for a fiery fraction of a second. Then she seemed to float in a weird nothingness. She had the strangest sense of detach-



ment, as if a stranger lay here with two sweaty, hard-breathing strangers standing over the limp body.

A soft breeze flapped the bell-bottoms and touched bearded faces marked by her raking nails. The two standing figures were quite still for a moment, immunized to real fright by pills but touched with caution.

"Glom the back of her head, Zeno."

"Yeah, all bloody."

"Is she dead?"

"Who cares?"

"Nobody saw it."

"That's right."

"But they'll see her car, some cruising county fuzz."

"So we'll park it out of sight behind the store."

"How about her? She comes to, busts a window in the store, finds a telephone before we've made miles."

"Not if she's in her car trunk."

"Hey, man! That's cool! If she ain't kaput already, she'll suffocate before anybody finds her."

"Go get her car. I'll drag her out of here."

Marilyn was vaguely aware of hands shoving under her armpits, of muscles straining against her weight. She sensed she was being half lifted and dragged, her heels bumping roots and grinding through sandy soil.

She floated away. Then the pain of twisted arms and legs came through as they lifted her and stuffed her callously in the car trunk. Somewhere in her mind despairing words formed, begging for mercy. The trunk lid slammed shut over her, locking automatically, the thud of a sealed coffin.

She was swaddled in blackness and silence for a long time. At last she choked a soft moan. Despite bleeding where the scalp had been scraped, her head wound was superficial. Her brain resumed its function with sparkles of pain.

She tried to move. She was wedged between the trunk lid and spare tire, and she thrashed wildly for a moment, in the grip of a nauseating claustrophobia.

She fainted in the midst of the useless, helpless effort. When she came to, she was weak, trembling, bathed in sweat.

She could move her left arm a little, and groped in the blackness. By straining, she reached the latch, but her fingers were powerless against the hard metal.

She fought down a fresh wave of panic. Her moving hand touched a tire tool. It was wedged under the spare. There was no way she could get it out.

Her muscles were cramping, but the growing fire in her lungs was the more real pain. She realized she

was having to breathe very fast. Her heart was racing in its hunger for oxygen.

She tried to scream; then restrained herself. Very little oxygen was left in the sealed trunk. The faster she used it, the quicker she would die.

Everything in her collapsed. She closed her eyes and wept silently. The pain was mounting steadily. She felt as if her chest were being crushed with a two-ton weight.

She tried not to think of Mom, Dad, the nice young associate professor at school, the faces she would never see again.

The scene tomorrow morning built frightfully in her mind. The storekeeper would return, see her simple black sedan, look it over, call the sheriff finally. They would talk, search the car. At last the trunk would be opened, and they would fall back and ask, "What kind of beasts could do this?"

They would lift out the cold, dead body and wish the stiff, unfeeling lips could answer the question. Perhaps in the light of day they would wish it almost as much

as she wished it right now in her dying moment.

A strange warmth suffused her. Then the fire seemed to die as her lungs gave up the impossible fight for oxygen. Bright motes began showering through her brain.

Her face rolled limply against the spare tire. The tread roughness meant nothing at first. Then a final thought struggled—spare tire. Pounds and pounds of compressed air, loaded with life-giving oxygen; enough air, taken a sip at a time, to be alive when the storekeeper came a few hours from now.

The thought of the zebra-striped car gave her a final ounce of strength. Her fingers fumbled along the spare tire, found the valve stem. She unscrewed the cap, set her fingernail on the tip of the core, and pressed her lips about it. She depressed the core and the first squirt of air volleyed deep into her lungs.

Only a little at a time, Marilyn cautioned herself. It was going to be a long night, but a brand new morning would come—for her and, incidentally, for a pair of pillheads.



That which one is not able to seek today may make a worthwhile quest tomorrow.

The Night of the Sea Serpent



by
**Thomasina
Weber**

EVERYBODY KNOWS there's no such thing as a sea serpent, especially my husband. He's the most down-to-earth, unimaginative person on the west coast of Florida. Still, ever since that glamorous divorcee next door insisted that she had been attacked by one, Jack has been out on the beach with her every night, waiting for it to come back.

I suppose I ought to be out there helping them because it's pretty

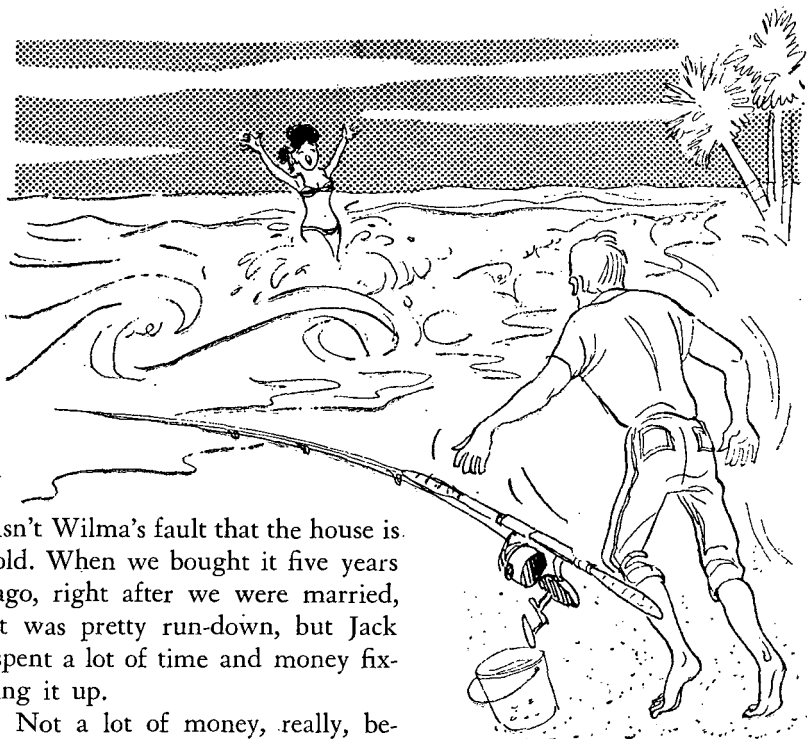
hard to see at night, but I never go out on the beach after sunset. The mosquitoes bite me something fierce and I swell all up. Besides, I'm usually busy with my embroidery or the mending. Actually, I don't often go on the beach during

the day, either, because I burn and peel and shed skin for a week after. Jack is usually pretty happy surf fishing by himself.

He hasn't done much fishing since Wilma Paine rented the other half of our duplex on the beach, though. There's always some little thing that has to be done after work at Wilma's place. Jack says it's the least he can do, since poor Wilma doesn't have a man around, and, after all, he is her landlord. It

cause we don't have much. Jack works as a maintenance man in a six-story office building. He's had the same job for twenty-nine years. He got it when he quit school to support his sick mother. When she died she left him a little bit of money and, with what he had been saving, he had enough for the down payment.

The night of the sea serpent was two weeks after Wilma moved in. I was re-covering a chair while Jack



isn't Wilma's fault that the house is old. When we bought it five years ago, right after we were married, it was pretty run-down, but Jack spent a lot of time and money fixing it up.

Not a lot of money, really, be-

was getting ready to go surf fishing. We both heard Wilma yell and Jack was outside faster than I ever saw him move. The moon was bright and he went galloping across the sand to where she was splashing out of the water. I can't figure what color that bathing suit was—as a matter of fact, I wonder if she—but then, I'm quite nearsighted.

Anyway, he brought her up to the house. She had on a terry cloth robe by that time. Her shiny black hair was piled neatly on top of her head the way she usually wears it. It wasn't the least bit wet, so I guess the sea serpent hadn't dragged her under.

"Can I get you some coffee?" I asked after she had told us what happened.

"No, thanks, Sophie," Wilma replied. "I think I'll go home and go to bed." She turned to Jack, who was standing there sort of glassy-eyed. "I don't know how to thank you, Jack."

"Yeah. Well." Jack isn't very good at conversation. In his job, people don't talk much to the maintenance man. Half the time they don't even see him, he says.

Jack didn't say another word for the rest of the night, but he made up for it the next morning. "You burned the toast, Sophie."

"The toaster doesn't pop up any-

more. Remember I told you about it three months ago?"

"Well, why don't you fix it?"

"It's worn out."

"If it's been broken for three months, how come this is the first time you burned the toast?"

"I guess I wasn't watching it."

So I watched it very carefully after that.

When Jack asked me how much longer I was going to keep mending his old shirts, I went out and bought him six new ones. I was glad I did, too, because he looked so nice in them. He really has a marvelous build for a man of forty-five. I wouldn't tell him, though, for it would only embarrass him. I guess he thinks he'd embarrass me if he ever gave me a compliment, but I wouldn't be embarrassed a bit. It would please me no end. But I suppose there's just nothing about me that's worth complimenting.

I'm not complaining. I consider myself lucky to be married at all, especially to Jack Conmar. He's very handsome, only he doesn't have the kind of job where anyone notices it. He was thirty-nine years old when his mother died, and if you ever saw a lost soul, Jack was it. I used to cook at the diner where he ate lunch every day, but he never had much to say to me. I felt so sorry for him after he lost his mother, but the only thing I could do

was give him extra-large portions of everything. I guess it worked, though, for he began to smile at me.

I wasn't kidding myself. It was no head-over-heels love affair. I could never hope for one of those. I was already forty-four years old—five years older than him, I found out—and when you've got all that against you besides being short and dumpy and nearsighted, well, anything goes. He needed somebody to take care of him and I needed somebody to take care of, and that's all there was to it. He thinks it was his idea, of course, and I'll never tell him different.

After Wilma moved in, she started coming over every day to have coffee with me, but since the night of the sea serpent she doesn't do it as often. She did come over one afternoon, though, to model a new bathing suit she had bought.

"Thirty-seven fifty I paid for it," she said.

"For—*that*? But there isn't half a yard of material in it!"

"It's the design that costs, honey. And you've got to admit this is an extremely strategic design." The words didn't mean much, but I got the general idea. "I've never seen you in the water, Sophie."

"I can't swim."

"Oh, that's too bad. Jack swims, doesn't he?"

"He's a real good swimmer. He likes anything that has to do with the water. If it was up to me, I'd rather live in the mountains."

"A man likes someone to share his interests."

"I do the best I can."

She gave me a funny up and down look. "You must be a good cook," she said as she left.

I noticed she had forgotten her cigarettes. I picked them up and dropped them in the trash can. Then I started to bake a batch of brownies, but I guess I wasn't watching those either. They burned and I had to throw them away.

There is this little island off to the south of us. I suppose it was a sandbar at one time and some mangroves washed up on it during a storm and took root and began to grow. Pretty soon the sand built up and the birds started to visit it and then there grew some Australian pines and some sea grapes. Anyway, it must be a couple of miles around by now. It's too far to swim to, but you can get there easily by boat.

King Charlie lives on the island. He thinks he owns it, so that is what he calls himself. Nobody knows where he came from or how old he is, because of that bushy white beard and thick mop of hair. He looks like a giant to me, but

when you are only five feet tall, everyone looks big. Jack says he's way over six feet, though. He could probably pick up his little boat if the engine conked out and carry it to the mainland under his arm.

Most people are afraid of Charlie. I guess it's because he has a voice to match his size. When he laughs, you hang on to your chair so you don't fall off. Everybody has his own ideas about Charlie. Some people say he is a rich eccentric who ran away and buried his fortune on the island so his greedy relatives wouldn't get it. Others say he's a political refugee or a disguised writer or a no-good bum. Whatever he is, he keeps pretty much to himself, coming to the mainland every so often to sell fish or clams he has collected. All the housewives buy them, because they are afraid not to. Not that he has ever threatened anyone, but you just never know what he's going to do next.

Wilma was sitting in my kitchen one morning when Charlie clomped up the steps, strode into the room and slung a sack of clams onto my table, leaving without saying a word.

"What was *that*?" asked Wilma, sitting up straighter.

I told her about King Charlie. "People think he's crazy because of the things he does. Like leaving stuff. If he likes you, he won't sell

you his fish—he'll give them to you. He used to leave me so much fish I finally had to beg him to stop."

Wilma's mind must have got stuck about halfway through my story. "Do you think he's really got a fortune buried out on that island?" she asked.

"Of course not. Where would Charlie get a fortune?"

"You're as bad as your husband, Sophie. No imagination at all. I can think of a million places he could get it. And I can think of a million places to spend it."

The next day was Saturday, Jack's day for doing chores. I expected him to clean out the garage, but Wilma came over and said she was having trouble with her refrigerator. I didn't see Jack again until lunchtime.

"Garage needs cleaning," he told me between mouthfuls of crab salad.

"I thought you wanted to do it."

"I haven't finished Wilma's refrigerator yet."

When I finished cleaning the garage, I went inside to take a shower. When I finally came out to the kitchen, I found a note on the table from Jack saying he had driven Wilma to the store because her car wouldn't start. The store had been closed for two hours by the time they got back. Jack didn't have much to say, just mumbled some-

thing on his way to the shower about a flat tire and no spare and no gas stations open. He must have had to do a lot of walking. He looked worn out.

I decided to sit on the beach the next morning while Jack fished. I put on a long-sleeved muu-muu and a floppy straw hat to protect me from the sun. I was sitting under the umbrella, my face smeared with suntan lotion, when Wilma appeared. She was wearing the thirty-seven fifty bathing suit. I still couldn't see that much money in it, but I guess Jack appreciated it. He went right over to talk to her. I watched them, feeling like a beached whale.

All of a sudden Wilma bent over, her arms across her stomach. Jack dropped his fishing pole and grabbed her. By the time I could get to my feet, he was halfway to the house with her in his arms. She seemed to be in pain.

It was quite a day. I phoned for a doctor, who came and said it was a touch of ptomaine, nothing serious. Jack, meanwhile, was charging around her apartment in a frenzy.

"Your wife's going to be all right," the doctor assured him. I tried not to laugh, picturing the doctor's face if I should tell him Jack was only her neighbor.

Wilma, weak and exhausted, told

us from her bed that she had eaten some fish she found in her refrigerator.

"You *found* it?" asked Jack.

"Yes. Somebody must have left it for me when we were in town yesterday."

"Who would do a thing like that?"

"King Charlie often leaves fish for people he likes," I said.

"*Tainted* fish?" asked Jack.

"Maybe it wasn't spoiled when he left it," I replied. "You said the refrigerator wasn't working, didn't you?"

"Oh, that's right," said Wilma.

"Well, no harm done," I said, getting to my feet. "I'll bring you a bowl of soup, Wilma."

We were having supper a couple of nights later when Wilma burst into the house, waving something above her head.

"Look at this!" She slapped it down on the table between us. It was a small cloth doll with shiny black hair piled on top of its head and it was dressed in a bikini. From the center of its chest protruded a long pin.

"What's that?" asked Jack.

"It's a voodoo doll! I found it on my bed."

"It's cute," said Jack.

"*Cute!* Don't you know what a voodoo doll is? Somebody is trying to kill me!"

"It's probably a joke," I said. "Sit down and have a cup of coffee."

I could tell that Wilma disturbed Jack. He had never had much experience with dependent women. Although his mother had been an invalid, she had always managed to fend for herself and take reasonable care of her son. Maybe if she had spared herself more, she would have lived longer.

Jack has had a hard life and I do my best to make up for it. I cook everything he likes and keep the house real clean and Jack never has any buttons missing. I make all my own clothes, and that's a big saving. Of course, they don't look like those gorgeous shifts Wilma wears, but then I don't look like Wilma, either. How she can sit in the sun all day and still look so beautiful is beyond me. Maybe if I spent as much time on myself as she does—oh, there I go again. I just don't have the material to work with in the first place.

The next day Wilma asked if she could use the outboard. "I'd like to see what the island looks like."

"King Charlie doesn't care much for company," I told her.

"I don't think he'll mind me," she said.

I sat down on the porch and watched her shove off, slim and tanned in a bathing suit I hadn't seen before. It was black, all in one

piece, but with a lot of see-through places in it. I wondered if I'd ever have the courage to wear a suit like that, if I was ever lucky enough to be as slender as Wilma.

I saw her beach the boat and throw the anchor up on the sand. I was glad Jack had bought such a good pair of binoculars. It was the first time I had used them. Wilma disappeared into the trees and I put the glasses down. She would probably spend a nice afternoon getting acquainted with King Charlie.

But she didn't. About fifteen minutes later she came flying out to the boat, snatching up the anchor on the way. King Charlie followed and stood at the water's edge watching her struggle to get the engine started. She must have thought he was chasing her, but if he wanted to catch her, all he had to do was step into the water and pluck her out of the boat.

She jammed it into reverse, making a sharp turn that almost capsized the small boat, and came toward the mainland so fast it looked as though she was skimming over the top of the water.

"That old goat!" she gasped when she finally got back. "That lecherous old goat!"

"I told you King Charlie didn't go for company."

"That's what you think! He went



for me! Like a four alarm fire!"

"Maybe you shouldn't have worn a bathing suit like that."

"How was I to know? I assumed he was civilized."

"Did he tell you where the money's buried?"

She gave me a funny look. "What kind of a crack is that?"

"Isn't that why you went out there?"

She reared her head back and looked down her nose at me. "Sometimes I wonder if you have any brains at all, Sophie Conmar!"

The nights were getting hotter

and Jack was coming home from work more cranky and tired than ever. The hot weather always affected him this way. He used to come home, take a shower and sit out on the porch after supper in an old pair of shorts until it was cool enough to go to bed. But this year he took up night swimming, staying out till eleven, twelve o'clock. I worried about him at first, but I guess I shouldn't have. Jack is a good swimmer and I'd be sure to hear him shout if anything went wrong, like getting a cramp or something. So I just put it out of my mind and kept busy with my needlework.

But the swimming was doing something for Jack. It was relaxing him and putting him in a better mood. I wondered if it was relaxing him too much; sometimes he didn't even hear me when I spoke to him.

I had fixed him some cocoa one night after his swim and he was just sitting down at the table when a shriek from next door lifted him right out of his chair. I followed him into Wilma's apartment.

She was standing by the bed staring down at something. Jack hurried to her side and I looked around them to see a carving knife buried in the mattress.

"Right where I would have been if I was in bed!" wailed Wilma.

"When did it happen?" I asked.

"I don't know. I came in and there it was." She turned and laid her face on Jack's shoulder. She's as tall as he is, so she didn't look too graceful. I guess she wasn't too comfortable either, because she lifted it again and looked into his eyes. "What am I going to do, Jack? Someone's trying to kill me!"

"Take it easy," Jack said, pulling her close to him. He saw me watching, so he patted her back awkwardly. "She's all upset," he told me.

"Have you noticed how nothing ever happens to her in the daytime?" I said. *Only when you're around to pat her shoulder, I thought.*

For the next three days and nights a storm hung in the air. The water was restless, and Jack said the bad weather would soon reach us. The days were humid with heavy air that pressed around me like a blanket. I didn't think Jack should go night swimming with the water stirred up like that, but he shrugged and went anyway. Once in a while I could hear him laugh out there in the dark, depending on if the wind was blowing. So I'd sit in the house and stitch faster on my embroidery. I had three-quarters of a rosebush done before I discovered I had used brown thread.

On the fourth night the storm still hadn't come and Jack and I were in bed, but neither of us could sleep. He kept tossing and turning and I stayed as close to my edge as possible so as not to disturb him. Finally he lay still. I hardly dared to breathe. My leg was cramped, but I wouldn't have moved it for anything. At least I thought I wouldn't have. Then all at once the room seemed to fill with sound. In the first second or two I thought the storm had broken, but I must have been half asleep myself, because I soon realized that it was King Charlie's thunderous laugh, and a shrill scream from Wilma. Jack and I leaped out of bed just as a lamp crashed to the floor next door—six ninety-eight at the five and ten—and a door slammed.

"What are you afraid of?" roared Charlie.

We got to our livingroom just as Wilma plunged through the door, her long black hair falling down her back, and her nightgown—My eyes popped. No wonder Charlie had been roaring. I went back to my bedroom to get her a robe. Jack just stood there, his hair all mussed up, his mouth open. I wondered if he was awake yet.

"He's after me!" said Wilma as I helped her put on the robe, though she might as well not have bothered since she left it hanging open.

"Charlie's the one who's trying to kill me!"

"Charlie?" said Jack, regaining consciousness. "Why should he want to kill you?"

"Because I called him an old goat! Because he's crazy!"

I heard Charlie's outboard start up. "Charlie wouldn't kill anybody," I said.

"How do you know?" demanded Wilma. "You said he was a nut. He left me that fish, didn't he? And he could have made that voodoo doll."

"Charlie is clever with his hands," I admitted, "but I still don't think—"

"You can't tell about someone like Charlie," said Jack.

"Well, he's gone now," I said to Wilma. "You'll be all right."

"I won't be able to shut my eyes."

"I'll sit on your porch until you're asleep," said Jack.

The storm never did come, and by Saturday Wilma had calmed down enough to polish her nails, set her hair and ride into town with Jack to do some shopping. They came back before noon and Jack carried Wilma's bundles inside for her. I was washing my kitchen windows when I heard Jack's voice.

"Say, somebody left you a note."

"They did?" Wilma laughed, a tinkly, musical sound. I wondered

how long it had taken her to learn it. "One of my admirers, no doubt."

There was silence. I could imagine her standing there reading it, with Jack looking over her shoulder. Then I heard her say, "Jack—do you think—it's a joke, isn't it?"

"It doesn't look like a joke to me, Wilma."

"But it's got to be! It's too ridiculous to be serious! 'Be out of town by two o'clock this afternoon or you're dead.' Who would believe a thing like that?"

"But so much has been happening, Wilma. And maybe Charlie isn't—I mean, we don't really know anything about him."

"Why, your own wife said Charlie wouldn't hurt a fly!"

"Don't pay any attention to Sophie. She's not much better than Charlie."

I wrung my rag out so tight it ripped. It was too bad if Jack felt that way about me, but I didn't think it was very nice of him to tell other people about it. I always did the best I could. Someday he might really look at me and see beneath the surface.

"Maybe you better go somewhere for a few days, just to be on the safe side," said Jack.

"Why, Jack baby, you aren't trying to get rid of me, are you?"

I was setting the table when Jack came in. "Was the traffic heavy?" I

asked. "Usually is on Saturdays."

"So-so." Which meant he hadn't noticed. "Wilma wants to go fishing this afternoon."

"That's nice."

"I said I'd take her on account of she doesn't want to take the boat out alone."

"She's taken the boat out alone before."

"She's afraid of Charlie."

I sat on the porch and watched them go. It was five minutes to two when they anchored over the rocks halfway between the mainland and the island. It was exactly two o'clock when the rifle bullet slammed into the side of the boat. Jack dropped his pole, grabbed Wilma and pulled her with him into the water. They must have surfaced close to the boat, because I couldn't see their heads in the water.

Then I saw them. Actually, the first thing I saw was the splashing. I wondered what was going on. I went inside for the binoculars and got back in time to see Jack sock Wilma on the chin. Then he heaved her into the boat and climbed in himself. He must have dropped to the floor beside her. They waited about ten minutes, probably to see if there would be any more shots. Then Jack started the engine, pulled up the anchor and headed for the mainland.

As soon as they were close enough, Wilma was out of the boat and running toward the house full tilt. She didn't even say hello to me. Jack ignored me too as he followed her inside.

"Look, I told you I was sorry," he said. "I had to sock you. You were hysterical."

"I have had it! When people start taking potshots at me, you can be pretty sure they're not kidding."

"But Wilma, I told you we'll go to the police."

"Oh, sure! And can you prove one bit of it? Did you see Charlie leave the fish or the doll? Did you see him try to stab me or shoot me? Did you?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Okay. So they can't touch him. So good-bye."

"But Wilma, what about me?"

"What do you mean, what about you?"

"Just that. How about—us?"

"Jack, you're just about as dumb as your wife. You two deserve each other."

"But I thought you loved me!"

"Did I ever tell you so?"

"Well, no—but words aren't everything."

"And neither are actions, dad. You were an amusing diversion, but it won't take me long to find another one. And this time I think I'll stay in the civilized world and

leave nature all to the primitives."

Jack was pale under his tan when he came in. Wilma hadn't even said good-bye to me, but I didn't care. Jack was here now and that was all that mattered.

"I'm making pot roast for supper," I said.

"Okay."

"And would you rather have apple pie or pudding for dessert?"

"Doesn't matter." He took a long shower before supper and he looked more like himself when he sat down at the table.

"I decided to serve the pie," I said.

"Okay."

I was wearing a new dress I had made last week and my hair was combed a little different. I saw him looking at it. He finished his meal and sat back. "You sure can cook, Sophie."

"Thank you, dear. That's only one of my talents."

He scraped at the tablecloth with his fingernail. "Wilma's gone," he said, not looking at me.

"I know."

"Sophie, there's something I

ought to tell you. About Wilma and me."

"Yes?"

His face got red. "She, uh, kind of liked me."

"I know."

"And I liked her too. Not the same as you, of course. I mean, she was different from you. She was—beautiful—and she needed me. At least, she acted like she needed me. She was sort of helpless. She made me feel—different."

"I understand, Jack."

"You always do." He smiled at me and I felt good all over.

"Would you like to take a walk on the beach?" I asked.

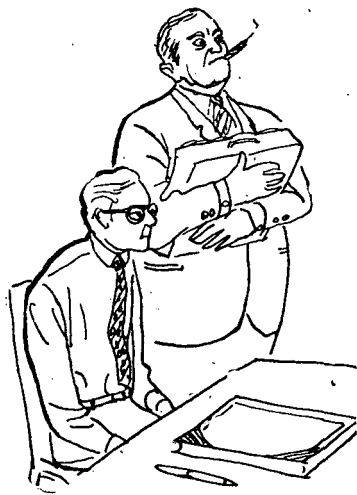
"What about the mosquitoes?"

"I'll take my sweater." I went to the closet to get it. I glanced at the rifle standing in the corner, as if it hadn't been moved for years.

He took my hand as we stepped outside. I haven't seen such a lovely night in months. The moonlight is bright on the water. Jack is still holding my hand. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if we end up looking for sea serpents.



That interim of life between youth and maturity is often, and justifiably, regarded as the incubator of short-sighted ambition.



It was just nine-thirty when Kohler and I finished making up the weekly payroll envelopes for the two hundred employees of the Bayport branch of Langdon Industries. I entered a final notation in my ledger, closed it, leaned back in my chair, removed my horn-rimmed glasses and rubbed wearily at my eyes.

Kohler, the branch manager, a short, plump, gray-eyed man nearing his mid-sixties, took a fresh

cigar from the pocket of his immaculate sharkskin suit. "Been a long day, eh, Stephens?" he said.

"Yes, sir," I said. "A very long day."

"Thursday always is."

"Yes, sir."

He stood and adjusted his striped silk tie. "Well, as soon as I put these

THE RIGHT MOVE

away we can just call it a night."

He lifted the metal tray of envelopes from my desk and started toward the open vault at the rear of

the payroll office—and that was when the door flew open and the man in the Halloween mask came in with a gun in his hand.

"Freeze where you are," he said sharply, "and neither one of you will get hurt."

I had leaned forward at the sound of the door bursting open, and now I remained motionless in that position, my hands on my knees.

Kohler had turned, and he stood with the tray of pay envelopes cradled against his chest like a baby, incredulity on his round, pink face. "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

The man was wearing a black leather jacket and a leather cap, and the mask was one of those rubberized, black-and-white skull things with oblong slits for eye-holes. He said easily, "What do you suppose the meaning of it is, fat boy?"

Kohler moistened his lips. "How did you get in here?"

"Never mind that," the masked man said. "Walk over here and put the tray down on your desk."

Kohler hesitated, and then came forward slowly and placed the envelope tray on the polished surface. "You won't get away with this," he said.

"Is that a fact?"

I watched the gun in the man's

hand. It was pointed at Kohler. While his attention was focused on Kohler, as well, I let my right hand slide down along my trouser leg to the metal handle of the second drawer in my desk. In there, as in both desks in the payroll office, was



a fully-loaded security revolver.

"All right, fat boy," the masked man said. "Sit down in your chair."

Slowly, Kohler complied. I hooked my index finger under the handle and began to inch the drawer open.

"Listen," Kohler said to the masked man, "this building is extremely well-guarded at night. I don't know how you managed to get past the guards this time, but you won't be able to do it twice."

"No? I wouldn't put any hope in those security people of yours if I were you." He chuckled. "They're sort of tied up at the moment."

I had the drawer open now. My fingers touched the smooth, cold grip of the revolver, then closed over it. I eased the safety off with my thumb.

The masked man, motioning with his weapon toward several large, cloth currency sacks on one corner of Kohler's desk, said, "Take one of those and put all the envelopes inside."

I lifted the revolver from the drawer, slowly and carefully, and held it on my right knee.

Kohler began to fill the sack. When he had emptied the tray, the masked man said, "Pull the drawstring and put the sack on the desk where I can reach it."

Kohler's lips were tight, but he obeyed. The masked man took a step forward, his eyes on Kohler. I waited until he had reached forward with his left hand toward the sack, and then I thrust my chair back sharply on its rollers, raised the security revolver and squeezed the trigger three times in rapid succession.

The reports seemed molded into a single explosion that was deafening in the confines of the small office. I felt the recoil of the revolver the length of my arm. The masked

man staggered backward a step or two, and a dark red stain blossomed on the front of his black jacket. He said, "What—" in disbelief, seemed to teeter for an instant, and then fell forward heavily onto the floor.

Kohler was on his feet now, staring alternately at me and at the man on the floor. His face was bloodless. I took a deep, shuddering breath and put the gun on my desk top.

Kohler went to the masked man and knelt; a moment later, he looked up at me. "He's dead."

"Oh," I said softly.

There appeared to be a new respect in Kohler's eyes. "That was a gutty thing to do, Stephens," he said.

"No," I said. "No, it was foolish. If I had missed him, he might have killed us both."

"It was the right move," Kohler insisted. "There's almost twenty-five thousand dollars in those envelopes. Even though we're insured, that kind of theft would have brought a good deal of adverse publicity to Langdon Industries."

I nodded gravely.

Kohler came over to me and put a hand on my shoulder. "I've misjudged you, Stephens," he said quietly. Then he stepped to the telephone on his desk, lifted the receiver and began to dial.

I walked slowly to where the

body lay on the floor and went to one knee beside it. Kohler was speaking into the telephone now.

Using my body to conceal my actions from him, I slid my hand into the pocket of the black jacket. I removed the duplicate key to the side entrance and the detailed map of the building's interior, and dropped both into the breast pocket of my suit coat. Then, with the tip of my forefinger, I raised the mask slightly. *I'm sorry, Pentell, I thought briefly, but you were a static individual; you weren't really going anywhere in this world.*

I lowered the mask again and got up. Turning, my eyes fell on the cloth sack on Kohler's desk. Twenty-five thousand dollars was a great deal of money—but when you compared it to the annual salary of a Langdon Industries'

field representative, or a branch manager, or even a vice-president, it seemed rather insignificant.

I had learned quite a bit about old man Langdon, and knew that the quality he respected above all others in his employees was loyalty. When he learned of what I had done tonight, there was no doubt in my mind that he would see fit to offer me a position much more worthy of such dedication. Perhaps, if I approached him properly, I would become Bayport's new branch manager when Kohler retired at the end of this year.

I smiled a little. There are more ways for a man to get ahead in business these days than one might realize—providing, of course, that he has imagination and enough ambition and courage to make the right move.



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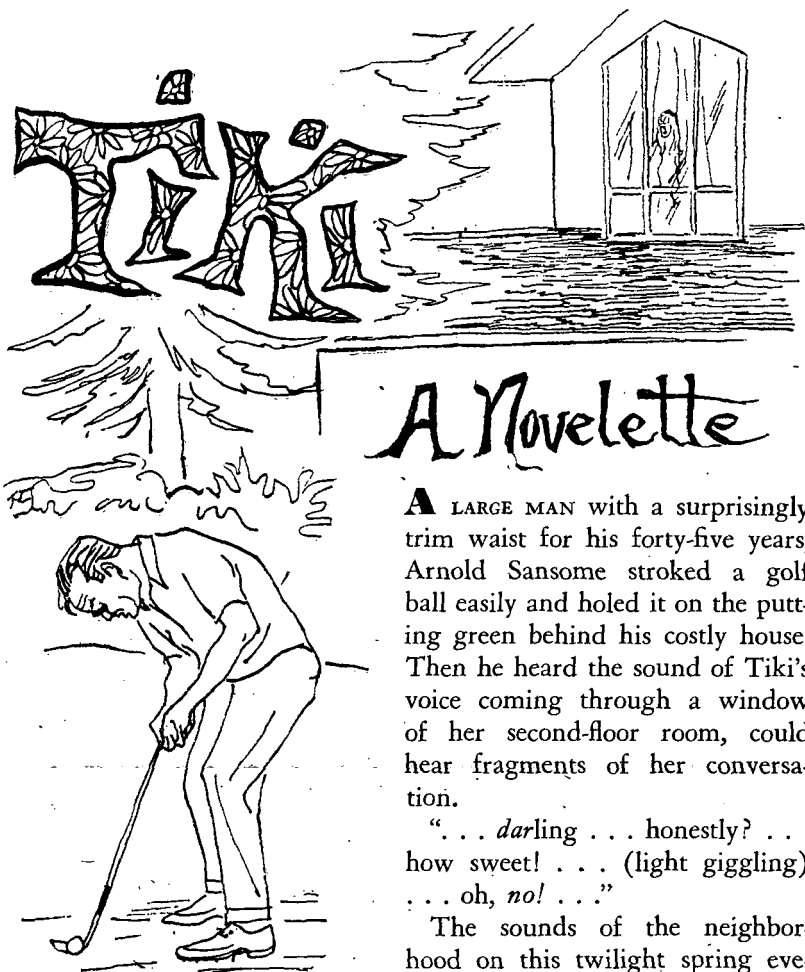
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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

One may sense a predestined life pattern yet—until fruition—be ignorant of the configuration.



A Novelette

A LARGE MAN with a surprisingly trim waist for his forty-five years, Arnold Sansome stroked a golf ball easily and holed it on the putting green behind his costly house. Then he heard the sound of Tiki's voice coming through a window of her second-floor room, could hear fragments of her conversation.

"... *darling* ... honestly? ... how sweet! ... (light giggling) ... oh, *no!* ..."

The sounds of the neighborhood on this twilight spring evening—children shouting, someone

calling over a fence, birds singing, dogs barking, a car moving down the avenue—kept obliterating her words, and feeling guilty and faintly jealous—it was obvious that she was talking to a boy—he proceeded to stroke balls into the various cups on the green. He'd always been well coordinated so he was naturally a good golfer, as well as swimmer, fisherman and hunter, but he'd gotten rusty with his putting lately. He had a high-wager game coming up tomorrow, and he'd always hated to lose to Ed Quigney, his banker, with

by
James McKimney

posed, as he had when he'd met Madge, and then again, years later, when he'd found Abby. Yet . . .

Tiki, in her room, lay on her bed, wearing nothing. She was an incredibly beautiful girl of seven-



whom he always played on Saturday mornings.

The sky was pink and yellow. The air was warm and scented with new flowers. Well, spring had meant one thing for him when he was young and had first met Madge—a hundred or was it a thousand years ago?—but now it meant the winter was definitely done and real construction could commence again, a good and practical attitude for a successful building contractor. Not romantic, when you examined it, but he *could* feel romantic again, he sup-

posed, attractively tanned from sunning beside the swimming pool beyond the putting green, where the man who had adopted her was now practicing. Blonde and green-eyed, with a small nose, full mouth, and a sensuous body, she held a white telephone against her ear and heard the boy saying:

"I don't get it, Tiki! You didn't look at me once, during the four years we were in high school. Now you call me, acting as though we've been the best friends—"

"Aren't we?" she asked, with a

husky inviting note in her voice. She lay on her back, moving one knee back and forth languidly.

"But *why*?"

"I have looked at you, you know; in the halls, in classes. I saw you in all of the plays you were in, and you were marvelous. You're the best actor I've ever seen."

"Okay. I'm the greatest actor in the world. Which is why I'm here in Loganville, that glamorous entertainment capital of the world, getting set to work in Avery's grocery store, so that maybe, *maybe*, I can earn enough to enroll in a second-rate junior college this fall, where some second-rate instructor who could never make it on Broadway or in Hollywood, or anywhere it counts, is going to tell me how to be an even better actor. Yeah, Tiki. This is *me*, Nick Page. I don't like being put down!"

She listened to the bitter edge in his voice, and she was certain that she'd chosen correctly. Nick Page, who—if she had not really been interested in him until now—had definitely been interested in her. She'd seen the way he'd looked at her all of these last years. "I'm not putting you down, Nick. I just thought, well, I'll call *him* because he certainly won't call me. Why haven't you, Nick, any time when we were in school?"

"You're the daughter of Arnold T. Sansome, right?"

"I'm adopted or didn't you know?"

"Yeah, but that's still your old man. Do you know what mine does for a living?"

She stared at the ceiling. "What?"

"Drives one of the city's garbage trucks!"

She smiled. "He serves a very useful purpose then, doesn't he?"

"Come *on*. What do you want from me, Tiki?"

"Are you doing anything tonight? After dinner?"

He was silent.

"Don't you know some place away from things?" she asked, when he didn't reply. "You know. Where we could have a drink or two?"

"A *drink* or two?"

"You don't know very much about me, do you?"

"I guess I don't!"

"Wouldn't you like to?"

"All right, Tiki Sansome. I did have a date with a sweet bird from the south side of town, very lush, very easy, who knows how to meet Nick Page on his own level. I am breaking that date. I am instead meeting Miss Tiki Sansome at Gus' crummy bar at Seventh and Cherry where the bartender'll serve underage if Gus isn't around.

Eight o'clock? And you'd better be there, or I'll come over to that fine house of yours and break your pretty arms!"

She heard the connection breaking and lazily put the telephone on its cradle, laughing softly. Then she swung her legs over the side of the bed and walked gracefully to the window where she could look down at Arnold Sansome. She felt the heat of sudden anger.

He, as well as that woman she could not remember clearly, had come to the Home and got her and brought her to this house, and now she was as surely caged as a zoo-bought animal. Who was he to have done that, anyway?

Tiki whirled around, knowing how much she'd come to hate him, and got dressed. As she finished her makeup, she noticed on the surface of her dressing table the list she'd begun for tomorrow's dinner. She had no interest in cooking, but she'd felt that she should learn how to tell Meg, whom Arnold Sansome employed as cook and maid, the kind of menu to prepare. Arnold had seemed pleased—proving, to her, that he expected her to remain in this prison with him forever, as daughter, hostess, *thing to be possessed*. She'd lost interest in the project quickly, and she knew

now that she would never pursue it.

Makeup completed, she examined her image in the mirror. Her cool appraisal told her she would look absolutely luscious to Nick Page, who was going to do precisely as she wanted him to do, before this was over.

Dinner was served informally in the comfortable recreation room where the large bar was. They sat at a round table. Meg, plump and middle-aged, silent in her endeavor, came in when Arnold had finished his martini. Tiki had not been offered a drink; she was never offered one, but she often poured herself one when Arnold was away. She could wait a little longer to bring that out into the open.

Meg served the first course, cracked crab and drawn butter, and Tiki nibbled at a crab leg delicately, examining the man who had elected to become her official father.

She could leave now, just pack her bags and walk out the door to be rid of him forever, but she'd come to know the comfort of a large house like this, the services of an excellent domestic, the feel of driving a powerful convertible, the possession of expensive clothes, the special attentions which townspeople reserved for the

daughter of one of their most successful citizens. She simply could not give all of that up, but she was going to free herself from him, nevertheless.

"Arnold?" she said, calling him by the name she'd always used. "Do you know what I'd like to do this summer?"

"I guess we haven't discussed it, have we?"

"I'd like to forget about going away to college this fall, that first."

"Really? You don't want to go?"

She shook her pretty head, seeing his eyes lighting. Yes, she knew, he would be content to have her at home for as long as he lived.

"Actually," he said, "a college education is nice. I've never regretted mine. But you're going to be well off all of your life, you know. You won't need to earn money from what you might learn in college. You can buy all the books you want and educate yourself nicely enough."

"I think so," she said, nodding solemnly. "Then there's something else. I want to go to Europe."

"This summer?" He shook his head, frowning. "You've never mentioned that before, Tiki."

"But I've thought about it. I've read about places. Copenhagen, Paris, London, Vienna, Rome—"

"Gee, I don't know, sweetie. I'm

up to here, all summer. You know that. We'd have to fly in and out, practically. But if you want to wait until winter, why, then maybe we—"

"Me, Arnold." She looked at her plate. "Just me, by myself."

"You must be kidding!" he said incredulously.

She looked at him and smiled. "That's true, Arnold. I was. You know I wouldn't want to go anywhere without my wonderful daddy."

Meg came in then, and served spaghetti and meat sauce, with Italian vegetables and a green salad. Before she had gone, Tiki tasted the sauce and said, "Ugh."

Arnold and Meg stared at her in surprise.

"I mean," she said, "blah."

"Is something wrong, missy?" Meg asked worriedly.

"It's the sauce."

Arnold tested his and said, "Tastes fine to me, baby."

"Take mine away," Tiki said, smiling at Meg.

"I made it like I always do!" Meg protested. "The meat was perfectly good—"

"You say," Tiki said accusingly.

Meg spread her plump hands, visibly upset now.

"She gives the best meat to her dog, Arnold."

"Missy! I've never—"

"She does. I swear it. I saw her wrap up the very best and put it in her purse so she could take it home and give it to a dumb dog. Springer, is that his name? He's a mongrel, isn't he?"

"What's got into you tonight, Tiki?" Arnold asked.

Meg, eyes misting, ran from the room.

"At least she saves the *scraps* for us." Tiki got up. "Excuse me, please. I'm not hungry anymore."

Arnold called after her, but she went upstairs to her room without answering, feeling better about everything.

After Meg had finished her work in the kitchen she came into Arnold's study, looking resentful and hurt. He stood up quickly.

"Now, Meg. I don't know what was wrong with Tiki tonight. But—"

"I'll take a cab home," Meg said abruptly.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm driving you, as usual. Meg, I've never pretended to understand women. I didn't understand Madge, and I don't understand Tiki. I guess I don't understand you, either, but you know how I've felt about all of you. Try to let it go. Tiki'll be okay tomorrow. All right?"

"Well—" Meg said. Then she smiled, a smile he'd come to know well during the many years she'd

worked for him. "All right, sir."

Driving her across town, Arnold considered the fact that, no, indeed, he hadn't understood his wife Madge, but he'd loved her until the day she died of the deadly disease that had struck so suddenly. Tiki? She was something else. All that he really understood about the girl was simply that he'd come to love her deeply—although he always had that feeling that she was not like anyone else, that she was apart from things, that she, well . . .

He was remembering back to when he and Madge had decided to adopt a child because they'd failed to have any of their own. Despite the fact that he was well up the success ladder, they somehow couldn't find an available adoption. Madge, who knew how to be assertive, decided they should try the Orphan's Home at the edge of town.

There, looking out on the children's playground, she had said, "Arnie, that child! She's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen!"

Although the officials had admitted that Tiki had gone out for trial adoption four times previously, they had also admitted that she had been returned each time. Two families had simply felt uncomfortable with her in the house. The other two had complained that

she'd shown cruel tendencies regarding other children and pets, but there was nothing about her described behavior that indicated to Arnold that she had demonstrated any traits beyond what he considered a normal cruelty often found in children. Nor had Madge been discouraged, and days later Tiki was in their home. The child seemed to enjoy the opportunity to live with them.

Arnold recalled Madge coming in from her garden and her beloved fish pond. She'd kissed Tiki, who had been playing inside, sent her upstairs to wash for dinner, and said, "She's a wonderful child, Arnold—a *beautiful* child—and now she's *our* daughter." Arnold, thinking about it seriously, decided there had to be some kind of pattern behind Tiki's winding up in their home, officially adopted. They existed as adults in this life; Tiki existed as a child who needed a home; so the probability that they would come together had existed, and it had happened.

He'd told Madge his theory a long time ago. That was just before she had subjected Tiki to some deserved, but not overly harsh, punishment for disobeying orders. A bottle of lye had been poured into the fish pond, killing everything in there. Meg had stated resolutely that she'd seen Tiki do it,

although the child had just as resolutely denied it.

Later, Madge had said to him, eyes looking shadowed, "I saw the way she looked at me when she came in, Arnie, right after Meg said she'd seen her pouring lye in the pond. Like a . . . vicious animal."

Shortly after that Madge had become ill, and the responsibility of Tiki had been handed wholly to him.

"Meg?" he said now, driving. "Did that actually happen? Tiki pouring lye into Madge's fish pond?"

"That was such a long time ago, Mr. Sansome."

"Well, I thought perhaps you felt, then, that Tiki might have been an intrusion into our house, a bother for you, so—"

"She did it, sir. I saw her."

He nodded, having known all along that the child had indeed done it, but it was a long time ago. He knew only one thing about Tiki now: he loved her, probably too much, because once Madge was gone he'd given all of his feelings to the child.

There had been that interval, of course, when he'd met and fallen in love with Abby, but when he'd announced that he was going to marry her, Tiki had objected so strenuously that he'd kept postpon-

ing it until Abby had met and married someone else.

So it was all Tiki, now, the recipient of his deepest love; and no, he would never understand her.

At the east end of town Sansome turned into a short cul-de-sac where the house in which Meg lived stood alone, at the edge of a field. The house was his, as was all of the land stretching behind it—an area live with game. He enjoyed hunting that land, and he'd tried to interest Tiki in the sport. He had, in fact, taught her to shoot a lightweight carbine, but her interest hadn't held for long.

"You know," Meg said, as he stopped in front of the small house where there was a wire-fenced yard, "I've always appreciated your allowing me to live here, Mr. Sansome, with no rent, and—"

"Now, Meg." He grinned, looking at a small, furry black dog leaping up and down on the other side of the fence. "You're leaving Springer outside these days?"

"It's warm enough now. Mrs. Tobley, down the street, sees that his water dish is filled."

"You think a lot of that dog, don't you, Meg?"

"I don't think of him as a dog, really. He's more like a person, like my own child."

Tiki saw the neon announcing

Gus' bar on the shabby street in the southern section of Loganville. She got out of her large convertible and strode to the entrance without trepidation or hesitation.

When she stepped inside, a half dozen dusty-looking men seated along an ancient bar examined her from beautifully tended blonde hair to lovely legs displayed beneath her mini-skirt. There was silence as she crossed a dirty floor toward the youth who was sitting in a booth. When she sat down, a faint hum of voices finally stirred the beer-scented air.

"You meant it, didn't you?" Nick Page said.

She looked at him, smiling in agreement. He was a tall, slim boy, her age. His hair was light brown and long, although it was neatly combed. His dark eyes were searching hers, she knew, for some sign as to why she had wanted to do this. His smile was the kind that could melt girls, as it had so often done in the halls, classrooms, and from the stage when he performed in plays. Everyone in school had known that he wanted to be a professional actor. Everyone in school had also known that he'd piled up a busy juvenile record when he was younger: theft, assault, as well as one charge of armed robbery and one of rape, neither of which had ever been wholly proved.

Tiki found satisfaction in using a boy like this to achieve her ultimate freedom from Arnold T. Sansome—especially this boy, because he thought he was hard and tough. Well, she decided, he was going to learn who was really hard and tough.

A fat bartender wearing a stained white shirt, eyes fish-like, came waddling around the bar to the booth. "Too good to get up and get something for you and the lady, Nick?" he rumbled.

"See?" Nick Page said to Tiki. "This place is class."

"If it was," the bartender said, "you wouldn't get service."

Nick placed several dollar bills on the table. "What do you want, Tiki?"

"Seven high?"

"I'll have a rum and coke, Harry."

The fat man shrugged and ambled to the bar, mixed the drinks and returned with them. He picked up four dollar bills, walked back to the bar and didn't make change.

"Expensive drinks," Tiki said.

"For you, honey, anything."

"Well, you've always impressed me, you know."

"You want me to sign an autograph for you?"

"I might want you to do a lot of things."

"Like?"

"Slow down, Nick. We started out fast today. Now we slow down."

He tasted his drink, then seemed to relax. "I never figured you for wanting anything like this."

"Nobody's ever figured what I want. Don't try. It never works."

"Then I'll just lean back and enjoy, all right?"

"That precisely," she said, slowly, putting a sexy huskiness in her voice.

Then, before she had finished half of her drink, a tall man with a broad face stepped in and looked at her directly. His face tightened; he strode across the room, said to the bartender, "How many times do I tell you, Harry?"

"Gus," Nick explained unhappily. "He almost never comes in this early."

The tall man came over to their table, staring at Tiki. "Who's the girl, Nick?"

"Shirley Temple."

"She's too young for Shirley Temple. Get her out of here and don't come back."

Grumbling, Nick Page slid out of the booth and escorted Tiki outside, saying bitterly, "Anyone else, he'd have turned his back. But Nick Page? Oh, no. You make a couple of mistakes, get in a little trouble, they remember it forever. I want away from this town, so I

can prove out. Then I come back and spit on them!"

He stood in the neon light, face tense with anger. Finally he relaxed as his eyes found her convertible. He stared at it admiringly and motioned toward an old sedan up the street. "That's what *I* drive—when it goes."

"Want to drive mine?" she asked softly.

"Sure."

She gave him the keys and moments later he was speeding across town, darting on and off neighborhood avenues, testing his skill against the big car. Then they were hurtling out of town, south, toward the river. He slowed and pulled off on a small dirt road. There was a sliver of moon and the water running just below caught its light.

"This is a *car*," he said.

"For the money Arnold paid for it, it should be."

"Is that what you call him—Arnold?"

"Yes."

"Where were you when you were adopted?"

"The Home, outside of town."

"Rough there?"

"Now and then."

"And Arnold Sansome came along to fix it. You lucked out, baby."

"Maybe."

"How maybe? A house like you live in? A car like this? All the money you can spend?"

She shrugged. "I want to talk about you."

"Okay. You've been eating your heart out for me for years. I'll try to believe it. What about me?"

"What do you want out of life?"

"I thought everyone knew."

"An actor, yes. A star."

"That's it."

"Why don't you, then? Why Avery's grocery store this summer? Why a second-rate junior college this fall? Why not go and *be*?"

He stared at her in the moonlight, then began laughing softly, shaking his head. "Honey, you've been away from what *is* too long! In the first place I don't have fare. I'd have to hitchhike either to New York or L.A. What then? I've got one, repeat one, decent suit on the rack at home. I paid fifty-nine-fifty for it, and it looks like fifty-nine-fifty."

"But—"

"Now listen to me. Remember when that touring play was here, a real play, with Rod Grange playing the lead? Well, I caught him leaving after a performance, and I told him I wanted to be an actor, and he drove me to this diner for coffee. I've never told anyone else. But it happened. Rod Grange!"

"Well, wow!" The exclamation

sounded stupid and juvenile in her ears, but she knew it was the sort of reaction he would expect.

He nodded, eyes getting brighter. "We sat at that counter, and we talked for two hours—him mostly, me just listening, see? And he told me the facts of life. You don't show up in Hollywood with a fifty-nine-fifty suit and try for it—they'll laugh you out of town. You've got to turn up like you don't care or need, and make them beg. So how would I do? I'm so damned hungry, Tiki, it shows right through. They'd have me on my knees in five seconds."

"New York then?"

"I could maybe get away with that. But just *maybe*. I've got talent, I know that."

"I know it, too, Nick."

"But it's not really developed. New York is a monster if you're not ready. I'm not ready. Not yet."

She nodded. "So that's why Avery's grocery store and a second-rate junior college?"

"It's all I can do while I get closer to being ready. If I could speed it up, somehow . . ."

"Maybe you can."

He'd been looking across the dimly lit river. Now he turned and stared at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that. Maybe you can."

"Don't fool around with me,

Tiki, when it comes to this. I mean it!"

"So do I."

"How?"

"Maybe I can do something for you."

His eyes thinned. "What are you going to do for me, Tiki?"

"Let's get to know each other a little better first, shall we? Meantime, what can you do for *me*?"

He remained motionless for a moment, then reached for her. Minutes later, she pushed away from him, saying, "Too fast."

"Not for me."

She knocked his hands away, eyes shining. "What you're going to do now is drive back to where your car's parked, get out, then do whatever you want to do while I drive home."

"What's the matter? You don't want your old man to know you've been out with the son of a garbage collector?"

"That's right. Only for reasons you don't understand. If you're a good boy, you'll understand quickly enough. Let's go, huh? While we're still friends?"

He shook his head, letting his breath out. "I don't understand you at all!"

She smiled and patted his cheek. "We're going to do fine, Nick Page. Just fine."

When Tiki got home, she saw

the note she'd left on a hallway table telling Arnold that she was going to the library while he was driving Meg home. As usual, he'd written a reply before going to bed early:

"Hope you found what you wanted to read. Sleep good, honey. See you in the morning after I clobber Ed Quigney at golf. Love, Arnold."

Once again a faint heat of anger warmed her cheeks. He would have developed the same affection for a dog or cat, had he chosen to bring one home instead of her; but a dog or a cat might have been content for his care and attention, licking his hand happily in response.

She had something else in mind, for him.

Saturday was Meg's day off, and Tiki was free to traverse the house alone and unobserved. After she'd drunk a cup of coffee from the electric maker Arnold had set up for her, she walked into the living-room. The recreation room was beyond, its sliding glass door facing the putting green and the swimming pool beyond. A hallway was to the right of the livingroom. She walked down that to the doorway which opened to Arnold's study.

It was a large room furnished with rugged, masculine furniture: desk, reading chair, bar, gun cabi-

net. The walls were shelved and contained his books on construction and philosophy as well as a great collection of paperback Westerns.

Tiki opened the bar and poured herself a quantity of vodka. Sipping, she walked idly about the room, stopping in front of the gun cabinet, made of hand-rubbed hardwood, holding ten weapons. She touched its glass door, knowing that he never locked it. Perhaps he



expected World War II to begin again and would need the guns at the ready. She somehow hated him most when he talked of that particular era of which she had no knowledge, experience or interest; and he talked about it often.

She moved to his desk, which was covered by papers containing figures written in his fine script. There was a Bible, as well as a photograph album and a history of the infantry division with which he'd served in combat, further proof, she decided scathingly, of his dedication to that which was no more.

She opened the album and looked at endless photographs of the woman who had said (he'd told her a million times), ". . . the most beautiful creature I've ever seen!" Well, what had they been shopping for? Tiki snapped the album shut and threw it to the desk. Feeling her blood warming with excitement and the liquor, she decided Arnold Sansome would soon find out what he'd really gotten.

She left the study, crossed the recreation room and went out through one of the sliding doors. She walked past the putting green and continued over the lawn until she reached the garage. Arnold had left the doors open, as was his habit. She stepped inside and looked at the abandoned gun rack there,

where he had once kept his rifles. She found a cloth and dusted the wood.

Returning to the kitchen, she picked up the phone from a table and dialed Nick Page's home number. He answered immediately, as though he'd been waiting for the call. "I was going to call you, Tiki."

"Now listen!" she said tensely. "You don't ever come over here until I say so! And don't phone me until I tell you! Do you understand?"

"What's the matter with you, anyway?" he asked in surprise. "Last night—"

"Nick," she whispered, "I'm sorry. I know it doesn't make any sense to you, yet. But it will. Then you'll like it. I guarantee."

"When do I see you again?" he asked, finally.

"Where can I pick you up?"

"Calanga Park?"

"Fine. Two o'clock?"

"That's a long way off."

"But I'll be thinking of you. Even that turns me on, you know."

When Arnold Sansome got home shortly after noon, Tiki had uncharacteristically made sandwiches and served them with iced tea beside the swimming pool.

"Well, this is great, Tiki," he said, obviously pleased.

"Thank you, Arnold. How was the game?"

"Ed was hitting like Nicklaus on the fairways, but he couldn't make a putt. I beat him by six strokes."

"Some day I'm going to learn how to play," she said, a cheek dimpling. "That way we could play together."

"Now that would be real nice, honey."

"I thought, too, I'd start practicing shooting again. So maybe we could go hunting, like you said you wanted to do."

"I didn't think you were really interested, Tiki."

"Well, I guess I am, after all. I was thinking we *could* go to some foreign places after the building season's over. Even Africa, maybe. I know you'd want to hunt there. So why shouldn't I, too? Wouldn't it be more fun that way?"

"You bet it would!"

"You see? You're stuck with me, Arnold. I guess you know you will be for a long time."

"Am I complaining?" Then his face took on a serious expression. "Tiki, you're the prettiest thing in this world, but I suppose I'm a little jealous because I know that one of these days you'll be leaving me to marry someone."

She shook her head. "I just don't see how any boy, no matter how wonderful he is, can ever match up to you. I'd always make the

comparison—I can't help that—so he'd just have to be a lot greater than any boy I've met yet."

After lunch, Tiki got the carbine from Arnold's study and put it, with ammunition from the garage and some empty tin cans Meg had discarded, on the back seat of her convertible. The rifle was an automatic, and Arnold had taught her how to adjust the scope. She hadn't expected to use the weapon on anything other than some worthless animal. Now, there would be a real use for it.

Feeling closer to that freedom she wanted so much, she picked up Nick Page at a corner of Calanga Park, then drove toward the land Arnold Sansome owned at the edge of town.

"What's with the rifle?" Nick asked, looking at it.

"Shooting."

"Shooting what?"

"I'll let you know."

Tiki was wearing shorts and blouse, and Nick, staring appreciatively at her legs, asked, "Where are we going?"

"The country."

"That's a great place to go with you, Tiki—to the country."

She left the city limits on a narrow road which wound through trees and brush. She stopped in a clearing. Nick reached for her, and she let him kiss her briefly. Then

she pushed away, picked up the rifle and ammunition box, and asked Nick to set up the cans in a line thirty yards away. When she began firing, she hit half of them.

She repeated the effort a dozen times, and Nick said, "Getting better. But why?"

"Let's walk."

"Sure. Deep in. Where we're really alone."

"Cool down, Nick."

They moved past trees over wild grass until Tiki saw the small house, perhaps a hundred yards in the distance. The plump woman stepped outside into the wire-fenced yard, and the small, furry black dog trotted beside her. The woman bent down, patted the animal fondly, then went back into the house, leaving the dog in the yard.

Tiki lifted the rifle into firing position and looked at the animal through the cross hairs of the scope.

"Don't aim that thing in the direction of that house," Nick said. "You'll—"

But the rifle cracked, and the dog was knocked off its feet, kicking. When the plump woman came rushing out, it had quit moving, and Nick and Tiki were out of sight.

Driving away, Tiki smiled. Nick Page stared at her in bewilderment.

"*Why?*" he asked.

"You'll find out." She continued

around the edge of town, then stopped again near the river and held her arms out for him. He kissed her several times, with mounting vigor, then she stopped him.

"Come on, Tiki!"

"What will you do for me, Nick?"

"What do you *want*?"

She told him, swiftly, precisely, in detail.

He stared at her again, protested, "Your own father!"

"He isn't my father!"

"Well, I know, but—"

"I hate him! I always have. He's all that stands in the way of my having everything!"

"You're not of age yet. And you say there'll be a guardian appointed if anything happens to your old man."

"Yes. Ed Quigney. But if you'd ever seen him look at me, you'd know how I can take care of that. He'll give me permission to travel anywhere, with as much money as I need. We can tour Europe all summer, Nick. Then you can have anything you want. Money buys connections. If you want to go to school in New York, I'll help you go anywhere you want. Actor's Studio? Would you like that, Nick?"

He was holding her again. "Don't kid me, Tiki!"



"I'm not. Just help me do this. What can they do to you? Give you a speeding ticket? Read you the riot act, then let you go? By that time it'll be done. Don't you want

what I've been talking about?"

"Yes," he whispered, and kissed her again.

"Don't you want me, too, Nick?"

"I want you, too."

"Will you, Nick?" she cajoled.

"Yes . . ."

That evening, Tiki placed two TV dinners in the oven to heat, and she and Arnold Sansome sat down at a kitchen table to wait.

"When I got over to Meg's place," he said, "I got her to calm down a little. Then I had Dr. Fritz prescribe something. I think she'll sleep tonight. I buried the dog in back of the house."

"I don't understand how she could feel that way about a dumb animal."

"Well, Meg's always lived alone, honey. She thought a lot of the dog." He sat looking at the table, frowning a little. "You took the rifle out to do some shooting, Tiki. I figured you'd go over to my property back of Meg's. But, well—that rifle's got a better range than maybe you'd think, and—"

"I didn't go over there, Arnold! I drove south to the river and practiced there!"

Feeling relieved, he reached over to pat her hand. "I'm sorry. I guess somebody was hunting over there without my permission. The dog caught a stray bullet that shouldn't have been fired anyway. Well, I'll buy her a new puppy next week. Doing anything tonight, by the way? I thought maybe we could play some cards if you'd like—"

"Oh, Arnold, I'm sorry. I'm go-

ing to meet Annie Wiles. We're going to this movie downtown. I promised. Now I wish I hadn't."

"Well, that's okay, baby. You have a good time."

Tiki could see the disappointment in his eyes, as the telephone began ringing. She picked it up quickly, already having forgotten about Meg and her stupid dog. "Hello?"

"Baby," said Nick Page.

"Who is this?" she asked, just as she'd planned.

He laughed softly, then began enumerating a number of indecent proposals. She listened, forcing a look of shock on her face. She hung up.

Arnold was looking at her with concern. The telephone began ringing again, and he started to reach for it.

Tiki stopped him, saying, "Don't, Arnold. I don't want to talk to him again."

The ringing finally stopped.

"Well, who was it, Tiki?" Arnold asked.

"This boy."

"What did he want?"

"I couldn't tell you. I *wouldn't* tell you anything like that. He—"

"He *what*, Tiki?"

"Well, he was in my class at school, but I didn't think he ever even looked at me. Then, the other day, I was downtown and he

stopped me on the sidewalk. He said some terrible things."

She looked at Arnold's face as she went through her performance, and saw him paling.

"What terrible things?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Well . . . *dirty* things!" She saw shock in his eyes. He had always thought that she knew nothing about such things—that, under his protection, she never would. He had no idea what an orphan's home was like. She'd found out about the worst sort of things before she'd learned how to count.

"*Who*, Tiki?" he demanded loudly.

She shook her head, remaining silent.

"Come on! We'll just turn him over to the authorities. There's a law against that!"

"No," she said in a small voice.

"Tiki?"

"You'd have him arrested. Then what? They couldn't do much to him for saying things like that on the telephone, could they? Then he'd be free again. And he'd take it out on me."

Finally he seemed to get control of himself. "All right. I won't do anything too fast, I promise you. But just tell me who he is, Tiki!"

Again she shook her head. "Maybe later, Arnold. Not now. I'm frightened."

"Then you're certainly not going out tonight, not with some kid out there who'd—"

"But I can't *hide* all the time. And I don't want to let him know that it really bothers me. Maybe he'll get tired and forget it. Don't worry, Arnold. I'm just going to a movie with Annie. I'll be all right tonight."

Later that night, in a booth of Gus' bar, with Nick Page sitting across from her, Tiki began drawing on a bar napkin with a ball-point pen.

"His study is just off this hallway." She wrote "study" inside a drawn square. "The hallway goes this way, into the recreation room. There're sliding glass doors there. They open onto the terrace in back of the house. There's a putting green and a swimming pool. Behind the pool is a fence which runs along the alley. Over here is the garage. That's where I've got my rifle, on a rack inside. All right?" She looked up at him with bright, cold eyes.

Nick took the napkin and examined it. "Where do I leave my car?"

"At the end of the alley. Come up by foot to the fence and climb over. You won't have any trouble."

"Then what?"

"Climb over at exactly ninety-three. He's always in his study by

that time, going over plans. It'll be dark. And he'll make sure every light in the house that isn't being used is turned off before he goes into his study. Like he's going broke tomorrow. But *I'll* make sure the lights are *on* in the recreation room at nine-thirty."

Nick nodded, rubbing a back of his hand along the ridge of his jaw. "Okay."

"When you get over the fence, I'll be outside near the garage, with the rifle. Stay in the dark, near the fence, and yell like you've gone berserk. I'll start screaming, like I'm being attacked, and that'll bring him out of that study and down the hall and out through the recreation room. He'll be in the light, then. And I'll—"

Nick, seeing the way her mouth was curling in anticipation, felt a chill running through him. But she'd promised him everything, and he knew that he was going to go through with it.

"As soon as you hear the rifle fired, go back over the fence and run for your car. Drive down the block as fast as you can, with a lot of tire rubber left behind, so it can be heard. Then turn onto Hillary Boulevard and put the accelerator down. That street is always patrolled. They'll pick you up. Just say you lost your head over me. Can you make it convincing?"

"Oh, baby! What an easy role."

"Tell them you wanted me so badly you just went over the fence and caught me outside. My story is that I screamed and broke away, then ran to the garage to get the rifle to protect myself. When I came back out, I fired at the first thing I saw moving. You heard the rifle and took off, figuring it was my father firing at you." She smiled confidently, with satisfaction. "When I phone the police and tell them that I accidentally shot Arnold, thinking it was *you*—" She began laughing, softly. Then she reached across the table and took his hand. "Hey," she whispered, "we're going to have a ball, sweetie."

"Like this afternoon?"

"Like this afternoon, only more so—I'm going to send you to heaven, honey."

"Yes . . ." he said. "But when does it happen, Tiki?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night!" he said, startled.

"But let's not think about that anymore now. Let's just think of us. This place is crowded, do you know that? Let's find where it isn't . . ."

Early the next morning Meg arrived at the large house. When Tiki appeared in the kitchen, she looked at the girl with tear-reddened eyes.

Tiki smiled at her gaily. "How was your day off, Meg? Did you have fun?"

Meg shook her head abruptly. "I lost my dog."

"That's *right*. Arnold did tell me. How very sad."

"He was shot with a gun. When I was coming inside, I saw that gun propped on the old rack in the garage. I don't like guns."

Tiki was pleased, because she'd wanted Meg to notice that rifle in the garage. "Arnold thinks it was just someone hunting on his property without permission. Some people just don't care. He's going to get you a new dog, Meg."

"I don't want another one."

"Suit yourself. I'll have two scrambled eggs, by the way, bacon, toast—and orange juice while I'm waiting. Please try to hurry, if you don't mind. I'm *starved*."

Later, when she went out to lie on the diving board in a bikini to sun, Arnold Sansome stepped into the recreation room and looked out at her—possessively, with pleasure, and yet with a certain pang of unrest because she was so sensuously beautiful.

He heard the telephone ringing and picked up the extension there. "Yes?"

"Mr. Sansome?"

"That's right."

"This is Gus Polente. You don't

know me, but I run a bar on Cherry near Seventh. It ain't much, but it's my living. Now, they've been in there twice. I saw them the first time and told them to leave, but one of my regulars said they were in last night again. I fired my bartender for serving them. I know who your daughter is. Seen her pictures often enough in the society section. Her being in there with some punk like Nick Page is about the best way I know for me to lose my license. So if you want her to run with Page, that's your business. But tell her to stay out of my place, all right?"

"Now just a minute, Mr. Polente. You say my daughter's been in your bar, *served* in your bar?"

"Twice last week, that's right. I'm being honest, and I'm hoping you're not going to get me in trouble."

He looked again at the girl lying outside, feeling stunned. "You say she was with this boy—Nick Page?"

"That's it."

"Well, I remember something about that name. He's been in some trouble, hasn't he?"

"They nailed him on some juvenile stuff. Personally, I think he was into bigger things they couldn't prove. Armed robbery, for one—word gets around, in this neighborhood. Then there was a rape charge

they couldn't actually hang on him. Look, Mr. Sansome, that girl of yours is class. I could see that looking at her. So I've told you how she's spending some of her time. Now you can do about it what you want."

"Thank you, Mr. Polente. I'll see that she isn't in your place again."

Tiki, half-asleep under the hot late-morning sun, opened her eyes as she heard Arnold approaching.

"Tiki?" he said, his voice sounding strangely brittle.

She sat up and looked at him. "Yes, Arnold?"

"Do you want to come over here to the table and sit down, please?"

She got up gracefully, walked along the diving board, then sat down in a metal chair beside him. "What is it, Arnold?"

"Do you know a Nick Page?"

The question came at her so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that she felt herself flushing. Recovering quickly, she said, "I went to school with him."

"Did you go into Gus' bar with him, too?"

She stared at him. "I mean, there's such a sepulchral tone to your voice, Arnold. Positively a last-judgment sound. Honestly."

"Let's not play around with this, Tiki. I got a call from Gus Polente, who owns the place. He says you've been in there twice with this kid,

and served. He doesn't want you in there, and I don't either. What's this all about, anyway?"

Tiki looked down at her bare feet resting against the warm concrete, her mind moving swiftly. Somehow she hadn't thought about the owner of that bar in that distant and foreign neighborhood telling Arnold about her being there with Nick, but suddenly she realized how she could turn it to her advantage.

"Tiki?"

"It wasn't just like that, really."

"Well, then, how was it?"

"Nick Page is the one who has been calling me."

Arnold stared at her intently, mouth thin, skin looking tight. "He's got a juvenile record as long as my arm. For heaven's sake, Tiki! Why did you go into a bar with him?"

"I couldn't help it! He kept stopping me in my car. He said he'd make me pay for it if I wouldn't at least have a drink with him. So I did. Then, the next day, he stopped me again. I had another drink with him. Only, honestly, Arnold, I barely touched that terrible stuff. All I wanted is for him to leave me alone!"

Arnold Sansome stood up abruptly. "All right, Tiki, I'll buy it. But I think it's time I did something about this young man. I'm going to

have a talk with his parents. Then—"

"Arnold, please. I really think everything's all right now. Last night, I said, 'Are you going to leave me alone now?' And he said, 'You really don't care about me, do you?' And I said, 'I honestly don't.' And he said, 'All right, that's your problem, honey. Because all of a sudden I don't care about you anymore.'

"See, Arnold, he's got this big ego thing. He thinks girls drop like flies whenever he looks at them. He thought I'd be the same. But I haven't been. I guess maybe if he's really been drinking—I've heard it, anyway—he turns mean and he'll try anything to get his way. But if he's sober—and he was last night—he won't go on chasing after a girl who doesn't care about him. I don't think there'll be any more trouble—not unless he starts some heavy drinking. In that case, you can do what you think you have to do. I'd want you to—because I think he'd be honestly dangerous. He might even be capable of . . . killing somebody."

Later, Arnold Sansome drove across town toward Meg's house on the edge of his land. He felt guilty pursuing the thing because, of course, he *had* to believe Tiki's explanation—there was no other way he could think about it, yet . . .

After he'd parked, he got out, unlatched the fence gate and walked across the small yard to where Meg had shown him the dead dog.

He revisualized the wound in the animal—a rifle bullet had done it, he'd guessed. Then he kicked a heel into the grass where the bullet had torn into the ground after going through the dog. He estimated the point from which the bullet had come. Then he vaulted over the fence and walked through brush and wild grass in that direction.

It took a while, but finally, a hundred yards from the house, he saw sunlight glinting against a spent casing. He picked it up and examined it. It was, he decided, the right size to have held a bullet designed to whirl through the bore of a carbine such as his . . .

Night came and there was no moon. Arnold Sansome told Tiki that he was going to his study to review plans, as usual. Noticing that the lights in the recreation room were on, he switched them off, then sat down in his study.

Still, he couldn't concentrate. He kept thinking of that call from the bar owner, Gus Polente. He thought of Tiki's association with a young tough named Nick Page, who, she'd stated, could go crazy if he'd drunk enough. He thought about that casing he'd found in

the woods a hundred yards from where Meg's precious dog had been shot to death. He tried to pull it all together—and couldn't. Finally, he decided that he would have to leave all of it alone for now, sleep on it, then think about it freshly in the morning.

He willed himself to concentrate on his work and had nearly succeeded in doing so when he heard a wild-sounding voice: "Tiki! . . . I'm going to get you! . . . *get you!*"

Arnold Sansome hurled himself out of his chair. It was as it had been a long number of years before, during the war he'd fought. He moved as he had to—fast. He didn't think. He simply felt his emotions firing him into action. Slamming open the glass door of the gun cabinet, he grasped the rifle he always kept loaded. He ran to the hallway, hearing Tiki screaming in protest now. Lights in the recreation room were blazing. When he went through and outside, he was momentarily blinded.

Then, near the garage, he saw a flash, heard the sharp report of a rifle firing and a bullet whining past his head. Reacting as he had once reacted, knowing there was an enemy in that darkness, he whirled and, at waist level, pointed the rifle in the direction of the flash. He squeezed the trigger and

the small rifle kicked in his hands. He jacked the lever, but then he heard something falling. He waited, ready.

Finally, finding self-control again, he walked slowly in the direction in which he'd fired. He saw a dark shape sprawled in front of the wide garage entrance—*The youth*, he thought, *Nick Page*—but when he went down and snapped his cigarette lighter into flame, saw with shock, disbelief and horror, that it was Tiki, shot through the heart, the carbine clutched in a death grip.

Arnold straightened, dazed and weak.

Hours later, standing in the too-warm interrogation room of Loganville's police headquarters, Sansome stared at the sweating youth sitting on a wooden chair. The detective, a stocky flushed-faced man in his middle years, looked at the boy with disdain.

"All right, Page! You were trying to attack the girl. She ran into the garage and got her rifle. When Mr. Sansome came outside, she thought it was you and fired at him. He, in turn, figured *you* were the one with a gun. So he shot his own daughter, by mistake. You just hotfooted it over the fence and got out of there." He looked at Arnold Sansome. "He was speeding along Hillary Boulevard when he was

stopped and given a ticket. He admitted being over at your place. Then, when we got your call saying you'd killed your daughter, we had him brought in. Now he's trying a cop-out with that story about the girl's planning the whole thing! I wasn't born yesterday, Page!"

"I tell you it's true!" the boy pleaded shrilly. "She wanted him dead, to get his money, so she could be free to do anything she wanted. She talked me into helping her set it up. It was all *planned*. But she got me thinking crazy. I didn't know what I was doing!"

Arnold Sansome watched coldly as the youth plunged a trembling hand into a pocket and pulled out a wrinkled napkin.

"It's the map she drew of the house for me," Nick Page said shrilly. "Isn't that her handwriting,

Mr. Sansome? You recognize it?"

Arnold Sansome looked at the familiar script and thought back over a thousand things, from the day when everything in Madge's fish pond had been killed, up to tonight when those lights in the recreation room had been turned on to illuminate the intended target—him, Arnold Sansome. "Yes," he nodded, "it's her handwriting."

"You mean you think—" the detective began in astonishment.

"Yes," Arnold said again, crisply, feeling old and defeated at that moment, but knowing somehow that he would recover. It had been the pattern all along, the probability had been there, and this was precisely where the pattern and probability had been heading. Very possibly there had been nothing else he could have done to stop it.



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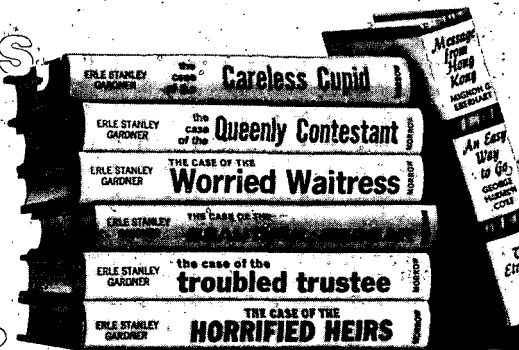
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