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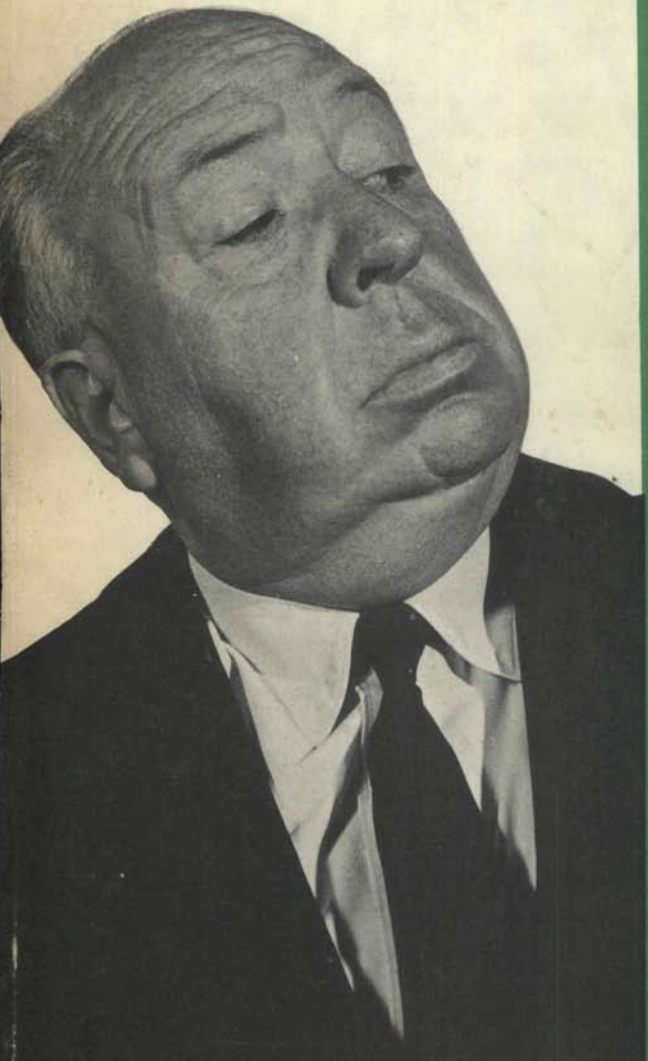
ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE

April 1970

Dear Reader:

A gallery of captivating personalities awaits you within this month's all-new (as usual) collection of bizarre tales written with you in mind. Some of the people are good, some are evil, and some are good and evil. No matter; all will demand your attention — and get it.

Consider, for example, a provoked professor, a jolted juror, a suicide soothsayer, a thorough thief, a primitive prisoner, an Archimedean architect, a wily wife (ditto husband), a helpful hobbyist and a game gambler; not to mention the diligent detectives. All lurk in the following pages.

Though certain titles listed opposite might seem to apply, there is nothing else that should remind you of revenue officials and their seasonal impositions. Instead, your way is clear for non-taxing enjoyment capably and amply provided by a host of your favorite authors.

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VOLUME 15, NO. 4 APRIL 1970

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 15, No. 4, April 1970. Single copies 60 cents. Subscriptions $7.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $8.00 (In U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H.

The only really happy man, it is said, is the one who retains his integrity; unfortunately, the price of his whistle is sometimes inestimable.

MOST PEOPLE, when challenged, will maintain vehemently that all their actions are governed by strict logic, but how many, in the last resort, will carry their reasoning to its full, logical conclusion? It is my conviction that the only person who can justly make such a claim is the scholar, the man trained in the strict discipline of the sciences or the humanities, the man who, like myself, will permit his logic to lead him without faltering into a course of conduct which he may find personally distasteful or even downright abhorrent. I am aware that most people will condemn my actions on the basis of their so-called moral principles, which are not really principles at all but an irrational system of prejudices. That is their privilege but, in the

final analysis, I have to state categorically that I did what I had to do and, to be perfectly frank, the opinions of others relating to this matter are of no real consequence to me.

The scene opened quite abruptly one morning while I was sitting in my study at Vaughan's College. I overheard some of my students discussing me outside the window.

"If you ask me, it's a bloomin' waste of time goin' to all them lectures just to 'ear old Morsby spoutin' about wot makes people tick. 'Oo needs that kinda garbage?"

The crudeness of this observation was matched only by the incredibly coarse cockney accent in which it was uttered. I could not believe that the speaker could possibly be a member of my class or, indeed, a student at Vaughan's at

By Anthony Marsh

all, but when I jumped up and peered between the slats of the venetian blind I recognized my young critic at once, a Richard Bradley. I had seen him at the beginning of the course some months back, but had no recollection of him whatever during the interval. Either he had been cutting lectures quite recklessly or else he had the faculty of rendering himself unnaturally with his uncouth style of delivery.

"I don't mind tellin' yer, I don't go for these 'ere long 'aired types like Prof Morsby, but me uncle says as 'ow I've got to get an edication, so I suppose I've got to get it. Else I wouldn't be 'ere."

I turned my attention to Bradley's two companions, a harmless enough looking pair whose expres-

commonly inconspicuous in class.

My initial reaction was that Bradley could not have been using his normal voice or diction, but was putting on an act. Vaughan's College is a rather exclusive institution which admits only young gentlemen, and while it does not enjoy the same flamboyant prestige as the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, a young fellow applying for a post in certain influential commercial houses or even scholastic centers need only drop a hint that he is a Vaughan's man, and doors hitherto closed to him will suddenly be unbarred.

Hidden by the venetian blind, I scrutinized young Bradley's face while he went on, and I had to concede that there was a certain distortion of the mouth and surrounding features that went all too

sions did not register the mirth of a music hall audience. Apparently they were accustomed to his manner of speech, so evidently this character Bradley was, as our transatlantic cousins would put it, for real.

Strangely enough, there was a sort of native wisdom in Bradley's description of my field. My name is Clarence Morsby, and I am professor of sociology at Vaughan's College. The definition of sociology as the science of what makes people tick is really quite descriptive in its own primitive way.

Bradley's companions must have realized how close they were to my window, for they began making vigorous signs to him, and all three moved out of earshot. I explored the back of my head with my fingers; I may have been a week or so overdue with my haircut, but I definitely do not grow my hair long. I decided I would have to find out a little more about this elusive member of my class. It would have been interesting, for example, to know how he had managed to gain admission to Vaughan's in the first place.

The college is a solid brick building in a cluster of annexes, lecture halls, offices and dormitories, the whole surrounded by a high stone wall rather like a medieval manor. In fact, it may have started that way centuries ago, though the wall itself is probably the only genuine remnant of the original architecture. The various buildings are connected by a neatly kept gravel drive which starts and ends at the main gate. The massive pillars of the gate support a pair of heavy wrought-iron doors which, to my knowledge, have never been closed, for the college is situated miles from anywhere in the beautiful, rolling Sussex Downs, and there is really no need of a gate to keep people in or out. Through the gate the gravel drive continues as a single road, a narrow country lane bordered, with hardly a break, by trees, bushes and shrubs. The lane winds lazily back and forth a distance of three to four miles until it joins the broad paved highway to London. In times past there was some chalk quarrying in the area, but the vast open pits have long been abandoned and their rims overgrown with thick vegetation. Where they come close to the road it has been necessary to erect signs warning motorists of their dangerous proximity. It was one of my great delights to walk along this rustic lane as far as the main highway where I could catch the bus to the nearest country town for banking and odd bits of modest shopping.

The marble clock on my mantel

said five minutes to ten. I draped my worn academic gown loosely over my shoulders and walked thoughtfully out into the sunshine. My lecture hall was on the other side of the grounds, a few minutes away. It was a fairly modern amphitheater, with benches rising steeply toward the back, and capable of seating about a hundred and fifty students. There was the usual good attendance that morning; the young men quieted as soon as I reached my desk, and I began my lecture without preamble. While I talked I scanned the benches carefully, searching for Bradley's ill-favored features, but failed to locate them. At 10:15 I saw him enter by one of the rear doors high above me and slide quietly along the back bench until he found a hiding place behind the broad shoulders of two of his fellow students. The lecture sheet was still being passed around and had not yet reached the back row. I guessed his intent, an old college trick, to sign the sheet in order to obtain credit for having attended, then sneak out again as soon as possible. I lost no time in forestalling him. It was often my habit to interrupt my discourse to question members of the class; I addressed him directly.

"Bradley, we have spent the last two lectures discussing the social organization of the Australian aborigines. What bearing do you think this might have upon our own type of civilization?"

He remained tongue-tied as though my remarks were couched in some mysterious foreign language.

"Come on, Bradley, you must have some ideas. Why am I going into all this detail about the habits of the Australian aborigines?"

"I dunno," he spluttered.

"Would you be kind enough to repeat the word 'aborigine,' Bradley?"

His mouth contorted. "Abby . . . abridge . . ." The word was too much for him; he gave up.

This degree of ignorance was appalling. I closed my eyes, a reflex effort to abolish this horror, but when I opened them again he was still there gaping at me. A tiny echo sounded at the back of my head which said quite distinctly, "Bradley must go." Some hideous error had been made by the college authorities which would have to be rectified without delay. I would report the situation to the dean at the earliest opportunity. Bradley was now grinning inanely at some inner joke, and I resumed the thread of my lecture as best I could.

As I had anticipated, as soon as he had signed the sheet Bradley started to move furtively toward the door, but I stared straight up

at him, and he froze. After that I kept my attention riveted upon him as though he were my sole audience; he did not dare defy me. The other students quickly realized what was going on and watched the contest between the two of us with immense delight. I won on that occasion; Bradley stayed on till the end, looking thoroughly disconsolate.

I had to postpone my report to the dean as I had been asked to attend the monthly meeting of the board of governors which was taking place that morning. I hurried directly to the board room. The chairman stopped in the middle of a sentence, greeted me effusively, and asked me to take a seat.

"I'll come straight to the point, Professor Morsby. We have been discussing your record here. You have only been with us two years, but we are highly impressed with your qualifications and your work. We would like to appoint you to our panel of examiners. May I take it that you will be willing to accept this appointment? I think I can say that you will find the additional remuneration quite attractive."

To become an examiner at Vaughan's had long been one of my secret ambitions, but I had not expected it to materialize nearly as soon as this. I told them how happy I would be to accept.

"Good," said the chairman. "Then that's settled. You will receive your contract shortly. Now, we would like you to stay till the end of the meeting, Professor. We have to discuss some important changes in our syllabus and in our examination standards. The outside world where we send our students is changing rapidly, and we have to make sure we keep up with the times."

I pulled my chair up to the table and joined in the discussion.

When the meeting was over several of the governors came up to me to offer their congratulations and to repeat the chairman's praises. One of them motioned to me to remain behind, and when everybody had gone he closed the door and drew me over to one of the windows.

"I'd like a word with you, Professor Morsby."

He was a short, square-headed man with a potbelly, expensively dressed in a dark gray suit and a rich silk tie. He spoke slowly, separating his words as though he were practicing them. I had never spoken to him before but his face was not unfamiliar.

He reminded me of his name. "I'm Mark Pritchard. You might not remember me. I don't come up here to many meetings, too busy with my business in London, you

know; and I still get a kick out of playing hooky."

He winked at me as one grown man to another recalling the joint mischief of their youth. I straightway resented his familiarity.

"Anyways," he went on, "the other boys don't mind if I come or not, so long as they get that big fat check every term."

He spoke more quickly as he warmed up, and his carefully monitored diction was slipping badly. Now I had the measure of the man. He was one of the nouveaux riches, common products of the last war, many of whom were using their wealth to worm their way into some of our time-honored enclaves of culture.

He looked straight at me, his jaw thrust forward. "I don't mind telling you, I was the one that got you made an examiner. Most of the other boys were willing to wait a while longer."

"I am extremely grateful to you," I answered coldly.

"I won't waste time beating about the bush," he said. "There's a little favor I want from you. I've got a nephew here, my sister's kid. He's a nice enough kid, but he needs a bit of pushing."

It was quite unnecessary for him to tell me his nephew's name. "I can see the family resemblance," I said. "You must be referring to Richard Bradley. He's your image."

He winked again. "I can see you're a smart one; you won't give me no trouble. Like I said, Dickie's a nice enough boy, but he didn't have the same start as some of the other young fellows here, so he needs a bit of extra push."

"As you probably know, your nephew attends my course in sociology. I am afraid that I can hardly describe him as a model student."

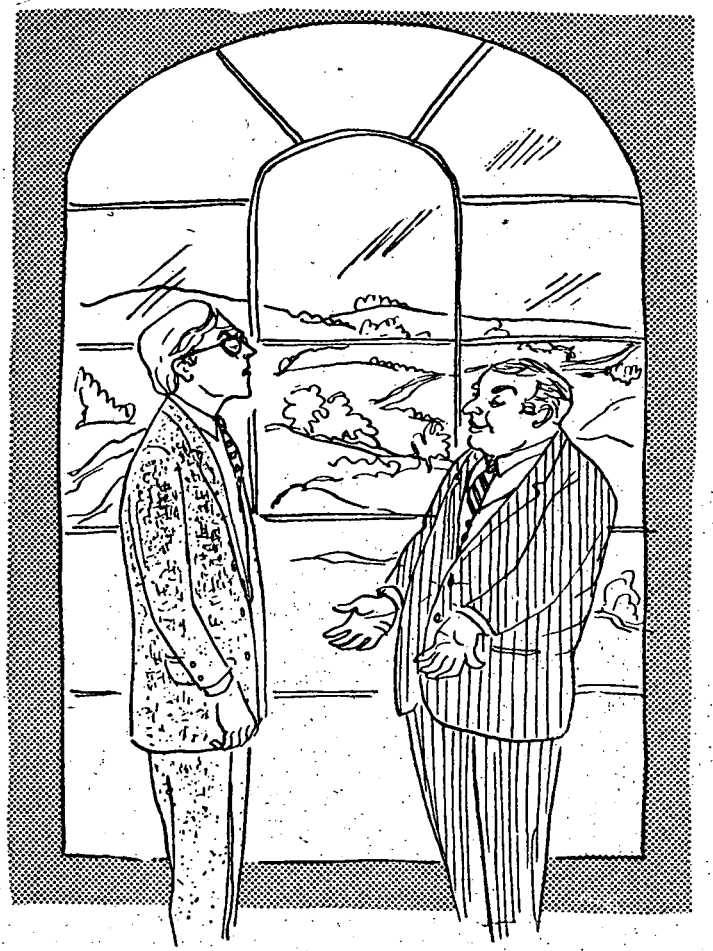
"Like I said," he insisted, "Dickie didn't have the same start as the other young fellows, so you can't very well expect him to be as good a student as them. But then, seeing as how you're going to be one of the examiners, that shouldn't matter much, should it?"

I was horrified and I made no attempt to conceal my disgust. "You mean you want me to falsify . . . to favor him in the examinations?"

He did not reply, but a cunning look crept over his face, and his hands spread themselves out in a gesture that said quite unmistakably, "Look, Professor, I'm a big man in this college now. Either my nephew passes his exams or you'll pretty soon find yourself out of a job."

"But this is outrageous, immoral."

He merely stood there, his fin-



gers spread out even further and his eyes fixed on me slantwise. For the first time I could remember, I was at a loss for words. I turned on my heel, stalked to the door and threw it open.

He called after me. "Think about it, Professor; don't be hasty. I've made bigger men than you change their minds in my day. You've got a whole month. I'll be up for the next governors' meeting. Take my advice; think about it."

I left him talking through the door, but I had no illusions. Mark

Pritchard meant what he said, and I certainly did think about it, long and feverishly. I did not know whether he had acquainted himself with my background, but I simply had to stay at Vaughan's. Not that I was concerned about getting another post, though I might have to accept something inferior, but to me Vaughan's College was much more than a place of employment, it was a haven, a refuge. I would never find another place like it, and the very thought of going out and looking elsewhere made me crumble inside. I had come to Vaughan's smarting and raw from the trauma of a vulgarly contested divorce. For five years I had been married to a young woman named Suzanne, of French origin and comely appearance, but with an intellectual capacity that was almost nonexistent. Where I used logic, she availed herself of something she described as feminine intuition, an entity which any sociologist knows is unadulterated myth. Obviously, such a marriage could not endure, but when I tried to terminate it in a manner befitting cultured and intelligent people, Suzanne became at first hysterical then, in short order, incredibly vicious. She lost no time in digging out of the mire a lawyer of like temperament and outlook, needless to say another woman, a type of modern rawboned Portia, and between them they flayed me unmercifully in court, depicting me as some kind of ogre who had spent the previous five years, not in lawful matrimony, but in an orgy of continuous, sadistic rape. I was spiritually so crushed by the violence of their onslaught that for months I was afraid to look at people in the street lest they detect in me the monster these two women had conjured up. Coming after such a shattering experience, my appointment at Vaughan's was a godsend, a veritable bonus from heaven.

As I have explained, the college stands in gorgeous isolation on the Sussex Downs. It is also free from feminine influence, a man's world where one can commune with one's fellow human beings on a plane that is strictly intellectual. When I say free from feminine influence I must hasten to point out that there are a few females of the species in attendance; for example, the housekeeper, Elenora Fudgeworth and a handful of her maids, but these had all been handpicked by Mr. Webley, our steward, with a careful view to their complete deficiency of feminine allure, by virtue either of age or unfortunate natural endowments. A case in point was Constance, the maid who looked after my quarters. She informed me that she was twenty-five years old,

and she was outwardly recognizable as a woman, but her arms and legs were thin and bony, her body flattened fore and aft, her nose shrewish, and her tight lips not enticing to any man. I had reason at one time to believe that Constance entertained amorous feelings toward me, but I could only have confirmed this by leading her on, and I found such an idea utterly repugnant.

Of course, my emotions about the opposite sex were not shared by the young gentlemen under our care or, indeed, by many of my colleagues. Every Saturday afternoon and evening, after classes had been terminated, the brick walls would reverberate with the splutter of sports car engines, tires would slither and crunch on the gravel drive, and one by one our inmates would speed through the main gates to the winding country lane, bound for London and adventure. As Mr. Webley once remarked to me very sadly, "I know, Professor, that sex is one of the inescapable facts of life, but at least we can keep it off the premises."

For my part, I had made only three visits to London during my entire stay at Vaughan's, and then only in order to transact some essential business. I particularly enjoyed those Saturday nights at the college when the place would be practically deserted, strolling for hours through the grounds or along the green lane outside, filling my lungs with great gasps of the sweet country air. Then, pleasantly fatigued, I would retire to my study like a cloistered monk and speculate about the sensual, irrational world outside. No, a regiment of amazons would not drag me away from Vaughan's.

Governor Pritchard's ultimatum occupied my thoughts unceasingly for the whole of that month, even during the course of my lectures, and I no longer bothered to circumvent young Bradley in his childish maneuvers. I seriously doubt whether he knew about my conflict with Mr. Pritchard; in fact, I doubt whether he had an inkling of any of his uncle's machinations. The poor simpleton probably thought he occupied a rightful place at Vaughan's College.

All this was beside the point. Mark Pritchard had placed me in a dilemma which had to be resolved. To comply with his cynical proposals was utterly out of the question; I could never bring myself to commit such a flagrant breach of trust, nor could I even permit Bradley to stay on as a student at Vaughan's without protest. Yet if he were dismissed from the college on the basis of my unfavorable report, then my career at Vaughan's

would come to an untimely end; the prospect was unendurable. I racked my brains till they ached, then the echo would resound at the back of my head, each time a little louder, "Bradley must go. Bradley must go. Bradley must go." Looking back on it now, I cannot believe that I allowed personal scruples to stand so long and so mulishly in the path of my reasoned thought.

The conflict began to take its toll of me; I lost my normal calm, my appetite faded, and my nights turned into sleepless torments. This is what happens when a rational man obstinately denies his reason. Strangely enough, it was Bradley himself who forced the obvious decision upon me during one of my lectures. Instead of signing the attendance sheet, then sliding with lowered head along the bench to the rear exit, this time he stood up and walked out quite brazenly, his clog-like shoes making such a racket on the wooden floorboards that the whole class turned and stared until the door swung behind him. I was obliged to stop only for a few seconds, but long enough to realize that I had never had any choice. The students returned their attention to me, with guilty looks on their faces as if they had participated in this piece of ungentlemanly behaviour, and I went on with my lecture. Although the words continued to leave my lips in orderly sequence, my brain was already searching out the process that would ensure Bradley's appropriate exodus.

There were many means at my disposal. I was physically bigger and stronger than young Bradley, and had I, like Suzanne, been a creature of passion, I might have resorted to brute force, for his latest effrontery had inflamed me. Yet I refused to entertain any plan involving direct violence or even the use of weaponry.

For the next several days I gave the problem the major part of my attention. I reviewed in great detail every fact available to me concerning Bradley, his uncle, and all other aspects of his environment. I considered dozens of ingenious schemes and rejected them, but always managed to extract some useful residue, and when I had fused all these together I found myself with a master plan which appeared completely foolproof.

I was ready for Mark Pritchard when he arrived for the next monthly meeting. We met as though by chance on an isolated part of the college grounds.

"How are you, Professor?" A brash self-confidence had rubbed every vestige of polish from his speech.

"Very well, thank you," I replied. "I have been giving very careful thought to your proposition."

His tiny piggy eyes shone. "I knew you'd come around," he said.

I assumed a solemn, abstract air. "In my opinion, the solution to your nephew's problems would be some additional coaching in his weaker subjects."

"You mean private lessons?"

"I am sure he would profit from them."

"And where would he get these lessons?"

"Naturally I should undertake to coach him myself."

"How much?" he shot out.

I was well prepared for this question and named a fee four times the current rate, all the time watching closely for his reaction. The price jolted him, but only for a split second, then a cunning look came over his face. "For that money will you guarantee that Dickie will get through?"

I hate to utter a direct falsehood even under duress. "I think I can fairly say," I replied, "that if your nephew follows the program I have in mind for him he will not fail his examinations."

"You've got a deal," he said.

"Will you undertake to see that your nephew keeps his assignments with me?"

"You bet I will, Professor, for that kind of money."

"Then everything is settled," I said. "We shall start right away, this week."

"I'll send you a check next week."

"It is my rule to insist on payment monthly in advance," I told him with polite firmness.

This time he regarded me with unfeigned admiration. "You know, Professor, I could do with a chap like you in my business. OK, it's a deal. You might as well have the money as let it lay in the bank."

He held out his hand. I took it without enthusiasm, and he marched off.

It might appear from this brief exchange that I am a commercially-minded person, and that I had struck a very hard bargain. In truth, all I had done was to apply my training in sociology or, to quote young Bradley, my knowledge of what makes people tick. I was positive that Pritchard knew as well as I did that no amount of forced mental feeding would advance his nephew more than a few shaky steps beyond the borders of imbecility. Had I merely asked the regular fee for my services, he would have been very poorly impressed, if not downright suspicious, of my proposal. The exorbitant sum I had demanded

could only be regarded as a form of indirect bribe; this was the kind of language he readily understood. At the same time one does not have to be a sociologist to know that men like Mark Pritchard do not become wealthy by flinging their money around idly; it is second nature with them to insist on full value for every penny they dispense. The governor would see to it that his nephew did not miss out on a single precious minute of his coaching; this was the first step in my overall plan.

Mr. Pritchard must have had a heart-to-heart talk with his nephew before he left, because when I sent for Bradley he appeared very docile and agreed without demur to this sacrifice of his valuable time. I told him that I would expect him for two hours every Friday evening.

Some of his uncle's admonitions must have worn off by the time the first lesson was due, for he turned up at my study with a sullen, resentful expression on his face. I was prepared for this, and had set out on the table a couple of glasses and a bottle of excellent Scotch. When he had drained the second glass Bradley began to warm up, as I expected; no doubt he had concluded that there was some spark of hope in these long-haired professors after all. Under the disarming influence of the liquor he even gave the impression of being more receptive and intelligent, and near the end of the session I actually had him pronouncing the word aborigines, though in his tongue-filled diction it sounded much more like 'able ridgid knees.'

In spite of the Scotch, Bradley's progress during the next few leslons was immeasurably minute. Trying to hammer knowledge into his dense skull was like trying to drive a blunt nail into concrete; it can be done by using an inordinate amount of force, but ultimately only to a very limited extent.

The inevitable happened on the fifth lesson, just after I had received Mark Pritchard's second advance check. Bradley failed to show up. I waited till Saturday morning, then summoned him. He came to my study seething with rebellion.

"Where were you last night?" I asked severely.

I knew perfectly well the answer he would have liked to give, but outward respect for authority was an ingrained tradition at Vaughan's; he merely stood there looking defiant.

Of course, my question had been purely rhetorical; I had not the slightest interest in his activities of the night before. I went on, "What are we going to do about your

lesson? You must make it up."

"Can't we give it a miss for once?"

"Your uncle has already paid me for last night's lesson," I said, crisply, "and I intend to fulfill my part of the bargain. We shall have our session tonight."

I was prepared for open revolt, but he suddenly subsided, a thick frown on his face, and for a few seconds I could have sworn he was thinking, though what cerebrations could be taking place in that lumbering brain were difficult to imagine.

His answer came out slowly, painfully. "Orl right, but I gotta be outa 'ere by 'alf past eight."

I did some rapid calculations of my own. At 8:30 it should be reasonably dark; at any rate, by that time I should have the situation under my control. "Right," I said, "I'll expect you by 6:30. Be sure you are punctual."

As he turned and slouched out, I caught a smirk of some secret victory on his face. I ignored it at the time, being too filled with contempt for him, but I remembered it later when 6:30 arrived and he was not there. At 6:35 I rose from my chair, determined to go and rout him out in person, when the door opened and he came in, a little breathless but without a shade of contrition on his disagreeable features. He sat down with no apology or by-your-leave and poured himself a drink. After the first noisy gulp the smirk returned to his face. I half filled my own glass, just enough whisky to steady me for the work of the evening, and slipped a hand into my pocket, feeling for my secret weapon, a small glass vial containing tablets once given to me by a chemist friend. He had described them as knockout pills; two of them dissolved in a man's liquor were calculated to render him unconscious in about ten minutes. I offered Bradley another drink; he nodded, and I filled his glass. I nursed my own drink while I watched him. By the time he had finished his second glass he was positively grinning, and he reached for the bottle once again. We engaged in no serious pretense at coaching after this; there was an unvoiced agreement between us, each man being too preoccupied with his own thoughts. Bradley returned so frequently to the bottle that I began to wonder whether I was going to need the pills, but he showed an amazing resistance to the effects of the alcohol, and when my clock chimed eight he was still ready for more.

I had to act. Under pretense of getting fresh glasses, I dissolved two of the pills in the whisky and

pushed it in front of him. He seemed to have lost all sense of taste at this stage, for he sucked it straight down. I took another drink for myself, sat back, a trifle nervous I admit, and waited, but nothing happened except that Bradley demanded another refill. Fifteen, twenty minutes went by; he was befuddled but still able to hold his glass, and I could hear him muttering. He was trying to mouth the word 'aborigine,' which had become for him now a sort of password to academic distinction.

I hastily reappraised the situation to see where I had gone wrong. Either the pills were too old and had lost their potency, or my chemist friend had woefully misled me as to the properties of the drug. Bradley now appeared to be seized with an insatiable thirst; he poured himself yet another drink and tried to bring it up to his lips, but the glass slipped from his fingers and tipped over on the table. Very slowly he sagged forward until his head and arms rested on the table in a puddle of whisky, his mottled face turned to one side. A few seconds went by, and raucous breathing noises began to emerge from his throat.

I watched him for several minutes while his breathing got deeper and noisier, then pushed him to reassure myself. He threatened to slither to the floor, and I had to drag him back. There was no further need for caution now; I went through his pockets till I found his keys, then hurried out to the low shed where the students kept their cars; his was the only one there. I started the engine and, keeping it as subdued as possible, drove through the grounds. I assumed the place was well-nigh deserted, but I preferred to draw no more attention to my activities than necessary. It was quite dark, but the moon was coming up, so that I was able to dispense with the headlights. I parked the car outside my study and went in to fetch Bradley. It was more difficult than I had anticipated to carry a man in his limp condition, but fortunately I did not have far to go.

I dropped him into the seat and tied him in place with the safety belt. His head and shoulders came well above the top of the tiny car, but he merely appeared to be slouching there in an attitude quite common among young people these days. I got in beside him and drove quietly once more out of the main gate onto the country lane. Only when the college was well behind us did I turn on the lights and pick up speed.

It was my plan to turn the car around about two miles farther on, but the road was narrow and

my driving rusty (Suzanne had confiscated my beautiful Rover at the time of the divorce), so I continued on to the main highway, hoping to turn there. However, I immediately found myself wedged into a heavy stream of traffic on its way to London. I had never used this highway on a Saturday night, and it seemed as though the whole population of southern England was headed for the bright lights of the metropolis. I stayed with the stream, gradually working my way to the center of the road, all the time keeping an anxious eye on the occupants of the surrounding vehicles who kept staring down at Bradley, but apparently nobody considered his posture in any way unusual. Finally I reached an intersection where I could make my turn and very gratefully swung the car around.

The traffic going the other way was much lighter, and I drove as fast as I dared, but after having traveled what seemed an interminable distance without reaching my turnoff I was seized with the oppressive conviction that I had missed it somewhere in the darkness. I slowed down, and the cars behind, impatient to go wherever they were going, took impulsive evasive action and screamed past me. Traveling at a snail's pace, I cursed my ineptitude in carrying out this part of my plan. It had been vital that I turn the car around; there would be broken shrubs and bushes and telltale wheel marks, all of which had to come from the right direction, but I should never have allowed myself to be enticed onto this impossibly congested, Saturday night highway. I was by no means certain how much part the so-called knockout pills had played in Bradley's stupor, and the rush of cool air in that tiny open car might easily have revived any ordinary drunk, disrupting everything. Suddenly I spied a familiar bus stop and pulled up; I knew that the road to Vaughan's lay directly opposite.

The only problem now was to cross that line of cars, three deep, hell-bent for London. I waited patiently for a gap, and above the noise of the engines I thought I detected a change in Bradley's breathing. Desperate, I began to nose my way across the road. With infinite reluctance, as though I were robbing them of moments of ecstasy that could never be replaced, the other drivers gave way to me. I made a final spurt, and we were once more in our own territory.

I was strongly tempted to dispatch my young friend at the first danger sign we came to, but I

knew we were separated from the quarry at this point by a good thirty feet of rough ground, and I had no idea how far I could safely drive on this terrain. I chose to continue to the next danger sign, a mile farther on. Here the road curved and sloped gently downward, coming barely a car's length from the quarry. In the moonlight I could see the ragged edge and the gaping void beyond. It was a miracle that no one had ever gone over there before; after what was going to happen that night I was sure a safety fence would be erected.

I stopped the car, scrambled out, and ran around to the other side. As I undid Bradley's belt he began to move. For a moment I froze, but there was no time for delay or contemplation; I gave him a mighty shove and wedged him behind the steering wheel. To my relief, he toppled forward once more and started to snore in tones that were disagreeably reminiscent of his waking speech. I released the brake, got behind the car and pushed. There was some inertia at first, then the car began to move forward and settled on the downward slope. I heard rocks crunch and bushes rip, followed by a series of bumps and thuds and ending with the sound of tinkling glass a long way below me. I stood still for several seconds listening for further sounds, but none came; my plan had followed its prearranged course.

Another man in my place might have been tempted to approach the quarry and stare mawkishly into its depths at Bradley's remains, but this spectacle held no interest for me. On my cheeks I could feel the cooling touch of the soft country air, a treasure I had almost lost. I sucked it in sensuously, taking enormous breaths until I began to feel dizzy, then I pulled back my shoulders, swung my arms, and set out for Vaughan's College and home, my steps lightened as I dwelt on this triumph of the scholastic mind over the crude plottings of the so-called practical men. I regretted I had not adopted similar measures in my conflict with Suzanne, thus saving myself untold trouble and anguish. With Bradley, my plan had worked to perfection. His body would not be discovered until tomorrow or even the next day, and it would be impossible to say exactly when he had died. The first action of the coroner would be to test the blood for its alcohol content, from which he would draw the obvious conclusions: Bradley had returned at a late hour after a riotous night in London, had lost control of his car at a dangerous bend in the

road, and had hurtled to his death.

I stopped at the gates of the college and spied out the land to make sure no one was about. The grounds were completely deserted; the moon cast clean-cut shadows of the buildings on the surface of the neatly trimmed lawns, giving the whole scene the serenity of a classical painting. I took the shortest path to my quarters, where I cleared up the mess Bradley had left, and retired. I slept peacefully that night, something I had not done for over two months, dating from that first vulgar encounter with governor Mark Pritchard.

Ideally, my story should end at this point. In fact, I may be accused of defective judgment in relating it at all. I had planned and carried out what is popularly known as the perfect crime, and to make public the details of such an operation is to defeat its initial purpose, but I speak because there were other factors which regrettably interposed themselves, matters of which I had no knowledge.

By training, I have cultivated an inquiring mind, but I have never been one to harbor undue suspicions of my fellowman. Had I been of such a disposition I would have asked myself more persistently why Bradley had put up so little opposition when I ordered him to come back on the Saturday night, and what pleasurable anticipations had inspired that obnoxious smirk he wore most of the evening. In retrospect, I swear that, had he told me at the time, I would not have believed him. Incredible as it may sound, he was in the course of an affair with Constance, our unprepossessing maid. He had spent the Friday evening with her when he should have been receiving his coaching, and he had arranged a further tryst with her after leaving me on the Saturday night. Bradley was not going to London at all; he had no need to travel so far afield for his delights. This was a complication no reasonable person could possibly have foreseen. To a man of my esthetic sensibilities, Miss Constance was unpalatable to the point of nausea but, of course, I realized too late that what made me tick did not make Bradley tick or, to put the proposition more accurately, what did not make me tick did indeed make Bradley tick in some strange manner.

Whichever way you put it, it was an unfortunate fact, and that Saturday night, as I drove Bradley out of the college, the faithful Constance was waiting for him at the gate, hidden by one of the wrought-iron doors. Had I turned the lights on I would have seen her, but in the interests of supposed security I did not. The crowning irony,

however, was her motive for revealing what she saw. It was not that she had associated me in any way with young Bradley's unhappy fate; like everyone else she assumed it was an accident. No, her subsequent conduct was the product of nothing more than primal feminine irrationality. She saw two men drive by as she stood by the gate, two men toward whom she had entertained amorous sentiments, both of them now, so it appeared, setting out for London and adventures of the flesh that did not include her. A woman scorned is a she devil; a woman doubly scorned is beyond human description.

The following morning, after a night steeped in suppressed hysteria, she ran screaming her outraged feelings to Elenora Fudgeworth, the housekeeper, and Elenora, quick to attune herself to the hysteria of a fellow female, ran screaming to Mr. Webley, the steward. Mr. Webley, in turn, fearful that his policy of keeping sex off the premises had somehow been sabotaged, gloomily reported the matter to the dean, and the dean, being a man of discernment like myself, felt that here was some information which should rightly be placed at the disposal of the police.

Had I been forewarned of this chain of inanities I might have armed myself with some convincing explanations, but the dean acted rather secretively, and when the police confronted me I was totally unprepared. They demanded an account of the plans Bradley and I had in mind for that fatal evening; they wanted to know how it came about that I had returned alone, as well as sundry other details. On the spur of the moment I was unable to provide them with satisfactory answers.

That is why I now find myself under close surveillance in this cramped, spartan cell, trying vainly to explain my actions to an unsympathetic world, a world swayed far more by emotion than by reason, a world whose inhabitants—let us state it frankly—are constitutionally inhibited in the presence of a trained and disciplined mind.

A juror's hang-up does not preclude a verdict—in more than one matter before him.

THE HUNG-UP JUROR

MONDAY AFTERNOON wore on, steamroom-hot and muggy. I was relieved when Judge Morton finally adjourned court. Outside, I loosened my tie and gulped at the lazy breeze loafing in from the lake. In the parking lot, I paused at my jeep, weighing the prospect of going home to a dull meal of warmed-over stew against stopping for a tall, cool drink. The drink won.

"Will! Will Kent!"

I'd just returned to the sidewalk when Miss Higby's shrill voice pierced me. Shuddering, I stopped —waiting for her whining demands that I pay my long overdue bill at her combination bookstore-stationery shop.

"I just wanted to thank you," she said. "I received your payment in full in this morning's mail."

Completely bewildered, I didn't answer, and she went on. "If you still want those first editions you were interested in, I can let you have them."

"I'll be in after the trial," I mumbled, my mind whirling. "I haven't had time to think of anything else these past few weeks."

"How do you suppose it will all turn out? Personally, I think Manny Dell is guilty as sin—and twice as evil!"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"My, you are a stubborn one!"

"I'm sorry," I said, eager to be rid of her. "But as a juror, I'm not

supposed to discuss the case with anyone." I brushed past her, heading toward Jim Goff's bar, stunned by her inexplicable revelation. *I hadn't paid her a cent on my bill.*

Jim Goff must have seen me coming. He had a chilled John

by George Antonich

Collins waiting as I entered and sat at the bar. "On the house," he said.

I sniffed the drink warily. Getting a free one from the penny-pinching bar owner was something. "Just what," I asked, "is this for?"

Grinning, he bellied up to the cash register. He took out a slip of paper which he placed before me. It was my bar bill, stamped PAID IN FULL. "I got your letter this morning. And the cash. Did you finally sell a story?"

I mumbled something again, pushed my way through a group of pool players, and sat in a corner booth. I should be getting back to my lakeside bachelor shack, but I was pooped, peeved, and perplexed. Pooped because the murder trial of Manny Dell was dragging into its fifth brain-numbing week; peeved because jury duty was keeping me from my writing; and perplexed because of the weird events of the past few minutes. First Miss Higby, and now Jim Goff. *I hadn't sent him any money.*

In the booth I sipped my drink and tried to ignore the loud pool players as I gave some hard thought to the matter. Since I was the only Kent in Lakeport, it was improbable that both Miss Higby and Jim Goff would mistake my accounts for those of someone else. My only living relative was my brother Mike, a cop in San Francisco. Had he paid my bills? And why? Five years older than my twenty-six, Mike had not been pleased when, after my medical discharge from the service, I'd chosen to try my hand at writing.

"If you weren't so blamed stubborn," he'd said, "you'd join the force with me and amount to something."

No, it was not likely that my establishment-oriented big brother would pay my bills. In his eyes,

only my military crewcut kept me from qualifying as a hard-core hippie. Even if he wanted to help me, how would he know what I owed, and to whom?

I sighed and lifted my glass. If there was one thing I'd learned in the service, it was never—*but never*—to question any good fortune. My motto had been: Lie Back And Enjoy It.

A minor argument flared at the pool table, cutting into my thoughts. Someone said, "How did you ever make that shot?"

"Nothing to it," bragged the shooter. "Just reverse English!"

My mood broken, I tooled my jeep down the lake road and into the carport I shared with the cottage next door. Linda Barret, a vacationing schoolteacher, waved at me. A tall, anonymous-looking female well past her first youth, she flashed me a warm smile as I dropped my long legs from the jeep. Force of habit skipped my eyes over her body, but whatever femininity she possessed was lost under a floppy straw hat, oversized sunglasses, and a loose tweed suit that could have been a horse blanket. In a way I was glad *she* had rented the cottage, instead of the usual bikinied coeds who could divert a man's mind with a swish of their bronzed hips. With the trial on my mind, my writing already neglected, and the puzzle of my bill-paying benefactor nagging at me, I had no time for anything else.

As I turned toward the shack, she called out, "Am I invited?"

"Invited? To what?"

"Why, to your party, of course! I saw all the goodies being delivered this afternoon!"

"Miss Barret, you've been in the sun too long. What goodies?"

"From Parker's market. The delivery man had to make two trips."

I dashed inside. The refrigerator was overflowing with fresh vegetables, fruits, eggs, butter and juices. Openmouthed, I checked the food freezer. In it were neat packages of steaks, chops and roasts—enough Grade AA meat to throw a Texas-style barbecue. The normally Mother Hubbard-bare cupboard bulged with canned delicacies, and the liquor cabinet held enough choice bottled goods to start a tavern.

Dazed, I stumbled back outside to face Linda Barret. "Did you say Parker's market delivered all that stuff?"

She nodded.

"They must have had the wrong address."

"But they didn't," she exclaimed. "I saw the typed list you sent them. The delivery man wanted me to check the items with him, to see he

hadn't forgotten anything listed."

I went back inside. There was no point in my phoning the market. The Phantom Do-Gooder had struck again. Instead of fighting it, I found myself enjoying it immensely; the martinis before dinner, the broiled filet mignon smothered in mushrooms, and the chilled Chianti. It was a rare, heady experience for a man who had been squeaking by on a slim disability check each month. Later, pleasantly full, I went to sleep without resorting to my usual numbing sleeping pill.

Tuesday morning I drove into town and took my place in the jury box. The defendant, Manny Dell, looked haggard and worn. He was in his middle thirties, but his boyishly handsome face made it difficult to believe the prosecution's contention that he was ". . . a sadistic, calculatingly cold-blooded killer."

On the basis of what I'd heard thus far, I was still undecided. Like it or not, I was on the jury and I meant to perform my duties with as much fairness as I could muster. Regardless of Dell's long and sordid past record, I was determined to make my judgment solely on the basis of the facts concerned with this case.

Briefly, the prosecution charged that Manny Dell, the number two man in San Francisco's underworld empire, had shot to death one Sandra Drake, his mistress. An exotic dancer from North Beach, she had tired of his jealous tirades and, in an attempt to escape his cruelty, she'd fled to Lakeport to live quietly in a rented apartment. By means of an anonymous phone call, Dell had learned of her whereabouts. "With malice aforethought," the D.A. thundered, "and with blatant premeditation, Manny Dell went to Lakeport in the dark of night, sought out Sandra Drake, and in a fit of rage at her rejection of him—shot her to death!"

At the end of the day, my mind as open as I could keep it, I headed for the lake. Already the evening was well-planned in my mind: a muscle-toning row around the lake, a refreshing swim, followed by another gourmet meal. After that, well-fed and content, I could perhaps squeeze a few choice words from my battered typewriter.

Linda Barret was on the boat landing, protected from the elements by a huge umbrella, the floppy straw hat, sunglasses, and the tweed suit. I wondered what had possessed such a sun-shy spinster to choose the lake for her vacation.

The moment I opened my door I was aware of a change. I glanced

around the room and saw that my ancient typewriter was gone. In its place, on a new desk complete with a comfortable chair to match, stood a gleaming electric portable. On the desk were reams of bond paper, second sheets, carbon, stacks of postage stamps, and large manila envelopes—everything a struggling writer needed, but could seldom afford in such abundance. There was a sheet of paper in the typewriter. I bent to read the single sentence typed in bold capital letters:

MANNY DELL IS INNOCENT!

I slumped to the new chair, stunned. What a fool I had been! Only a witless idiot could have failed to see the connection between my sudden good fortune and the fact that I was on the jury trying Manny Dell. Someone was trying to bribe me, that was obvious. Or was it? Perhaps I was jumping to conclusions. I mean, what sort of bribery could this be, where nothing had been asked directly of me? Or were they merely softening me up, waiting for me to get so accustomed to the good things thrown my way that I couldn't bear to part with them?

The thought left me shaken—and mad. Someone had researched me very thoroughly. Could this be his final evaluation of me—that I could be bought off with a few dollars' worth of food and furniture? It was not a flattering thought.

I poured myself a double and considered the situation. Perhaps this was as far as it would go. Manny Dell's legal staff could use this as a bargaining point. If, when the case went to the jury, it looked like a conviction for Dell, what better grounds for a mistrial than to reveal the sudden wealth of a jury member? And how could I, if called upon, explain my unearned affluence?

Either way, it was a beautiful loophole to guarantee another trial. Even if I went to the district attorney now, the jury would be dismissed.

Still undecided on which was the best course to follow, I dragged myself off to bed and fell into a fitful, uneasy sleep; a sleep filled with taunting visions of Manny Dell, completely exonerated, laughing as he looked into the cell where I sat, charged with accepting a bribe.

Wednesday morning, feeling drained, I drove to the courthouse. Crazily, Manny Dell looked as if he had spent a night that rejuvenated him physically and mentally. Was it my imagination, or was that a sly, conspiratorial wink he sent my way? I turned away,

infuriated by the thought that I was being used. Still, I had no definite proof that it was Manny Dell's doing. It would be much wiser, I thought stubbornly, if I just rode it out for a while, to see what might develop.

The day began with a parade of character witnesses, all proclaiming Dell's great and generous contributions to various charities. His parents tearfully took the stand to verify his sterling qualities, the mother putting the blame for her son's troubles on the ungrateful wife who had deserted him. Dell's attorney stressed the point that it was his wife's desertion that had driven poor Manny to the comforting arms of another woman.

Dell, led by his attorney, Jake Berman, was so convincing that I found it difficult not to accept his replies to the prosecution's accusations. It was true, he admitted, that he *had* learned of the whereabouts of his wandering mistress, and he *had* gone to Lakeport to confront her. But it was neither jealousy nor revenge that drove him, for Manny Dell had discovered that when Sandra Drake disappeared, so, too, did fifty thousand dollars of his money.

I left the courthouse with the realization that my sympathies were subtly swinging toward Manny Dell. I wondered if I were being influenced by his masterful lawyer, or by my own attempt to justify keeping the material things an acquittal would assure me. But why, an inner voice kept nagging, if Manny Dell were innocent, would he try to buy me off in the first place? It didn't make sense!

If I had any doubts that someone was trying to bribe me, they were quickly dispelled by the letter in my mail slot. It was from the local bank, with my account book enclosed. My eight dollar balance had been upped by an incredible *five thousand dollars.*

Now there was nothing left for me but to call the D.A. and lay the whole stinking mess in his lap. It would mean a dismissal of the jury, a new trial for Dell, and additional expense to the taxpayers, but I just might salvage what little reputation I had.

Before I could change my mind, I left my shack and crossed to Linda Barret's cottage to use her phone. When I knocked, I heard a faint, "Come in," and stepped inside.

"I'm in the shower," her voice sang out. "Is that you, Mr. Kent?"

I told her it was. "I've come to use your phone, if I may?"

"I'll only be a minute," she called. "Please wait. You might fix us a drink. I like my martinis *very* dry!"

I felt my eyebrows rise. I had her figured for nothing more potent than iced tea. I went into the kitchenette, and on the drainboard were bottles of gin and vermouth, a martini pitcher, a stirring rod—and two glasses. Obviously she'd been expecting someone. I wondered suddenly if that someone could be me?

I mixed the pitcher of drinks and went into the livingroom as the bathroom door opened. Linda Barret stood there for a long moment, perfectly still, as if posing for a glamour photo—and 'well she might. Gone was the floppy straw hat, the sunglasses, and the tweed suit. She was dressed in a long, baby-blue, almost transparent housecoat—and apparently nothing else. Blue-blue eyes were set in a nicely chiseled face, with just a touch of hardness about the full-lipped mouth. I stared. She was beautiful!

"Surprised?" She moved toward me with a flowing grace.

When I didn't answer, she said, "Who did you plan to call—the district attorney?"

I nodded dumbly.

"Then you must have received your bankbook in the mail?"

I felt myself tense. "Just who *are* you?"

She smiled and reached for her drink. "I'm Manny Dell's wife."

That stunned me, but it all added up. Who else could have been responsible? Who else had access to my shack while I was in court each day? My bankbook, my outstanding bills, all were kept in my old desk. She had simply gone through it and paid everything by

mail, using my typewriter to do it.

As if reading my thoughts, she said, "Yes, it was I. How do you like your taste of the good life?"

"It could become habit-forming. But why? Why me?"

"You were the only logical one."

"Why? Because I was broke, and in debt, and struggling to make it on my own? Did you think you could buy me so cheaply?"

She shook her head. "I chose you for another reason. A very flattering one, believe me." She paused to sip her drink, studying me over the rim of her glass. "I chose you because of your record in Vietnam."

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Everything! You were quite a hero, you know. I read every word the papers printed about you. How the helicopter was shot down with eight of you aboard. How you held the men together by sheer guts and willpower when most of them wanted to give themselves up to the North Vietnamese. How magnificently stubborn you were! You held out against all of them. In the end, in spite of your leg wounds, you brought them all safely back. In short, *you forced your will on them.*"

"Just like you want me to force my will on the jury, right?"

She nodded. "Actually, I don't think any undue pressure on your part will be needed after all. I've seen the whole complexion of the case changing. I honestly believe the jury will find Manny innocent."

"Then why all the bribes?"

"At first, of course, I couldn't be certain. I was afraid popular opinion would be against my husband. They might just convict him because of his reputation. It wouldn't be the first time someone like Manny was railroaded for past sins gone unpunished. I had to have you as insurance against that possibility. You were my ace in the hole."

I stayed silent for a long, angry time, until the drink in my hand grew warm. "Well," I snapped, "what do we do now?"

"That's entirely up to you. If you report this, there will most certainly be a new trial, and you'll lose everything—including your hero status."

"That's crazy! I didn't accept those things as bribes!"

"Try to convince the good citizens of Lakeport of that." She laughed harshly. "Especially if I should spread the word that you forced me to give them to you."

"You'd do that?"

"I might. On the other hand if you say nothing, you keep all your goodies and no one will be the wiser."

"But I'd still be your insurance —your ace in the hole?"

"Of course. I wouldn't put it past the D.A. to pressure one or more of the jurors for a conviction. He's an ambitious man. Nailing Manny would be a feather in his political hat."

My mind worked frantically, assessing everything that had taken place this past incredible week. Linda Barret-Dell had me between a rock and a hard place. Laying my cards on the table for the D.A. might save me from criminal charges, but it would not stop the wagging tongues, the seeds of suspicion sown in the minds of the townspeople. Of course, I could pack up and leave town, but the stubborn streak inside me refused to consider that possibility.

I put down my drink and stood up. "I'll think about it," I told her.

"You'd better," she said. "Believe me, I wouldn't hesitate to destroy you. You *have* to do it my way."

I felt the small hairs on the back of my neck begin to bristle. My hands knotted into fists. Quickly, before I could do something I'd regret, I stormed out of her cottage.

Thursday was a scorcher. In the courtroom, only Manny Dell's lawyer seemed cool. In calm, even tones, Jake Berman tore apart the prosecution's line of reasoning. It was true, he admitted, that his client had gone to Lakeport to confront Sandra Drake, but for the sole purpose of getting back the money the girl had stolen. Had he recovered the money? No, Berman said. When Manny Dell arrived, Miss Drake was already dead, her apartment a shambles. In his haste to leave the murder scene he struck another car parked at the curb. A witness took down his license number and provided a detailed description. When the Highway Patrol stopped his car, Manny Dell was found to be carrying an unfired .38 in his shoulder holster. But Sandra Drake had been killed by a single shot from a small bore weapon—a .25 caliber automatic.

I couldn't imagine a hood like Dell using a popgun .25. Of course, the prosecution reasoned that Sandra Drake, frightened for her life, had pulled the gun to defend herself. Manny Dell had taken the gun from her and shot her to death with it. The murder weapon—and the money—had not been found.

At the end of the day I was convinced of Manny Dell's innocence. My decision should have made me happy. Instead, it left me with a nagging doubt I couldn't shake. In Jim Goff's bar, I ordered a drink and carried it past the usual shouting pool players to the corner booth. Seated, I groaned and bur-

ied my head in my hands. I felt caught up in a nasty mess.

"Hey!" one of the pool players yelled. "Are you sure that shot is legal?"

"Just good ball control with reverse English," bragged the shooter.

I stared at the man for a long moment, then put down the drink and moved to the telephone booth. My first impulse was to call the D.A., to tell him, "Look, I've got a theory that will knock this trial wide open!" But even as I dialed his number I knew it would sound wildly improbable—and improper. I hung up momentarily, then dialed my brother's number in San Francisco.

"Hell, yes!" Mike growled when I told him what I wanted. "I've got a complete dossier of her in my mind. The whole force is looking for her."

"Why all the police interest in Mrs. Dell, Mike?"

"We know for certain that she's a walking file cabinet of her husband's criminal activities. She was a brilliant student at Berkeley, graduated with honors, and all that. She kept most of Manny's records in her head."

"You think she'd talk if you found her?"

"Possible. We know for certain that Manny was fond of pushing her around. She took that. But when she learned of his affair with Sandra Drake, she blew her stack. A stoolie told us she threatened to talk if Manny didn't stop tomcatting around."

"Maybe," I suggested, "she just got tired of the whole mess and ran away from it."

"With what?" Mike said. "Manny doled out pin money to her. We've learned that she took off—if she did take off—with just the clothes on her back."

"Why do you say *if* she took off?"

"It's our unofficial opinion that Manny had her done away with. We fully expect to find her washed up on the beach one of these days."

I talked with him for a few minutes, then hung up and headed for my shack. A cool breeze was blowing off the lake. It was possible that the long, miserable heat wave would break soon. I grinned. Maybe something more than the weather was about to break!

Linda Dell was lying on the shore, stretched out on a blanket. I went into the shack and changed into my swim trunks. Then I fixed a pitcher of martinis—very dry, very special.

She rolled over when I sat down beside her. Seeing the pitcher, she cried, "How very thoughtful of you!"

I poured for her. "There's something I want to discuss with you."

"What is there to discuss?"

"It's about Manny. The case should go to the jury tomorrow. I've decided to go along with you."

I watched her face closely. Everything depended on her reaction. Her eyes narrowed. "You mean, you'll hold out for a verdict of not guilty?"

"Of course not!" I laughed. "I'm going to do exactly what you wanted me to do from the start. I'm going to *convict* him!"

She looked down at her glass. "How did you know?"

"It just didn't make sense for you to spend so much on me when Manny already had the rap beat. But it took a pool game to put me straight."

"A *pool* game?"

I nodded. "A matter of reverse English. Only, in your case, reverse *psychology*. You really made an in-depth study of me, of all my habits and hang-ups. With your quiz-kid background, you knew I couldn't be stampeded into anything. The minute someone tells me I *have* to do something, I usually do just the opposite. Call it cussed stubbornness, but you counted on that. You wanted me to send Manny to the gas chamber for you!"

She laughed, very thinly. "For what reason?" she wanted to know.

"For maybe a dozen reasons—but two major ones. First, you were insanely jealous of Sandra Drake. You followed her to Lakeport and killed her. You disguised your voice and called Manny to tell him where she was. Second, you have the missing fifty thousand dollars. When you left Manny, you left everything else. Where else but from Sandra would you get the loot to buy me off?"

"What are you going to do with me?" she whispered. "Turn me over to the police?"

"Certainly not! I have other plans for you."

She stayed silent for a time, then she came up on one elbow and pressed herself against me. It was a little clumsy because of the martini pitcher between us. She gave me a brief kiss then, barely touching the corner of my mouth. "What do you want, Will?"

"Half!" I said. "Half of Manny's fifty grand."

Linda didn't say a word until she'd poured herself a drink and gulped it down. Then she said, "I've been doing a lot of thinking about you and me, Will. With Manny out of the way, the fifty thousand is only a drop in the bucket. I know where he keeps the big money—and how to get it."

"What's in it for me?"

She fluttered her eyes coyly, with the look of a young girl testing the power of her sex. "Perhaps, after a while, something might develop between us. Something meaningful and important. Something I never had with Manny."

"And if it doesn't develop?"

She smiled. "It's still a lot of money, Will. Sweet, wonderful money that could let you live and work as you please." She poured another drink. "You wouldn't be committed to staying with me. When it's all over, take your share and go where you like."

"It's a tempting offer. I might just do it."

"Wonderful!" she cried. Then she sat up suddenly, hugging her knees. "Oh, that breeze feels so good! Let's go for a boat ride!"

Her suggestion took me by surprise, but I agreed. A ride on the lake might be just the thing. I stood up. "I'll get the boat ready," I said. "Have another drink and join me."

We were in the middle of the lake when Linda took the gun from her purse. It was a tiny thing —a .25 caliber, I figured.

"I'm really sorry about this," she said. "But don't you see? The money and the knowledge of what we'd done to Manny would always be between us."

"I know," I said. "But what happens when a member of the jury turns up missing—or dead?"

"I've thought of that," she said, stifling a yawn. "Manny will get a new trial. By then I will have cleaned out his secret money cache. There's bound to be another Will Kent on the new jury. One I can easily get . . . to do . . . what . . ."

Her voice trailed off slowly, and when her head drooped, I reached out and took the gun. I smiled. The very dry, very special martini had worked beautifully. I hoped Jim Goff would never get the idea of using sleeping pills in place of vermouth.

Linda was snoring peacefully. The boat was drifting. I put the gun away and reached for the oars. As I did, my cold inner voice said, *No! Reach for the anchor, you fool! The police expect to find her dead! The money will be all yours! Tie the anchor around her ankles! You have to do it, Will!*

I felt the small hairs on the back of my neck begin to bristle. I picked up the oars and began to row toward the landing.

I just don't like being told what to do—not even by me.

One must believe, of course, that a person occupying a strategic position will be incognizant of personal reflections or feelings.

WITH OBJECTIVITY

by Pauline C. Smith

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Despite the dissent of the other members of the committee, as head of the Suicide Prevention Program my decision to reject the volunteer services of the woman known as Mrs. Elsie Tabor was a valid one, as proved.

To indicate the methods used in conducting our Suicide Prevention Program, the design of operation is as follows:

1. Persons interested in helping the program are requested to phone the County Mental Health Department, at which time one of our switchboard operators takes the name and address of the caller for the purpose of mailing an ap-

plication blank to be filled out.

2. After the completed form is returned to the office, a committee comprised of three members of the board—a teacher, a doctor and a psychologist—with myself, of course, as head of the committee, examines and votes upon which applications are to be rejected and which to be accepted for training purposes.

3. The volunteers then selected meet regularly in the Mental Health Building for a rigorous training program under the direction of Dr. F. R. Moody, Psychiatrist.

4. Once this initial program is completed, the new volunteers are assigned times and dates of their phone service.

This four-point plan has proved highly successful in the selection of psychologically competent and dependably efficient workers, so why in the world should my negative vote against the woman known as Mrs. Elsie Tabor cause the committee to cast aspersions upon me? Oh, not directly, but by innuendo, especially when it became obvious that my vote had been the correct one in view of Mrs. Elsie Tabor's resultant actions.

At the time of the voting I stated my reasons clearly, concisely, and with objectivity. I am a concise and objective person, as everyone in the Mental Health Department (where I have worked for over twenty years) will admit. They will admit it, that is, if they are being honest and not seeking petty vengeance upon me for some imaginary grievance.

You can't imagine the back-stabbings that go on in the Department—the way the employees call me *Miss* Foster, with an accent on the *Miss*, as if they were sneering "old maid" at me. The nameplate on my desk reads: Miss R. A. Foster, and not a soul in the place knows that the R. A. stands for Ruth Ann. They call everyone else by their first names. It's Mary-this and Joe-that; but with me it's *Miss* Foster. That's all right with me, though. If you can't retain your dignity, you have no authority, I always say.

The voting that day went along just fine until it came to this Mrs. Elsie Tabor's application, and the way she answered the questions that showed her up for what she was, an emotionally unstable personality. That, incidentally, is exactly the reason for asking certain questions on the form—to weed out the undesirables from the potential candidates—but did the committee remember this relevant point? No. When I voted against her application, each member was astounded. "Why?" they asked.

So, concisely *and* with objectiv-

ity, I offered reasons that should already have been clear as day. I polished my glasses, replaced them, rose, looked deliberately at my hostile audience, and pointed out my objections.

"First," I said, "the question regarding motivation, and I shall quote it precisely from the form: 'Why do you wish to become a volunteer worker in the Suicide Prevention Program?' "

Carefully observing the three members of the committee to make sure of their attention, I continued, "The applicant's answer is as follows: 'Because I myself have been on the edge of suicide twice in my life; once when my husband was killed, and another time when my child died. Therefore, I feel that I could be of help to others who feel as I have felt.' "

I looked over my glasses at the committee members and asked them, "Do you think such an emotionally unstable person as this applicant," and I jammed my forefinger on the application form, "could possibly deter a potential suicide?"

"Yes," interrupted the psychologist, "because she has contemplated the act herself. How *does* she put it? On the edge? Yes, I think she could offer a powerful deterrent simply because she's been there herself. She knows the thoughts, the worries, the anxieties, the terrible contemplations of a potential suicide. Who better could give advice?"

"Advice!" I pounced upon the word. "What kind of advice? What will she suggest? 'Slash your wrists, put a gun to your head, swallow a bottle of sleeping tablets, jump off the roof,' or 'find a plastic cleaning bag and smother in it'?" I stopped suddenly. I, too, was becoming emotional, and the committee members were looking at me with suspicion. I steadied myself. "Gentlemen," I said to the psychologist and the doctor, "and lady," I said to the teacher, "this application form has been purposely worded to eliminate such warped personalities and lonely souls from the volunteer rolls of our program."

"Lonely soul?" asked the doctor. "Where do you find that, *Miss* Foster?"

"Here. Right here." I was becoming ruffled. It was difficult to find the question on the form. I polished my glasses again, and searched the blurred, printed words. Triumphantly, then, I said, "This question: 'How much time *could you devote to the program?*' " I looked up. "There are the boxes, you know, two hours a week, four hours a week and so on. Well, this applicant," and I had to search to find her name again,

"this Tabor woman doesn't X any of the boxes. Instead, she writes in that she can spend all the time required . . . As she puts it," and I adjusted my glasses to read: " 'Nobody ever phones me. I phone nobody. I really have no one to talk to at all, so I can spend as much time as you would require, just to have someone to talk with.' "

"So?" said the doctor.

"So she's a lonely soul and all she wants is someone to talk with. Is that the nature of the Suicide Prevention Program? To provide telephone communicants for lonely people?"

"Possibly," said the doctor. "It might be therapeutic."

Well, really! "To whom, Doctor?" I asked acidly. "To the caller or to the volunteer?"

"Why not to both?" he suggested cheerfully.

I looked at him with positive loathing as I remembered my mother's cheerful doctor saying, *"Your mother may live for years with constant care and attention . . ." He could afford to be cheerful. It wasn't his care and attention that was required, but mine.*

"A potential suicide," continued the doctor, all wrapped up in his antibiotic therapy, "needs a lonely soul in order to communicate. And the healer," he said, steepling his fingers, "needs to be a lonely soul to become a good communicant."

The two committee members looked at him admiringly. I went on to another question in order to break up their worshipful admiration.

"Now this question," I said with some anger, "the question that reads: 'Will you be able to attend regularly a two-week training period of one-hour evening sessions without absence?' "

The committee members' faces were bland and waiting.

"How did this applicant answer this question?" I demanded.

"How?" asked the teacher. "All I remember is that her answer was enthusiastic. She was more than willing to be trained."

"More than willing? She was eager," I cried. "This woman," and I tapped the application blank forcefully, "this woman, this potential suicide—"

"*Once* potential suicide, *Miss* Foster," corrected the teacher, and I glared at her.

"Once means always," I said crisply. "The fact is, this potential suicide is obsessed by the thought of suicide. She wants to talk of it, she wants to hear about it. She wants to be *trained* in it. Can't you see that?"

"Oh, come now, *Miss* Foster . . ." The objection was quietly contemptuous.

"It's obvious," I snapped. They were all contemptuous, these three know-it-alls, as they sat stolidly, with infallible assurance, in their committee chairs—*just as my mother used to sit in her wheelchair and say, with absolute certainty, "He won't come back to you, Ruth Ann," when the letters stopped coming from the Pacific in '43. I should have maintained my silence. I should have been as concise and objective, as I learned later to be, so that I did not ruffle the thought waves, but I was heated and I argued. "He will come back," I cried. "He is missing. He is a prisoner," and my mother scoffed. In '45 I conceded, having finally reached a level of concision and objectivity. "He will not come back to me," I said, "because he is dead." She watched me from the wheelchair with those contemptuous eyes. "You would know. You would have heard," she stated. "He will not come back to you because he does not want to."*

"*Miss* Foster," said the teacher, "how *did* Mrs. Tabor answer the training period question? You were about to tell us, and explain your objections."

"Yes, of course." I was confused. I, who am never confused! "Yes, let's see now . . ." My eyes and my finger traveled down the application form. "Oh, yes, here it is. 'Will you be able to attend regularly' and so forth. Well, now, Mrs. Elsie Tabor answers this question excessively and with exaggeration, a simple little question, lady and gentlemen, requiring a simple yes or no, but this is the way she answers it," and I read slowly so that they could gain the full import of the message in the answer: "'I will, indeed, attend each and every session. I want to learn all that I am able to learn. I wish to understand so that I may become the best volunteer worker in the Suicide Prevention Program that you have ever had.'"

I stopped with a flourish and stated, unequivocally, "That is the answer of a potential suicide who wishes to take all other potential suicides with her when she goes."

"No." The teacher rose. "This applicant is a woman who has been through the trauma of wanting to die, and now, if she can help others, she will live. If we don't allow her to, she will die."

The others nodded in agreement.

I said, "Poppycock!" a surprising expression since it was a distasteful word to me, one of my mother's favorites, one she often used when I insisted that he would come back to me . . .

Well, if you are aware of the four-point plan of our Suicide Pre-

vention Program, you will realize that the woman known as Mrs. Elsie Tabor was not accepted as a volunteer since my negative vote had kept her out.

My vote was the correct one, despite the attitudes of the committee members who were all against me that day I so brilliantly analyzed the application form, and at each succeeding meeting I felt the cold rejection of their disapproval. Then, when the suicide of that woman, Mrs. Tabor, became known, they blamed me, as if my reasonable negation had done the killing instead of the woman's unstable personality and a bottle of sleeping tablets.

The teacher, who is outspoken, was positively censorious. "It happened about the time the training program was completed," she accused. "That training program might have been her therapy."

"Or a number of other people's suicides," I said realistically.

"She needed help and she needed to help. *That* might have saved her," said the doctor. "But by your sin of omission, she died."

I stared at him, but he couldn't know about my mother. It had happened too long ago. *"She can live as long as she has constant care and attention," I had been told—and I had committed the sin of omission only after my mother killed my hopes for the man I loved.*

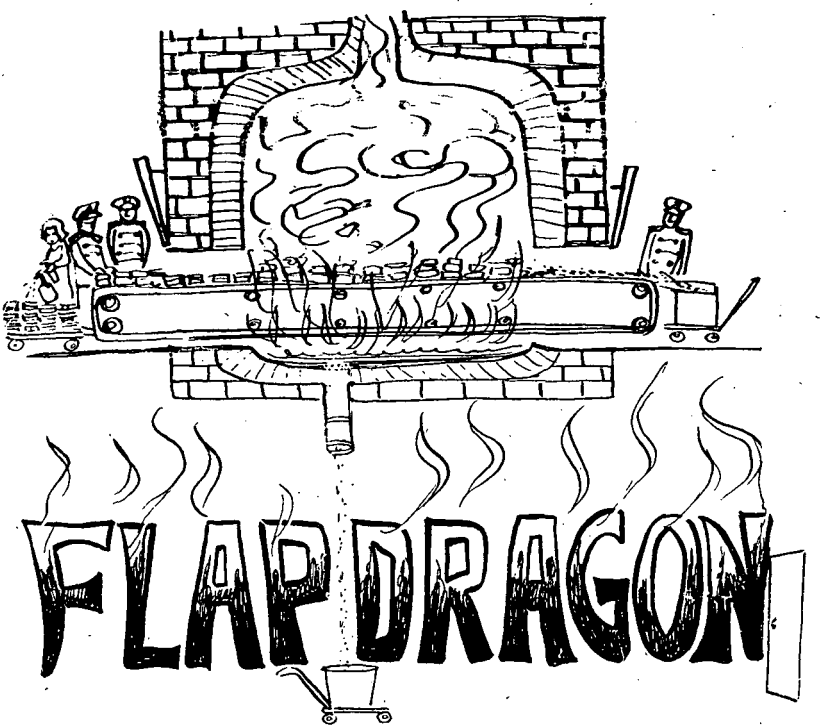
"*Miss* Foster," said the psychologist, "you were wrong in your vote. If Mrs. Tabor had been allowed to participate in the program, it would have helped her and, by her participation, she would have helped others. So you were wrong."

They made me out wrong—I, *Miss* Foster, head of the Suicide Prevention Program, a concise thinker, an objective viewer. They made me out wrong just as my mother once did, when she argued with such contempt, "He won't come back to you," relegating me to the ignominy of being *Miss* Foster alive; and now dying, still *Miss* Foster, with a plastic bag wound around my head as you will see when you find me.

(Signed) Miss Ruth Ann Foster

Then, too, there was St. George's dragon, which also breathed fire.

THEY MET AT THE BAR of the Athens Hotel, just as they'd planned weeks before. Sherry was wearing a white linen dress with a high neckline, and Tullis had on the same rumpled suit he'd worn the last time Carter saw him. They acted like three strangers, and in a sense they were, but when Carter signed his check and went up to his room, the other two trailed along at five-minute intervals.

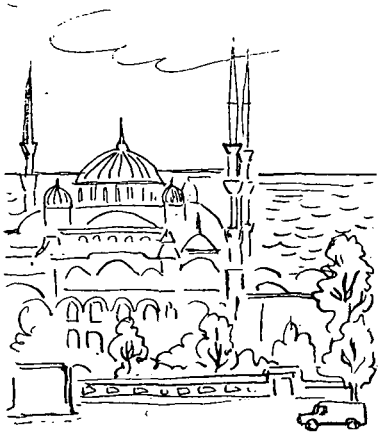


Carter opened a bottle of Scotch and poured them each a drink. "How've you been, Sherry?"

She grinned up at him, the pixie he remembered. "Hot! It never cools off in that damned country! You could have warned me before you sent me there."

"It's always hot in the desert," Carter replied. "Didn't you ever study geography? How about you, Tullis?"

Tullis was bald and nearly forty, though his shiny skull made him appear ten years older. Carter didn't like him, and didn't trust him, but he needed him. Tullis twisted in his chair and reached for the drink. "I've been bored, Michael. Anxious to hear all about your big scheme." He was the only one who ever called Carter by his first name.



by Edward D. Hoch

"I've got the whole thing here." Carter unrolled the map and spread it on the floor, pointing to the country outlined in red. "Syrastan, the largest, richest nation in the Middle East; ninety minutes from Athens by plane."

"Don't I know it," Sherry sighed.

The bald man grunted and sipped his Scotch. "Get to the money part."

Carter took out his wallet and extracted a bill only slightly smaller than an American dollar. "This is a Syrastan lira, the national currency. One of these is worth about 25 cents American."

"You're talking about peanuts!" Tullis complained. He scratched his bald head, looking unhappy.

"They come in 100-lira notes. That's $25 American. Any better?"

"We're going to rob a gambling casino?"

"Gambling is illegal in Syrastan."

"A bank?"

"Guess again."

"I ran out of guesses."

Carter smiled. He really didn't like the man, and he was enjoying these few moments of superiority. "They have very little coinage in Syrastan. The people prefer paper money, and it circulates widely. The average bill like this lasts about two years in general circulation, which is still six months longer than a dollar bill lasts in the United States. This means that Syrastan, for all practical purposes, replaces half of its entire currency each year. You know how much that is?"

Tullis was growing interested. "Millions?" he ventured.

Carter wrote the figures on a pad as he talked. Someone like Tullis needed visual aids. "Total currency in circulation right now is the equivalent of $48,000,000, not counting coins. Not much compared with nearly $50,000,000,000 circulating back in America, but it's a hell of a lot easier to get at in Syrastan. Each year about $24,000,000 of it has to be replaced by new bills."

"You're going to steal the new money when it's printed?"

Carter smiled. "Not exactly. The new currency is printed in West Germany and its serial numbers are carefully noted. Stealing it would be difficult and meaningless. No, we're not going to steal the new money when it's printed. We're going to steal the old money before it's burned!"

"Burned?"

"Old bills are withdrawn from circulation periodically. They make their way through the banking system to a central vault in the Treasury Department, where they're stored for up to six months. Then, twice a year, they're burned in a large incinerator. Twice a year, Tullis, which means they burn the equivalent of $12,000,000 in bills each time. Think about it."

"All of $12,000,000? With just the three of us to split it?"

"It's in lira, remember, not dollars. But it's money. I've already arranged to sell it in Switzerland at a discounted price. We'll get a third of the value—about $4,000,000. Split three ways, that comes to better than $1,300,000 each. Enough for you?"

Tullis nodded, grinning. "Enough for me, if it can be done."

"Anything can be done." He turned to Sherry. "And Miss Watson is going to tell us how."

Michael Carter had first met Sherry Watson in a little Paris bistro some nine months earlier, when the Syrastan scheme was only beginning to take shape in his mind. He'd bummed around Europe for five years, starting out as a small-time con man, working

the casinos and resorts. His knowledge of telephone taps and electronic bugging devices had landed him a job with the security forces of a Middle Eastern oil sheikdom. It was a good job, and a profitable one, until he'd reverted to his old ways and tried to swindle the sheik with some third-rate electronic equipment that burned out after a month's use. In the Middle East such crimes against the ruler were rarely referred to courts of law. Carter had left the country ten minutes ahead of a pair of Abu Hail's executioners.

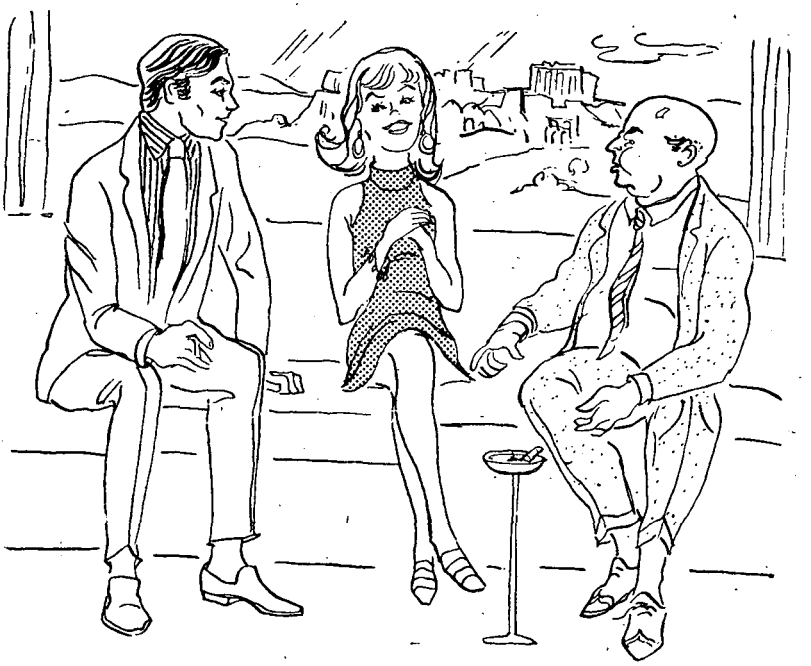
He'd gone then to Paris, and had found Sherry. She was an American like himself, who had taken a job as secretary to a wealthy international banker. When her boss was jailed by the French government for currency manipulation, she'd found herself out of work, adrift in Paris without money. Carter liked her quick wit and her brains, and they'd been a team from the very beginning.

Sherry was twenty-seven, with long, nearly-blonde hair and a figure perfectly proportioned for her small size. She liked to laugh and joke and drink, and in her present circumstances she wasn't opposed to making a buck any way she could. Her background of finance and currency work made her a natural for the Syrastan plan that was beginning to form in Carter's mind. He'd managed to set her up quite easily in the Syrastan Treasury position, and if she hadn't got quite the job he'd originally planned, her present one was just as good for his scheme.

Back in the United States it would never have worked. There, old and worn currency was handled with the greatest care, punched with holes and burned by a special "destruction committee." The ways of the Middle East were just a bit more relaxed. For one thing, worn Syrastan currency was burned only twice a year. It was stored in a vault till then, closely guarded. No holes were punched in it, but the bundles were sprayed with a red dye before being removed from the vault to be burned. The incinerator was a variation of the type used in American crematoriums. A conveyer belt carried the money into the furnace, and carried the ashes out.

During the nine months of her employment by the Treasury of Syrastan, Sherry had seen the entire operation performed. It was, in fact, her job to spray the old bills with red dye before they left the vault for the incinerator.

"I don't like it," Tullis decided, stubbing out his cigar. "The money's too well guarded. There's no



chance to get at it, even with her inside."

Carter turned from his contemplation of the sun-streaked Athens skyline. "There's a way," he said.

"How? While the money's in the vault, it's impossible. Once it leaves the vault, it's covered with red dye and still heavily guarded. It goes into the furnace on a conveyer belt, and comes out ashes. There's no chance."

Carter smiled slightly. "Why do you think I needed you, Tullis?"

The bald man's eyes widened. "You can't mean for the furnace!"

"I mean the furnace. It's the only weak spot in the setup."

"It'll be just like flapdragon!" Sherry exclaimed with pixie-like glee.

"Like what?" Tullis asked.

"Flapdragon! It's an old game where the players try to snatch raisins and plums from burning brandy and eat them. I think it was popular in Samuel Johnson's time."

"The word had a somewhat more vulgar connotation, too," Carter said. "But it does fit our

operation more or less perfectly."

Tullis snorted. "Flapdragon! I'm not snatching any money out of that flaming furnace, I'll tell you that!"

Carter turned to the window. "We'll see," he said simply.

Izmir, the capital city of Syrastan, was alive with activity as Carter's plane landed there a week later. The tensions of the Middle East had grown again, and even as he watched, fighter planes were taking off and landing. The city was tense and confused, which was the way he liked it.

Despite their careful planning, he still had to wait an hour in his hotel room before Sherry called. "Is this phone safe?" he asked when he heard her voice. The dealings with Abu Hail in the neighboring sheikdom were still too fresh in his memory.

"As safe as anything in this country," she replied. "Did you have a good flight?"

"Smooth. When can we meet?"

"In an hour. At the place I mentioned."

He hung up and decided he had time for a shower. The water was not warm, and the pipes made a clanging, thumping sound, but it did not bother him. He was used to the ways of the Middle East.

Sherry was waiting in the shadow of a great mosque near the center of the city. Here, a fountain played a cooling spray over those who lingered at its edges, perhaps not too differently from the fountains of Paris or Rome. The city of Izmir seemed alive with fountains, some two hundred in all, if one counted the *sebels*, small richly-decorated buildings which served as drinking fountains. These, Carter reflected, were among the few signs of a Muslim tradition still found in the city. The process of westernization had been speeded by oil money and foreign trade, and perhaps in another decade Izmir would have gone the way of Athens and Istanbul.

"I don't trust Tullis," Sherry began, opening the conversation without preamble.

"You don't have to trust him to work with him. Tullis happens to be an expert with furnaces, piping and duct work. He once re-routed the entire heating system of a London bank so he could crawl through the ducts to a vault."

"I still don't trust him, I don't like the way he looks at me. He arrived yesterday and came right to my apartment, against orders!"

Carter frowned, seeing how upset she was. "Did you handle him?"

"Don't worry. But he was hinting at a double cross, Carter. You know—he does all the work, so

why cut you in on the proceeds?"

"Who in hell does he think's going to be at the other end of that pipe?"

"He said I could do it, after I sprayed the money."

Carter muttered an obscenity. "I told him it takes three, and that's cutting it fine. Even six wouldn't be too many."

"Then cut him out, Carter. Before he does the same to you!"

"I can't. I need him. I guess I just have to watch him." He glanced across the fountain, noticing a tall man with a hooked nose. The man seemed to be watching them, but turned quickly and walked away. "Otherwise, how are things going at the Treasury?"

"Like clockwork. The official order for the burning came down today. It's to be Monday, right on schedule."

"How much is in the vault?"

"Just over 47 million lira. A bit less than usual, but it still works out to just under $12,000,000."

"Enough," Carter said. "How about your boss?"

"A minor complication there. General Alizar has taken over Treasury operations personally. He needs money for Russian arms."

"Any chance of tightened security?"

"The security is always tight, but it shouldn't be any different this time. Alizar isn't worried about the old money."

"Good," Carter said. "Keep him that way."

On Sunday evening he met Tullis in his room, going over the plan one last time. The bald man was gruff and unsmiling, glancing about the place with small, intent eyes. "I been thinking," he said, lighting another of his cigars. "I been thinking I should get a bigger cut, since I'll be doing most of the work."

Carter had expected this after his conversation with Sherry. "You don't think I'll be doing anything? Or the girl?"

"Hell, Michael, I'm the one taking the chances. One wrong twist of a nozzle and I could cook along with that money."

"All right," Carter said. "Sherry and I will pull out. You can try the whole thing yourself."

"You know I can't . . ."

"Then shut up and do your job! I'm making a millionaire out of you in just one day."

"All right," Tullis conceded reluctantly.

"What time are you going into the furnace?"

"Early. Around five. Sherry said she'd leave a door unlocked. I'll only have to short out the alarm system."

"Guards? Can you handle them?"

Tullis grinned, finally beginning to unwind. "They'll be watching the money, not the incinerator."

"Have you traced the discharge pipe?"

"We're in luck there, Michael. It's a straight drop to the subbasement. You may have to take care of one security guard, but there's nothing else. It's a good plan."

"Thanks."

They had another drink together and then Tullis left. Monday would be a busy day.

The city was peaceful in the morning, as if the threat of war had gone into periodic eclipse. It was a bit too quiet for Carter, who thrived on movement and confusion. By the time he reached the Treasury he was so nervous his hands were shaking. He stopped in a little cafe and took a tranquilizer with some strong Turkish coffee.

Then he went to the service entrance of the Treasury basement, making sure the truck was in position, as he'd planned. If all was well, Tullis would be inside the incinerator by now. He would have entered the building at five, shorting the alarm and using the door Sherry had left unlocked. Once at the furnace, his job would be tricky, painstaking and very dangerous.

The incinerator was fueled by oil, like nearly everything else in the Middle East. It would not be operating at that early hour, so Tullis could slide into the heart of the thing on the conveyer belt and go to work. First, he had to shut off each of the nozzles that fed oil to the flaming interior during operation, spraying the conveyer and its cargo with sheets of fire. This seemed a simple enough task, but if a single nozzle wasn't completely shut off, Tullis could be burned to death.

The conveyer's cargo passed through a double set of spring-operated doors, so from outside the furnace there was no way to see the flames within. There was, however, a temperature gauge to show the heat of the furnace, and the roar of the flames could usually be heard through the doors. The roar was easy to fake, since a separate nozzle fed air to the interior, to support the combustion. Tullis had simply to turn it on full, and the hiss of escaping air could be mistaken for the fire's roar.

The temperature gauge was a bit more tricky. Tullis had to locate the sensing bulb within the furnace, the one which reported the temperature to the outside dial. Finding it, he taped a flare to the inner furnace wall near the bulb so it would not only register the

temperature of a raging fire, but would give him light to work by. The only tricky part would come when the furnace was first turned on. Tullis would have to hold the flare away and bring it gradually toward the bulb, so the outer dial would show a slow rise in the inner temperature. Tricky, but it could be done.

In the base of the incinerator there was a three-inch pipe which was used to drain off excessive oil and flush out ashes and dirt. The width of the pipe was very important to their plan. It dropped straight down, through the subbasement and into the sewer system. Once he'd gained access to the subbasement, it had taken Carter only ten minutes to saw through the pipe in two places and remove a section of it. Then he was looking straight up at the metal grill in the bottom of the incinerator.

"Tullis!" he called softly.

"Here." Tullis unscrewed the grill and lifted it off. Carter could see his face by the light of the burning flare.

"Everything on schedule?"

"Perfect. Bring on the money."

Carter went out, through the subbasement to an interoffice phone near the exit. He dialed the number of Sherry's extension, and when she answered he said, "All is fine here. But how about you?"

"Flapdragon," she replied.

He hung up and started back to the room beneath the incinerator. That was when the security guard rounded a corner and saw him.

Carter had only an instant to act, and he floored the man with his fist rather than use the silenced pistol he carried under his arm. That would be for later, if it was needed. He dragged the guard's body across the floor and into the room where he was working, hoping the man wouldn't be missed.

Sherry's job was to spray the money with red dye, and he knew she would be starting now. Each stack of bills had to be covered with dye before it left the vault for its last trip on the conveyer. The system was not as efficient as the American method of punching holes in discarded paper money, but it had always served its purpose.

Carter's plan at this stage was simple and clever. The regular mixture of Sherry's dye was replaced with a chemical substance much like disappearing ink. The red dye would remain on the bills for about three hours, then vanish without trace as exposure to the air faded it. Carter wasn't worried about the worn condition of the money, and neither was his Swiss

contact. Old money was always easier to pass than new money, with its constant danger of counterfeit. The average person accepted the signs of wear as proof of authenticity.

So Sherry continued spraying the money, as armed guards began the job of moving bundles of it from vault to conveyer. The job of burning would take half the day, even with several men loading the conveyer.

Back at the pipe, Carter could see Tullis moving the flare. That meant the furnace had been turned on—the oil, and air, and the pilot light to set the whole thing blazing. Carter held his breath, but there was no reason for concern. Tullis had done his work well. The flare moved slowly, and finally came to rest on one wall of the incinerator. Then came a grinding, clanking noise as the conveyer belt was turned on.

Quickly, Carter began passing little plastic bags full of ashes up the pipe to Tullis. There had to be traces of ash on the conveyer when it left the incinerator. Tullis would sprinkle the ashes on the metal plates as he scooped off the packets of currency. It was a fast operation, with every second counting.

Then the packets of currency began dropping through the pipe, landing in the large laundry hamper Carter had placed beneath the drain. Carter would have to make numerous trips with it, wheeling it out the door to the loading platform where the large garbage truck waited. He'd paid a city employee 100 lira to bring the truck to the dock and leave it, no questions asked. The price of corruption came low in Syrastan.

Carter had spent some time with pencil and paper, figuring the total capacity of the truck. With luck, the packets of old money should just about fit, and then he'd be on his way.

The flow of money stopped momentarily as Tullis whispered down the drain, "More ashes!" Carter passed him more plastic bags of ashes, and the bills started dropping again. Occasionally there was a packet so thick that Tullis had to split it to fit it through the drain.

Things went well for the first hour, with Carter making a trip to the garbage truck for unloading. Carter figured it would take some nine hours to empty the Treasury of its lira. He glanced at the guard, bound and gagged in a corner, and hoped again that he wouldn't be missed. Perhaps, in the haphazard way of the Middle East, it would be assumed that he'd gone home without checking out.

It was during the fourth hour of

the operation that trouble started to develop. The flow of money stopped suddenly and Tullis whispered harshly and a bit desperately down the pipe. "I can't keep up with the damned stuff! The conveyer's bringing it in faster than I can drop it down the pipe. It's piled all around me and I'm afraid the flare will set it on fire!"

Carter cursed under his breath. His hands were beginning to shake a little. The thought of Tullis burning up inside the incinerator didn't especially bother him, but he certainly didn't want the fuel to be Syrastan currency.

He tried to think what must be going wrong, and suddenly the flaw in his calculations was only too clear. Sherry had said the burning operation took half the day—some four or five hours—to complete; but his flow of money through the pipe was calculated at nine hours! The conveyer was carrying the money into the incinerator twice as fast as Tullis could drop the individual packets from the drain. Carter had expected some back-up, but nothing like this. Soon the whole incinerator would be full of money.

"Tullis!"

"What should I do?"

"Jam the conveyer! Stop it somehow!"

"How?"

"With the pliers you used on the nozzles. Jam them between the metal links of the conveyer."

There was a grinding of metal and a sudden silence from above. All Carter could hear was the hissing of the air. The conveyer had stopped. "I did it," Tullis whispered through the drain.

"All right. Keep feeding the money. It'll take them a while to decide what's wrong, but when they get to examining the incinerator we'll have to start it up again. At least you can get some of the money out and give yourself breathing space."

Carter watched the laundry hamper filling again, and grew increasingly nervous. He had to know what was happening upstairs. He crossed the concrete floor to the wall phone in the outer room and dialed Sherry's extension, hoping she hadn't left for lunch.

"Yes?" she answered on the second ring, sounding as nervous as he felt.

"Flapdragon. What's happening?"

"The conveyer's stopped. They're checking the fuse box."

"Tullis jammed it from inside. The stuff was piling up too fast. Look, when they start to examine the incinerator, ring this number once. It's extension 56. I won't an-

swer, but it'll warn me of trouble."

"All right."

"Then you'd better go to lunch."

"I can't! The dye's already faded on some of the bills I sprayed. I have to stay here and spray them again."

"Damn!"

"Don't worry. There are just the guards here now, and they haven't noticed. As long as General Alizar or the department head doesn't come down . . ."

"All right," he said. "Ring this number." He hung up and hurried back to the hamper. It was filled to overflowing and he wheeled it quickly out to the garbage truck for unloading. Then back to the pipe again, scooping up the packets that had fallen through in his absence, he wheeled the hamper into position once more. Panting, he leaned against the smooth wall and took another tranquilizer from the little box in his pocket.

The hamper was almost filled again when the phone rang once. "Tullis! They're getting warm! Unjam it!"

"Right."

After a moment the conveyer started clanking again. Carter grinned as he imagined the guards' puzzled faces.

Then the smile froze on his face. There were voices from the next room, perhaps guards searching for their missing companion. He flattened himself against the wall and drew the silenced pistol. One of the men said something in Arabic, and they both chuckled. Their voices receded across the basement. Carter put the gun away and started breathing again.

It was nearly two o'clock when the conveyer shut off again, signaling the end of the burning operation. Tullis now had been inside the incinerator for close to nine hours, and he'd been sending the money down the pipe for six hours.

"How's it going?" Carter whispered.

"Terrible! If they hadn't stopped, I was going to jam it again. I'm almost drowning in the stuff."

"Keep it coming."

"Man, I could use a cold beer!"

"After today you can buy a whole brewery." He saw the flicker of the flare through the drain. "Turn off your air nozzle and move the flare away from the temperature bulb. They would have shut off the incinerator by now."

"Right."

It went on for over two hours longer before the last of the money dropped through the drain.

"That's it!" Tullis sighed.

"All right. Sneak a look through the conveyer doors and see if the coast is clear. Then meet me at the truck in ten minutes. If you're not

there, I'll see you at the airfield."

Carter wheeled the last laundry hamper out to the loading dock and dumped it into the garbage truck. That was it—11 million, give or take a million.

He climbed into the cab of the truck and lit a cigarette, his first of the day. After five minutes he started the motor. To hell with Tullis! He couldn't risk waiting any longer.

Then he saw the bald man appear in the doorway and run toward the truck. He was grinning. "Did you count it all?" he asked.

There was a sudden deafening chatter of gunfire, and a line of jagged red holes appeared across Tullis' chest. Carter tore at his own gun, seeing too late the uniformed man who had come up on the other side.

"Stay!" the officer commanded in English. "Or you, too, are a dead man!"

Carter let his fingers slip from the gun butt. A uniformed soldier was bending over Tullis, going through his pockets. "What is this?" Carter asked. "Why'd you kill him?"

The officer smiled slightly, his thin black mustache twitching as he spoke. "I am General Alizar of the Syrastan Treasury Department. You are under arrest for grand theft."

"All right," Carter said, allowing his gun to be taken from him. "I guess you've got me."

"So true!" Alizar, a little man with hard eyes that missed nothing, motioned with his gun.

"Why'd you kill him?" Carter asked again. He felt suddenly very tired.

"The wrong question! You should ask, instead, why I didn't kill you as well."

"All right. Why didn't you?"

"Because I want the rest of them. The girl, and the others."

Carter's mind was racing. They didn't have Sherry, not yet, and they didn't know how many were in the plot. There was a chance, just a chance, of coming out of this alive. "All right," he said, speaking to Alizar's gun.

"Where are they?"

"The airfield. Waiting for me."

"Then we will drive there. After we unload the money."

"If I'm not there in fifteen minutes, they leave without me."

General Alizar pondered. "Then the money goes, too," he decided. "There is no time to unload it. I will be in the truck cab beside you. My men will follow. No tricks, or you are a dead man."

"No tricks." Carter slid back behind the wheel and started the motor. When Alizar was in the seat next to him, he wheeled the

big garbage truck out onto the highway and headed for the airfield at the edge of town. "How did you know about it?" he asked finally. "Were you watching me all the time?" He was remembering the hook-nosed man by the fountain.

"We weren't watching you," Alizar said. He seemed eager to talk about it, perhaps already thinking of the medal he'd be adding to his chest. "You were clever, but you forgot one thing. While the conveyer was broken down, one of my guards happened to notice something strange. Although the temperature gauge showed the incinerator to be in operation, the oil level gauges showed that no oil had flowed from the tanks to fuel it. After four hours of operation, the oil tanks were still full!"

Carter cursed himself for a fool. One mistake, just one! "We couldn't think of everything," he muttered.

"Keep both hands on the wheel, please." The gun nudged him in the ribs. "So you see, I began looking around the building. A garbage truck parked all day at my back door is not a familiar sight, and so I investigated it while you were inside. When I saw the dye fading from the money in the truck, I knew the girl had to be involved, too. Unfortunately, she had apparently left the building."

"A clever bit of work," Carter said. "The government will reward you."

"Yes." He touched his mustache lightly. "Who else is in it, besides the girl and the guard?"

They hadn't yet found the guard, bound and gagged in the subbasement. "Those, and others," Carter answered.

General Alizar grunted. "Turn here for the airfield."

Carter wheeled the truck down a dirt road to the little airstrip. It had a private hangar, across from the main airport, and he saw the plane waiting there, as scheduled. Sherry was nowhere in sight. He glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw the carload of security guards still behind them.

Carter bit his lip and stepped down on the gas pedal. The truck picked up speed and bumped along the rutted road toward the waiting plane. "Slow down!" Alizar barked.

"Sure." Carter slammed on the brakes and Alizar's forehead hit the windshield. The car behind them, speeding to catch up, hit the rear of the garbage truck.

Carter threw open the door, dropped to the ground and started running, trying to reach the shelter of the plane before they opened fire. General Alizar, dazed and

angry, jumped to the ground behind him and fired one wild shot.

Then Sherry Watson appeared in the hangar entrance with a rifle in her hands, and fired two careful shots. Alizar turned, staggered, and went down hard in the sand. He was dead before he hit the ground.

The security guards, still shaken from the crash and with no desire to join their fallen general, offered no resistance. Carter and Sherry disarmed them and locked them in the hangar.

"What about the ground crew?" Sherry asked.

"They've been paid to stay out of the way. How come you had that rifle ready?"

"I thought Tullis might double-cross you. If it had been he driving that truck I was going to kill him."

"Alizar saved you the trouble. Come on, we've got to get that money loaded onto the plane."

"How do we do that?"

"The truck has a dumping mechanism. Get the cargo door open."

They'd almost finished the job, chasing down some scattered loose bills, when Sherry straightened from her task, pointing toward the highway. "An armored car!"

Carter saw it and cursed. "Into the plane, quick! Leave the rest." Someone in the control tower hadn't been paid enough to keep silent. Someone had made a call.

Sherry dived in after him and he slammed the giant cargo door. Then he was gunning the twin engines to life and taxiing down the runway. A few minutes later, as the plane's wheels left the ground, the men in the armored car had already opened fire. Carter lifted the nose and headed high about the city.

"I think we made it," he breathed.

"Where now, Carter? Switzerland?"

"We have to refuel first in Turkey."

"So soon?"

"Don't worry. We're out of danger." He took one of her hands and squeezed it. "Flapdragon. We didn't even get burned."

She returned his smile. "Flapdragon."

It was night when they landed at the little airport near the Turkish coast. There was no point in continuing before morning, so they took a room in a seedy hotel nearby. The night was calm but starless, and Carter felt a great sadness as he stared up at the sky. He'd stuffed his pockets with the stolen money, leaving the rest of it locked in the plane. Now, alone with Sherry, he could only think about the money and the future, and he wondered why he was sad.

She left him for a time, and when she returned there was a small smile playing about her lips. "It was good that Tullis died," she said.

"Very good. I forgot to thank Alizar."

They ate, poor food served on greasy plates, and went to bed early. In the morning Carter awakened before Sherry, and sat cross-legged on the bed for a long moment, watching her.

Then he got up, and dressed, and left her alone. He did not bother with a note, but placed, instead, a packet of money on the dresser top. He thought she would understand.

At the airfield, he asked if the plane was ready, and had it wheeled out. He had just paid for the gasoline and was walking toward it when the man with the hooked nose appeared in his path. Carter tensed and felt for his gun, and then remembered he no longer had it.

"Who are you?" he asked. "A friend of Alizar's?"

"No," the man answered. "I have followed you a long time. You have some unfinished business—some faulty electronic gear sold to Sheik Abu Hail."

"Is that all?" Carter felt himself relax. "That's ancient history." Another thought crossed his mind. "How did you find me here so soon? Did the girl tell you? Did she phone you last night when she left me alone?"

The hooked-nose man smiled sadly. "They all betray us, sooner or later."

Carter shifted his feet, anxious to reach the plane. "What is it you want? Money? Will a million lira settle my account with Abu Hail? Two million lira?"

"You have no such money," the man said. "You are only a poor swindler."

"I have! I have!"

Carter went for his pocket then, tugging at the bundles of currency there. Perhaps the man misunderstood his gesture, or perhaps he had meant to shoot him all along.

Carter never knew.

One good word deserves another, but speechlessness reigns.

THE FIRST TIME I saw Harris Bateson, he was in his cell in the Los Angeles County Jail. He was a large man, well over six feet tall, with thick wrists and broad shoulders, and he weighed at least two-twenty. Despite his size, he gave the impression of weakness. A head of curly yellow hair framed a round face that had pale-blue eyes; full, pink lips that seemed slightly moist like a baby's; and a small, weak chin. Even without a knowledge of his past I would have figured he was the type some older women always want to mother. He was twenty-nine, but still had the soft, pampered look of a slightly overweight teen-ager.

I was working my way through college as a member of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and it was my first night as officer of the high-power tank. This was a short, isolated row of cells which were watched more carefully than

the other cell blocks in the jail. They were more secure, too, because each cell had a heavy steel mesh over the bars, and even if a man somehow escaped from his cell there were two heavy doors that had to be passed to reach the rest of the jail. At that time Bateson was the only celebrity prisoner in the jail and, therefore, the only prisoner in the high-power tank.

He was sitting on the edge of his bunk, reading a paperback book and chewing a chocolate bar. I was surprised at how confident he appeared. By then the jury in his murder trial had been out a day and a half, trying to decide whether he'd killed his wife or not. He had a lot riding on that verdict, and I thought he would have shown signs of the pressure. Every minute must have seemed like an hour to him. When I approached his cell, he stood up and came close to the mesh so we could talk.

"Well, well, a new face," he said sarcastically. He had a high-pitched voice that matched his face, not his build. "I thought I was going to have to talk to myself if I wanted conversation. Is it true this cell used to be Chessman's?"

"I don't know," I said. "I suppose it's possible. He was tried here in L.A. and had a lot of action in the courts, but that was before my time."

"I read a lot about him," Bateson said.

"Be happy you don't have to worry about ending up the way he did," I said.

"That's right," he agreed with a smile. "When there's no body, they don't gas you. It'd be too embarrassing if the victim turned up alive. So I don't think I have much to worry about. That jury will never find me guilty."

The Bateson murder case had been in the newspapers for months. When a good-looking young guy is accused of killing a rich wife fifteen years his senior, but no body can be found, it makes a situation ideally suited to newspaper exploitation. When the state doesn't hesitate to bring formal murder charges even when the victim's body is missing, the headlines are blacker, the stories longer.

by Alberto N. Martin

The whole thing began about a year earlier. Bateson's car was found abandoned at a roadside camp between L.A. and San Francisco. The highway patrol towed

it away, and an effort was made to locate Bateson and his wife, but no one got very excited. Things happen every day that are far more attention-getting than an abandoned car and missing owners.

However, when Harris Bateson came lurching out of the underbrush a few weeks later with his wild story, interest picked up. He claimed to have parked his car and gone exploring with his wife, only to become hopelessly lost. He said that he and his wife became separated after the first day and that he'd been wandering alone ever since.

He certainly looked the part of a man who'd been lost for weeks. At least, he was dirty enough, his clothes were worn enough, and his yellow beard was long enough. A full-scale search was made, but no sign of Jean Bateson was ever found.

A couple of weeks passed, during which the police received dozens of letters and phone calls from friends and relatives of Jean Bateson. All of them doubted her husband's story and were quick to point out its flaws. Harris and Jean Bateson had lived in an apartment in Los Angeles. Both had been city people all their lives. Neither had ever expressed interest in geology or nature study. What possible reason could they have for wandering away from their car and getting lost so far from home? It didn't make sense.

Also, though he claimed to have been living on roots and berries, Harris Bateson didn't appear to have lost any weight. The photos taken shortly after he returned to civilization showed that his clothing fit him quite well. This wasn't consistent with the fact that Bateson was no woodsman—in fact, he had never even been a boy scout.

An investigation followed and more evidence was turned up. It was learned that Harris had been married and divorced twice before, and each of his former wives had been wealthy older women. Both had divorced him for physical cruelty and one said he'd stolen her jewelry before he left. Harris and Jean Bateson had had frequent quarrels over money and she had been threatening to leave him. This, coupled with the discovery that he'd forged her name to stock dividend checks after her disappearance, gave the police all the motive they needed.

A warrant was issued and the Bateson apartment searched. Jean's best friend examined her clothing and was prepared to swear the only things missing were a cocktail dress and a pair of high-heeled shoes—not exactly anyone's first choice for exploring the wilder-

ness. Then the woman's false teeth were found in the glove compartment of Bateson's car and the police no longer had any doubts that a murder had been committed.

Harris Bateson said the teeth were his wife's extra set, but no dentist could be found to confirm it. He said the trip north had been an impulsive thing withour prior planning, and that the same was true for the decision to leave the car and explore some of the countryside.

His explanations weren't good enough. Jean had been seen last at the apartment in L.A. two days before the abandoned car was discovered. After much discussion the police theorized that Jean had been murdered in Los Angeles and her body transported upstate and hidden somewhere. Harris Bateson had then either camped out, using supplies he'd taken with him, or, what was more likely, hidden in a city for a few weeks and gone back when he figured it was time to make his big entrance. Harris Bateson's story had too many holes in it to be believed.

The trial as reported in the newspapers was far more exciting than most people had expected. Just a few weeks before, there had been a sensational murder trial in which a woman had been found innocent of killing her husband, not on the strength or weakness of the evidence, but because her attorney vilified the murdered man. The picture he painted was so black, the sexual aberrations so grotesque, that the jury found the woman not guilty. Harris Bateson apparently decided to employ the same tactic.

The Bateson trial lasted two weeks and Harris Bateson conducted his own defense. The court would have appointed an attorney, but he refused, saying he preferred to speak and act for himself. And he seemed to do quite well.

The prosecution presented its entire case in three days, and then Bateson took over. He repeated his story about going exploring, getting lost, and becoming separated from his wife; but the prosecutor had already shown how improbable that was, so Bateson didn't put much effort into that defense. Instead, he began to attack his wife.

To hear him tell it, and the jury heard nothing else for seven days, Jean Bateson was the lowest human being who ever lived; no one more despicable ever walked, crawled or swam. When he had finished, the murder victim in the earlier case seemed a saint by comparison. Most of what Bateson said couldn't be printed in family newspapers, but the shocked tone of the reporters' prose carried some idea of the magnitude of his accusations

to people like myself who couldn't be at the trial.

While I was talking to Bateson in front of his cell, the phone on the wall rang. The officer at the main desk told me the Bateson jury had returned a few minutes before and left a sealed verdict before heading for their hotel. It was a Sunday night, so Bateson had to wait until the following morning to learn the jury's decision. When I told him the jury had reached a verdict, he smiled confidently and tore the wrapper from a candy bar.

It turned out his confidence had no basis in reality. Bateson was found guilty. I bought a newspaper the next day on my way to the jail and learned that the jurors had been affected by his trial tactics, all right, but not in the way he'd expected.

"No one could possibly believe he'd been lost in the woods, but if he'd been less vicious we might have brought back a different verdict," they all said. "We all felt there's something terribly wrong with a man who can be married to a woman and not have anything good to say about her. He didn't have one good word."

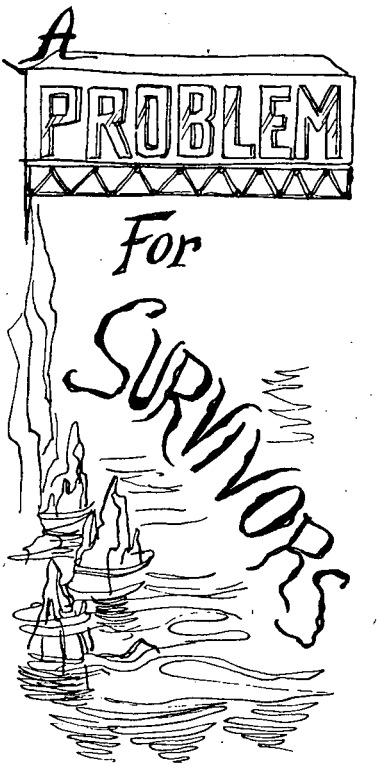
When I reached the jail, Bateson was completely changed from the night before. He was in a rage and was pacing rapidly inside his cell, spitting out fresh curses with each step.

"They're imbeciles," he shouted. "They wouldn't know the truth if it was beaten into their heads with a baseball bat."

He turned to me and put his hands flat against the steel mesh. I'd never seen such hate-filled eyes, and I knew then that Bateson was capable of anything.

"Sure, I killed her. There's no use denying it anymore. But being found guilty for the wrong reason makes me want to explode. We *did* take that trip north on impulse—we'd been drinking and simply climbed into the car and went. Also, I *was* lost in those blasted woods. And I *do* have a good word for Jean." He paused and his lips parted in a smile that made me thankful for the bars and steel mesh that separated us. "She was delicious."

As Cervantes observed: The charging of his enemy was but the work of a moment.



GILBERT RHEIMER got there fifteen minutes early. He let his chauffeur Jeff assist him from the car to the wheelchair, which he didn't really need any longer but he considered it an interesting prop for the indelicate business ahead of him. Jeff jockeyed the chair up five broad flagstone steps to the large oaken door with heavy twists of molding. Above the massive brass handle was a silver nameplate about the size of a calling card. *Seascape Golf & Tennis Club,* it read. *Private.* Jeff swung the door carefully outward, clearing the chair's right wheel by a scant inch.

"I'll be ready to leave at five-thirty," Rheimer said.

"I'll be here, sir," the chauffeur said, departing.

Rheimer wheeled himself through the doorway. At the far end of the blue-carpeted foyer the chief steward turned to see who had entered, then came forward with a cordial smile.

"Welcome back, Mister Rheimer. Good to see you again."

"Well, thanks, Alonzo."

By Frank Sisk

"Must have been an awful spill you took. It's all of three months, isn't it?"

"All of that, yes. I'll tell you one thing, Alonzo, it will be a hell of a lot longer than three months before I climb into another saddle." Rheimer patted the arm of the chair. "This is just about my speed for a while. Two horsepower."

Alonzo grinned appreciatively. "Looks a lot safer than the horse that threw you. From the pictures I saw in the paper, a real big mean baby."

"I guess I met my match." It pleased Rheimer that the myth of his masterly horsemanship hadn't been shattered by the foolhardy performance at the Tri-County Equestrian Exhibition. "But it's going to take more than a horse to keep me down for good."

"Like I was saying to some of the members when we got word of the accident, don't worry too much about Mister Rheimer. He's survived worse, he's a born survivor."

"Very kind of you, Alonzo."

"No matter how tough the going gets, I said, Mister R's the type that'll squeak through somehow."

If "squeak" had come from almost anyone else, Rheimer might have suspected a satirical undertone—implicit in the word was the idea of winning by hook or crook or, by some jugglery, giving the illusion of winning—but over the years Alonzo had often demonstrated a partiality for Rheimer. It was Alonzo, was it not, who had told him in confidence that a straw poll secretly conducted among the club's paid personnel had named him overwhelmingly The Most Popular Member of the Board of Directors? Not an enormous thing, but not wholly trivial either; a small honor unsung, a minor tribute unheralded, a little something that indicated a little something.

"Has my wife arrived yet?" Rheimer asked. "And her guest?"

"Not yet, sir. It's still short of four. Fourteen of, to be exact. But the table is ready. And we can serve the hors d'oeuvres on a moment's notice."

"Fine. I'll head out there and get one-up."

"May I be of assistance, sir?"

"No, thanks. I'm checked out on this thing for solo now. See these buttons here?"

Alonzo looked and nodded.

"That's the flight panel," Rheimer said. "White is manual, red reverse, green ahead, and at a good three miles an hour."

Alonzo shook his head. "A far cry from what you used to tease out of that Maserati."

"Yeah." He had once told Alonzo, a great admirer of the Italian car, that he'd attained 144 mph

while driving it early one morning on the Maine Turnpike. Actually he'd hit 110 for a frightening moment, but 144 was more in line with what might be mentioned casually by an amateur racer, which he purported to have been briefly as a young man. "That Maserati was a dream. Oh, and Alonzo, before I forget it, another thing."

"Yes?"

"Flag down a waiter, preferably Gene, and order me a bloody mary, easy on the tabasco."

"Why, of course, sir."

Rheimer pressed the green button. Smoothly and silently the chair moved forward under its own electric power. With light palm pressure on right or left wheel, he guided it up the gently inclining ramp into the dining room and down the wide middle aisle between the tables. Several late lunchers were still washing down whatever they had eaten hours ago, but the area was generally deserted. He offered a smile and a nod to the diehards and got in reply an "Attaboy, Gil," and a "Hi, tiger"—buddy-buddy but not personally involved. Most of the members were probably as well aware of his domestic crisis as his contretemps with the horse, but they preferred to take no direct notice of either. Let such unpleasant situations simmer like a mirage in the background. It was the best way. Under similar circumstances, please reciprocate. The principal responsibility was to ignore the struggle of others and to survive as gracefully as possible. One must master defeat. If a true key to club membership existed, that was it. Otherwise the members had little else in common.

We're all a pack of dehumanized eunuchs, Rheimer told himself whimsically as he coasted out onto the Terrace of Glass. Still, we're always mutely rooting for each other. We're on the side of success, if not valor. Cool and courteous, we don't cry much, and we never consider ourselves losers until we lose our money. That loss, understandably and excusably, is almost not to be survived.

Bill Kidder, for instance; he lost his only begotten son in a motorboat explosion. Dauntless and tight of lip, he resumed life after a funereal week of drinking. Then he lost his wife to, of all persons, her chiropodist. He found a lopsided laugh in it. A few years later his generally robust health began to dissolve in an endless bottle of Scotch, yet he staggered rock-jawed through the misty days in search of the radicals who were everywhere at work for the overthrow of the honest dollar. At last he lost his lucrative insurance-brokerage business to a sober junior partner, sal-

vaging not much more than enough to buy a final case of Scotch and a gun. The shot that ended his life was readily explicable: Bill Kidder had lost his money and couldn't afford to go on, to survive.

What was that neat thing that Thomas Mann had said about survivors? (Rheimer had been reading *The Magic Mountain* somewhat fitfully during his convalescence, the first such book in years, and small pieces of it were settling like sediment in the unexplored regions of his mind.) Something about the problem of survival. What was it now? Neat and deep. Quotable, if he could only remember it. Oh, well, it would come to him soon.

Proceeding to the center of the terrace, he again experienced the feelings always associated with this place—an exhilarating sense of freedom and a tingle of creative pride. For this terrace, this simple, this beautiful, this sensational terrace, was solely his from conception to construction. Not dollarwise, of course (although more than his share of bucks was built into it) but as a unique child of his brain. Upon its completion a year ago, the terrace was nearly named the Rheimer Room by a grateful Board of Directors, which enabled Rheimer to demur in all modesty and suggest instead the Terrace of Glass. Unanimous assent followed generous applause.

The rectangular plexiglas floor soared outward on steel cantilevers with an engaging force that seemed ready to violate its own geometrical limitations by continuing on into thin air. Looking through the floor's nacreous translucence, one could discern dimly, a few hundred feet straight down, the frothy rush of river waters among the sharp fingers of stalagmitic rock. The reinforced plate-glass walls offered an unimpeded view east, south, west; and the blue-tinted plexiglas canopy supported a chimera of cerulean skies directly overhead even when black thunderheads were massed.

Normally, at this time of day, the canopy would have been recessed and the walls lowered to railing height in order that the members might drink and talk while apparently afloat on sun-warmed zephyrs, but it had been raining earlier in the afternoon, an off-again on-again August rain, and the terrace had been abandoned, then protectively enclosed. The air-conditioning system was now on too, but none of the members had returned. They were probably anchored idly at the bar, forgetting some things and remembering others.

Well, just as well, Rheimer

thought. When reconnoitering a sticky situation up close for the first time (and definitely the last), the fewer eavesdroppers on the scene the better.

The terrace was furnished with a dozen tables. Placed deliberately at random, like rose-colored intervals of thick glass, the oval shapes rested on a central column of black. Each table was large enough to seat six adults, with plenty of elbow room, in the scoop-like chairs surrounding it. An earthenware vase of lipstick vine was the thematic centerpiece, flanked by two kidney-shaped ash trays with black stripes on white. One table, over at the western wall of glass, had additionally three place settings guarded by snowy damask napkins held erect in red crystal rings.

Rheimer piloted his chair to this table. The sun, halfway down the sky, was striking the glass dazzling blows. Squinting, he looked outward, downward. The sun was also striking the deep blue of the bay where it was joined by the green gut of the river, creating an estuarial outline of strident silver. The bouncing needles of light pierced the eye.

"May I draw the blinds, Mister Rheimer?"

He turned, temporarily blind. "Gene?"

"That's right, sir. How are you?"

"That's what I call rapid service, Gene."

"I saw you talking to Alonzo," the waiter said. "I took a gamble and ordered a bloody mary right away."

Rheimer lifted the frosty glass from the tray and took a sip. "Easy on the tabasco, I see."

"Exactly, sir."

"Nothing wrong with your memory, Gene."

"Well, thanks. About these blinds now?"

"Don't bother. I'm going to sit with the sun at my back. You can take this chair away, though."

Gene removed the indicated chair and Rheimer wheeled into the vacancy.

"Shall I lower the walls and roll back the canopy, sir?"

"After the others arrive, Gene. It's a conversation piece."

"Just give me the signal."

"Lower away as soon as you've served the first round."

"Check."

"Meanwhile—" taking a long ice-rattling swallow from the glass, "meanwhile, Gene, you may as well start another of these delightful refreshers on the way."

Alone, the sun powerfully behind him, Rheimer considered the potential field of combat—the sparkling oval of glass. He'd seat

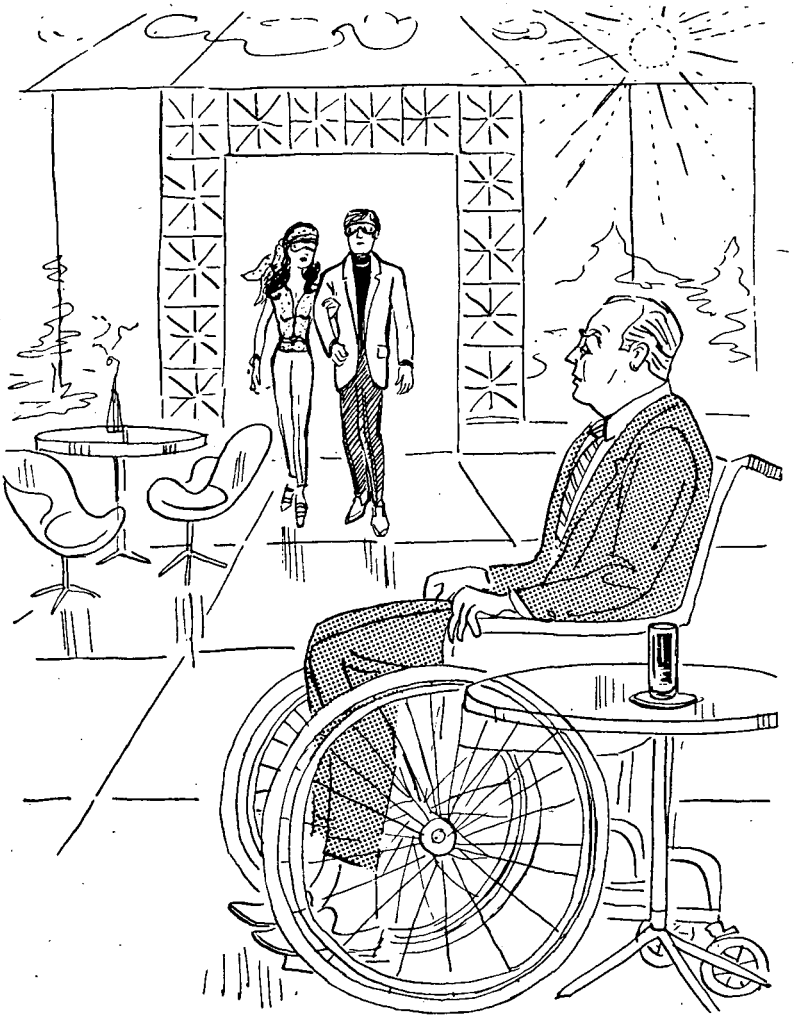
Beatrice to his right, the northside; the bright glare at that angle would be a source of irritation but not an outright menace. Durand he'd place on his left, the southside, where the westering sun would zero in its heaviest artillery. Give the man about ten minutes' exposure to *that*, Rheimer concluded with satisfaction, and he'd have developed around the eyes an expression of strabismic idiocy.

As luck would have it, however, when the loving couple arrived a few minutes after the second bloody mary, they were both wearing almost identical wraparound sunglasses, Beatrice's magenta and Durand's a cobalt blue. Beatrice gave the distinct impression of not wearing much else. Her remarkable breasts were vividly accented in a sleeveless pink jersey sweater, and a braided gold belt cinched in a pair of white toreador pants that erotically outlined all variations of the contour as typified in thigh and calf. She wore gold sandals and, in her black hair, a pink kerchief.

Just the sight of her at that moment, framed in the terrace entrance, made him forget that he was fifteen years her senior and a prematurely debilitated senior in the bargain. That had already been attested to once too often. Well, at the time of their marriage nearly four years ago, he'd known he was putting on an act. Even then he'd known it. She was no chicken herself—thirty-six right now standing there—but his rooster days, never particularly good at prime, were pretty much over.

Durand obviously was cut from different timber. Next to Beatrice, he looked lithe, tigerish. He was the type who could wear a black turtleneck sweater, a white linen coat and dark flannel slacks like a professional model, and that was what he was wearing. He appeared to be about thirty, but as the sleek lovers approached, shoulder occasionally touching shoulder, Rheimer was pleased to note that Durand weathered a little with each step forward. By the time they reached the table he'd aged ten or twelve years. The juice of youth still coursed beneath the sunbronzed skin (as befits an itinerant golf pro) but the goodly liquor was undergoing the inevitable dilution. Mark the incipient pouches like a faint extra rim below the sunglasses. Above the turtleneck, parched wrinkles orbit. Tiny veins flicker brokenly on the wings of the nose, and the reddish sideburns are threaded with gray. The mouth, however, a full-lipped moist smirk, is a clear clue to the pudenda orientation.

Bea's eyes artlessly confessed to



a few preparatory drinks already down the hatch.

"Here, my dear," Rheimer said, patting the arm of the chair to his right. "A reserved seat."

"This is Al Durand, Gil," she said, slush slightly thickening her delivery. "You prolly seen his picture in *Golf Talk*."

"Excuse me for not rising,"

Rheimer said, ignoring the hand offered by the silly rip. "*Golf Talk*? The last time I looked at it, Lee Elder was the featured player."

Awkwardly retrieving the unwanted hand, Durand said, "Oh, yeah, I remember that issue. Won thirty-five grand on his first PGA tour, if I remember."

Durand, immune to subtle nastiness, jiggled the back of Bea's chair as if to assist her in sitting, although she was solidly settled, and then walked behind Rheimer and took the chair by the other place setting. "Quite a place here. I see something on it written up somewhere."

"In *Golf Talk* perhaps?"

"Let's keep this on a human plane, Gil," Bea said. "After all, we're here as your guests."

"And very welcome you are, Bea. A sight for sore eyes, if I may coin a phrase. The Bahamas did you the world of good."

"Nothing like 'em," Durand said. "I mean, for pure relaxation and recreation, take your pick, you can't beat the old Bahamas."

Rheimer mentally composed a question about *im*pure relaxation and recreation but before he could utter it Gene came to the table for orders. Beatrice and Durand specified extra-dry vodka martinis (the undercover drink) while Rheimer went along with the bloody mary. In the immediate lull that followed, Rheimer produced a gold cigarette case and, snapping it open, held it out to Bea. She declined with a glance at Durand, who promptly came up with a king-size pack of a popular brand.

"You must be saving the coupons," Rheimer said.

"Lay off the wisecracks," Bea said, eyes flashing. "We want to keep this, this whatever it is, this meeting on a civil plane. After all, it's the twentieth century, isn't it?"

"We're rather tense, aren't we?" Rheimer said, smiling. "I'd thought that three months in the Bahamas at this time of the year would have baked the cantankerousness out of you."

"I don't like that line," Durand said, seeming to catch on for the first time. "I mean, we can try to play this threesome in a polite way or not at all, the way I see it."

Rheimer derisively said nothing. He had resolved, in arranging this confrontation two days earlier, to keep it cool. Now, having met Durand and classified him as an absolute lout, he knew the situation was amenable to his control. His position was further strengthened by the fact that he'd already reached a firm decision in the case, whereas Bea and her Number One

Iron believed the outcome was negotiable. Twentieth century notwithstanding, Bea's chances of obtaining a divorce à l'impuissance or à la gorge, or whatever, were about as meager as a wasp's waist.

Phil and Helen Pendleton appeared on the terrace. Rheimer waved his hand and they waved back. Bea glanced in their direction but didn't recognize them. Her sight was not too good at distances, and the sunglasses were no help. The Pendletons took a table at the eastern wall and promptly fell into a sotto voce conversation. Rheimer knew instinctively he was part of the subject matter—ménage à trois, they'd consider it.

Well, if they kept an eye on the action, they would see him ostensibly defeat the rugged rival . . .

Gene arrived with the drinks and the hors d'oeuvres. Bea, served first, downed half her vodka martini almost before the men got their drinks.

Rheimer said, "Start another round, Gene. It's been one hell of a dusty day."

"What does the doc say about the hip?" Bea asked.

"Keep off horses," Rheimer said.

"I could have told you that free of charge." Bea put an end to the remainder of her drink. "I *did* tell you, in fact. A dozen times."

"At least. I can hear you now."

"But you always had to be such a damned show-off."

"Never was much for horses myself," Durand said, trying to mediate.

"Neither is Gil," Bea said with a sharp laugh. "He talks a great gallop and that's how it goes. Fast talk. Oh, he might be able to handle a plough horse, one of these bony old hacks on the way to the glue factory, but give him a spirited filly and dear old Gil is strictly upsville and outsville from the saddle."

"Takes all kinds," Durand said feebly.

"That's the literal truth," Rheimer said, smiling. Behind the smile he was thinking how sexually ideal Beatrice seemed at a distance of fifty or so feet and how, vis à vis, she was simply too much.

Just then something extraordinary came to pass. The million refractions of sunlight on glass began to transform themselves at a rapid rate into a warm, syrupy effulgence. Moving slowly at first and then with a slight acceleration, the merging warmth drifted across the terrace, softly caressing the air-conditioned brow, causing the napkins to flutter a little bit, drawing the tendrils of cigarette smoke eastward, for the canopy was rolling back and the walls were sink-

ing smoothly into their own slots.

Removing his sunglasses, Durand got to his feet in order to obtain a better view of the phenomenon—outdoors banishing indoors to the vanishing point. With an air of self-satisfaction, Rheimer himself turned the wheelchair in a quarter circle and surveyed the deep azure sky and the scintillant waters that finally joined it.

"And when I say *filly,*" Bea was saying, for she'd seen it all before and was no longer impressed, "I don't mean only horses. Four-legged fillies aren't the only kind he can't ride." She emitted that sharp laugh again, her drinking laugh. "There's a lot of saddles he can't sit."

"Well, now I guess I've seen everything," Durand said, still watching the glass walls as they ceased sinking five feet from the floor. "Bea was trying to tell me what it was like, but you gotta really experience it."

"Nothing like experience," Bea said dimly.

"It's a pleasant architectural innovation, I think," said Rheimer.

"You can say that again."

"But I won't."

"Don't let the highfalutin skunk suck you in, Al," Bea said.

"Well you gotta hand it to him, irregardless," Durand said. "It's got to be a real mechanical marvel. I mean, we're like way up here on that so-called magic rug."

"Carpet," murmured Rheimer.

"Carpet, yeah. And it's quite a unique feeling to me at least. How far up are we, offhand?"

"If the truth were known," Bea said, "some bright-eyed kid in his office, some young swinger fresh out of college, did most of the brain work here. Gil just took the credit."

"Two hundred and sixty-seven feet above the water level at high tide," Rheimer said.

"Some drop," Durand said.

"Some kid deserves the credit," Bea said spitefully. "That blond boy you got from Rensselaer—what's his name? You know who I mean, Gil. David something. Ash-blond hair worn kind of long."

Gene appeared with a new round of drinks. Rheimer smiled upon him benignly and made an unobtrusive gesture with his left hand that said plainer than words to keep things flowing.

Bea lifted her glass and took a generous swallow. It had the effect of pointing her thoughts in a new direction. "Let's get down to particulars, Gil. You too, Al. After all, this isn't exactly a social occasion. So let's get right down to it."

"The nitti gritti," Rheimer said in an amused tone.

"The nitti gritti," Bea said emphatically.

"I guess so," Durand said as if in some doubt.

Leaning back in the wheelchair, Rheimer said amiably, "All right then. I'm at your disposal."

"I bet." Bea took another swallow. "But anyway, if you have no objections, shall we get right to the subject of the divorce?"

"By all means."

"First, the grounds. There's a lot of them, Gil. Now what ones do you prefer?"

"If I were suing, I'd make a nice case out of adultery."

"But you're not suing, so let's stop being funny about it."

"Bea wants to keep the grounds clean, if possible," Durand said.

"Considerate of her."

"That's been my advice right along. Keep the grounds up above the foul zone. Desertion, for instance, or incompatibility. Sounds a hell of a lot better than impotence or sterility or something along those lines, don't it?"

"It do."

"Will you sit still for incompatibility?" Bea asked.

"That's what I've been doing for nearly four years," said Rheimer. "Go on."

"We'll file in Mexico City," Bea said.

"No publicity there," Durand said. "Unless you're in movies or TV."

"What if you're a moderately well-known architect?"

"Dick Wilson or Robert Trent Jones would rate attention. Sure. But even they could be sub rosa with the right approach and a little dough in the right hands. Take it from me."

"You don't have any serious objection to Mexico, do you?" Bea asked.

"Delightful country."

"Then that's settled. I'll file for divorce in Mexico City on the grounds of incompatibility. Now, as to the financial arrangements, you'll pay the legal fees, of course, and I'd like a flat settlement. In that way, we won't have to deal with each other in the future. Al thinks that's the best way and I agree with him."

"A fresh start," Durand said.

"Once we're married, we won't even live in the States," Bea said.

"The nation's loss," Rheimer said. "Just where do you plan to put down roots?"

"It's really none of your business, Gil. Or won't be. But we've found a place on Treasure Cay. Perfect."

"An island paradise, I understand. That's where you met, if I'm not mistaken."

"Right," Durand said, not quite

smacking his lips. "A real island paradise. You're right."

"Getting back to money matters," Bea said, "the legal fees will run around two thousand dollars."

"You've already received bids?" inquired Rheimer with a bland grin.

"Why, yes, in a sense. Then there'll be incidental expenses like airline tickets, hotels, things like that. I'm just trying to be practical for once in my life."

"I don't believe you've ever drawn an *im*practical breath once in your life, my dear." Rheimer faced Durand. "The day I was joined in wedlock with this lovely creature I deposited the sum of fifty thousand dollars in her own personal bank account, by way of added inducement to my formidable charm; an impost that could be levied only on twentieth-century man by his female contemporary, for whom a dowry is often what she receives rather than gives. And now this selfsame filly (her own term, Durand, so take no offense) considers it her blessed prerogative to shake me down for—How much of a flat settlement were you counting on, sweetheart?"

"A hundred thousand. Don't look so surprised. You can well afford it. Besides, the house on Treasure Cay is going to cost *almost* that much."

"Such serene reasoning." Rheimer was still addressing Durand as if the man were an impartial judge. "Weigh the words most carefully, old niblick. She figures it should cost me twice as much to get rid of her as it did to acquire her. Admittedly she has a point. However, she fails to take into consideration the distressing position a divorce would place me in, no matter what the grounds or how discreetly it was obtained."

"What do you mean by that?" Bea snapped angrily.

"What would my friends say, those who regard me as an unusual man among men?"

"What friends?"

"The Pendletons over there at the other side of the terrace, to mention a couple. They're already impugning my manhood in quiet undertones, inferring that I'm a wittol. You know what a wittol is, don't you, Durand?"

"Can't say I do."

"Neither do I and I don't give a damn," Bea said. "We're talking divorce, remember?"

"You're talking divorce, Bea. I'm not."

"On the phone the other day you talked it."

"Think back now, my dear, think back honestly. You talked divorce on the phone the other day, not I. You phoned me and

said—and I'll quote you exactly—"

"Well, we're all here, aren't we?" Her voice was strident. "What in hell are we all here for, in this phony club of yours, if it isn't to discuss a divorce? That's what I'd like to know."

"Me, too," Durand said. "What's the switch all of a sudden?"

"No switch," Rheimer said calmly. He finished the bloody mary and patted his lips with a napkin. "You're the victims of your own sleight of hand, not mine. You've both been so busy building castles in the air these last few months that you haven't noticed the utter instability of the foundations. As an architect, I spotted the defect right away, and I didn't have any help from young blood out of Rensselaer either. Although to give the blond genius a bit of credit, Bea, it was your weekend with him last year at Martha's Vineyard that made me suspicious of small bodies of land surrounded by large bodies of water."

"You dirty, underhanded sneak," Bea hissed. "Don't listen to his lies, Al."

"To continue—" Rheimer said.

"We don't want to hear any more," Bea said.

"To continue," Rheimer went on, "when my helpmate here, the sole wife of my life, decided a cure for a case of nerves could be found only in the Bahamas, I generously underwrote the trip. I think you'll both agree on my generosity because, to judge from the bills I've just paid, you didn't want for anything. You lived well."

"What are you driving at, Gil?"

"I'm getting kind of fed up," Durand said.

"You should be well fed up, Durand. But it's the last time you'll feed off me. I may be somewhat older than you, but I'm not precisely a doddering fool. Easy now. Control yourself. What I'm going to say won't take long. After that, I think you'll be glad to leave here for good. And I bet you leave alone."

"That's what you think," Bea said.

"That's exactly what I think, and here's why. Listen to this, my dear. When you departed for the Caribees, I very much wanted to go along. Unfortunately my misadventure with that horse kept me immobile. But intuitively I knew you needed a protector—"

"What nonsense!"

"—somebody reliable but inconspicuous, a kind of guardian angel. I believe Herbert Glover was the right choice. Don't you agree?"

"Herbert Glover? Herbie?" Bea raised her dark eyebrows above the sunglass rims. "You mean the car

dealer from Cleveland? That one?"

"That's the gentleman. He plays a fair game of golf, doesn't he?"

"I'll be damned," Durand said.

"Mister Glover is not really a car dealer," Rheimer continued with a happy smile. "He's not really from Cleveland, either. And his name isn't actually Glover. He was simply practicing a pretty deception under my auspices."

"A *private detective*. You finally stooped to that."

"All in the interest of your own welfare, my dear. Lucky I did, too. Otherwise, out of abysmal ignorance, you might be about to make the most impractical move, perhaps, the *first* impractical move, of your pragmatic little life. I'm referring, of course, to your silly plans for the future with this bamboozling bum on my left."

"Watch them cracks," Durand warned in a suddenly gruff voice.

"I'll do that," Rheimer said, laughing outright. "Now, Bea, listen carefully. Mister Glover kept me not only abreast of the current events in the Bahamas; he also did a considerable amount of research into Durand's background. And you'll be quite shocked to learn, as were I and Mister Glover, that our self-styled global golfer here, the redoubtable Alderic A. Durand—the *A* standing for *Alphonse*—is not much better than an itinerant caddy master. The closest he's ever been to a PGA tournament is clerking in a pro shop. Moreover—"

"You're making all this up," Bea said.

"Sure he is, baby," Durand said. "We don't have to sit here and listen to this creep."

"He was chief pro in Pinehurst last winter, I know that for a fact," Bea said.

"How do you know it for a fact?"

"His card, I've got one here in my purse."

"Don't bother looking. I've got a photostat of the printing bill for those cards, among other interesting documents." Rheimer took from the inside pocket of his jacket a stout manila envelope. "True, Durand *was* in Pinehurst a month before he met you in Nassau, my simpleton, but he was there in the capacity of bartender at a hotel. And not even under his own name. Called himself Jack Wallace. Just as well, because the management is looking for good old Jack. They want him to return approximately three hundred dollars in receipts that he took when he left without notice."

"This is a bunch of baloney, honey," Durand said to Bea. "Believe me, on my oath."

"You can believe him on his

oath," Rheimer said, opening the envelope, "or you may examine a few certified public records, and a few private ones also, that will tell you a much different story. You accuse me of being a *poseur*, my dear—unjustifiably, I feel—but at least I'm a *poseur* with money, with position. And yet you seem ready to trade me in for this other *poseur*, this criminal *poseur*, all because of an ill-conceived notion of money and sex. Oh, and it should interest you to learn that your lover here (he seems to be perspiring, doesn't he?) is married and the miserable father of four neglected children."

"He's divorced," Bea cried. "He told me all about it."

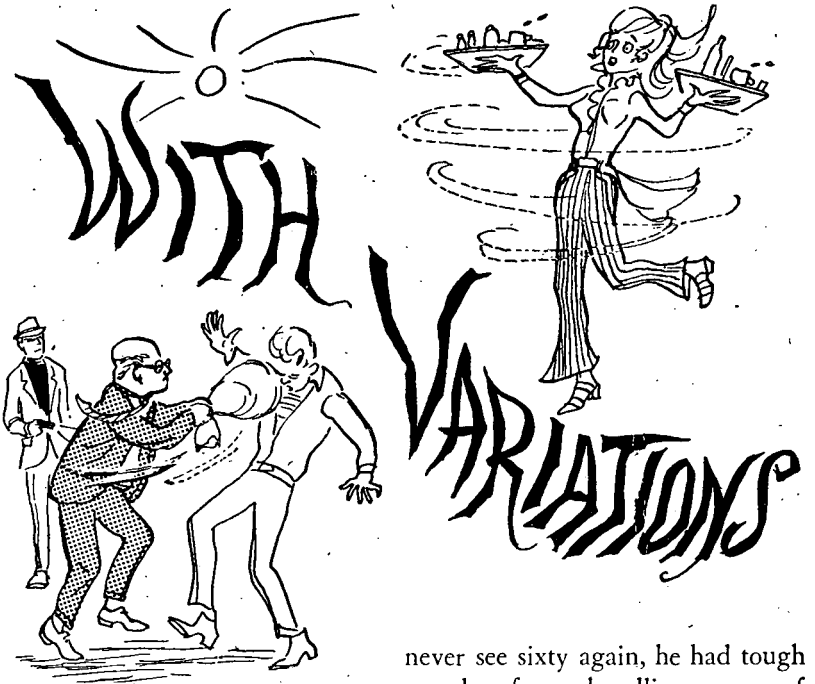
"He's a fugitive from a non-support warrant," Rheimer said, beginning to remove papers from the envelope. "That's what he is. If you won't believe me, I think there—"

"I don't believe it," Bea screamed.

At the same time, Durand sprang up from his chair and lunged toward Rheimer, apparently trying to grab the envelope with the incriminating papers. In reflex, Rheimer did something he couldn't have done if his hip had not been mended. He stood up on the narrow footboard of the wheelchair, preparing to ward off a blow, but Durand wasn't trying to hit him. In making his desperate grab, though, Durand's hand did strike Rheimer as he rose, a glancing blow on the right shoulder, and sent the light aluminum chair spinning backward in a half turn. Nearly upright, Rheimer wished to inform those present that the original documents were safe in the hands of his attorneys, but he didn't seem to have time.

As the chair struck the glass wall sidewise and lurched over on one wheel, he was aware of the Pendletons staring unabashedly in his direction from eyes too huge for the other indeterminate features of their faces, and for a fraction of a second he saw Gene stock-still at the terrace entrance with a dangerously tilting tray of glasses. Then everyone was whisked away as he was catapulted over the glass wall. In the swift plunge downward, that Thomas Mann thing illuminated the interior of his skull like a gigantic flare: *A man's dying is more the survivors' affair than his own. A man's dying is more the survivors' affair than his own. A man's dying . . .*

Although the materials of action are frequently variable, the use one makes of them should be constant.



BRIGHT AND EARLY that Monday morning they were waiting for Old Man Summerville as he came out of the Valley View market with the weekend receipts, roughly fifteen grand in cash and checks.

"We'll take it from here, dad," said the taller one.

Though Summerville would never see sixty again, he had tough muscles from handling cases of canned goods. He let the tall one have the bag smack in the face. The other man shot him twice.

They grabbed the canvas bag and joined the third man, waiting at the wheel of the getaway car. The car squalled out into Highway 70 which formed the main street of Valley View, population

2534, at the last count anyway.

The only witness was Hester Dorsey, carhopping at her father's drive-in across the way. She'd just come out with two breakfast trays for an Iowa car. At the sound of the shots she stood wide-eyed,

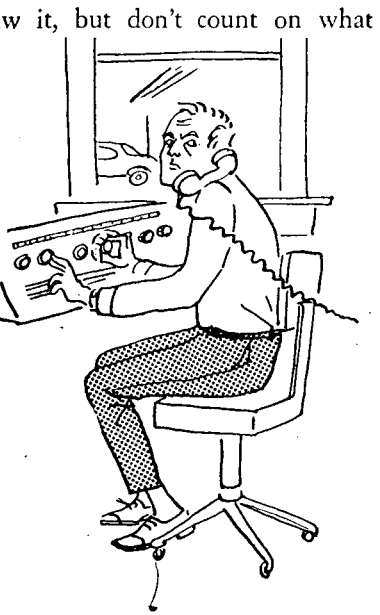
open-mouthed, then she screamed, whirling her reedy body without spilling anything on the trays.

Jake Dorsey, hearing the shots, had stepped back from his grill. He spotted Summerville sprawled across the way, the car roaring down the street. His teeth bit through the inevitable match stick. He hit the No Sale on the till and his clutching fingers caught one of the spilling dimes. Hester came screeching as he headed toward the pay phone.

"Stop screaming," he snarled, sucking in his thick belly to avoid collision with the trays. Then he was at the phone. "Gimme Mac, quick," he told the city hall operator, and he waited until he heard the answering voice of McCabe, chief of Valley View's three-man police force. "Mac? Summerville was just held up and shot. Three of them, I think. They took off south in a blue four-door—"

Hester pulled at him. "I think it was cerise."

Dorsey elbowed her away. "Yeah, that was Hester, Mac. She saw it, but don't count on what



she thinks she saw. No, I didn't get the make or license. That's right. They went south." Dorsey hung up and faced his daughter. "Hester, calm down. Try to remember *exactly* what you saw. Mac will check with you when he gets time."

Dorsey grabbed a bundle of towels and ran across to the bleeding old man.

McCabe, cradling the phone, spun his swivel chair to the radio in the one-room police headquarters in city hall. There was no Valley View car to call at the moment—*it* was parked outside his door—but he had the necessary hookup to count on cooperation from state and county units. Then, just to play safe, he put the alert on the teletype to state police headquarters, eleven miles east in Allentown. He told the city hall operator to call in Tom Knapperman, one of his regular patrolmen.

Then he hurried out to his official station wagon. It was too late now to have any thoughts of floorboarded pursuit, though he was still young enough, a widower in his early thirties, to prefer such action. Usually a small town police chief has to cover everything personally, but this would extend outside his bailiwick and might rekindle the sheriff's grandiose opinion that town forces were an anachronism and should be swallowed by his department.

The market parking lot was a confused clutter of cars and pickups, clusters of townspeople. McCabe, with eyes as gray as winter clouds, moved through, answering excited questions with a wordless nod or a shake of his head. He felt a seam of his whipcords give slightly as he knelt beside Old Man Summerville.

Dorsey growled across the figure between them, "He's gone."

McCabe helped to spread a towel over the old man's head. Time and again he'd told Summerville to wait for an escort on Monday mornings, or at least to vary the time of his trips to the bank. The old man wouldn't use the night depository since he'd once lost his key and the bank wanted to charge him two bits for a replacement. McCabe stood up and looked around.

"Did anyone witness the holdup?" he asked.

He got a dozen volunteered answers. All boiled down to hearing the shots and a fleeting glimpse of the car.

Dorsey listened in, chewing his match stick, then spoke resignedly. "I guess it's only Hester, Mac, who got a bird's-eye view of it." His tone implied that a bird brain went along with the view.

McCabe sighed. Starting across the street with Dorsey, he saw a sedan arriving with canvas covers removed from flashing red lights mounted inside the front and rear windows. Tom Knapperman, one of his regular patrolmen, leaned out, wearing official cap, shield hastily pinned to plaid shirt, and gun belt strapped around jeans. When he'd gone off the graveyard patrol he'd said he was going to work his farm's irrigation ditches.

"City hall is trying to locate Donovan. Do you want any of the auxiliaries called in?"

"We don't need any more manpower here," McCabe said. "Take care of anything else that comes in."

"And," Dorsey said to Knapperman, "don't expect him in a hurry. He's going to interview Hester."

Knapperman grimaced.

Across the street, Dorsey growled at Hester. "Got yourself calmed down?" He slid a cup of coffee across the counter. "Take this to Mac in the booth and stay there. Try to give him some sensible answers."

McCabe let her gush a few moments about how terrible it was for something like this to happen in such a quiet little town. "I mean, you sort of expect it in a big city like where you came from, after your wife died."

McCabe didn't want to get into that. People thought he'd moved to a small town with his three kids to get away from memories of Joan, but memories move with you. He and Joan had already made up their minds to bring up their children in a small town before she became an innocent bystander in a bank holdup, so this morning's holdup and killing was a knife digging into his memories.

"Hester," he interrupted her brusquely, "tell me exactly what you saw."

"I was just going out with breakfasts for the Iowa car. They said they were on their way to Lowry City to visit—"

McCabe leaned out of the booth. The Iowa car was gone, dammit.

"Then you heard the shots," he prompted. "What did you see?"

"Nothing. The getaway car was in my way. I didn't know they'd shot Mr. Summerville until the car drove away and I saw him lying on the—"

McCabe put his cup down deliberately.

"Now listen to me carefully, Hester. That job went too smoothly, was too perfectly timed. It had to be well-cased, probably every weekend and Monday mornings, to learn exactly when the old man took the weekend receipts to the bank, and the logical place from

which to do that casing was here. Now who's been dawdling around here the past few weekends and Monday mornings?"

He sipped coffee with outward patience while Hester pursed her over-crimsoned lips and squinted at the booth partition behind him.

"There's Tom Knapperman, but I don't suppose you'd want to suspect him."

"Hardly. I know him too well." McCabe also knew that Knapperman, a bachelor, had been avoiding Dorsey's because Hester had been trying to serve matrimony with the meals. McCabe lifted his empty cup but shook his head as Hester reached for it. "I'll get the refill. You stay here and think of strangers."

Dorsey, filling the cup, asked, "Any luck?"

McCabe filled him in quickly. "Did you notice anyone hanging around?"

Dorsey scowled. "They'd have to be out front to watch the market, so I wouldn't be apt to notice."

McCabe picked up the cup and turned toward the booth.

"Wait," Dorsey called, and pointed the match stick toward Hester. "It comes to mind that she did mention, among too many other things I never listen to, that there was some guy out front the past few weekends making a traffic survey."

McCabe went to the booth. "What about the man making the traffic survey?"

"Oh, it couldn't be him," Hester protested. "He was so gentlemanly. Talked like he'd been to college or England or something. You know, like President Kennedy used to talk. I love the way it sounds, and tried it on customers once, like 'May I ahsk you what you wish to order?' But Daddy noticed the customers giving me funny looks and he got nasty about it. To me, I mean, not them."

McCabe sighed, glancing at the clock. Time and those killers were getting away, but this was his only lead so far and it was in his bailiwick.

Hester wondered if he were mad at her the way he interrupted, pinning her to statements of fact without all the asides. The traffic surveyor had been here nearly a month of weekends and Monday mornings. He hadn't used an official car, he'd told Hester, because of the recent furor that such cars were being used for personal pleasure on weekends.

"Stay put and think some more about him." McCabe went to the pay phone and called the highway department. His gray eyes had a bleak gleam when he returned to

the booth. "There's been no traffic survey made in Valley View since last year. Now let's find out some more about this man who speaks with the broad A."

It was like trying to guide someone with no sense of balance on a log over a stream. McCabe kept a grip on himself and Hester's teetering tongue. The phony traffic surveyor was about six-two, blue-eyed, nice teeth. That much was finally definite. Then McCabe went back to pick up a loose end.

"You said he was dark-haired, but you also mentioned that when he took his coat off on a warm afternoon he had downy russet hair on his arm."

Hester stared. "I did say that, didn't I? He must have had his hair dyed. It was a beautiful job, so glossy. I wonder where he had it done."

"I'll ask him when he's apprehended," McCabe said with a harried glance at the clock. *Where were those killers now,* he wondered. *Had they slipped through the state and county road blocks?* He forced his attention back to Hester. "In all those weekends, in all the time you must have chatted with this guy, did any suggestion of his name, nickname, or present alias come up?"

"Well, not like a formal introduction. He knew my name, of course. It's embroidered right here." Hester pressed a finger so the blouse bulged more over her left breast.

McCabe looked her in the eye. "And what about *his* name?"

"He never told me and I never asked." McCabe started to get up but Hester went on talking. "But even so, I think I said his name once and it really surprised him."

McCabe paused, propping himself between the table and the bench. "What do you mean, you *think* you said it?"

Dorsey called from the counter. "Mac? Phone."

McCabe nodded. "Make it fast, Hester. Now what about your saying his name?"

She squinted again. "It was last Monday, a week ago from today, I think. I walked up to his car and said something to him. I don't remember what it was, but he sort of jumped and started to say, 'How did you know my n—' and then he stopped and gave me his breakfast order and turned away to work on his survey sheet."

McCabe went to the phone. The call was from Knapperman. The getaway car had been found. McCabe quickly relayed the description of the supposed surveyor, ordered it put on the teletype, and returned briefly to Hester.

"I'll be back later. Try to recall

what you said that sounded like the man's name."

It was a relief to get in the car, open the wings for a rush of air, and drive quickly to Luster Road, just outside his bailiwick. State and county cars were there. So was Sheriff Byers, at the moment posing for news photographers. McCabe skirted around that area to where the work was going on. The car *was* a four-door, faded blue, and its license was on this morning's hot sheet from Allentown where it had been stolen during the night. A sheriff's deputy was dusting it for prints, but shaking his head. Judd, a tall state trooper in dark blue shirt and short-crowned Stetson, came beside McCabe.

"Let me fill you in, Mac, before His Bigness cuddles the evidence to his bulging tummy. My outfit got our roadblocks set up almost immediately, because we were all out clamping down on Monday morning drivers venting their weekend hangovers in traffic. From what I hear, the county got set up fast, too. Personally, I think we bottled up the getaway and they're being forced to lie low somewhere in the area, so if there's a chance to grab them, my outfit will see that you're in on it."

Judd broke off as a heavy hand rested on McCabe's shoulder.

"Well, Chief," boomed Sheriff Byers, "bet you're glad there was a big outfit like mine to block the getaway."

McCabe turned from under the hand. "Of course. And thanks for returning the big favor my department did for yours a few weeks back."

Somebody snickered. Byers, flushing, ignored it. "I just heard your description report on the air, Chief. A bit scanty, but that can't be helped under the circumstances. So if you'll tell me its source, I'll order half a dozen men in there to dig out the rest of it and—"

"Thanks, Sheriff, that's generous of you," said McCabe. "We'll let you know if we should happen to need you."

When McCabe got back to town, Dorsey's was busy with lunch. He skipped his own lunch to check the market and vicinity for a possibly overlooked eyewitness or anyone who could give him additional information. He needn't have skipped lunch. At one-thirty he drove to Dorsey's. Hester was busy with a car outside. McCabe sat at the counter opposite Dorsey, who was sipping coffee past the match stick.

"Jake, what does Hester usually say when approaching customers?"

"Anything that's rattling through her head."

"Isn't there some standard greeting, like 'Good morning,' or 'What will it be, folks?' or something that might be mistaken for—"

"I just answered you. The only thing standard about Hester is her rattlebrained yakking." Dorsey shrugged. "But dammit, she's got her good points, too. Never louses an order, doesn't drop stuff. You should have seen her after the shooting. Spun around like a dancer, without jostling a thing on the trays."

Hester came in with a stack of dirty dishes. "Hi, Mac! Didja get 'em?"

"I'm working on it," said McCabe. "I still need your help, Hester."

Dorsey pointed his match stick at her. "So shut up and listen."

McCabe grabbed the silence. "Let's try to tab down what you said that could have been mistaken for the man's name. Maybe you said 'Good morning' and slurred it so it sounded like Goodman? Goodwin?" Hester shook her head. "Or maybe," McCabe suggested, "you remarked about the weather. He heard only the part that sounded like his name. Weatherby? Maybe it was raining. Raines? Rainey?"

"It was clear last Monday, don't you remember?" said Hester.

Dorsey shrugged and took over. "Okay, let's try it that way. I don't remember last Monday's weather. Let's assume it was clear, turning hot. So you said it was going to be like a summer's day. Mr. Summers? Mr. Summerfeld?"

"Mr. Summerville!" Hester exclaimed.

McCabe stared. What kind of a coincidence was this?

"Poor Mr. Summerville," Hester went on. "When's the funeral going to be? We'll have to close up, Daddy, and—"

"Right now you can close your yap unless you've got something to say on the button," her father snapped. "Let's try spring weather. Springer?"

"Mr. Fall?" McCabe joined in. "Winters? Frosty? Was it windy that day? Windle? Windsor? Did you say something about his car? A tire going flat? Mr. Wheeler? Treadwell?"

"*Rim*sky," growled Dorsey.

"Oh, Daddy, don't be absurd. I'm sorry, Mac, but it just won't click, yet I know I said something that—"

"Keep trying to remember." McCabe sighed, sliding off the stool.

Back in his one-room police station he quickly cleared up some routine matters, then leafed through FBI and other Wanted bulletins, seeking a name that could be a mistaken distortion of

something a carhop might say. He thanked Knapperman for taking over the day's patroling, then turned it over to Donovan for the four to midnight. Just before the supper rush started he went back to Dorsey's. Jake shook his head.

"She's been trying, Mac, but my guess is she ain't going to remember it until someone tells her what she said to the guy."

Hester came to the counter. "Two without. Iced Java and malt choc." She turned to McCabe. "And I'll bet you haven't had anything to eat all day. Sit down. I'll get you some pie and coffee while you question me again. It's on the house. What'll it be? Apple-cherry-custard-lemon or . . . or . . ." Her lips became a silent protrusion. Her eyes were starey. "That reminds me."

McCabe tensed, waiting.

"Pie," she murmured. "*Custard* pie."

"His name?" McCabe prodded. "Custer?"

"No-o-o. Let me think."

Dorsey, looking over his shoulder, stood with spatula pressed on protesting hamburger.

"It was one afternoon," Hester recalled. "I asked him if he'd care for some pie. I suggested custard. He said nothing doing on custard so angry-like I wanted to know why. He said he'd once been poisoned by it and nearly died. You know how it is with custard in warm weather, if it isn't kept refrigerated."

"Salmonella poisoning," said McCabe. "Where did this poisoning occur?"

"In his stomach, silly."

Dorsey swatted her rump with the greasy spatula. "Stay on the beam."

McCabe ignored the interruption. "Did he tell you where and when he was poisoned?"

"Not exactly. When I asked him, he laughed and said it was two years ago at some friends' place. Then he brought suit against them because he'd nearly died. I said that accidents will happen, and it didn't sound like friendship to me, his suing them. He laughed again and said he hadn't called them friends in that sense."

McCabe asked a few more questions, just to be sure this wasn't from Hester's dubious imagination. He told her to keep trying on the name, then he drove quickly to city hall. In his office he hesitated, drumming fingers on the desk. It seemed like a wild grab, and if he missed, Sheriff Byers would seize the chance to push his face in the mud. But what the hell! Nothing attempted, nothing accomplished! Police work was dogged persistence in following

down vague clues on the chance one might be *it*.

He pushed the swivel chair to the teletype and directed the state police to put his request on their direct line to the FBI in Washington. He typed all the information, the earlier description he'd obtained, and then added that the suspect had nearly died of salmonella poisoning two years ago, possibly from contaminated pie served in prison—his "friends'" place, though McCabe didn't include that. The suspect had brought suit about it.

McCabe phoned a neighbor who served as baby-sitter for his three youngsters when he was called out at night. Then he stayed in the office, waiting for a reply. It might take hours. He tried to concentrate on the inevitable paper work. Every time the teletype activated he strode to it. Later, he tipped back in the swivel chair and listened to the state, sheriff, and Allentown radio traffic. The dragging clock made a complaining buzz.

He was dozing when the teletype began again. The reply; he read it as fast as it came on paper. Tearing it off, he read it again and that wintry gleam returned to his gray eyes. All the clues he'd dragged out of Hester fitted perfectly, all except one, but he didn't have to bother about that one now; later, perhaps. The most exciting part of the report was that the suspect had an equally long-record cousin living in Allentown; just eleven miles east, ten minutes drive on the freeway!

An hour later McCabe and six Allentown officers deployed on foot, while police cruisers waited nearby with lights out and engines running. McCabe and a captain went to the door of a house with carefully draped windows. They stood to either side of the door as McCabe rang. Waiting, McCabe wasn't sure whether the drapes moved slightly. He rang again, hard and insistently.

The door remained closed. A woman asked, "Who is it?"

"Police officers," McCabe said. "There's going to be some trouble in the neighborhood. May I have a moment's word to prepare you for it?" Another wait, then the door opened slightly. McCabe spoke with more authority. "Madam, I have a warrant for the arrest of—"

She tried to slam the door, but he was already ramming with his shoulder. Beyond a doorway to the side, he saw them waiting with guns in hand. He lunged in low, bellywhopping. Their shots went over him. He fired from the floor, getting one of them in the chest.

The Allentown captain doubled another with a slug in the stomach. The third man tore back drapes just as officers smashed in the window. McCabe rose slowly. On a table were stacks of currency and checks, and Old Man Summerville's canvas sack.

About nine-thirty the next morning, just twenty-four hours after the holdup and killing, McCabe got out of his car at Dorsey's, across the way from the market. The Allentown morning paper had a big front-page spread about yesterday and last night, featuring McCabe. There was one photo of Sheriff Byers back on page 10. People smiled and called to McCabe. Dorsey grinned past a fresh match stick and circled thumb and forefinger. The counter stools were all occupied. Hester was busy outside. McCabe waited in a booth until she came over and sat down.

"Just one more question, Hester. Everything you told me about the supposed traffic surveyor fitted perfectly—build, red hair dyed black, the poisoning in prison, even the Harvard accent. He was the black sheep of a New England family with a long-handled name, and that's what I can't tie up. How could you possibly think you could have called him by name? His name is Brighton van Wortendyke Erly."

He watched Hester silently repeat the name. Finally she shook her head.

"I know I said his name, but this can't be it. Brighton van Wortendyke Erly. You must have got the wrong man."

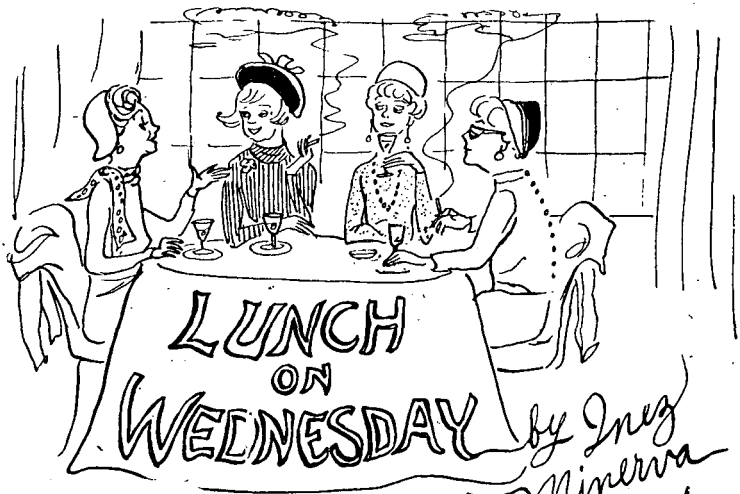
"No," McCabe insisted. "I've got him wrapped up tight. He *is* the man. Brighton Erly."

Light flooded Hester's stare. "Why, of course! That's exactly what I said to him that Monday morning when he got here just as we were opening up. 'Well,' I greeted him, 'bright and early.' "

Now McCabe stared. He tried it over a few times in his mind, and with variations: bright and early; bright 'n early; Brighton Erly.

Rubbing fingers over his gray eyes, he spoke quietly. "Hester, I think I could do with some coffee. Very black."

To be alone is the fate of all great minds—Schopenhauer, with tongue in cheek.



LUNCH ON WEDNESDAY

by Ines Minerva Schwarzkopf

ON WEDNESDAYS, Tillie Obermeyer had lunch with the girls at Charlotte's Tea Room. Stella Schwartz's CLU husband had considerately overworked and overinsured himself so that Stella enjoyed an early and comfortable widowhood. Daphne Stafford's exhusband considered exorbitant alimony a small price to pay for replacing Daphne with his former secretary. Grace Gordon had never married—she was a retired elementary school principal.

Only Tillie still had a husband—a complication she would acknowledge after an afternoon's shopping when the girls stopped for tea in the Garden Room. "I mustn't stay but a minute," she would giggle. "J. T. wants his dinner hot when he gets home," and she would trip out in her tiny high-heeled sandals to find a cab before the rush began.

She was able to continue meeting the girls for lunch even when

J. T. was in the hospital after his coronary, but those weeks she would leave before tea: "J. T. wants me by his side every minute of visiting hours."

J. T. was not a good patient. He insisted on reading his own chart, refused to allow his temperature to be taken, and sent more than one student nurse from his room to cry in the linen room on the starched white shoulder of a college-boy orderly. Everyone on the floor liked Tillie. She remembered their names, complimented them on their excellent care of J. T. and asked about their grandchildren and boyfriends.

When Dr. Wells said J. T. was able to go home, Tillie told the girls she would have to give up the Wednesday lunches for the time being. "It's only for a short while," she explained. "He'll soon be well enough to go back to work, and then my time will be my own again."

Four weeks later, J. T. was back in the office. Daphne stopped by to pick up Tillie at 11:30 on Wednesday.

"My, this is lovely of you," Tillie said. "How you have the courage to drive downtown!"

"When you're alone you learn to do a lot of things," Daphne said, her bracelets jangling against the steering wheel as she reached out and pushed in the cigarette lighter.

"I guess you're right," Tillie said smugly. "J. T. likes to look after me."

J. T. had always handled things like bills and driving and explaining to the March of Dimes blockworker why they didn't contribute. He said it was Tillie's job just to take charge of the house and garden.

Six months later, J. T.'s electrocardiogram showed tracings of dangerous coronary activity. Dr. Wells advised him to take advantage of the company's provision for early retirement.

"You're only a couple of years away from retirement age anyway," he said reasonably. "The pressure of the job seems to disturb you. I'm not saying there's any danger—you'll probably outlive me. But why take extra chances? You've earned the right to stay home with that charming little wife of yours."

On Mondays Tillie did her housecleaning. She tied a clean scarf around her head and went through the rooms systematically, rubbing, polishing, spraying and vacuuming. By four o'clock she would have finished the whole house, leaving both it and herself in precisely the same neat, shining condition in which they had started. She believed firmly that

one should never allow dirt and disorder to gain a foothold.

The company had a farewell party for J. T. on the last Friday he worked. They spent the weekend as usual, and on Monday morning Tillie got up and cooked J. T.'s usual oatmeal and coffee. After breakfast she changed out of her perky chintz morning coat into her cotton print housedress and scarf and went back to the kitchen to gather up her basket of aerosol cans and paper towels.

J. T. still sat by the table, unshaved in a sleeveless undershirt and rumpled gray putter pants. She wiped the spotless Formica and took his coffee cup from him, dumping the dregs and washing it.

"I wasn't done," he growled.

"But sweetheart," she said. "I have to finish the washing so I can get on with the cleaning, don't you see?"

He grunted, took a clean cup from the cupboard and poured himself another cup of coffee, sloshing it on both the counter top and the table. Tillie sighed. As she finished the livingroom, J. T. settled himself there with another cup of coffee, folding the morning paper the wrong way to do the crossword puzzle, stuffing the needlepoint pillows behind his back and propping his feet on the coffee table after sliding it closer.

She did the bedroom and the spare room and came back to the livingroom. J. T. had gone outside. She refolded the paper and placed it in the rack, plumped up the pillows and replaced them and resprayed the coffee table with cleaning wax. All this picking up after J. T. was slowing her down. If she didn't hurry, she wouldn't have time for "Search for Tomorrow" before lunch. Tillie had known a woman once who couldn't keep to a schedule in her housework. Before she knew it, she had weevils in her paprika.

J. T. pushed in the front door, carrying armloads of lily of the valley, clods of mud dropping from his shoes and blackened pantknees on the beige carpet.

"Sweetheart, whatever are you doing?" she asked.

"Digging up the damn flowers," he said. "We going to start living on my pension, we got to grow something we can eat."

"But love, your heart!" she said, picking up the mud before it had a chance to dry and crumble.

"These damn things are poisonous anyway," he ignored her. "Some fool kid comes through the yard, starts chewing on them, next thing you know you got a lawsuit on your hands."

"I've had them for years," she

protested. "Nobody ever ate them."

By the time she finished arranging the flowers it was time for lunch. She fixed a lovely omelette and rasher of bacon—something special for his first day off work.

"Blast, woman, what you trying to do, kill me for my insurance?" he shouted. "How many times I got to tell you, no cholesterol! For lunch I have a salad. Two parts polyunsaturated oil to one part vinegar. From now on, that's what we'll have."

After lunch he changed the channel from "As the World Turns" to Matinee Movie. Steve Reeves carried a half-naked slave girl away from the fiery altar of the high priestess. Tillie brought the vacuum cleaner back into the living-room. Reeves and the slave girl faded behind a static snowstorm.

"Dammit, Tillie, unplug that thing!"

Clearly, the schedule would have to be rearranged. The market was a nice four-block walk. Tillie combed out her hair, made up her face, sprayed on "Charisma" and got her folding shopping cart from the hall closet.

"Where are you going?" J. T. demanded.

"To the supermarket."

"Wait, I'll drive you. We should be buying in quantity to save money—we'll need the car to get it all home. Can't you see that?"

"But love, I've been doing the marketing all these years."

"Aah! What do women know? I'll come and really show you how to shop. I wasn't a purchasing agent for forty years for nothing."

It took much longer to market than usual. J. T. carried a pocket slide rule. He compared prices and weights of all brands and sizes of everything she wanted to buy, computed the price per ounce and told her which to choose.

"But, sweetheart, Happy Horse green beans always have horrid woody pieces of stem in the cans," she protested.

"Never hurt anybody," he growled. "Ten cans for a dollar's a damn good buy."

He swore at the stock boy in Produce when he saw the price of iceberg lettuce. "Thirty-five cents for a little head like that! We won't buy it!"

"But what will I use for your salads?" she asked.

"Buy some of this other green stuff, here," he said. "What's this, escarole, romaine?"

"They're awfully bitter and strong-flavored," she warned. "I really like lettuce better."

"Well, we'll learn to like this," he said, piling the greens in the cart.

On Wednesday morning she had

to clean the house all over again before she got dressed to go downtown for lunch. Daphne would be coming for her at 11:30.

"Where are you going?" J. T. asked. He still hadn't shaved.

"Out for lunch with the girls," she said.

"No, you aren't. You'll stay home to fix my lunch."

"But I always go downtown on Wednesdays. I could fix a salad for you before I go."

"Who'll serve it?" he demanded.

Finally she had to call Daphne and tell her not to come by.

"It's only just this one time," she said. "I'm sure I can work something out by next week."

She went into the livingroom to the set of encyclopedias which were often dusted but seldom used. Wiping a tear from her eye with the back of her hand, she checked out the window to make sure that J. T. was in the garden. She took down the volume "Kra to Maf" and read, "all parts contain the poison Convallarin, similar in action to digitalis." She replaced the book and went to the kitchen to shred romaine and escarole into two large salad bowls. She topped one with a generous dollop of roquefort dressing. Then she took glossy leaves from the bouquet of lily of the valley in the center of the table. She washed them, snipped them fine with her kitchen shears, added them to the second salad and tossed it all with two parts polyunsaturated oil and one part vinegar.

When he stopped breathing she called Dr. Wells.

"It was just like before," she sobbed. "I gave him his pills, but he's gone."

When the doctor came she said, "I thought at first it was indigestion. Could it be something he ate? Should . . . should you do an autopsy?" blowing her nose with brave and lady-like sniffs into a lilac tissue.

"Now, now, Tillie," he said, patting her shoulder before signing the death certificate. "We knew it could happen any time. Don't torture yourself."

After the funeral she started taking driving lessons.

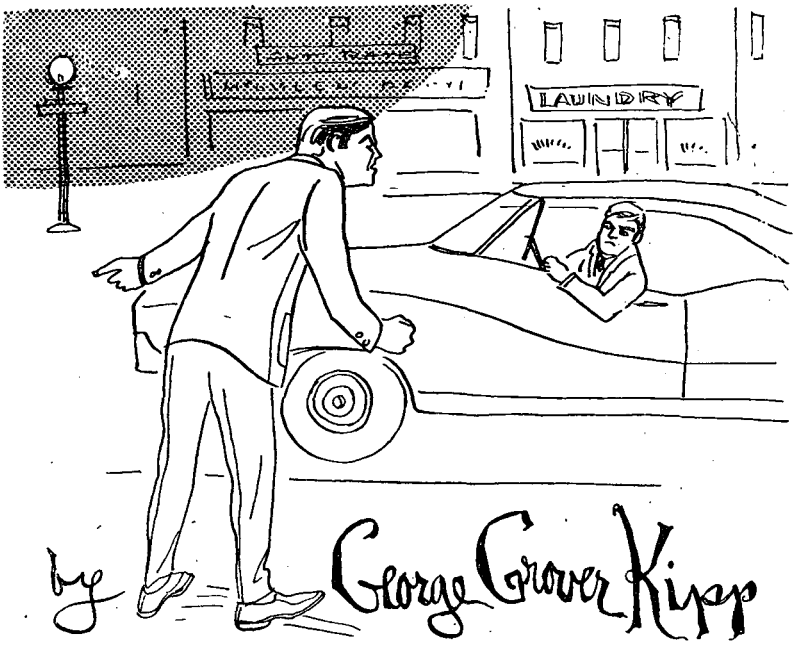
To quote Chaucer: The wrestling for this world axeth a fal.

CROPPERS IN TANDEM

I DIDN'T KNOW who the guy was when he came through the door. He could have been a businessman, a banker or a lawyer. I was willing to bet he was none of the three. Even across the spacious dining room, offset from the posh hotel lobby, he smelled like a cop. I've been working with and against the law off and on for the better part of eleven years, and there is something about a cop . . . His eyes swept the twenty-odd diners scattered through the array of tables and chairs, and came to rest on me. The distance between us had dwindled to half when it dawned on me that I was about to make the acquaintance of Police Commissioner Gordon (Leadbottom) Reeves.

I'd never met the commissioner, but I had seen him a few times from a distance. He was big and tough, but he had a reputation for being fair, and he was all cop. His nickname was a carry-over from his flamboyant youth when he was practicing the fast-draw bit and

jerked the trigger of his target pistol too soon. The wound did more damage to his pride than to his right buttock, but from that day forward he'd been known as Leadbottom—behind his back. He had been a *damned good cop* before he became commissioner, having attained his current position at the incredible age of thirty-nine.



by George Grover Kipp

He halted at my table. "Jock Doolin?"

I nodded and pointed to the opposite chair. "Sit down, Commissioner. The second cup of coffee is due in a minute."

Reeves slid his considerable bulk into the chair across the table. "You've visited the same tenement in Spanish Harlem three times this month. Mind telling me why?"

I savored a bite of sirloin. "Five times, Commissioner. Two of them after dark. And all of them for purely personal reasons," I told him.

A frown gathered on Reeves' face. "You raised a lot of hell in Miami, Galveston, and Los Angeles, to name just a few places. You seem to delight in making the law look like a herd of incompetent boobs. Your visits to the tenement in Spanish Harlem smell like you're setting up another Doolin

Special. You try setting up Maxie Randall and knocking him off for some unknown interest, and you've worked your last day in New York as a shamus." There was a distinct edge to the commissioner's voice. He wasn't kidding a bit.

"Maxie Randall? I never heard of the man."

The commissioner's eyes were relentless. "Of course not. You just visit the building where he's holed up in the basement apartment, to visit an old friend. Don't try conning me."

Strangely enough, Reeves was right. I went to the tenement every so often to visit Mama Rivas, mother of Sergeant Joe Rivas, a buddy of mine killed in the early stages of the Vietnam fracas. I'd never heard of Maxie Randall. I said so to the commissioner, then added, "You're letting a preconceived judgment of me distort your perspective, Commissioner. It's true I did a lot of leg work in Miami, Galveston and Los Angeles, but it was borderline stuff; work the cops couldn't do without violating somebody's constitutional rights. In all three instances I was hired by private citizens who were tired of having law and order practically nullified by decisions of the higher courts."

The commissioner beckoned a waitress and ordered a cup of coffee. "No explanation of why you go to Spanish Harlem?"

I rarely answer questions I don't have to. "None."

"And you did all your work in the towns mentioned, strictly to please certain private citizens and help the cops out?" Reeves sounded bored.

I shook my head. "Not on your life. They needed my services, and I needed their money. I was in hock for twelve grand and it was a fast way out."

Reeves was through sparring. He reached inside his coat and brought forth a sheaf of papers. "Pepe Dante had your life story recorded for posterity. Jock Doolin, six-foot-two, twenty-eight years old, flaming red hair, blue eyes and beaucoup freckles . . ."

"Dante?" The name was more than vaguely familiar.

Reeves nodded. "Dante. He's one of my best men, and he's the real reason I'm here. I never let a good man go to pot if I can prevent it; and Dante's headed straight for trouble. He always was a determined cuss, but I've never seen him packing so much hatred. He's out to bury you, Doolin, even if he hangs for it, and I want to know why. I suspect it might have to do with Maxie Randall. Dante's been after him a long time, and maybe he figures you're cutting in."

The commissioner was right about one thing: Pepe Dante was loaded with hate for me, only I didn't have the faintest notion of why. It didn't have a thing to do with Maxie Randall because I'd never even heard of the man before the commissioner stopped to chat. "Why don't you ask Dante about it?"

Reeves made a sour face. "So I asked him already, and he told me to drop dead—in a roundabout fashion—and him with nine years in on his pension. This sheet of yours could be his, in a way. Strictly a loner, close-mouthed, highly capable . . ." The commissioner emitted a sigh. "A pity, really. You and Dante should have been friends. You'd have made a helluva team."

Leadbottom pointed at the file. "What's this business about you playing hopscotch back and forth across the Iron Curtain five-six years ago? It reads like something out of a James Bond novel. Half the gestapo in Commie Land were after your scalp, while you hunted for some mysterious man, and even the KGB was on your tail. The CIA sent in a report on you. I know you're good. But red hair, blue eyes and freckles, along the Iron Curtain, and you got away with it? You're more than good."

Reeves' remarks evoked some painful memories. Only a hard-headed Scotch-Irish mixture like me would have gone the full route.

"I had a helluva makeup man," I said honestly. Actually, I'd been more or less adopted by the underground when they learned I was really an American. At the time, I was out of time and money and patience—in short, I'd had it—and the people of the underground not only hid me, and fed and clothed me, they located the man for whom I was searching. He'd been hiding out for years and just finding him was no small feat, but for me, an American who was bucking the establishment, the underground went all out. I got my man, the KGB got a black eye and everybody had a good laugh; everybody, that is, except the KGB.

Reeves flipped a page over. "Quite a rundown here on you and that Countess Yvette Dupre in West Berlin. You two really had the scandal-sheet boys digging for adjectives." His insinuation was both familiar and cock-eyed.

I sipped my lukewarm coffee. "Evy Dupre had just got a divorce from the count. She was young, beautiful, and loaded with loot, and the yellow journalists were camped on her trail, looking for something juicy and immoral to give to their readers. The Countess and I hit a few night spots together,

nothing more. Seventy-two hours later my picture was in papers around the world and I was called 'The International Lover' and 'The Yankee Playboy.' I haven't seen her since, but the names stuck."

When he'd finished his coffee, the commissioner rose with a sigh. "I don't know what there is between you and Dante, but I'll find out. Sooner or later I'll get the story. In the meantime, don't do any fancy cutting up because you wouldn't like the interrogation room at the seventeenth precinct. Its underworld description has been known to make strong men pale."

I rose and picked up the check. "And what do the hoods call it?"

Leadbottom stuffed the dossier on me back inside his coat. "Dante's Inferno." His grin told me he wasn't just making small talk. If I ever got nailed and hauled into the seventeenth, I'd damn well know what went on in 'Dante's Inferno.'

Leadbottom was no more than out the door when I checked my watch. It was four-twenty and Mama Rivas was due to cater to a party on Fifth Avenue. She'd explained her routine to me in detail. Not that I was overly interested, but I'd been gone a long time, and since the death of her son Joe, she lived pretty much alone; so when I came blundering along, she was inclined to overdo the conversation bit. Before I'd gone to Europe, and then back to Miami, Galveston, Los Angeles, Indianapolis, Mama Rivas and I had been good friends. She'd missed me, and when I'd asked her how she was getting along, she'd told me about the parties she had been catering. Especially, I remembered her references to the man in the basement apartment who had introduced her to the people who were now hiring her to serve cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. Now, according to Leadbottom Reeves, there was only one apartment in the basement, the hangout of Maxie Randall, narcotics merchant . . .

I found a phone booth and put in a call to Chauncey Kirby-White. Chauncey is a throwback to history, a modern remittance man. His family in Merrie Olde England provides the funds as long as he does his tippling in the Colonies and does not return to the Motherland to cause them undue embarrassment. Chauncey is a clothes-horse, drunk or sober, and he's possessed of both cold nerve and an active imagination. Since it was nearing the end of the month, I knew Chauncey was apt to be short on cash and long on thirst, and under such conditions he has been known to perform admirably.

I explained the situation to Chauncey, hinting at fifty dollars

as a reward for his services. I told him that Mama Rivas would arrive at a certain laundry at five o'clock, or thereabouts, by taxi, that she would collect a bundle of linen for a party somewhere in town, and then go on her way. Chauncey's job was to scrutinize the acceptance of the linen by Mama, in a very clinical manner. For a half-century note, Chauncey can do a creditable job.

I was waiting in Riley's Tavern two hours later when Chauncey wheeled through the door. His homburg was askew, his spats half buttoned, and his cravat off-center, but he was reasonably sober.

"My congratulations on your perspicacity, Jock, my boy. The lackey behind the laundry counter made rather a production of having Mama Rivas count out the linen for her prospective employer. Then, just as he was tying the bundle, he asked her to get a coat from a rack near the door. It was while she was collecting aforementioned garment that he switched bundles on her."

I gave Chauncey his fifty and sat back with a double shot of choice bourbon to mull over the matter. Five drinks later I had built up a reasonable head of steam. I'd promised a dying man eight years earlier that I'd keep an eye on his mother, and now she was the unwitting courier for a narcotics merchant! Two more drinks, and I was ready to splatter Maxie Randall all over Spanish Harlem. I didn't know what he looked like but I was ready to murder him. By the time I reached the laundry it was dark. I was still feeling the effects of the bourbon, but my thoughts were clearing rapidly. A car was parked diagonally across from the laundry, and the two men trying to appear unobtrusive in the front seat fairly shrieked *stakeout!* I meandered around the corner and into the darkened alley.

A fire escape at the rear of a flea-bag hotel led me to the roof. From there, I tiptoed across the rooftops to the laundry. There are probably as many angles for approaching such a situation as there are shamuses, so I had no pat formula. I intended to case the dump through the skylight. If it looked interesting, I could lower myself into the building; if not, I could back off. I never got that far along. As I crouched beside the skylight, peering down at the mangles and centrifugal dryers, I heard footsteps moving stealthily across the rooftops from the same direction I had come. Rolling clear of the skylight, I flattened out in the heavy shadows and waited.

There were two of them, dressed in dark clothing and soft-soled

shoes. I was reasonably sure I was watching a burglary in the making, but they halted well short of the skylight, along the side of the building.

"You sure this is the right place?" one of them whispered nervously. "It wouldn't do to drop the goods down the wrong pipe."

"This is the place all right," the other man replied. "I've been here lots of times." He lowered a small bundle into the four-inch drainpipe that led down through the laundry and connected to a storm sewer. "One kilo ordered, one kilo delivered. Let's get out of here." They faded softly into the night.

As setups go, it was real neat. No cop was going to bother checking a four-inch galvanized pipe that began and ended outside the building. Likely as not, there was an opening somewhere along its length that would be well-nigh undetectable. Maxie Randall was a lot of things, but he wasn't stupid. I hurried to the edge of the hotel and managed to get the license number of the car that carried the two delivery boys away.

It had been a productive day, and I was feeling pretty smug as I eased down the hotel ladder to the alley. Then a pair of flashlights zeroed in on me, and the place was crawling with cops. I didn't have to ask who had sprung the trap. In the background, I could hear Pepe Dante barking orders. Two plainclothesmen were hustling me toward an unmarked police car when Leadbottom Reeves drove up.

"I'll take over, Dante," he said crisply.

Dante looked like a frustrated bulldog, squat and angry. "*You'll* take over?" he exploded. He could almost taste victory and he wasn't going to let it go without a squawk.

Reeves motioned me to get into his car. "That's what I said. I'll take over." His eyes were cold and hard, his voice flat.

Dante teetered for a minute, then his shoulders slumped resignedly, and he turned away.

The commissioner had tooled his car expertly through six blocks of heavy traffic before he spoke. "You've got two ways to go, Doolin. You can level with me all the way, or you can order some asbestos drawers and get ready for a session in Dante's Inferno. I'll tell you right now you wouldn't like it."

The thought had already occurred to me. "So what do you want to know?"

Reeves braked for a red light. "Start with your first day back in town."

It was easy to remember. I'd been counting the days. "Three

months ago tomorrow, I flew in from Indianapolis and went to see my cousin. Two days later, I put her on a plane for Los Angeles. Since then I've worked a little, but mostly I've been to the theater, done some nightclubbing, walked through Central Park; all very quiet and commonplace, except for the nightclubbing. Some photographer remembered me and Countess Yvette Dupre and snapped a picture. You probably saw it in the paper."

Leadbottom chewed reflectively at his lower lip. "And you never had a run-in with Dante at any time?"

I shook my head. "I never even knew his name until he came up to me on the street one day. I'd been back about a month at the time. He told me in no uncertain terms that he was going to crucify me. I tried to find out what was bugging him, but you know how close-mouthed he is. Then, a couple weeks later I bumped into him over in Manhattan. He was drunk enough to take a swing at me. Some guy with him cooled him off, but Dante still wouldn't say where he got the big hate."

Reeves eased the car into a drive-in hamburger stand and ordered two black coffees. "I didn't know you had a cousin. The records show that you were orphaned at the age of seventeen and placed in the custody of Louie Pitt. That really threw me. Of all people, Louie Pitt . . ."

I'd met a lot of people who knew Louie, but very few who approved of him. The yellow pages listed him as a private investigator, but he was actually an industrial spy. Let some company come up with a gimmick for cutting costs or increasing production, and six companies immediately had men out trying to steal it. Nobody could steal like Louie Pitt. In the cutthroat jungle of high finance, big business and industry, he was feared by all, right up to the time of his death from a coronary.

"I needed money," I said. "Big money. And I was willing to learn. Louie took me under his wing and taught me every dirty trick in the book."

The commissioner sipped his coffee. "At seventeen you needed big money?" He sounded skeptical.

I nodded. "At seventeen, at eighteen, at nineteen. Right on up to a year ago. It took me ten years, but I finally made it."

Leadbottom studied the undulations of a mini-skirted carhop. "Keep talking. Why the yen for all the loot?"

His request evoked a memory I could do without. "The last time I saw my father alive I was baby-

sitting Karen, my cousin, who was ten at the time. The last thing he said to me was: "You're responsible for Karen until we get back.' Only they never got back. An hour later some creep in a stolen car hit them broadside at seventy miles an hour. All four of our parents, Karen's and mine, died in the crash. So there I was at seventeen, a ward of the court until Louie Pitt came along. Karen was placed in a foster home, but it didn't last. Being crippled, she couldn't walk without crutches; which also meant she couldn't do much work. Nobody wanted her."

For the first time, a gleam of interest crossed the commissioner's eyes. "You had a crippled cousin ten years old. That would make her twenty now."

"Next month," I said. "And she's going to celebrate it by dancing all night. It should be quite a party." At Leadbottom's quizzical glance I backed up and started over. "She can walk now. I sent her to Los Angeles to have her clubfoot operated on. The operation was an unqualified success, and she's due home tomorrow. A living, breathing doll with two feet."

"It shouldn't have taken ten years," Leadbottom said slowly. "Not with the kind of money Louie Pitt was making."

"It shouldn't have," I agreed. "But it did. I sent her to clinics all over the country, which cost about two grand per visit, what with meals and transportation and all. And nine out of ten of them came up with the same opinion: amputate. They shared one other thing in common, though; the belief that a Doctor Gottlieb Mueller was the man to perform a successful operation. If he couldn't do it, it couldn't be done. Only Dr. Mueller was in Hungary. I was about to go in search of him when the government decided my services were required in Vietnam. Scratch three more years. By the time I was discharged, the good doctor had patched up some of his countrymen, much to the disapproval of the boys in the Kremlin who like to minister to protestants in their own way. The doctor was in hiding from the KGB and a few other such fraternities, so it figured that finding him wasn't going to be easy . . ."

Leadbottom's eyes widened knowingly. "You mean all that hell you raised in Berlin and along the Iron Curtain was because you were hunting for a doctor for your cousin? Oh, this is unbelievable. I knew you were hardheaded, Doolin, but this is absolutely incredible." He sipped his coffee absently, then turned to face me. "But that

all happened five or six years ago. How come, if you got the doctor then, you didn't get the operation until two months ago?"

"There is a quaint law in America that decrees that any incoming member of the medical profession from another country must serve a five-year internship, regardless of who he is, or how good he is. No exceptions permitted, not even for the best, which Dr. Mueller is. His internship was up three months ago."

Leadbottom slumped slack-jawed in the seat. "You mean after you finally got the money and the patient and the doctor together you still had to wait five years?"

"That's the way it stacked up," I said. "I don't come a cropper very often, but when I do it's usually a real dandy. Anyway, I needed some time to pay off the debts I'd built along the Iron Curtain. Springing a man like Dr. Mueller is damned expensive. So I lit out for Miami, Galveston, Los Angeles and back to Indianapolis. Wherever the big money beckoned, that's where I went. Now Doctor Mueller is free, the operation was a smashing success, and I'm solvent again. Who knows, maybe the next Miss America will be a stunning blonde named Karen Sundstrom. She's got all the assets."

The commissioner shook his head admiringly. "She's a lucky girl, having a hardhead like you for the only man in her life. A normal man couldn't have got the job done."

So I was abnormal . . . "Not the only man anymore," I corrected him. "She's got a boyfriend named Pete here in town somewhere. I wanted to meet him and give him a looking over while she was in Los Angeles, but she wouldn't give me any information on him. Being related to the Doolins, she's naturally closemouthed. Hell, she didn't even tell him where she was going or what she was up to. All he knows is that she had to leave town for a few months. She said she wanted to surprise him. As near as I could tell, they're really gone on each other."

"The girl is real smart," Leadbottom growled dryly. "You wouldn't approve of the guy if he had wings and a halo. She wants to be on hand to protect her interests."

I grinned despite myself. He was right.

"Wow!" Leadbottom grunted, looking at his watch. "Two o'clock in the morning, and I have to be at the station house by eight." He eased the car into the traffic and headed across town.

The sky was beginning to lighten in the east when he pulled up

in front of my hotel. I said, "Dante won't like you turning me loose."

"Dante didn't like the Beatles, or green stamps, or skate boards either. It's a thing with him. Goodnight, Shamus."

Karen's flight was due at LaGuardia at ten that night, so I stalled until nine before driving to the airport. Half the people in New York seemed to have the same idea at the same time. By nine-thirty I was less than halfway to my goal, and my temper was growing shorter. Then it began to rain, coming down in great sheets, like diamond-studded cellophane. I finally broke clear of the heavy traffic and could have made it to LaGuardia on time, but two uniformed cops pulled alongside and motioned me to pull over. They checked my driver's license, the car's registration and serial number. Such checks are an inevitable part of the great American scene, but those two clowns acted like they had an hour to kill. By the time they waved me on, I was hopelessly late.

I spotted Karen, a study in beauty as she moved along the far side of the terminal. Then I recognized the man with her—Dante! He had her by the arm, steering her toward a side door. His words flashed through my mind: "I'm going to bury you, shamus, one way or another." So this was the way he played the game! The traffic and rain and the two cops had stretched my patience to the breaking point; the sight of Dante marching Karen away was all I needed to start swinging.

I dashed across the terminal just as they started down a long, deserted ramp leading to the outside, and tapped Dante on the shoulder. When he turned, I brought up a vicious right that caught him squarely between the eyes. Karen screamed once but neither of us heard her. Dante bounced off the wall and drove a jolting left into my mouth. I scored with another right, and he let me have another left.

I was vaguely aware of a crowd gathering, but I was in no position to let myself be distracted. Dante was as eager for blood as I was, and the slob knew how to fight. We stood toe to toe on the deserted ramp, like a pair of herd bulls battling for the harem. Neither of us gained an inch or gave one. We sparred and jabbed, hooked and dodged until I thought my arms were going to fall off, and I was puffing like a steam engine. Dante's nose was bent to one side and there were knots all over his face, but I knew I looked just as bad.

Then, seemingly from nowhere,

Leadbottom Reeves loomed up between us. He slammed us up against the wall. "Sit down, you fools, before you kill yourselves."

We didn't sit; we simply slid down the wall and oozed all over the ramp.

"Shocking," a bypassing harridan sniffed haughtily. "Somebody should call the police."

"You're absolutely right, madam," Leadbottom returned righteously. He winked at one of the plainclothesmen with him. "Harrison, call a cop."

"Right away," Harrison said, and he headed for a telephone.

I knew something was wrong, but I was hurting all over and fighting for air. Finally, it dawned on me: the crowd of men that had gathered to witness the brawl were all plainclothesmen from the seventeenth precinct—Leadbottom's own men! The commissioner stood to one side, talking to Karen as she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. Even with one eye swelled shut, I could see she was a lot of woman.

Leadbottom crossed the ramp and squatted before us with an audible grunt. "Karen was hoping you two could get together tonight. Since one of you is her cousin and the other is her boyfriend, it figures you should get acquainted." The twinkle in his eye betrayed his amusement as he watched us.

I stared stupidly at Dante. *"You're Pete?"* I didn't want to believe it.

"You can't be Karen's cousin," Dante croaked. "You can't be."

I shook my head. "Then you weren't arresting her just to get at me?"

"Arresting her?" Dante said. "Hell, man, I'm crazy in love with her. I saw you by her apartment just before she disappeared, and I thought you'd conned her into keeping house with you. That's why I was so set on nailing you. I guess it goes back to the time all the papers built you up as a real lady-killer. Karen said she had a cousin, but she never mentioned your name."

The laughter started with a low chuckle and rose to a booming crescendo that ricocheted off the walls. Twenty cops let down their hair and roared until the tears coursed down their faces. Even Old Leadbottom had to clutch a candy vending machine for support.

Karen soaked a handkerchief in the water fountain, then dropped to her knees before us and began dabbing at our faces. "You two crazy fools. You lovable idiots. A woman has to be crazy herself to love you like I do."

A thought occurred to me as I grunted my way to my feet. "You

had this whole thing figured out last night," I snarled at the commissioner. "And you set this deal up here tonight. Why?"

Leadbottom palmed the tears from his eyes. "Sure I had it figured. I could have told you Dante's nickname comes from his initials, P.P. We call him Pepe but his name is Pietro Paolo Dante. Around home he's called Pete. I could have told you, but you're both such unmitigated hotshots. To fall on your ugly yaps is the best thing that could have happened to you. I could see you were both coming a cropper, and fixing to meet head-on in the process. I couldn't resist the urge to let nature take its course."

"You helped nature take its course," I accused. "Those two cops who stopped me on the freeway tonight were just making sure I got here late."

Leadbottom grinned. "You pegged it right. If you'd been here to witness the clinch between Pepe and Karen you'd have figured it out on the spot."

Dante came to his feet. "But you still could have told us, you sneaky old devil."

Leadbottom hadn't enjoyed himself so much in years. "What, and let all that hatred go down the sewer? Think of the waste! Besides, there isn't a man in New York so bad he deserved to have a run-in with either of you. On this occasion, I can say you truly deserved each other." He turned to Karen. "When is the wedding?"

"Not until these two are healed and presentable," she squealed. "With one of them to give me away and the other to accept me, my wedding pictures would be a disaster!"

"That makes sense," Leadbottom said. "In the meantime, there's a small matter that requires their attention; a slimy narcotics merchant named Maxie Randall. Do you two suppose you can handle the job?"

"How about it, cousin?" I asked Dante.

"Let's give it a try, cousin," he replied.

As we headed toward the door, I had the feeling that Maxie Randall wasn't going to last very long.

In the absorption concomitant with a new pursuit, one might deem impertinent the suggestion that it was Janus who presided over ancient beginnings.

EVERYBODY SHOULD HAVE A HOBBY

by Theodore Mathieson

MR. PEABODY awoke from a troubled sleep to hear a banging of pots and pans in the kitchen downstairs and for a moment he thought it was his wife Ellie, until he remem-

bered that Ellie had died of acute appendicitis six years ago, and he'd lived alone in the house ever since.

He jumped out of bed then, and was standing in front of the bureau; when contemporary memory returned to him. It was *Wasley* down there, of course, and the fact the boy was here, in his kitchen, at breakfast time, *meant that he, Herbert Peabody, had won the game!*

He washed and shaved leisurely, savoring his victory. Wasley wouldn't go away until he went downstairs, he was sure of that. He studied his withered features carefully in the mirror. That he got younger looking every month, he was convinced, now that he had found the Key to Happy Living.

He hadn't always known it.

Six months after Ellie died (Ellie, who had been more mother than wife), he'd gone into the bathroom and tried to slash his wrists with a razor, but he hadn't been able to do more than scratch himself. Yet how could he go on? Retired from his job as an accountant with a life insurance firm, which he'd held for thirty years, he'd suddenly realized he had no interests, no children, and no friends—just money in the bank, and too much time on his hands.

As he had stood with the razor still poised over his wrist, he'd seen a packet of nasturtium seeds in the open medicine cabinet, where Ellie had kept just about anything. With shaking hand, he picked up the packet and read the instructions on the back. Then, putting the razor away, he cleaned out one of Ellie's flowerpots, filled it with new soil from the back yard, and carefully planted eight nasturtium seeds in a circle.

Inside a week, he had potted two dozen crops of nasturtiums, and after a month, having switched his efforts to Ellie's former garden, had planted almost everything from azaleas to zinnias.

Then one morning he awakened with the inspiration that eventually brought the challenge of the boy Wasley into his life.

"I want to devote the rest of my life to the guidance of the juvenile delinquent," he told the administrator of the local youth rehabilitation center, whom he visited straightaway on the morning of his inspiration. "If having a hobby can give meaning to my life, then it can do the same for these errant youngsters."

"Sometimes it takes more than giving them a hobby," the administrator warned him.

"But at least I can try. I am by way of being something of—er—a horticulturist. Let me teach some of these underprivileged kids how to plant things, see them grow. The

sight will nurture hope and beauty in their souls."

"Well, Mr. Peabody," the administrator said, "we'd certainly be glad to have you belong to our volunteer corps."

So Peabody began spreading his gospel, working at the youth center from nine to five, teaching those who showed interest in growing things how to plant and nurture. Nor did he stop with gardening; he took up chess, so he could teach it, and then, as the weeks passed, he studied puppet-making, sleight of hand, and even cooking.

His success was notable. Many of the boys responded to his interest, and that was enough reward for Mr. Peabody. Whether or not his effort deterred them from committing further offenses, he really didn't know, but he had succeeded in touching a responsive chord, and he felt his mission was fulfilled.

"We want to congratulate you on your fine work, Mr. Peabody," the administrator said one day. "You've spread a lot of hobbies among these boys."

"Everybody should have a hobby," Peabody said, glowing as if a medal had been pinned on him.

Then one day there arrived at the center a sullen-looking blond boy with the face of an angel and eyes of ice.

"I'd go careful with Wasley Davis, if I were you," the superintendent warned Mr. Peabody. "He's out of reform school on probation. He's not the constructive type. Perhaps you'd better read his dossier."

Mr. Peabody was aghast at Wasley's record—first arrest at eight, for breaking windows in a church; second at ten, for painting swastikas on the house of a Jewish businessman; then followed a whole series of arrests, mostly for vandalism, theft, and drunkenness, and finally, at sixteen, for mugging a man in a public park, for which he'd been sent to the reformatory, and had been released on probation after six months.

"Well, at least he isn't taking drugs," Mr. Peabody told himself optimistically, and he buckled down to attack his new assignment.

"What do you like to do in your spare time, Wasley?" he asked, after he'd introduced himself. The boy put down a copy of *Hot Rod* and looked up innocently.

"Break things," he said.

"Well, now, that's not very constructive, is it?"

"Sure it is. I'm going into anti-construction work."

"Anti-construction?"

"Yeah, tearin' down old buildin's."

"Well, that's a legitimate field, I

guess. But you can't do that for a while yet, until you're old enough. Meanwhile, do you have any *hobbies*?"

"Who needs hobbies?"

"Everybody needs them."

"You really want me to tell you what my hobby is?" The evil leer on the boy's face forced Mr. Peabody to retreat in embarrassment.

Another day, on noting Wasley had brought his lunch, Mr. Peabody again sat down beside him. "Are those potato pancakes you're eating?" he asked.

"Yeah. I made 'em myself."

"You cook, do you?"

"Once in a while, when my old man drags himself out of the kitchen. I like to put things into potatoes."

"Like what?"

"Onions, cheese, apple—stuff like that."

"Have you ever tasted potatoes hollandaise? No? Well, you've missed something. They were a favorite of the Bourbon kings of France, you know."

"What goes in 'em?"

"Chicken stock, lemon juice, parsley—a lot of other things."

"We don't have things like that at home."

"I tell you, why don't you use *my* kitchen, and I'll supply the materials, and Fanny Farmer, and you can experiment to your heart's content," he offered him hospitably.

"This Fanny Farmer, is she a *young* chick?"

In spite of Wasley's levity, Mr. Peabody felt he'd scored his first victory in catching the boy's interest. His second came when Wasley actually showed up at his home for his cooking experiments, although most of his subsequent potato creations were either burned or ill-timed. The litter he left in the kitchen afterward was phenomenal, but Mr. Peabody cleaned it up each time Wasley had left, consoling himself with the thought that creative processes always make a mess.

After his fifth visit in a period of two weeks, Wasley branched out a little, and turned out some scorched corned beef hash, which Mr. Peabody managed to eat for supper. It was then, in a mood of great confidence, that he'd made his suggestion.

"Some morning, when you feel like it, Wasley, just come in the back door and make some breakfast for me."

"Sure, if you want," Wasley said.

Now, as Mr. Peabody listened to the banging of pots and pans down in the kitchen, he felt a heady triumph. The problem-kid-of-them-all was cooking his breakfast. It was like having tamed a tiger to carry out the garbage.

Swaggering a little, Mr. Peabody descended his neatly polished stairs, strolled into the back hall, and opened the door to the kitchen.

He stood appalled at what he saw. Drifts of flour covered every inch of floor and furniture, and all his sauces and liquid condiments had been emptied on tablecloth and curtains. The boy himself stood at the stove, grinning, with the iron frying pan in his hand.

"Wasley, what do you think you're doing!" he demanded.

"I decided I ain't gonna cook nobody's breakfast," Wasley said. "And cooking ain't a good hobby, anyhow. *I hate hobbies!*"

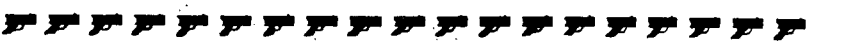
"You've ruined my kitchen."

"I ain't even started." He brought the iron frying pan down on a stack of California pottery which Mr. Peabody particularly prized, and as the shards went flying, Mr. Peabody ran to Wasley and tried to wrest the frying pan out of his hand.

For several seconds, the two grappled for possession, Wasley tittering in a high voice. Then, pulling the utensil away from Mr. Peabody, he raised it high above his head, and brought it down with a lethal *bong* on the elder man's skull.

For a moment there was silence in the kitchen as Wasley looked down on Mr. Peabody, lying quite dead upon the floor.

Then he looked at the frying pan, and although his lips didn't actually smile, his eyes did, because he knew that Mr. Peabody had succeeded, after all, in giving him a hobby—a *real* hobby.



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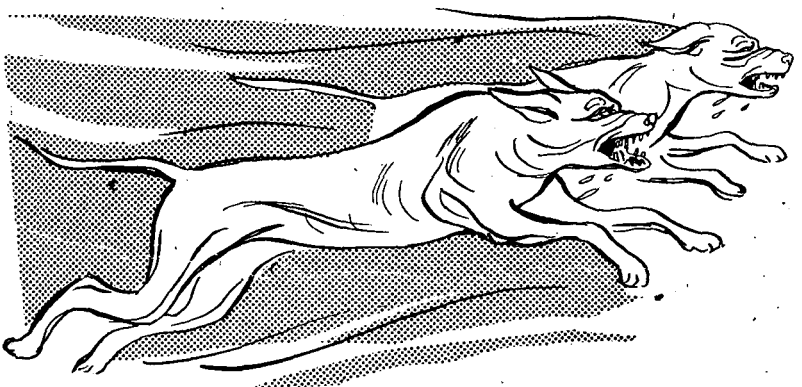


DOG DAYS

ALL RIGHT, OFFICER, I *will* answer your question, even if I don't have to, but it's a long story. It all began with this *weirdo*, this big guy Arfy.

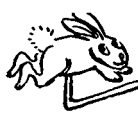
I knew right off there was something wrong with Arfy. He was big, but he didn't act like a big guy, you know what I mean? Arfy's coat was too tight on him, but it wasn't too tight on top or in front. It was too tight around the caboose. He walked slow and pigeon-toed, and he had a doughnut look in his eyes. Glazed, I mean.

I was all for leaving him alone, just on the grounds that somewhere in the world there was a very happy kid playing with something he found that Arfy lost—his marbles. But Salmon Sam, my partner, wanted to put the snatch on Arfy and torture his secret from

him. He'd do anything to learn it.

Salmon Sam was very big on torture. You know, if anyone asks me what I do, I say I am a retired hood, the second half of which is true. Salmon Sam, though, insisted he was a psychopath, whatever that means. Personally, I think he was a little crazy. I mean, anybody who likes to torture people probably has some kind of a problem upstairs. I should add that Salmon Sam came by his monicker honestly, after he made several trips up the river.

Well, back to your question. Until Salmon's recent untimely departure, him and me were working the dog track. By that I mean we were touting dogs to the wagering public, hoping there was not the best arrangement. Salmon lived out in the country with two watchdogs which, even if you saw them, you wouldn't believe. They were big enough to milk. They were called Genghis and Attila, and their names were the nicest



by Miel Tanburn

a buck or two in it for us. This was a terrible way to spend the summer, not only because a lot of the sports fans were wise to us, but also because it was unprofitable. If I was not lifting a wallet for my nest egg now and then, I would have had to chalk up the summer as a total loss.

Meanwhile, I was imposing on Salmon's hospitality for a bunk and a place to hang my hat. It was things about them. Their fondest ambition was to get their teeth into my throat.

Such were my circumstances when this guy Arfy entered my life. Like I said, I was all for leaving him alone, but Salmon wouldn't hear of it.

"I tell ya, I checked him out," Salmon told me. "He lives alone in a crummy hotel room. He's got no family, no friends, no nothin'

but that sad puss of his. After the last race, he goes to his hotel and he don't come out again until the next day. All he does then is come to the dog track and watch the training races and snoop around the kennels. When the races start, he begins to bet."

Arfy's betting was what had Salmon excited. Salmon had been watching him cash win tickets for a week.

"I won't say he picks a winner *every* race," Salmon said. "Maybe he picks only nine out of eleven. If we can find out his system, we make a killing!"

"Why don't you ask him?"

Salmon gave me a disgusted look. "I *did*. All I got was a clam-up and some very fast blinking of the eyes. That's why we gotta put the snatch on him tonight. We'll take him out to my place."

"What do we do with him there?" I asked.

"We torture him," Salmon said, "of course."

That's how it began. After the last race, when thousands of sports fans were making for the parking lot, we sidled up to Arfy. Before he knew it, he was sidled right into the front seat of Salmon's car. Salmon began laying down rubber between us and the dog track.

Up close, I noticed that Arfy had a look in his eyes that reminded me of a stripper I once knew in L.A. She was endowed with a surplus of everything but the old gray matter. Once she was doing about eighty down one of those suicide freeways, looking very intently at the road, when she took a handkerchief and wiped a speck off the windshield. That was when I realized her attention span reached about two feet in front of her. All the time I thought she'd been looking at the road, she was only studying the windshield.

When we got to Salmon's place, Salmon pushed Arfy through the front door and shoved him onto a couch.

"Now you're gonna tell us how you pick winners," Salmon said, "or we're gonna show you what happens to guys who drink clam juice. You got that?"

Arfy sat on the couch and watched us, but he didn't say anything. In fact, I had not yet heard a word of the King's English pass his lips.

Salmon saw he was not making an impression. So he announced it was time to start the torture.

I said I thought that was taking drastic action.

Salmon turned on me with a gun in his hand. "No one argues with me," he said, lifting a piece of his lip. Salmon can be very mean.

So I didn't argue with him—not then. I had a gun, too, but it was under my pillow in the bedroom and that seemed like quite a distance.

"We'll start the torture," Salmon said. "We'll get Genghis and Attila."

With Salmon's dogs, the mention of their names was enough to bring them galloping. Salmon just opened the door and the room was suddenly full of snarling, barking, furry bodies and large yellow fangs. It was a madhouse. Salmon was yelling at the dogs. I was trying to look invisible, but I couldn't help doing some screaming of my own. Like I said, the dogs hate me.

It was Arfy who really surprised us. The dogs zeroed in on him like he was a soup-bone, but Arfy dropped to a crouch and began barking. This puzzled them.

"Get him! Tear him up!" Salmon commanded the dogs.

Genghis and Attila rushed back at Arfy like they meant business, but Arfy barked some more and they stopped again.

The dogs' teeth were snapping like buttons in a fat ladies' gymnasium, but it was a standoff. Arfy was looking them in the eyes and barking, and they were calming down.

"I don't get this," Salmon said. He motioned me to follow him out of the room. I was relieved to do so.

Salmon closed the door behind him and said, "Did you feed those dogs?"

"You must be kidding. I wouldn't feed them with *your* hands."

"Something's fishy," Salmon said. He opened the door again. Then he yelled, "He's *gone!*"

I looked inside. All I saw were the two dogs, prowling around the room.

"This is awful," I said. "They *ate* him."

Salmon scowled. "No, they didn't. The window's open. He escaped. We've got to find him."

Well, we beat the bushes outside of the house for a long while, but we didn't turn up a trace of Arfy. Finally we went back inside and Salmon locked the dogs up for the night. "He won't get away with this," Salmon said. "I'll learn his secret if I have to kill him."

I turned in for the night, hoping that was the end of it.

But fat chance. The next thing I knew, there was a loud knocking at the door. It was hours later. I took my gun from under my pillow and put it in my bathrobe pocket. Salmon got to the front door ahead of me. He opened it, and then we both backed inside, because two big guys were walk-

ing in, and we weren't arguing.

One of them had a gun.

The other one was Arfy.

"Are these the two men, little brother?" the guy with the gun asked.

Arfy nodded. The guy with the gun looked like Arfy, except he was even bigger, and he didn't have that For Rent sign hanging in his eyes. He was all business. He had muscles where Arfy just had blubber.

"I'm going to get to the bottom of this," he told me. "Will you talk, or must I thrash you?"

"This is the man of the house," I said, pointing to Salmon.

"What about it?" the big guy said, swinging his gun in Salmon's direction. He held the gun very confidently.

Salmon was all smiles. "Would you care for a drink? Something to eat? Sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

He began to leave the room and the big guy fired his revolver. There was a splintering of wood. A hole appeared in the door, just above the doorknob that Salmon was reaching for.

Salmon pulled his hand back and yelled, "Help! Genghis! Attila!"

From down in the basement, there was a loud barking and a clanging of chains, but the dogs were locked up. Salmon suddenly realized it. When he turned around, he had a sick smile on his face.

Then Arfy's brother walked up to Salmon and took him by the chest. He grabbed most of Salmon's pajama top in his fist. He pushed Salmon to the wall and said, "Now, will you talk, or shall I lose my patience?"

Salmon obviously didn't want that to happen, because by the time he slid down to the floor, he spilled his guts about why we kidnaped Arfy.

Arfy's brother shook his head. He put his arm around Arfy. "Is that right, little brother?"

Arfy nodded.

The big guy sighed. "Why is it that some people can't leave other people alone?"

"We're psychopaths," Salmon said.

Arfy's brother continued, as if he didn't hear Salmon. "Here's a harmless fellow," he said, giving Arfy a little hug, "who doesn't have a mean bone in his body. There was a judge once who wanted to put Arfy away for no good reason—just because his brain doesn't work the same as everybody else's."

"I don't think it works at all," I said.

The big guy frowned at me. "But

I told the judge that would be wrong. Sure, I said, it's true that Arfy can't hold a job like other people can. I suppose I could support him, if it came to that, but I don't want Arfy to live on charity. And with Arfy's special talent, there is no reason he can't provide for himself. He makes a modest living at the dog track. He makes enough in the summer to tide him over the winter. He could make a killing if he wanted to, of course. But that wouldn't be fair.

"After all, when someone can talk to dogs, it does give him quite an advantage over the pari-mutuel odds."

"He talks to dogs?" Salmon and me asked.

The big guy raised his eyebrows. "Yes," he said. "I thought you had that figured out. My brother, limited though he may be in some respects, is quite a phenomenon in his own way. He makes his bets on advice straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak."

"*That's* why Genghis and Attila wouldn't get him!" Salmon said. "He talked them out of it. What a dirty trick!"

"For your sake, I hope you can do the same," Arfy's brother said. "I feel you deserve a taste of your own medicine. Please fetch the dogs, little brother."

Well, what happened next, I hate even to remember. In fact, Officer, that's why I had those few drinks that you seem so interested in. You see, Arfy brought Genghis and Attila back into the room. He gave them a couple of barks and they perked up their ears. Then Arfy and his brother left.

"Down! Down!" Salmon yelled, because by then the dogs were lunging at us.

"Listen to him, dogs!" I screamed. I wrapped my arms around my throat and backed up against the wall. I've seen tusks that were smaller than those teeth.

Salmon's orders to the dogs didn't do any good. Whatever Arfy barked at those dogs, it really impressed them.

So that was when Salmon changed his approach. "Kill *him!* Not *me!*" he yelled at the dogs, pointing to me.

It looked like the dogs were ready to obey him, and that's when I hit the panic button. Because, let me tell you, *I was fed up with dogs!*

So I took the gun out of my pocket and shot them. That ended that, as far as I was concerned, and not a minute too soon. Believe me, it was my life or theirs. I mean, as it was, one of them got a piece of my ear.

Well, I was feeling relieved about the situation until I looked at Sal-

mon; his face was dark, scowling.

"You shot my dogs," he told me, like he couldn't believe it. "My dogs. You killed."

His voice was a whisper, a weird one. It was like I was suddenly in a movie and Jimmy Cagney was about to rub me out.

Now Salmon had *his* gun out, pointed at me. "Oh, are you gonna get it!" he said. "Are you gonna get it good!" His eyes were doing funny things, rolling backwards in their sockets, and then trying to look at each other.

He meant business with the gun, so there was nothing else I could do. I shot him a number of times.

That's when I left Salmon's house. I mean, I was sick of that place. I took the nest egg I had been saving and I went downtown. Before I fell asleep, I was able to purchase a drink or two with the nest egg, as I previously mentioned.

Yes, Officer, I certainly agree with you. Let me be the first to acknowledge that it would have been far better if I had gone to the trouble of finding a bed before catching my forty winks. But it has been a tiring summer, and at the time I fell asleep, this sidewalk seemed friendly enough.

When I woke up, this little poodle dog was also friendly. He was licking my face, as a matter of fact. So I decided to have a talk with him. You see, I have decided to learn how to talk to dogs. You never know when a trick like that will come in handy.

Since you ask, Officer, *that* is the answer to your very rude question; namely, just what do I think I am doing here on my hands and knees underneath this street lamp at four in the morning, barking at a poodle? I am having a conversation, that's what I am doing. What do you think—that I am a common bum who is drunk on the street? Officer, how could you harbor such a poor opinion of your fellowman? Please unhand me. Where are you taking me?

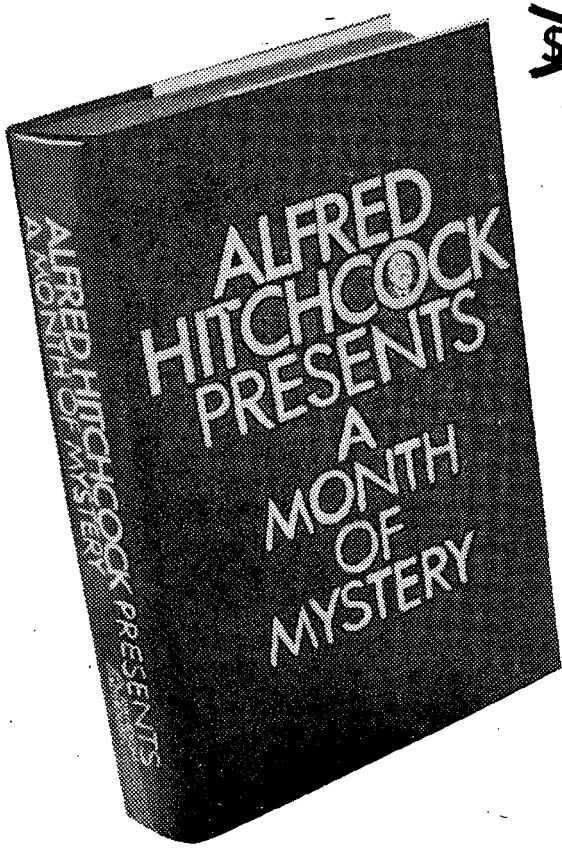
Listen, Officer, as a taxpaying citizen, I request that you do your duty and arrest this dog. He does not seem so friendly anymore. In fact, he is biting me. Ouch!

NEW NEW NEW

BIG

MONEY SAVING OFFER

~~$13.95~~
$7.98



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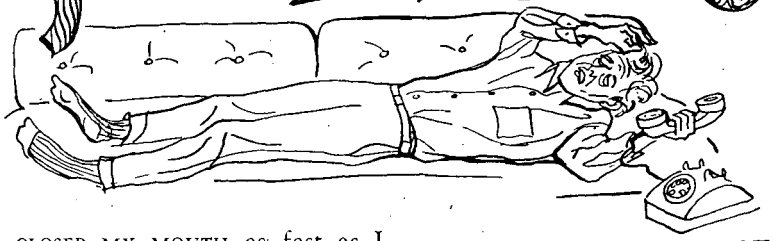
A bird on the wing covers an amazing amount of territory.

Finders Keepers



I CLOSED MY MOUTH as fast as I could and almost got him, that damn little bird that builds a nest in my mouth some mornings. This morning he had help from a couple of condors. I had just got used to the idea of being alive when someone shot me through the head at close range. I tried to sit up, which was a mistake, and groped around for the phone before it could go off again.

"Errum."

"Hello, Mr. Michaud, please."

"Hmm?"

"I'd like to speak with Mr. Claud Michaud of Confidential Investigations."

"Ysshe, here, Michaud, speaking."

"Is something wrong, Mr. Michaud?"

"Could you please whisper?" The agony of that shrill voice in my left ear had jarred me semi-

conscious. Once more, I'd hang up.

"Sorry. I'd like to make an ap--pointment with you. Say, in one hour at your office?"

I tried to remember where my office was. At the same time I tried to think of a reason to make it at least two hours.

"I'll see you then," he said.

The phone went dead. I hadn't been fast enough. Now, the guy with the most obnoxious voice in the world would be here in one hour. I was making progress. I had remembered that I was in my office, and I was alone, which surprised me until I recalled that I had been celebrating at Helen's place the night before and she had turned me out at 3:00 because she had to be in court this morning. The clock said it was 9:30.

By 10:30 I looked better and felt worse. I hadn't been in the place for a week and could find nothing to eat or drink but a warm beer, but I had managed to shower and shave without cutting my own throat, always a temptation.

The man was on time, too; rather, they were on time, a smartly dressed couple in their forties. They looked loaded; the best kind.

I caught a two o'clock plane to San Francisco. In California, finding lost hippies keeps many private investigators in business. I'm one of them, and I have a reputation of locating kids other people cannot find. I have some pretty good contacts in San Francisco, so it usually doesn't take more than a few days; but this would be different.

Mr. and Mrs. Christianson didn't want a runaway found. She had been found, dead. A medical examination of the body revealed that she had died of hepatitis. It also showed that Julie Christianson had become a mother about four months before she died, and had been nursing a baby. All I had to do for $30 a day and expenses was try to find the baby and return it to its grandparents. If I succeeded, I got a $1000 bonus.

Contrary to what you may believe, a PI does not get offered many $1000 bonuses—and he collects even fewer. My chances at this one were not good. The only thing I knew for sure was that the kid existed. There was no name, birth certificate, identification bracelet, footprints; nothing.

I figured I could rack up enough at thirty-plus a day to catch up on the rent, and there was always that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that beckoned with visions of paying bills and getting my car out of hock. Hopefully, I'd have enough left over for wining and dining all those money-hungry young things I knew back in L.A.

Since I was being paid expenses, I had lunch, rented a car, and checked into a hotel. Then I drove over to police headquarters, where I sat around waiting for a friend of mine on the force to come in. I did Bill Root a favor a few years back and since then we have helped each other several times. He knew what was happening, and I needed a place to start. PIs are all good waiters. We have to be. It's an acquired taste, but you pick it up early or fold. Bill rolled in about 5:00 with a couple of shaggy kids in tow.

"Be with you in a minute, Claud."

For once, it was only a minute. He turned the kids over to a desk sergeant and accepted my dinner invitation before I had it half out. After he had a couple of highballs in him, he loosened up and started giving me the information I needed.

"The problem is, Claud, the group she was living with has broken up, scattered. They were one of the last groups in the city. Most of them live out in the country now, do some farming, smoke a little pot, happy as clams. Raise their kids as community property, no ID, no birth certificates. That way, they won't have to register for the draft when they grow up. Those kids don't even have names. Call them stuff like Morning Flower or Starshine; absolute noncitizens. The hips may not know which one it is themselves."

"Any ideas about who took the kid when the mother died?"

"That's the thing," Bill answered around a chunk of steak. "She was planning to move to the country with the rest. Left the kid somewhere. The hips may not even know she's dead, and if they do, they'll do their best to keep you away from the kid. Don't want the Establishment to get him."

"So all I get for dinner is the same thing you handed out to her parents. Give me something. That steak you're cramming down your gullet was $8.95."

"And you got a fat expense account or we'd be in a hamburger joint." He belched, looked startled, then greatly pleased with himself for making such a satisfactory noise. "I've got one name, Sue Cameron. She's a friend of the Christianson girl. She'd know where the baby is, but she doesn't like cops or the kid's grandparents. You won't get much out of her. Dead end as far as we're concerned."

I got the girl's address and bought the man a big dessert. A good solid name is better than I usually start with.

The address was an old, run-

down building with long, dark halls and rubber mats to cover the holes in the carpet. Sue Cameron was in the back, third floor. I listened at the door, then knocked. No one answered. I looked at my watch. It was almost 8:00. Bill had told me that she worked till 9:00 in a taco joint nearby. From what he could find out, she lived alone, on the fringe of the hippie scene. She had known Julie Christianson in high school and they had moved in some of the same circles in Frisco.

I knocked once more, then opened the door with a little celluloid calendar I carry for such purposes. I started to give the place a fast search. I found Sue Cameron sprawled on the floor of the bedroom, dead. She hadn't died neatly. I finished my search in a more leisurely fashion, leaving the bedroom for last. The only clue I could come up with was a note stuck to the refrigerator with magnets:

Take Julie and Porpoise to see the baby tomorrow.

That was all the note said. It looked old and was three layers from the top of the stack. I put the note in my pocket and called Bill.

"What the hell do you want?" he cordially answered the phone. "Can't I spend one night with my family?"

"Sorry, Bill, but I just found Sue Cameron dead."

"Swell! And I suppose you expect me to do something about it."

"Don't be belligerent or I'll tell your wife about the swell blonde I fixed you up with last time you were in L.A. All I'd like you to do is have someone come over here without my getting involved."

"Just like that, huh?" He continued to act difficult, but his heart wasn't in it. Finally, he promised to send me a copy of the report on the body.

For two days I went everywhere and learned nothing. No one had heard of a guy named Porpoise. Bill had called to tell me that Sue Cameron had died of food poisoning. She'd eaten something spoiled while high on speed. Having looked into her refrigerator, I could see how easy that would be.

Day three started out the same way, talking to people who should know, if anyone did; no dice. This was the part of being a PI that's never shown on TV; talking to bartenders, hookers, information peddlers all over the city. You go into enough bars, ask enough people, and you can find anybody. All it takes is patience, and thick soles on your shoes. Both of mine were wearing thin.

I went back to the hotel about 4:00. Someone had called and left

a number. No name, but then I didn't expect one. I made a fast call and a faster trip across town to check out one more guy trying to earn the fifty bucks I was paying. In three days I had found four men who called themselves Porpoise. Each one had been wrong. Fifth time's the charm, I told myself.

My informant led me to a dingy little bar that had added an espresso machine to cater to the long-hair crowd. From the looks of the place, no one was buying much coffee. I was pointed in the direction of the back corner, while the informant said he'd wait outside.

"Hi. One of you guys named Porpoise?"

"Yeah. Me. What you want?"

"I just want to talk to you."

He looked me over. He was in jeans and a boldly striped T-shirt, and his lank, blond hair hung to his shoulders. Even from a distance I could tell he dug garlic bread.

"What about?"

"Julie Christianson."

"Beat it!"

"Looks like a nark to me," added one of the other boys. They all reappraised me in this new light. I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable.

"There might be some money in it for you," I tried hopefully.

"Get out of here!" He started to scream and almost froth at the mouth.

Two of them grabbed me and began to push me out the door. The bartender didn't look up. I sprawled on the sidewalk, and they went back inside.

I walked back to my car, paid off the informer, and got a bag I had stashed under the spare tire. Then I went looking for a liquor store. I bought a bottle of cheap Scotch, went back to the bar and settled down to wait.

Porpoise left the bar two-and-a-half hours later. I followed him four blocks to a dingy apartment house. His room was on the top floor. He wasn't walking too steadily and had trouble with the stairs. He answered the door in his shorts.

"What you want again?"

"I'm an old friend of Julie's. I was told you might know where she is."

"Who?" He peered at me fuzzily.

"Julie Christianson."

"She's dead."

"I didn't know. Her folks hate my guts. Wouldn't tell me anything. I need a drink."

I held up the bottle and he let me in. I downed a healthy swig and passed him the bottle. One thing led to another, and we were

trading drinks. Then I brought out my little sack of grass that I always carry to hippieland and made us a marijuana cigar. Within twenty minutes we were old friends.

"Julie wrote me she was gonna have a baby."

"Yeah. Nice kid."

"I came up to see it. Where is it? Cops didn't get it, did they?"

"Nope. In the Land of Aquarius."

"Where's that?"

"Can't tell. Promised."

"I just want to see the kid."

"No! Can't tell! You can't make me tell. You get out of here!"

With that, he was off again. Real stable, this kid. Rather than fight him, I left. Deciding I'd broken enough laws for one night, I gave up and drove back to the hotel.

I was up and on the job bright and early the next day, about 11:30. I ordered breakfast, then I called Bill.

"Morning, Bill. How's it going?"

"You bum. It's the middle of the afternoon. What the hell do you want?"

"Is that any way to talk to an old friend who fed you steak just the other night?"

"You're wasting the taxpayers' money."

"OK. I need to know where the Land of Aquarius is."

"Lot of places named that. How did you get that name?"

"Just asked sweetly. How about Aquarius?"

"Who'd you ask? How come they didn't tell you where the place is? Your boyish charm fail or something?"

"Come on, Bill. After that dinner, you should be willing to do anything for an old pal like me."

"You sure get a lot of mileage out of one steak. OK, my best guess would be a little farm some hips with dough bought upstate a ways. Sixty or seventy kids live there. Some sort of back-to-nature thing. Stop by the office before two and I'll find it on a map for you."

The Land of Aquarius looked like it had once been a quiet little truck farm, but now there were weeds in the gardens and the fields. The house and barn were painted bright yellow and covered with signs of the zodiac and the kind of art found in cheap bars and high-class johns.

I spent the afternoon studying the place with binoculars from several vantage points. I also talked to a couple of the neighbors. Seems every night was party night in the Land of Aquarius. All I'd have to do is slip down, mingle a bit and check the place out. Maybe I'd even find someone who could tell me which baby was the one for whom

I was looking. Sure I could . . .

I drove into a little town nearby and ate dinner. I practiced my waiting technique until dark, then went back out to the farm. I parked down the road from the entrance and donned my aged-but-still-with-it hippie disguise, which consists of a pair of ratty jeans, an old serape and a layer of dirt crowned by an ancient fall I had bought in a pawnshop. With an Indian headband, the fall looked disreputable enough to be real. I was ready.

The neighbors had exaggerated a bit. It wasn't the wild party with orgy I'd been led to believe, but a quiet get-together and smoke-in.

By keeping out of the few lights, I could move around and look at the house up close. It was the house which interested me. My homework up on the hill with the binocs had shown me that the house was where the children were kept. Their parents slept in the barn. It seemed to fit.

No one was moving around in the house. I stood outside and looked in a window. I could see a girl breast-feeding a baby. In cribs around the room there must have been ten other babies. Now, all I had to do was make up my mind.

"Hey! Who are you? What the hell you doin' here?"

I turned around to see five or six guys walk up close.

"Like wow, man, I'm up from Frisco and—"

One of them reached out and grabbed my hair. It came off in his hand.

"Nark," he pronounced.

Pain! Back hurt! Leg hurt! Ribs hurt! Head hurt! Blackness. Out.

That little bird had made the long trip up to Frisco just to build an enormous nest in my mouth. As a joke, he also glued my eyes shut. I wanted to move, to get up and remove the twigs and feathers from my mouth, but I was nailed down. I could feel the spikes that had been driven through my head, my back and my left leg.

When I finally made it all the way up to my hands and knees, I felts lots worse, but the thought of $1000 got me onto my feet. The left side of my body was broken. Beside me was my hairpiece with a note attached to it. *Scalped by the Indians. Nark go home!*

I took the advice and drove to a motel. I had to pay double, in advance, but I got a room. They must've been hard up.

I spent the next day in bed, moving as little as possible. Some people heal fast, a definite advantage to a PI. Me? I'm a slow healer, so I took my time and tried to think of some way to earn $1000.

After fourteen hours of sleep I

was able to move about fairly successfully. I ate a giant breakfast, checked out and drove back to Frisco to put my plan in action. My first move was to phone Mr. Christianson and tell him that I needed $200. Once he decided I was telling the truth about locating the kid, he promised to wire the money right away. Then I set off to find a pusher I know.

The trouble with pushers is, they move around often and are a secretive lot. After looking most of the day, I found him in his new hole. It took forty minutes of fast talk, a hundred-dollar bribe, a hundred-dollar sale, and three of my best threats to get him to spill, but he gave me a name and the location of a "meet" after he made a few phone calls.

That evening I drove north again and found the little restaurant where a local pusher called three times a week. I checked into a nearby motel.

It was Wednesday evening when I arrived. I knew nothing would happen until about 8:00 Friday evening, so I put the time to good use by practicing my waiting some more and sleeping a lot.

Friday evening was typical of the beautiful weather enjoyed almost year round by San Franciscans, rain with fog. Only the fog managed to get into the restaurant. Then some jerk played the same song on the juke about seven times and the fog left. The man I was looking for came in and took a corner booth. I walked over and gave him the word. It took a while to convince him, but right was on my side; right, two more of my most inventive threats, and a snub-nosed thirty-eight.

At the stroke of 8:00, a young man burst through the door in a swirl of fog. He must have been caught short, because he almost ran to our booth. He threw $60 on the table in a rumpled heap. The pusher counted it, then gave him six white caps of heroin. The boy turned and ran out. He wasn't the type for which I was looking.

As the fog rolled in the open door it seemed to carry with it a young girl. She looked as though she were being forced along by the mist because she lacked the strength to fight it. I didn't notice the boy behind her until he shut the door. He seemed to blend into the background. His face was almost exactly the same color as the fog. They both wore regulation hippie dress and both looked around nervously, then they seemed to drift toward the corner booth as though carried on a draft.

I nodded to the pusher and he got up and started to leave. The boy who had just come in looked

startled. He gestured at the man.

"Where you going?" Panic was in his voice.

"Sit down, friends. You can talk to me." I said.

The pusher walked to the door and was swallowed by the fog. The two kids sat down and looked scared.

"What's going on?"

"Easy. No buy this week for you."

The boy went white. Panic was close to the surface. The girl reached over and took his hand.

"Sit still, Billy. What do you want, mister?"

"To give you these." I held out the ten caps I had bought in Frisco. The boy named Billy could look at nothing else; $100 worth of snow would keep him happy a long time.

"What do we do to get them?" the girl asked.

She was the decision maker of this pair. I aimed my pitch at her.

"Help me find Julie Christianson's baby."

"Why?"

"Yes or no, honey. You want these, or do I throw them in the bay?"

She looked at the young man who sat beside me, but his eyes never left the capsules in my hand. I saw I had a sale. They were up against it.

"OK, we'll help. Give us the stuff."

"When we're finished, then you get it."

We got in my car and drove to the farm. I hid the car and we started down the driveway. We ducked with the fog into the bushes when several people passed in a group. On a night like this no one would ever see us.

They led the way down the path to the house. The girl went in and told an identical-looking young baby-sitter that she would take over. Everyone seemed to look the same in this place, each one out of the same mold. After a minute I entered, leaving the boy to watch for visitors.

"OK, honey, which one is it?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? This is a fine time to announce that."

"No one knows. It's one of these three over here. We don't try to keep them separate."

All three of the babies looked about the right age. All looked well-fed and cared for. I had to make a choice. One of the three was at least half-Negro. That didn't rule him out, but I didn't think the Christiansons were ready for a black grandchild. Better to leave him in a society that was truly color-blind. I looked over the

other two possibilities, puzzled.

"Are they boys or girls?"

"This one's a boy and this is a girl."

Mr. Christianson had mentioned to me that he had raised three "fine boys" besides his one wayward daughter. He seemed to do better with boys. I reached for the boy.

There was a noise outside and I threw a quick glance out the window. Billy was leading ten or twelve other boys toward the house. I snatched up the baby and dashed out the back, knocking the girl aside, and said, "Sorry, baby."

I ran down the walkway that led to a small outbuilding. Around the corner, through the bushes, over the fields and down a large ditch, we played hide-and-seek for keeps. I hid in a cul-de-sac between two buildings.

I lay still, trying to hold the baby in a comforting manner so he wouldn't cry, but he screwed up his face as though he were going to howl his head off. I stuffed a corner of his blanket into his mouth and held it in place with

my hand, taking care to see that he could still breathe. His muffled little sounds were swallowed by the fog.

I took out my gun and waited; these guys looked like they were mad and I was through playing gently. The first one who saw me would be a dead man. One boy came close. I was sure he would hear the baby crying, and I was ready to drop him, but the baby stopped for breath and the boy walked on.

As the search passed me by, I sneaked out and headed for my car. I approached slowly, ready for any nasty surprises. Billy's girlfriend was standing by the door.

"I'm alone. I came for the capsules."

"How come? Why didn't you lead the others here?"

"We made a deal. I didn't know Billy would call the others. Besides, the baby might get hurt."

I gave her the caps of heroin.

"Take good care of him. He's the best baby we have. He never cries."

"Don't worry. He's going to good people. They'll love him."

She smiled and vanished into the fog. I wondered what she would tell the others.

It was almost 4:00 before I reached Bill's house. I rang the bell and waited for several minutes. Bill's wife, June, had not had a baby to take care of for years. After one look at my little bundle, she pronounced him wonderful. She cut off Bill's complaints about being dragged out of bed in the middle of the night with a sharp glance, then carried the baby off into another room to bathe and change it. I could hear her cooing.

I told Bill what had happened at the Land of Aquarius, and how I had to make a best-of-three decision. I made a few plans and managed to wheedle his grudging cooperation. Then he went to bed and I stretched out on the couch, leaving June the job of watching my charge.

Two days later I landed in Los Angeles with the baby and June, who insisted that I could not be trusted with a baby for forty minutes by myself. She was right. The Christiansons met us at the airport and June boarded a plane for San Francisco. When we reached the house, Mrs. Christianson and two of her daughters-in-law started fussing with the baby while Mr. Christianson and I went into his den.

I told him the story I had concocted about finding the baby and the homemade birth certificate. He found the loophole that I had left, and I confessed that maybe I had overstepped the law just a little bit. We both smiled.

I didn't want to have him checking back for at least several years. By then, all details would be forgotten. I gave him all the papers I had made up to prove that the child was really his grandson. Since I had gotten lucky on blood types, in a few years no one would be able to prove any different. Maybe it was true.

Now came my favorite part. He sat at his desk and wrote me a check.

"Here you are, Mr. Michaud."

As I put the check into my pocket I caught a glance at the figure written on it: $1087. My expenses and salary had come to $987.

"Mr. Christianson, what about the $1000?"

"Mr. Michaud, that was before I knew about your methods. If you don't like the size of the check, you can give it back." He had a smug smile on his face.

"Why you cheap, son-of-a- . . ." I continued in this vein for two or three minutes, never repeating myself once. The whole time he just sat there with a complacent smile. I turned and headed for the door.

"Christianson, you better keep a damn close eye on that kid. I'll be back!" I shot over my shoulder as I left. That wiped the smile off his face, and I hoped he'd spend a fortune on guards.

As I walked down the drive I was fuming. I'll wait two or three years, till they're real attached to the kid. Then I'll move in with an investigation into the kid's background. It'll cost him ten, fifteen grand to call me off. I'll take him for every cent he's got. I'll cut him up so bad he won't even want to look at the kid.

By the time I reached the bus stop I had cooled down a bit. I had cleared $430 after expenses and that was lots better than nothing. I remembered the girl in the fog. "He's the best baby we have. He never cries." What the hell, why spoil the kid's life? I got on the bus and headed home.

I got stinko that night to help forget the thou that I had thought was so close. Next morning, I found that damned little bird had made it back from Frisco and was building nests as well as ever.

The sagacious homeowner disposes of all incendiary agents.

THE NORMALLY QUIET residential street was alive with black-uniformed firemen and blue-uniformed police, and fire-fascinated neighbors in varying stages of night dress, when Carla Avery turned onto San Amaron Road shortly past midnight. Equipment from the sub-station five miles away jammed the oak-lined avenue, and police cars with flashing dome lights barricaded the area.

Carla parked her small foreign car as close as she could, and ran wildly toward the thick knot of people gathered across from a ranch-style home in the middle of the block. Tongues of flame jetted from its heat-shattered windows and through a collapsed portion of its redwood-shingled roof, illuminating the starless sky with a smoky orange shimmer. Hoses crosshatched the neat green lawn and crushed oyster shell drive, and two groups of firemen played streams of pressurized water back and forth across what was left of the house, in an effort to prevent the blaze from spreading to the similar homes on either side.

Carla ran diagonally across the street, past one of the two fire engines parked there. A ruddy-faced policeman caught her arm as she came up onto the curb, restraining her. "Hey, wait now, you can't—"

"That's my house!" she screamed at him. "Let go of me, that's my house!"

"Are you Mrs. Paul Avery?"

"Yes! Yes!" She struggled

against his grip. "My husband—where's my husband?"

"Just take it easy, Mrs. Avery," the policeman said in a soothing voice. "We haven't been able to locate him as yet—"

"But he was home when I left at eight o'clock, and he wasn't planning to go out! Oh, *please* . . ."

"Don't you worry now. We'll find him, all right."

It was one of the firemen who found him, or, rather, who found the charred remains.

Sprawled on the floor of what had once been the family room, covered with glass and wood charcoal, it had almost been overlooked. But a member of the crew whose job it was to prowl among the smoldering ashes once the fire had been extinguished, so as to prevent any rekindling of the blaze, finally recognized the blackened mound for what it was. He rushed outside immediately to summon an ambulance.

The body was placed into a white canvas bag and removed on a stretcher. Carla Avery had to be restrained from rushing forward as it was loaded inside an ambulance. She was weeping hysterically, pleading futilely to be allowed to ride with her husband.

"I'll drive you to the hospital, Mrs. Avery," the ruddy-faced policeman offered gently, and at length Carla allowed herself to be led to one of the squad cars.

In the offices of the county morgue in the basement of the hospital, Carla waited fitfully with the policeman and a young intern. After a time, the assistant coroner entered carrying a large manila envelope. Sobbing, Carla identified its contents: the blackened shell of Paul's expensive gold wristwatch, and a half-melted clot of metal which had been his platinum-and-diamond wedding ring.

The intern said gently, "Come upstairs with me, Mrs. Avery. I'll give you a sedative and you can spend the rest of the night here."

Carla shook her head, long auburn hair veiling her wide, oval face. "No," she said haltingly, "I'll . . . I'll be fine." She looked toward the ruddy-faced policeman. "Could you please take me back to my car now?"

"But where will you go?" the intern asked solicitously.

"To my sister's," Carla told him. She stood, smiling weakly. "We're very close, and I need to be with somebody close to me just now. I'll arrange for the—the funeral in the morning, if that will be all right."

"Of course."

The ruddy-faced policeman took her to where she had parked her small foreign car on San Amaron Road, offering his deepest condol-

ences and asking if she was sure she would be all right. She thanked him gravely, assuring him that he needn't worry.

When he had gone, Carla drove across town to the Regency Park Apartments, a block-square complex of wood-and-old-brick townhouses, set in double tiers and surrounding a huge swimming pool and cabana. She parked in the adjacent lot and walked a flagstone path to the east wing. She unlocked the door to Number 206 with the key she had been given, and entered the darkened foyer.

The stairs leading up to the second floor townhouse were carpeted in dark green shag, and as she ascended them, Carla found herself smiling amusedly. What would that kind and sympathetic policeman say, she wondered, if he knew her husband had not died accidentally? If he knew that she and Craig Oldham, Paul's oldest friend, had plotted his death for the past two months in order to collect his fifty thousand dollar double indemnity policy? If he knew Craig had gone to their home tonight while she was at her bridge club, killed Paul with a blow from a sand-filled stocking so as to leave no traces, and then set the fire?

Carla smiled again as she reached the top of the stairs. Poor, stupid Paul, she thought; unsuspecting all these months that she was having an affair with Craig, of what they were planning for him when the time deemed itself right.

She stepped into the deeply shadowed living room. The night lamp in the bedroom opposite was on. Quickly, Carla started there.

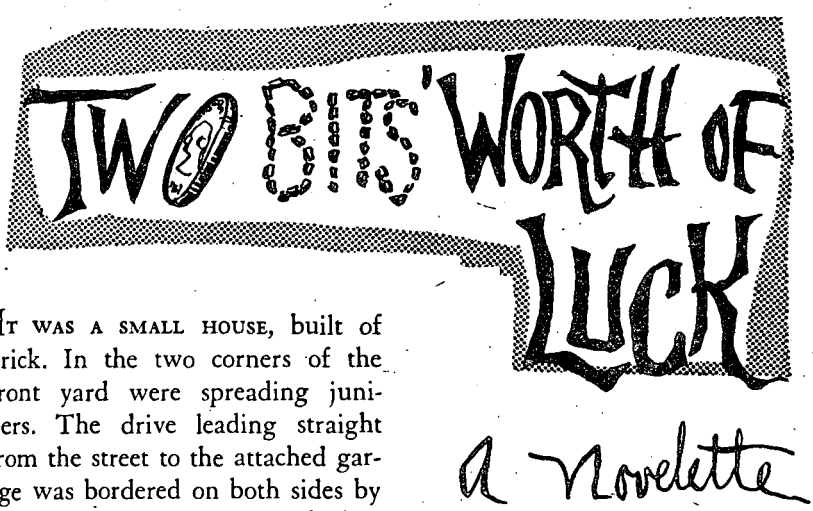
She stopped, paralyzed.

Paul Avery stood framed in the bedroom doorway.

The diffused light behind him made his angular face look darkly Satanic, and his smile was a thing of complete horror. "Craig wasn't as quick as he once was," Avery said softly. "Or as quiet. He told me everything before I killed him, before I saw the advantages of carrying through your little scheme, before I put my watch and wedding ring on his body and set the fire myself. He even told me that you were coming here to his apartment tonight as soon as you were able." He took a step forward. "Ironic, isn't it, Carla? A dead man commits two murders, and another dead man takes all the blame, with no one able to deny his guilt. What more perfect and fitting crime?"

Carla Avery opened her mouth to scream, but her husband's big hands closed around her throat and crushed the life from her.

Success, frequently attributed to luck, is, I daresay, never incompatible with efficiency.



a Novelette

IT WAS A SMALL HOUSE, built of brick. In the two corners of the front yard were spreading junipers. The drive leading straight from the street to the attached garage was bordered on both sides by parallel plantings of box hedge, neatly trimmed. In the center of the front yard, between the drive on the right and a flagstone walk on the left, was a hard maple with thick leaves that cast on the grass in the morning sun a ragged pattern of deep shade. Detective Lieutenant Joseph Marcus, a step ahead of Detective Sergeant Bobo Fuller, went up the walk from his car at the curb. He climbed two shallow steps to a low stoop, prodded a button beside the door, and listened to a ringing bell within. He was admitted with Fuller after a moment by a slight man, two inches under six feet tall, with a pale face and full red lips under a thin thatch of limp brown hair. The man's voice when he spoke was surprisingly resonant and deep, suggesting to Marcus' wanton mind that it had been installed deliberately as a kind of natal joke in an incongruous body.

"Come in," he said. "I'm Thurston Weller. You, I suppose, are the police."

"Detective Lieutenant Marcus,"

said Marcus. "Detective Sergeant Fuller."

"We've been waiting for you, gentlemen. Come this way, please."

He led them down the length of the livingroom, across a small dining area, and through a louvered swinging door into a kitchen. Around a corner, opening into a tiny entry, was the back door. Directly opposite the back door was another door which was standing ajar. Weller opened the door wider and gestured for Marcus to go ahead. Marcus did, still followed by

Fuller. They descended steep steps into a basement. At the foot of the steps, looking up at them as they descended, was a plump little man with pink cheeks and enormous horn-rimmed glasses. His eyes behind the glasses seemed to bulge with apprehension, as if he expected them at any moment to lose their footing and come pitching down ends-over-elbows as, apparently, the woman on the concrete floor at his feet had done. She lay on her back with her arms flung wide and her head pointed toward the stairs, indicating to Marcus that she had, falling headfirst downward, struck a tread near the bottom and turned inadvertently a complete somersault. She was wearing a white cotton robe which had fallen apart to expose a sheer blue gown, through which was exposed in turn, on a significantly twisted leg, a part of a thigh and a calf. On his way down, Marcus noted a loose mule on the stairs; just a thin sole with a French heel and enough of a pocket at the front to hold the toes, nothing at all at the back to secure the heel. His mother had often worn them around the house. The heels had flopped when she walked, dangerous things, especially when walking down a steep flight of stairs. The mate to the mule, the one on the stairs, was lying loose on the concrete basement floor some four feet from the body.

The plump man behind the glasses was Dr. Edwin Harshfeld. He had received an emergency call from Thurston Weller almost an hour before. The call had been relayed to him by his office nurse, for he was in the process of making hospital rounds at the time, and he had come as soon as he could. Poor Mrs. Weller was quite dead when he arrived; had been dead, in fact, for some time. It was impossible to tell precisely. It was also impossible to tell, precisely, what had killed her. That would need, of course, an autopsy. Meanwhile, it was safe to say, in general, that she had died from a blow to the head, or possibly a broken neck, sustained while falling downstairs.

"When I was satisfied that nothing could be done for her," he said, "I thought it would be unwise to move her. She is just as I found her."

"Good. There are formalities that must be observed, you understand, in the case of accidental death."

Marcus knelt by the body and went through some of the formalities, not that there was really anything he could do. Poor Mrs. Weller, as the doctor had said, was quite dead. There was an ugly abrasion high on her forehead,

near the hairline, that had seeped blood. Slipping fingers under her skull, Marcus could detect pulpiness where her head had smashed against the concrete floor and her head on her neck was oddly twisted. Maybe the neck was broken, and maybe it wasn't. He would know in good time. Her hair was lusterless and nondescript in color. Neither blonde nor brunette nor redhead was she, nor had she been; but that kind of hair could use a bottle. Her face, plain and washed-out in death, had been in life, he thought, plain and washed-out. Poor Mrs. Thurston Weller, washed-out and washed-up.

"Damned things." Marcus stood up. "Damned treacherous things."

Light flashed from the lenses of Dr. Harshfeld's glasses as his head jerked around. His slightly bulging eyes behind the lenses had a wild expression of almost comical shock.

"What?" he said. "What's that?"

"Slippers." Marcus gestured toward the offending mule on the basement floor. "No way of keeping them on. They flop. They trip you up."

"Oh?" Dr. Harshfeld, looking at the loose mule, seemed uncertain. "You think she tripped on the stairs?"

"It's possible. Even probable. But you don't agree, Doctor?"

"To tell the truth, I was thinking along a different line."

"Is that so? What line?"

"Well, I'm the Wellers' family physician. Mrs. Weller suffered from hypertension. She had dizzy spells."

"I see. Bad place to get dizzy. Coming down a flight of stairs like that, I mean. They're steep. The treads are narrow, and the edges are sharp. That's where she got that abrasion on her forehead, on one of the sharp edges. I wonder why she was."

Dr. Harshfeld, trying to follow, looked confused. "Why she was what?" he said.

"Coming down the stairs."

"There was something down here, I suppose, that she wanted. After all, women *do* come down basement stairs sometimes."

"True. Still, she wasn't dressed. It was early. When women get up in the morning, they don't usually go immediately to the basement. Or do they?"

"I shouldn't think so. Not ordinarily. There may, however, be occasions."

"So there may. Pity she can't tell us. But never mind. The investigation of all deaths would be easy if the victim could talk. No such luck."

The effect of these rather inane

comments was simply to increase the doctor's impatience, which was already becoming apparent. The implication was plainly that the competence of Marcus was suspect if not condemned. Bending his short body at its pot, Dr. Harshfeld picked up his bag from the floor at his feet.

"No doubt," he said. "Now, if I may be excused, I had better go about my business. My hospital rounds have been interrupted. I will have patients collecting in my office."

"You go ahead, Doctor. We'll take it from here. The medical examiner will be out to take a look at the body before it's moved. You understand, of course."

"Certainly. He will also perform the autopsy, I suppose."

"That's the routine."

"Yes. Well, if I'm needed again, you can reach me at my office in the Clinical Arts Building."

Dr. Harshfeld, carrying his bag, climbed the stairs and disappeared around the door jamb above. Fuller, who had been standing stolidly apart, cleared his throat to remind Marcus that he was still at hand and open to conversation. Marcus obliged.

"Well, Fuller," he said, "what do you think?"

"It seems clear enough," said Fuller.

"An accident, do you think?"

"What else?"

"There is another possibility."

"I know. Murder. There's always murder."

"Not always. Too often."

"In this case, what makes you think so?"

"I don't *think* so, Fuller. I'm just wondering."

Here he was again. Fuller knew that now he was supposed to ask the big question. Now it was time for Marcus, the genius, to enlighten Fuller, the slob. Bitterly, Fuller asked the question.

"Wondering about what?" he asked.

"Nothing much," Marcus said. "This is a small house. Ground floor and basement. The only flight of stairs, therefore, is the flight from here to there."

"That's a brilliant observation. I'm proud that I could have made it myself."

"Right you are, Fuller. It's fatuous, but it suggests exigency. Given another flight of stairs from the ground floor to a second story, I wonder if Mrs. Thurston Weller would have fallen down the stairs to the basement."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that all of us, like the Admirable Crichton, must make do with what is available. However, let that pass. I notice that Mr.

Weller did not follow us down the stairs."

"No. He stayed above. Do you want him?"

"I want him, but not here. Upstairs will do. Come along, Fuller."

Thurston Weller was sitting at the kitchen table. He had brewed a pot of coffee, and a cup of the brew, emitting aromatic steam, was on the table before him. He looked up as Marcus appeared, but he did not rise. Marcus helped himself to a kitchen chair and sat down. Fuller stationed himself near the basement door.

"Will you have a cup of coffee, Lieutenant?" Weller said.

"Thanks, no. I've had mine for the morning."

"I haven't. Not until now, that is. Poor Ethel came in ahead of me this morning to make it, but she never got it done."

Thurston Weller, trying to sustain himself through the dreadful vision of what poor Ethel had got done instead, thrust his nose into the rising vapor from his coffee and sniffed as gingerly as if it were spirits of ammonia.

"Did she even begin to make it?" Marcus asked.

"Ethel? To make the coffee? Apparently not. The can of coffee was still in the cabinet where it was kept. No water had been put into the pot. Why?"

"It suggests that she must have gone directly to the basement stairs. Do you think she did?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Does it matter now?"

"Perhaps not. It seems, however, odd. Most people, after getting up in the morning, make coffee the first thing. I always do. It's a kind of national habit."

"So did Ethel, ordinarily. She always put it on to perk while she was preparing the rest of the breakfast. This morning she didn't. I don't know why."

"Did your wife can?"

"I beg your pardon? Can?"

"You know. Put up her own fruits and vegetables. Jellies and jams. Things like that."

"No. Never. I don't believe many women do anymore."

"No help there, then. It might have explained why she started downstairs into the basement before breakfast. To get jelly or jam or something. Such things are usually stored in basements."

"There is nothing of that sort stored in ours. I wish I could help you, Lieutenant, but I can't. As I said, however, I can't see that it really matters."

"It helps to clarify these things if we can reconstruct what happened. Perhaps you can help me in other respects. Was it your wife's practice to come into the kitchen

ahead of you and prepare breakfast?"

"It was. Invariably, except on Sundays. We got up together when the alarm went off, and she came straight to the kitchen while I bathed and shaved and prepared myself for the day. I like to be on the job by eight o'clock."

"What job?"

"I'm in business. I own a shoe store."

"I see. Where did you and your wife sleep?"

"In the front bedroom."

"Across the house, that is. Some little distance from here. Still, the house is small. You must have heard something when your wife fell."

"I heard her cry out. I heard her strike the stairs. I had just gotten out of the shower. I pulled on a robe and ran out here to investigate. I found her as you saw her. Lying at the foot of the basement stairs."

"You are dressed now."

"After the doctor came, when it was determined finally that she was dead and the police had been called, I finished dressing."

"Did you think she was dead when you found her?"

"I didn't know. I wasn't sure."

"Why was it that you didn't move her? Wouldn't that have been the natural thing to do? To carry her to her bed and try to make her comfortable?"

"I was afraid to do that. She might have had a concussion or something. I've always understood that it could be fatal to move someone with a concussion."

"How long was it before the doctor arrived?"

"An unconscionable time. At least half an hour. He had to be called away from the hospital."

"Meanwhile, what did you do?"

"What was to be done? Little enough. I got a cover and put it over her. I stayed beside her and tried to get her to respond to me, but there was no response."

"You must have been convinced, after a while, that she was dead."

"Yes. I began to think so."

"I'm sorry. It was a bad experience."

"Yes. It was bad."

Thurston Weller, reliving the bad experience as he would surely relive it many times in the days ahead, took up his cup of coffee in both hands and began to drink. There was a tremor in the hands, and the cup clicked against his teeth. The coffee was still hot, and he sipped it slowly with little slurping sounds. Marcus, watching him, was afflicted with an uneasy sense of guilt. He was, to tell the truth, having difficulty in feeling for Thurston Weller the compassion

properly due a husband whose wife had just died in a tragic domestic accident. He did not, to put it bluntly, like Mr. Weller. He did not like his wet red lips. He did not like his pale face with skin the color of flour-and-water paste. He was repulsed by the beautiful, incongruous baritone voice. He felt somehow queasy in Mr. Weller's presence. He imagined that he could detect about him the faint, pervading scent of something fetid. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair, and Marcus, who was a fair man, was further offended by Thurston Weller for making him feel as he had no right to feel.

"Mr. Weller," he said, "I assume that you and your wife were alone in the house at the time of the accident?"

"That's right."

"You have no children?"

"None. Ethel and I were married only a little more than a year ago. That may surprise you, Lieutenant, for you can see that I am not a young man. I am, in fact, thirty-eight. I was, however, married previously. My first wife was very different from Ethel. She was six years younger than I at the time of our marriage, whereas Ethel was two years older. Dottie, my first wife, was quite pretty—and quite faithless. I was a traveling man then, in shoes. We lived in another town. I was on the road five or six days a week, and Dottie exploited her opportunities to carry on affairs with other men. Eventually, she ran off with one of the men. I haven't seen her since. I was granted an uncontested divorce on grounds of desertion."

"Tough luck. I'm sorry."

"You needn't be. After recovering from the shock of it, I considered myself fortunate. I am telling you all this, my private affairs, because I realize it is to your advantage, as well as mine, to have everything that might be considered relevant expressed candidly."

"You're wise. I wish everyone I investigate were as helpful. When, incidentally, did you move here from the other town?"

"Let's see. It was about six months or so before Ethel and I were married. That would make it, say, approximately twenty months ago."

"Why here, precisely?"

"To this town? Well, it was in my territory when I was on the road, and I had already decided that it would be a good town for a small business. I didn't want to be a salesman on commission the rest of my life, and I had been scouting for a favorable business location for some time. After my experience with my first wife, I was ready to make the break. In

spite of her extravagance, I had been able to lay aside a substantial sum, and so, after a few months, I came on."

"What was this other town?"

"A smaller place about a hundred and fifty miles from here. Cadmus."

"I know the town. Had Mrs. Weller been married before?"

"Ethel? No. When I met her, she was clerking at the glove counter in a department store near my shop. We used to have lunch in the coffee shop of the same hotel." Thurston Weller, who had set his cup aside, spread his hands in a gesture oddly Shylockian. Over his wet red lips crept a grieved and tender smile that Marcus would have sworn was a sincere expression of his feelings. "She was, I suppose, a spinster. Plain and comfortable. I didn't care. Indeed, I preferred her that way. After Dottie, she suited me exactly."

His words, like his smile, convinced Marcus of their sincerity. Thurston Weller had loved his wife. Well, maybe love was putting it a bit strongly. He had been devoted to her. He had been comfortable and contented with her. He was sorry she was dead. Consequently, Marcus felt more than ever like a louse. Because, despite all impressions of sincerity, he still did not like Mr. Weller. He would have to be careful. He would have to lean over backward.

Anyhow, they had digressed. The interview had taken a different tack than Marcus had started out to give it, simply because Thurston Weller had volunteered information for which, at this stage of the game, Marcus had not intended to ask. He returned to the point of digression.

"To revert," he said, "you and your wife were alone in the house at the time of the accident. You must surely realize, Mr. Weller, that this places you in a difficult position. Our investigation will have to be more thorough than it might otherwise have been."

"Naturally. I understand that quite clearly. That's why I have tried to be completely open with you."

"Good. A commendable attitude. Now I must ask you some personal questions with unpleasant implications. Your answers will be checked, of course, so I warn you that you may as well tell the truth. I hope you won't be offended."

"I assure you that I won't."

"Very well. Was your wife happy in her marriage? Bluntly, did you have any reason to suspect that she was interested in another man or other men?"

Again Thurston Weller smiled,

now as if he were, in a sorrowful sort of way, amused.

"My wife was happy. She considered herself fortunate, although I was no prize catch, to have secured a man at all."

"How about you? Did you consider yourself as fortunate?"

"I have told you my attitude. My earlier experience made me bitterly prejudiced against infidelity. I was faithful to Ethel and would have remained so."

"That's credible. Did Mrs. Weller have any considerable money of her own?"

"When we were married, she had less than a hundred dollars in her checking account. Nothing else anywhere. She had been supporting herself on her salary as a clerk."

"All right. One question more. Did she have insurance?"

"She had a small burial policy for a thousand dollars. I suppose it had a double indemnity clause. Even so, as costs are nowadays, I shall be out of pocket for the funeral."

"Well, nothing there. Perhaps your position is not so difficult as it appeared." Marcus pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. "I'm sorry to have put you through an ordeal, Mr. Weller. The medical examiner will be here any moment, hopefully, and he will need to take your wife's body, of course, for autopsy. It will be returned to you as soon as possible. No doubt you are anxious to see it properly cared for."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I'm resigned to your procedure, whatever it entails."

Turning to Fuller, Marcus announced his departure. "You can catch a ride downtown with the medical examiner," he said.

If he'd waited another minute, he could have taken Fuller along. On the way out, he met the medical examiner coming in.

"Let us consider," said Marcus, "the factor of mass reasoning."

Fuller, who had wandered in, was trapped. He did not wish to consider the factor of mass reasoning, or any factor whatever. Nevertheless he saw he was in for it. Resigned to enlightenment, he settled himself in the other chair in Marcus' cubbyhole office.

"This is my lucky day," he said. "The factor of mass reasoning is something I've been wanting to know all about for years."

"It may surprise you to learn, Fuller, that you have already known about it for years, even though you weren't aware that you knew."

"That's comforting. I hate to be ignorant. Tell me all about what I

knew but didn't know that I knew."

"The factor of mass reasoning, Fuller, is simply a fancy way of saying that the vast majority of us will do certain things for adequate reasons, but we will not do those same things for reasons that are *not* adequate."

"Sure. We have to be motivated."

"Precisely. Nothing gets done in this world unless the doer is prodded into doing it for reasons that are considered sufficient."

"That's reasonable."

"On the contrary, it is *not* reasonable. I should say, reason does not invariably control human behavior. I knew a man once who murdered another man because he persisted in playing the same tune over and over on the jukebox in a tavern. The first man had asked the second several times politely to quit playing the damn tune, and for his pains had been told several times where he could go. Thereupon, the first man pulled a gun and shot the second man several times in several places. What do you think of that?"

"I think the first man was a nut."

"Maybe so. There were at least a dozen witnesses to the murder, and so there was no question of guilt or innocence involved. But I submit to you that if the same murder had been committed in private for the same reason, no one would have believed it."

"All right. What's the point?"

"The point, Fuller, is the factor of mass reasoning. Not only do the vast majority of us refrain from committing murder for petty reasons, we are also reluctant to believe, unless it is rammed down our throats with incontrovertible evidence, that anyone *else* will commit it. In brief, if we commit murder, the first long step toward evasion of the consequences is to have no sufficient reason for having committed it."

"Then why commit it?"

"Ah! There, Fuller, you have come to the crux. Why, indeed? Maybe you don't like your neighbor's face. Maybe your wife leaves her stockings hanging in the bathroom."

"That's silly, if you ask me."

"There you are, Fuller. You have reinforced my point. You are a true member of the masses. The factor functions in your brain."

"You can't go around suspecting people of murder for reasons that wouldn't even cause a serious argument. Anyhow, cops can't."

"There you are again, Fuller, right on the nose. Cops can't. Cops need evidence. Cops need motives. As a cop, that's what bothers me."

Are you bothered? Eh? What-

ever about, now, do you suppose?"

"I'm thinking of the wife who took a header down the basement stairs. Poor Mrs. Thurston Weller."

"An accident. That was the verdict."

"I know what the verdict was. I'd give a pretty penny to know what the truth is."

"You investigated. You're supposed to know."

"So I did, and so I am. I was stuck with a suspect, if you can call him that, who had opportunity galore and not a smidgen of motive. After all, you can't indict a man for a murder on the sole grounds that he could have committed it if he'd wanted to. Mr. and Mrs. Thurston Weller got along well with each other. Every neighbor and friend said so. They apparently had no domestic battles. She had no money of her own, and practically no insurance. In their relationships with other men and other women, they were mutually as pure as a pair from the pages of Oliver Optic. Moreover, all the injuries to Mrs. Weller, according to the medical report, were compatible with a fall down those steep basement stairs. Certainly the abrasion on her forehead and the broken neck were a result of the fall. The blow on the back of the head *could* have been delivered in advance, but also it could have been suffered when she smashed her head on the concrete basement floor. No physical evidence of murder. Not, to repeat, a smidgen of motive. What's your conclusion, Fuller?"

"There's no problem there. Mrs. Weller had an accident. Mr. Weller is innocent of murder."

"If so, why do I feel uneasy?" Marcus pushed himself up in his chair off the back of his neck. "End of discussion for today. Any questions?"

"Yes," said Fuller. "Who is Oliver Optic?"

The Chief of Police was clearly a part of the youth movement, contributing evidence, on a local level, of a national swing. New brooms sweep clean. What's needed at all levels, from top to bottom, and in all places, from here to there, are the bold and bright ideas of those who are on their way to where others have been. Out with the old fogies, in with the young fogies. It may not be any better, but it's different.

This one's name was Karl Kinkaid. That's Karl with a K, if you please; part of the picture, essential to the total effect. The crisp Teutonism went well with his military bearing, his impeccable uniform, his modulated bark and abrupt manners. He must have been in

his middle thirties. Marcus, in his presence, felt ready for his pension, old and tired, tobacco-stained and whiskey-soaked and heavy with ancient sins. Marcus was forty.

"What brings you to Cadmus, Lieutenant Marcus?" Kinkaid asked.

"To tell the truth," said Marcus, "I'm just sort of poking around."

"Official business?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. In another manner, no. Let's just say that it may avoid embarrassment to me if my visit is treated confidentially."

"I'm not sure that I understand."

"Well, there's nothing very obscure about it. I want some information about a man who used to live here. You may have it."

"I see. What man?"

"His name is Thurston Weller. He left here, I understand, about twenty months ago. His wife left before him, presumably with another man."

"Yes. I remember. There was something in the local paper. I seem to recall that there was an investigation. Rather cursory, I should imagine."

"Should you? Why?"

"To put it bluntly, the police department was in a bad way then—incompetent personnel, inadequate methods. Few of its functions were performed properly."

Marcus listened to the new broom with a feeling that was a mild mixture of cynicism and nausea. New brooms, on the whole, with infrequent exceptions, did not appeal to him. Maybe he was biased. Maybe he had been around too long. Maybe he had just reached the point of hanging on.

"I take it, then," he said, "that you were not in office?"

"I was not. I was appointed after our last municipal election. New mayor, new commissioners; practically a clean sweep of all departments."

"Is anyone left in your department who would be familiar with the Weller investigation firsthand?"

"I'm sure there isn't. There should, however, be a record on file—such as it is."

"Records, even the best of them, leave too much unsaid. I'd rather talk with someone who was involved. Who was the chief you succeeded?"

"His name is Schreiber. Albert Schreiber."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"He has a place out on Cobbler's Lane. That's a short side road off the main street, the highway, on the west side of town. The new administration has put up markers at all corners. You can't miss it."

Having thus been informed of

his debt to the new administration, Marcus stood up, said, "Thanks, I'll drive out that way."

"Suit yourself. I doubt if old Bert will be able to help you much, even if he wants to."

"Oh? Why shouldn't he want to?"

"He's got a sore head these days. Imagines he was given a raw deal or something. You know how these things go."

"Not empirically. I've never been swept out. Maybe someday."

"Incidentally, what's your interest in Thurston Weller?"

"His wife fell down the basement stairs. Accident. That was the verdict."

"You have another notion about it?"

"I'm always getting notions. Sometimes I'm wrong. That's why I want to keep this quiet. I don't want to be caught like an old coon hound baying up the wrong tree."

Marcus hadn't the faintest idea if old coon hounds ever bayed up wrong trees, or if they did, if they were ever caught at it. It merely gave him satisfaction, when confronted with new brooms, to act the old shoe. He put on his hat and went out, feeling satisfied and seedy.

He drove two blocks to the main street and turned west. Cadmus, as towns go, was not large. Population, he guessed, approximately ten thousand. Six blocks west from the street where he'd started, which had been in the central business district, the houses on both sides began to thin, acquiring elbow room in larger yards. He watched the new markers at the corners, all thanks to the new administration, and there on its new post, just as Marcus was about to run out of markers and town altogether, was the one that said Cobbler's Lane.

They had rural type mail delivery here, with metal boxes on posts beside the Lane. The last box before the last house before the Lane went dead bore the name of Albert Schreiber, the sorehead. Marcus pulled into a graveled drive before a separate garage and stopped. He went up one shallow step onto a narrow front porch running all the way across the front of the house. The house was old, from the last century or near it, but it was in good repair, bright with paint and patched where needed with new wood and new nails. Even the new broom at police headquarters could not have made it cleaner. Marcus knocked, and the door was opened promptly by a diminutive woman with white hair and rimless spectacles. Marcus, whose imagination was wayward, was reminded of an albino

wren. Maybe she could even sing.

"How do you do?" he said. "My name is Marcus. I'm looking for Mr. Albert Schreiber."

"Bert's around back," she said. "In the garden."

"Thanks. I'll find him."

"You can come through the house if you like."

"No use tracking through. I'll just go around."

He went off the end of the low porch and around the house along a bed of flowers bordered with bricks. Behind the garage, bending over a hoe among parallel rows of growing green, was a burly old man in a rough blue shirt and denim pants. Albert Schreiber, no doubt; like the Emperor Diocletian, he had retired from authority to raise cabbages, among other things. Marcus went down to the edge of the garden and called across the rows. Schreiber stopped hoeing and looked at Marcus. He removed a sweat-stained hat and fingered grizzled hair. He came across to Marcus, stepping high and carefully over the rows, and leaned on his hoe.

"I'm willing to talk," he said, "but I'm not buying."

Marcus laughed. "I'm not selling. The truth is, I'm begging."

"Chances are, I'm not donating, either."

"It won't cost you anything. Just some information. I'd even be receptive to opinion. My name is Marcus. Lieutenant Marcus."

"I've heard of you. You've got a reputation. What can I do for you?"

"As I said, I'm after information. Couple years ago, more or less, a man named Thurston Weller lived here in Cadmus. He was a salesman. Remember?"

Albert Schreiber bent over and laid his hoe on the ground at his feet. Straightening, he dug into a pocket and came out with a jackknife. He dug into another pocket and came out with a plug of tobacco.

"Chew?" he said.

"No, thanks. I don't indulge."

"Not many do these days. Just being polite." He opened the jackknife and pared a chew from the plug. He put the chew into his mouth, the knife and the plug into their separate pockets. "About Weller. I remember. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

"If you're curious, you're curious for a reason."

"His second wife had a fatal accident. She fell down the basement stairs in their home."

"That so? Seems to me Weller has bad luck with his wives. His first one ran away with another man."

"That's what makes me curious.

I'm always curious about men who have bad luck with their wives. I get to thinking that maybe it's really the other way around."

"Could be. In Weller's case, I doubt it. Take it from me, the first Mrs. Weller was bad luck for any man. She was younger than Weller, pretty and sexy. According to my information, she had round heels. I wouldn't know personally. As I said, she finally ran away with another man. If you want my opinion, Weller was lucky to get rid of her."

"What man?"

"Fellow by the name of Sloan, Clifford Sloan. Good-looking fellow, but otherwise worthless. Worked around town at various jobs. Tried to sell insurance for a while. Managed a bowling alley a year or so. After that, I'm not sure what he did. I suspect he was a petty gambler. Anyhow, he took off with Dottie Weller one day, and neither of them have been seen since."

"How do you know he took off with Dottie Weller? Did anyone see them go? Did they *tell* anyone they were going?"

Albert Schreiber removed his old hat and scratched in grizzled hair with thick fingers.

"Now that you ask, I don't know that anyone did. If they told anyone, I never heard of it. What of it? A man planning to run away with another man's wife doesn't go around announcing it publicly. Everyone knew they were together when Weller was on the road. When we checked, we found most of her personal things gone, as well as his. Everything of value. He had a room over a cigar store downtown. Closet and drawers were practically bare. He took off with her, all right. No doubt about it."

"How did you happen to check?"

"Well, Weller reported her missing. We had to make some kind of gesture, so we looked into it—not very hard. The way I see it, it's a woman's own business if she wants to run away from home."

"So it is. Did Weller report her missing immediately? After a day or so, that is?"

"How could he? He didn't know about it. He left on the road every Monday morning and didn't get back until Friday night or Saturday. This particular week, the week his wife took off, he just came home at the end of it and found her gone. He reported her absence on the following Monday morning. I guess he wanted to investigate a little on his own before calling in the cops."

"Natural enough. A man would be a little reluctant to admit that

his wife had run away, especially with another man. Do you happen to remember the date he came to the police?"

"It happens I do. It was Monday, 15 March, 1965. The only reason I remember exactly is because it was payday at Cutter's Foundry over on the other side of town. Old Cutter still pays his help in cash on the first and the fifteenth of every month. I always drove out there and picked up the paymaster in the morning and drove him to the bank to get the cash. Then I drove him back to the foundry. I wasn't required to do it, but I believed in rendering service, which is more than I can say for certain others. Anyway, it was Cutter's payday when Weller came in with the report on his wife."

"Then it would have been during the week of the eighth that Mrs. Weller disappeared."

"Right. My guess is the night of the eighth, reason being that she was seen by several folk during the day of the eighth, after Weller had left in the morning, but apparently by no one afterward."

"What action did you take after he reported her missing?"

"We looked around. Knowing his wife and what she was, I wasn't inclined to make too much of it. Oddly enough, Weller himself kept insisting that we do the job thoroughly. He even insisted that we check the basement and the back yard. I guess he was afraid we'd think he butchered his wife and her boyfriend and buried them somewhere. God knows he had cause, and he knew we knew it. That must have been why he wanted a thorough investigation, to protect himself. He'd been reading too many murder stories or something. The concrete floor of the basement hadn't been touched since it was laid down. No one had dug in that back yard in the past year. Of course, he could have hauled the bodies away, but I don't hold with that. You're a cop, you know how hard it would be to dispose of a couple of bodies so that no trace of them could be found. Hard, hell! It would be practically impossible."

"Right. There's a lot of nonsense written about such things." Marcus sighed and lit a cigarette that he didn't especially want. "How were Mrs. Weller and this fellow Sloan supposed to have left town?"

"I couldn't say."

"Did Mrs. Weller have a car of her own?"

"No. Weller never bought her one. I guess he figured she got around a little too much as it was."

"How about Sloan?"

"No car. Not much of anything. He must have been having a run of bad luck."

"Still, Mrs. Weller presumably ran away with him."

"That's right. Some fellows are like that. Not worth a damn or a dime, but the women go crazy for them."

"Well," said Marcus, "Maybe they'll show up again one of these days, together or apart. Then, again, maybe they won't. Anyhow, thanks for your help, Chief."

"Don't call me chief," Albert Schreiber said. "The chief's a juvenile brat."

Having committed a tactical error, Marcus retreated.

Down the street and across, half a block from headquarters, was a place called Fat Ferd's, a lunchroom, although Fat Ferd, who was a sensitive man, preferred to have it called a cafe. The menu was limited and repetitious, established and immutable for each day of each week of every year, but it compensated in economy for what it lacked in inspiration. Fat Ferd's was, if you weren't a full-time gourmet, a fair place to get a quick bite.

Marcus was there. So was Fuller. They had come in separately and sat at the counter on stools apart. Marcus was eating corned brisket on rye. Fuller was lapping up a bowl of beans and ham. Fuller, finished, rose to go. Passing out, he stopped by the door in front of a cigarette machine and dug into his pocket and came out with three coins. He stood looking at the coins, in obvious distress. Marcus, meanwhile, had also finished. He visited the cashier and paid his check and stopped afterward at Fuller's shoulder.

"Having trouble, Fuller?" he asked.

"I need cigarettes," said Fuller, "but I don't have enough change."

Marcus looked at the change in Fuller's big palm. Twenty-five, thirty-five, forty. A quarter, a dime, a nickel.

"Count again, Fuller," he said. "You've got it on the nose."

"I can't spend the quarter," Fuller said.

"Can't spend it? Why not?"

"Because someone gave it to me, that's why. It's my lucky piece."

"Change a bill."

"It's three days till payday. Who's got a bill?"

Marcus dug into his own pocket and came out with a quarter that was not, so far as he knew, lucky. "Try one of mine," he said.

Outside on the sidewalk, he paused. Fuller came out, and they walked back to headquarters together.

"Fuller," said Marcus, "if that two-bit piece is so lucky, why don't you take better care of it?"

"What do you mean? I've had that quarter for years. I treat it like an only child."

"Carrying it around in your pocket with the rest of your change, aren't you afraid you'll accidentally spend it one of these days?"

"Not much. I've got it marked. I can see the difference and *feel* the difference."

"You might lose it."

"Fat chance. The safest place for that quarter is right in my pocket."

Fuller was bullheaded and Marcus was indifferent. Anyhow, they had reached headquarters. Fuller went his way, and Marcus his. It was more than an hour later when they bumped into each other again. Marcus, at the time, was on his way out with his hat on.

"Fuller," said Marcus, "you're right."

Fuller was plainly shaken by this rare high praise. "Am I?" He said. "About what?"

"That two-bit piece of yours is the luckiest coin that ever came out of a mint."

"Sure. I told you so."

"What's more, Fuller, you're an unconscious genius."

"Go to hell," said Fuller—but he said it under his breath after Marcus was gone from headquarters.

Having been prodded by Fuller's credulity into the hatching of a wild idea, Marcus, at the courthouse, consulted the register of deeds. His infant idea seeming somewhat less wild, even faintly plausible, he later called on a certain Mrs. Petrie, with whom he had a prolonged and amiable chat. Mrs. Petrie, of no great consequence in the scheme of things, had the temporary significance of being the nearest neighbor, next door west, to Mr. Thurston Weller. She was not a particularly lucrative source of information, limitations being imposed by her natural and commendable tendency to mind her own business, but Marcus, who needed nothing that could not have been acquired by casual observation, was able to learn what he needed to know without exciting, on Mrs. Petrie's part, either curiosity or resentment. Mrs. Petrie, indeed, good neighbor that she was, saw Mr. Weller as a sympathetic figure, whose lonely privacy should be respected by neighbors and police alike. Marcus, who had a different opinion, kept his opinion to himself. After a while, on good terms, he said good-bye and left.

Marcus drove back to headquarters, put his feet up on his desk, closed his eyes and considered

Thurston Weller. Summoned from obscurity by the intensity of Marcus' concentration, Weller materialized slowly in darkness behind the closed lids, like a vision fixed between life and death, with his dead-white face and his thin limp hair and his red wet lips. Marcus opened his eyes to dispel the vision, but when he closed them again it was still there, suspended in darkness behind his drawn lids. Marcus sighed and, eyes still closed, started to construct a brief chronology.

Well, then, on 2 March 1965, Thurston Weller had bought a house, a matter of record, as Marcus had this day learned from the register of deeds; the same house that Weller was now living in; the house in this city that he had chosen beforehand as one favorable to a modest private business.

The following Monday morning, 8 March, from his home in Cadmus, Thurston Weller left on his sales route as usual, leaving behind his young wife, who was seen later in the day, after Weller's departure, but not the next, at least not by anyone who could remember definitely. Five days later, on Friday evening, Weller returned to his home to find it empty, his wife gone and his bed cold. After making discreet inquiries, it was to be assumed, he came inevitably to a grim conclusion. His wife, wanton Dottie, had clearly flown the coop.

Well, it was hardly surprising. By all reports, Dottie had never been one to keep the faith, and Weller, to say the least, had been given repeated cause to anticipate her eventual desertion. So, on Monday morning next, 15 March, payday at Cutter's Foundry, the cuckold had gone to the police to report his loss. He did not do so, apparently, in the hope of finding the wayward Dottie and hauling her home, but for the practical purpose, quite obviously, of clearing away any sneaking suspicion that he, the cuckold, had done in fury and violence the definitive deed that Dottie had repeatedly invited.

The investigation, conducted under the supervision of Chief Albert Schreiber, later the victim of a new broom, was clearly somewhat less than inspired. Nevertheless, evidence was found to support the assumption, also supported by Dottie's reputation, that Thurston Weller's faithless spouse had, sometime between Monday and Friday of the week previous, probably on Monday, the very day of Weller's departure, indeed flown the coop, in the company of one Clifford Sloan. The evidence was inconclusive, assuredly, but the evidence to support any other conclusion was virtually nonexistent. Besides, it didn't make a lot of

difference. Good riddance, all in all, of bad rubbish.

After a lapse of some six months, during which time he filed for divorce on grounds of desertion and sold his house and finally quit his job, Thurston Weller moved; into the house, in this city, in which he now lived; into the house which, since 2 March, had stood empty but not neglected. No one but the admirable Mrs. Petrie had testified to that. Mr. Weller, said Mrs. Petrie, kept a neat place. From early March until September, the time the house stood empty, Weller had appeared every week or ten days to make repairs and cut the grass in season and, all in all, to keep the premises respectable in a respectable neighborhood.

Thurston Weller apparently did well in what might be called his new life. He established a business, a shoe store, and the business prospered reasonably. Before long, he was married again; to Ethel, as different from Dottie as day from night. Then, after a while, in June of 1967, Ethel died; about a year after the marriage, say fourteen months, accidentally, by pitching down the basement stairs. Poor Thurston Weller, two-time widower; once grass, once weeds. At least, in a way, he was improving.

When Dottie and Clifford flew the coop, thought Marcus, *I wonder what they used for wings?* For there was, after all, the simple matter of transportation. Thurston Weller had owned no second car for Dottie to use. Clifford Sloan, between jobs and apparently living from hand to mouth, had lost his car, if he had formerly owned one. So how had they got from Cadmus to wherever they were going? Had they walked, carrying luggage? Had they boarded a train or a bus? If so, in a small city like Cadmus, how had they escaped notice? Had there been a third party, a confederate in their affair, a friend or crony of one or the other or both, who had driven them out of town? If, leaving thus, they had left at night, it would explain, at least, why no one had seen them go. Marcus, skeptical, conceded the possibility—but he didn't believe it, not for a minute. What he believed was something else entirely.

Thanks to Fuller. Thanks to Fuller's lucky two bits. Now it was time, high time, to be doing instead of thinking. It was time, in brief, to bet the quarter against the pot.

Marcus got up, put on his hat and went. Going, he collected Fuller, who went along reluctantly. It was six o'clock, and Fuller had had a long, hard day.

Placing a thumb against the bell

button, Marcus pressed. He could hear the bell respond within, but no one answered the summons. He pressed again and looked at his watch. He and Fuller having stopped on their way for a quick bite, it was now after seven. Was Thurston Weller working late? Was he having his dinner downtown? Was he merely reluctant, bereaved as he was, to return to a haunted house?

Turning away, brushing past Fuller, Marcus descended the steps of the stoop and rounded the house. His way to the rear was impeded by a fence of redwood slabs six feet high, weathering to rusty gray. There was a gate, solid like the fence, set out a few feet from the side of the house. Marcus tried the latch and opened the gate. He passed through, Fuller at heel.

The entire back yard was enclosed by the fence. A concrete walk ran from the back door of the house straight down to another gate in the fence at the rear. For some fifteen feet of the way, between house and fence, the walk passed under a lattice-work arbor covered with a tangled vine that Marcus, correctly, took to be grape. Beyond and to the left of the arbor, straight ahead of Marcus in a corner formed by the fence, there was a green-painted wrought iron bench and two matching chairs. On the bench, his head turned toward Marcus, was Thurston Weller. Marcus, followed by Fuller, cut straight across the grass toward the bench. Thurston Weller did not move. He seemed, in fact, to be caught and held in a kind of cataleptic trance, touched by the pathos of loneliness in the thin, fading light.

"Good evening, Mr. Weller," Marcus said.

The mind of Weller had been away. He looked at Marcus for a moment with a vacant expression while the mind came slowly back over the long way it had gone. Vacancy was filled with recognition. And something else?

"Lieutenant Marcus?" he said. "Is that you?"

"Yes. I rang the bell, but there was no answer. I took a chance and looked for you back here."

"I see. Since Ethel's death, I've acquired the habit of sitting out here in the evenings until it's dark enough for the lights to be put on inside. The house seems empty."

Marcus, uninvited, sat down in one of the chairs. Fuller, two paces apart, stood.

"I don't want to intrude," Marcus said, "but I felt that it was urgent to see you."

"Oh? I'm afraid I don't understand. I was under the impression that our business was finished."

"I know. This concerns something else."

"Something else? I still don't understand."

"Perhaps in a moment you will. I've been to Cadmus."

Thurston Weller was very quiet. His head was tilted back, his face a

stone, as if he sought warmth in the lingering light of a sun that had disappeared. His voice, the incongruous baritone, had acquired, when he spoke, a light and lilting kind of cadence.

"Cadmus? Why ever should you go to Cadmus?"

"Let's say I was curious. After my experience with the wife who fell downstairs, I had a curiosity about the wife who ran away."

"I trust, Lieutenant, that the curiosity was satisfied."

"Sorry. Not completely. Bluntly, I thought there were too many unexplained factors too many loose ends lying about. I don't like loose ends. They nag me. They disturb my sleep. I thought that you, perhaps, could tie up the ends and put me at rest."

"You already seem to suspect me of being guilty of something dreadful, Lieutenant. I shouldn't, in addition, want to be responsible for disturbing your sleep."

"Good. Very considerate of you. Let us, then, examine what we may call the official version of your first wife's defection. She was, to begin with, no better than she should have been. She was faithless. She had a record of extramarital hanky-panky. At the time of her defection, she was consorting with a local character by the name of Clifford Sloan. It was no secret. Everyone knew it, including, no doubt, you. This Sloan was no prize. He was clearly deficient in ambition, ability, and the world's goods. He had no car. He had no property of value of any kind. He lived in one room over a cigar store, and he seemed to have no money except what he picked up here and there in occasional enterprises, probably shady if not illegal. Chances are he was a petty gambler. He had, at best, no apparent prospects. Would you call this a fair summary?"

"He was a worthless scoundrel. I have no quarrel with that."

"All right. So far, so good. And yet your wife, who surely knew at least the side of her bread the butter was on, is supposed to have deliberately run away with this man. She left bed and board and a productive husband for a fellow who had nothing to offer but something she was already getting anyhow. This, I found, was accepted. It was, in fact, the official verdict of such investigation as was made. Well, maybe. Women who are emotionally involved cannot always be depended upon to behave rationally. Nevertheless, I'm inclined to be skeptical. Maybe I'm just mulish. Anyhow, I would like to know how your wife and her boyfriend, without a car, got out of a small city together without attracting any

attention. The question has nagged me. As I said, it has disturbed my sleep. I have an idea, of course. Would you like to hear what it is?"

"I see no point in all of this, but you will say, nevertheless, whatever you wish."

"Very well. *You* drove them out of town, Mr. Weller. You drove them out of town in your own car in the middle of the night after you killed them."

Thurston Weller was no longer looking up into the lingering light. His head was bowed, his face obscured by shadows. His lilting voice was hardly louder than a whisper.

"You're insane."

"Am I? I don't think so. On the Monday morning of 8 March 1965, you left home as usual on your sales route. But you did not, as usual, stay away the week. No. You came back that night. You found your wife and Clifford Sloan together in your house. Were they asleep by then? I suspect they were, but no matter. You killed your wife because you were sick to your soul of the humiliation and contempt and derision to which she had subjected you. You killed her lover because he was there. His presence must have been, in fact, a serious complication. Because he was there and you had to kill him, you were forced to a deadly risk. You were forced to take the key to his room and drive downtown and remove his personal effects in order to establish evidence that he had left town voluntarily. As I say, it was a deadly risk, but you were in luck. The hour was late, the streets were deserted, and you got away with it. Back at your own house, you loaded the bodies and your wife's effects into your car, which you had rolled into the attached garage, and then you backed out quietly and drove away. As it turned out, it was simple. Everything went just right. How did you kill them, Mr. Weller? With a gun? Doubtful. Too noisy. With a knife? Also doubtful. Too messy. With a bludgeon? Probably. Practically no noise. Practically no mess. And quite easy if they were asleep. Well, let it go for the moment. We'll know when we look at what's left of the bodies."

"Ah, yes. The bodies. Where are the bodies, Lieutenant?"

"I was hoping that you would tell me. It would save us a great deal of time and trouble if you would."

"There being none, I'm afraid that I can't."

"In that case, we'll have to dig for them."

"Dig? Dig where?"

"Why, here. Somewhere in this

yard we now occupy, Mr. Weller."

From the deepening shadows that surrounded Thurston Weller in the shade of the high fence came a thin, soft laugh of such a quality that Fuller, ordinarily a stolid soul with no discernible nervous system, felt his substantial flesh crawl coldly on his bones.

"That's preposterous. You have lost your senses completely."

Privately, apart, Fuller agreed. Marcus, at last, was surely coming a giant cropper. In a way, Fuller was sorry. Although he was not adverse to seeing Marcus bruised, he really had no wish to see him broken. Marcus, heedless, rushed on to ruin.

"It could be so," he said. "If it is, I'll pay for it. Meanwhile, let us get on. We are after hours, Fuller and I, and we want to get finished. You bought this house, Mr. Weller, on 2 March 1965, almost a week before your wife ostensibly ran away. I've checked the register of deeds. It's a matter of record. You bought it in this city because you had already decided to establish a private business here; to establish, in fact, a whole new life, a life your wife would never share. You hated her. You wanted her dead for what she was and what she had done to you. You planned her murder very carefully, long in advance, and after you had killed her, together with her lover, you brought their bodies here, to the house you had bought beforehand. From Cadmus to here is slightly more than one hundred miles. You had just about time to drive the distance before it began to get light. You drove into the garage and shut the door. You remained in this house with the bodies all that day. No one had seen you come. No one knew you were here. That night, under cover of darkness you dug a grave and buried the bodies together in the grave as you must have found them together in your bed when you slipped quietly home the night before. Long before it was light you were finished. You drove away and sold shoes; away clean. In the months that followed you returned openly now and then to keep the premises in order until you had settled your affairs and could return to live. Meanwhile, the scar of a new grave healed in this yard."

The air seemed suddenly hushed and still. Darkness gathered thickly in the shadow of the fence where a murderer sat silently on a wrought iron garden bench. A long sigh, coming from the bench, whispered in Fuller's ear.

"You are a clever man, Lieutenant," Thurston Weller said.

"Not I," said Marcus. "Credit Fuller."

This, to Fuller, was so unex-

pected and so shocking that he started violently, as if he had been suddenly stabbed in the stern with a pin, and turned his head to goggle at Marcus with his jaw hanging.

"Fuller," continued Marcus, "has a lucky coin. He cherishes it. He will not spend it, even if he is out of cigarettes and developing a nicotine fit. When I asked him why he carried it loose in his pocket, since he cherished it so much, he answered, with considerable sense, that his pocket was the safest place for it. I saw what he meant. He had it at hand. He could constantly, after a fashion, watch over it. Well, then, where would be the safest place for the body of a murdered person? If it were buried or hidden in some remote spot, there would be the lifelong, never-ending fear hanging over the murderer that it would eventually be found and identified. Much safer and much more comfortable to keep it with you. Bury it, that is, where you intend to be, where you can, by day and by night, keep watch. Keep it, so to speak, in your pocket."

Fuller felt as if he had been somehow exploited. Annoyed, he missed completely the next words of Thurston Weller. So almost did Marcus, so softly, with such damned despair, were they spoken.

"You are wrong about one thing, Lieutenant. They are not together as I found them. You will find them apart, one on each side of the walk, there behind you under the arbor."

It was the shag end of a sleepless night when the realization burst like a bomb in Fuller's brain that something was unresolved. He sat bolt upright with a jerk, the bedsprings groaning beneath his considerable weight. Swinging his legs out of bed, he groped with bare feet on the floor for his slippers. Shod, he shambled through the house to the kitchen. Sleep, heretofore elusive, was now shot. He put on a pot of coffee and headed for the bathroom and his razor.

Subsequently, having risen early, he was early to work. Early as he was, however, Marcus was before him. He went into Marcus' office, where Marcus was, and sat down with a vague air of belligerence.

"Damn it," he said, "you solved the wrong case."

"Well," said Marcus, "one case is as good as another if it comes to the same end."

"Just the same, it would be a satisfaction to know if Thurston Weller killed his second wife or if he didn't."

"As to that," said Marcus, "he

did. He whacked her on the noggin and pitched her down the basement stairs headlong."

"Why?"

"A good question, Fuller. As you may recall from our earlier conversation, he didn't seem to have any motive whatever."

"Are you suggesting that he had the bad habit of killing wives just for fun?"

"Not at all. As a matter of fact, Weller was fond of his second wife. He killed her with regret."

"Then why did he do it?"

"Because she talked too much."

"Oh, come off. What's happened to the factor of mass reasoning?"

"Nothing's happened to it. What I should say is, Thurston and Ethel *both* talked too much. Trouble was, *he* talked in his sleep. Unfortunately, guilty men sometimes have troubled dreams, and sometimes, when they have them, they talk aloud, and their wives are sometimes awake and listening. What Ethel heard was sufficient to make her suspect that something was planted in her back yard besides grape vines and hollyhocks. That was when *she* talked too much. She made the fearful mistake of asking Weller, awake, what he had been talking about asleep. Too bad for Ethel."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Fuller. "As simple as that."

"Sure. It was easy."

"Don't get me wrong. I'll have to admit you did some damn good work."

Marcus made a deprecating gesture. "Not much, Fuller. A nickel's worth of work and two bits' worth of luck."

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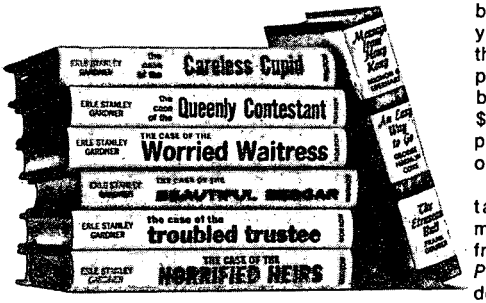

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