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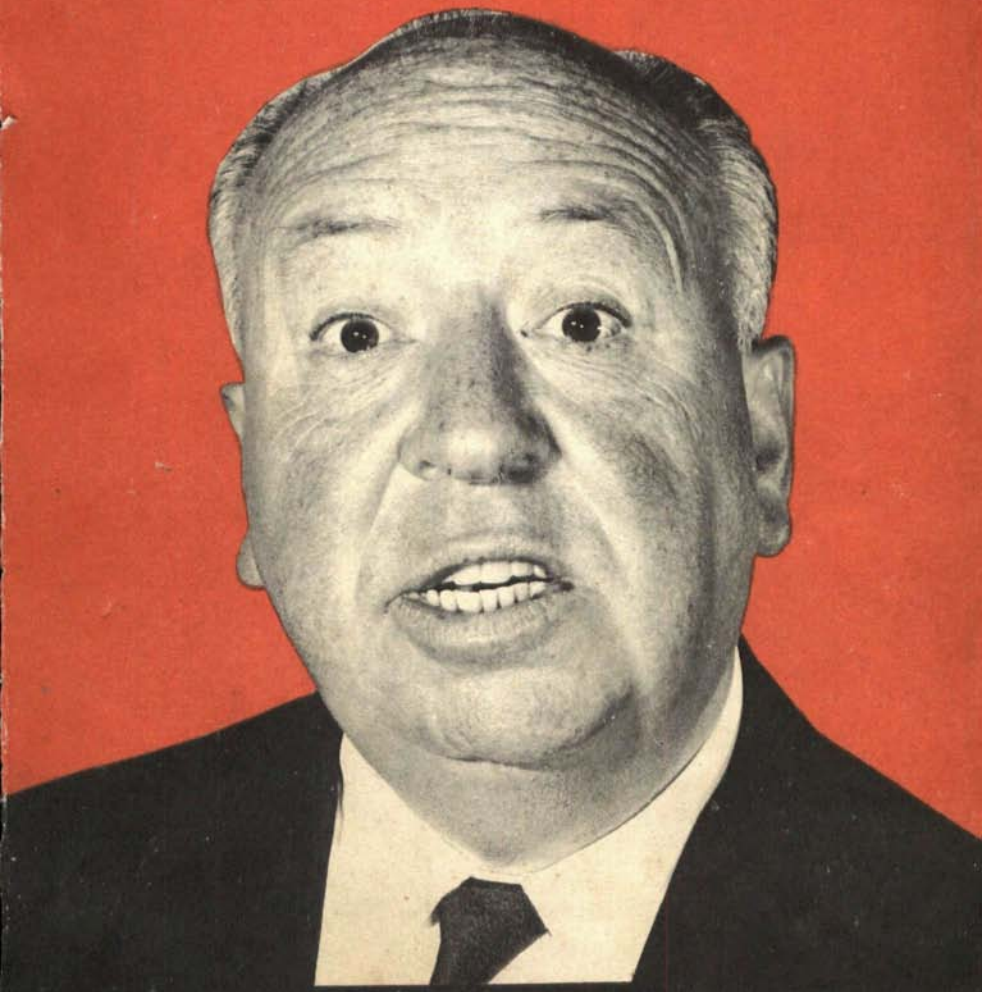
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

November 1970

Dear Reader:

Autumn chills blow your way again in a formidable list of all-new tales hinting of pigskin and pumpkin. For instance, *Season Tickets* by Earle N. Lord will get you into a crowd of "intrigue-ing" folks, and then *Into the Morgue* by Hal Ellson will get you—well, read that one for a sort of south-of-the-border twist to the Headless Horseman.

For more Halloween treats, dip into *Bag of Tricks* by Edward D. Hoch. Another trick is played by Pauline C. Smith in *The Game*, and still another by George C. Chesbro, who presents a firm argument for teacher pay raises in *Firefight of the Mind*. Subequently, R. J. Saliby explores the black depths of an old man's mind in *Bait*.

County Attorney Lon Gates and Sheriff Ed Carson carry the ball for Pokochobee County in the fine mystery novelette, *The Dark Well* by Richard M. Ellis.

These and many others make up a razzle-dazzle issue which, I trust, you will cheer lustily.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 15, NO. 11 NOVEMBER 1970

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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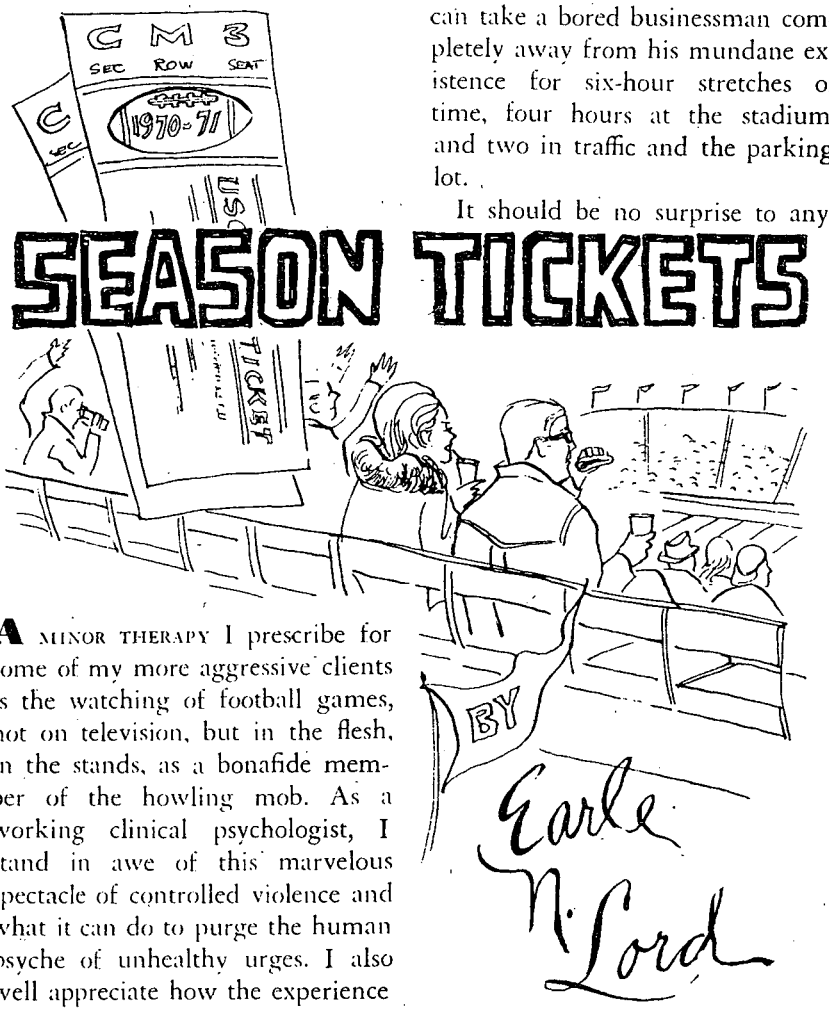
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 15, No. 11, Nov. 1970. Single copies 60 cents. Subscriptions $7.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $8.00 (In U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03301. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H.

The world is said to be a chessboard on which one's opponent never overlooks a mistake, or makes the smallest allowance for ignorance. On the other hand, no one is perfect.



SEASON TICKETS

BY Earle N. Lord

A MINOR THERAPY I prescribe for some of my more aggressive clients is the watching of football games, not on television, but in the flesh, in the stands, as a bonafide member of the howling mob. As a working clinical psychologist, I stand in awe of this marvelous spectacle of controlled violence and what it can do to purge the human psyche of unhealthy urges. I also well appreciate how the experience can take a bored businessman completely away from his mundane existence for six-hour stretches of time, four hours at the stadium, and two in traffic and the parking lot.

It should be no surprise to any-

one to discover that I happen to be a rabid football fan. Clinical psychologists, being human beings in spite of popular opinion to the contrary, tend to recommend to others what works best for themselves. I consider my U.S.C. season tickets to be a vital part of my personal means of remaining sane in a world which seems to be hurtling madly toward mass lunacy. I squire my receptionist-secretary, and near-fiancee, Beverly Wayne, to all the Trojan home games and my mental health benefits greatly therefrom.

I have a good deal on the tickets. Because I teach a weekly evening class in Abnormal Psychology, I have been placed on the faculty season ticket list along with my old buddy, Hank Edmonds, who also taught night school. He is now working out in the San Gabriel Valley on some kind of a hush-hush project. (When you ask him what he's doing, his eyes glaze over and he changes the subject.) Hank and I send in our applications together so we can sit together at the games, and this is the only time we ever see one another. He is almost as big a football nut as I am, and we sit side by side and root violently for the Trojans while his wife and my girlfriend sit together and talk girl talk. We usually follow up the games by going out to an enjoyable dinner afterward.

It was a good year for the Trojans. They had won eight in a row, were rated number one in the nation, and had already cinched the Rose Bowl. They had only two games left. One, unfortunately, was with a team called Notre Dame. I had once watched another Trojan Rose Bowl-bound team get annihilated by Notre Dame 51-0, and I was in a state of nervous shock by the time we climbed up to our seats. We were late because of the enormous traffic jam surrounding the Coliseum. I was then upset by the sight of two strangers sitting in Hank's seats, a man and a woman.

At first, I thought they were rooters who had drifted up into the faculty section, hoping the regular holders were not going to show up, but they seemed pretty old for students. When the game started and the Edmonds did not arrive, I began to simmer. This was the biggest game of the year!

In the middle of the second quarter when S.C. fell behind 14-7, I couldn't hold back any longer. I reached over and tapped the stranger in Hank's seat on the shoulder.

"Are you friends of Hank?" I asked with a winning smile.

The man, a clean-cut middle-aged type, lowered his binoculars and turned to face me. He had icy,

blue eyes and there was an expression in and around them that I had seen once before. At the L.A. Zoo, a black panther once glanced over my shoulder at a donkey pulling a cart. House cats look at fat little birds in a similar manner but with not quite the intensity.

"Hank?" the man said softly, laying the binoculars carefully down in his lap. He was studying me.

"Hank Edmonds," I said. "You are sitting in his seats. I thought he must be sick or something," I added, trailing off lamely.

"You are close friends of Hank Edmonds?" he asked, glancing sharply at Beverly. He seemed upset, at what I could not imagine.

"We are good friends of Hank's," I said firmly. "I've known him for years."

The man stared blankly at me for several long seconds. "What is your name?" he asked abruptly, smiling quickly as an afterthought. It was a nasty smile, and something about his speech bothered me. It wasn't an accent, but rather the complete lack of any trace of accent, a sort of super precision of speech that is not normal in our society.

"I'm Mike Karlins," I said, "and this is my friend, Beverly Wayne."

"I am honored to meet you," he said, "but I am sorry I do not know your friend, Edmonds: These tickets were given to me by my employer. Where do you live, Mr. Karlins?" he asked, making no effort to introduce the cool-looking blonde seated beside him.

"In West L.A. Do you know how your employer got Hank's tickets?"

The man still had that icy catlike depth to his eyes and he ignored my question. "Do you work with Hank?"

"No, I'm not an electronic wizard," I said. "I'm a psychologist. I knew Hank at S.C. before he went to Cal Tech and got brains."

Our conversation was interrupted at this point by events on the field below. Notre Dame exploded with their third touchdown, and the Irish went ahead 21-7. When I sadly turned toward the man in Hank's seats, he was gone, as was the girl who had been sitting with him. I guessed they had checked out early for refreshments. When the first half ended, I decided to get some too.

When I climbed back up to the sixtieth row with my cardboard box full of hot dogs, potato chips, and cold pop, Beverly was there, but the man and his companion were not. Nor did they return during the second half, when the Trojans came back to outplay those Irish monsters by 14 points. I wrote

the creep off mentally. Any man who could walk out of that particular game at half-time was no Trojan rooter. I erased him from my memory, although I still wondered about Hank.

The game finished in a tie, and after that first half, we Trojan rooters considered this to be a blessing. Beverly and I floated down to the escalator in a state of mild euphoria and made our way to the parking lot on the west side of the Coliseum. As we snaked our merry way through the long rows of cars, trying to spot my two-year old sports car, guess who we ran into, waiting for several hundred cars ahead of him to leave?

It was old evil-eye himself, the idiot who had tried to leave at half-time, with his car parked in that lot, where nobody moves until the man in front arrives. He must have sat out the second half in the car, but the girl, whom I dimly remembered as being a fashionable blonde in a pink miniskirt and sporting large round purple glasses, was gone. The man didn't see me as we walked by, so I reached in his window and tapped him on the shoulder.

I should not have done that. He almost jumped out of the seat! Reaching inside his jacket as he jumped, the man whipped out a vicious-looking weapon which had a big enough hole in its business end for at least a .45 caliber bullet, if not larger. He zeroed in those chilling eyes of his on me with venom dripping all around him, then his face fell into an expression of extreme dejection. He put the gun away with a sigh.

"It is you again, Dr. Karlins," he said gloomily. "I should have known you would be coming by."

"I never did catch your name," I said cheerfully, rather enjoying his discomfort.

He sent me one of his two-hundred-watt glares. "My name is Donald Brown," he said evenly. "Donald Brown."

"Is this your car, Mr. Brown?" I said, pegging the man as some kind of petty crook who had stolen Hank's tickets. We both looked at the registration slip on the steering column, which listed the legal and registered owner of the car to be one Peter Dubrovin.

He sighed again. "Mr. Dubrovin lent me his car, if it is any business of yours, Dr. Karlins."

"And your employer gave you Hank's tickets," I said cheerily. "Is his name Dubrovin? What business is he in?"

He looked up at me with that bleak, chilling expression on which he had a patent. "With logic and foresight we can usually protect ourselves from the very best of pro-

fessionals," he said, choosing his words carefully and looking at me directly. "But nothing can be done about bumbling idiots like you, Dr. Michael Karlins, nothing at all." He leaned forward and started his engine with a twist of his wrist. His lane was now clear ahead of him, so he gave me a little half salute and half a twisted smile and moved away.

"I wonder what that was all about," I said to Beverly. We walked another fifty feet to our car, waited a few minutes, then drove to dinner at a drive-in.

As soon as I dropped Beverly off at her apartment that evening, I drove to mine a few blocks away and called Hank, convinced that someone had stolen his tickets. There was no answer at first, but I called on the hour until eleven and finally got him.

"Hank," I said, "where were you today?"

"Asian flu," he said in a muffled voice. "Margie's got it, too."

"What did you do with your tickets?"

A four-second pause followed while some music in the background cut off. Then the music came back on again as Hank answered. "I gave the tickets to my boss and he gave them to a friend of his."

"Are you in any trouble, Hank?"

"No trouble, Michael," he said with a little quaver in his voice. "I'm just weak from the flu."

He did not sound right to me. "How did you like the game, Hank?" I asked, trying to keep the conversation alive. "How did you like that second half?"

"I didn't listen to the game, Michael. I was sleeping. Did S.C. win?"

I reported the last-minute tie, while feeling convinced that Hank was in trouble of some kind. He may have been sick, but unless he were dead I knew he would at least have the radio on. The game was on local TV and he had not even mentioned that.

I told Hank I would be right over, and again the background radio noise cut off. Then he came back on the line.

"Don't do that, Michael!" he said, his voice rising in pitch sharply. "Margie and I are leaving for a friend's house in a few minutes. These people are going to put us up until we shake off the flu. I'll call you when we're better." He rung off before I could say anything more to him.

I sat down by the phone and thought about the matter for a while. Hank had called me Michael three times, which is three more times than he had ever done before, whatever that meant. He

had obviously been talking to another person in the background while he was speaking to me, covering his mouthpiece as he did so. He certainly was not as sick as he claimed to be or he would have been in bed, and he sounded like a terrified man.

I could not claim that anything was really wrong. The situation smelled, but life is full of odorous situations. I decided to let things slide for a while and tried to dismiss the matter from my mind.

I was able to do this for one evening, but on the following day I found I could no longer ignore Hank's odd behavior. I started calling his home, again. There was no answer. I phoned several friends who knew him, including a man who worked with him. Aside from the information that Hank had reported ill on Thursday, I gained nothing from the calls.

I was still stewing about my friend when I strolled into my office at 8:55 Monday morning. Beverly was sitting at her desk, her red hair back-lighted by the morning sun and her emerald eyes alight with curiosity.

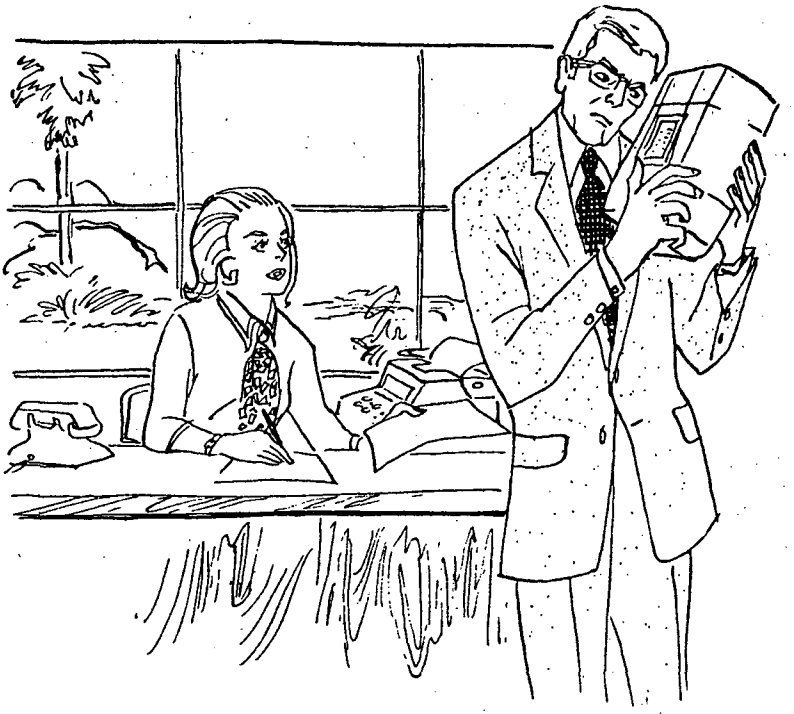
"You have a package, Mike. A messenger brought it in five minutes ago."

The thing was sitting on the corner of her desk. Call it ESP or telekinetics, if you like, but I had suspicions about it at first glance. Probably the idea of a delivery service operating before nine in the morning set them off. It was a sturdily wrapped package about six inches high and a foot square. I picked it up and it was heavy, at least five pounds. On a white label on the front of it was the inscription: "Dr. Michael Karlins. In grateful appreciation." That made me even more suspicious. My clients just don't feel that way about me when we part company. They have the same warm, affectionate feeling toward me that one has toward a crutch that has been used for a month of Sundays.

I have excellent hearing and I heard a faint something when I picked up the package. When I put my ear to it, I heard it loud and clear. The box was ticking!

"Call the police, Beverly, and tell them I think we have a bomb, a big one," I yelled, then ran out the back way. My office faces an inner courtyard away from a back alley which passes behind it. This alley services professional offices on one side and a large hardware store on the other. No one was in sight when I ran out into the alley and placed the package gently down on the asphalt, then galloped back into my office.

"Did you call the police?" I yelled at Beverly.



"They're coming. Get away from that door, Mike," she screamed back at me.

I could not leave the door. A large truck had just driven down the alley and parked right over the package. It was a delivery truck for a paint company and it had a huge slogan lettered on its side, stating that they covered the earth. I watched with silent horror as the driver jumped smartly out of his cab on my side of the alley and started to walk back to the side of the truck, whistling his last tune.

"Hey, mister," I called to him. "Come here for a minute."

He smiled a friendly smile at me and walked over to my door. I grabbed him by the collar and jerked him into my office. He fell on the floor with a crash and came up swinging and swearing at me. I tackled the poor guy, and while we were wrestling on the floor, the bomb went off with a dull *baruumph*. The window glass in my utility room sailed in with high

velocity, then the building rocked with the blast.

I was on top of the truck driver when the blast wave arrived so I got a few cuts from the flying glass. They stung a little but were not at all serious, so I was not prepared when Beverly began to scream about my back. I reached behind me and my hand came back gooey and red, which gave me a turn until I noticed that it was also polka-dotted with blue. This kind of blood I do not have, and when I sniffed it, it turned out to be paint.

This was nothing compared to the scene outside. The truck was loaded with several hundred gallons of canned paint, all hues and colors, and most of the cans had gone straight up. Some of them had burst and sprayed their contents forth in mid air. Other cans had remained intact as they mortared through space, landing with brilliant splashes of color as far as five hundred feet away. The business street on the other side of the hardware store was especially hard hit by these colorful projectiles. Fortunately, no living things were hit directly by the flying paint cans but a number of Angelenos went into a panic, thinking that the Russians were attacking us with some fiendish new kind of weapon. Traffic was tied up for blocks.

I called off my appointments for the morning and sat down and waited for Lieutenant William Steele to arrive. Steele is the divisional commander of the area of the city which houses my office. Because I once worked for the detective agency of my big brother Andy, and had later worked for the C.I.C. in the army, this police officer has the suspicion that I am running an undercover detective agency in the guise of a psychologist's office. At least once every month, he warns me to cease and desist from these illegal activities or he will complain to the State Board of Clinical Psychologists about me. His suspicions have very little basis in actual fact. I offer him free treatment for his paranoiac condition, but this just seems to make him angrier.

The lieutenant has some kind of arrangement that whenever anything peculiar happens around my office he is notified. I had a feeling that this paint explosion would qualify. It did. Steele arrived twenty-three minutes after the bombardment of paint cans commenced. He did not knock, just walked in, tall, cool, and gray. By gray, I mean gray hair, eyes, suit, and tie. The black shoes were a relief.

He threw me a wintry glance, then turned to face Beverly. "You

called the police bomb squad?"

I broke it. "I told her to call, Steele." I then described the events concerning the package to him.

"That was very enlightening, Doctor. Who sent you the bomb? Are you playing Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe again?"

"I am not playing detective, Lieutenant. I can't imagine who sent me the bomb."

That, of course, was a barefaced lie. I knew who had sent me the bomb. It was that cat-eyed character who sat in Hank's seats. I was sure he was the culprit, but I could not tell the good lieutenant this. Steele had me typed as an incurable romantic who dreamed of nothing more than becoming an active participant in some Raymond Chandler private-eye adventure. Until I could offer some logical reason for that man's wanting to kill me, I had to be quiet about him. Hunches meant nothing to William Steele.

The lieutenant told me to call my insurance company and to hire a good lawyer because several hundred people were planning to sue me, gave me his customary injunction to stay out of police business, then left. Beverly made a face at him as he did, then turned toward me.

"Shall I call Hank?"

"You bet," I said, commending her mentally for being one hell of a bright girl.

The call was interesting. The phone rang several times, then I heard a click, but no voice.

"Hank?" I said tentatively, after a few long seconds of silence.

"Who's this?" someone asked in a low, confidential voice.

"Donald Brown," I said brightly. "Put Hank on."

"Hank isn't here. Can I take a message?"

"How about Margie?"

"She isn't here, either. I'll be glad to take a message, Mr. Brown."

"O.K. Tell Margie that I'm always thinking of her," I said, and hung up. I called Hank's place of business. It was one of those space age think-tanks, but it seemed to have some old-fashioned communication problems.

First, I got a girl who had never heard of Hank Edmonds. Only when I assured her firmly that he had worked at the place for at least seven years did she grudgingly relent, and tried to find him. When she came back on, she was a different person. Bored before, she was interested now, and I was suspicious.

A muffled voice answered the phone at the extension she gave me.

"Hank?" I said guardedly.

"Who's this?" someone asked in

another low and confidential voice.

"It's still Donald Brown," I said cheerfully. "How about putting Hank on or telling me where he is. I don't have any messages for him. I just want to talk to him in person."

"Mr. Edmonds has reported ill, Mr. Brown. Where are you calling from?"

"I'm in a phone booth in the Coliseum," I said, smart aleck that I am. "Tell Hank I'll have to come see him myself." I hung up and turned to Beverly. "You want to come with me?"

"Indeed I do," she said.

"We've got to find out what's going on with Hank. I'm sure it's linked with this bomb business and that weirdo at the game."

After meeting my afternoon appointments, I drove to my apartment and put on some dark slacks and a black Windbreaker. Then I loaded my faithful mutt, a terrier named Fritzer, into the rear seat and drove over to Beverly's apartment. Minutes later we were headed east on the Santa Monica Freeway.

Hank lived in Arcadia, about a mile from the Santa Anita racetrack. I had never been to his house but I knew my way to the track, and we made excellent time once we got past the L.A. traffic. After stopping for dinner in a drive-in at the Arcadia turnoff, we arrived a block from the address I had for Hank at eight p.m. I asked Beverly to stay in the car while I took Fritzer for a stroll. I wanted to look at Hank's house and I knew, from working with my brother, that a man with a dog on a leash is not considered to be a suspicious character by anyone.

I walked the mutt by Hank's house, observed it to be dark and apparently unoccupied, and that four men were apparently watching it from cars parked on both sides of the street. I couldn't tell what they were, but they looked like pros to me. I was much impressed. Having worked as a private detective, I knew what a four-man operation would cost. I was even more impressed when I got a half block down the street and I was picked up by two other men. They were plainclothes and they weren't too careful about presenting their identification to me. I had no chance to study the cards they flashed at me, and in my role as an innocent member of the neighborhood, I could not appear to be too fussy. So I had to play them for possible phonies.

When they asked for my name, I gave it to them with a genial smile. When they asked me where I lived, I gave them the address of the house in front of which I'd

parked. When they requested identification, I became irritable.

"I normally don't carry identification, officer, when I walk my dog around the block. What's this all about?" I said, raising my voice a notch. "What's going on around here?" They shushed me and let me go, and the minute I turned the corner and got out of their sight, I began sprinting rapidly back to the car. I piled into it and lit out for dear old L.A., telling Beverly our prowling was over and done with for the evening.

"What's wrong, Mike?" Beverly asked as I whipped the car up on the freeway and revved it up to the legal limit.

"I can't be sure, but there were at least six men sitting on Hank's house. That has to be government, and it has to be big to lay on an operation like that. Whatever it is, I shouldn't be fooling around with it if I like working as a clinical psychologist in California. Hank may be in some big trouble with the government and I'd rather not help them bury him, at least until I know what he is supposed to have done."

We called it a night, and I went back to work the next day. I had a fairly light morning schedule on paper but a series of surprise drop-ins filled it up for me.

The first one was a former client whom I'd seen several times concerning a minor nervous condition. He was a well-to-do Beverly Hills wholesale jeweler who looked like Kriss Kringle, and he had an interesting proposition for me. He was going on a buying tour in the Orient, looking mostly for jade pieces, and he wanted me to accompany him on the trip as his own private clinical psychologist. Money, he said pointedly, was not an object. He would pay me double my monthly earnings. The last time I had seen him, he told me I charged too much for what I accomplished.

When I stated that I had a responsibility to my other clients, he asked a question.

"What would your clients do if you got sick for a month?"

"I'd ask another psychologist to take over my practice."

"So get sick for a month, Doctor. I will pay you twenty thousand plus all of your expenses if you come with me."

I began to have a funny feeling about this man. "Could we leave next week?" I said.

"Tomorrow morning at five a.m. it has to be," he said with a coy little smile. "I already have the tickets," he added, taking a folder from his coat pocket and tossing it on the desk before me.

I glanced inside the folder. There were three tickets.

"We would like your secretary to go with you," he said gently.

"Who is we?" I asked. "Does it include a man named Brown or Dubrovin?"

He kept the smile but it cost him some effort. "I made a little mistake. My 'we' was merely a figure of speech."

I told him I was sorry that I could not go, and he left me with another sweet little smile and a sad shake of his benevolent white-haired head. He seemed to be saying to himself that I was such a nice fellow and that it was too bad what was going to happen to me. I may have been imagining things.

The next drop-in was new to me. He was a tall, thin man in his late forties, who had a built-in expression of deep sorrow on his long face. He strolled in carrying a briefcase, placed it carefully alongside his chair, then plunged into a long rambling story about a friend of his who needed psychological help. He asked me pointed questions about my background and experience, then made an appointment for his friend the following week. I bet myself I'd never see him or his friend again.

Minutes after he left, Beverly came into the office, a troubled look playing on her normally sunny face.

"Mike," she said, "that last man you talked to, the sad-looking man with the briefcase, I think he took some things off my desk. When I came in to arrange his appointment with you, they vanished. He was the only person waiting."

"What were they?"

"It doesn't make sense, Mike. He took two sheets of paper out of the typewriter, that I'd just put in, and a personal letter I was writing to Midge Wilson. Is the man a kleptomaniac or something?"

"I don't know what he was. I think he was carrying a tape recorder in the briefcase. Did he ask you any questions?"

Beverly's pretty eyebrows went up. "He asked me how I liked Southern California, whether I went water-skiing, and whether I ever climbed any of the High Sierras. I was very happy when you came out of your office and took him away."

"He has samples of your handwriting, some of your typing paper, and probably took some spoiled sheets out of the wastebasket. And he may have recorded our voices. For what purpose, I don't know."

We were interrupted by our next surprise drop-in. This time it was a pair of surprises and it was not business, not my business, at least. The pair consisted of one highly irritated L.A. detective lieutenant named William Steele and a bland-

looking individual who identified himself as an F.B.I. agent. The agent got right to the point.

"Dr. Karlins, do you live at 3342 Val Verde Place in Arcadia?" he asked, referring to a small notebook.

I knew the address. It was the one I had given to the two men who had stopped me the night before. I wished I could talk to this man by himself. Steele was watching me grimly. I smiled bravely at him while I mentally reviewed his many warnings about my not playing private eye while working as a psychologist.

"I live in an apartment in Westchester, Mr. Robbins. I believe you know that."

"A man gave one of my men in Arcadia your name and this address last night. His description matches yours closely. He was observed walking a wirehaired terrier past the home of a man named Henry Edmonds. I believe you know him."

Steele's presence was like a gag in my mouth. "I've known Hank for years. I've been trying to get in touch with him. Is he in some kind of trouble?"

Robbins ignored me. "You also own a wirehaired terrier?"

This little habit that police officers have of ignoring questions is a pet peeve of mine, and it angered me a little. I decided to make it a lot.

"Yes," I replied hotly, hamming it up. "Would you like to question the mutt about his whereabouts last night?"

Mr. Robbins remained bland. "Dr. Karlins," he said evenly, "do you know where Henry Edmonds is?"

"No, I don't. Why are you looking for him?"

"He possesses valuable information, Dr. Karlins. If you hear from him, please call me at this number," he said as he handed me a card.

Steele never said a word. He just sat there and disapproved of me during the whole interview.

When they left, I sat in my chair and worried for several minutes. I worried about Hank and wondered whether or not I should have mentioned the man I had met at the football game. It was a tenuous, wispy link that I just could not bring out into the full glare of Lieutenant Steele's suspicious eyes. Now that the pair had gone, I did not feel like phoning the F.B.I. directly with it. No matter how I phrased the incident, it sounded insane. I let the matter slide and went to work with some people that had some solid problems.

Next morning, I had a substan-

tial problem of my own. When Beverly and I arrived to open the office, we found that the courtyard door had been forced open. I called the police and was distressed when Steele arrived in a squad car with two plainclothes detectives.

"You're handling minor break-ins?" I inquired.

"I'm working on anything that happens at this address, Dr. Karlins. I'm hoping to discover what is going on here."

He didn't find anything. No one did. Nothing was taken. No attempt was made to force open the safe in which I kept my interview tapes. The petty cash in Beverly's desk was intact.

Steele gave me one of his special looks. "Someone jimmied your door, walked in, looked the place over, then walked out, taking nothing?" he said.

"It doesn't make sense," I said, using a little non-directive technique on him.

"No, it does not make sense," he said, his voice rising in pitch and volume. "You are positive that there isn't something missing that you would rather not discuss with the police?"

"Aside from a ten-kilo tin of heroin and a sketch of our latest anti-ballistic missile, I can't think of a thing."

One of the detectives with Steele smiled broadly at this clever remark of mine, but the lieutenant did not. He didn't think I was funny.

"You stick to your business, Doctor. Don't start playing Philip Marlowe in my district without a state license or I'll have you moved out."

I bowed my head in abject submission and he went away. I tried hard to go back to work but found it hard to concentrate on other people's problems.

I found it especially difficult when my own began to pile up on me. That afternoon the Secret Service called on me to discuss my warning of a death threat to the President of the United States. They informed me that I had telephoned them that one of my clients was flying to Washington, D.C. with a bazooka capable of firing a rocket a half mile. I denied everything, and they left after warning me of the penalties for issuing false reports to the U.S. Secret Service.

The next morning, the C.I.A. came in the person of a pipe-smoking, folksy old gentleman who looked like my idea of a British diplomat. He wanted to know more about my report about an espionage apparatus centered in the local movie industry. I played tennis with a producer who frequently

went down to Mexico to make Westerns. I had apparently accused him of being the resident agent for a spy ring in both countries. He had been picked up and questioned but had admitted nothing. I denied everything again, but it did not seem to go over very well with the kindly looking C.I.A. agent.

"I talked to you myself, Dr. Karlins," he said. "You called the F.B.I. first, and they transferred your call to me."

"Next time that happens, you had better record it and run a voice print on it. You'll find someone is putting you on."

He wanted to know for what purpose. I couldn't tell him and he went away mad.

They let me have Thursday off, but on Friday, the Office of Naval Intelligence called concerning my letter reporting espionage in the Long Beach area. They brought in a letter typed on my office typewriter with Beverly's fingerprints on it. I reported the theft of the stationery and the break-in to my office to them but this did not seem to satisfy them. When they finally left, I looked over at Beverly and groaned.

"I wonder how many investigative agencies there are. I hate to confess being stupid, Beverly, but I think I know what this is all about. Can you imagine what the F.B.I. would do if I called them up now about that guy in Hank's seats?"

"They'd put it in their crackpot file, of which you must be a major member."

I brooded about what was happening to my general reputation for about an hour, then reluctantly phoned my big brother Danny. I could not see where I was in the possession of any vital information, but if strenuous efforts were being made to make me appear to be a blithering imbecile, I decided I had better swallow my pride and report what little I knew. Danny, an ex-L.A. cop who runs a big private detective agency in Beverly Hills, listened patiently to my story, then agreed to carry the ball for me. He knew the resident director of the F.B.I.'s L.A. office, and he carried a complete report on my activities down to him. He returned that evening to my apartment with a worried look on his big, homely face that spelled trouble.

"It's pretty big, Mike. Your old college chum may have defected to the Soviets and he evidently took some knowledge with him that can hurt us. He was seen having some chummy conversations with a man who matches the character you ran into at the Coliseum. Henry Edmonds reported sick on Thursday, then he and his wife packed up

and left town Saturday evening."

"Hank would never sell out his country," I said stoutly. "At least not until after the Notre Dame game."

"Mike," Danny said with a massive frown, "that warped sense of humor of yours is going to hurt you someday, hurt you bad. If it doesn't, I am going to."

I didn't tell my brother that I had not meant to be funny. That would have made him angrier. He went on to say that the only tangible thing I had given them was the involvement of my former patient, the jeweler, in the pressure play on me. That lead had gone nowhere. The man had used one of the tickets he had shown me and left the country the morning after he saw me. These people believed in covering their tracks.

On Saturday morning I had no surprises. Beverly and I went to the U.C.L.A. game that afternoon and tried very hard to enjoy it while being haunted by the empty seats to our right. I was hoping to talk to whoever occupied them, and I knew the F.B.I. was right with me here, but the seats remained unoccupied throughout the game.

We gloomily pushed our way through the happy mob which was celebrating a victory over the nefarious Bruins, and got into my car to wait for the line ahead to start moving. While we were waiting, a man with a newspaper stopped by the car and asked me for a light. He was a big, raw-boned man with a flat, hard face.

I pushed in the car lighter and when I turned back to him, his newspaper was resting lightly on the door ledge beside me.

He threw me a big, toothy smile. "There is a .45 under the paper, Buddy. Tell your girlfriend to move into the back seat and nobody gets hurt. Easy does it, Doctor."

I glanced at Beverly, who was staring at the gun under the newspaper with large, wide, green eyes. A second man was standing at her side of the car. He opened the door for her and escorted her into the back seat. He had a raincoat over one of his arms. Lifting it up to show me the gun he was carrying under it, he pointed it at Beverly while the man by me circled behind the car and got into the seat beside me.

"You know where Lake Arrowhead is, chum? Drive there."

I drove to Lake Arrowhead, a pleasure resort in the San Bernardino Mountains, about a hundred miles east of L.A. When we got close to the little lakeside community, we drove off onto an unpaved side road and stopped. I was shoved over and blindfolded, along

with Beverly, and told to lie down on the seat. After a few minutes of a jolting, twisting road, we stopped again. Someone pulled me upright and hauled me roughly out of the car. I was guided along a path, up some stairs, and into a room. It was cold and windy outside, and warm within. I could hear Beverly being brought into the room, and the sound of an open fire battling the winter temperatures outside.

I was seated by my guide, then the blindfold was removed. I found myself facing a small, neat man with intensely black eyes and an air of absolute authority. I looked around the large, plushly furnished room. The entire cast was there. The man who had sat in Hank's seats was standing alongside Beverly with one hand resting lightly on her arm. The man with the long, sad expression and the briefcase was seated by a door. The big guy was standing by a window, admiring a view of the lake below and flexing his muscles.

The small man spoke with a quiet, pleasant voice. "Steven, take Miss Wayne up to the north bedroom. I believe Mrs. Edmonds would appreciate some companionship."

I watched them move over to the side of the large room and climb a stairway leading to the second floor. When they were out of sight, the little man spoke up once again.

"My name is Endrin, Dr. Karlins, Marco Endrin. I'm sorry you became accidentally involved in this sad business, but it seems that I have a thoughtless employee who had never seen an American football match. When he picked up your friend, Edmonds, and found the tickets on him, he decided to use them. He did not realize that Edmonds had a friend who always sat alongside of him and who would be very curious about the absence. Steven did not consult me about his little whim. For that, he has been fined two months' wages and a reprimand has been placed in his file."

Mr. Endrin waited for me to say something, but I did not speak. It was his party. I figured that with my present batting average, the best thing I could do was nothing.

"You say nothing?" Endrin went on. "It is the wisest course. When you phoned Edmonds and let us know about Steven's blunder—he had neglected to mention it—we first tried to correct the matter simply by having you killed. When that didn't work, we decided to discredit you instead. We could never understand why you didn't tell the authorities about Steven right away."

"I goofed," I said. "I didn't see the importance of it."

"That was convenient for us. We suspected that you might be wanting to profit from your knowledge, but you did not take the offer we sent you. Then, we thought you might be waiting for a higher price. However, when we got Steven out of sight and caused you to be discredited, thoroughly, you were no longer any threat to our operation."

"So why am I here?"

"We need your services as a psychologist, Dr. Karlins. Your friend, Hank, is in possession of some information that we need. He knows the details of a clever device which receives radar impulses, analyzes them, then broadcasts a return wave which cancels them out. This gadget makes missiles and aircraft invisible electronically. He will not tell us anything about it, even when we torture him or threaten his wife. He tried to kill himself yesterday."

"And you want me to help you break him?"

"Yes, using hypnosis, drugs, anything you like."

"And how do you plan to make me do this for you? Surely you must have a plan for this?"

"If you don't cooperate, we have Mrs. Edmonds and your fiancee to experiment with, not to mention yourself. I have never had to try to force a psychologist to do something that he did not want to do. It's my hypothesis that they are made out of the same common clay as the rest of us."

"They probably are, Mr. Endrin. Let me talk to Hank and I'll see what I can do."

Endrin nodded, and I was led up the stairs to the second floor. Seconds later, I was with my friend. They were confident enough of themselves to let me visit him alone. For that, Steven was going to earn another reprimand.

Hank was a mess. He had lost at least ten pounds and had a haunted, ravaged air about him. They had been working on him hard. He was sitting in front of a TV set, watching a kiddie program. When they locked the door behind me, I walked up to the set and turned up the volume. Then I stepped over to him and spoke directly into one of his ears. "Hank, go along with me. Don't believe anything I say, but watch out for anything I write. *Comprende?*"

Hank woke up fast and nodded. When I made writing motions, he pointed to a desk on the far side of the room. There I found a notepad and pencil. I started talking and writing simultaneously.

Walking over to the TV, I switched it off. "Hank," I said, "you have four lives in your hands.

If you don't trust me implicitly, all four of us will probably die. The women will probably be tortured first. Will you let me help you?"

I wrote on the pad: "Pretend to cooperate. Pretend to be hypnotized when the time comes and make up phony details about your invention. Don't ask me what I am doing while we talk. This room is bugged."

I handed the pad to Hank. He read it, then spoke: "Mike, I can't consciously sell my country for any price."

I knew Hank had a high I.Q. You have to have one just to get into Cal Tech, let alone get a Ph.D. from them. But I did not realize it was that high. He wasn't just going along with me. He began to lead me.

I followed his lead. "Hank, what you do when you are hypnotized is not conscious. It will be my treason, not yours."

He groaned in reply, and I walked over to the door and knocked on it. When the door was opened cautiously by Steven, I sounded off. "I need a pitcher of water, an FM radio, a small flashlight, and a hand mirror. I'll try to hypnotize him, and then you can come in and talk to him. Until I get him under, I must have absolute privacy."

I knew this was corny, but I had one big, crashing advantage. Soviet psychology is in about the same state of advancement as European psychology was in the 1850s. The Russians don't believe in Freud, Jung, or Adler. They never heard of Carl Rogers. They don't believe in the subconscious or in personality testing. They don't even believe in intelligence testing, because they think the state can make anyone intelligent; so this meant I was working with children when we wandered into the psychological field. When they assumed that I could make a friend betray his country by hypnotizing him, they demonstrated their absolute ignorance.

A few minutes passed, then the paraphernalia I had requested was brought in. I turned the radio on to a classical music station, turned it up fairly high, then asked Hank to stare into the mirror while I waved the light around. I began giving out a mumbo-jumbo patter that I hoped sounded like a psychologist trying to hypnotize an extremely reluctant patient. While speaking these lines, I disconnected a cord leading to a lamp and cut it loose from the lamp and its plug with a small pocketknife I carry on my key ring. I began to separate the ends of the wire and fray them.

As I remarked before, Hank was not just with me; he stayed ahead

of me. All I had to do was point to the TV set, and he had the interlocking back off the thing in fifteen seconds with hardly a sound. I had a rough notion of where to attach the wires. He knew exactly, and soon had the lamp wires connected to the high voltage box in the set. I separated the wires on the other end, frayed them and ran them under the rug, just like Philip Marlowe did way back in the 'thirties, only we had 20,000 volts instead of his piddling 110. Times have progressed. I poured the water on the rug and then we went into our little act. I thought to myself, if only William Steele could see me now.

"Hank, you must cooperate more. You are resisting me," I said in my most soothing professional voice.

"I will not betray my country, you fool. You are much worse than they are. At least, they are not traitors."

"Get back, Hank. Put down that bookend. I'm trying to save your life. Get back, you idiot. Get back."

I groaned mournfully and fell to the floor with a crash, taking the lamp with me.

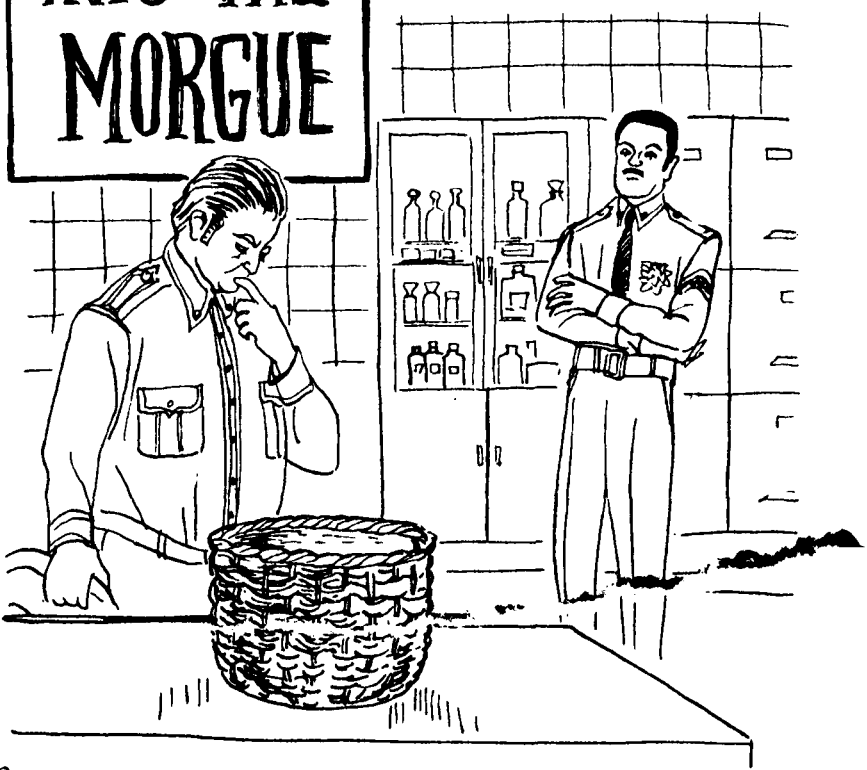
We heard a key turn in the lock and then the door flew open and Steven ran in, gun in hand, followed by the man with the doleful countenance. Hank turned on the juice and Steven froze in his tracks, fired four rounds into the wall in front of him, then fell stiffly to the floor. The other man just stiffened in the center of the electrified puddle until Hank switched off the set, then collapsed into a crumpled little heap.

Seconds later, Hank and I had two weapons and complete control of the second floor, including both girls. I would like to say we charged downstairs and rounded up the entire spy apparatus, but we did not. We waited cautiously up on the second floor until the local sheriff arrived to investigate what all the shooting was about. By the time he arrived, the first floor was unoccupied. Our hosts were gone.

I let Hank make the report to the F.B.I., C.I.A., and especially to the L.A.P.D. A month later, Hank and the girls and I went to the Rose Bowl with our tickets. I would like to report that our beloved Trojans won, but the Buckeyes did not cooperate. However, all in all, I was satisfied with what I got that year with my tickets. I can hardly wait for next year's program.

It is alleged that woman has a thousand tongues to lure a man, and but one to bid him go.

INTO THE MORGUE



THE YOUNG WOMAN surely had been pretty, but . . .

Detective Fiala turned to Captain Meza. "A nasty job," he said. "Who is she?"

The captain didn't know. An old man had made the discovery in

Garza Canyon that morning. He'd brought the head in a basket. A half dozen men had gone back to the canyon and found nothing else. "The canyon's big." The captain shrugged. "With all those caves, you could search it for a year and not find the body."

"I doubt if it's there," Fiala said, studying the head again. "Very strange that the tongue is missing."

"That seems to bother you, Victor."

"No." Fiala rubbed his nose,

asked if any girl had been reported missing.

"Our daughters and wives don't stray from home," Meza answered. "I'm sure the girl isn't from Montes."

"And what other conclusion have you arrived at?"

"I'd say she was married, and her husband caught her with another man."

Fiala shook his head. "A husband so frenzied by jealousy—"

Meza interrupted him, second-guessing now: "A sex maniac might have committed the crime."

"Or perhaps just a collector," Fiala said dryly.

"A what?"

"Someone who likes tongues."

"Very amusing, Victor."

"And as good a guess as yours, Captain."

Meza flushed at his rival's remark. "Murder isn't exactly a guessing game," he answered. "But allow me to remind you, the chief agrees with me."

"As usual. And, as usual, he's wrong."

"Better tell him that," Meza flung back, grinning and showing his teeth. "He's been asking for you."

"I'm sure of that. After all, he always expects me to come up with the answers."

"Please don't disappoint him, Victor."

Fiala let the sarcasm pass, left the morgue and went to Chief Lopez' office.

"So you finally arrived," Lopez greeted him. "I hope you didn't strain yourself."

"It's too hot for that, senor."

"Damn the heat. Do you know what happened? Did you see Meza?"

"I heard his story. Don Quickshot has already ironed out his theories."

"And you don't agree with them?"

"When do I ever?"

"You must have reason for doubting him."

"No reason, just a feeling," Fiala lied, preferring to keep what he thought to himself.

"And this feeling?" Lopez said. "What do you base it on?"

"The murdered girl's missing tongue."

"If you're going to make something of that, then what about her body?"

Fiala was about to reply when the phone rang. Lopez answered it, hung up and said, "The body's been found, Victor."

"Good." Fiala left and went below, where Meza awaited him.

"The body was discovered in a well behind an abandoned house in San Rafael," the captain said. "Coming along?"

Fiala shrugged and followed him through the door. The plaza outside headquarters dozed in the heat, empty jeeps and several motorcycles lined the curb, a peaceful scene which was suddenly transformed as policemen rushed from the cool depths of headquarters. Four jeeps loaded up, motorcycles were straddled and started; the plaza trembled. With Meza and Fiala in the lead, jeeps and motorcycles roared out of the plaza, through the city and into the desert.

A wild, rough ride brought them to San Rafael. The village dozed in the heat. Flowers were blooming there, roses in profusion—the red roses of San Rafael—and a woman's body in a well. *Does she belong to the village?* Fiala wondered as the cavalcade halted in a tiny plaza, a forlorn square with only a few old benches and dying orange trees. The sheriff stepped from a cantina, greeted Fiala and Meza, directed them to the abandoned house and climbed into the jeep.

The cavalcade moved on again and stopped at the house, a crumbling ruin, doorless and roofless. The sheriff led the way to the back and the well which had gone dry. Two boys had discovered the body, he explained, lifting the blanket which covered it. The torso was that of a young woman, the skin very white; the sun had never touched it.

"Whoever she is, she's not from the village," the sheriff remarked.

Fiala nodded and signaled to two of the policemen. They wrapped the body, placed it in one of the jeeps and waited while Fiala questioned the sheriff. Finally he

climbed into the lead jeep and the cavalcade started back to Montes.

This much was known now: the murdered girl wasn't from San Rafael, wasn't an Indian and the head and body hadn't been touched by the sun. But what of the legs and arms?

Returning to headquarters, Fiala was informed that an important call had come through from the sheriff of Minas, a village forty miles to the south. "The missing arms and legs," he remarked, picking up the phone on Meza's desk.

The connection was bad, but he finally got through. A brief conversation ensued and he put down the phone. "That's it. The missing limbs," he said to Meza. "Ready for another jaunt?"

Again the cavalcade moved out of the city, this time southward through wilder country on a road that sometimes denied the name. Minas was larger than San Rafael, but just as lifeless, the plaza deserted, no one about. The sheriff stepped from a cantina, a tall gaunt man bronzed by the sun. A smaller man followed him, the mayor of Minas. Greetings were exchanged and they crossed the plaza to the jail. Wrapped in newspaper, the sheriff's gruesome find lay on a table, two legs, and two arms minus the hands. The sheriff had searched for the latter, but . . .

"No girl's missing from the village?" Fiala asked.

"No, senor."

"As I thought." Fiala turned to Meza. "Shall we go?"

Shrugging, the captain returned to the jeep and was forced to wait while Fiala went into the cantina with the sheriff. Five minutes passed and Fiala came out. "You took your time," said Meza.

"It doesn't pay to miss anything."

"Such as a little drink in the cantina?"

"A necessary gesture."

"You know the regulations?"

"I entered the cantina in the line of duty."

"But you smell of—"

"Tequila?" Fiala laughed. "It's in the air here. You should try it sometime. But enough on that. The sheriff gave me something which should help establish the identity of the murdered girl. What did he give me? Patience, Captain. You'll have to wait."

Angered, Meza locked his jaws and remained silent the rest of the way to headquarters. Reporters were waiting there; he ignored them. As they trailed him, clamoring for news, Fiala slipped off across the plaza for a cup of coffee. When he returned, Meza met him with a grin and gave him the message: the chief wished to see him.

Up he went to see Lopez in his office. Meza obviously had set him off. "So you had enough coffee?" Lopez snapped as a starter.

"Only one cup, senor."

"And how many tequilas did you have at San Rafael?"

"Ah, Meza said his piece."

"You deny drinking with the sheriff at San Rafael?"

"It was in the line of duty."

"In the line of duty?" Lopez shouted. "Since when . . ." The anger, invective and reprimand readying to explode never came. Lopez' jaw dropped as Fiala unwrapped the newspaper he'd taken from under his jacket.

"The hands of the girl in the morgue," the detective explained.

"Where did you find them?" Lopez asked, keeping his distance.

"At San Rafael. The sheriff gave them to me in the cantina."

"But Meza didn't know."

"The sheriff isn't very fond of him. But look, senor, we're in luck. Those initials on the right thumb—they should help identify the girl."

Lopez nodded and lit a cigarette. "My apologies for jumping the gun, Victor. Meza charged you, and I had no choice . . ."

"Forget it. Meza's too young and too quick. He has a lot to learn. Now if you'll excuse me."

The door closed behind Fiala. Down from the balcony he went, through the patio, toward the morgue to deliver his gruesome package. Captain Meza looked up from his desk when the older man entered his office. "You saw Lopez?" he asked.

"I enlightened him."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I told him what really happened in the cantina at San Rafael. You see, you jumped to the wrong conclusion and accused me, but your error . . . Perhaps if you were older, you wouldn't have made it."

"My error? What are you talking about?"

"Put it in your report. The hands of the murdered girl were found in the village of San Rafael. The sheriff—"

"Gave them to you in the cantina," Meza said.

Fiala nodded. "As a favor to me. Why? We won't go into that now. Do you want to look at them?"

"With your permission?"

Fiala laughed and they went off to the morgue. "C. R.," Meza said, frowning at the pair of hands. "The girl's initials. Now we have something to bite on."

"If those are her initials."

"But whose else could they be?"

"Her boyfriend's."

"I doubt it."

"That's your prerogative. Meantime, what's the next step?"

"It's already been taken. The photographers were here. The girl's picture will be in the paper. Someone will recognize her."

"I hope so," Fiala said, and glanced at his watch. In two hours he'd be off duty; two hours to kill. "I'm going for coffee," he said. "If anything comes up, let me know."

Meza nodded and they left the morgue. Crossing the plaza, a newsboy waved a paper in Fiala's face and there was the photo of the murdered girl. He bought the paper, went on to the restaurant, ordered black coffee and opened the paper to the sports section.

At six he dined at home; at eight he left to return to headquarters. As expected, the newspaper story and photograph of the murdered girl spread word of the crime. Crowds came to view the body in the morgue, but no one identified it.

"That's it," Captain Meza finally said. "The girl isn't from this area, or someone would have claimed her."

"Under ordinary circumstances," Fiala replied. "But there's nothing ordinary about this case."

Meza conceded the point and said, "There's a chance she was a tourist traveling alone."

"If she was, then the odds would be that she was murdered for her money. In that case, the robber wouldn't stop to dismember her."

Meza shrugged and returned to his original stand, that the girl wasn't from Montes or someone would have claimed her.

"Perhaps no one wants to," Fiala pointed out. "If she went bad, if she lived off men . . ."

"We're going in circles." Meza yawned.

They were, and Fiala got up. "Home and to bed. I'll see you in the morning, Captain."

At midnight the captain called it quits and left, but didn't go home. He went to the Blue Moon restaurant and found Fiala there. "I thought you were in bed," he said.

"I'm too tired to sleep."

"Lopez will expect some answers tomorrow. Doesn't that bother you?"

"His demands are always exorbitant, but that's the nature of the man."

"I don't want him on my back."

"He'll always be there, so don't let it get you down."

"That's easy to say, but if we don't come up with something soon . . ."

"We've done well enough, I think."

"But *does* he?" Meza said. His coffee came, disrupting the conversation. When his cup was empty, he stood up and said, "I'll leave you to your thoughts, Victor," and

he started for the door of the cafe.

As he reached it, it opened before him and in stepped a thin pock-faced man named Vasquez. Their eyes met; each regarded the other with a look of contempt and went his way.

"You were looking for me?" Vasquez stood over Fiala.

"You took your time."

"It couldn't be helped. I was with a young lady."

"I assumed that. Sit down."

"I hope this won't be too long. The young lady's waiting."

"If she likes you, she'll wait all night. If she doesn't . . ." Fiala shrugged, and Vasquez sat down. He had no choice.

"You know why I'm here, of course," Fiala went on. "The girl in the morgue. Did you go see her?"

"Why should I? I had nothing to do with her."

"You saw her picture in the paper?"

"I happened to."

"Know her?"

Vasquez' uneasiness was apparent from the moment he stepped into the restaurant, but now he was beginning to sweat. "I don't know the girl," he finally said.

"And you've heard nothing."

"Nothing."

"But you're frightened and very pale."

"Are you accusing me, senor?"

"You appear to be accusing yourself. The sweat of guilt is running off you."

"I had nothing to do with the murder. That's not my thing."

"Not until it happens. Not until you lose your head because one of your girls cheated on you."

"I'm not a fool. I wouldn't hang myself for a—"

"Perhaps you were drunk."

"You can't put it on me," Vasquez said. "Ei! Every time something happens you send for me."

"I shouldn't have to send for you. You're supposed to come to me."

"When I know nothing?"

"Who said you know nothing? It's on your face."

Vasquez bit his lip and finally shrugged. "She got what she deserved," he muttered.

"So you do know her."

"Many men did."

"Was she one of your girls?"

"No, and I'm glad of that. She worked in The Ranch."

Fiala knew The Ranch was the fanciest place in the city, with the fanciest girls and fanciest clients. With her looks, the girl must have been in constant demand, but no one had come forward to identify her and none of the fancy clients would. Had one of them murdered her? It didn't seem likely, but . . .

"You know the girl's name, of course," Fiala said.

"Carmen Rios."

"Many thanks. A cup of coffee?"

"No, I'm in a hurry. The young lady—"

"Is getting anxious. Go," Fiala chuckled, and as Vasquez went out the door, he glanced at his watch. It was late, but he couldn't go home. His presence was demanded at The Ranch.

Ten minutes later he drove up to the "house" where Carmen Rios had worked. The doorman let him in. A long dark passage led to a bar and reception room in back of the house. The girls sat there, awaiting their clients who crowded the bar.

"Carmen Rios," Fiala said to the barman. "She worked here?"

"Not that I know of, senor."

"I've reason to believe she did."

The barman shrugged, but he wasn't as calm as he appeared. If he talked, he might cause trouble for himself and the house.

"Where's the boss?" Fiala asked.

At that moment Francisco Otero entered the bar. He was smiling, but he stopped when he saw Fiala and his face became a mask. "What brings you here?" he asked.

"Carmen Rios." Fiala threw the name at him, but to no effect. Otero offered his cigarettes and asked, "Who is Carmen Rios?"

"She *was* one of your girls."

"I don't recall the name. How long ago?"

"Within the past week."

"No." Otero shook his head.

"I have good word she was."

"Your informer lied."

"She was murdered, Otero. The girl who was chopped up. You know about that."

"Who doesn't?"

"And you didn't recognize her?"

"I didn't go to the morgue."

"Her picture was in the papers."

"I haven't looked at a paper in a week."

"Then look at this," Fiala said, taking a newspaper from his back pocket. "Now do you recognize her?"

"She worked here," Otero admitted, "but not under the name Rios."

"What name did she use?"

"Maria Villa."

"An assumed name. She was very pretty, Otero."

"My clients demand the best."

"She must have been very popular."

"She earned her money."

"Did she have any difficulty with one of your clients?"

Otero knew the question was coming and shook his head in denial. He had to, considering the men who patronized his place.

"You're not playing ball," Fiala

said. "You're just stalling now."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't give me that, and don't forget your little debt."

"Ah, my eternal debt," Otero sighed, "for something I did ten years ago. I thought I repaid you."

"Not quite."

Otero sighed again. He did not want to name the man who'd murdered Carmen Rios, but there was no way out. "The girl was no good," he said. "She deserved what she got."

"Perhaps, but that's beside the point. The name of the man?"

"He deserves to go free."

"The name, Otero."

With a shrug, Otero gave up and named the murderer. "Now do you understand?" he said.

Fiala said nothing, and turned away.

Otero followed him through the dark passage to the door. "Are you going to let him go?" he asked. "After what she did to him, what would you expect?"

Expect? Fiala shrugged and opened the door. The street outside was dark, the sky black and ominous. He glanced up at it, and the doorman bade him good night. Fiala didn't reply, but climbed into his car. Let the killer go? Again he heard Otero's plea. Mercy for the killer? He wondered as he drove off.

Five minutes later, stepping from his car into the dark street, his brow furrowed. Twenty years he'd lived here and now neither house nor street looked familiar. I'm tired, he thought, and he was. His body ached and his feet dragged as he went to the door.

Lest he wake his daughter and grandchildren, he went to the patio where his special chair awaited him under the avocado tree. Easing into it, he lit a cigarette and Otero's words came back: "He deserves to go free." Let him go?

"Papi?" The voice came from the kitchen doorway beyond the screen.

"I'm home, Aurora," he said to his daughter. "Go back to bed."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"It's always nothing with you."

"And with you it's always calamity. Go to bed and wake me early. I've important work to do tomorrow."

Argue with him? The older he got, the more stubborn he became. "I'll wake you early," Aurora snapped, and went back to bed.

Silence now, the whole city was sleeping. But Fiala? There was too much on his mind, and tomorrow was rushing at him. What should he do? Behind him the fronds of the banana palm stirred to a vagrant breath of wind, then stood

still again. The night was deepening, sky blackening, white and distant, the stars blazed and told him nothing. What should he do?

He could not answer himself, could not sleep unless . . . Rising, he went into the house and came out with three bottles of beer. He opened and emptied them quickly, lit a cigarette and allowed the sedative hops to do its work. In the morning all things would be righted, all questions answered.

It was dawn when he opened his eyes, much too early to rise and go forth. He grumbled in protest, but a persistent hand and voice prodded him. Laura, his youngest granddaughter, who regularly rose with the coming light of day, was up and at him and there was no denying her. Informed that it was time to go to work, he conceded and the child relented only to tell him that coffee awaited him in the kitchen.

"I'll drink it here, if you don't mind," he said, and Laura toddled off and returned, carefully balancing a cup of black coffee. He drank it and the child watched, then examined the cup to make sure he'd emptied it. Satisfied, back she went to the kitchen and let him be.

Thankful, he smiled and closed his eyes. An hour later, with the sun well up, his reprieve was ended. This time Aurora shook him awake. Breakfast was ready, the day awaited him, but he begged off breakfast and informed his daughter that he'd go to work when it suited him.

It was enough for Aurora. With her own temper, she answered him in kind and let him be.

It was his own fault; the morning slipped away and he slept on. Finally, the heat of the day brought him awake. Even in the patio it was hot, and the house silent, for Aurora had taken herself and her children off somewhere.

Slapping cold water on his face, Fiala changed his shirt and left the house, a house so hollow and silent. The world outside was the same, made desolate by the fierce white light of the sun. He started the car and drove off. Headquarters lay five minutes away, but there was no point in going there with the question still unanswered in his mind—what to do about the one who'd killed Carmen Rios.

But for an old man sleeping on a bench, the big plaza in front of headquarters was deserted. Fiala stopped his car, stepped out and light flashed as the door of the Blue Moon swung open and caught the sun. Senor Otero, owner of The Ranch, stepped to the walk, greeted Fiala and said, "I've been waiting for hours. When do you start work?"

"When it pleases me. What's on your mind?"

Otero let out his breath. "More trouble."

"You gave me the wrong information and decided to retract?"

"No. The man you want is going to hit the bank."

"Again? And at this hour? He wouldn't get a peso."

"He's not after money. This time it's blood he wants."

"Whose blood?"

Otero explained, and Fiala frowned. "It's possible," he said, "but how did you find out?"

"He was with one of my girls last night, raving drunk and talking about killing someone. She finally got the story out of him and came to me."

"And here you are."

"You sound as if you don't believe me."

"It's the girl's story, not yours. But many thanks."

"Senor, I think you'd better hurry."

In this heat and at his age? Fiala nodded and walked off. Halfway through the narrow street siding headquarters he caught himself, broke into a jog, then began to run as he hadn't run in years, thinking himself a fool and half-expecting to collapse from a heart attack. Gasping, he turned the corner. There was no traffic, not a person in sight. The whole city seemed to be sleeping, but the illusion, like a struck mirror, suddenly shattered when a man burst from the door of the bank on the corner. Gun in hand, he jumped into a car at the curb and it moved off.

Fiala stepped into the gutter. Roaring of death, the car hurtled toward him. Stop it? Never. He jumped back, his heels struck the curbstone, down he went and his gun went off. The car roared past, swerved sharply, leaped the curb and catapulted through a shop window. Glass shattered, wood splintered, metal twisted; then sudden silence, and the car half-buried in debris.

Fiala picked himself up. Splintered glass mirrored the white light of the sun. The gunman sat unmoving behind the wheel of the car; the street was still silent, the city deep in its siesta, but the spell soon broke. Running steps echoed from headquarters.

In less than a minute, a dozen policemen and Captain Meza were at the scene. A wild-eyed teller from the bank appeared and pointed at the car. The one behind the wheel had gunned down the president of the bank.

Meza nodded and approached the car, looked inside. The gunman's head was thrown back, his mouth agape; a .38 slug had

pierced his temple. Confused again, Meza frowned.

Let him wonder about that, Fiala thought, and walked away. In spite of the heat, it was cool under the arches of the Municipal Building. Leisurely, he made his way to headquarters and up the iron stairs to the balcony and Lopez' office. A knock on the door and he stepped inside.

The chief looked up, ready to roar, but Fiala's grin stopped him. "Ah, you've swallowed the canary?"

"If you wish to put it that way," Fiala said, and he explained: the girl in the morgue had been identified; her name, Carmen Rios. She'd 'worked' in The Ranch and had lived with Juan Rivera, the bank robber.

"So she lived with him. What does that establish, if anything?"

"Rivera murdered her."

"Impossible. He's in prison."

"He was. Early this week he went over the wall."

"Escaped?"

"Yes, senor."

"And why did he kill the girl?"

"Why? Because she spent all the money he got from the bank holdup, but that was the least of it. When the last peso was gone, she turned him in and claimed the reward, so . . ."

"So she got what she deserved, but that doesn't let Rivera off the hook."

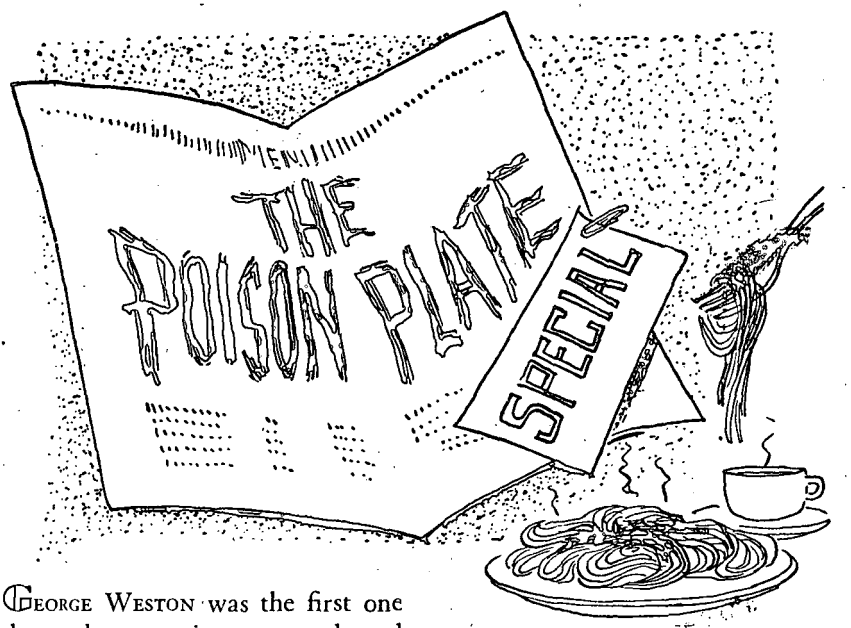
"I'm afraid he is. A short while ago he went back to the bank to square things for the reward put on his head. He killed the president and, in attempting to escape . . ." Fiala shrugged. "By coincidence, I happened to be on the scene. I was forced to shoot him."

"A logical move," Lopez said and frowned. "One more question, Victor. Why did Rivera—"

"Chop up the girl?" Fiala shrugged again and went to the door. "She was greedy," he said from there, "so I presume that was the reason he cut off her hands, and her tongue because she talked and gave him away." With that, he opened the door and looked back. "The missing tongue was the key to the whole business. If it hadn't been for that . . ." His voice trailed off, the door closed softly as he stepped onto the balcony.

Voices and a shuffling of feet sounded in the patio below. Fiala leaned over the railing, then nodded his head. The police were carrying the body of Juan Rivera into the morgue.

As Will Shakespeare so aptly phrased it,
"Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble."



GEORGE WESTON was the first one down that morning, as usual, and made the coffee which was all he ever had for breakfast. When Angie showed up, it didn't take him long to drain his cup and head for the door.

"Bowling tonight," he informed her briefly. "I'll have a bite in town."

Angie went to the kitchen window to watch him open the garage. He was eleven years older than she, had lost most of his hair and hunched his shoulders as he walked. He never had much to say and his taciturnity made him seem extremely unsociable.

The sound of bubbling cereal hurried Angie back to the stove and when her sister Gloria breezed

in, she was sitting at the table pouring two cups of coffee.

"Don't expect me for dinner," were her sister's first words. "I'm eating with the girls from the office and then we're going to a movie."

Angie regarded her thoughtfully. "What movie?"

Gloria gave her a surprised look. "Why, for heaven's sake?"

As Angie continued to stare, she tossed her long, honey-blonde hair, and said, "I haven't the foggiest. Joyce Lyman planned the whole thing and I didn't ask for details."

"Joyce Lyman, my eye!" scoffed

Angie. "When you go out with a bunch of girls, that will be the day!"

As Gloria maintained a lofty silence, Angie turned back to her cereal and began to eat. Suddenly she laid down the spoon. "It's bitter," she said.

Gloria set her cup on its saucer with a clatter. "So?" She reached for her purse.

"I wish you'd taste it." Angie offered the bowl.

Her sister waved it away. "For heaven's sake, Angie, you know I've got to be at work by nine!"

"Why won't you taste it?" persisted Angie.

Gloria looked at her with impatience. "I'll tell you why! One, I'm in a hurry and your dear, dumb husband is waiting; two, I think cooked cereal is positively nauseating. I wouldn't touch it if you paid me." As she started for the door, she turned back for one parting shot. "And three, I'm fed up with the way you've been acting. I think you're nuts!"

She slammed out of the house, and from the front window Angie watched her run down the walk to where George and the car were waiting.

At twenty-nine, Gloria was only two years younger than Angie but her deceptively ingenuous beauty made her seem even younger. Her eyes were dark blue, her skin clear and smooth, while her figure and legs seemed made for minis.

Her second divorce, this time without alimony because her latest husband had taken off and nobody knew where he was, would soon be final. Until then, as her lawyer had warned, she was supposed to behave herself.

Since they had been little girls and it had become obvious that Gloria was a beauty and Angie

merely pretty, the girls were never close. Only in time of stress, and then because there were no other relatives, did they turn to each other.

This time the bond was wearing thinner than usual. Gloria had asked for refuge until she could, as she said, "decide what to do"; but now, after several months and with her final decree only weeks away, she was making no effort to move into an apartment of her own. She still rode into the city each day with George as far as Government Center, which was only around the corner from the office where she worked.

After watching them drive off, Angie returned to the breakfast table and lifted the cereal bowl to her nose. After a careful sniff, she shook her head, scraped the contents into the sink and turned on the disposal. She had a thoughtful look as she cleared the rest of the dishes from the table.

At ten, her neighbor found her still in the kitchen, cleaning out the refrigerator.

Madge McDermott lived next door with her husband, Albert, and her bachelor brother, Leonard Stone, who still lived with them after six years of law school, where he had taken night courses while working at the filling station owned by his brother-in-law. After passing his bar exam, he had been taken on by one of the large firms in the city.

"What happened?" was Madge's surprised greeting. "You just did that a couple of days ago."

"I'm getting rid of everything that's open and exposed," Angie answered, pushing the hair back from her forehead with a tired sweep of her arm.

"Power off?" Madge sat down and reached for the percolator.

"It's cold. I'll make some fresh." Angie reached into the cupboard for a can and removed the cover. It was half full. She stared at it for a long moment and then tossed it into the wastebasket under the sink. "No coffee today," she said shortly.

"Come on, Angie," Madge protested. "What's the idea?"

Angie's eyes filled with tears. Madge rose quickly and put her arm about her shoulders.

"We'll go to my place, Angie. I've got coffee galore."

As she set the steaming cups on the tiny dinette counter, she said comfortingly, "Now you just tell old Madge all about it."

Angie's eyes were still wet. Shaking her head, she said ruefully, "Don't mind me. I guess it's just nerves. They get the best of me sometimes."

"Come now, Angie, you never

have nerves. Tell me!" she coaxed.

Angie wiped away the tears and blew her nose. She thought awhile and then said, "Someone is trying to poison me."

"Someone is trying to poison you?" Madge laughed. "You're joking!" Then at the look on Angie's face, she sobered and added warily, "All right, so you're not joking. But who in the world would want to poison *you*?"

Angie swallowed hard. "George. He's changed. He hasn't been the same since Gloria came to live with us. He never talks to me anymore."

"Oh, Angie, he never talks to anyone."

"He's out almost every night!" Angie's voice began to rise.

Madge laid a placating hand on hers. "George has always had his bowling nights. You've never minded before. Now take me, I hardly ever see Albert, he works such long hours every day and when he is home he does nothing but complain about Leonard. Says he's nothing but a sponge and a leech, when all the poor boy has been trying to do is get an education so he can support himself properly; and now that Leonard knows there's no future where he's working—there are so many young fellows ahead of him—it's only natural for him to want to save his money so he can set up for himself. But Albert keeps yelling at me all the time. Leonard must pay board or get out! Be glad George is quiet. You're having it good!"

"I did, before he decided to poison me," Angie returned shortly. "Last night it was the swordfish and this morning it was the cereal."

"Why just those two things?"

"Gloria wasn't home for dinner and George doesn't like swordfish, so I always fix salmon for him. He was in and out of the kitchen while I was getting dinner." She drew a deep breath. "And then he gets up first in the morning and I'm the only one who eats cooked cereal. Besides, I'm not sure it has been only those two things. I haven't been feeling well lately. You know I told you those pills Dr. Turton gave me didn't help my indigestion."

"Dr. Turton's getting old," said Madge. "Why don't you go to another doctor?"

"Because I don't need pills. I'm being poisoned, and what I need is to be very, very careful what I eat."

Madge studied her closely. "Why doesn't George ask for a divorce?"

Angie stared in front of her without answering.

Madge gave an exasperated sigh and poured them each a second cup of coffee. "You *must* be imagining this. You can't make me believe

that Gloria would ever fall for George. And George wanting to poison you for any reason whatever sounds awfully crazy to me."

"Well, *he's* in love with her, anyway."

"Suppose George *has* fallen for Gloria and wants you out of the way so he can marry her, why hasn't he asked for a divorce? It's a lot cleaner and it's legal."

Angie pushed both hands through her hair, then let them fall to her lap. "George hasn't asked for a divorce because his job doesn't pay enough for two wives; he wouldn't be able to pay alimony. Besides, there's the insurance."

She paused as Madge's eyes widened. "Insurance! What insurance?"

"Mine and George's. After we were married and while I was working, some sharp agent got George to take out insurance on me as well as himself. There was a special rate for husband and wife together. Thirty thousand on each of us."

Madge thought this over. "Then you'd better get a divorce quick and never mind the alimony. Let Leonard handle it, and you get a job."

"I don't want a divorce," said Angie.

"Then you'd better change your beneficiary," said Madge drily.

"To whom? I haven't a relative in the whole world except Gloria. Besides, it's all in one policy and I wouldn't be able to do a thing without George's permission."

Madge shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, I guess it's—" She hesitated and then continued firmly, "It's your funeral!"

"Oh, no," protested Angie. "It's not going to be my funeral because I'm going to be very, very careful and I'm not going to let Gloria or anybody else ruin my marriage."

"I should say it was already ruined if what you say is true."

"It's only an infatuation. There was a girl in the office a few years ago. He never said anything about it but I could tell, and it wore off. This will, too, if I'm patient."

"So?" Madge looked at her quizzically. "And what are your plans for being so very, very careful?"

"Well," said Angie, "first, I'm going shopping at the supermarket and then I'm stopping at the hardware store for a padlock for one of the kitchen cupboards." She pushed her cup from her and stood up. "Why don't you come with me, and we'll buy a big steak and eat together tonight." She forced a shaky laugh. "It should be perfectly safe. Neither George nor Gloria will be home until late."

"Sure, I'll come shopping,"

agreed Madge, "but nix on tonight. It's my ceramics class and I have to catch the five-thirty bus." Then, as Angie stared at her, "Tonight—my ceramics class—remember?"

"Yes," said Angie with a faint smile, "I remember."

Angie had just finished rinsing her supper dishes when Leonard breezed in the back door.

"Well, well, well," he drawled. "What's this Madge tells me about George trying to poison my little next-door neighbor?"

Angie clutched the dish towel to her breast and made a lugubrious face.

"So little Angie loves her husband and doesn't want to end a lousy nine-year marriage, and to hell with divorce!"

"He'll come around," choked Angie, and with a rush she was in his arms.

"Boy-oh-boy, how Madge fell for it!" chortled Leonard, nuzzling Angie's cheek.

"I almost believed it myself," she confessed.

He gave her an appreciative hug before seating himself across the kitchen table from her.

"What did Madge really say?"

"I only had a few minutes with her before she left to catch the bus, but she begged me not to tell anyone, especially George. She thinks you're slightly psycho." He grinned. "But she's sure her tender-loving care will bring you out of it."

"I guess I really shook her. But wouldn't it be better if she did tell people?"

Leonard shrugged. "Not really. You don't want to get yourself committed, do you? Besides, Madge and Gloria are your chief witnesses, so if it gets all over town that you suspect hanky-panky with Gloria it will spoil her effectiveness. Time enough for that later."

"Gloria thinks I'm nuts, too."

"Good! But they'll both change their tunes once we're finished. And we don't have to worry about George. Right?"

She pouted. "He's not interested in anything but bowling and TV. He probably doesn't say a word to Gloria all the way in to work mornings, and I'm sure if she told him that I think he's poisoning me, he wouldn't pay any attention."

Leonard shook his head. "How you ever got tied to such a crummy guy!"

"He wasn't always like that," she said defensively. "And he's always had a steady job."

"Sure, I know," said Leonard sarcastically. "One of those routine, do the same thing over and over, day after day with a two-week vacation and a hundred dollar raise each year. He can have it!" He

snapped his fingers. "I want something more out of life than that!"

"Of course you do," agreed Angie cozily.

"And Al is getting pretty nasty. I don't know how long Madge can hold out against him, so we'll have to get going."

"Yes." Angie was still dreaming. "Just as soon as I get the thirty thousand dollars, and we're married. I can see the sign over your office—Leonard Stone, Attorney at Law—and you'll be able to take only the cases you want and you'll win them all like Perry Mason and your name will be in all the papers!"

He, too, basked in the thought for a while before he roused with a start. "Hey, not so fast. We haven't got the money yet. We have plans to make. How about next week? Didn't you say Thursday is a good night?"

Angie nodded. "There's no bowling, and Gloria washes her hair Thursdays."

He dipped his hand into his pocket and pulled out two small plastic bottles. The smaller one was filled with fine white crystals, while the larger one was empty except for particles of a grayish powder that clung to its sides.

He held up the full one first. "Cyanide of potassium," he explained. "And this is how the police will reason. George becomes thwarted in his attempts to poison you slowly because of your suspicions and subsequent precautions so, in desperation, he gets the cyanide and carries it around with him in the hope that you will get careless and he can finish you off with a quick, one-shot poison. It works so fast that even if the doctor were having dinner with you, he wouldn't be able to save you."

Angie shivered. "Won't he taste it?"

"It won't matter. Just put it in something he likes and the first mouthful will do it."

"He loves spaghetti," she mused. "I could mix it with the sauce."

He handed her the bottle, which she took gingerly. "The timing is the thing. When do you eat?" he asked.

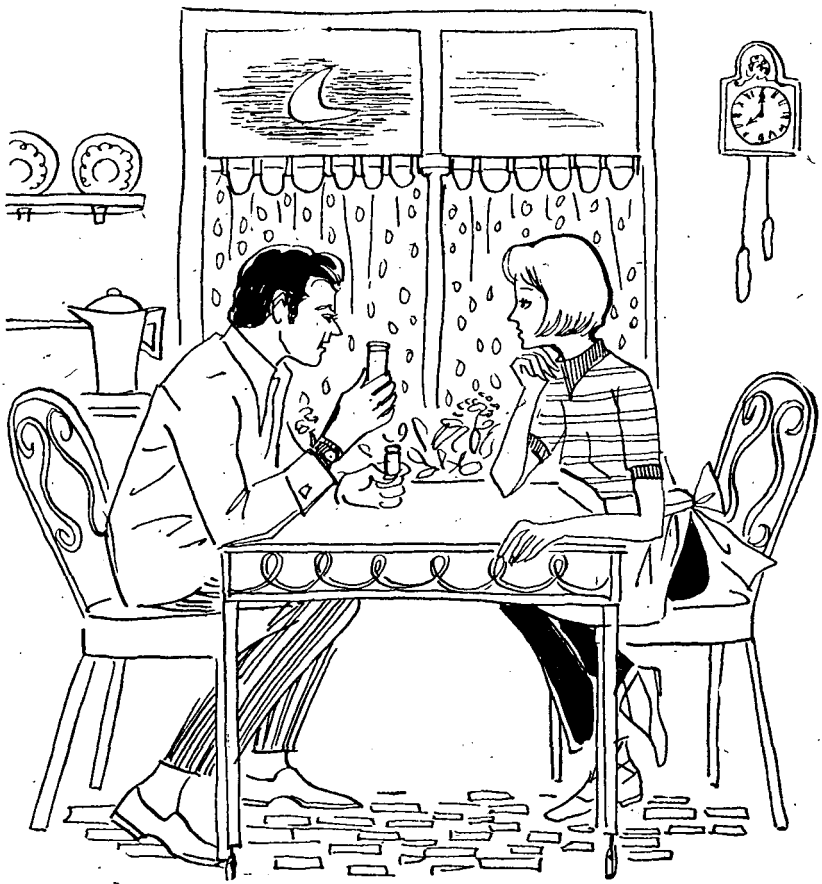
"Six-thirty. George likes it on time."

"How about Gloria?"

"She never comes to the table until I call her."

"Okay. I'll call at six-thirty-five, on the dot. Don't call Gloria until George comes to the phone. That will give George time to be alone in the dining room for at least a minute or two. Then I'll keep him busy long enough for you to do your thing, with Gloria watching. She'll be your alibi. Okay?"

"Okay," she said.



"Now this one," he indicated the almost empty bottle, "This is arsenic, and old Doc Turton should be a pushover."

They talked until almost nine, when Leonard jumped up with, "It's time for Al to close the station. Madge gave orders for little brother to put a TV dinner in the oven for her hard-working husband."

Angie clung to him. "When will we meet again?"

"Not until it's all over. Not even when everybody's out, like tonight. It's too dangerous. From now on

I'm what I've always been, just Mrs. McDermott's brother and your next-door neighbor."

They stood like that until she said, her voice muffled against his chest, "What if the police won't buy it?"

She could feel his body stiffen before he pushed her away so he could see her face. "You want out? You want that dreary old creep for your husband the rest of your life or do you want to go places with me?"

"I just meant 'what if'," she said weakly.

He looked searchingly at her and then his voice softened. "In that remote case, you should ask the advice of your dearest friend, Mrs. Albert McDermott, who without a doubt would suggest you consult with her brother, the lawyer." He brushed his fist across her chin affectionately. "Honest, Angel, it can't possibly fail. You just play your part the way you've been doing and you haven't a worry in the world."

During the following days, Angie never deviated from her role. She kept most of her supplies in the locked closet and at dinner would pointedly bring in her own plate, which she had filled directly from the pots on the stove.

Gloria usually greeted this action with a caustic remark but George, whenever he was home, paid no attention, eating his dinner methodically and silently before retiring to the livingroom to turn on the TV.

Suddenly it was Wednesday morning and Madge was over again for coffee. Angie's face was set as she unlocked the cupboard door. She thumped the can of coffee onto the table and then, without a word, slumped into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

"Angie! What is it now?"

Angie wiped her eyes. "I've got to tell someone and you're the only true friend I have. Look!" She fished into her slacks pocket and came up with a medicine bottle, the one with the traces of grayish powder streaking its sides. "I found this in George's bureau drawer when I put away his clean shirts yesterday afternoon."

Madge was puzzled.

"Don't you see, Madge? It's the poison bottle and it's empty. He was putting it in my food, just like I said, and that's why I had those pains in my stomach." She gave a shudder. "It's empty but he won't stop. I'm afraid, Madge, I'm afraid!"

Madge sighed. "It could be anything. You're letting your imagination run away with you."

"My imagination," repeated Angie. "I know, you think I'm

crazy, but I'm really scared."

"I don't think you're *really* crazy but I certainly think you don't have enough evidence to be so sure George is poisoning you."

"Not enough evidence!" flared Angie. "How about my not having any stomach pains for over a week because I've kept my food locked up? How about that? And don't tell me it's just a coincidence or that the doctor's pills take time to work. I threw them away a week after he gave them to me and that's all of a month ago."

"Well, then," Madge's voice was subdued, "if you're in such danger, I do think you're crazy if you don't get a divorce, or at least get away from this house."

"Get away from this house!" Angie's voice rose. "This happens to be *my* house. I paid the down payment with the money I made working when we were first married and it's in *my* name!" Her voice quieted a little. "After Gloria's divorce is final and she starts dating again, he'll soon find out she doesn't give a damn about him. Then he'll come to his senses."

"I just don't understand that kind of reasoning!"

Angie patted the pocket of her slacks. "And I'm not just sitting here doing nothing. I've got an appointment this afternoon with Doctor Turton. I'm going to show him this bottle and when he tells me it's poison, then I'm going to face George with it."

"And then?"

"And then," said Angie firmly, "I'll go on from there."

Dr. Turton rolled the bottle between his dry old fingers. He was always uneasy with emotional patients. "Yes," he admitted, "I suppose this could be arsenic but it could be something harmless as well. I don't have the facilities here to make sure and the hospital lab that does my work is very busy right now. So perhaps you could take it to someone else."

"This is so important, Doctor," said Angie, "and I don't trust anyone else." The tears welled in her eyes.

"Now, now," he soothed helplessly.

"Doctor," she said, "it's so terribly important. I know it sounds unbelievable but it's absolutely true. Someone is trying to poison me!"

He peered at her through his thick lenses. "Mrs. Weston," he said stiffly, "I'm only a doctor. You must take this to the police and tell them what you suspect." He held the bottle toward her. "The police, Mrs. Weston."

She countered with a hint of hys-

teria. "But, Doctor Turton, I couldn't possibly go to the police, not yet. I have to be sure first. If I went there without being sure, I might hurt a person who is very near and dear to me and who might turn out to be innocent. Please, you must understand that I have to do this quietly and I must know what this is before I make any accusations."

The doctor sighed, and she knew she had won.

Leonard had prophesied it would be this easy. "And George will be dead before the report gets back, and then old Doc becomes your alibi, along with Gloria."

Angie always made the spaghetti sauce early in the morning because it was better if it stood a while. It was her own cherished recipe, with lots of garlic and oregano. At six in the evening, she prepared meat balls and at the last minute boiled the pasta and brewed the coffee.

As usual, George was waiting, hunched in his chair, as she carried in the steaming platter and its companion pitcher of sauce. Then she brought in her own plate, the sauce liberally laced with cyanide.

George was pouring the sauce in generous dollops over his spaghetti when the phone sounded in the hall. At the same time that Angie reached the phone, Gloria came from her room.

"It's not for you," said Angie quickly and Gloria brushed past her to enter the dining room.

"It's for you, George," and Angie handed him the phone as he came reluctantly.

When she sat down beside Gloria, George was shouting "hello" into the telephone.

Angie picked up her fork, then suddenly dropped it, saying to Gloria, "Heavens, he had time to poison it!" With a swift motion, she exchanged her dinner for his. "Let *him* get stomach pains."

Gloria made a face. "What a nut," she observed.

At that moment, after George had given a last exasperated, "What the hell!" he came back into the room.

"Some fool kept telling me to hold the line," he grumbled.

"Probably long distance," said Gloria.

With an unsociable grunt, George sat down and dug his fork deep into the spaghetti with its rich, red, pungent sauce. The fork, however, never reached his mouth because Angie, with a choked scream, slipped sideways from her chair to the floor upsetting, as she fell, the plate from which she had begun to eat.

Two days later George was arrested for the murder of his wife.

It was clear sailing for the prose-

cution from the very beginning of the trial, which was held several months later. Police testimony showed that the spaghetti sauce ingested by the victim had been loaded with more than enough cyanide to kill; and that the remnants of gray powder, in the bottle sent to the hospital lab by Doctor Turton, were arsenic.

The doctor made an obvious impression on the jury as he described Angie's anxiety and suspicions during her last visit to him.

Madge, an excellent witness, kept insisting that if she had only believed her dearest friend, she would be alive today. In between her self-incriminations, the district attorney was able to elicit testimony of a decidedly damaging nature.

Dressed in a simple black dress that reached her knees, Gloria quickly dispelled any suspicion that she had been privy to any of George's alleged thoughts or actions. Under gentle questioning, she told what she knew about the events of the days that began with Angie's first complaint of stomach pains and ended with her violent death at the dinner table.

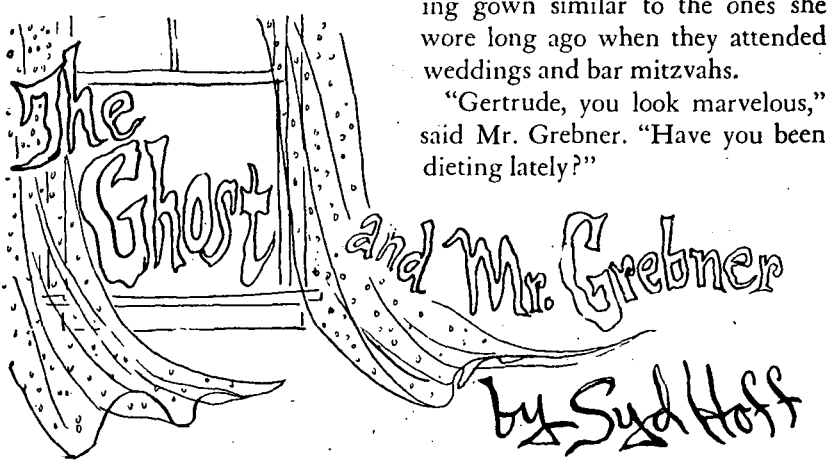
The key question appeared to be: How long had George been in the dining room alone while Angie was answering the phone?

Gloria's answer was a firm, "At least two minutes," and before the defense could object and it could be stricken from the record, she added, "Plenty of time for him to put the cyanide in my sister's food."

However, nobody asked how long Gloria had been in the dining room alone or why, when she was alone, she had switched the plates before Angie returned and switched them back again.

Because nobody did, George got a life sentence; and because anyone convicted of a murder cannot inherit from the victim, Gloria got the house and the thirty thousand dollars. After the appeals had all been denied and (her divorce being final and therefore she and Leonard no longer forced to sneak their dates) they were married, the sign went up over the new office of Leonard Stone, Attorney at Law.

Herein is offered further proof that woman's work is never done —even unto eternity.



SIGMUND GREBNER was ready to pop the question. Just as soon as Mrs. Kornish returned from the next room, he'd ask her to marry him. "Mrs. Kornish," he'd say, "you've been a widow eighteen years, I've been alone just about as long. What do you say we go down to City Hall and make it number two for both of us?"

Before Mrs. Kornish could return, the window curtain fluttered and when the smoke from Mr. Grebner's cigar cleared, he beheld his beloved wife standing in front of the sofa, wearing a white flowing gown similar to the ones she wore long ago when they attended weddings and bar mitzvahs.

"Gertrude, you look marvelous," said Mr. Grebner. "Have you been dieting lately?"

It was a white lie. His wife looked as fat as ever, but Mr. Grebner saw her so infrequently he felt it incumbent upon him to say something nice.

"Sigmund," she said, and the voice was unmistakable, "I want you to put out of your head this instant any notion of taking a second wife. I want you to go on being faithful to me."

"But, Gertrude, you've been gone seventeen and a half years," said Mr. Grebner. "Our children are grown up and married. When I go to visit them, they have little

time for me. Our grandchildren are in high school and I can't dangle them on my knee anymore. It's not easy being alone, Gertrude. I have to take my own shirts to the laundry, sew on my own buttons, stand in line myself in the markets. . . ."

He didn't want to tell her the worst; that sometimes old people's senses desert them, they don't know what they are doing, and that lately it was happening to him more and more often.

"Sigmund, do you remember kashe varnishkes, stuffed derma, gefilte fish with horse-radish?"

Mr. Grebner breathed deeply, could almost smell the cooking in an apartment long forsaken.

"Flanken, Sigmund, split pea soup with a big bone in it, brisket, tzimmes. . ."

"Stop, Gertrude! In heaven's name, say no more! You're torturing me! I haven't eaten a home-cooked meal since they took you away to the hospital that last time with a gallstone attack."

"Then don't marry this woman, Sigmund! She's all wrong for you. Look in her kitchen. The oven has never been used, there isn't even a jar of sour cream or an egg in her refrigerator. She eats out, Sigmund. Restaurants is where you'll spend the rest of your life with her. You're hungry? Read a menu, she'll tell you."

"But, Gertrude, anything is better than being alone, isn't it? I can't go on like this. I'm afraid, afraid . . ."

"Nevertheless, I won't stand for somebody else taking my place, and that's final," said the late Mrs. Grebner.

She straightened a cushion behind his head, swept up some ashes he had dropped on the coffee table in front of him, and vanished through the window as Mrs. Kornish returned to the room.

"Were you saying something just now, Mr. Grebner?" she asked, sitting down opposite him.

"Huh? No, Mrs. Kornish. That is, I was merely thinking out loud."

"Ah! A very good sign, Mr. Grebner, a sign of character. It gives a person a chance to hear what's on his mind, to see if what he's thinking sounds like good sense. I always say when you keep things locked up inside your brains, they get all confused and you can't tell right from wrong. That's why I'm so glad . . ."

"Glad?"

"Yes, I'm glad you came along, because I've been doing some thinking of my own."

"What kind of thinking, Mrs. Kornish?"

"I've been thinking what a strange way fate has of working.

Here we are, a man and a woman in the twilight of life, two people who should have met maybe forty or fifty years ago. But we didn't. So, now, what is there left in store for us? We sit in the park together. Sometimes I invite you up here for both of us to sit and watch the clock tick away. Then good-bye, every evening good-bye."

Mr. Grebner dropped his cigar and sprang to her side with the agility of a man half his age. "Say no more, Mrs. Kornish—Selma," he said. "We don't have to watch the clock just tick away any longer. We can make time stand still in its ceaseless flight. Yes, there is something I've been mulling over in my mind for a long time and now I know what I want. I want you. Will you marry me?"

"Of course, Mr. Grebner—Sigmund."

They embraced. Perhaps Mr. Grebner tried too hard to show how tightly he could squeeze a woman long ago.

"Sigmund, I have a wonderful idea." said Mrs. Kornish finally, pulling away and going to the window for some air. "This occasion calls for something special. How about a good dinner and a bottle of wine, right here, just the two of us, alone?"

Mr. Grebner wanted to cry from the happiness that engulfed him.

"You see, you were wrong about this woman," he almost shouted. "She's like you, Gertrude, exactly like you—a cook, a homebody, a *baleboosteh*."

"Please don't bother," said Mr. Grebner.

"No bother at all, Sigmund dear."

"But the fuss in the kitchen, the cooking, the preparing, the dishes to wash and clean afterward . . ."

"Who's going to fuss? Hand me the phone. The delicatessen delivers."

Mr. Grebner thought he heard his wife laughing, pushed the curtains to keep her from coming through the window again, pushed Mrs. Kornish instead, pushed very hard with both his hands.

"I still say don't bother, Selma," he called after her.

Then he picked up his cigar, took his hat and left the apartment. Yes, sometimes old people's senses desert them and they don't quite know what they are doing. When Mr. Grebner got downstairs he couldn't understand what that body was doing on the pavement with all the people standing around it.

Mr. Grebner went home, wondering if he'd ever meet another woman his late wife would like.

As there is said to be comformity between the soul and nature, so is the art of prestidigitation variously pursued.

CAPTAIN LEOPOLD'S cousin Sara was a handsome woman of forty-one whose husband had died in a private plane crash in Arizona two years earlier. His death had left her childless but quite wealthy, and with an urge to see some of that mysterious east coast of America which had existed for her only in campaign slogans and half-remembered history lessons.

Meeting her now at the airport, Leopold was struck by how little she'd changed since he'd seen her last. Wearing a bright summer dress that ended fashionably above

her knees, she could easily have passed for thirty-five or younger.

"Welcome to the wicked East," he said with a smile.

"You never change, do you? At least I'm pleased to see that the weather is as promised."

Leopold smiled at the cloudless sky. "Late June is the best time there is in Connecticut. Two weeks here and you'll never go back to Arizona."

"I doubt that." She strolled along at his side toward the baggage area. There had been no kissing, no emotion. Sara Leopold was not the sort for it. "How far are we from the Tiller Club?"

"About twenty minutes. It's right on Long Island Sound."

"I should hope so, for those prices!"

The Tiller Club was only a year old, but already it had earned the reputation of being the most luxurious and expensive on the Sound. It was a great sprawling palace of a place, part hotel and part yacht club, all glass and metal and plastic. Leopold had never been inside it, though it was located in his jurisdiction. The Tiller Club was a place for love and fun and relaxation and entertainment. It was not a place for murder.

"Are you dining with me tonight?" she asked as Leopold escorted her through the glass doors to the lobby. Somehow she managed to make it a command.

"Sara, I have to exist on a policeman's salary."

"A captain's salary," she reminded him. "I wish you would join me, though. The first night may be a bit lonely, until I get to meet some of the millionaires."

He really believed she had come here to meet them, and perhaps he couldn't blame her. Certainly if that was what she wanted, the Tiller Club was the place for it. "I'll call for you at seven," he said, relenting finally. "We can eat in the dining room here."

She smiled, pleased. "Till seven."

He went back downtown to Police Headquarters and spent the remainder of the afternoon bustling about his tiny office, pulling open file drawers in frustration, and then closing them again.

At one point Sergeant Fletcher wandered in. "Doing anything tonight, Captain?" he asked. "I've got a couple of tickets to the ball game and now my wife doesn't want to go."

"Wish I could join you, but I'm having dinner with my cousin. She's staying at the Tiller Club for a couple of weeks."

Fletcher grinned. "Real class."

"Yeah," Leopold grunted.

The dining room was less than

half full as Leopold and Sara followed the headwaiter to a table near the bandstand. It seemed like a slim crowd for a Friday night, but Leopold thought little of it. He was more interested in the glittering decor of the place, which might have been lifted from the plushest night spots of Miami or Las Vegas. It almost made up for his distaste of the evening as a whole.

"Have you ever thought about marrying again?" Sara asked after their cocktails had come.

"Once was enough," Leopold said, trying a chuckle he didn't quite feel. "But I notice you're using your maiden name again."

"Of course. I'm after a husband. Why confuse things by keeping the name of the old one?"

"Any luck so far?" He sipped his martini and had to admit it was a good one.

"Luck? I haven't met a single millionaire, even down at the pool! It's an odd sort of place, really. They have guards patrolling the hallways."

"Guards?" Leopold hadn't heard of any crime problem at the Tiller Club. "That's strange."

"But I did meet a magician! He's performing here tonight." As if on cue, a tall white-haired man entered the dining room and began to thread his way between the tables. "There he is now! Acamas, over here!" she said excitedly.

The man turned, smiled at Sara, and quickly accepted her invitation to join them. His eyes, when they turned on Leopold, sparkled with an odd, almost hypnotic depth. He was a magician of the old school, and Leopold was surprised he hadn't been wearing a red-lined cape.

"I only met Sara here this afternoon," he said, signaling the waiter for a drink. "At the pool."

"You're staying here?" Leopold asked.

"Performers always do. This is my second visit here, and it's one of my favorite bookings. So many nightclubs are bad for magicians these days. You only get a crowd of heckling drunks with no desire to suspend disbelief."

Leopold smiled. Despite the piercing eyes, he thought he liked the man. "Your name is Acamas?"

"My stage name."

"The warrior who entered Troy hidden inside the wooden horse?"

The magician seemed pleased that he knew the name. "In a sense, it seemed appropriate to my profession."

The little combo which had been playing discreetly at one side of the stage gave a sudden fanfare and a man in a blue dinner jacket appeared at the microphone. Acamas downed part of his drink and

stood up. "I must go! A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Leopold."

"And now," the man at the mike was saying, "the Tiller Club takes great pride in welcoming back to our stage . . . *The Great Acamas* and his bag of tricks!"

The white-haired magician took the stage with another fanfare from the combo and some light applause from the scattered diners. He produced the usual cards and flowers and coins, then blew up a balloon and burst it to reveal a live dove. "He's very good!" Sara whispered to Leopold.

Always somewhat suspicious of magicians, Leopold couldn't really judge the man's skill. His eyes wandered from the stage and settled upon a hairy young man seated with a blonde girl at ringside. The man was nervously smoking a cigarette, paying little attention to the mystifications of the Great Acamas.

Then the voice of the magician boomed from the tiny stage. "For my next presentation, I need a volunteer from the audience—a lovely young lady or . . ."

He paused, glancing around at the ringside tables, and Sara tugged at Leopold's sleeve. "I hope he doesn't pick me!"

". . . or this gentleman right here." He stepped down from the stage and grasped the hand of the nervous young man nearest him.

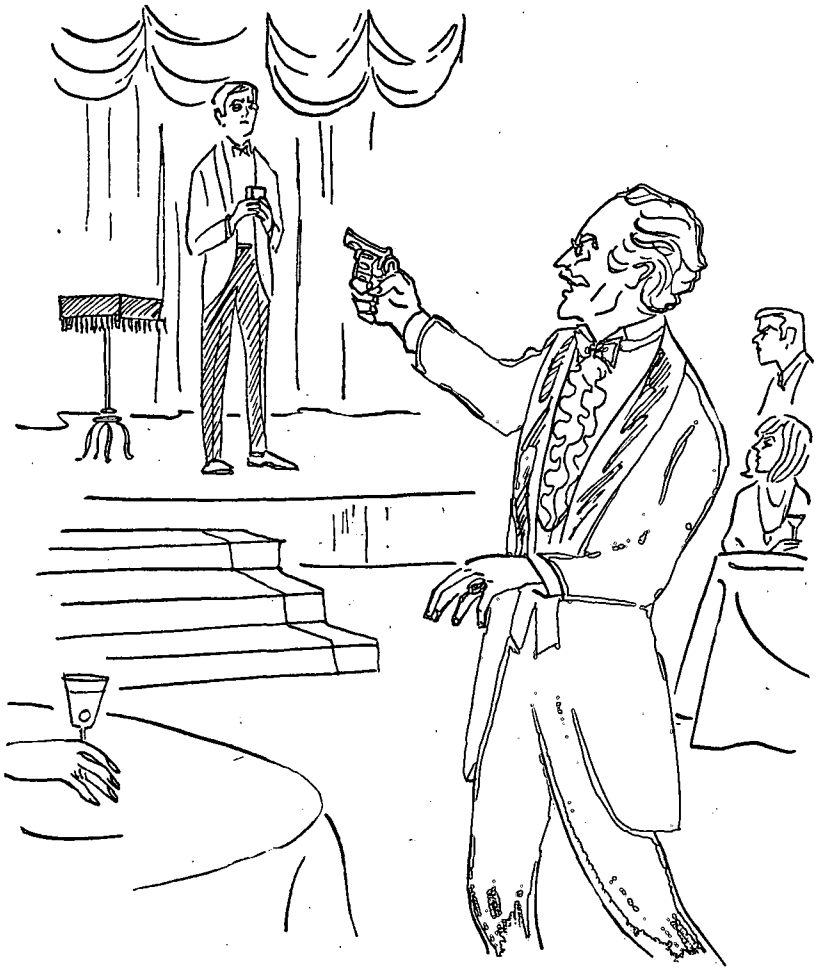
"No," the man started to object, but Acamas was obviously experienced at handling reluctant helpers. He had him on stage in a moment, pretending to brush some lint from his sleeve as he whispered some quiet words of instruction. The young man seemed to wince at his role, and when Acamas produced a deck of cards he eyed them with suspicion, but the magician was still in command.

He went down into the audience again with the cards, this time heading directly for the table occupied by Leopold and Sara. He fanned the cards to show the audience it was a normal deck, then held them out to Sara. "Choose a card, dear lady, and remember what it is. Then return it to the deck."

Leopold watched while she slipped out a card, glanced at it, and then returned it. The card was the five of spades.

Acamas turned back to the stage, where the nervous young man was now as pale as the tablecloths. The magician reached up to hand him the deck. "Hold it tightly in front of you, sir. Do not drop it, if you value your life!" Then he produced a small black revolver from his pocket, and pointed it directly at the man on stage.

Leopold felt his muscles tense at



the sight of the gun. He shuddered.

"Dear lady, call out the name of your card."

"The five of spades," Sara said loudly.

"The five of spades it is!" And Acamas fired the pistol directly at the man on stage.

The cards slid from his hand, and someone in the audience screamed. It was the blonde girl with whom he'd been sitting, and suddenly Leopold knew that something had gone wrong.

The voice of Acamas was lost in the general uproar as the man top-

pled forward on the stage. Immediately Leopold was on his feet, running toward the stage, threading his way between the tables.

The man in the dinner jacket reached the body first, an instant before Acamas and Leopold. He felt for a pulse, then said, "I think he's dead."

Leopold reached over and took the pistol from the magician's trembling hand. "I'd better keep this for you," he told him.

Acamas seemed almost to ignore the body. In a daze of confusion, he picked up the fallen deck of cards and showed Leopold the bullet hole through the center of the top cards. He pulled them apart and showed the bullet itself, stopped at the five of spades. The trick had worked.

During the hour that followed, Leopold lost all track of his cousin Sara. He was the center of a swirl of people, with screaming women and babbling men and more police arriving by the minute. It took some doing, but the man in the blue dinner jacket finally caught his shoulder and pulled him aside.

"I'm Morris Stringer, the manager here. The detective who questioned me said that you were in charge, Captain."

Leopold shrugged. "I was on the scene, and it's in my district. I guess that puts me in charge."

"My boss would like to see you. Mr. Prince, the owner."

"I'd like to see him, too. Get him down here."

"Mr. Prince is crippled, in a wheelchair. It might be better if you could talk to him in his office."

"All right," Leopold agreed with a sigh. "Lead the way."

On the way out, he saw Sergeant Fletcher near the door and called him over. "Take the magician down to headquarters for questioning," he said.

"Should we book him?"

"No. There didn't seem to be a bullet wound. None that I could find, anyway."

"You think the shot scared him to death?"

"Stranger things have happened. Find out who he was, and if Acamas knew him."

"Right, Captain."

"And, Fletcher, take the girl down for questioning, too. The wild-looking one who was at his table." Leopold pointed her out, then followed Morris Stringer upstairs.

The upper reaches of the Tiller Club were designed to complement the decor and atmosphere of the main floor. A long glass wall looked out onto the yacht basin and beach area, and even at night the scores of craft drifting at an-

chor were clearly visible in the harsh floodlights.

Leopold took it all in before Stringer ushered him into a surprisingly plain and businesslike office. There, seated behind a cluttered desk in a chrome wheelchair, was a large bald man who wore an identical blue dinner jacket. "Ah! You would be Captain Leopold?"

"That's right."

"My name is Jules Prince. Forgive me for not rising. My legs were damaged in a boating accident some years ago."

Leopold nodded in understanding. "You're the owner of the Tiller Club?"

"Correct. You've already met my manager. Since you hold the rank of captain, I'm surprised our paths haven't crossed before. The police commissioner often dines here."

"That's out of my class," Leopold told him, "although I did happen to be dining here with my cousin when it happened; Sara Leopold, one of your guests."

"I see." Jules Prince bit the end off a cigar and lit it. "Have you arrested Acamas?"

"Not yet. There are a number of questions to be answered first. For instance, the identity of the dead man. I have a name—Roger Minden—but nothing else."

Prince nodded. "Surely you've heard of the Minden department stores in Chicago? The dead man was the heir to a considerable fortune."

"Was he a regular customer here?"

"Please, Captain! A guest, not a customer. He has been a guest here several times during the past two years."

"You have uniformed guards in the hallways. Why?"

Prince shrugged. "For the protection of our guests. You must realize they are wealthy people who pay my prices because I promise them safety and privacy."

"How many guests do you have at present?"

"Close to one hundred. Does it matter?"

"The dining room seemed quite empty."

"Some guests like to dine in their rooms, or on their boats."

"I see," Leopold said, but he didn't really see at all. Jules Prince had something to say, and hadn't quite gotten to it yet.

Now the bald man cleared his throat. "The point is, Captain, we've had very good relations with the police thus far."

"I'm sure."

"The publicity will be bad enough, without the added hardship of police harassment."

"You needn't worry about that," Leopold said, growing increasingly

uncomfortable talking to Prince.

"Good! I'm glad we understand each other." He started to turn his wheelchair, ending the conversation.

"I have some questions—"

"Morris, here, can answer them."

It was not the time to press the point, though Leopold filed Jules Prince away for later action. He followed Morris Stringer downstairs and went through some routine questions with him. Then Stringer saw Leopold to his car, leaned toward the window and pressed an envelope into his hand.

"What's this?"

"Mr. Prince's contribution to the police pension fund."

Leopold opened the envelope as Stringer walked quickly away. Inside were ten fifty-dollar bills. The ways of the Tiller Club were strange indeed.

Sara Leopold was awaiting his return to headquarters. She was sitting outside his office, close to tears. "What have you done with Mr. Acamas? They won't even let me talk to him!"

"We're just questioning him. Routine." Leopold had no experience dealing with Sara's imminent tears, and he felt a sense of masculine helplessness before them. "After all, he did fire a gun at the man."

"But it wasn't real! It was a magic trick! You could see that!"

"Death is real. A man named Minden is really dead." He patted her arm reassuringly as he went into his office.

Fletcher was just hanging up the telephone, and Leopold asked, "What have you got?"

"One unhappy magician. He wants out."

"Have you questioned him?"

"A bit." Fletcher scowled at his notes. "I thought he was going to hypnotize me with those eyes of his. And did you catch the big ring he's wearing? It looks like something out of the Borgias!"

"Did he know the dead man?"

"Claims he never saw him before."

"What about the girl? The one at the table?"

"Mrs. Minden. I just checked that out with a call to Chicago. It's her, all right. No hanky-panky."

Leopold grunted. "Anything from the medical examiner yet?"

"Just a preliminary. Minden's arms looked like a pin cushion. He'd even shot the veins in his wrists."

"Heroin?" Leopold's eyelids raised slightly.

"Looks like it."

"No other wound?"

"None." Fletcher stood up and stretched. "How's your cousin taking it?"

"Don't remind me. She's upset because we're holding Acamas."

"Should we release him, Captain? Whatever killed Minden, it wasn't the magician's gun. The thing was only a starter's pistol. It couldn't fire a bullet."

Leopold nodded. "The slug in the deck of cards was obviously planted there in advance of the trick. Acamas forced the five of spades when he asked Sara to pick a card, then pretended to fire a bullet into the deck Minden held."

"But what could have killed him at the exact instant the gun was fired?"

"That we'll know when we get the M.E.'s report."

"What about Acamas?"

"I want to question him before he's released. Meantime, see what you can dig up about the Tiller Club."

"How do you mean?"

Leopold tossed the envelope on the desk. "The owner gave me a five-hundred-dollar bribe."

"For what?"

"That's the funny thing. I don't know."

Leopold went downstairs to the little room where Acamas was waiting. As he entered, the white-haired magician got to his feet and hurried over, almost imploringly. "What's happening? Are you going to release me?"

"Probably," Leopold said. "You didn't shoot Minden."

"Minden?"

"The dead man. That was his name."

"I couldn't have harmed anyone with my gun."

"I know. We've examined it. Did you notice anything strange about Minden when you chose him?"

"Strange? No, nothing. He seemed a bit nervous, that's all."

Leopold sighed and motioned toward the door. "All right, you can go now. My cousin Sara's waiting for you outside."

She was, indeed, waiting for him. She ran to meet him with, "Are you all right? What a terrible experience!"

"My dear lady, it was nothing," the magician said, quickly regaining his composure, the old flash back in his eyes. "Since your meal was interrupted, could we dine together?"

She turned uncertainly to Leopold. "Would you join us?"

"Run along. I'll be working half the night."

After they left, he went in to see Mrs. Minden. A doctor had given her a tranquilizer, and she sat staring out the window at the night lights of the city. She was still a beautiful young woman, if a bit pale and drawn by the death of her

husband. "Are you feeling all right now?" he asked.

"Sure." She gave a little laugh. "To think we came all the way from Chicago so he could get killed."

"We don't know yet if he was killed, Mrs. Minden. It might have been an accident."

"What sort of accident?"

Leopold shifted uneasily. "An overdose. He was taking narcotics, wasn't he?"

Suddenly she tensed up, on guard against an enemy. "I think I want a lawyer," she said. "I can't answer any questions without a lawyer."

"Very well. But you understand you're not being charged with anything."

"I understand."

"You can go now. Be back at ten o'clock in the morning with your lawyer."

He escorted her to the door and went back upstairs to his office.

Sergeant Fletcher was waiting for him. "We've got the autopsy report, Captain."

"What's the story?"

"They want to run more tests in the morning, but it looks as if the narcotics didn't kill him."

"Heroin?"

"Heroin and cocaine. But something else, too. The doc called it a cardio-active glycoside." Fletcher read this last part from his notes.

"A what?"

"You'd better phone him. I don't know what he's talking about, Captain."

Leopold phoned the medical examiner's office and caught him just as he was closing up. "It's almost midnight, Captain! Give me a break and wait until morning."

"Just tell me what killed him. In plain language."

"You wouldn't like it in plain language."

"Try me."

"Arrow poison. He was killed by some sort of arrow poison, or a drug very similar to it. A poison which caused very rapid heart action."

"No arrow poisons, Doc. Come back to earth."

"I knew you wouldn't like it. I'll know better in the morning."

"Then you're saying he was murdered?"

"It certainly looks that way. He was shooting a combination of cocaine and heroin into his bloodstream—it's called a speedball sometimes—and somebody just substituted the arrow poison for his regular stuff. An easy way to kill."

"How quickly does it act?"

"Depends on how the residue of cocaine and heroin might have slowed the drug's action. I doubt if anybody's ever timed it under labo-

ratory conditions. Anywhere from a few minutes to a half hour."

"Fast."

"Oh, yes. Fast."

"Wouldn't there have been convulsions before death?"

"Probably not, with that much heroin in the system."

Leopold still didn't like it. "I was there, Doc. He keeled over just after this magician fired a pistol at him."

"Quite possible. These poisons have to reach the heart to be fatal. The shot would have caused increased heart action and carried the poison the rest of the distance through the bloodstream to its goal."

"Is this stuff easy to get?"

"Not so difficult as you might think, Captain. Sometimes used as a heart tonic, it's only fatal in excessive doses."

"Thanks, Doc," Leopold said. "Let me know what you learn tomorrow." He hung up and turned to Fletcher. "I want someone to keep an eye on Mrs. Minden. Make sure she doesn't leave town before our appointment in the morning."

"Should we pick her up?"

Leopold shook his head. "We don't have enough. It's just that if someone tampered with his drug supply, she had the best opportunity."

"It's murder, you think, then?"

"It's murder. For sure, this time."

It was an hour after midnight when Leopold returned to the Tiller Club. The place was still ablaze with lights, and he could detect moving shadows behind some of the drawn drapes. He stopped at the main desk and asked the reservations clerk for Morris Stringer.

The clerk pouted for a moment and then answered, "Our manager goes off duty at nine. Perhaps the assistant manager could help you."

Leopold flashed his badge. "Does Stringer live here?"

"Yes, but . . ." The clerk hesitated. "But he's out for the night."

"All right." Leopold went to the house phone and rang Sara. "How was your dinner?"

"I just climbed into bed! What time is it?"

"After one. Put something on. I'm coming up."

She greeted him at the door with a mixture of indignation and interest. "Just what's the purpose of this visit?"

Leopold smiled. "I wanted to see your room." He glanced around, taking in the soundproofed ceiling. Then he tapped one wall. "Solid."

"It should be, for the price they charge! There isn't a sound."

"I'll bet. Are the guards still in the halls? I didn't see one when coming up."

"They're still around," she confirmed.

He took out a cigarette and sat down, searching his pockets for a match. "Do you have any matches, Sara?"

"In my purse, by your chair. I thought you gave up smoking."

"I'm trying." He rummaged through the purse until he came up with matches.

"Why so quiet?" she asked after a moment.

"Where'd you get this?" He held up a tiny vial that still showed traces of a dark liquid in the bottom.

"Why, I don't know. I never saw it before." She bent closer, squinting at it. "Could it be perfume?"

"Perfume or poison. I'd bet on the latter right now."

"Do you think *I* killed that man?"

Leopold smiled. "Hardly, Sara, unless you've been leading a double life. I just wonder . . ." He thought a moment and then said, "Sara, I want you to do something for me. Phone the desk clerk. Tell him somebody's up here knocking on all the doors, trying to get in."

She drew a breath and marched to the phone. He waited till she'd made the call, then slipped into the hall, heading for the fire door at one end. He hid behind it, leaving it open a crack, until at last the elevator doors opened. It was Stringer, suddenly back in circulation, and he had one of the uniformed guards with him.

"There's nobody here," the guard said. "The woman must have been imagining things."

"I don't know. That detective, Leopold, is around somewhere. I'd better warn them." He headed down the hall in the opposite direction, with the guard at his side.

Leopold came out of hiding fast and followed along, hoping they wouldn't look back. His feet made no sound on the thick carpet, and he was almost up to them when Stringer paused to knock on a door.

As the door swung open, the guard half turned and saw him, but Leopold was already in motion. He hit Stringer with his shoulder and drove him into the partly opened door, forcing it the rest of the way. Stringer twisted around, pawing for Leopold's throat, but he was no match.

There were six men in the large suite, all middle-aged businessmen types, all smoking. The air was thick with an acrid blue haze. At the sudden intrusion, one of the men ran to the bathroom with his cigarette, and Leopold heard the toilet flush. The guard had his gun out now, but Stringer waved it away.

"I'm a police officer," Leopold announced, showing his badge.

By now Stringer had recovered his composure. "Wise guy, you *were* a police officer! You broke in here without a search warrant, and that little trick's going to cost you your badge."

Leopold smiled at him. "Suppose I take these six distinguished gentlemen downtown and charge them with possession of marijuana? I'll lose my job, and they'll be free in an hour, but it'll still make a great story for their hometown papers. What say, gentlemen?"

"You, Stringer!" the nearest one shouted. "You told us this couldn't happen here! You told us we'd be safe."

"Shut up!" Stringer barked. "Can't you see he's bluffing?"

"Am I?" Leopold asked with a smile. The smoke was still thick in the room, and at least one of the men seemed to have fallen into a sort of stupor.

"What do you want?" Stringer demanded. "More graft?"

"No. In fact, I've come to return your previous gift. Let's go see Mr. Prince."

"I'm hungry!" one of the businessmen moaned from the floor where he'd been sitting.

Leopold glanced down at him. "Better call room service. Marijuana's great for the appetite. Come on, Stringer."

The guard made a final move to block their exit, but Stringer motioned him aside. They went up in the elevator to the top floor of the Tiller Club, and Leopold waited in the hall while Stringer wakened Jules Prince. Finally the bald man appeared in his wheelchair, wearing a satin robe over blue pajamas. "You've had a busy night, Captain."

"I wanted to return your money. I decided I couldn't do it justice."

"You're a fool! I'll simply offer it to your superior."

"You do that."

"Why did you force your way into the room downstairs?"

"I wanted an explanation of the guards in the hall, the heavy soundproofing in the rooms, the murdered heroin addict in your dining room. I found it."

"Without a search warrant?"

"I plan to make no arrests. Not yet, at least." His eyes were hard, meeting those of the man in the chair.

"My guests come here for relaxation, for privacy."

"They come here to smoke pot, to take LSD. Some come to shoot heroin."

Jules Prince sighed. "They are wealthy people, important people. To experiment with such enjoy-

ment in their own towns would be to invite disaster. We have a leading San Francisco banker who flies here once a month. We have a number of lawyers, and quite a few advertising executives. Right now our guests include the mayor of a large southern city. Most of them are middle-aged men, looking for the harmless kicks that drugs can bring. Many come here with their wives."

"Like Roger Minden."

"Like Roger Minden. He was something of a special case, and he got by our guards. He shouldn't have been allowed downstairs in his condition. He sometimes bothers other guests."

"Does Acamas know what goes on here?"

Prince and Stringer exchanged glances. Then Prince answered. "No, though when he played here last year his daughter was assisting him in the act. She may have gotten wind of it."

Leopold wondered silently if Sara knew that the great magician had a daughter and, perhaps, a wife. Aloud, he said, "You're being frank. I appreciate that."

Prince motioned toward the envelope. "The money's still yours."

"No."

"My frankness cannot harm me. Courts have ruled that evidence obtained during an illegal search is inadmissible. Since your search was certainly illegal, nothing I've told you can be used against me."

"I understand that," Leopold said. "I'm looking for a murderer. Someone else can deal with what you're doing here."

Prince spread his hands. "You can't think I killed Minden. It's the worst thing that could have happened to my operation."

"Somebody killed him," Leopold said, "probably by substituting poison for his regular mixture of heroin and cocaine."

"His wife," Stringer suggested.

"Why?"

A shrug. "Why do wives ever kill husbands? He had quite an eye for any stray young girls around the place. Once he got a waitress in trouble."

Leopold thought about it. "Is Mrs. Minden in the club now?"

"I can check," Stringer volunteered. "We keep pretty close tabs on our guests." He picked up the phone and dialed the room clerk, asking a quick question. Then he turned back to Leopold. "She returned an hour ago. She's in bed, as far as we know."

Leopold nodded. "I'll be going now. A word of advice—get rid of the narcotics by morning if you want to stay out of jail. When the other boys come, they'll have a search warrant."

Jules Prince merely smiled. "We'll do what's necessary."

Leopold went down to his car and climbed behind the wheel, but he did not drive away immediately. Instead, he sat staring at the lighted windows of the Tiller Club. Wealthy, famous men in search of relaxation, talking their dreams of empire in the midst of the marijuana smoke—were they any different from the hippies down in the park, or the addicts huddled in doorways?

Finally, Leopold drove over to Fletcher's house and got him out of bed. "What's up?" Fletcher asked sleepily, and Leopold told him what had happened at the Tiller Club.

"Should we raid the place?" Fletcher asked.

"Not yet. I'm still after a murderer." He slipped the vial from his pocket. "Get the medical examiner out of bed and have him run a test on this."

"What is it?"

"Could be the poison that killed Minden."

Fletcher grunted. "Where'd you find it?" He held it to the light, examining the dregs in the bottom of the vial.

"In my cousin Sara's purse."

"Wow! You don't think she killed him?"

"No, but if we play this right I think she can lead us to the killer." Above him, as he walked to the car, the moon had a misty halo around it. Clouds were forming, and he knew the morning would be overcast.

A warm June rain was falling when Leopold awakened, having slept only three hours, and the humid air of his bedroom was damp against his forehead. Fletcher was already waiting in Leopold's office when he arrived a little before nine, and he was secretly pleased to note that the sergeant, too, showed signs of lost sleep.

"How about it?"

"Poison, all right. The same as killed Minden."

Leopold sighed. "Did you check the other thing I asked you about?"

"Yeah. You were right on that, too. I checked with the New York police. She died of an overdose of heroin about two months back."

"Come on," Leopold said. "You might as well be in on the last act."

They drove out to the Tiller Club, and found Sara Leopold sitting alone in the coffee shop. "What terrible weather!" she complained, staring out at the rain. "None of the yachts can go out in this!"

Leopold sat down opposite her. "Sara, I want you to help us with something. We're going to pretend

to arrest you for Minden's murder."

"Arrest? Me?"

"Don't worry. I think it will force a confession out of the real killer."

"But . . . his wife did it, didn't she?"

"No. No, not his wife."

"Then who?"

They were interrupted by a shout from the lobby. The desk clerk came running through the door to the coffee shop. "Captain, there's trouble in Mr. Prince's office—a shooting!"

Leopold and Fletcher were on their feet, running for the elevator. Already Leopold was tugging at the gun on his belt. Too late—just minutes too late!

The top floor was crowded with confusion and they fought their way through the scattering guests to the door of Prince's office. Leopold entered with his gun drawn, and barked, "All right, Stringer! Drop it!"

Morris Stringer turned and stared at him with unseeing eyes. Leopold stepped across the body of Jules Prince and knocked the gun from Stringer's hand. "Did you kill him?" he asked.

Stringer shook his head, as if dazed. "No. No, it was the magician, Acamas. He—he's behind the desk."

"Hold him, Fletcher." Leopold stepped behind the desk and found Acamas there, gasping for breath as the blood pumped from a wound in his chest. Leopold bent close and said, "You're dying, Acamas. Want to tell me about it?"

The magician turned his eyes up. The fire was going from them, leaving only the bitter chill of impending death. "Tell . . ."

"You killed Minden, didn't you?" Leopold glanced over at Prince's body. "Just as you killed Prince now, with that poison ring you're wearing."

Acamas closed his eyes, then opened them against the pain. "My daughter . . . Minden got her onto heroin. All of them, no good . . . Killed Prince, too . . . Kill them all for her . . ."

Leopold stood up. From somewhere in the distance a siren grew, but if it was an ambulance it would be too late for Acamas. "What happened here?" Leopold asked Stringer.

"The magician came in and sort of touched Mr. Prince on the arm. Then he started talking wildly about his daughter. He said he'd injected poison into Mr. Prince, and then Mr. Prince fell over on the floor. That was when I shot Acamas, before he could do the same thing to me."

"A few minutes sooner and I

might have saved them both," Leopold said, regretting his actions. "I was too anxious to force a confession out of him by pretending to arrest Sara."

"When did you know it was Acamas?" Fletcher asked.

"Probably not till I heard he had a daughter. We knew Minden played around, and I figured if he got waitresses in trouble he might go after magicians' assistants too. Your New York report told me Acamas had a daughter who died of a heroin overdose, and that gave him plenty of motive. He was planning to kill Prince, but when he saw Minden there in the audience he had to kill him, too. You called his ring a Borgia type, and you were dead right, Fletcher. Acamas poisoned Minden when he pretended to brush some lint from his coat sleeve. I even remember seeing Minden wince when it happened. The poison worked fast, and the medical examiner never noticed one more puncture mark among all the others on his arm."

"Then Minden's wife had nothing to do with it?"

"Nothing. I knew Minden wasn't shooting heroin at the table, and if she'd given him the poison in his room it would have worked before it did. Acamas was the only one who could have done it—and who was also close enough to Sara to hide the poison vial in her purse."

"Why'd he do that?"

"In case he was searched. We might miss the ring, but we'd never miss the vial from which he filled it." Leopold stepped aside as the police and medical people began to arrive, crowding into the office. "I know he wouldn't have let Sara take the blame, though. He probably only wanted to stay free long enough to kill Prince, too."

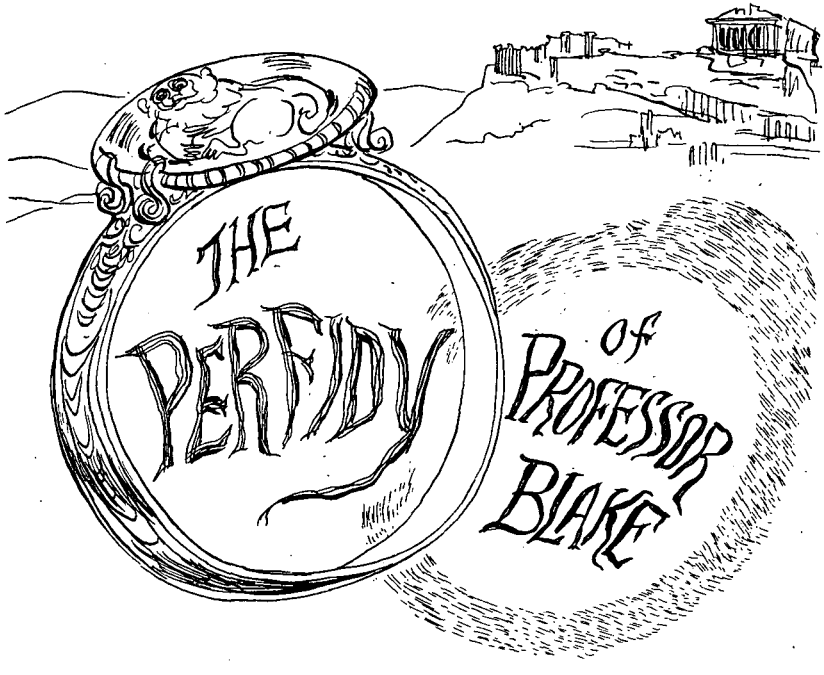
"He did that," Fletcher observed, looking down at the body.

"Come on," Leopold said. "I gave Prince till this morning. Let's get someone down here with a search warrant and close down this place."

Sergeant Fletcher grinned. "Your cousin Sara won't like that."

"No," Leopold agreed glumly, "I suppose not."

Double-barreled treachery may at the same time be a cousin of tact.



TO BEGIN WITH, the whole thing was out of character, the Morrisons being the kind of people who always told the truth, no matter how unpalatable. They never cut corners on income tax returns—not even quite legitimate corners. Once, Mr. Morrison, who had forgotten to brake at a stop sign, had to appear in court and pay a ten-dollar fine. Once, Mrs. Morrison had an interview with a cop: her cleaning woman, arrested for shoplifting, had given Mrs. Morrison's name as a character reference. These incidents left them quite shaken.

Yes, the Morrisons were law-

abiding people. Oh, they knew about the other kind. They'd had experience with dishonest persons. Plenty of it. When they first fell in love with archeology, they'd been incredibly gullible. In Mexico they'd bought a "guaranteed" pre-Columbian statuette. Back home in Riverview, New Jersey, their friend and new neighbor, Professor Blake, smiled tolerantly and pointed out the telltale marks of factory mass production. He hoped they hadn't been badly taken.

They had, by just how much they never told. Before their next

trip—this time to Italy—they read and studied books he loaned them. They returned triumphant, proud owners of an Etruscan bowl. Professor Blake, again wearing that superior smile the initiate reserves for the tyro, showed them a photograph of the original (property of the archeological museum in Ravenna) and patiently pointed out the discrepancies between the real vase and their cleverly-crafted copy. At least, this fake was an expert one, handmade by a master of the counterfeiter's art.

The Morrisons' enthusiasm for archeology was entirely due to the influence of the neighbor. When Professor Blake moved into the house next door, he began, belatedly, to learn gardening. The Morrisons contributed cuttings and good advice. In return, they were invited to view some of the professor's color slides. Egyptian tombs and the temples of Southern India were a revelation to the Morrisons who, if they thought of them at all, thought of ancient civilizations as something kids studied in school. Their new friend brought the ruined buildings to life, peopling them with a colorful cast of characters: three-dimensional men and women who had servant problems and marital arguments. Mr. Morrison was fascinated by the Romans' advanced engineering techniques. Mrs. Morrison, easily able to contain her enthusiasm for drains, was enchanted by the jewelry and statuettes of semiprecious stone in the professor's collection.

That summer, the Morrisons went to Mexico instead of making their usual visit to the Iowa relatives. Professor Blake helped them plan the trip, supplying introductions to friends and colleagues that enabled them to visit sites where actual digging was go-

ing on. That did it. They were hooked.

Their children, all grown, were doing well. There was no reason the Morrisons shouldn't spend their money on travel to distant places.

"Why," demanded their eldest, "are you suddenly ruin-happy? Go play shuffleboard in Florida. You might break a hip, wandering around those sites."

Mr. Morrison smiled the tolerant smile he reserved for generation-gap arguments and pressed the button on his new carousel slide projector. Onto the screen flashed a picture of a temple, precariously perched atop a steep flight of steps.

"That's why," he said. "That's a stiff climb. There are two hundred of those steps. But the view from the top—fantastic!"

"How do you get up there?"

"Walk, naturally," Mrs. Morrison said.

Her son stared at the screen, verified that each of the steps was a good two feet high, looked back at his mother's short legs and portly midsection. "That's a physical impossibility," he said.

"No, dear. It's easy. The guides get behind and boost." She giggled. "Try not to think about it, dear, since it seems to distress you."

That spring they stopped in Athens for a few relaxing days between excavations. Now that Mr. Morrison was retired, there was no longer any need to rush madly from site to site. They taxied up to the Acropolis and settled down, hand in hand, on a huge block of stone in their favorite spot near the Temple of Athena.

"I never really believe this air," Mrs. Morrison said softly. "It makes me drunk, like champagne. We're so high, up here, I feel I could reach up and touch the sky."

Mr. Morrison squeezed her hand. "Don't do it," he said. "It might be dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Athena or Mercury might just reach down . . ."

"And I'd find myself jerked up to the ultimate heights?"

"Right. So don't do it. I'm not quite ready to let you join the gods on Mount Olympus."

"Mr. Mor-rees-sohn, is it not?" The fat gentleman confronting them was even shorter and more rotund than Mrs. Morrison. His smile glittered with gold. "You do not remember me!" His voice overflowed with sorrow. "I, who have sell you the most beautiful handwoven skirts in all of Greece without charge for the postage. All the way to Keokuk!"

"I'm afraid our minds were far away," Mrs. Morrison said. "Of

course we remember you, Mr. Scopas."

"I have follow you." Mr. Scopas lowered his voice to a whisper, though no one was nearby. "I have close up my shop in order to do so. The matter is not one to be discuss within four walls." He turned to peer behind him, the back of his short neck bristling with suspicion. "These days, one is never safe."

"I told you this morning, we don't need a beautiful handmade carpet. You can skip the dramatics, man. A better offer won't change our minds," Mr. Morrison growled.

"Ah! It is no matter of a carpet. I speak now of a priceless object. Because you came to my shop from Professor Blake, I know you can appreciate it."

Mrs. Morrison shaded her eyes against the golden glitter of his teeth in the late-afternoon sunshine. "What sort of priceless object?"

"You know of the persecution of the royal family by the Junta? They have been force to hide. One—a second cousin of the King!—is an old customer. In order to eat, he must sell an item from his collection of antiquities. A tragedy!"

The little man was overacting. The Morrisons felt a strong inclination to laugh. "Lucky he's got things to sell," Mr. Morrison said.

The Greek sighed, a sigh so gusty it ruffled Mrs. Morrison's hair. "It is a tragedy that this magnificent Greek antiquity must leave Greece. But this man has children. So he parts from this precious ring. It is from Crete, where it was found in the Palace of Minos."

"And how can we be sure it's not a copy?"

"But no! This is real, made by a master craftsman, two thousands years before Christ! Think of it! You will present it to a museum, where your countrymen may look upon it and read, 'Generous gift from the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Mor-rees-sohn'! You will be a benefactor of the public."

"Okay. No charge for looking, is there?" Mr. Morrison was not ordinarily impolite, but he was anxious to terminate this idiotic conversation, though he feared it was already too late to recapture his shattered euphoria.

"Not here! You do not imagine I would carry it with me? We make an appointment. You come to my home and then I show, and you have opportunity to study it careful and verify the truth of my story. Here is my address. I am at home until nine in the morning. I do not suggest the nighttime. It is unsafe in the narrow streets of the Old City these days, with this vicious

curdog of a Junta we have now . . ."

"What kind of guarantee do I get?" Mr. Morrison interrupted.

"Nothing in writing," the Greek said hastily. "It would not be safe, not for me nor for my client." He raised a pudgy hand. "I give my word of honor!"

"Not good enough. Sorry. I need a written guarantee from a recognized antique dealer."

"Impossible! Surely you know I would not cheat a friend of Professor Blake."

"Let's assume it's real. How do I get it through customs, with no bill of sale? Antiques come in duty-free only if you can prove they're real."

"A ring, it is so easy to slip through the customs."

"Smuggle it in? You must be crazy."

"You are making big mistake," Mr. Scopas said. "It is too bad. I had thought you more courageous."

"It's no use, Scopas. You can't needle me. Find yourself another customer."

With one last enormous sigh, the Greek gentleman turned his back and departed, slipping and sliding over the rough stones in his shiny pointed shoes.

Mrs. Morrison laughed comfortably. "There was a time when we'd have fallen for a crazy story like that. We were inexperienced then."

"If," Mr. Morrison said, "he weren't such an obnoxious little creep, I'd have taken him up on it. I'd like to have a look. It is just barely possible he's telling the truth."

"We promised Professor Blake we'd never buy another artifact except through a reputable dealer," Mrs. Morrison said. "Besides, Scopas' apartment is sure to be full of fleas."

"Right! Just the thought of it makes me itch." Mr. Morrison pointed to a place between his shoulder blades which his wife obligingly scratched for him. "Whew! That's better. Let's try a few more shots in this light. Okay?"

"We must have a hundred slides of the Parthenon from here."

"Not one of them does it justice. Stay right where you are."

Unlike Mr. Scopas, his feet were sure on the uneven ground as he moved into position. Not for nothing had Mr. Morrison been a member of the mountain-climbing club in his undergraduate days. Mrs. Morrison, with a resigned shrug, arranged her red sweater over her shoulders. One of her wifely duties was to be equipped at all times with a touch of red, to serve as a spot of color against gray stone or green mountain. She owned, be-

sides the sweater, a red pocketbook, a red raincoat, and a vast red straw shade hat. She looked terrible in red.

Next morning, following a restless night, Mr. Morrison woke early. In the other bed his wife slept on. He knew there'd be no going back to sleep for him. Might as well go and have a look at Scopas' ring—with no idea of buying, of course, but just for the fun of calling his bluff. He dressed quietly and slipped out.

He covered the distance rapidly, consulting his map of the city from time to time. Though a short man, only a couple of inches taller than his wife, he was thin and wiry. It wasn't fair, she had complained only last night. He ate far more than she did. He had no right to his slim figure while she suffered a steadily increasing girth. He had laughed and ordered more dessert for both of them. The layers of pastry were thin as tissue paper and oozed butter, honey, and other high-calorie, cholesterol-laden undesirables. "We'll walk it off tomorrow," he had said. It made no difference to him that his wife's figure did not show off a frock to good advantage. Besides, when hungry, she was cross, and that did matter. Nothing else upset her equanimity.

The home of Mr. Scopas was in a most unsavory neighborhood. The stench from the gutter was thoroughly uncivilized. Handkerchief to nose, Mr. Morrison sprinted up the four flights of stairs and knocked.

"Who is it?" came a whisper through the door.

"Morrison! Let me in!" he shouted, trying unsuccessfully to breathe in air without smelling it.

"Shhhhh!" The door opened, a pudgy, hairy hand reached out, clutched his sleeve, and drew him in. Scopas closed and locked the door. "So you come after all? Good! My wife sleeps. Come, we go in the kitchen."

They tiptoed down a narrow dark hall. In the kitchen, Scopas opened a battered tin box and took out several half-eaten loaves of bread. From behind them, he produced the end of a final loaf, green with mold. "Good hiding place, no?" His fat fingers fumbled in the moldy remnant. "Ah! I have it!" He wiped the ring on a grimy rag, no less unsavory than the moldy bread, then handed it to Mr. Morrison, who received it without enthusiasm and carried it to the narrow dirty window.

The ring consisted of a circular piece of some semiprecious stone—chalcedony, probably—set in silver and carved. It was hard to see clearly. Deciding to sacrifice his handkerchief to the cause of arche-

ology, Mr. Morrison scrubbed a clean spot on the window pane. Now he could see the carving. It was a seated monkey, the figure distorted to fit the circular shape of the stone. Yes, both style and subject were quite typical of the Mid-Minoan period. An excited feeling began to grow in him. Surely nobody would go to this kind of trouble to create a fake. Would they? With an effort, he assumed an expression of doubt.

"Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all for a copy."

"You know it is no copy," Mr. Scopas replied with quiet assurance. "It is yours for fifty thousand drachmas."

Mr. Morrison did a rapid calculation. He had enough traveler's checks—he and Mrs. Morrison between them—so that he could pay Scopas and still finish the trip as planned. Just barely. If they were careful.

"It's worth much more than that," he said aloud. "*If* it's real . . ."

"But you will not pay more," Mr. Scopas replied with disarming candor. "The owner can live on the sum for a long time, perhaps until the Junta is overthrown and his family return to power."

Still uncertain—after all, he had been stung before—Mr. Morrison continued to hesitate.

"I hear my wife," Mr. Scopas hissed. "Better she not see you. Pay me and go."

Five minutes later, the signed traveler's checks were in the soiled fat hands of Mr. Scopas, and Mr. Morrison was hastening back to his hotel, the ring on the little finger of his left hand. He had put it on backward; all that showed was a narrow band of silver, the carved stone safely hidden in the palm of his hand. Now what? he thought. He couldn't wander around Greece with a clenched fist for the next two weeks. Nor did he care to admit his folly to his wife—not until Professor Blake had verified its authenticity. It must be hidden, not only from customs inspectors, but from Mrs. Morrison—an infinitely more difficult assignment. Where did people hide jewelry? Only diamonds were small enough to be pushed into a tube of toothpaste. There was no false bottom to the heel of his shoe. What did he own that was safe from Mrs. Morrison's tidying fingers? Ah, he had it! Shoe polish. By mutual consent, she was the laundress of drip-dries during their travels, while he attended to shoes. But what to do with the ring until he could arrange an unobserved session with his shoe-polishing kit? He was still seeking the answer to this problem when he reached his room to find

that Mrs. Morrison had solved it for him. Her bed was empty and on the pillow reposed a note, stating that she had gone to the hairdresser. She hoped he had enjoyed his walk.

Using the handle of his toothbrush, he scooped polish from the kit, inserted the ring into the hole, replaced the paste, packed it down neatly, and washed the brown stains from his improvised tool. All that now remained was to present a cool and casual air to the customs and passport inspectors. Could he do it? He considered racing back to Scopas, shoe-kit in hand, to return the ring and retrieve his money and his integrity. But he rejected this thought even as it came to him. Too late for that. He shrugged, shoved the whole matter into the back of his mind, and went in search of a morning newspaper.

It was lunchtime when Mrs. Morrison returned, demanding to know how he liked the new hairdo the Greek operator had contrived. He did his best to be satisfactory. It looked just like the old one to him, but he had been a husband too long to say so. As soon as possible, he changed the subject.

"Let's go cash some of your traveler's checks," he said. "Mine are all gone."

Mrs. Morrison looked startled. "So are mine. I haven't one left."

"All of them? Impossible! You haven't paid for a thing since we left!"

"Not a thing . . . except the wonderful surprise I bought for your birthday, dear. Now don't ask questions. It was a lot of money, I know. But when you see it, you'll say it was worth it."

He tried vainly to remember what he'd admired during the last few weeks. That chess set in Ankara, maybe?

"It better be. Nothing for it, we'll have to cut the trip short." He laughed. "Never mind. It'll be nice to get home. Seems to me you've been talking about the grandchildren a lot lately."

"You're right. I start worrying that they'll forget me. Let's count up our cash and see how many days we've got left."

Mr. Morrison kept his bills in his wallet, his coins in his pants pocket. He counted it all carefully, while Mrs. Morrison was adding up the money in her pocketbook. The total was discouragingly small.

"That'll take care of the hotel bill and a taxi to the airport," he said. "Good thing we already have our return tickets. If all the flights are sold out, we may get pretty hungry."

Mrs. Morrison yanked open a dresser drawer. "Oh, I'm not fin-

ished counting, dear," she said. "There's some money in my brown antelope bag, the one you bought for me in Bologna. And there must be something in my little white evening bag—from that little shop next to the hump-backed bridge in Venice, remember?"

"Women!" But Mr. Morrison smiled as he said it, for the total, when collected at last, was respectable. A call to Air Olympia brought good news: a cancellation had just come in. There would be no problem about changing the reservations to an early-morning flight. Since this was their last night, they decided to splurge by going out to dinner at the Grande Bretagne.

"Pack first, dinner afterwards," Mrs. Morrison said. "When we get back, we'll be full of good food and good wine and we won't want to be bothered."

They returned quite late after dinner. Mr. Morrison, having unlocked the door to their room, stepped aside to let his wife go first. She advanced into the room and then, with a small startled shriek, backed out again, treading rather heavily on Mr. Morrison's toe.

"Ouch! What the devil's the matter with you?" he shouted.

"There's a man . . . a man in there! Oh, dear, do be careful . . ."

Pushing her aside, Mr. Morrison catapulted himself into the room, just in time to see a foot disappear over the balcony railing. He ran out and looked over. A dim figure was running down the street. No use shouting; no one else in sight. He turned back into the room, which was a shambles.

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Morrison wailed. "All that packing to do over again!"

"Never mind the packing! What's he stolen?"

Mr. Morrison began rapidly to sort out their belongings. The shoe-polishing kit lay under a heap of tumbled sweaters. He contrived to drop it and in stooping to pick it up again, knocked it under the bed. He took his time about retrieving it and rose reassured. He'd managed a good look and ascertained that the smooth surface of the polish was undisturbed. If, as he was beginning to suspect, the thief had been after the ring, he'd been interrupted in time.

When at last all their belongings had been sorted out and repacked, they compared notes and decided that nothing was missing.

"He was probably looking for money," Mrs. Morrison said.

"Man, did he ever come to the wrong shop!" They laughed inordinately. Mr. Morrison felt his tension draining away. Again he

wished he'd never got himself into this. He did not have the temperament for operations outside the law.

By the time they descended from the plane at Kennedy Airport, Mr. Morrison, though his heart was pounding, felt relatively calm—at least, calmer than he had expected to feel. He had lived through the coming hour so many times in imagination, nothing could be so bad as some of his fantasies.

The customs inspector was not one of the friendly sort. He poked and peered. "What's that?" he demanded, pouncing on a white powder in the bottom of Mrs. Morrison's carry-on.

She smiled disarmingly. "Soap flakes," she explained. "The box leaks. Isn't it a mess?"

The inspector glared. He wet his finger, dipped it in the powder, smelled it, tasted. Then he smiled too. "It *is* soap." He seemed surprised. "Okay. Close 'em up."

When they were safely out of hearing, Mrs. Morrison whispered, "Did he suspect me of smuggling in heroin? Surely no smuggler would be so careless as to spill it around loose!"

Her husband, who did not trust his voice, made no reply. Tomorrow, he was thinking, he would make some excuse to get out of the house alone and pay a call on Professor Blake.

As it turned out, no excuse was needed. Struggling to relaunch her household, Mrs. Morrison ignored him. He skulked next door with the ring.

"Scopas!" Professor Blake shouted subsequently. "That crook?" He covered his eyes with his hand. "Oh no! When I gave you the address, I warned you. His shop is okay for handwoven stuff, I said. But nothing valuable."

"Well, take a look and let me know the worst."

The professor took the ring and inspected it carefully. He whistled softly between his teeth. Mr. Morrison, annoyed to find that he was holding his breath, let it out with an explosive sound.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Can't be sure . . . yet." Professor Blake wrapped the ring carefully in his handkerchief before tucking it into his pocket. "Let you know in a few days."

Mr. Morrison went home to lunch.

"Where've you been?" Mrs. Morrison asked.

His weary mind went blank. He could think of no reasonable story. Fed up with the strain of keeping secrets from his wife, he blurted out the whole tale. At the end, Mrs. Morrison got up and ran out

of the room. In a moment she was back, hand outstretched. In the palm lay a ring, chalcedony set in silver. What Mr. Morrison said then was not language a respectable middle-aged man customarily uses to address the wife of his bosom.

"I don't blame you," she said, when at last he ran down, having exhausted his limited stock of obscenities. "I deserve it. But you're just as bad."

"When did you go to see Scopas?" Mr. Morrison asked.

"It must have been just after you left. We probably missed each other by only a few minutes. When I woke up, you were gone, so I rushed through my dressing and got to his place a few minutes before nine. I pretended I'd been to the hairdresser. I knew you wouldn't know the difference!"

"Where did you hide the ring, to get it past customs?"

"Here." She held out her left hand. "I told you I cut myself peeling an orange, but that wasn't true. This was just to hide the ring." She ripped off the strip bandage from the middle finger, revealing the undamaged skin beneath. "I can take it off now, you know. When I first brought the ring back to the hotel, I put it in my box of soap flakes. I thought of leaving it there, but at the last minute I changed my mind. Can you imagine how I'd have felt if I hadn't—when the customs officer got so nosy about the spilled soap in my carry-on?" She stood up. "Well, I might as well take this over to Professor Blake."

"Why bother? Just admit it: we got taken again, dear."

She set her jaw in an unaccustomed stubborn line. "I'm a pretty good judge of old jewelry by now. This looks real to me. The ring you bought is counterfeit. Mine's not."

"That's ridiculous! If Scopas is dealing in these fakes, he's got a dozen of 'em, all alike, one for every idiot that comes along."

"Maybe so. But I bet you he had a real one to begin with, to copy. Probably he ran out of fakes, so he sold me the original. Say! Maybe he did it by mistake! Oh, I hope so. Can you imagine his face when he realizes . . . ?"

Her giggle and his booming laugh filled the room. Then, abruptly, he stopped. "You know, you might be right? I mean, about his having an authentic ring for copying. That's got to be it. And he sold it to me, because he knew darn well I'd be able to tell the difference." Suddenly he let out a shout. "Hey! How thick-headed can we be? That last night at the hotel . . . Scopas sent that guy to

go through our baggage. He wasn't after money. He wanted that ring back!"

"Of course! It's a good thing we left in such a hurry. Heaven knows what he'd have tried next. Well, I'm taking this to Professor Blake, right this minute. We'll see who knows best."

It was several days before the professor summoned them.

"I have wonderful news." He beamed. "Scopas isn't quite as much of a crook as we thought. He actually sold you a fine specimen. Even taking into account the other ring—which is a fake, of course—you got a bargain. It's worth three times what you paid for the pair of them. I suggest you present this valuable antiquity to the museum." He placed one of the rings, which now rested on a bed of black velvet, on the coffee table. The other, he handed to Mrs. Morrison. "Wear it as a souvenir," he said.

Watching his wife slip the ring on her finger, Mr. Morrison grinned. "Wow! What a relief!" he said. "I don't like being made a fool of. Knew darn well that ring was the real thing."

His wife glared at him. "*This* is the ring you bought," she cried, holding out her hand. "It's easy to see the difference. This would never have fooled me!"

Together they turned on the professor. "Well?" Mr. Morrison added, "Mine was the real one, wasn't it?" as his wife shrilled, "Tell him he was the one who got cheated."

Professor Blake shook his head and smiled a benevolent smile. "Dear friends," he said, "during the tests, we put the two rings side by side. I haven't the faintest idea which is which. It doesn't matter. When you present the ring to the museum, a card will be printed to read, 'Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Morrison.' Congratulations to you both!"

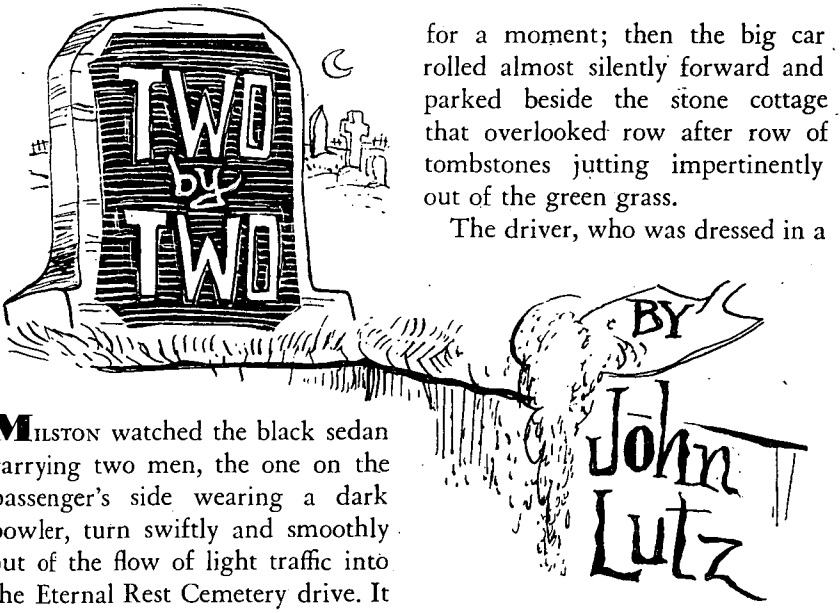
For a moment the Morrisons sat in silence, glowering alternately at him and at each other.

"I don't believe you," Mrs. Morrison said at last. "You know which is which. You just don't want to tell us."

"You old devil! You did it on purpose!" Mr. Morrison cried.

The professor shook his head. "That would be most unethical. How can you suggest such a thing?" The lines of his face were stern. But Mr. Morrison could have sworn that he saw the suggestion of a twinkle in the professor's eyes.

Conscience (or greed) to the contrary, to be safe is to be silent.



MILSTON watched the black sedan carrying two men, the one on the passenger's side wearing a dark bowler, turn swiftly and smoothly out of the flow of light traffic into the Eternal Rest Cemetery drive. It was halfway up the winding concrete toward the cottage when another black sedan carrying two men, passenger wearing a dark bowler, sped majestically past the wide wrought-iron gates of the cemetery without hesitation and continued down Creighton Boulevard. The car that had turned into the cemetery stopped, and the driver twisted his head to study the street beyond the iron gate intently for a moment; then the big car rolled almost silently forward and parked beside the stone cottage that overlooked row after row of tombstones jutting impertinently out of the green grass.

The driver, who was dressed in a neat blue business suit, got out and walked around to open the door. Mr. Lagress, blunt-featured, heavy-set, well-groomed, and with the wary, direct gaze of a hungry animal, climbed out of the car and adjusted the bowler to fit at a precise angle on his balding head. He turned in a circle to take in the spacious grounds about him, then looked steadily at the cottage door.

As if at the bidding of his stare,

the heavy wooden door opened and Milston stepped outside and blinked at the sunlight.

"Morning, Mr. Lagress."

Lagress nodded.

"I'm alone," Milston said, cutting off the last word with a brief smile that didn't move his lips but seemed to pass over his entire lean, bony face. He watched Mr. Lagress very carefully.

A huge sycamore tree grew behind the cottage, casting half of it in shade and half in bright sunlight. Lagress glanced at his driver, who was standing motionless in the shade. "It's okay," he said. "I'll be a minute."

Milston let out a long breath and led Lagress into the dim cottage. A threadbare sofa stood against one wall, and in front of it was an incongruous oak coffee table. On the floor was a faded oval rug that seemed somehow misshapen. Shelves containing assorted odds and ends lined the wall by the door, and there was a battered desk with some papers on it weighted by half a brick.

"Here we can talk, you know, in private," Milston said in a voice that was nevertheless a whisper.

Lagress stood like a pompous penguin amidst his shabby surroundings and gazed into the tiny kitchen and out the rear window at the building where the grave-digging equipment was kept. "Is it important, Milston?"

"Important?" Milston seemed to consider the question for the first time. "'Course it is, Mr. Lagress. Lord knows you're a busy man . . . nobody but me knows how busy you really are," and Milston laughed inwardly at this despite his nervousness.

Lagress gave no outward sign of emotion, but his gaze moved to steady itself on the lean man's shadowed face.

"I mean to say," Milston's words came slowly and carefully, "that you're a busy man 'cause you're a smart man—not like the likes of me. Not smart I am, but so to speak, I know where the bodies are buried." He smiled a bit at that little joke. "Like it would take a smart man like you to have figured this thing out years ago, how to get rid of certain bodies, to have me bury them directly on top of the caskets in fresh graves. One grave, two bodies . . . Who'd think to look for a body in a grave, I ask you? The police, they drag rivers and check all over when one of your . . . eh, acquaintances is missing, but they never look for a body in a grave; not two bodies, anyways. What better way for the syndicate to be getting rid of bodies all these years?"

Lagress stood still. "Syndicate?"

Milston's bony shoulders shrugged beneath his faded plaid shirt. "Organization, you might say."

"The 'organization' pays you well to dispose of the bodies of certain people," Lagress said. "I take it you haven't called me here to complain."

"Complain? Me? No, I called you here for something more important than complaining. You see, like I said, I know where the organization's bodies are buried. That seems to me to be worth something, don't you think?"

"I think that's a dangerous thing to know," Lagress said in a flat voice.

"Oh, it is, it is." Milston felt the beat of his heart throughout his entire body. "You and me think the same, I can tell. I got to considering that the other day, that my only safety is in my usefulness to you, so I figured I best take some sort of added precaution."

Lagress lighted a cigarette, his glance flitting to Milston over the flame before he clicked the lighter shut with his black-gloved hand. "Precaution?"

"You're the one I always heard say it," Milston said. "Always be double safe, is what I heard you say. Last time I heard you say it was six months ago, when I was digging the grave for that Wilson fella, the one the newspapers said disappeared with all that money."

"And what precaution did you take?" Lagress asked.

Milston forced the words out. "I been to a lawyer."

"Lawyer?" Lagress inhaled deeply on his cigarette. "What lawyer?"

"Oh, I didn't tell him anything," Milston said quickly, and he seemed to back into the shadows. "I was just playing it safe, Mr. Lagress, like you do when you have that car just like yours with the two men in it so it'll be hard to follow you. I saw it go past out the window. 'Course, I was watching for it."

"If you didn't tell this lawyer anything," Lagress said, "why did you go to see him?"

"I left him a letter," Milston said, "and I left him instructions to open it if anything happens to me."

"Ah, yes, a letter," Lagress said with almost a smile. "And what's in this letter?"

"It don't say much," Milston said in a quick voice. "But there's a map with it, a map of the cemetery with certain graves with X's on 'em."

"Insurance," Lagress said in a suddenly friendly voice. "It's double safe to have insurance." He waited.

"I knew you'd see it same as

me," Milston said, feeling better now. "But then I got to thinking some more, same as you would, I'm sure. I got to thinking, my knowledge is worth something. Doctors, lawyers, get paid for their knowledge, so why not me?"

"Why not?" Lagress said.

"Sure, no reason." Milston wiped his lips on his shirt sleeve. "I figure three thousand a month ain't much. Lots of doctors make more'n that." He paused awkwardly, feeling the weight of his words.

Lagress stood for a moment, gazing at the jars and chipped knick-knacks on the dusty shelves by the desk. "This is what . . . the fifteenth?" he asked.

"Sure is, Mr. Lagress, fifteenth of September."

"Well . . ." Lagress' thin lips slipped sideways into a smile. "Can't blame you for wanting a piece of the pie, I suppose. It'll be mailed to you. Fifteenth of each month okay?"

"Sure, Mr. Lagress, okay. It ain't like I was asking for so much, you know."

"I know," Lagress said. "Your first payment will be in tomorrow's mail." He moved toward the door, but Milston was there ahead of him, opening it for him to let in a burst of swirling sunlight.

"Anytime you need something . . . you know . . . put away," Milston said, following him to the car, "you just let me know. The digger's in that building there, always gassed up and ready to go." Milston suddenly felt a grateful affection for Mr. Lagress, whom he'd always regarded with awe and respect.

"I'll let you know," Lagress said as his driver and bodyguard shut the car door for him and walked around to get in on the wheel side. Milston watched from outside the closed window as Lagress raised a gloved hand in a perfunctory wave and the big car rolled away.

As they turned from the cemetery drive onto Creighton Boulevard, neither Lagress nor his driver glanced at the identical car, carrying two men, that had been waiting up the street and now passed them going the other direction.

An envelope arrived for Milston the very next day, and he opened it with shaking hands and an elated heart. It contained thirty well-worn and crinkled hundred dollar bills; and it was only three days later that Lagress called and told him he needed something 'put away' at two o'clock the next morning.

A full moon shone opaquely through black clouds at two o'clock Wednesday morning as Milston saw the blink of headlights and swung the iron gates wide, with a

cautious glance up and down the otherwise deserted street.

A dark-colored panel truck approached, killed its headlights, and without pause turned through the gate and continued up the winding cemetery drive. Milston closed and locked the gate, then walked with hurried strides after the truck. Approaching through the darkness, he broke stride as he saw the stocky, dark form of Lagress standing beside the truck.

"Mr. Lagress," Milston said, breathing rather hard, "must surely be an important one for you to be here," and his mind was spinning with suspicion and fear.

Lagress nodded. "Just being on the safe side, Milston."

Milston's lean body tensed with a stronger wave of fear. This time there might not be a body in the back of the truck.

"Have you got the grave dug?" Lagress asked.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Lagress." Milston felt as if he might bolt and run at any second, but he forced himself to be steady. "Over by that stone angel. I'm putting this one on top of Mrs. Doan, poor woman just buried yesterday . . . A young woman, too."

"Interesting," Lagress said. "Let's get this over with. The less time we spend here the safer it is."

They walked behind the truck as it rolled toward the stone angel and the open grave.

The grave was beautifully symmetrical, with straight, steep sides that fell away into blackness, and despite his uneasiness, Milston looked at it with a certain pride.

Two men got out of the truck. They were both big and wore dark overcoats and gloves. Milston watched them as they walked to the back of the truck and opened the doors. He felt like shouting with relief as he saw them slide the black oilskin bundle from the back of the truck.

"Dump him right in and I'll fill 'er up," he said in a noticeably lighter tone. "It's a good deep grave."

"Maybe you ought to look at him first," Lagress said.

The fear hit Milston again. "Look at him?"

One of the big men had stooped and parted the black oilskin to reveal a pale and peaceful face that seemed blissfully asleep in the moonlight.

Milston's body gave a frightened little start, and he couldn't stop looking at that stone-like face.

"Recognize him?" Lagress asked.

Milston swallowed and nodded. "It's Mr. Spangler." He forced himself to look at Lagress now.

Lagress nodded. "Your lawyer." He reached into his overcoat and

drew out an envelope. "Know what this is?"

"My . . . letter," Milston said in a choking voice.

Lagress smiled and nodded. He tore the envelope and its contents into small pieces and let them flutter down into the open grave. Then he drew a folded piece of white paper from inside his coat. "Know what this is?" he asked again in the same flat voice.

Milston shook his head, wincing at the muted thud of Mr. Spangler as the dark oilskin bundle was tossed into the grave.

"This is your note to your employer," Lagress said, "written by one of the best forgers in the country. It says how you decided to quit and go live with some relatives in Canada."

Milston felt himself begin to tremble. Each of his arms was held now by an iron-hard grip as he was flanked by the two big men.

"You didn't think we'd let you drain us of all that money, did you?" Lagress said. "You should have heeded my advice, Milston, and played it safe."

Milston's body arched and he gave a cry of fear as a piercing pain shot through the left side of his neck. Then the man on his right plunged another hypodermic needle through the skin of his thigh. Suddenly he felt nothing.

"That's sodium pentothal," Lagress said calmly, as if he were teaching a course in pharmacy. "It's nice and neat and it makes you very tired very quickly."

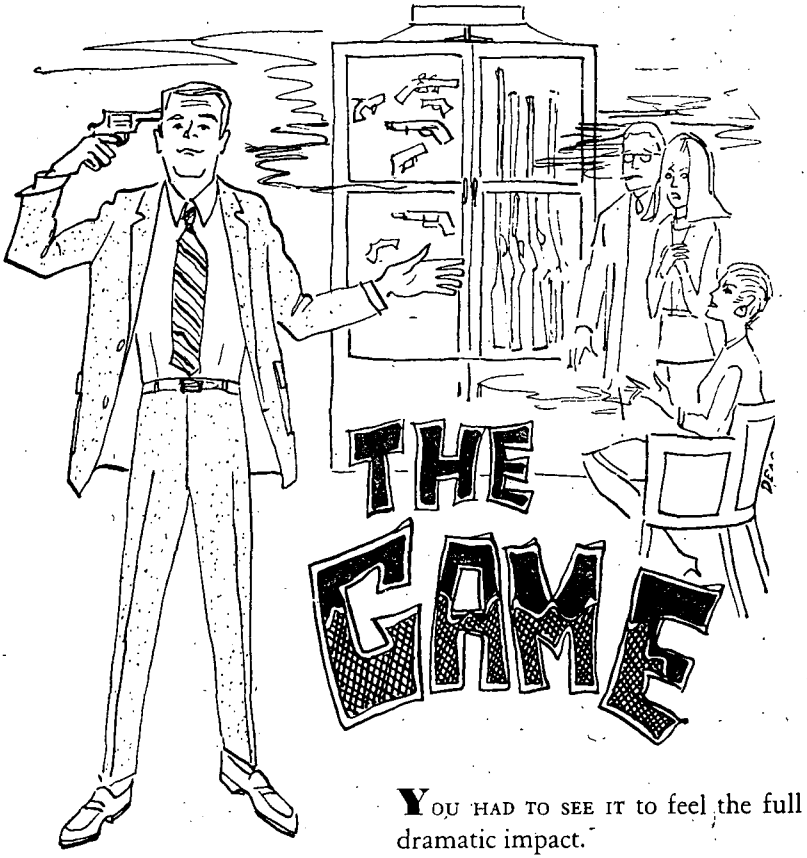
. . . *Very quickly.* Lagress was right. Milston did feel sleepy. He was rocking on stiff legs and his mouth was gaping.

Lagress clucked his tongue and his voice came from a great distance. ". . . should have played it safe . . . always . . . double safe."

Milston widened his eyes and tried to move his stiff jaws, but the moon seemed to sweep over him in a mad arc as he was toppled backward into the grave atop the oilskin bundle. He didn't even feel himself land on top of Mr. Spangler. Sluggish terror moved through his drugged body as he struggled to get up and found that his limbs wouldn't respond. He was heavy, as heavy as the earth itself. He heard the faraway, incomprehensible gurgle that came out when he moved his numbed jaws and tried again to tell Lagress that he *had* played it safe—even double safe; that he'd left a second letter, with a second lawyer.

From a thousand miles above Milston came the dull scrape of metal, and the dirt began to fall around him.

It well may be that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world —but innuendo is not to be dismissed lightly.

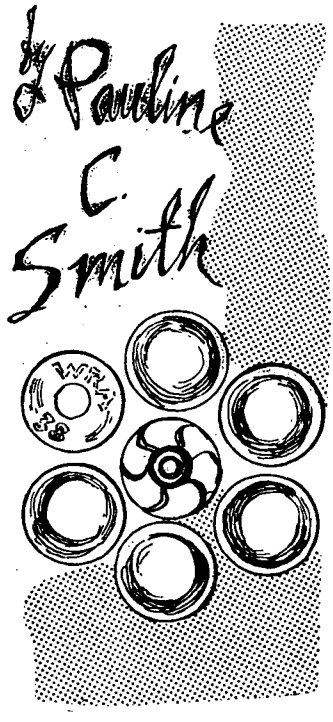


THE GAME

YOU HAD TO SEE IT to feel the full dramatic impact.

He made a production of it. I mean, he'd walk over to the gun case and open it with a flourish.

That's when everybody stopped drinking, stopped talking, stopped everything. The guests that were relaxed on chairs and couches straightened their spines. Those leaning on the wet bar twisted around for a better view.



The happening always took place in the Gerrolds' big basement rumpus room where the gun case was an impressive piece of equipment, a built-in glass affair with one of those hooded brass fixtures above it like they use to light up valuable paintings.

Oh, it was a spectacular act, the way he stood there, contemplating that sweet collection of Smith & Wessons, deciding which one he'd use for his performance. I watched it maybe a dozen times, each time being as dramatically terrifying as the first.

I was young then, fresh out of law school, a new and very minor member of *Gerrold and Hanawalt,* doing the routine jobs of a law office, a glorified clerk I suppose I was, hoping and dreaming of a day when the firm name would read, *Gerrold, Hanawalt and Brown.* Well, that never came about because *Gerrold and Hanawalt* is gone and although my office is still a part of that old suite in the Broadway Building, mine is the one-man law firm of *Peter Brown, Attorney.*

I have ten years more knowledge now of law and of life, and I know how Bat Gerrold did his trick. I know, too, why it didn't work that last time, and I *think* I know the motivation, but what I *don't* know are the background events. Was there, in actuality, a crime? If so, what crime? And was there collusion?

But I can remember how it was ten years ago when I was young and suffered from a feeling of inferiority at being young and only a clerk to two brilliant law partners,

allowed entrance into their social life by way of offhand token invitations . . . "Drop up to the house, Pete. We're giving a bash . . ." always extended by Bat Gerrold.

He, with his wife Michele, gave the parties in their big and beautiful home with the gun case in the basement rumpus room. Corwin Hanawalt never entertained in the only "penthouse" we had in town, his apartment atop the Broadway Building, for he was a sought-after bachelor, so not required to seek. I never even saw his apartment until that last time at the party he so unexpectedly gave in that penthouse apartment with *his* gun case, which was a surprise.

I suppose, being young, I didn't feel the necessity to prove myself by feats of derring-do, as did Bat Gerrold, or by the standoffish suavity denoting steadfast purpose, as did Corwin Hanawalt. I suppose, therefore, I became a devout observer and so noticed things that escaped the friends and guests of the Gerrolds and, finally, of Corwin Hanawalt, but being an observer did not exclude me from the emotional impact of Bat Gerrold's repeated performance. My heart tripped each time it was offered. My breath clogged my throat, to finally let go when the gun clicked and Bat stood there, smiling and alive . . . except for that last time, of course.

While the party swung, Bat Gerrold would suddenly set down his glass, then easily and with his panther-like tread, he'd walk to the gun case. I often wondered what tripped the scene, and began to look for clues. Was it a glance between Corwin Hanawalt and Michele Gerrold? Oh, the glances happened all right. In a room smoky with cigarettes, noisy with conversation, jumping with stereo music, the look one to the other and between them, cut through the smoke and sound and boxed the two together, alone and isolated. Was it their physical separation from the crowd for an instant? Or was it only the metabolic imbalance within Bat when he felt he needed a shot of adrenalin, to cause him to walk to the gun cabinet, unlock it, open it with a flourish, pausing to listen as the room abated its noise and muted its music?

By the time he had selected the Smith & Wesson he would use and reached into the case for the one bullet to insert, even the smoke was diffused, for by then the guests had stubbed out their cigarettes.

This was the dramatic moment, rising to its peak of perfection. Most of the guests had seen it before but were not inured to it, for

no one with any sensibility enjoys watching a gamble with death. So those guests who had seen it before became rigid, and those few who had not, resisted watching, with small cries of protest and clapped hands before the eyes.

Always and always, even after her pleas became perfunctory—at least to my objective ears—Michele begged Bat not to go through with it. "Not again!" she cried. "Bat, please, not again. You can't be lucky every time."

"But I can try, baby," he answered with a smile. "I can always try."

By then, the single cartridge was in place. Bat stood spraddle-legged in the center of the rumpus room. In all that silence, he spun the cylinder—once perhaps, but very often twice or more times. This spinning ritual heightened the drama and I thought that was the reason for it, to get the crowd to pay attention; but Bat didn't have to do that. They always paid attention.

Then he lifted the gun, pointing it—resting it actually—against his right temple and pulled the trigger.

Click! And there he stood, upright and alive, laughing at us.

No matter how often I saw it, in whatever group down in that basement rumpus room, the drama was ever suspenseful with a sensational climax of laughter and life, until the actual and final climax—that is, the one played out in Corwin Hanawalt's penthouse—and that time was the most sensational of all.

I didn't really like Bat Gerrold. He was a trickster, too bright, too erratic, too careless, too everything, I guess. I didn't really like Corwin Hanawalt either. He was devious and cool, too reserved, too careful. But I admired both of them and wanted to be a little like each. Much of my job in the law office was plugging the holes in Bat's cases before he brought them to court. If I missed a hole, Corwin found it and plugged it himself, letting me know of my remission by innuendo; if I didn't plug it tight enough, I felt the stab of Bat's biting sarcasm.

That's the way they were, and that's the way I was ten years ago, when Corwin said, in his diffident, very clipped speech, "Peter, I am having a small dinner at my place. I hope you can attend."

Well, gosh, of course I would. What else? Dinner in the only penthouse in town! I wouldn't miss it for anything.

I couldn't imagine . . . so I said, like a sophomore, "How come?"

Corwin laughed and told me it was a celebration. "Celebrating the Gerrolds' seventh wedding anniversary," he said. I suppose that

made sense, after all, Bat being his partner and Michele . . . Well, Michele seemed to be something special to him. I don't suppose anyone else ever noticed it, since everyone else was older and each had an axe to grind and so looked inward, but I, still in the plastic age ready to be molded, noticed.

I was the observer and caught all kinds of nuances that probably weren't too apparent. Anyway, Corwin was never blatant about his feelings. Sometimes I wondered if he had any, his personality and his actions being so understated.

The penthouse apartment was just like Corwin, quietly elegant. It was a warm summer evening and we ate out on the terrace with the city lights below. The dinner party was pleasant, low-key and tinkling.

It was afterward, when we took our liqueurs and coffee into what Corwin called his study that things livened up. For one thing, there against the wall, probably twice as large as Bat's, stood a gun case with as beautiful a display of weaponry as you'd ever want to see, all racked up.

"I didn't know you collected . . ." I remember that those were Bat's first words. "Corwin, I didn't know."

You could feel it right there in the shadowy room with the lamps making pools of light on the rug, you could feel Bat's ego deflate. *He* was the guy with the guns and it had always been *he* who made the big display, the splash, the production. He shrank there, within those circular pools of light, as he said, "You never told me you had a gun collection, Corwin."

"You never asked," said Corwin easily.

He turned, then, to his guests. I remember he was particularly attentive to Michele, seating her in the big leather chair that was surely especially his on the nights he was alone, which were probably most nights. He murmured a host-murmur, making sure each guest had been supplied with coffee, that each had a liqueur.

"I'll try one," said Bat, in a hurry, almost out of breath, as if he were afraid that Corwin would get there first with the single bullet in a chamber and the high drama of the death gamble, as he would have every right to do, it being his house, his gun collection, his gun and his party.

"One what?" said Corwin, even while he turned the key on the cabinet.

I was watching and I was listening, being the observer. All the others were paying attention to their own charisma, but I was watching. I saw Bat reach out for a gun, and I heard Corwin say, "I suggest this

one, Bat. It's oiled and ready for use."

I am not an expert on guns, but those guns *all* seemed to be in excellent shape, showing the loving care that a true gun collector gives to his collection. I *think*, but cannot be sure, that the gun Bat reached for was a familiar one, a Smith & Wesson, a twin to the one in his own case, but the one Corwin selected for him, not by touch but by innuendo, was a Colt. That part I *know*, because it was a Colt on the rug by the side of Bat when it was all over.

The guests began to settle into their customary rigidity of attention. They stubbed out their cigarettes, drained their liqueur glasses, pushed back their coffee cups, as Corwin handed Bat the cartridge to fit into the chamber of the Colt he held in his hands.

Michele half rose, with her usual protestation: "No, Bat. Please. Not now. Not again," but Bat slipped the cartridge into place and spun the cylinder.

It was quiet . . . dead quiet.

Bat was again in his element. He had the floor. He held the tense and quaking attention of his audience.

Michele's wide pansy eyes were upon him, unblinking and without expression. Corwin had faded somewhere into the shadows. Corwin always seemed to slip into the background.

Bat went through his usual routine. He spun the chamber, glanced at it; spun it again and glanced at it once more.

I don't know how the rest of them felt, but my nerves were ready to snap.

Bat widened his stance. I remember staring at the knife crease of his slacks. I could not see his face too clearly; the dark lamp shades threw it into the shadow and the cones of light rising from the shades lit angles on the walls and widened to glow against the ceiling. The glint of the gun as he raised it and pointed it at his temple held an old pewter sheen in the dusk of the room. He hesitated for one long, breath-held minute.

Then he pressed his finger on the trigger.

The shot roared.

Bat crumpled slowly, and as he fell, what was left of his face held total surprise just before it froze into no expression at all.

I remember the catatonic moments after he had fallen and as he lay there on the rug at our feet. I remember the heavy, shocked silence, and the sight of Corwin, out from the shadows, looking not at Bat but at Michele—and was she looking at him rather than at her freshly-dead husband?

I don't know, for at that instant, bedlam broke loose as bedlam always does on the heels of tragedy and following shock.

There were only two possible verdicts: death by suicide, or accidental death. What else?

With seven witnesses, it had to be one or the other, and with the insurance company in there fighting, suicide won. As one psychiatrist explained, "Only a man who is asking for death ever plays Russian Roulette, and only the man who begs for it plays the game over and over until, if he is not stopped, he receives the death he has been seeking, yet fighting against."

The verdict seemed to be a fair one.

All those who had known Bat, and especially the ones who had seen his game in action, spoke in erudite psychiatric terms, restating statements made at the inquest, speaking of Bat as a pseudomonopolistic egocentric who, in fact, was not just playing a dangerous parlor game to make of himself, literally, the life of the party, but was instead, with each spin of the cylinder, each click of the trigger, asking his friends to halt the action and give him back the life he was spending.

The verdict, seemingly a fair one with its psychiatric explanation, caused all Bat's friends to reel with the self-guilt that they could have stopped him if he were truly a man bent upon self-destruction and asking to be stopped. Having discussed it then, they put him and his death and their guilt quickly out of their minds and were greatly relieved when Bat's widow moved away and, shortly after that, Bat's partner left town.

The verdict of suicide seemed fair and everyone wanted to forget it. I did not.

No mention had been made of the fact that it was a Colt that had killed Bat, a friend's Colt, when always before he had used one of his own Smith & Wessons. Why should that fact be pertinent since it could only be accidental death or death by suicide—except that I thought it was murder and had thought so for ten years.

"Corwin Hanawalt." I held out my hand. "It is good to see you."

"Thank you, Peter."

Corwin didn't look ten years older, but then, a very cool, reserved, very careful man who operates mainly by innuendo doesn't age much.

"I wrote, asking you to come, relative to your uncle's estate."

"Yes, Peter," he said with just the hint of a smile around the eyes.

The same scornful smile that was once a reminder to plug up the holes in one of Bat's cases, now suggested that I get on with it, the business of a small estate involving minor negotiations.

I got on with it.

He signed the two or three papers necessary for his signature. Then he said, "Well, Peter . . ."

I said, "That didn't take long. Why not come up to the penthouse and join me in a drink?"

"The penthouse?" he said, as if he had forgotten the penthouse where it had all happened, just as Bat's friends had so intentionally and self-protectively forgotten.

"I live there," I said. "Your penthouse," and Corwin Hanawalt laughed.

We went up in the elevator and I unlocked the door and led him to what had been his study and was now mine, and switched on the lamps in the dusk and walked to the bar to mix drinks.

"Sit down," I said, and he sat, facing the gun case, remarking, as had Bat ten years ago, "I didn't know you collected guns."

"I don't," I said. "At least, it's not a serious collection," and it certainly was not that. Mine was a very small case with only two mounted guns, a Smith & Wesson and a Colt.

"It's not a collection. It's a study I've been making," I added.

I brought him his drink and sat down with mine so that we were both facing the gun case.

"A study." He looked thoughtful.

"I know how it was done, Corwin."

"You do?"

No mention had been made of Bat's murder, but he knew I was speaking of it. I was now an experienced lawyer, not a clerk still learning and eager to extract the flair of one boss and the cool of the other, disliking both.

I stood and stepped to the case. I lifted down the Smith & Wesson. I inserted one cartridge, spun the cylinder. I spun it three times before I was satisfied. I then lifted it to my temple and pulled the trigger.

The trigger clicked.

Corwin nodded.

I replaced the Smith & Wesson and reached for the Colt. Again I inserted a cartridge and again spun the cylinder.

"*Watch* it!" cried Corwin.

"I am watching it," I said. "I have *studied* it, Corwin. I know how a Smith & Wesson works. I know how a Colt works, too." I dropped the hand that held the gun to my side. "But Bat didn't know, did he?"

"Bat didn't study anything," said Corwin. "Remember?"

Oh, I remembered. I remembered the holes in his cases that Corwin plugged up if I didn't; and I remembered the hole in his knowledge of weaponry that Corwin left wide open.

I spun the cylinder once more and clicked the trigger against my temple, then put the gun back in the case and closed the glass door.

I sat down again and picked up my highball. "So it was murder."

Corwin's eyes got that half-smile. "I suppose so," he said. "It certainly wasn't suicide, as the psychiatrists so brilliantly decided. I have discovered," he said, steepling his fingers as he had always done when he meant to veer from his subject only as an explanation, but not to escape from it, "I have discovered the psychiatrists, in their attempt to psychologize, become muddily complex, and to clear up their complexities, they oversimplify."

He paused to look at me to make sure I was following him. He saw that I was not.

"First," said Corwin, "the psychiatrists made of Bat a complex and devious personality who played his Russian Roulette as a call for help, hoping each time that someone would stop him or that he would succeed. We both know, Peter, that Bat was not so complex as to gamble with his life nor so devious as to cry for help through his gamble, so we both know that, of course, Bat did not commit a simple suicide."

"It was murder," I said.

He shrugged.

"I know how it was done," I said.

"Obviously," he answered.

"You killed Bat."

"Nonsense," he said. "A gun killed Bat. A gun in Bat's hand."

"But not Bat's gun," I said, growing excited with what I had figured out through these ten years. "With Bat's gun, a Smith & Wesson, he was in danger only if the bullet was one notch to the left of the barrel."

"Right," said Corwin with admiration for a growingly-careful legal mind, "because of the Smith & Wesson counterclockwise action."

"Which is opposite to that of the Colt," I said, "and because a Smith & Wesson revolves counterclockwise, making the bullet on the left in the lethal position, Bat naturally spun the cylinder that night to place the bullet to the right of the barrel, but he was using a Colt, your Colt, and the Colt action is clockwise."

"Exactly," said Corwin, still with admiration.

"So you killed Bat," I said.

"Peter," said Corwin, a little wearily now, "Bat killed Bat by his very personality. Just as the psy-

chiatrists pointed out, he did it himself—not suicide—but he committed his own murder." Corwin stood. "My wife is with me," he said. "We'll be at the hotel for a couple of days. If you could have dinner with us while we are here . . . ?"

I made some vague reply, still thinking about Bat killing Bat. Then I jerked to attention. *His wife?*

"Michele," he said. "You remember Michele?"

Oh, I remembered Michele all right.

"I'll let myself out," he said, smiling. "I remember the way."

He turned at the study door. "Oh, by the way, if you do join us for dinner, please don't remind Michele of Bat's suicide. That was a bad time for her. The stigma, you know." He started to leave again, then turned once more. "She doesn't know one gun from another and, furthermore, she doesn't know why she should."

He was gone. I heard the elevator door clang in the hall outside the penthouse apartment.

I stepped out to the terrace and looked down upon the street. I could see Corwin far below as he stood on the curbing, with a carefully raised arm to signal for a cab. No imperious waving, no leap from the curb—but cautiously, with reserve and with innuendo—just as he had killed Bat, who died by his own hand, being simply too bright, too erratic, too careless—a trickster finally tricked.

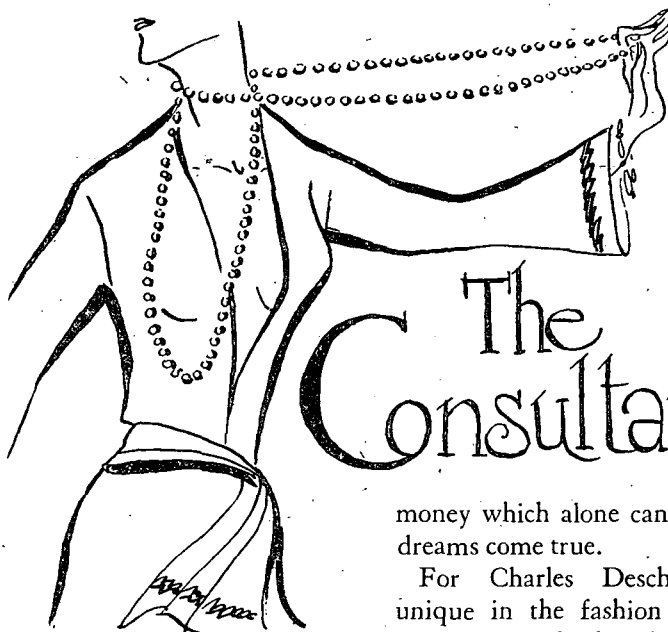
I turned from the terrace and walked back into the study. I looked upon my two-gun collection, knowing that Corwin killed Bat with caution, and Bat killed Bat without caution.

As for Michele, I knew now that there had been no collusion. Corwin made that clear when he said, "She does not know one gun from the other."

But Michele was the motive. Without her, Bat would never have played his Smith & Wesson game; and without her, Corwin would not have used his Colt to turn the game into death.

So it was murder all right. Three people killed Bat.

As signified by one 17th Century philosopher, there is, indeed, great skill in knowing how to conceal one's skill.



The Consultant

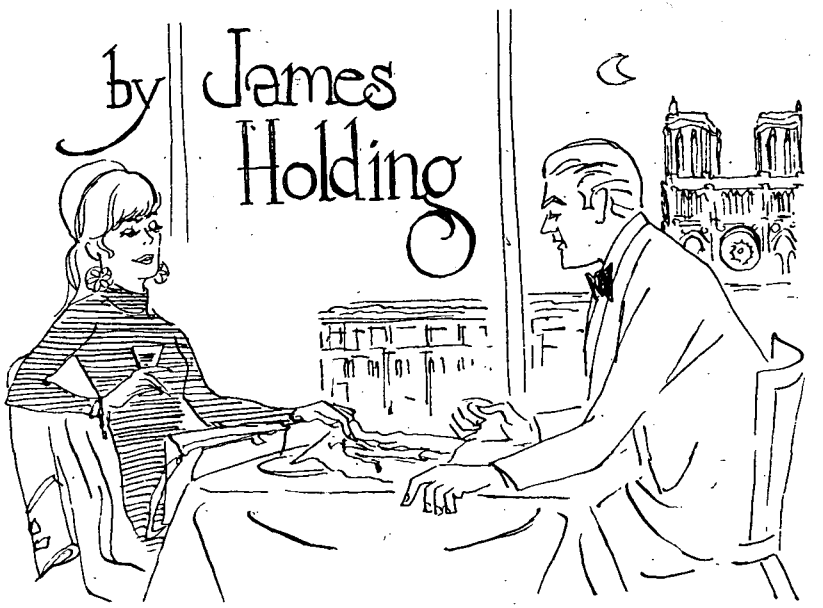
CHARLES DESCHAMPS, the Paris couturier, was going to bring down necklines in his next collection and I knew about it six months ahead of time.

Foreknowledge of a fact like that is all a good consultant needs to make him dream dreams and see visions; dreams of idleness and sybaritic luxury, and visions tinted uniformly green, like the folding money which alone can make such dreams come true.

For Charles Deschamps was unique in the fashion world, the unquestioned leader of the style parade. He was the Paris dress designer whose designs other designers copied, the ultimate arbiter of the world's fashions, and if he was going to bring necklines down in his next collection, you could bet your bottom dollar that within a very short time thereafter, necklines all over the world would inevitably follow suit. That's why the news that Deschamps intended to

return to plunging necklines woke such a fever in my usually phlegmatic blood.

This was not only a piece of news that could be turned to good account by a clever man who appreciated the possibilities; it was also a piece of news that came into my possession months before the rest of the world even suspected what Charles Deschamps was go-



ing to do next. So it was exclusive news, you might say; a scoop.

Why? Because Deschamps wrought his wonders of creation (or destruction) in utter secrecy each year, following in this respect the couturier tradition. No one, outside of his own four walls and his sworn-to-secrecy staff, ever had an inkling of what his new decrees in women's fashion were to be until, each fall, he generously permitted them to burst upon a dazzled world at a Paris showing of his latest "collection."

How then, you may well ask, did I contrive to hear of the prospective tumble in Deschamps' necklines before that public showing?

It is no great mystery, actually. I have what many would call an industrial spy in the Charles Des-

champs organization, a very attractive industrial spy named Michelle. She works as a cutter and part-time mannequin in the famous designer's salon and happens to like me. We met quite by chance. She thinks American men are glamorous and that I am the most glamorous of the lot, being without visible means of support yet usually in funds when I visit Paris, and thus able to entertain her in the most chic and expensive places. If she occasionally breaks her vow of secrecy to the House of Deschamps, it is innocently—under the influence of my seemingly aimless questioning and a glass too much of the sparkling burgundy she loves.

Thus, on a night in June, Michelle and I were dining at the Tour d'Or, a fashionable aerie in a glass-walled penthouse high above the Seine. As we ate, we could look across the river and see the towers of Notre Dame soaring upward in the moonlight. Michelle was chattering charmingly away, her tongue somewhat loosened by three glasses of wine. It was shop talk, mostly, about her colleagues at the salon, about Monsieur Charles, her employer, about the comparative merits of cutting cowl collars on the bias, about anything, in short, which came into her pretty little head. I listened, as usual, with more attention than she realized, masking my interest behind an air of casual indifference, almost boredom. I was, in fact, beginning to be bored in earnest when she brought out the tidbit about Charles Deschamps bringing down his necklines.

I almost missed it, torn as I was between the beauties of Notre Dame across the river and Michelle across the table. Yet the odd computer I have in my brain which manages, I don't know how, to sort out automatically the few tiny kernels of potentially useful information from the large cornfield of a woman's gossip, flashed me a signal at the word "necklines."

"What was that, darling?" I asked negligently. "I'm afraid I missed your last remark. The moonlight is so enchanting . . ."

Michelle dimpled. "You were enchanted by that blonde across the restaurant, admit it."

"Not true. I have barely noticed her. You mentioned necklines?"

She nodded, taking another sip of wine. "At the salon, yes. Monsieur Charles is bringing down necklines next season."

"A cataclysmic event," I offered, "that will no doubt shake the world of high fashion to its foundations." I did not yet understand how such a simple style change could have significance for me, yet

I never ignore my mental computer. I kept the subject alive, hoping for enlightenment.

"Pas de blague," said Michelle, "and I for one shall be very glad to see it happen. A woman's neck is one of her loveliest features, don't you think so?" She put up a hand to her own, covered almost entirely by a high-necked gown of Thai silk, and smiled at me.

I instantly agreed, with the more fervor since I was quite intimately acquainted with Michelle's neck. I said, somewhat cautiously, "It is rather early for Charles Deschamps to announce, is it not? With his showing still six months away?"

"Oh, he didn't announce it, silly. He never does, not even to us girls, until he can't put it off a minute longer, if he is to get his new designs made up in time for his showing."

"Ah, then, it is merely a rumor, I suppose."

"No, it will happen. I have seen some of Monsieur Charles' own sketches for his next collection. They all show lower necklines."

"You are teasing," I rallied her. "You saw his sketches? One does not see the master's sketches, does one? Such top secret documents?"

She laughed. "I *was* surprised. I went into his studio to ask a question about accessories for a pants suit he wants me to model, and he was not there. The sketches, however, were; on his drawing board, ready to be put into his safe. I just glanced through them quickly, you understand, before I really knew what they were. The safe door was standing open, you see."

"Odd," I said, refusing to waste time on her nonsequitur. "Where was Monsieur Charles?"

"He had gone to the W.C., I think." The corners of her mouth turned up. "He came back in a moment, while I was still in his studio, and put the sketches in the safe while he answered my question about accessories—all except the one I found in the wastebasket."

I gave her a severe look. "*What* did you say, my dear?"

She giggled. "One of his sketches, crumpled up and discarded in his wastebasket. Because he didn't like the design when he got it finished, I suppose." She said without guilt, "I stole it," then added at my reproving look, "it was signed, you see."

"Oh?"

Her dimples appeared and she took another sip of burgundy. "Even a discarded sketch by the great Deschamps is a collector's item. Especially if it's signed. *You* know that, darling."

"May I see it?"

She unlatched the handbag in

her lap and brought out a folded piece of artist's drawing tissue and opened it out. Then she thrust it across the table to me with a pretty air of triumph. "You see? The signature is only a little smeared. Because it's in pencil."

I was more interested in the sketch than in the unmistakable, boldly slanted signature "Deschamps" that appears on the label of every Deschamps creation. The sketch showed a three-piece costume, for afternoon wear, Michelle explained, but so ungraceful of line and so absurdly unfeminine that it might have been produced deliberately to uglify any woman who wore it, as perhaps it was. Michelle once told me that all the great male fashion designers, including Charles Deschamps, really hated women in their hearts and designed clothes that would make them appear ridiculous. Nevertheless, the neckline of the dress in the sketch *was* deeply cut—a scoop affair that dipped far enough to permit a tantalizing glimpse of cleavage.

I said to Michelle, "May I keep this for a few days?"

"Keep it? Whatever for?"

"It may be worth some real money . . . a Deschamps sketch with an authentic signature."

"But it is a keepsake!" Michelle protested.

"So is money," I said, and Michelle, being French, could not deny it.

Our waiter came and poured more burgundy into her glass. Refolding the sketch, I slipped it into my pocket. As soon as it was out of sight, Michelle forgot it.

Why did I borrow the sketch? I acted by instinct alone. And why did I feel that Charles Deschamps' neckline apostasy had significance for me? Instinct again. I can only say that somewhere in the situation lurked a fine opportunity, I was sure, to acquire a substantial consultant's fee from someone—if I could only determine from whom, for what and why.

Hours later, in my hotel bed (I stay at the Meurice when I can afford it) I pondered the problem further, waiting for the penny to drop and the conundrum to be elucidated, but my mental computer, usually so reliable, proved stubbornness itself that night. It was only when I went over Michelle's chatter at the Tour d'Or word by word that I gained a tiny foothold on the edge of an idea. Recalling one word of hers produced the miracle. The word was "accessories".

Accessories . . . Somewhere at the back of my mind there seemed to exist a fragile connection between that word and plunging

necklines. It was elusive, but I worked at it until at length a vague possibility of profit appeared. This vague possibility I duly fed into my mental computer for elaboration, and the print-out that resulted was eminently satisfactory. I am by nature a modest man, yet I admit thinking as I fell asleep that night that perhaps I was touched, however lightly, by genius. In any event, I slept the sleep that night of the able consultant who is about to make what we used to call a bundle by rendering valuable service to a rich client.

I did not see Michelle next day. Instead, I visited several high-class shops; I dawdled in a book store, leafing through scientific treatises; I obtained a first-class ticket on an evening jet for New York; and just after the dinner hour, I saw the lights delineating the French coast appear and then fade away below me.

New York did not detain me long. I visited more shops; I consulted more books, this time at the public library. I even, to my own surprise, for I detest active physical work, spent three days in the suburbs, going from door to door of numerous prosperous homes, conducting, so help me, a survey of sorts. These preliminaries out of the way, I took a jet on Saturday to Tokyo.

Inside a large Tokyo hotel, one does not know one is in Japan, but on Tuesday morning, when I left the hotel for Ashimoko's famous shop on the Ginza, Japan was all around me. The sights, smells, noises and people of the largest city in the world are like no others anywhere.

I decided to walk to my destination since Japanese taximen do not speak English. Never; at least, I never met one who could or would. Recollections of my former visits to the city, fortified by a good street map, should lead me to where I wanted to go. Strolling vigorously along past the site of Frank Lloyd Wright's beautiful old Imperial Hotel (now, alas, replaced by a glassy modern horror) I perfected my plan of operations.

Ashimoko's shop stood in central grandeur among a cluster of other smart store fronts, most of them displaying cameras, binoculars, electronic wonders, and delicate pottery. I went in, putting on my most impressively businesslike expression. Of the clerk behind the first display case I came to, I inquired for Mr. Ashimoko himself. Japanese clerks in swank shops, unlike cabdrivers, *do* speak English. I was directed politely to an elevator at the rear of the sumptuous store.

On the third floor of the building I stepped out into a deeply-car-

peted, tastefully-decorated reception room, guarded by a young Japanese girl seated at a desk before a pair of carved doors. I presented my card, asking for Mr. Ashimoko. Within two minutes, I was facing him across his handsomely inlaid desk.

That he merited his exalted station in the hierarchy of his industry was apparent at once from his demeanor. Mr. Ashimoko, even in western dress, was the picture of a dispassionate, shrewd and successful Japanese businessman. Short and rather heavily set up, as many Japanese are, he yet seemed to sit very tall behind that desk of his. His head, rather flat on top beneath two wings of raven hair parted in the middle, was slightly too big for his body. His candid gaze was the result of myopia, no doubt, yet it was candid, all the same, or seemed so at that moment as he peered at me through spectacles with heavy tortoiseshell frames. His cheeks were ruddy, their skin stretched tightly over strong bones, and his voice, when he spoke, was more mellifluous than I expected. His English, aside from a faint difficulty with the "l's" and a slight hissing of the sibilants, was excellent. I would need no interpreter here, which was a relief. Interpreters make delicate matters difficult to communicate delicately, I have found in past encounters.

My card lay on his desk top, a tiny spot of white on the large expanse of rosy wood. He said, "You are a consultant, Mr. Jones?"

"I am, sir, yes."

"Of what kind?" His lips parted politely, revealing small square teeth.

"A fashion consultant, Mr. Ashimoko. Women's fashions."

"Ah." He waited for me to state my business.

My purpose was to intrigue him a bit before we came to that, so I said, "I am also modestly qualified as a consultant on pearls."

I couldn't be sure, but it seemed to me that his candid gaze became momentarily less candid. "A pearl consultant? How interesting," he said.

He wasn't helping me any, you perceive. I ploughed doggedly ahead. "Yes. And what insignificant expertise I have in this area deals primarily with cultured pearls, Mr. Ashimoko, and with matters relating to the market for them."

Even his expressionless oriental face couldn't quite conceal from me the flash of interest my remark aroused. "It is odd," he said, "that I have not previously heard about you, then, Mr. Jones, cultured pearls being my business."

"Exactly why I am here. Your

name is synonymous with cultured pearls, if I may say so, and I wanted to come straight to the fountainhead."

"With what purpose? We need no consultant on pearls. I am, myself, without vanity, the best pearl consultant in the world."

I bowed to him from my chair, an awkward business, but always appreciated by a polite Japanese. "I am fully aware of that, of course. Still, I believe I can be of service to you. Great service."

"Please explain."

"Gladly. In doing so, I may touch upon matters already familiar to you, yet which have important bearing on my business with you. Have I your permission?"

"Of course. I am extremely curious."

"Okay." I threw in the Americanism to show him I was no snob. "So let's take a look at the cultured pearl business, shall we? First, you fellows have had a rough time of it in recent years. Very rough."

He merely shrugged, admitting nothing.

"Your troubles have stemmed from various causes," I continued, "one of them being that you failed, for a while there, to give your oysters enough living space or exactly the proper kind of food. The result was that your oysters grew lousy pearls, if you'll forgive the expression, but I must be explicit."

He said obliquely, "I went to Stanford, you know."

"Well. So you pearl cultivators here in Japan, instead of destroying those lousy pearls, tried to sell them off at low prices. Right?"

Again he shrugged, but regretfully, I thought.

"With the predictable result that world pearl prices fell, and pearl buyers, especially in America where your biggest market is, began to distrust the cultured pearl industry."

Ashimoko finally said, "So we made a mistake."

From him, I considered this an admission of moment and very encouraging. "But then you gave your oysters more space, expanded the previously limited areas of pearl culture, and the quality of your pearls began to rise again. Quantity went down, but quality went up. Am I right?"

He nodded once. "Our pearls today are more lustrous, more beautiful, better quality than ever before."

"Granted. Therefore, may I ask this question, Mr. Ashimoko? What is the average auction price for a momme in Japan this year?" (Now perhaps it is clear why I consulted those books in Paris and New York. A momme is a pearl weighing 3.75 grams, the most pop-

ular size, and a traditional measure of pearl weight.)

Deadpan, Mr. Ashimoko said, "About a dollar and seventy-five cents in your money."

"And what was the average price per momme in 1966?"

"Three dollars and a half or thereabouts."

I spread my hands. "You see? Your pearls, now finer than ever, are selling for half what they used to. Yet they are still, I believe, as expensive to produce as ever? Or more so?"

Ashimoko said quietly, "You could say that, yes."

"I do say so. It takes you three years to train a girl to place the bead of pigtoe clam in an oyster's gonad properly, so there's some chance that a pearl will grow there. It takes two or three years for the oyster to produce that pearl, *if* it produces one, for only about sixty percent of the oysters you plant produce a pearl; and most of the pearls produced by the other forty percent of your oysters are soft, discolored or misshapen. Then only a few seeded oysters out of every hundred come up with a pearl good enough to sell on the best market."

The man before me said, "I assure you, you don't need to lecture me on pearl culture. What you have said is all very true, of course, but very dull. You understand."

I gave him an apologetic glance. "May I have one more moment, sir, to point up my conclusion from these facts before I offer my consultation services?"

He nodded, although his thick fingers played an impatient tattoo on his desk top now.

I went on, "So with finer pearls than ever, an historically low price despite high production costs, and the American market still financially able to absorb with ease its usual forty percent of your output at *whatever* price you asked, your industry is still in very deep trouble. The pearl market, worldwide, is sluggish, depressed, stultified. You have virtually admitted it yourself, sir." I paused. There was no sign from him. "So the question I ask myself—and which you undoubtedly have asked yourself—is *why?*"

"You have an answer to that question?" said Mr. Ashimoko acidly.

"I have. Not because I am an expert on pearls, however, which I am not, but because the answer lies in the field of fashion, Mr. Ashimoko—women's fashion—and I am a fashion consultant."

The inscrutability of Mr. Ashimoko's features softened enough to allow a gleam of interest? amusement? anger? to be glimpsed

for a fleeting second. Then it closed in upon itself once more. He regarded me a moment in silence. "You are, of course, referring to *young* women's fashions, Mr. Jones?"

"In minor degree only, sir. You are testing me, are you not? For you must know as well as I that the chief market for your cultured pearls is not among young women. It is among women over forty."

"That is so. And as a fashion consultant, how do you explain *that*, Mr. Jones?"

I grinned at him as naturally and spontaneously as I could. "I cannot explain it with certainty, but I have long entertained a theory."

"Which is?"

"That elderly women wear pearl chokers to hide their wrinkles," I said.

Mr. Ashimoko nodded solemnly. I could tell he was not disappointed in my answer; he seemed rather pleased with it, like a teacher whose young pupil has given him a correct answer. "There is more than a grain of truth in that," he said. "However, you were about to adduce the *real* reason, or what you think is the real reason, for our depressed pearl market, were you not? And, presumably, to offer some solution to these grave problems we face?"

"Yes," I said earnestly. "The primary reason for the current poor world market for cultured pearls is simply this: that among women of all ages, high-necked dresses are so much the fashion today—the only *acceptable* fashion, indeed." I brought this out with a flourish, believing such important observations occasionally merit a dash of panache. Mr. Ashimoko merely raised his sooty eyebrows a fraction of an inch.

"I am not theorizing now, sir," I said forcefully. "I am giving you the hard fact."

"Fact?" asked Mr. Ashimoko. "You're sure?"

"Certain," I answered. "Such facts are the essential foundation upon which we fashion consultants build our recommendations, sir. We therefore make very sure of them, indeed, before we proceed to build upon them. This is such a fact. I have here . . ." and I pulled from my inside jacket pocket a sheaf of papers, "a statement from the vice president of the most famous firm of jewelers in Paris that he definitely places the blame for his poor pearl sales on the current fashion for high-necked dresses."

"Ah, so," said Mr. Ashimoko, so much like a Japanese stereotype that I shot him a sharp glance; no expression whatever on that oriental face.

"Yes, and here . . ." I selected

another paper from my sheaf, "is a similar and quite independent opinion from the head of New York's most fashionable jewelry firm. Here are fourteen similar statements by smaller but very reputable jewelers of France and America. Here are statements from a score of jewelry and department store clerks and buyers, all to the same effect."

"Hearsay evidence only, Mr. Jones." But he was listening.

"I have other testimony. Irrefutable evidence, I think, since it comes from the ladies themselves, the kind of ladies who used to buy your pearls, Mr. Ashimoko, and who do so no longer." I separated another sheet from my papers. "Here are names and addresses. The ladies are emphatic that pearls do not go well with high-necked dresses, and that therefore no truly fashion-conscious woman wears pearls anymore." I told him then about the personal survey I had made among the suburban ladies of Westchester some days before.

"How many women did you interview, Mr. Jones?"

"Thirty-three."

"All affirming your thesis?"

"All. Absolutely unanimous." They had been, too.

"Well," he said grudgingly, "it's a small sample on which to base such a generality. However, the ladies were unanimous. So please go on. You can suggest a solution to this fashion impasse?"

I had him. It seemed to me he sat forward in his chair a little. I said, "Before I provide the solution, sir, it is customary to settle upon an appropriate consultant's fee, is it not?"

"I don't know, never having had a consultant before," said Mr. Ashimoko. "But let us settle on a fee, by all means. What did you have in mind?"

"Considering the total value of the market I shall enable you to revive, my consultant's fee is a modest one, you will agree. As the largest of the Japanese pearl cultivators, you may speak for your colleagues in this business?"

"Of course. For our Pearl Growers Association, at least. What fee do you suggest?"

"One million dollars," I said.

He drew in his breath. "So high?"

It was my turn to shrug. "Large problems demand large solutions," I said somewhat sententiously. "A million dollars."

He hesitated perceptibly before asking, "Payable when?"

I played my trump card. "Only after you are completely convinced that I have made good on my contract, Mr. Ashimoko. Not a cent before you are certain that I have

definitely delivered what I promised—which should be about six months hence."

"That seems fair." He swung his chair back and forth a few times on soundless ball bearings in an access of good spirits. Or was it nerves? "Just what is it exactly that you are promising to do, Mr. Jones?"

"I propose to bring pressure to bear," I said, "on the world's leading fashion designer to make him lower the necklines of women's dresses in his next collection."

He said, "Charles Deschamps of Paris?"

"Who else? The most influential designer of them all. The world will follow his lead. Necklines will come down internationally. Pearls will once more be worn as the perfect accessory to set off the charming female flesh thus unveiled." I rather liked that phrase. "And presto, Mr. Ashimoko, your troubles are over!"

"But surely you cannot sway such a great master as Deschamps in a matter of design? Bring pressure to bear, you say. What pressure could be strong enough?"

His evident consternation pleased me. "You must leave that to me, sir. Suffice it to say that there *is* an adequate pressure . . . and I know how to apply it."

That held him for a moment, but only for a moment. His next question went right to the heart of the matter. "This pressure you speak of, Mr. Jones, would its application involve additional funds from our association? Over and above your consultant's fee?"

I waved a negligent hand. "Any expenditures necessary to apply the pressure shall be defrayed out of the fee you pay me," I said. "You may set your mind at rest on that score."

Mr. Ashimoko smiled, truly smiled, showing all his square teeth, for the first time in our interview. "I didn't know Charles Deschamps was *that* hard up," he said, "if you will excuse the Stanford expression."

Something about his tone and that wide smile made me stare at him without reply. He went blithely on, "Hard up, yes. Everybody knows he is hard pressed, this posturing gigolo in Paris who presumes to dictate women's styles." (Everybody but me. Michelle had never hinted at that.) "Rumor has it that Monsieur Deschamps is paying blackmail to any number of . . . ah . . . discarded friends. And his advertising and public relations expenses are enormous, no doubt, in addition to the overhead and salaries. But to expect him to bring down his necklines for less than a million dollars! It is incredible for

a man of Deschamps' reputation."

I agreed with him there, but I didn't say so. Better for him to think I was suggesting bribery than to suspect the truth. I said confidently, "I have already indicated, sir, that this is *my* problem, not yours, and I assure you it is not by any means insurmountable." I hesitated just the proper instant, then asked the vital question. "Is it a deal?"

Mr. Ashimoko laughed aloud, with what sounded like pure enjoyment. I couldn't have been more flabbergasted if he'd broken into tears. When his mirth had subsided somewhat, he said in a sympathetic voice, "You are too late, Mr. Jones."

"Too late?" I echoed like a fool. "Too late?"

"Four weeks too late," said my client. "Exactly four weeks ago today I, myself, journeyed to Paris and bribed Charles Deschamps to lower his necklines next fall."

I was speechless. I was also suddenly blinded to all but one shattering sight: the biggest consulting fee of my career melting sadly away like snowflakes in the sun. My jaw must have sagged, for Mr. Ashimoko said, "Don't look so surprised, man. It has been evident all along what was wrong with our pearl business. Evident to us pearl planters, that is, if not to you fashion experts." He kept all trace of irony out of that sentence, for which I gave him credit. "We all agreed, sometime ago, that high-necked women's dresses must be got rid of somehow. In fact, that was the entire burden of our most recent association meeting. Persuading Charles Deschamps to oblige us seemed the simplest way."

Shock and disappointment made me stammer, "But . . . but . . ."

"I can understand your feelings at this moment, Mr. Jones. I regret that you must lose your consultant's fee."

I swallowed and tried to pull myself together. "Under the circumstances, it is clear that such a fee is no longer at issue."

He gave a shrug. "I wish you had come to me two months ago. Then we could have reached agreement. For I can tell you in confidence that the bribe I was forced to pay Charles Deschamps was more than double the fee you asked." He shook his head. "Your pressure might have saved us money."

I felt too sick to reply.

He went on, "Do you honestly think you could have bribed Deschamps for less?" His candid gaze was suddenly as sharp as an ice pick.

Well, it wasn't Mr. Ashimoko's fault that my timing had been off.

I gave him an honest answer. I said, "I wasn't going to bribe him at all, Mr. Ashimoko. As far as that goes, I am no true fashion expert. I have been running a bluff here for your benefit, trying to earn a few dollars."

"I thought so," he said. He was quiet for a few seconds, his sharp gaze now blunted by contemplation. At length, thoughtfully, he murmured, "You call yourself a consultant, a word that is a euphemism for its own first syllable, is it not? You are a con man, in other words?"

"That's about right."

"Well," said Mr. Ashimoko with a twinkle now in the slightly slanted eyes behind the big spectacles, "don't think I condemn you for it. Far be it from me to criticize one of my own kind. I am a con man of no mean talent myself, you know."

"You?" I said.

"Certainly. I have conned millions of harmless and innocent oysters into excreting calcium carbonate for me, have I not, under the impression that they are acting in their own defense? And I have sold their pearls at a profit all over the world." He paused. "So as one con man to another, may I ask a question which has been puzzling me for some minutes?"

I nodded.

"This is it: if you weren't going to bribe Charles Deschamps to lower his necklines, how did you expect to collect your consultant's fee from us? You agreed we should pay it only *after* the fact."

I stood up. "I discovered last week that Deschamps had *already* decided to lower necklines next fall, Mr. Ashimoko. Probably, as I see now, the result of your own recent visit to him."

Ashimoko said, "You discovered this, you say? Six months ahead of his fall showing?"

"Right."

"May I ask how?"

I told him then about Michelle, about her accidental viewing of Deschamps' fall drawings, about the sketch found in his wastebasket.

When I had finished, he said apologetically, "Since we are both con men, Mr. Jones, I can't completely trust you in this matter. I wish I could. You say your friend, Mademoiselle Michelle, showed you a sketch made by Deschamps' own hand? And signed by him?"

"Yes. I have it right here if you'd care to see it. I wouldn't kid you anymore, Mr. Ashimoko, not now. What's the use?" I took the folded sketch out of my wallet. "Maybe I'll have to sell the damn thing after all, just as Michelle expects."

He held out a small hand and I passed him the sketch. He exam-

ined it carefully. "Mademoiselle Michelle found this last week? In Charles Deschamps' wastebasket?"

"Monday of last week."

He studied the sketch some more, with great deliberation. At length he left his chair and went to a small safe in a corner of his office, twirled the dial, opened the safe door, and came back to his desk with a handful of tissue paper. He held it out to me with a polite bow.

"What's this?" I asked.

His square teeth gleamed at me. "Your consultant's fee, Mr. Jones."

I didn't get it. I said, "For what?"

"For bringing us tangible proof that Charles Deschamps actually intends to keep his part of our bargain. We had only his word, you know. There could naturally be nothing in writing, so he could easily have accepted our money, refused to honor his agreement with us, and we would have no possible recourse, you see? This sketch is welcome proof that we have made a good investment, Mr. Jones, that Deschamps will actually lower his necklines. You can understand that we are vastly relieved. You have saved us six more months of uncertainty and anxiety, and given us the assurance we need to begin at once to expand our pearl production in preparation for the larger future markets we shall enjoy." He bowed again. "Therefore your consultant's fee. For services rendered."

I looked down at the crumple of tissue paper in my hand. Gingerly I drew the edges of the tissue aside. *Some consultant's fee!* I thought sourly. *A string of lousy cultured pearls that won't bring five hundred bucks at the very best.* I had visited enough jewelry stores in the past week to know that much about pearls, anyway.

As though he had read my thoughts, Mr. Ashimoko said in an amused tone, "Those are not our own product, Mr. Jones. No oysters were conned into making those. They're the real article, genuine oriental pearls, which we occasionally use for comparison purposes. I daresay the vice president of that Paris firm of jewelers you mentioned would be very glad to take them off your hands for forty thousand dollars."

I didn't know whether to believe him or not, but I slid the pearls into my pocket on the off-chance he was leveling with me . . . as one consultant to another.

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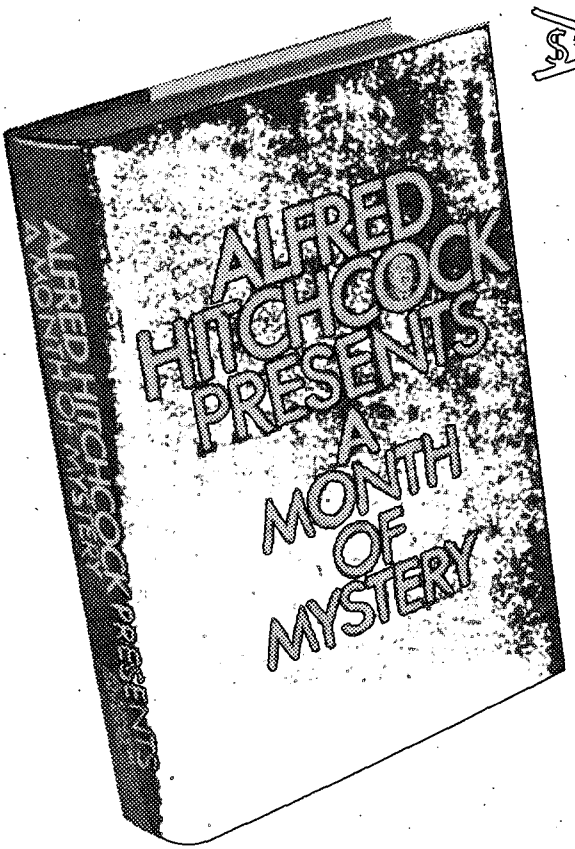

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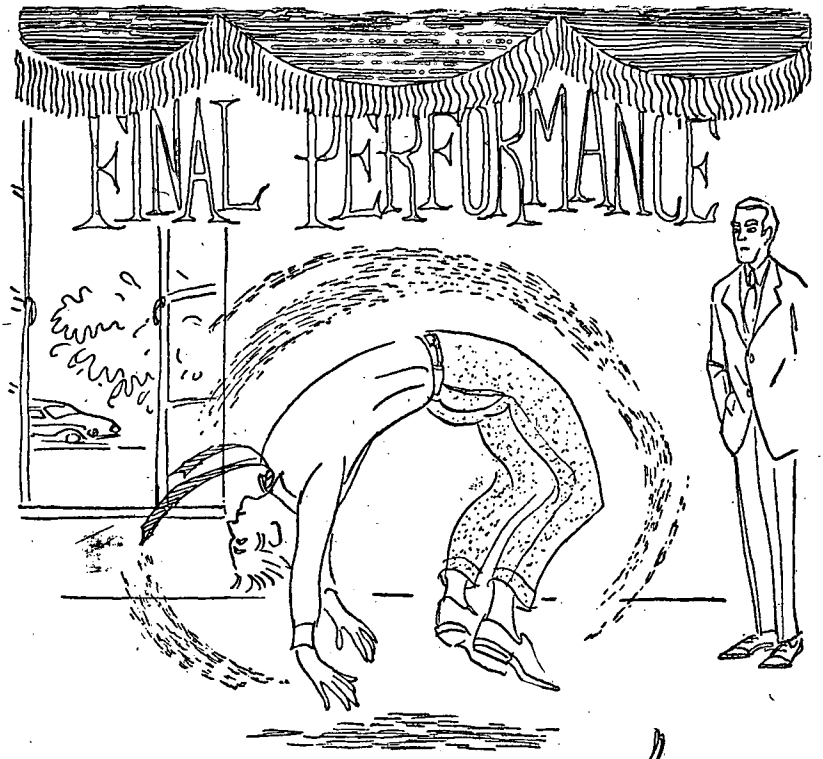
Whatever one may choose to call it, this act is surely a tough one to follow.



by George Grover Kipps

WHEN I FIRST DECIDED to kill Cousin Charlie, the thought actually made me physically ill. Not that I rejected the thought, mind you. I just got sick. You see, violence is definitely alien to my na-

ture. Hence, it was mandatory that I arrange for his unorthodox demise in an unorthodox fashion, leaving me above suspicion.

Charlie is one of those flashy show-type characters you see in circuses and carnivals, and occasionally on television. He's a tumbler-dancer-trapeze artist who's had all the best that life has to offer. In short, he's not only good, but he's a taker. As long as I've known Cousin Charlie he's been taking.

Charlie was a taker even when we were kids together, with our maiden aunt trying to bring us up. Aunt Lucy was our only living relative after all four of our parents had died in a traffic mishap, and what she didn't know about boys would have filled several volumes. In school, on the athletic field, or out with the girls, Charlie took great pains to see that the best of everything came to Charlie. He could run and jump like you wouldn't believe, but he never passed up a chance to cheat.

I remember when we were ready for the final exams that would convert us from high school seniors into college freshmen. Charlie had been leaning real heavy on the night life, and he never had a prayer of passing the exams. I figured he'd finally got in over his head, but I was wrong, as usual. One of the chicks he'd been romancing had access to the dean's files, and she supplied Charlie with all the questions and answers a week before the tests began. Charlie passed with honors while I eased through in rather mediocre fashion.

While I labored through our small college, majoring in business administration, Charlie was living it up, but good. His swarthy good looks, topped off with intense black eyes and unruly hair, bowled the girls over. It was my first experience with what the politicians would come to call the 'domino theory.' He married one comfortably rich woman ten years his senior, and when the loot ran out Charlie did likewise. A week after his divorce, he married a younger woman, also loaded.

As the years passed he amazed the experts by maintaining his incredible athletic prowess. His coordination remained a thing of sheer beauty and he could do cartwheels and backflips with the best of them.

Then he discovered Glenda, the only hometown girl ever to make international headlines.

Glenda had been on the U.S. gymnastics team at the Olympics. She wasn't rich, but with her beauty and talent she didn't need money. After the Olympics she'd signed on with a circus as a trapeze

performer. To further his courtship, Charlie signed on with the same circus. The newspapers kept the town informed on their itinerary: London . . . Paris . . . Rome . . . Whenever Aunt Lucy saw Charlie on television, she'd flip. "Isn't it wonderful that Charles is so successful and famous?" Somehow all the blood and sweat I'd poured into my work didn't impress her. I owned three luxury apartments, a shoe repair shop and two cafes by then, and was even handling all of Aunt Lucy's paperwork. But I'd never gone to Europe or been on TV. . .

For a while after they were married, Glenda and Charlie had their own act. Then she began to appear less and less. Finally she stopped performing altogether and Charlie blossomed out with a petite redhead. The years rolled by as they are wont to do, and I lost track of both of them. Then, one morning I looked up from my desk, and there stood Glenda, as slim and pretty as ever. Up close I could see the lines around her eyes, lines brought on by worry and fear. Beside her were two boys and a girl. They all had Charlie's good looks, but there the similarity ended. Somewhere in the mysterious reproductive processes, the shifty-eyed greed of Charlie had been eradicated. Glenda had instilled in all three of them her own charm and level-headed integrity.

I pretended not to see the frayed cuffs and half-soled shoes, and slid a chair under Glenda. "It's nice to see you, beautiful. How are tricks?"

She smiled faintly. "I've seen better times . . . and worse. . ."

"And Charlie?" I asked without thinking.

A cloud crossed her pretty blue eyes. "He left me in Brussels two years ago. Then, last winter, he divorced me. I haven't seen him or heard of him since."

"You been keeping up with your secretarial skills?" I asked. "My secretary, Mrs. Jamison, is retiring next week, and I still haven't picked her replacement. Besides, I just happen to have a nice warm suite available in one of my apartments. It could use a ready-made family. As a matter of fact, there's a baby-sitter on the ground floor, rear. What more could you ask for?"

Glenda wasn't the type to go for charity. She shook her head. "I couldn't, LeRoy. . ."

I looked down at the kids. "They haven't got a father, and since the next best thing is an uncle, I hereby appoint myself a committee of one to do the honors. And don't get the silly notion I'm doing you any favors, beautiful.

I'm going to work your fanny off."

Glenda dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. "Thanks, LeRoy."

"Welcome home," I said, and I meant it.

I did work her, too. Not that I'm a slave driver, or that I couldn't have hired an additional girl, but she had a lot of forgetting to do. I was just making sure she was too busy to remember.

Things went along beautifully for a whole year. The oldest boy was enrolled in a good school and the other boy and girl were left in the care of an excellent baby-sitter during the day. Glenda grew more beautiful every day. The color came back to her cheeks, and when she laughed it was like the tinkle of little silver bells instead of broken glass.

And then Aunt Lucy passed away in her sleep.

I don't know where Charlie was holed up at the time, but he must have had a direct line to the funeral parlor. Nine and one-half hours after Aunt Lucy died, he knocked on my door. He tried to act off-handed and very man-about-townish, but the greed in his eyes couldn't be hidden. Like Glenda had been when she first came back, he was a bit thin, and frayed around the edges. I shook hands with him and invited him in.

He looked the apartment over, then whistled softly. "Louie the Fourteenth furniture. You're really uptown, LeRoy."

His observation surprised me. I didn't think he'd know Marred Maple from Duncan Phyfe. I motioned him to a chair and poured two drinks. "For old time's sake, Charlie."

His eyes widened slightly. "You mean you're not sore at me? I mean after all the years of not writing or calling, and after splitting up with Glenda. . . I know how you felt about her once, and I could understand it if you *were* mad at me."

I shook my head. "Life is what we make it, Charlie. I went after what I wanted, and I suppose you did the same thing." I raised my glass. "Cheers."

I'd read somewhere that he was 'semi-retired.' The same article explained that he was still a helluva hand for his age, but there were younger men coming up who were better. And the big shows, where the real money is, don't settle for second best. Still, he would have said it anyway:

"How much did Aunt Lucy leave us?" Charlie purred silkily.

That was the moment I decided Cousin Charlie had to die. Not one word had he asked about Glenda or the kids, nor was he concerned

about how Aunt Lucy had spent her last days. Did she suffer? Was she mentally alert? Had she been bedridden? Those questions were unimportant to Charlie. His sole interest was in the estate—and Charlie.

"We get three hundred thousand apiece after taxes."

Charlie almost choked on his drink. "That much?"

"That much," I said. "I've handled her business matters for a long time now, and the books are available whenever you want to check them. As a matter of fact, I'd like you to check them."

Charlie tried to hide a smirk. "I wouldn't think of it, LeRoy. Your word is good enough for me." What he was really thinking was, *Why bother. You're too stupid to be crooked, LeRoy.* I'd seen the same smirk before.

Three drinks later I began probing Charlie about his show-business exploits; his favorite subject, no less. An idea had flashed inside my skull like a neon sign, and I had to make sure it was a worthwhile inspiration and not an hallucination. Bit by bit I swung the conversation around to a specific trick he'd perfected, in which he'd do a dozen backflips, then go over a waist-high wall and land with his feet in two circles on the far side. Once, he'd used two boxes instead, for depth, just to prove his expertise.

"I can still do it," he said.

I opened the French windows and pointed down to the soft bed of compost and bark dust where my roses were going to be planted. "Do it once, Charlie. Just for me. I've never seen you do it except on television and once in a movie."

He moved to the window and studied the distance to the ground critically. Then, with an umbrella from the stand, he leaned down and drew two circles in the soft mixture. Gauging the distance from the middle of the room to the window, he did two beautiful backflips and disappeared out the window.

"Absolutely amazing," I said as I helped him back in over the sill. "After all this time you're as good as ever."

We had two more drinks, then he paused at the door, his hat in his hand. "Uh, when will the estate be settled?"

"I'll let you know," I said. "Where are you staying?" I could have offered him a place to bunk, but that would have loused up my plans.

"The Miramar. And push it, will you, LeRoy?"

A full week passed before I got to the Miramar. When Charlie opened the door, the hungry look in his eye was even hungrier. I

should have let him sweat and suffer, but I'm not the type to make people suffer needlessly.

"It's all set for tonight," I said. "The lawyers will be at my place with the papers at eight o'clock. All we have to do is sign on the dotted line. . ." I moved past him and set a fifth of bourbon on the table. "So about all that's left is the celebration. And I don't think a few drinks now would be considered out of order. After all, three hundred grand. . ."

Charlie rolled his glass between his palms and licked his lips. "Three hundred grand." He still hadn't mentioned Glenda or the kids, and he wasn't going to, either, because they didn't enter into his plans.

I waited until the fifth was almost gone before I slipped the white powder into his drink. By then he was his old self, cocksure and greedy. Over a quarter of a million dollars was almost in his hot little hands and he could barely sit still. When the powder had done half its work, I eased him toward my car, ribbing him all the while about being such a poor drinking man. By the time I got to the apartment he was out cold.

Waking him up turned into something of a chore. When he did start coming out of the fog he was immediately suspicious. "Where am I—? And how did I get here?"

"I brought you here," I said. "The booze caught up with you and I could see it wasn't smart to leave you at the motel. This is one time you couldn't afford to be late."

Charlie was coming wide awake fast. "Are the lawyers here?"

"Come on," I said. "I'll introduce you." When the introductions were over I motioned Charlie to follow me back to the kitchen. "Entertain our guests while I fix a round of drinks. Especially the tall one with the glasses. He thinks your backflip over the wall is the greatest, and he's the key figure in this business."

Charlie downed a straight shot and moved toward the door. "*Entertain* them? For three hundred grand I'll put on the damnedest show they *ever* saw."

I was still puttering with the drinks when Charlie's scream split the night.

Lieutenant Platt from Homicide finished his investigation, then sat down in the livingroom facing me and the two lawyers. "This is really a strange case, Mr. Harding. And I might add you're an extremely lucky person. Without these two witnesses, two attorneys of good character, you would have been on the spot. With three hundred thousand dollars involved, and you as a potential heir, no jury on earth

would have believed your story."

"I thought about that," I said truthfully. "But actually I wouldn't have gained a nickel. All of Charlie's estate would go to his children."

"And be administered by his ex-wife," the detective said pointedly. "I've seen her around, and she's enough to make a real good man do real bad things. Like I said, you're extremely lucky." He pondered the matter a moment, then looked at me again. "How come you met here in his ex-wife's apartment?"

I shrugged. "Where else? Charlie was going to make some financial arrangements with her regarding the children as soon as the papers were signed."

After the lieutenant and the two lawyers had gone, I phoned Glenda and told her to come home. Then I mixed a drink and leaned back in a contour chair by the window. When Glenda came through the door she never stopped until she was on my lap. "What happened, LeRoy? I heard the news on the radio right after you called."

"Charlie tried to show off with his backflip bit by going out the window," I said. "You know how he was. Only this time he made a mistake. He thought he was in my apartment when he was actually in yours. Anybody could have made the same mistake. Our places are identical in all respects, right down to the Louis the Fourteenth furniture."

Actually, our two apartments aren't identical in *all* respects. Mine is on the first floor, and Glenda's is on the ninth.

Dear Fans:

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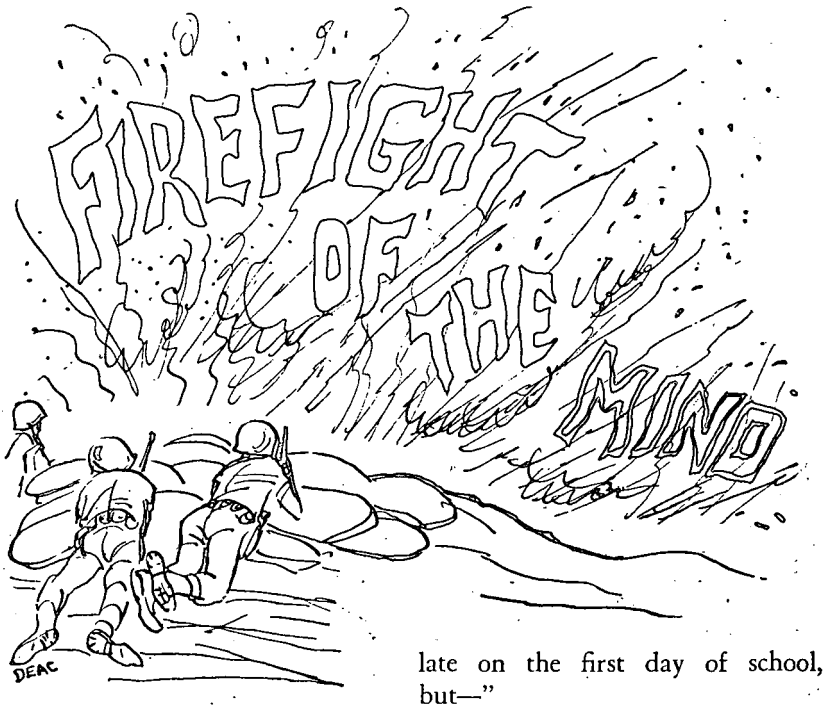
I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

An examination of the definition of "cowardice"—a lack of resolution—prompts the thought that perhaps the appellation is, at times, unjustified.



"They're all yours, Eddy," Brokaw said, stepping out into the hallway and closing the classroom door behind him. "Did you get your business with the draft board taken care of?"

"Yes, sir," Eddy said to the principal of the Marsten Elementary School. "I'm sorry to have to be late on the first day of school, but—"

"Listen," Brokaw said, touching Eddy's arm solicitously, "you just let me know if they give you any more trouble; I'll call them personally." Brokaw winked broadly. "We need all the men we can get in the elementary schools. This war keeps up much longer, and we'll have them."

Eddy jammed his hands into his pockets and looked away to hide his anger. He knew he could not really blame Brokaw for assuming he had entered the teaching profession because it was a deferred occupation, the easiest way to beat the draft—it was a widespread practice—but he wished Brokaw and the others would keep their opinions to themselves and stop acting like smug, self-satisfied collaborators.

"Well, they look like a bright bunch," Brokaw said hurriedly, sensing Eddy's embarrassment.

"Believe it or not, there's even an apple on your desk."

"Thanks for covering them for me," Eddy said evenly. "I don't think my board will have any more questions, now that I've actually started on a job."

"Well, good luck," Brokaw said. "Don't hesitate to call me if you have any problems."

"Thank you. I won't have any trouble."

Brokaw smiled nervously and hurried off down the hall.

Eddy waited until Brokaw had turned a corner, then he turned to go into his classroom. He hesitated with his hand on the knob. A month before it would have been inconceivable to him that he would be made nervous by the prospect of facing a roomful of fifth graders; now he recalled his own elementary years and he imagined himself being greeted by a large spitball in the middle of the forehead, or a fleet of attacking paper airplanes.

Eddy laughed aloud, and stepped into the room.

"Good morning, Mister Reese!"

It's going to be all right, Eddy thought. He could feel his anxiety melting in the vibrant glow of the children's eagerness and warmth. He walked up to a blond-headed boy with braces on his teeth and rumpled the child's hair.

"I see you know *my* name," Eddy said, laughter tugging at the corners of his mouth. "It shouldn't take me more than six or seven months to learn all of yours."

The children giggled. Eddy strolled to his desk and picked up the large, gleaming apple someone had placed there. He juggled it in his hand. The long, thin streaks of brown discoloration on the skin of the fruit registered somewhere just below the surface of his consciousness.

"I want to thank whoever brought me this apple," Eddy intoned with mock seriousness. "We're all going to get along fine as long as you keep me well fed."

There were more excited giggles as Eddy lifted the apple to his mouth. The muscles in his jaw tensed, but not before his teeth had broken through into the crisp meat of the apple. Now the memory of the brown slashes in the fruit surfaced, tripping a warning signal in his mind.

The warning came too late.

The sound of metal scraping against bone echoed inside his skull as the acid tartness of the apple was blurred by the warm, salty taste of his own blood in his mouth. The ribbon of steel screeched down between his teeth and sliced into his gum and upper lip. The front of his tie and white shirt were suddenly, liberally spotted with red.

Eddy jerked the apple from his mouth and stared at it; his blood, diluted with the juice of the apple, was beading on the exposed edge of the razor blade. He threw the apple to the floor and wadded his handkerchief into his mouth to stanch the bleeding. He glanced up at the faces of the startled children.

Which one? Which child was so sick that he or she would try to destroy a man's face and mouth? And *why?*

The faces of the children were white. Two girls in the back of the room had begun to cry, and others soon joined them. The aura of excitement and anticipation that had greeted Eddy when he first entered the room had now hardened into the sour smell of fear.

Which one?

Eddy walked over to the intercom. It seemed an eternity before Brokaw's secretary finally came on the line.

"I'd like to speak to Mister Brokaw."

"Mister Brokaw is in conference now."

"Get him!"

There was a moment of shocked silence, then the sound of another phone buzzing. Eddy continued to stare at the faces of the children. The children stared back. At last there was the sound of Brokaw's

voice crackling over the line.

"This is Mister Reese," Eddy said around the edge of his handkerchief. "I need you right away."

"Eddy, what's the matter with your voice?"

"Right away," Eddy repeated, then replaced the intercom on the wall. He glanced up to find the children turned around in their desks, staring at something in the back of the room. Eddy followed in the direction of their gaze, and froze.

A tall man with lean, hard features was standing at the back of the room in front of an open closet door. Both his hands were buried in the pockets of a worn, checked jacket. Intense, pale green eyes searched for and locked onto Eddy's.

"I see my booby trap was not entirely successful," the man said. His voice was soft, but his words carried clearly, like the distant sounds of rifle shots on a cold day.

Eddy continued to stand very still, holding the man's gaze. He was too far away to rush. Too many children. The man had made no move toward any of the children, but Eddy knew that was no guarantee that the man wouldn't if there were any sudden move on his part. There were four girls sitting directly in front of the man; a single swipe with a razor could kill or at least disfigure all of them.

Eddy struggled against his own panic. He knew there was a small fire-alarm box just outside his room in the hallway. One blow on the glass would set off a cacophony of bells which would in turn summon scores of police and firemen to the school; but the alarm was out in the hall, and he had closed the door to the classroom.

"Who are you?" Eddy asked quietly. "What do you want?"

The man walked slowly and deliberately toward Eddy. Eddy pressed his lips tightly around the cloth in his mouth and tensed, ready to leap. The man stopped directly in the center of the room; he was now completely surrounded by children.

"You're very fortunate," the man said, still looking directly into Eddy's eyes. "I can see the bleeding's almost stopped. By rights, that apple should have been a land mine; I'd like to see you try to stuff your handkerchief into a hole where your leg used to be."

The man was not drunk. He spoke very clearly, every word distinct, but the blood was draining from his face, and his voice was steadily rising in pitch. Eddy thought he could hear Brokaw's steps in the hallway.

"On the way to school this morning," the man continued,

"you should have fallen into a pit lined with bamboo stakes. They say it takes four strong men to pull a man off one of those things."

"I don't even know you."

"My name is Plakker," the man said. "Ernest Plakker."

"I still don't know you. What reason do you have to want to hurt me or the children?"

Something clicked far down in the green depths of Plakker's eyes. "Your father didn't know my son either. Not really."

Eddy blinked at the mention of his father. He tried hard to find some association. None came.

"My father's a major general in the Army," Eddy said tightly. "He's in Vietnam."

"I know where your father is." The man's voice was like silk pulled over the edge of a knife.

The door clicked open and Brokaw burst into the room, then stopped when he saw the blood on Eddy's face and clothes. His startled gaze swept down to the apple with its deadly seed, then up to the man standing a few paces away.

"What the—!"

"This man's name is Plakker," Eddy said hurriedly, half turning in Brokaw's direction, but keeping his eyes firmly locked on Plakker. He spoke softly, with a perfectly even cadence. "It seems like he's after me. I'm sure he wouldn't want to harm the children, but I think it would be a good idea if you pressed the fire alarm out in the hall."

Brokaw did not hesitate; he wheeled and darted out into the hall, swinging his fist through the air and smashing it into the tiny glass box. Immediately, the air was alive with the sound of clanging bells.

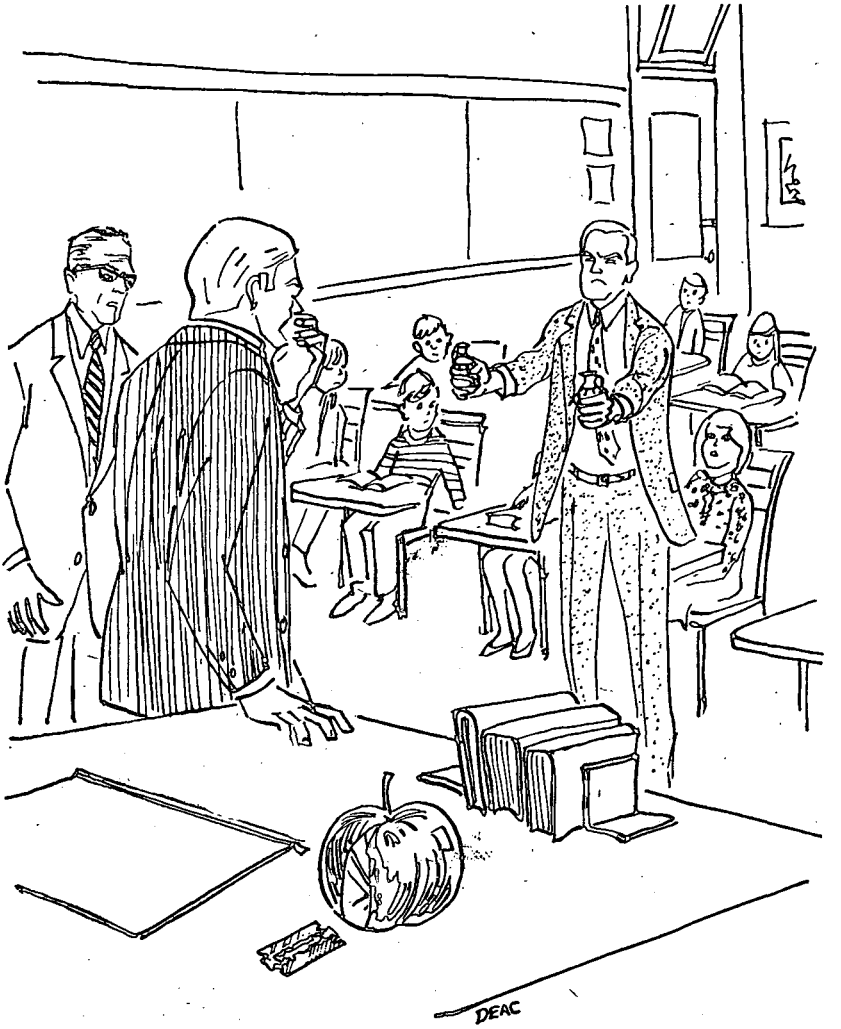
Plakker stood impassively, as if the sounds—and the results they would bring—held no meaning for him.

Brokaw raced back into the room and went directly for Plakker. Plakker calmly lifted his hands out of his pockets. Brokaw jumped backward, smashing into a desk and falling to the floor. He pulled himself to his feet and slowly backed away.

Plakker was standing with both his hands extended in front of him, a hand grenade clenched tightly in each fist.

"I don't know whether either of you is familiar with this type of grenade," Plakker said. "As you can see, the pins have already been pulled. They will explode six seconds after I release the levers on the side."

Someone had shut off the alarm bells. A horn was blowing a few blocks away, and there was the distant, ghostly wail of fire engines.



"Get out," Brokaw whispered fiercely to Eddy. "I'll handle this."

"No," Plakker said, raising both his arms. "I'm here because of Reese. He's not going anywhere. Not until I want him to."

"Let the children leave, man!"

Plakker shook his head. "In war, there is always the danger that innocent bystanders will be hurt. This is no different."

"This isn't a war!"

"Yes it is," Plakker said. "It is because I say it is."

"You're crazy," Brokaw said through clenched teeth. Muscles in his jaw rippled and danced. "In a few minutes this whole building will be surrounded by police and firemen. You can't possibly get away with whatever it is you're trying to do."

Plakker smiled thinly and motioned Brokaw toward the door. "You get out there," Plakker said, holding one grenade over the head of a boy who whimpered and crouched down behind his desk. "It will be your responsibility to make sure no one comes into this room. If anyone does try to come in, I explode the grenades."

"And kill yourself?"

Plakker's answer was in his eyes. Brokaw continued backing away until finally he was out the door. At the same time there came the sounds of booted feet running in the corridor. Brokaw shouted, and the running stopped. Then there was nothing but silence.

I am alone, Eddy thought. *Completely responsible for the lives of twenty-six children. Alone with a madman where all our lives could depend on what I say, or how I say it. Or maybe, after all, it really makes no difference; Plakker will release the grenades anyway.* Eddy shivered. *I am adrift on an ice floe, freezing under a blue, frigid sun.*

Plakker settled himself down on top of one of the desks. The child at the desk got up and ran to the back of the room. Plakker seemed to take no notice. He seemed to be studying Eddy.

Eddy could feel his legs begin to tremble. Occasionally, a dark spot would well up and swim before his eyes.

"You know," Plakker said in a tone that was more conversational than threatening, "your father thinks you're a coward. He's said so."

Plakker seemed to be waiting for Eddy to say something. Afraid that he would say the wrong thing, Eddy remained silent.

"Your father was my son's commanding officer," Plakker continued. "Your father used to tell his men how ashamed he was of you. Did you know that? He told them you were one of the people trying to tear this country down. Does it surprise you that your father would say these things about you?"

"No," Eddy said flatly, "it doesn't surprise me."

"Frank used to write me about the things your father told his men. Your father thinks you're a rotten coward, Reese. So do I."

Eddy breathed deeply in an attempt to clear his head. The dark spot in front of his eyes was grow-

ing larger, furrier. His voice sounded thick and muffled as he forced his words through lips he dared not move.

Plakker's arms remained extended out in front of his body, and it seemed to Eddy that the arms must be suspended from invisible wires; they never wavered or trembled despite the steel bundles of death they supported.

"Frank is your son, isn't he?" Eddy murmured. "That's what this is all about, isn't it?"

Eddy glimpsed a movement out of the corner of his eye and he glanced out of the window in time to see two policemen duck behind trees about fifty yards away, at the very edge of the school yard. Both men carried rifles with telescopic sights.

Eddy felt his mouth go dry. He could imagine policemen moving toward them on the outside, hugging the side of the building. *Hadn't Brokaw explained?* Even if they could be sure of killing Plakker without harming any of the children, the grenades would almost certainly go off when Plakker fell.

Don't let them shoot, Eddy thought. *Don't let them be stupid enough to shoot.*

"They'd been out in the field for three weeks," Plakker said. His voice was unsteady now, and he continually glanced around the room as though he were speaking to the children as well as to Eddy. "All that time they'd been sleeping in the water and the mud. They'd take off their clothes and find chunks of their skin inside. And all the time the VC were taking potshots at them, picking them off one at a time."

Plakker heaved a great sigh. He was standing at the window now, his hands at his sides. Eddy studied the man, feverishly trying to explore any possibilities open to him. He could still try to rush Plakker, but that would mean he must somehow find a way to grab the grenades *before* Plakker released the levers. Eddy suspected that once the levers were released, there was no way of stopping the explosion. *Six seconds.*

There was no way. Eddy stood still.

"The word came down that a battalion of North Vietnamese Regulars would be sweeping down through their area," Plakker continued. "The men were told to stand and fight." Plakker looked up at Eddy, and for the first time Eddy felt pity for the older man. "Those men were in no condition to fight. They were hungry. They were exhausted."

"Your son was killed," Eddy said softly.

Plakker shook his head. He closed his eyes and grimaced as though he were trying to erase the memory his words conjured up.

"Frank ran. He turned tail and ran. When they found him, Frank was sprawled in a ditch, crying his eyes out."

"That's nothing to be ashamed of," Eddy said carefully, watching Plakker's face. "Your son's not the first person to suffer from battle fatigue."

Sunlight glinted off metal somewhere out in the yard. Eddy braced himself, half expecting to hear a shot.

"Your father decided to bring Frank up on charges of cowardice in the face of the enemy," Plakker continued "He said it was necessary to preserve the morale of his men."

"My father was wrong," Eddy said with genuine anger. "My father's wrong about a lot of things."

"But *you* have no right to say that!" Plakker snapped. He clicked the two grenades together and the sound crashed around inside Eddy's skull. "My son *hanged* himself three days before his court martial was scheduled to begin! Frank *killed* himself rather than live branded as a coward! You! You *revel* in your cowardice!"

"You've already said that I'm a coward," Eddy said, afraid now to stop speaking, afraid that Plakker was working himself up to a pitch where he would release the grenades. "My father has said it, and I admit it. You've made your point."

"It's not enough!" Plakker's voice was approaching a shrill scream. His hands had begun to tremble. "*You* don't suffer, and your father won't suffer until *everyone* knows that you're a coward! I want that fact plastered across the pages of the newspapers! I want to hear it on radio and television! I want people to whisper behind your father's back! I want *him* to suffer like *I've* suffered!"

Outside the window, three firemen were constructing a bunker from a pile of sandbags. Occasionally they glanced nervously in the direction of the classroom. Two policemen with drawn revolvers stood guard.

So that was the plan, Eddy decided. He was supposed to ask Plakker to go outside and drop the grenades in the bunker. Eddy shivered.

"It won't do any good to harm the children," Eddy said. "I'll admit anything you want. By now, there are plenty of reporters here. They'd have monitored the police calls. I'll hold a press conference. I'll say anything you want me to say."

Plakker's eyes glittered. The

flesh around his eyes and mouth had taken on a greenish cast.

"That will do for a start," he said. "You can start right now. You can walk out that door and start talking to the people out there."

"Where will you be?"

"Right here. That way we'll both be certain that you put on a good performance. You'll have to keep your promise. I want you to make it real good."

"No. You come out with me. I'll keep my promise."

Plakker raised his arms. Eddy sucked in his breath and shook his head feverishly. The scab on his lip cracked open, splashing blood on his wrist. He knew he should have known better than to try to bargain with a madman.

"All right," Eddy said. "For God's sake, all right." He paused to catch his breath and press his jacket sleeve against his lip. "If I go out there and say the right things, you'll follow me out and drop the grenades behind those sandbags?"

"Of course. All I want is your public announcement. I want your father to read about it."

"How do I know *you'll* keep your promise?"

"You don't know, but you're in no position to bargain. I think you know I'm not afraid to die. I'll drop these grenades if you *don't* go out. You have no choice, you see."

Eddy hesitated. He could feel the sweat pouring from his body, pasting his clothes to his skin. How could he leave a classroom full of children alone with a maniac? Yet, if he didn't, they would be killed anyway.

"I'll do everything you say," Eddy said evenly. "I'm going. You just keep a tight hold on those grenades."

"I'm waiting!"

Eddy dropped his eyes and found himself looking directly into the face of the blond-headed boy with the braces. The boy stared back at him, his child eyes wide and trusting.

Strange, Eddy thought as he turned and headed toward the door, *I hadn't even had a chance to ask the boy his name.*

"*Run*, Reese! I want to see you *running* out of here! *Run*!"

Eddy froze; something tore at the fabric of his senses, paralyzing his muscles. His reflection on the glass panel of the door stared back at him. Something was wrong, and he could feel twenty-seven pairs of eyes boring into his back as he struggled to discover what it was.

Run, Reese, run! Run, Reese! Run!

Plakker was obviously mad, but he was not stupid. He had said that he did not care about dying,

and Eddy believed him; the only thing keeping Plakker alive was the hope of vengeance for the death of his son and his own humiliation. Why, then, should Plakker accept a lifetime in prison—or a mental hospital, where he would have nothing to do but dwell on the very thoughts that had driven him mad—for a statement that Plakker could not even be sure he, Eddy, would not qualify and explain away the moment the children were out of danger?

Run, Reese! Run, Reese! Run, Reese!

Then it came to him, and the enormity of the realization rose up and choked him. Eddy then slowly turned to face Plakker.

Plakker looked stunned, unable to comprehend the change in the other man. Eddy walked across the room and stopped a few paces away from Plakker.

"What's the matter with you, Reese?" Plakker's face was livid as he danced up and down on the balls of his feet, clicking the grenades together. "Get out of here! Run! I'm going to drop these grenades and blow this whole room to hell!"

"No, you're not," Eddy said, wrenching each word from deep inside himself, digging his nails into the palms of his hands.

"Please leave, Mister Reese." It was the blond-headed boy. His voice shook uncontrollably and his face was wet with tears "*Please*, Mister Reese! The man will hurt us if you don't leave!"

"You won't drop those grenades as long as I'm in the room," Eddy said, wrenching his eyes away from the boy's. "You see, I know that the only way you could be sure of getting the kind of publicity you want is by blowing up the room *after* I leave. You want me to *live* while you and the children are killed. That's the only way it would work." Eddy paused. Plakker's mouth was working rapidly, but no sound emerged. "I'm staying. The only thing you'll get by killing me is a martyr."

"Get out!" Plakker screamed, pushing Eddy with one hand-grenade fist. "I'm going to drop them!"

"Give them to me," Eddy said, holding out his hands. "It's all over now. We want to *help* you. Please give me the grenades."

Plakker's eyes opened wide and he made sounds deep in his throat as though he were gasping for air. The saucer-wide eyes and the bunching of the muscles in Plakker's neck and arms were warnings that cascaded over Eddy just long enough to show him that he had been wrong. Time stopped. Children sobbed.

Please leave, Mister Reese. Please, please . . .

Plakker's hands came together, then flew apart. The grenades flew through the air in opposite directions. There were two sharp, obscene clicks as the levers were released.

ONE:

Click, click. The first grenade hit the blackboard at the front of the room, then fell onto a bookcase and off onto the floor. The second landed in the rear of the room, caroming off the wall and coming to rest against the leg of a chair.

TWO:

Eddy leaped to the front of the room, skidding across the floor on his belly. He reached out and grasped one of the grenades in his hand.

THREE:

Eddy rolled over on his side and came up on his feet. He brought back his arm to fire the grenade through the window and found himself staring into the confused, terrified faces of a group of police and firemen. Eddy knew that could serve no purpose anyway; there was still the second grenade.

FOUR:

Eddy's fall had smeared blood from his lips into his eyes, and Eddy saw everything through a hazy red curtain. He tucked the grenade firmly into his side and raced toward the rear of the room, knocking Plakker and the children in his path to one side.

FIVE:

Eddy was afraid for a moment that he would not be able to find it. Then it was there in front of him, ugly and bloated, resting on the shining tile. He had always said that one day the war would come home. Eddy tucked the first grenade into his belly and fell on the second.

SIX:

"Don't be a fool, Reese! Get up and run! Save your life! Run, dammit, *run!*"

SIX:

It was the waiting. The waiting. He wondered if he would scream when the jagged slivers of metal tore through his body, and he wondered how long he would feel the pain. He could hear himself making grunting sounds, and he supposed he was choking on his own blood.

SIX:

Somewhere, a thousand miles away, glass was breaking and men were running.

SIX:

Flapping on the ground, like a shattered bird.

SIX

SIX

SIX

SIX.

"Eddy, can you hear me? Get up, Eddy! It's all right now!"

Someone was daubing at his face with a wet cloth that reeked of antiseptic. Eddy writhed on the floor and pressed his fists into his belly.

The grenades were gone.

He slowly rolled over on his back and found himself looking up into Brokaw's sweating face. Brokaw was holding the grenades.

"Deactivated," Brokaw said, juggling the pieces of metal in his hands. "Plugged up with cement. He must have picked them up in a war-surplus store."

Eddy blinked and looked around him. A policeman came into the room and walked over to Eddy.

"That was really something you did there, pal," the policeman said, apparently embarrassed by his own emotion. "You had no way of knowing they were no good."

Eddy nodded dumbly. The policeman walked away.

"Plakker?" Eddy asked Brokaw

"They took him away ten min utes ago," Brokaw said. "We go the grenades away from you, bu we couldn't get you to open you eyes."

"The children?"

"Out playing on the fire trucks I heard one of the girls say sh thought you were 'real cool'. Hov does it feel to be called 'real cool by a fifth grader, Eddy?"

Eddy sat up, and his head spun Brokaw pushed him back.

"They're sending an ambulanc for you," Brokaw said. "Do yo think you'll be ready to come bacl in two weeks? I don't think you children will let me keep you ou much longer than that."

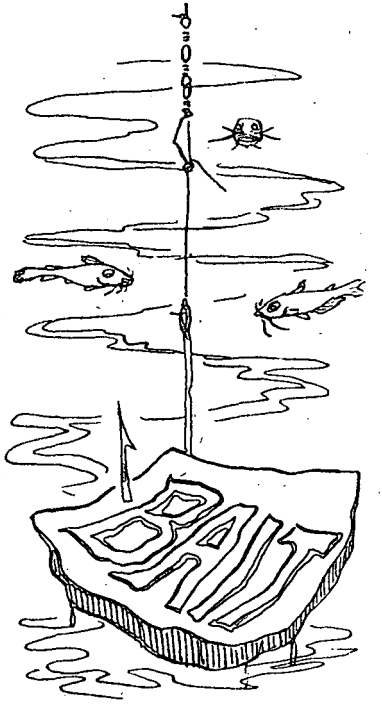
"I don't have that much sicl time," Eddy said stupidly.

"It's on the school board. Whei you come back, you'll have to tel me what this was all about."

Eddy nodded, and almost passe out from the exertion, but he ha seen the look of awe and respec on Brokaw's face.

"Eddy," Brokaw said, "welcom to the teaching profession."

One's specialty is not necessarily his obvious ability.



HE LAY on a narrow bed in the quiet room. It would be noisy soon with the sounds of supper, but now it was still. The late afternoon sun coming through the single window made a checkerboard pattern on the clean tile floor. The man lingered on the edge of sleep, feeling the lazy current of the day slip by.

Silently the dark evening clouds reached out for the sun, and the room was dim. The man got up and went to the window. His voice seemed loud in the quiet room.

"Nice night for fishing. Looks like the moon will be bright."

He leaned against the wall and listened to the whisper of soft shoes in the hall. Soft voices, mingled with the aroma of fried fish, drifted in under the closed door.

"Friday again. Be nice to have some fresh-caught catfish for a change. Bet I could catch quite a mess if I was out by the river right now."

He walked over to the bed and sat down.

"Yeah, it sure would be nice to be out there sitting on the bank, fishing for yellow-bellies again, with a moon so bright. . . ."

A key clicked in the lock and the heavy door swung open suddenly as two men entered. One of them carried a tray.

"Here's your supper, Pop. Corn bread tonight, just the way you like it."

"Thanks, boys. Say, look at that sky, will you? Sure is good fishing weather." He got up from the bed and sidled over toward the men. "How about us goin' down the river, fishing, a little later this evening?"

"Sorry, Pop, not tonight. Some other time, maybe."

"Yeah, sure. Be a good night, though. 'Minds me of another time I went, not too long ago. I think it was . . ." He paused and bit his lip, thinking. "Well, anyway, it was a nice warm evening like this, with the moon all bright and shiny, like a new two-bit piece stuck up there." He shuffled toward the window and stared out at the moon, hanging now over the horizon.

The door opened and closed again, softly. The key clicked harshly in the lock and he was again alone.

The river moved darkly under the silver film of moonlight. A cork, fastened to an invisible line, sent shining ripples down the slow water. In the gloom of a bent pine sat a man with a pole. He sat quietly, moving only to replenish the bait on the hook or to put another stick on the small fire nearby.

From far upstream the sound of a shrill and tuneless whistle intruded upon the silence. The man stirred. Soon he could hear the thud of heavy feet on the wet sod.

"Hallo there!"

The old man did not reply, but continued to fish. In a moment the other man strode into view.

"Hallo there! Having any luck?"

The old man grunted. "Some."

"Mine ain't been so good, up where I been. Mind if I join you here?" He sat down without waiting for a reply. "Name's Jake Howell. What's yours?"

"Most folks call me Pop."

"Well, Pop, that's a real nice fire you got. Never would have noticed you without it."

"It'll do."

Jake baited his line and tossed it far out into the river. The plop of the cork on the silver broke the film into countless gleaming ripples. Jake sighed noisily and leaned back against the pine tree. "You come here often?"

"Yep."

"I never been here before. Never got this far downstream. It's kinda far from the path, ain't it?"

"Yep. The way I like it. It's sort of my own private fishing hole. Nobody else knows just where it is

except me—not till now, anyhow."

"Sure. I don't blame you for wanting to keep it private. Get hold of a good thing and try to keep it for yourself. Seems like my buddies and me, ever' time we latch onto what we think will be our own private hole, why, someone else horns in and busts up our fishing parties." Jake reached inside his jacket and pulled out a flat bottle. "Here, Pop," he offered. "How about a drink? Best white lightning you ever tasted, I'll bet."

Pop shook his head. "Much obliged just the same," he said.

Jake took a long drink and put the bottle down on the ground beside him. The fire crackled sharply in the stillness.

"You ain't much for talk, are you, Pop?" said Jake. "Now, take me—I like to have somebody to shoot the breeze with while I'm sitting here. Sort of breaks the monotony, having somebody to gab with."

"I reckon so," replied Pop. "Me, when I want to fish, I fish, and when I want to talk, I talk. I don't like mixing the two."

"Sure, sure." Suddenly Jake sat up. "Think I've got a bite!" he exclaimed. "Sure enough, there it goes again!" He reached for his pole. "Hey, look there, will you? Oh, hell, he got away!" He cursed briefly and sat down again. "What are you using for bait?" he asked.

"Night crawlers. Ain't had much luck on them, though. Sure would like to have a nice fresh hunk of liver."

"Liver?"

"Yep. Them yellow-bellies sure go for liver some nights, and I got me a feeling that this is one of them nights."

Jake laughed loudly at the old man's statement. He dug around in his bait can. "Looks like I'm out of bait. Got any you can spare?"

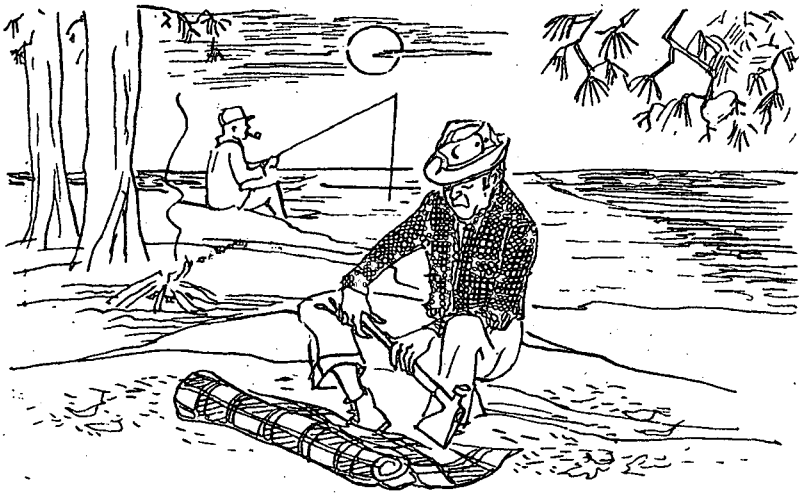
Silently the old man handed over his can of worms.

"Thanks." Jake laughed loudly again. "I've got a feeling that I'll get some action now. Maybe you'll bring me luck."

The old man nodded.

Jake moved closer to the dying fire. "Well, Pop, how about throwing another stick on this fire? I'm getting cold."

Pop laid his pole on the ground and reached for a neatly rolled blanket which lay on the grass beside him. Carefully he unfolded it and pulled out a small, gleaming hatchet. He folded the blanket again and, placing it beside the pole, he stood up. "I'll cut a stick or two," he said. He looked for a long moment at the moon high on the horizon. "Won't take much. Moon will be down 'fore long." He moved off into the darkness.



On the river a silver carp leaped, breaking the film of rippling moonlight. The ragged growth of bushes along the riverbank flung shadowy scars across the shining water, while somewhere downstream a fox barked.

The morning star gleamed like a solitary, unblinking eye. The fire on the river bank was a bed of cold ashes; the moon had set.

The old man walked steadily up the bank along the river, a string of fish hanging heavily on his arm. The sky lightened as he left the river and swung over through a small stand of timber.

"Hello there, Pop." A lone hunter came down the hill. "Been fishing, I see."

"Yep."

"Hope I do as well with my gun this morning."

The old man nodded.

"Where you been, down at your old fishing hole?"

"Been there all night. Sure is good fishing weather."

"It is at that, Pop. Say, when you gonna let me in on where that hole is? I never did see anybody catch catfish out of that river like you do."

Pop smiled and shook his head. "Now, you know that's my secret. Nobody knows where that place is but me, and I plan to keep it that way. You can look for it if you want to, but I bet you this string of fish you'll never find it."

The hunter whistled shrilly and a small black and tan hound bounded into view over the top of

the hill. "Well, Pop, I'm not much of a gambler, so I guess I'll stick to the fishing holes that I know. But what did you catch those fish on? I've tried most everything lately, and haven't caught anything to compare with those you've got."

"Why, there's only one sure-fire bait to catch them yellow-bellies on. Just bait your line with little chunks of liver, and you'll catch a mess every time."

"I'll give it a try, Pop." The hunter whistled again for the hound, and together they moved off through the trees toward the river.

Slowly the old man resumed his steady pace up the valley, away from the river and between the low hills. Just beyond the hills, the sun, with blinding intensity, broke through the low cloud of pre-dawn mist, spreading a pinkish glow.

A sudden light flooded the silent room.

"Pop, you haven't touched your supper."

The two men stopped by the side of the narrow bed. Pop sat up and blinked.

"Guess I been dreaming again." He stood up and shuffled over to the window again. "Say, you sure you can't go tonight? Sure is pretty out there, and I got a feeling the yellow-bellies is biting good."

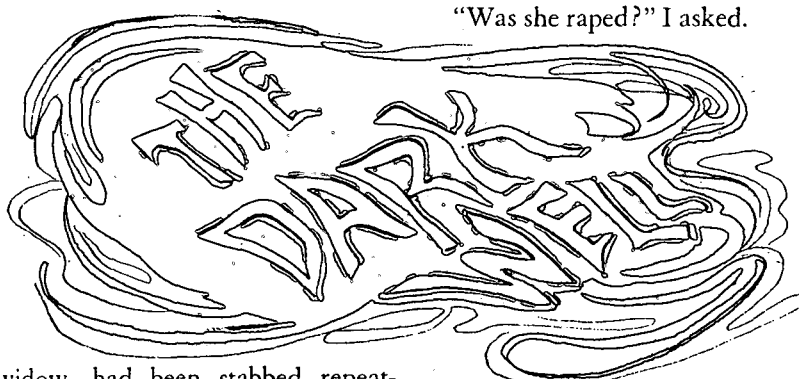
"Sorry, Pop, but not tonight." The men went out and closed the door. The key clicked harshly in the lock.

"Fishing!" said one of the men. They turned and looked at the closed door. "Wonder what he'd use for bait?"

Modesty and unselfishness, noted André Maurois, are virtues which men praise—and pass by.

"WOMAN LIKE Blanche Ames, endin' up like this," muttered Dr. Johnson as he examined the body. "Enough to make you sick."

The doctor got no argument from Sheriff Ed Carson or myself. Mrs. Ames, a dumpy, middle-aged widow, had been stabbed repeatedly and left in a crumpled heap on her bedroom floor, at the end of a trail of blood and torn clothing that led halfway through the house she had shared with her younger brother.



"Nice guy, our killer," I said.

"Yeah," said Sheriff Carson with a sigh that ruffled the ragged lower fringe of his pepper-and-salt mustache. "Well, Doc?"

Dr. Johnson wheezed to his feet. "She was knocked out, I'm glad to say, sometime before she was killed by a knife-thrust that severed the carotid artery, here, in her neck. The rest of the wounds are more or less superficial—aimless slashin' around with the knife."

"Was she raped?" I asked.

"Not far as I can tell here, Lon," said the doctor.

"Mebbe her brother come home 'fore the killer got to that," Carson said, "and dealin' with the brother made the killer lose interest in anythin' but gettin' out and away."

Mrs. Ames' brother, Lloyd Parmeter, was in the livingroom at the front of the house. He'd been shot

through the heart. He was found lying just inside the front door, his door key still clutched in his hand.

I asked now, "When did it happen, Doc?"

"Near as I can make it, sometime between, say, seven and midnight last night. Closer to seven, mebbe. And both Mrs. Ames and Parmeter died at about the same time."

The doctor tramped out to summon his ambulance crew to haul the bodies over to the hospital morgue for autopsy.

Carson and I stayed a moment longer in the bedroom. It was a pleasant room, the furniture massive and highly polished, bathed now in autumn morning sunlight flooding in the windows in the far wall; pleasant, except for the silent figure that lay on the blood-spattered gray carpet.

When found, the dead woman's naked body was covered by a patchwork quilt that the killer had evidently taken from the bed. The knife he'd used—wiped clean—he'd left atop a chest of drawers beside the door leading to the hallway. One of Carson's deputies had taken the knife away to test for fingerprints.

Now the lanky, rawboned sheriff stirred. "Let's see if the boys have turned up anything else. Then mebbe go next door and talk again to those two women that found this mess."

From the bedroom we moved along a corridor toward the front part of the house, staying close to the wall to avoid splotches of blood on the corridor's polished wooden flooring. We passed open doors that gave us quick views of a bathroom, a linen closet, and a couple of other bedrooms, the largest that of Lloyd Parmeter. Only he and his sister, Blanche Ames, had lived here.

It was a few minutes after ten o'clock when we emerged into the livingroom. The sheriff, his two deputies, and myself—Lon Gates, Pokochobee County Attorney—had been at the house not quite half an hour.

Deputy Buck Mullins was standing near the front door, huge fists on his hips, his square inch of forehead wrinkled in ponderous thought as he stared down at the dead man. He said, "Looks like he

didn't have no warnin' at all. Just opened the door, stepped inside and *bam*, he was dead."

"Yeah," said Carson. "Way it appears, if he'd got home a few minutes sooner he might've saved his sister's life."

"Or a few minutes later and he might have at least saved his own," I put in. "His timing was lousy."

After the gruesome scene in the back bedroom, studying Lloyd Parmeter's body was almost a relief. He could have been asleep, if you ignored the small circle of blood on the front of his white shirt.

He was dressed for the street, wearing a suit and a light topcoat that had flopped open when he fell. He was on his back, one leg drawn up, arms outflung at his sides. When found, his key had been in his loosely clenched right hand; near his left hand was a briefcase containing business papers.

Parmeter, backed by his sister's money, had operated a local real estate brokerage.

I'd known him slightly and hadn't particularly liked him. His handshake was always a little too hearty, his white-toothed smile a little too sincere, and his gray eyes a little too cold and calculating for me. He'd been in his early forties, a good many years younger than his sister.

As far as I knew, he'd never been married but he had quite a reputation as a ladies' man. I'd heard him quoted as saying it wouldn't be fair to the rest of womankind to tie himself to any one woman.

Deputy Mullins said, "Avery is still checkin' with the neighbors on the block. So far, nobody's turned up who saw or heard anything out of the way around here last night."

Carson went over to squint at a bone-handled knife that was on top of a cloth spread on a coffee table. Mullins followed.

"Nary a print on it," Mullins commented.

I said, "You haven't found the gun he used on Parmeter?"

"Nah, Mr. Gates," said Mullins. "That knife he picked up in the kitchen—it matches a set of steak knives in a drawer in there—but I reckon the gun was his. He brung it with him, and carried it away. From the size of the hole in this feller's chest, it was a little gun—twenty-two, mebbe."

"Big enough," Carson said. "What about that back door we found standin' open?"

Mullins shrugged. "I guess that's the way he got into the house, but he didn't leave no prints on the doorknob, just smudges. He must of wore gloves."

"They always do," sighed the sheriff.

There was a clatter at the open front door and Dr. Johnson came in, followed by two men lugging a long wicker basket between them. They passed through and disappeared down the hall leading to the bedrooms.

I'd been looking at the small heap of torn clothing that Mrs. Ames had evidently been wearing when she was attacked; a bra and panties, a cotton petticoat, and an old flannel robe. We'd found the robe just this side of the blood in the hallway, the other garments scattered beyond it.

Carson was telling his deputy, "Stay with it. Lon and me're goin' to see if the two women who found the bodies can tell us anythin' more."

The sheriff and I went out the front door. I shaded my eyes from the sudden glare of sunlight as we cut across the sweep of lawn toward the house next door on the west. A crowd was gathering, attracted by the ambulance and the lineup of official cars parked on the street.

The Monroe chief of police and two of his men were on hand, to take care of any traffic problems that might develop, and to try to keep curious citizens away from the house. Now the chief waddled over to intercept us as we crossed the lawn.

"What's the word, boys?" he boomed heartily. Since the investigation involved capital crimes, it was the county's baby, not the city's, so the chief could afford to be hearty.

"Bad," said Carson. "Appreciate it if you'd percolate among the people here. See if anyone turns up who might know something about what happened last night."

The chief nodded. "Well, course I got my own work to worry about. Awful busy, and as few men as I have—"

Carson and I moved on, leaving the chief frowning after us.

The owner of the house next door to the Parmeter-Ames place was lurking just inside his front door. His name was Henderson, a big man with heavy jowls and narrow eyes. He barked, "You caught him yet?"

"Not yet," the sheriff said.

"Helluva note," Henderson fumed. "Could just as easy have been my wife. I worked late at the store last night, and she was here alone!" Henderson glared accusingly from Carson to me and back again.

"Are Miss Baker and Mrs. Denman still here?" I asked.

"What? Yes, yes, come on in. They're back in the kitchen with Noreen. Anytime women get in a tizzy, they head for the nearest

kitchen. You can count on that."

A moment later we entered a big, sunny kitchen and found three women sitting around a plastic-topped table that was cluttered with coffee cups and an overflowing ash tray.

"About time," snapped Mrs. Mary Denman, a middle-aged, leathery woman with beady eyes and pugnacious jaw. "Keep me and Aggie waitin' here half the day."

"Now, Mary," said the tall, rather willowy Agatha Baker, sitting to Mrs. Denman's left.

The third woman, Noreen Henderson, suddenly quavered, "It's all so awful! That going on next door, and me here alone. Awful!"

Henderson, standing behind her chair, dropped soothing hands on her shoulders. A plumply pretty blonde, young enough to be her husband's daughter, she leaned forward to avoid Henderson's touch. I'd heard stories about plump little Noreen.

Carson said, "We'd like to hear again how you two ladies come to find the bodies. Miss Baker?"

Agatha Baker nodded hesitantly. She had a rather faded-rose prettiness and guileless air but she also was known as a shrewd business woman. Her father had left her well off, and she had at least doubled the inheritance on her own, so I had heard around town.

She said, "There's not much to tell. Today is Saturday and Mary, Blanche, and myself planned to go downtown to shop for the weekend. Mary and I came by for Blanche at nine, something over an hour ago—"

"That's right," Mrs. Denman horned in. "I got out of the car and went to the door myself. Didn't get no answer when I rung the bell. Then I tried the door. It was closed, but not locked." She paused abruptly.

I prompted, "You pushed the door open?"

"Yes—and there was Lloyd Parmeter. First, I thought he was passed out, drunk—it wouldn't be the first time—but then I seen the blood on his chest."

Miss Baker grimaced. "Mary screamed. I went to see what was wrong. There was Lloyd, and over on the far side of the room what appeared to be a—a spatter of blood. It didn't seem likely that it was Lloyd's blood, so we went into the house, calling for Blanche. We found her."

"Uh huh," said Carson. "And you came over here to phone."

"We knew we shouldn't touch anything in there, even the telephone," Miss Baker said. "Besides, we wanted out."

"Couldn't believe what they told

me, when they come runnin' up on my front porch," Henderson growled. "I went over and had a look-see myself. Then I believed it."

His wife shuddered. "And I—I was here alone."

"It happened sometime durin' the evenin', before midnight. You notice anything at all?" asked Carson.

Noreen Henderson vigorously shook her blonde head. "I was in my room, watching television. Until J.C. came home."

"That was about nine o'clock," said Henderson. "The lights was on over there when I drove in, but ever'thing looked same as usual."

"And you didn't hear or see anything after that?"

"Not a thing. Me and Noreen went to bed early, and—" Henderson broke off, his jowly face reddening.

Agatha Baker filled the silence, after a faintly disgusted glance at the blushing Henderson. "I spoke to Blanche on the phone late yesterday afternoon. She mentioned that Lloyd would be out for the evening, and she—"

"She was plannin' to stay home and nurse a sick headache," Mrs. Denman said. "I talked to her—when was it? About seven o'clock, I guess. Anyways, she told me she'd see Aggie and me this mornin'."

I noticed that Agatha Baker frowned slightly, but she didn't speak. Instead, she pushed back her chair and rose to her feet. Carson took the hint.

"If that's all you ladies can tell us, there's no reason you can't go on home now."

"What I want to know is, what're you all doin' to find the—the fiend who murdered poor Blanche and Lloyd?" cried Mrs. Denman, also getting up.

I said, "If you have any suggestions . . ."

"Why, you ought to be combin' out them beer joints down on Second Street, and over in shantytown. Certainly not messin' around here!"

She turned and bustled from the kitchen, clucking like an angry banty hen. Agatha Baker gave us an apologetic smile and followed her friend.

"She's right," Henderson growled a moment later. "Man that'd do a thing like this, he sure don't live in *this* neighborhood. Best people in Monroe . . ." but his voice, if not his words, was tinged with doubt.

The sheriff and I left. Out front, the mid-November sun shone down from a cloudless deep-blue sky, but a chilly wind was blowing, plucking the last dead leaves from the big trees that lined the

street, swirling them at our feet.

The ambulance had left for the morgue. The crowd was still there, though; bigger and a good deal more vocal than before. So far, the town cops had managed to keep clear the area immediately in front of the Parmeter-Ames house.

Here, the chief of police met us. He was chewing on a frayed cigar, and looked both harried and pleased. "Me and the boys've heard from several people—neighbors—that Mrs. Ames and young Parmeter ain't been gettin' along."

"How come?" asked Carson.

"Dunno, but the talk is they've had some pretty fierce quarrels. So mebbe Parmeter—"

"Lloyd Parmeter has a fair to middlin' alibi," Carson said. The chief blinked, then reluctantly nodded.

Carson and I went into the house. Though the ceiling light was on in the livingroom, after the bright sunshine it was like entering a cave.

A door on the far side of the room banged open and Buck Mullins lumbered in, followed by the sheriff's other deputy, Jack Avery. They saw us and stopped short.

"Found this under a hedge, way down at the east end of the alley that runs out back," said Avery. He held up a badly wrinkled brown wool dress. "Might not've spotted it, 'cept the sun was gleamin' on this here brooch pinned to the front of it."

Carson took the dress. As he examined it, his lips pursed into a silent whistle beneath his bedraggled mustache.

He muttered, "Name tag inside the collar . . . Blanche Ames. And there's what appears to be bloodstains all over the collar and shoulders of it."

He folded the dress and placed it on the chair that held the dead woman's undergarments and the robe.

"Now, why should the killer try to hide that dress," I said, "and try to make us think she was wearing the robe?"

"Why should he rip off the woman's clothes as he chased her down the hall—if he did—and then go to the bother of tuckin' a quilt real neat-like round her dead body?" replied the sheriff. He sighed and turned to Avery. "You hear anythin' from the people livin' on the block?"

"Nothin' much," said Avery, a tall, skinny man with puffy-lidded eyes that made him look as if he might topple over asleep any second. "Feller who was out walking his dog claimed he seen Mrs. Ames drive off, alone, about seven-thirty last night. That's the only thing."

Carson grunted. "Just a half

hour after tellin' one of her friends she planned to stay home all evenin'. Well . . ."

I mentioned that I'd got the idea Agatha Baker might have known more than she told us on that point.

The sheriff grunted again. "Whatever, let's try to find out where Mrs. Ames went, and where Parmeter was at. Findin' that dress kind of puts a crimp in the idea the killer was just some passin' sex-pervert."

"Don't see why," grumbled Deputy Mullins.

"Because he went to some pains to try to make it look like the woman was wearin' this robe, instead of a dress, when she was attacked. And there's a couple other things—"

"Hell, none of it makes sense," Mullins complained.

"Accordin' to how you look at it," said Carson.

Jack Avery thoughtfully blinked his puffy-lidded eyes. "I did hear from a couple people that Lloyd Parmeter and his sister had a fallin' out about somethin' here lately. Fact, they been expectin' Lloyd to pack up and take off, bag and baggage. Nobody that I talked to knew what the trouble was."

Mullins snorted. "I guess now, Sheriff, you'll try to tell us Lloyd took and carved up Mrs. Ames, and she had just energy enough left to put a bullet through him 'fore she died."

"No, but I am beginnin' to be real curious about the cause of the squabble between them," said Carson.

I crossed to the phone on a little desk in a corner of the room and called my wife. She belonged to most of the same ladies' clubs as had Blanche Ames. As I knew from experience, a sparrow couldn't fall in Pokochobee County—much less Monroe, population 4,500—without it being a subject of conversation around the bridge tables.

Martha didn't fail me.

A few minutes later I hung up the phone and turned back to Carson and the deputies. "Parmeter was wanting to get married, and sister Blanche wasn't happy about it."

"Why not?"

"It seems she didn't like the lucky girl, though evidently Blanche had never met her. Some girl Lloyd had on the string up at the capital. The real beef seems to've been that Lloyd planned to move up there and go into business. Martha said that Blanche had been pretty close-mouthed about it all, at least by the usual standards of gossip."

Carson ran a hand through his

already tangled thatch of gray hair. "And Parmeter needed his sister's blessin', in the form of cash, to make the move. Otherwise, he'd have to start all over."

"Sounds reasonable," I agreed.

The phone I'd just put down shrilled; I answered it, thinking it might be my wife with an added tidbit, but the caller was Agatha Baker.

She said, "I thought you and the sheriff might still be there. I—I wonder if you could come by my apartment? There's something—I didn't want to mention it at the Hendersons', and I can't see that it matters now, but—"

"All right, Miss Baker. Just what—"

But she had hung up.

I relayed the message to Carson; he nodded and, after giving his deputies some instructions, he and I left.

During the short drive through the neighborhood streets to Agatha Baker's place, I groused, "You say it wasn't a sex crime—okay. What was it? Not robbery. There was a fair amount of money in Mrs. Ames' purse, which was in plain sight on her bedroom dressing table. So?"

We covered another block.

Then Carson said, "I dunno, Lon. The only thing I feel reasonable sure of is that the killer had a good, logical reason for wantin' the old lady dead. From his viewpoint, anyhow. And he went to a lot of trouble to make it look like somethin' it wasn't, like switchin' that street dress for the robe Mrs. Ames was wearin', to give the idea she'd been home all evenin' and not expectin' company."

I said slowly, "If Parmeter hadn't blundered in and got himself killed, he'd make a prime suspect. Assuming this quarrel with his sister was serious enough."

"Yeah . . . Me, I'm wonderin' why he came in the front door."

I stared at the sheriff's craggy profile. "What—"

"His car was in the garage, alongside the one belongin' to Blanche Ames. The garage is attached to the house, with a door leadin' right into the kitchen. Why didn't he go in that way, instead of clear around the side of the house and in through the front door?"

"Oh, for—the kitchen door was probably locked, bolted on the inside."

"Matter of fact, it wasn't locked at all."

I said bitterly, "Haven't we got enough to worry about?"

"Mebbe," said the sheriff. "But it is interestin'."

He pulled in at the curb in front of Agatha Baker's home. It was a large, red-brick house that Miss

Baker split up into three or four luxury apartments, keeping the ground floor for herself.

She let us in. She looked a bit angry as she gestured us to chairs in the tastefully decorated front room.

"Actually, this is Mary Denman's idea," she said. "I wasn't going to say anything—and I can't imagine that it matters—but I let it slip to Mary, while I was driving her home a few minutes ago. She insisted that I tell you."

Carson raised tufted eyebrows. "Anythin' that'll help—"

"All right." Miss Baker stood there, twisting her long pale fingers together. "When Blanche called me yesterday afternoon, she was rather excited, and worried. It seems that the woman Lloyd wanted to marry was driving down from the city. Her name is Reynolds, I believe, and she was due to get here about eight. Blanche was going to meet her at the Seven Oaks Motel."

I sat forward on my chair. "You didn't think this was worth mentioning to us?"

"Frankly, I didn't think it was any of your business. Or anyone else's, now. It couldn't have any connection to what—what happened to Blanche. Could it?"

The sheriff grunted. "Go ahead, Miss Baker."

"That's all. I gathered that Lloyd didn't know the woman was coming. The main purpose for the visit was so that she and Blanche could get acquainted." Agatha Baker smiled slightly. "I imagine it was a rather strained meeting, the way Blanche felt. But of course I don't know that Blanche actually saw the woman. I didn't hear from her again."

I said, "You and Mrs. Ames were pretty close, weren't you?"

Her face tightened with emotion. She said slowly, "Blanche was a good friend, Mr. Gates. For a lot of years . . ."

"Yes. Outside of the recent to-do about her brother's proposed marriage, was she worried about anything? Anything at all, personal, business—"

"No, of course not." Miss Baker frowned huffily at me. "Blanche was the dearest, kindest person I've ever known. She didn't have an enemy in the world, if that's what you're asking."

I shrugged. Carson took up the questioning, and I looked around the room. Through an archway I could see a dining room, and I did a double take. Seated at the head of the polished oak table in the dining room, facing me, was a huge toy panda bear. Its bright black glass eyes gleamed merrily.

Now, Carson was pushing to his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feet. Agatha Baker had told us all she could, or would. Moments later, as the sheriff and I went down the walk to the car, I glanced back.

In the doorway, looking after us, she stood straight, tall and prim, her dark hair glinting in the sun. She was something of an enigma in Monroe, because of both her unladylike astuteness in making money, and because she had never married, though I had an idea she'd had plenty of offers. Even now, well on the wrong side of forty, she was an attractive woman—and she kept a toy panda bear.

Well, to each his own, or her own.

"Wonder why Mrs. Ames lied to Mary Denman," said Carson, as we drove away.

"What? Oh. If she'd told Mary Denman where she was going last night, every old hen in town would've known about it ten minutes later," I said. "Probably would've been a regular traffic jam at the motel, everyone wanting to see what happened when Blanche and this gal from the city met."

Carson snorted. "I'm kind of curious about that, myself."

The motel was just beyond the last straggle of houses and gas stations on the east edge of town. It was, by Monroe standards, fairly new and well constructed, with two rows of neat frame cabins facing each other across a courtyard. Spaced along the courtyard were the oak trees that gave the place its name.

We found the manager in the office at the front of the courtyard. "Reynolds? Yes, sir, Sheila Reynolds is the way she registered. Checked in here little before eight last night. I wish she'd gone somewhere else."

"How's that?" asked Carson.

"Oh, not like you might think. She didn't try to run in any men customers. I don't stand for that kind of—"

"Uh huh. What did she do?"

"Well, she'd barely got checked in and gone to her cabin when another woman showed up. Older woman—seems like I've seen her around town, but I don't know her. Anyways, she went into Sheila Reynolds' cabin, and 'fore long they was havin' one hell of a cussfight in there. Got so bad that people on either side complained to me. I went down there and asked 'em to please hold it down to a roar." The manager paused for breath.

"What were they fighting about?" I asked then.

"No idea. Not long after I spoke to 'em, the older woman come bustin' out and took off in her car.

That was at eight-thirty, or thereabouts."

The manager directed us to a cabin midway along the row on our right. As we approached the cabin, the door opened and a girl appeared, stopping short when she saw us.

"Miss Reynolds?" said the sheriff.

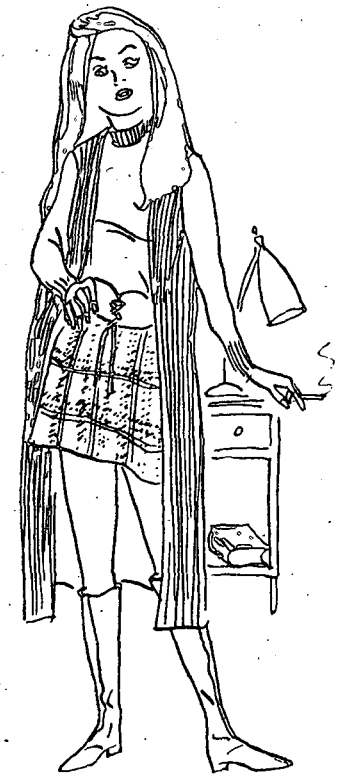
She hesitated, then nodded. She was young and pretty, with dark red hair spilling down over the shoulders of the rather tight sweater she wore. Her green eyes widened when we introduced ourselves.

"How about that?" she said. "I was just on my way to see you. You beat me to it. Come on in."

"We understand you saw Mrs. Blanche Ames last night," Carson said. "Is that right?"

The girl nodded. She took a cigarette from an open pack on a nightstand beside the rumpled bed that, with a single chair and a dressing table, made up the furnishings of the cabin we entered. She lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. Her bright green eyes flicked from me to Carson, and back again.

"Okay. You two evidently know who I am and why I'm here in your town, so there's no use horsing around. I heard just a little while ago what'd happened to



Lloyd and that old witch. Heard about it at a cafe where I had breakfast. What do you want from me?"

She flipped ashes from her cigarette with a businesslike gesture and waited, her head cocked to one side.

"Tell us what happened here last night," I said.

Her plaid skirt ended well above her knees; it hiked up even farther as she sat down in the chair. "I don't mind telling you. But what's it matter? The way I heard it, the old woman and Lloyd were knocked off by some stray nut."

"Mebbe," said Carson.

Sheila Reynolds' finely plucked eyebrows rose. Then she shrugged. "Okay. I live at the capital. I met Lloyd when he was up there on business, and we hit it off pretty good. Better than pretty good . . . But when he told his sister about me, she like to've gone through the roof. Maybe she was one of those kinds of sisters, you know? The sick kind."

She punched out her half-smoked cigarette in an ash tray, then went on. "Finally I decided to come down here and meet this Blanche, face to face. Lloyd wasn't getting anywhere with her so I called her yesterday, long distance, and set it up to meet her here last night."

"Parmeter didn't know you were coming?"

"Not from me, and I doubt very much if Blanche told him. No, I planned to surprise him after I'd seen the sister. Big deal. She charged in here breathing fire, and let me have it with both barrels. You know? Accused me of being—a lot of things. Even offered me money to get the hell out of Lloyd's life, and stay out. That's when I kinda lost my temper." She grinned ruefully.

I said, "The manager of this place told us it got a little noisy in here."

"What happened next?" the sheriff asked.

"Blanche left, just about a minute before I'd have thrown her out on her fat ear. Most maddening woman I ever saw, and I've seen some beauts. I'm a hostess in a cocktail lounge, you know, and some of the dames that come in there you wouldn't believe. But Blanche—" She broke off with an eloquent shrug.

Carson glanced at me, his eyes twinkling. I had an idea he was thinking, as I was, that we'd finally reached the cause for Blanche Ames' violent disapproval of this girl.

"You say you work in a cocktail lounge?" I asked.

Sheila Reynolds bristled. "Something wrong with that?"

"Not a thing."

"Okay. Well, that's all there was to it. After she left here, I tried to phone Lloyd but I couldn't reach him. No answer either at his home or his office. I never did get him." Tears suddenly welled in her eyes.

"What time did she leave?"

"Right around eight-thirty—

sooner than she expected to be leaving, no doubt. Thought she could bully *me*!"

"Uh huh. How was Mrs. Ames dressed, Sheila?"

"How was—I didn't really notice. A light tan polo coat over a dark brown, woolen sheath, with a silver brooch at the neck, low-heeled brown pumps—"

"Yeah, all right," Carson broke in. "We may want to see you again, if you don't mind stickin' around a day or two."

She said grimly, "I'll be here. Don't worry about that. My full name is Sheila Reynolds Parmeter. Lloyd and me were married last week, in the city. He wanted to keep it quiet until he could talk his sister around. Fat chance!"

The sun was almost overhead when Carson and I left the motel and drove back toward the downtown area.

"So much for that," I said. "Blanche didn't want her poor little brother to get tangled up with a barmaid. She went out last night to try to buy the girl off."

The sheriff nodded absently. "Ain't hard to see why Lloyd went off the deep end, even to marryin' the gal."

I agreed. Remembering her red hair and snapping green eyes, I added, "It also isn't too hard to imagine her putting a shiv in someone if she got stirred up enough."

Carson didn't answer. We reached the courthouse square in the center of Monroe's meager business district. Since it was Saturday, the ancient courthouse was closed, except for the sheriff's office on the ground floor, but there were a good many people milling around outside. It wasn't every day that two more or less leading citizens got themselves murdered, and there was something of a holiday atmosphere among the crowd. Carson and I managed to get inside before we were spotted, and went along the echoing corridor to his office.

Buck Mullins was on the phone when we entered the outer office and crossed to the sheriff's private cubbyhole on the far side. The deputy joined us a minute later.

"I been usin' that phone so much my ears is ringin'," Mullins grumbled. "For all I found out, I might as well not've bothered. A lot of nothin'."

Carson leaned back in his swivel chair and propped a size twelve on the edge of his desk. "Let's hear it."

Mullins scowled at a scribbled notepad in his hand. "I couldn't get a line on where the old lady went last night—"

"We dug that up."

"Huh. Well, Parmeter closed his office about five-thirty and drove

over to a private bottle-club he belonged to. Avery's out now checkin' with the guy who runs the joint. Ought to be back any minute."

Carson nodded. "Anything more from Doc Johnson?"

"He called a while ago. Says the old lady's skull was cracked, and that she was for sure knocked out before she was killed. And the slug from Parmeter's chest is a twenty-two. Bent up some, but prob'ly not too much for ID, if we should find the gun. He also kind of closed in the time. Now he says those two died right around nine o'clock, give or take an hour on either side."

"All right. What else have you got?"

Mullins growled, "I told you, nothin'. Nobody I talked to had a bad word to say about Mrs. Ames. Parmeter ain't quite so popular but it don't appear he had any particular troubles, outside this business with his sister—him wantin' to get married." Mullins suddenly chuckled lewdly. "You believe ever'thing you hear about him, he must've played footsie with half the females in Monroe."

"Wouldn't be surprised," said the sheriff.

"Yeah. He even managed to get engaged to Agatha Baker some years back, but she evidently got wise to him and give him the boot," Mullins said.

I wondered briefly if that was when Agatha had bought the toy bear. Then I heard the clomp-clomp of hurried footsteps in the outer office, and Deputy Jack Avery burst in. For once he looked wide awake.

"I got somethin', but I ain't sure what," he snapped. He took a couple of deep breaths, and went on, "Parmeter was at this bottle-club last night. Acted like he meant to stay the evenin', drinkin' and playin' poker with some of the fellers there. Then he got a phone call."

Carson sat up straight in his chair.

Avery grinned. "Yeah. Feller that owns the place answered the phone. It was a woman, and it ain't the first time she'd called there, wantin' Parmeter. But last night he wasn't glad to hear from her. In fact, he was overheard tellin' her to go to hell. But then he said, 'Okay, okay—but this is the last time, Noreen.' He flung down the phone and left. This was at a few minutes after eight."

I said slowly, "Noreen. Well, well."

"Mebbe one Noreen Henderson wasn't as all alone last night as she kept tellin' us she was," Carson said. "Come on, Lon."

The noon whistles were blowing as Carson tapped on the front door of the Henderson house. Noreen wasn't glad to see us. Opening the door a few inches, she glanced past us toward the yard of the Parmeter-Ames place next door, and seemed relieved to see that the crowd over there had dwindled to a handful of kids. Her gaze came back to us, and hardened.

She said, "You'll find J.C. at the store downtown."

"It's you we wanted to talk to," Carson said mildly.

"Me? What about?"

"We're curious about how many times Lloyd Parmeter was over here keepin' you company, on evenin's your old man worked late," I said. "Like last night, for instance."

"Oh, no," she breathed, backing away but leaving the door open. She kept backing until she hit a chair and half fell into it. Carson and I followed.

Noreen Henderson stared up at us, her blue eyes wide and glazed with fear. "Listen, it wasn't at all like you think. Lloyd was a friend, that's all. J.C. knew—"

"Did he?"

She covered her face with her shaking hands. "Please, don't tell him. He'd kill me."

"What happened last night?"

"Nothing! I—I got in touch with Lloyd and asked him to come see me. He'd been avoiding me for a couple of weeks. He drove in at his place a little after eight, and came on over here. We talked a while." She dropped her hands. Her face was slack and sweaty.

Carson asked, "What did you talk about?"

"Lloyd just told me he was through. That he'd married this—this tramp of his in the city, and he wouldn't be seeing me anymore." She shrugged plump shoulders. "I didn't especially care. I was more relieved than anything else, believe it or not."

I grunted dubiously. "What time did he leave you?"

"Twenty minutes till nine. J.C. was due at nine, so I was watching the clock. I went to the door with Lloyd, and watched him cross the yard and unlock his front door and go inside. He slammed the door real hard behind him. He hadn't acted mad—at least not when he left—but I guess he was."

Carson said, "Did he bring his briefcase over here?"

"Oh, yes. He didn't stop at his house when he arrived, just hustled on over. I was watching for him."

"And he went home at eight-forty."

"That's right. I didn't see or hear a thing after that, till J.C. came in at nine. I—I took a shower and got all prettied up during that twenty

minutes I had to wait for him."

She licked her pouting lips and ran a hand over her mass of blonde hair. Then she suddenly looked thoughtful.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't suppose it means anything, but a couple of times while Lloyd was here I kind of thought I heard someone outside the windows. You know? Like someone moving around out there, though it was probably just dead leaves blowing in the wind."

That was all we got from her. As Carson and I went out the front door, Noreen put a hand on my sleeve; I paused, while the sheriff went on ahead.

She whispered, "You won't tell J. C. about this, will you? Please don't."

"That depends."

She smiled up at me through her long, false eyelashes. "You're kind of cute. I like you, Lon."

"Fine. Be sure to vote for me at the next election," I said, and got out of there.

The sheriff gave me a quizzical look when I joined him on the lawn. "You think she knows more'n she told us?"

I shrugged. "Maybe—maybe not. Actually, I think all she's worried about is Henderson finding out she was playing around with Lloyd Parmeter."

I started toward the county car, but the sheriff said, "Let's take another look around the place over there."

We walked to the Parmeter-Ames house. A uniformed town cop was lounging on the front porch. He eyed us suspiciously, but agreed to allow us to go inside

In the livingroom, Carson stood with his hands on his lank hips, frowning into space. Meanwhile, to the renewed suspicion of the cop on the porch, I tried slamming the heavy wooden front door but the weather stripping along the bottom of the door dragged on the thick carpet. Even muscle-bound Buck Mullins couldn't have given that door enough of a shove to make it slam shut. Closing it all the way took firm and sustained pressure.

I said, "So what Noreen heard was—"

"The gunshot that killed Parmeter, more'n likely," said Carson. "Yeah. That part all fits together nice and neat. Only, if Mrs. Henderson was tellin' the truth about the time, Parmeter was killed *before* his sister. Not afterwards."

"Huh?" Then I saw what he meant. It was at least a quarter-hour drive from the Seven Oaks Motel to this house, and both the motel manager and Sheila Reynolds—the new Mrs. Parmeter—had told us that Blanche Ames

didn't leave there until at least eight-thirty.

Carson nodded thoughtfully. "Mebbe, just mebbe, we've had the right idea all along, only turned the wrong way round. What if it was Parmeter who was the real target, and Mrs. Ames who came in and caught the killer in the act?"

That opened up some interesting possibilities, all right, but I said, "Hell, the way the old woman was mauled, whoever did that had to hate her—"

"She's not a bit deader than Parmeter," said the sheriff. "You leave aside all the gory stage scenery, and what happened to her was that she was slugged, and stabbed through the neck. The rest was done after she was dead. And we know, or think we know, *why* it was done. To throw us off the trail."

I had to admit it made sense. In fact, if Parmeter's death was the real goal, drawing all the attention to his sister's much more spectacular death made very good sense indeed; but I reminded Carson, even though it was now fairly sure that Lloyd Parmeter was the killer's first job, that didn't prove that the second job—on Mrs. Ames—hadn't been the main event.

"True enough. But it does kind of get us over a hurdle that's been stoppin' us all morning! Nobody, with the possible exception of the Reynolds gal, appears to have any kind of reason for killin' Blanche Ames. But Parmeter is somethin' else."

"So perhaps there wasn't any reason, except she saw the killer and had to be shut up. Yeah, but we don't *know* that."

Carson groaned dolefully. "What we don't know would fill a whole wagon full of empty barrels . . ."

He crossed the room to the phone and dialed his office.

While he talked, I paced back and forth across the big, deep livingroom. At the rear wall I paused and looked to my right along the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

I shook my head and made another trip to the front door and back. Carson was still talking on the phone, or rather, listening. I stopped to light a cigarette.

Finally, he grunted and put down the phone. "Well, nothin' new. Or at least, nothin' helpful. What ails you?"

"It just occurred to me, Parmeter's new wife is likely to be a reasonably well-off girl before long."

Carson perched on the arm of a chair. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. With Lloyd dead, little Sheila inherits whatever estate he might've had."

"Only, he ain't got any estate. His sister was the moneybags in the family, and she—"

"She's dead, too," I broke in. "And if she died first, or it can be arranged to *look* as if she died first—it doesn't matter if it's only one minute before Parmeter himself—during that minute he inherited from her, providing he's her legal heir. So, when he dies, the whole works goes to his widow."

Carson took a deep breath, let it out in an explosive sigh. "I presume the gal had somebody do these killin's for her. There's no way *she* could've got here to knock off Lloyd at eight-forty, unless you figure the motel manager is in it with her. And Noreen Henderson. And—"

"All right, all right." The enthusiasm I'd been building started to die away. "At least it's a theory."

"Yeah, but you wouldn't think Sheila would come down to Monroe on the night when her killer-friend was supposed to do his work."

I threw up my hands in defeat.

Carson went on, "Not to mention that my deputy just told me that Mrs. Ames' will, which he checked, leaves all her money to the county children's hospital. And I got a hunch a gal like Sheila would find out about that will, before she—"

"All right," I yelled.

Carson grinned, then said, "I don't know what I'm cacklin' about. The little notion I was workin' on just went by the board, too."

"What was that?"

"I was thinkin', what if old J. C. Henderson didn't come home at nine last night, like he told us, but twenty minutes or half an hour before that? In time to listen outside his livingroom windows, and hear his wife and Parmeter talkin'. And then hustled on over here and in through the back door, which we found open this mornin', remember?"

I nodded. I also remembered that Henderson's wife had told us she had a vague idea someone might have been listening at the windows.

Carson went on, "He shoots Lloyd, and before he can get out the back door, Mrs. Ames comes in through the door to the garage, so he has to kill her, and the rest of it."

"And rushes home to Noreen with blood all over his clothes, unless he happened to have a change with him," I said sardonically. "Because the killer surely got blood on him."

The sheriff winced. "The big trouble is, there was at least four, five people saw him leave his store last night a few minutes till nine o'clock, no earlier."

I snapped my fingers. "I've got it.

He and Noreen were in it together. She held Parmeter while J.C. shot him. And then—"

"Okay, now we're even." Carson laughed, but not for long. "You think Noreen would cover for Henderson?"

"No." I shook my head. "Not for two minutes. And I don't think *she* did the killings, either. She hasn't got the brains, or the guts."

Carson had gone back to frowning into space, or rather at something over on the far side of the room.

He said, absently, "The thing is, there's nothin' to see. The blood-spots are in the hall, around the corner and out of sight from in here."

"What? The blood—"

"I didn't think nothin' about it—her sayin' she looked in from the front door and saw a puddle of blood on the far side of the room. Just figured she'd been too upset to get things straight. But now I wonder."

I realized what he was getting at. "Hell, that's the screwiest theory yet. Blanche Ames was her best friend!"

"What if it come to a choice between Blanche Ames—and savin' her own neck?" Carson replied. "The more I think about it . . . For instance, how do we know it wasn't Lloyd who broke the engagement with her, 'stead of the other way round?"

I found a chair and sat down abruptly. "It can't be."

"Yeah. Far as we can find out, she's the only one that knew Blanche was goin' to see that gal at the motel. Now, suppose she walked over here—it ain't but a few blocks from her place—to wait for Blanche to come home, so she could find out what'd happened at the motel. That'd figure, if she was still interested in Lloyd Parmeter for herself."

I thought about the toy bear, presiding over an empty dining table. I said, "It's possible. If all this time she was planning, hoping, to get Lloyd back."

"And then, listenin' outside the Henderson windows, heard him say he was married . . ." Carson picked up the phone. He called Mrs. Mary Denman, who told him she hadn't seen Agatha Baker last night. Just before he hung up, she told him something else.

"She talked to Agatha on the phone a little while ago," Carson snapped. "It seems Agatha is goin' to be out of town this afternoon. Let's get over there in a hurry." We did.

Agatha Baker was wearing slacks and a cardigan sweater that did nothing for her angular figure. She looked curiously at us as we

stood in the pleasant front room of her apartment, and this time she didn't offer us chairs.

"I was just leaving," she said. "It's lucky you caught me. Now, what—"

"Going on a trip?" I asked, glancing at a small pigskin bag on the floor beside the front door.

Her dark eyes flickered, then steadied. "No, of course not. I've been cleaning out closets—anything to keep myself occupied—and there were a few items of clothing that I don't want, but the Salvation Army might find a use for them."

Carson said, bluntly, "Where were you last night, Miss Baker? You weren't home. At least you didn't answer your phone, accordin' to a lady who tried to call you."

The bluff worked. "Why, if it matters, I took a long walk. I try to do that at least once or twice a week, for the exercise, but I don't see—"

"Did you mebbe happen to walk past Mrs. Ames' house?"

"No, I went the other way, all the way downtown and back," she said, her voice beginning to fray around the edges.

I said, "That's strange. We had an idea you might've gone over to wait in front of Mrs. Ames' place for her to come home, and tell you about her talk with Sheila Reynolds at the Seven Oaks Motel."

Her face went black with shock. "No—"

"And then you heard voices over at the Henderson house. You were curious enough to go listen under the front windows, and discovered that Lloyd Parmeter was in there."

"No! It's a lie! How dare you—"

"What did you hear?" I asked roughly. "You heard enough to know that Parmeter and Noreen Henderson had been having a cozy little affair, I imagine . . ."

She seemed to shrink suddenly. Turning blindly, she took a step toward the door but Carson was there. She stopped.

The sheriff said, "Why don't you tell us about it?"

"You're crazy! You're both crazy, to think that I—"

"How would you like to take a ride?" I snapped, pretending an anger I didn't feel. "To the hospital morgue, for a good, long look at Blanche Ames' body. Your best friend's body!"

"Stop it!" She pressed her hands over her ears, and turned her head violently from side to side. "Stop it, for heaven's sake! You don't understand."

I bored in. "We understand that you've been carrying a torch for Lloyd Parmeter for years. And last night when you found out, once and for all, that you were never go-

ing to get him, it was too much for you. You went inside his house and waited, with a gun in your hand, and when he came in the door you killed him."

"He deserved to die," she breathed harshly. She let her hands fall to her sides. "Marrying a—a—"

"A barmaid," I said. "A cheap little barmaid, not much more than half his age."

Agatha Baker's eyes flamed for an instant; then the flame died and in its place was naked fear.

Carson said, not unkindly, "It's all over, Agatha. It was over when you just now let it slip that you knew Parmeter was married. The only way you could've known was—"

"All right," she said. She straightened, and looked almost relieved. She even managed a shaky smile. "Yes. You were right, Mr. Gates, it was too much. All these years of waiting, hoping, that Lloyd Parmeter would finally grow up . . ."

"Mrs. Ames knew how you felt?"

"Of course. She wanted Lloyd and me to get together as much as I did. Perhaps even more so."

I nodded. "That's why she went to see the Reynolds girl last night, and why she was so dead set against the girl."

"Yes." Agatha Baker scrubbed a palm, hard, over her face. "And I had to—do what I did to Blanche, the best friend I ever had. But I couldn't let her find Lloyd."

Carson and I exchanged puzzled glances. I said, "What?"

"Don't you see? The shock—finding him dead—Blanche could not have stood it."

Carson said slowly, "We'd figured that Mrs. Ames came home before you could get out."

"Oh, no. She came sooner than I expected, but I was going to wait for her." Agatha Baker frowned. She said patiently, "Can't you understand? I loved Blanche—and the split-second she came through the door from the garage into the kitchen, I hit her as hard as I could, with the gun. She never knew about—any of it. I carried her into her room and did what I had to do. It was very unpleasant."

"Yeah," said Carson. "You stripped her body, and made the trail of blood spots in the hallway."

"I thought that if it looked as if she had—you know—been assaulted by some criminal, no one would ever think it was anything else." She paused to moisten her pale lips with the tip of her tongue, then said earnestly, "Blanche would have wanted it that way. She wouldn't have wanted me caught, and punished, for Lloyd's death. Or hers."

I stared at the woman. I wondered how much of this was laying a foundation for an insanity plea, and how much she actually believed to be the truth about her own motives for what she had done.

Now her gaze met mine and it was like looking into the dark, murky water at the bottom of a long-abandoned well.

The sheriff was saying, "I expect we'd better be goin'. Miss Baker, you want to take this suitcase?"

She blinked and turned to him, and suddenly laughed. "Oh, yes, I was going to take those things out into the country and burn them, or bury them somewhere. They're the clothes I had on last night, all stained and—"

"Is the gun in there, too?" I asked.

"Yes." Again she gave a childishly mischievous laugh. "I always carry it in my purse, when I go out walking at night—like last night—alone."

Carson picked up the pigskin bag and opened the door. "We can talk some more at my office."

"All right, but you do understand?" she said, the laughter gone, and her face twisting into a mask of anguished pleading. "I had to do it; I had no choice."

"Sure," I said, and I took her arm and guided her gently toward the door and the waiting sheriff. "Tell me something, Agatha. Why did you spread that quilt over Mrs. Ames?"

She gave me a shocked glance. "I couldn't leave her lying there completely nude. It wouldn't have been decent."

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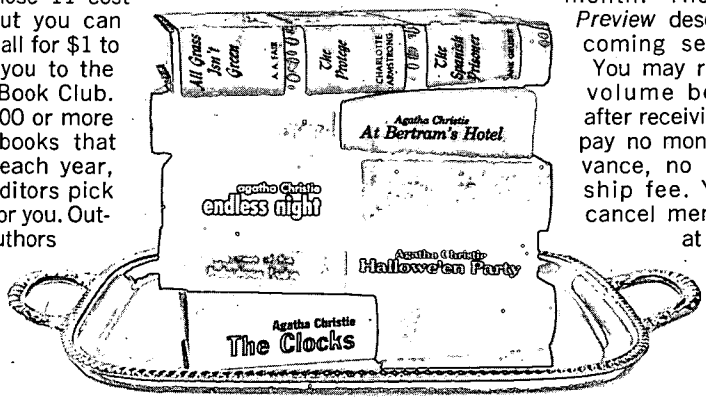

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