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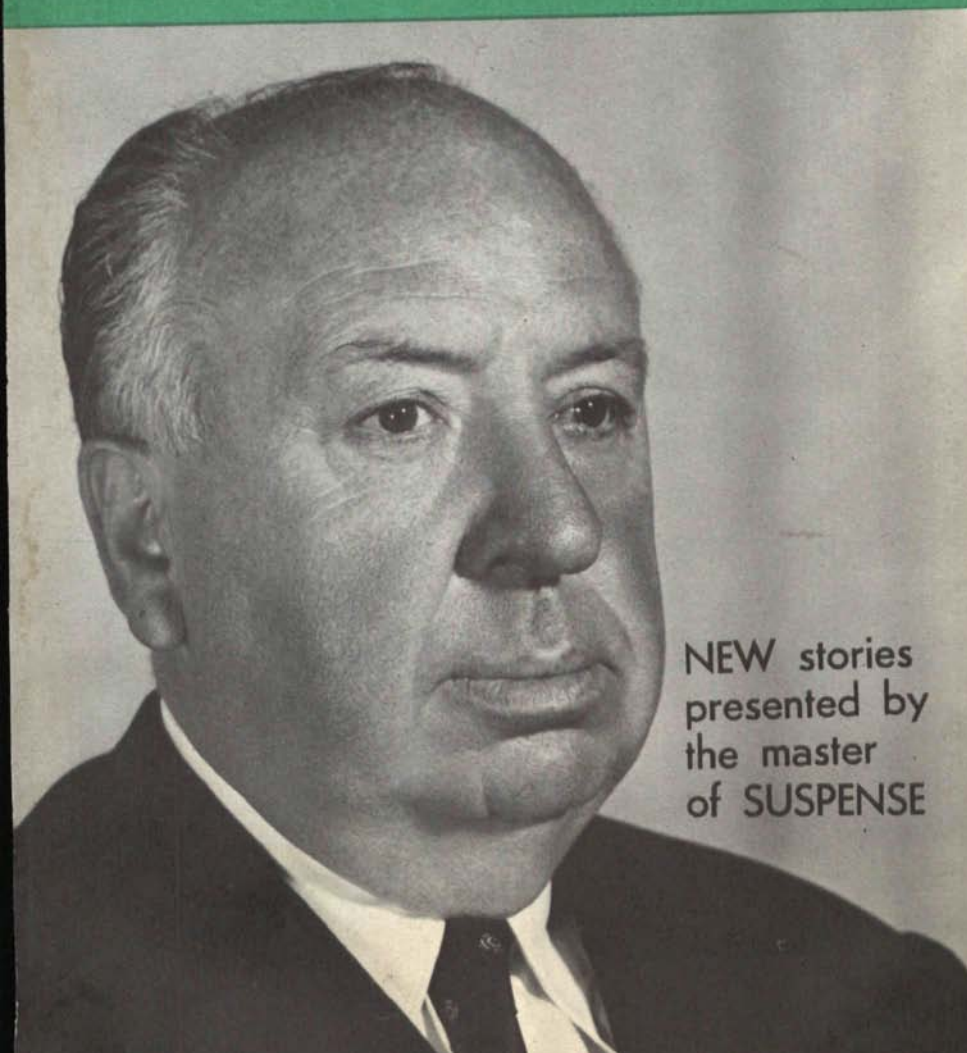
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

March 1971

Dear Reader:

What the groundhog saw this year is of small consequence when one considers that far more fascinating image produced by George C. Chesbro in *The Shadow in the Mirror*, this month's pacemaker to a chilling new lineup of mystery and suspense.

What is more, winter's grip can be no firmer than that of the law in such tales of detection as *A Little More Rope* by Edward D. Hoch, *Farewell Gesture* by George Grover Kipp, *Sam's Ziegfeld Folly* by Leo P. Kelley, and *Close-Up* by Frank H. Olsen.

Suspense abounds in such terrifying measure that it must be criminal, and more of your favorites provide it. There is—but why go on? You shall see for yourself, particularly after traveling with *A Good Kid*, a great novelette by James Holding. If a groundhog could read, he would surely hide.

Alfred Hitchcock

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Gladys Foster Decker, Editorial Director
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VOLUME 16, NO. 3 MARCH 1971

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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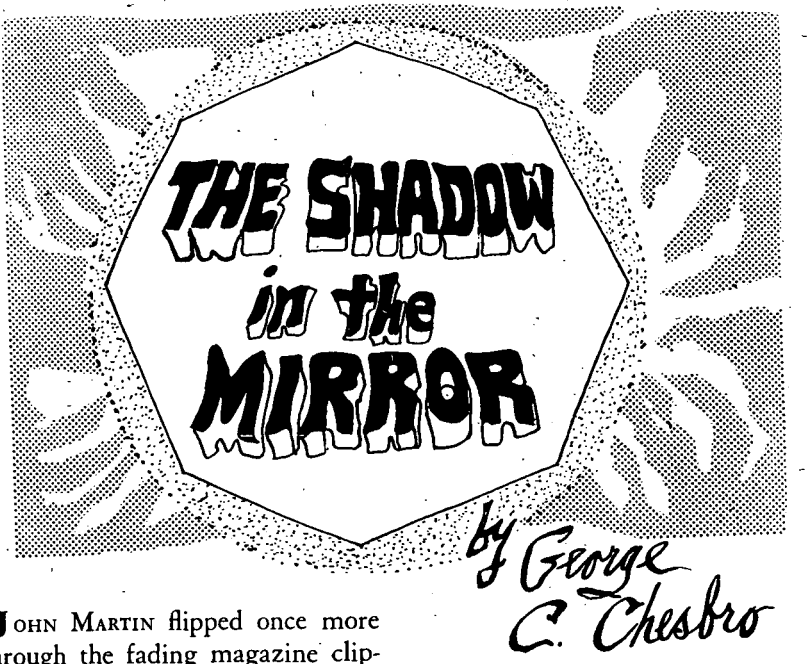
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 16, No. 3, Mar. 1971. Single copies 60 cents. Subscriptions $7.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $8.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Entered as 2nd class matter at Riviera Beach, Fla. Additional entry at Concord, New Hampshire. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H.

It has been said that nothing is so firmly believed as what we least know, and that some make themselves believe that they believe, not being able to penetrate into what it is to believe.



JOHN MARTIN flipped once more through the fading magazine clippings, pocketed the canceled check and hurried to the room where he knew he would find his wife.

She did not hear him enter; or if she did, she did not turn around. Joanna Martin was kneeling before a crude altar in a dim corner of the room. On the altar, stacked in neat piles, were articles of their dead daughter's clothing.

"Joanna," John said softly. "Joanna, I want to talk to you."

For a moment he was not sure she had heard him, but finally she turned to face him, and John winced at the sight of his wife's raw features. Grief still was gnawing at her beauty, sucking the life out of her eyes. It was obvious to John, now more than ever, that the

woman he loved was in need of a solace far beyond anything he could provide.

The birth of an only child to a couple well into their forties had been a touch from heaven, her death eight years later a hushed giggle from hell.

John would have remained silent were it not for the checks and the clippings he had found in Joanna's room. He did not mind the loss of the three thousand dollars; he could afford it, and would have given it to his wife gladly. He did mind the fact that the money had been given to an organization of which he had never heard, an organization that appeared to advertise exclusively in the back pages of cheap, sensational women's magazines.

"Joanna," John said, taking the papers from his pocket and holding them out for her to see, "what's this all about?"

Joanna looked at the checks and clippings, then turned back to the altar. "You've been prying," she said mechanically.

"The papers were on your dresser. I couldn't help but see them."

"You had no right."

"Since when have we felt the need to hide things from each other?"

"Since you killed Heidi."

The words barely dribbled from Joanna's lips, but they struck at John with the force of machine-gun bullets. John opened his mouth to speak, but the words froze in his throat. He knew it would do no good to deny the charge, or to reason with his wife; he had tried before, and had failed. Still, he clung desperately to the hope that time would dull his wife's pain, and return to him the woman he had known before the accident.

Joanna's graying hair shone dully in the copper glow of late afternoon. John reached out his hand to touch her, then drew it away. He stepped around in front of her, blocking her view of the altar.

"Joanna," John said evenly, "what is the League for Spiritual Contact? And what prompted you to give them three thousand dollars?"

Joanna blinked rapidly, then rose to her feet and walked to a window. Her fingers trembled as she lit a cigarette, but her eyes were clear when she turned back to her husband. For a few seconds her lips moved silently, as if waiting for the words to filter down from her mind. When she did finally speak, her voice was strained and pleading. "I've spoken to Heidi," she said. "I've felt her presence."

John shuddered involuntarily. He'd waited too long for the sor-

row to pass. He'd left her alone. Now, instead of passing, the grief and loneliness were eating holes in his wife's mind. He walked over to Joanna, gripped her shoulders hard, stared down into the pale blue depths of his wife's eyes, and imagined that he could not see the bottom. "Heidi's dead," he said, unable to keep his voice from breaking at the end. "Our daughter is *dead*. Do you understand? Nothing you can do or say is going to bring her back again."

"Of course she's dead," Joanna whispered, tearing out of her husband's grasp. "You should know; you killed her."

"No," John said, shaking his head. "It was an accident—"

"It was your idea to go to the lake! Your idea to—"

"Stop it!" John's voice rose to a shriek, and he bit down hard on his fist to keep from screaming. For three months he had stood helplessly by and watched his wife retreat into herself, down trails he could not follow. For three months he had watched her build tiny altars and talk to herself. "Now you just stop it! All the crying in the world isn't going to make one little bit of difference. Blame me if you want to, but stop talking like a mad woman! Stop destroying yourself, and stop destroying me! Don't you think *I* miss her too?"

Joanna's soft voice lashed at him like the frayed end of a whip. "You never loved her that much, John. Don't you think I know?"

It took John a few seconds to identify the new emotion that battered at him, and then he realized that it was terror; he was terrified of this woman who had become a total stranger to him. Still he loved her—or the memory of her.

"Joanna," John said softly, "I want you to see a doctor."

"A psychiatrist?"

"Yes." John concentrated on keeping his voice as matter-of-fact as possible. "Maybe then we can go ahead and see if we can't get our lives straightened out."

"No," Joanna murmured, glancing at him sharply. "There's nothing the matter with me."

John touched his wife's arm. She did not pull away, but he could feel her muscles tightening.

"Tell me about the money. To whom did you give it?"

"You have the clippings," Joanna said, turning back to the window.

"You said there was nothing wrong with you. What do you call giving three thousand dollars to a crackpot group of strangers? Do you call that normal?"

"Don't you dare call them crackpots!"

The sudden vehemence in his wife's voice drove John back a step.

He stood helplessly and watched as Joanna began to pace back and forth across the room, nervously lighting one cigarette after another. Frustrated by his feeling of helplessness, John jammed his hands into his pockets and waited for Joanna's agitation to ebb. He could understand the loss of a priceless treasure that was irreplaceable, but the treasure—and the loss—had been his also.

Of course a woman always felt more keenly. Joanna had not spoken to anybody until two weeks after the funeral.

Now his loss was surely greater, John thought. Both of them had lost their daughter. Now it appeared that he had lost his wife as well.

"I told you that I've spoken to *Heidi*, John!"

It took John a moment to emerge from the webbed cocoon of his own thoughts. Suddenly realizing that Joanna was standing very close to him, her eyes burning, he said, "What did you say?"

Joanna was almost smiling. Her hands were clasped together, her fingers bloodless, as if she were pleading with him. "I *know* it sounds crazy, John, but I've *talked* to her. What's more, I *know* she listens. I *feel* her all around me. I even think I may have seen her!"

"At the League for Spiritual Contact?" John asked sharply.

"Yes!" Joanna was talking very rapidly now, her words melting into one another, running together in a blurred, trembling plea. "I can't explain it! You just have to experience it for yourself."

"Heidi is dead," John intoned very slowly. "*Dead!* You simply *must* learn to accept that fact."

"She may be dead," Joanna said eagerly, "but it's only her *body* that's been taken away from us. Her *spirit* is still alive, and it's her spirit that I've been talking to!"

"For heaven's sake, Joanna, you haven't been inside a church in ten years!"

Something dark and fearful flickered in Joanna's eyes, but it passed as quickly as it had come. "Somehow, these people have learned to communicate with the spirits of the dead," she said. "They've discovered a way for me to communicate with Heidi."

"A quaint service for which they charged you three thousand dollars!"

Joanna stopped and glared at her husband. Once again, an iron gate had crashed shut behind her eyes. "You care more about your money than you do our daughter. Was it always that way, John?"

"Our daughter is *dead*. All the money in the world isn't going to change that fact."

"Can't you even accept the idea that there's a *possibility* that the living can communicate with the dead? The League has shown me that it *can* be done."

"For three thousand dollars! Joanna, you're no—"

"They charged me *nothing*, John! I *contributed* that money of my own free will. And I intend to contribute more!"

John reached out a trembling hand to touch his wife, and cringed inside himself when she drew away. He clasped his hands behind his back and looked down at the floor. "There'll be no more money for that organization," he said softly. "Do you understand? No more money. And I insist that you see a doctor. In fact, I think I'll call one right now. I've put this off too—"

"Then you'd better call a lawyer while you're at it, John. I want a divorce."

John felt a giant hand tightening on his throat, crushing his hope.

"If I can't get the money from the checking account, I'll get it in divorce court."

"Joanna," John whispered. "Joanna, you don't know what you're saying. We're too *old*, Joanna. We need each other."

"I need Heidi."

"Joanna . . ."

Joanna stared silently at him, her mouth set firmly, her figure rigid.

John turned and walked slowly to the door. He paused with his hand on the knob and turned back to his wife. "I miss her too, Joanna," he said, making no effort to hide the quaver in his voice. "Don't you think I miss her too?"

Joanna did not answer. She was already back in the corner, kneeling at her altar.

John was very conscious of Joanna's grip on his arm as they mounted the stone stairs beneath the red, hand-lettered sign advertising the headquarters of the League for Spiritual Contact. A light rain was falling, but it felt good on his face. John was happy. He had heard Joanna laugh for the first time since the accident. Also, he was at last embarked upon a course of action that he hoped would bring them back together again. If he could not persuade Joanna to leave the League, he would persuade the League to leave Joanna.

John composed his face into an immobile mask as they reached the top of the stairs and pushed through an aging, weathered oaken door. He found himself at the entrance to a huge foyer. A mammoth crystal chandelier did little to dispel the wet atmosphere of gloom and smell of mold.

"We'll wait here," Joanna said,

touching John's arm. "Mister Lazarus will come for us when he's ready."

John nodded as he took off his overcoat and slung it over his arm. He continued to avoid meeting his wife's eyes, fearful that she would see the lie swimming in his own.

Lazarus. *Mister Lazarus.* John smothered a smile. He wondered what the man's real name was. Later, he'd make it a point to find out.

A door opened to his left. John turned to see a small man staring at him. The man's eyes were lost in the convex folds of thick lenses, but John could feel his gaze.

"I am Mister Lazarus," the man said, his voice muffled by the distance between them. "You do not believe our organization can help you. Why do you come here?"

John could feel Joanna's fingers digging into his arm.

"What you say is true," John said evenly. "I don't believe. Not now, at any rate. But I'm trying to be open-minded. I'd gladly give my life if I thought it would help me to communicate with my daughter. My life, or my money—I'd pay anything you charged."

Lazarus made an almost imperceptible nod with his head, then came toward them. He walked with a decided limp. "We don't charge anything for our help, Mister Martin," he said when he had come abreast of John. His voice was like dry wind in a desert. "Later, should you wish to make a contribution to our group, your gift would be greatly appreciated."

"All right," John said, momentarily abandoning the hope of proving fraud and extortion. "Show me what you can do."

"You don't seem to understand," Lazarus said, his lips barely moving. "There is very little that we can do *for* you. You must help yourself. You must *believe*. The powers we serve demand it."

"Powers?"

"Come with me."

Lazarus abruptly turned and headed down a long corridor that branched off from the foyer. Joanna hurried to catch up with him. John stayed behind them until Lazarus finally turned into a room. Lazarus waited for John to enter, then closed the door behind them.

The room was bare, except for a single table directly in the center. The walls, floor and ceiling were an unbroken expanse of matte black.

John walked to the center of the room and discovered that the tabletop was, in fact, a large mirror. A circle had been painted on the surface of the mirror with red paint. Superimposed on the circle was a

blue octagon. There were also crudely drawn figures, and writing that John could not understand.

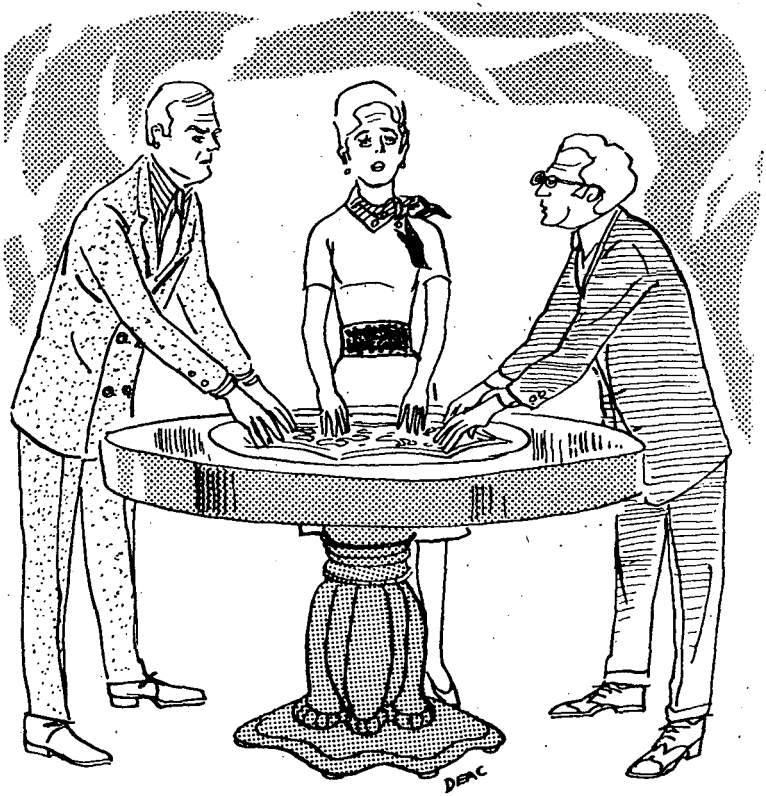
"Place your hands on the points of the octagon," Lazarus said, placing his own fingertips on two of the angles.

Joanna immediately stepped up to the table. She placed her hands on the mirror, closed her eyes and threw back her head, then waited.

"Your eyes, Mrs. Martin. And press softly; a soul is soft, tender to the touch."

"Yes. Yes, I'm sorry."

The thick lenses swung in John's direction. John swallowed hard, stepped up to the table and placed his fingertips on two of the remaining angles. Immediately, the lights



winked out. At the same time, John felt something resembling a mild electric shock stroke the tips of his fingers and run through his body.

Electrodes, John decided; impressive, but also obvious to anyone who really stopped to think about it. He vaguely wondered how an intelligent woman like Joanna—despite her grief—could have allowed herself to be taken in by a group of men who, like spiritual vampires, grew fat by sucking off the juices of a family's sorrow.

Suddenly he was aware that the three of them were swimming in a harsh pool of light. At the same time John felt his mouth go dry. Perspiration was pasting his clothes to his body as Joanna began to speak.

"Heidi," Joanna whispered. "Heidi, I can feel you around me. Can you speak to me?"

"She can't speak," Lazarus said. "Not at this stage. The contact has not been maintained long enough. Please remember to keep your eyes open."

"Heidi!" Joanna sighed. "Heidi, we miss you. We miss you so much! Daddy and I want you to know that!"

John suddenly felt cold. He struggled for control, struggled to maintain some semblance of objectivity, for he, too, felt something, a *presence* poking at the surface of his consciousness—and that presence was Heidi.

"Keep your eyes open, Mrs. Martin. Your eyes are the entrance to your soul. The presence finds its way to you through your eyes."

"Heidi," Joanna continued. "Oh, Heidi, Daddy and I are so sorry for all the times we had to punish you. If you only knew how much we miss you and want you back!"

John tensed, and looked around him. The light had dimmed to a soft glow, and it seemed as if the black of the walls was closing in, threatening to smother them all. Still, he felt that Heidi was near.

Heidi was dead. Heidi was dead. Heidi was *dead!*

Why, then, did he feel her so close to him? He closed his eyes and, for a moment, the sensation receded.

"Heidi, how we love you!"

John looked down and froze; the table was *moving*—or so it seemed to John as he stared down into the depths of the mirror. His own image stared back at him, wild-eyed and pale. His legs felt weak under him.

Lazarus was chanting, his mouth gaping grotesquely.

John looked back down into the mirror, past the circle and the octagon and the writing; something was moving. It was not a person,

as much as it was the shadow—or the *essence*—of a person, but was the shadow in the glass, or in his mind?

Whatever, wherever, it was, it was *there*, dark and foreboding, gliding and slipping, expanding and contracting like a fetid oil slick on an ocean of storms; and it was surfacing, coming up toward him, touching his fingertips—

"All right, that's it! Stop it! *Stop it!*"

The lights flashed on, and John found himself standing three feet away from the table, his hands clutched to his chest. He could feel driblets of sweat trickling down over his forehead and cheeks.

Lazarus and Joanna were staring at him.

"John, you *broke* it!" Joanna said in the tone of a petulant child. "You *broke* it!"

"I'm . . . I'm sorry," John said, his mind racing. He knew that a wrong word at this moment could ruin any chance he might have of making his plan work. "I'm afraid the experience was a little too much for me."

Lazarus stared at him, his face blank. Joanna blinked, and the muscles in her face suddenly relaxed.

"Wasn't it *wonderful*, John? Could you *feel* her?"

John smiled at his wife and turned to Lazarus. It was absolutely impossible for him to read anything in the other man's face. On the other hand, John could not escape the sinking feeling that Lazarus could read his every thought.

"It was all quite unusual," John said, glancing at his wife. "There certainly seems to be something to it."

As before, Lazarus gave a short, almost imperceptible nod of his head.

"We'll be back," John continued, looking away from Lazarus, and hating himself for it. "Also, I'm sure I can see my way clear to making a sizable contribution."

"Oh, John!"

John squeezed Joanna's arm, and stared back at Lazarus who seemed to dismiss the gesture with a peremptory wave of his hand.

"Any money you wish to contribute is completely up to you, Mister Martin," Lazarus said casually. "You are welcome to come here any time you wish, whether or not you make any contribution."

"Why don't you wait for me outside, darling?" John said to his wife. "I have a few things I'd like to discuss with Mr. Lazarus."

Joanna kissed John on the cheek, then hurried out of the room.

"You've got a pretty cute setup here," John said, turning back toward the smaller man, moving

very close to him. "I don't know how you manage all the special effects, but I'm impressed." John waited. Lazarus stared back impassively. "I want *you* to be impressed with the fact that I'm going to bring this whole thing crashing down around your ears if you don't leave my wife alone."

"There are no special effects here, Mister Martin," Lazarus said in a voice so soft John could hardly hear him. "Your wife came to us; we did not go to her. There is nothing illegal about what we do here, as I'm sure you're convinced by now. Also, we neither accept nor reject supplicants on the basis of whether or not the marriage partner agrees with our methods. I'm sure you understand, Mister Martin."

John clenched his fists until he could feel the nails biting into his flesh. He knew it would be useless to threaten Lazarus; that would only serve to give the other man the edge, something to hold over him.

John waited for his anger to cool. He had played what he had thought would be his trump card, and he had lost; Lazarus wasn't even breathing hard. He knew that their marriage would be finished if Joanna discovered what he had been trying to do. His wife would be lost to him, and to herself, forever, unless he could find a way to shake Lazarus.

"I'm a wealthy man," John said at last. "I'm sure you appreciate what wealth can do. Sooner or later, I'll find a way to expose you. You leave my wife alone, or I'll have your hide. Think about it, Lazarus; is one woman worth jeopardizing your whole operation?"

Lazarus said nothing. John met his gaze for a moment, then turned and walked toward the door. The voice of the small man came at him, unyielding in its terrible softness.

"Mister Martin."

John stopped, but did not turn around.

"You felt the presence of your daughter, Heidi," Lazarus continued. "Why do you refuse to admit that there may, indeed, be a force, a power, at work here that is beyond your understanding? You know, it *was* your daughter that you felt."

John whirled on the other man. "I suppose you're talking about the so-called 'Powers of Darkness'," John said in a voice heavily laced with sarcasm.

"Yes," Lazarus said, the trace of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I *am* talking about the powers of darkness, as you choose to call them."

"I prefer to look to the powers of light." He had meant to be mock-

ing but the words had not come out that way. There was something about Lazarus that drained off his sense of irony, and filled the hole with fear.

"The powers of light are subtle," Lazarus said evenly. "Subtle and long range. Not much good to people who are in a hurry, as most people are. The powers of darkness are not subtle. Look around you for the proof. Thus, the powers we worship are more effective over a short period of time."

John tried to smile, but the muscles in his face were stiff as dried leather. "I thought a man's soul was the payment demanded by the forces you're talking about."

"That's propaganda," Lazarus said. "They require only tribute, something without which they could not exist. The needs of our organization are dependent upon your money; the force we wield is dependent upon your *belief*. The soul has nothing to do with it. In most men, the soul is dead long before the body. We need the living, not the dead."

"You're mad," John said. As before, his voice trembled, but this time it was not from rage. "You're stark, raving mad!"

"You've already been granted a great deal, Mister Martin. Despite your disbelief, you were granted a feeling of presence. Now, your belief and cooperation are required if you wish to continue communicating with Heidi. In any case, it would not be wise to attempt to interfere, Mister Martin. It would not be wise at all."

"Are you threatening me?"

"I am warning you. No more, and no less."

John opened his mouth to speak, then remembered what it had felt like to feel Heidi all around him.

"Think about what I have said, Mister Martin."

John wheeled and walked from the room, slamming the door behind him.

John waited across the street for two hours. Finally satisfied that the building housing the League was deserted at that early hour of the morning, he crossed the street and ran up the stairs, slipping into the safe shadows. He waited ten minutes, then dug into his pocket for a set of skeleton keys. He tapped the other pocket to make sure he had his tiny camera, then put his hand on the knob.

The knob turned easily. Breathing hard, John pushed open the door and stepped into the darkened foyer. For the hundredth time, he told himself that he was a fool for attempting this alone. It was a job for a detective, but then he suspected that it would be ex-

tremely difficult to find any reputable detective willing to effect a forced entrance, almost as difficult as finding one who would take him seriously.

No, John had decided; it was his wife who was being exploited, his marriage that was being threatened. In view of the imagined difficulty in getting anyone else to handle the job properly, it was his problem to solve.

John followed the narrow beam of his flashlight down the hall to the room containing the table and mirror. The door was open, and he walked in. He realized that he was grasping for straws, and that he might find nothing. After all, a great deal of what had gone on was undoubtedly psychological. On the other hand, he too had felt the "presence" of Heidi. Then there was the sensation of electric shock when he had touched the glass, not to mention the shadow in the mirror.

There had to be some kind of equipment to produce these illusions, and John was determined to find it. He would take the resultant photographs to Joanna. If that failed, he would take them to the police. There had to be some way to stop Lazarus. John paused to consider some of the possibilities he had thought out beforehand.

The easiest explanation was hypnosis, electronically induced. Lazarus had continually cautioned both of them to keep their eyes open. That meant that there was something he wanted them to see. Light patterns? That would explain the moving shape in the glass. The machine was embedded in the table. The electric shock would be transmitted through tiny electrodes hidden beneath the painted figures on the table, and Lazarus would start the whole thing going by pressing some control with his foot on his side of the table.

It all fit. Now all John had to do was find the actual equipment. He began by kneeling down and inspecting the floor area near where Lazarus had been standing; the floor was solid marble. He stood up and pushed on the table. It moved easily. There were no wires running up through the legs.

He hesitated a moment and inhaled a series of deep breaths. His heart had begun to race, and he made a conscious effort to move at a slow, deliberate pace.

The equipment *had* to be here, somewhere around the table. It was simply a matter of finding it, but a close inspection of the table showed that it was exactly what it appeared to be—a mirror, and a very thin one at that. There was obviously no room in the glass suf-

ficient for the sophisticated machinery and circuitry needed to produce the effects he had experienced.

Finally, John gripped a key in a trembling hand and scraped away the oily paint at the corner of a figure where he had laid his fingers. There was nothing but glass beneath, and glass was not a conductor of electricity.

John felt a chill run through his body. At the same time a dampness began under his arms and quickly spread over his chest, back and stomach. John shook himself, loosened his tie and took another series of deep breaths. The darkness beyond the shaft of his light had taken on a menacing aura, like a wet, woolly blanket the night was trying to shove down into his lungs.

He beat at the blackness with his light, then stopped and brought the beam back to a section of the wall. He stared at the wall, then stepped closer. He put out his hand and traced his index finger up and down the barely discernible outline of a door—a door with sunken hinges and no knob. He pushed at it, and the door swung open.

It was more a closet than a room, and in the closet, wired to a cable outlet snaking across the floor and into the opposite wall, was a film projector. Behind him, on the door and lined up with the lens of the projector, was a tiny opening that swung easily back and forth. A thin wire ran down along the wall and into the main cable.

John barely managed to stifle a cry of triumph. He was certain he had found what he had come here seeking. It remained only to discover exactly how the whole thing worked.

He pulled open the door on the side of the projector and flashed his light inside. He found there a long strip of film, its ends spliced together so that it would run in a continuous loop.

John knew even before he took out the film and examined it that the picture on the frames would be that of Heidi. It was a very good picture, capturing all of Heidi's vitality and innocence. It was a picture he had taken the day before their boat had hit a submerged rock.

Lazarus must have got the picture from Joanna. John imagined he could almost hear Lazarus explaining to Joanna the necessity of a photograph to facilitate "communication."

John swallowed his rage and examined the film more closely. In fact, out of hundreds of frames there were no more than a half dozen of Heidi. The remaining frames were coated with jet-black ink that would block any light

from shining through. Somehow, Lazarus was able to activate the projector by remote control, and the "presence" he had felt came as a result of Heidi's picture flashing before his eyes. There were undoubtedly at least three more projectors in the walls around the room, so that a person could be looking in any direction and still "feel" whatever "presence" Lazarus happened to have on the film loop—he had *seen* nothing.

The darkness was no longer menacing and John clicked off the flashlight. An idea was smoldering just below the surface of his consciousness, something he had read. Film runs through a projector at the rate of twenty-four frames per second, but *one* frame flashing at two or three seconds would go by too quickly to register on the conscious mind.

On the *conscious* mind.

Keep your eyes open, Mrs. Martin. The eyes are the window to your soul.

Subliminal suggestion. That's what they had called it, John remembered. Some psychologists had once tried it out in a commercial movie house, splicing in pictures of various products throughout the length of a feature film. Not one member of the audience could remember seeing any of the frames, yet sale of the specific products had shown a fifty percent increase in the following month.

Everyone in the scientific community had thought it a very interesting experiment, if slightly immoral; and even the government had dismissed it as being an "impractical" way of disseminating propaganda.

Obviously, Lazarus did a lot of reading—or perhaps he was a psychologist.

John was still left with the problem of the shadow in the table. Having discovered part of the small man's secret, John was determined not to leave without a complete photographic record. He wanted to see Lazarus try to maintain the same calm when he saw the pictures. He wanted to watch Lazarus react when he told him that his "powers of darkness" were manufactured by Bell and Howell, and processed by Kodak.

Once more John flashed on his light, walked to the table and stared down into the design formed by the red circle and overlapping octagon. Absently, he rested his hands on the figures.

Curious, John reflected, the sensation of molten fire running up through his arms; curious how, deep-down in the silver-white glass, shadows moved. It was good, really good. He decided he must get a picture of that shadow. He needed

proof to augment any description.

Vaguely, John wondered where the music was coming from. Turning his head, he saw three naked drummers sitting in a far corner of the room. Their eyes were closed, their mouths open as though suspended in the middle of a perpetual spiritual orgasm.

"It's so unfortunate that you would not listen," Lazarus was saying.

The man did not limp as he walked over to John, and he was not wearing his glasses. His eyes were black pools of ink, with no pupils, and shadows moved there, sisters of the shadow in the table.

John tried to speak, but could only mumble behind the thick strip of adhesive tape over his mouth.

The shadows in the man's eyes moved, reaching out, threatening to engulf him. "You're a fool, Martin. I think you realize that now."

John struggled against his bonds, and sank back exhausted. He had been stripped naked, and the cold stone of the table on which he had been laid was seeping up into his bones, numbing him. Out of the corner of his eye he could see stone cups set on a ledge running alongside both sides of the table. They were positioned beneath grooves that had been cut in the stone, and they were stained with what might have been dried blood.

Lazarus motioned to someone just beyond John's line of vision. John struggled to see who belonged to the soft footsteps approaching him from the rear.

Joanna was naked, her body glistening with sweat and some foul-smelling ointment. The shadows in her eyes danced and writhed as she raised the knife into the air above his chest.

A scream bubbled soundlessly in John's throat as the knife began its rapid downward descent. *It was mad,* John thought behind the shriek in his mind. *Insane.*

Right up to the moment that the knife plunged into his heart, John was convinced that, given just a little more time, he would have discovered how Lazarus managed the shadow in the mirror.

Just a matter of time . . .

One end of a rope will, eventually, lead to the other.

IT WAS EARLY MORNING at headquarters, and Captain Leopold was using the rare quiet hours to wade through the routine reading on his desk before heading home to bed. Outside, a bitter February wind was cutting across the darkened parking lot beneath his office window, stirring the occasional snow flurries into little eddies of white that shimmered and danced in the street lights' glow.

Leopold's office was situated at the rear of police headquarters, on the second floor, and the two floors above him had long been given over to an arrangement of temporary cells where prisoners could be held overnight while awaiting preliminary hearings or release on bail. He was rarely aware of the jail, except at times like this when a strolling woman might pause in the night beneath a street light to stare up at the barred windows. Leopold rarely visited those upper floors, for he preferred to question prisoners in his own office. The cells, to him, were a world apart, a world where enforcement gave way to the beginnings of punishment.

"Anything new?" he asked as Sergeant Fletcher entered with the morning coffee. He liked Fletcher. He especially liked these slow days when the two of them could chat over coffee and relax a bit.

"Just the routine. No homicides."

It had been three nights since there had been a murder in the city, and that one had been only a barroom brawl. During weeks like this, the men of Homicide held their breaths.

"Maybe they'll fire us if there's nothing to do," Leopold said with a smile.

"Sure! Listen, by midnight we'll probably have a half dozen cases. These things run like that."

"It's too cold for murder, Fletcher. Homicide is a summer crime."

Fletcher was just reaching for his coffee when the explosion came. It was like a dull rumble of thunder that shook the building and sent tiny bits of plaster raining down from the ceiling.

They were out of their chairs together, running into the hall to see what had happened. For a moment all was confusion, and then a uniformed patrolman came running down from the third floor.

Leopold grabbed him as he passed. "What happened?"

"Explosion in one of the cells."

"A break?" Fletcher asked, already letting his hand slip toward his holstered revolver.

"No," the officer answered, his blue eyes wide with fright. "Some guy just blew himself up."

The third floor, when they reached it, was a babble of running, shouting men converging on a single cell located almost above Leopold's office. The interior of the cell showed scorched steel walls and buckled bars, surrounding the thing in the center that had been a man.

"How'd it happen?" Leopold asked someone in charge.

"Damned if I know. Nobody was watching, but he just blew up, I guess."

"Who was he?"

After a moment, somebody else appeared with the records. Sergeant Lamb, in charge of the cell block, read quickly down the sheet. "They brought him in last night, Captain. Name was Graham Hackis."

"Charge?"

They'd gotten the cell door open now, and somebody was bending over the body. "He was a strange one," Sergeant Lamb said. "Broke into a downtown office last night and started smashing their computers. A watchman called the police."

"Did he say why he was doing it?"

"We hadn't really had a chance to question him."

"Was he searched when you brought him in?"

Sergeant Lamb looked hurt. "We certainly would have found a bomb big enough to do all that

damage here, Captain Leopold."

"Perhaps," Leopold said. A flashbulb popped and he saw that a police photographer had arrived from downstairs. "Fletcher, check the arrest record and find out everything you can about Graham Hackis. I especially want to know the name of the place he broke into."

"It must have been suicide, Captain," Fletcher said. "He must have had a tiny bomb hidden on him."

"Maybe," Leopold agreed, "but then why didn't he use it to blow up this computer they found him smashing?"

"He was probably planning to."

The incident bothered Leopold. Suicide by explosion in a cell at police headquarters was almost unthinkable, especially since the dead man was not being held for a capital offense, and yet Leopold knew that the only alternative—homicide—was even more unthinkable.

The building was in a turmoil for the rest of the day. Nothing like this had ever happened, and the mayor himself was on the scene, nodding somberly as he answered questions and posed for the blinding lights of the television cameramen. It developed that the dead man had a wife and child living in New York, and presently the center of attention shifted to there. Working in his office, Leopold heard the latest developments from every passing officer, but he paid little attention till Fletcher returned in the late afternoon and settled into the leather chair opposite him.

"The city chemist's finished his tests, Captain. The bomb was fulminate of mercury."

Leopold grunted. "Surely a most unique method of death."

"Not as unique as you'd think. Doc had a textbook there that he showed me. On November 10, 1887, a convicted anarchist bomber blew himself up with a capsule of fulminate of mercury in the death cell of an Illinois prison. He was to be hanged the following morning. It was assumed at the time that he'd hidden the capsule in his mouth."

Leopold scratched his head. "I think we can assume, then, that Graham Hackis had read the same book. Coincidences like that just don't happen. Now we have to figure out why."

"Why?"

Leopold nodded. "Why he would want to kill himself."

Sergeant Fletcher smiled. "You've come around to my side."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Let's go over to this office he wrecked. Perhaps we can learn something there."

The office of Andrews Research, Inc. occupied the entire top floor of

the National Bank Building. From its windows, one could see almost to the Sound, and the city was spread beneath like some dreamy wonderland. The sight of it made Leopold dizzy and he moved away from the window. He was too used to his own two-story view of things.

"Market research, that's what we do here," Frank Andrews was saying. "Largest market research organization in the northeast, outside of New York City. See these computers? They're the key to our whole system. We've got the latest models; this 360 is a vast improvement over the old 1401."

"Just what do you use them for?" Fletcher asked, making notes.

Frank Andrews was a tall, balding man of about forty. He seemed to be constantly in motion, gesturing as he launched yet another explanation. "A thousand things: market areas, population, buying power. People come on the market with new products, or old products in new areas, and they need advice. What's the buying power of teen-agers in Kansas City? Of housewives in San Francisco? What's the best city to test-market a new toothpaste? That sort of thing."

"And the machine gives you the answers?"

Andrews nodded his shiny head. "If we've programmed it correctly. If we've fed it enough information."

"Tell us what happened last evening," Leopold said.

"We were working late. I had some of the girls in, running the card-sort machines. It's a big marketing project, and we are up against a deadline. Well, suddenly this fellow Hackis shows up. Says he's come to service the machines. The machines didn't need servicing. I told him that. Told him to get out, that we were running highly confidential matter. We certainly couldn't shut down the machines while he serviced them."

"Did he show any identification?"

Frank Andrews nodded. "The machines are leased. He had a card from the leasing company, but that could easily have been faked."

"Is that when he started smashing the machines? When you ordered him out?"

"No, no. That was around nine o'clock, and we knocked off soon after that. It was around eleven-thirty when the watchman found the door of our office broken open. This fellow Hackis was inside, smashing one of the computers with a hammer. The watchman was armed, and he held him here while he called the police."

They walked over to inspect the damaged machine. There were no tubes for the hammer to smash, but it had done a fairly complete job on the wiring in one area. Leopold studied the damage carefully. "It almost appears as if he had hacked away at a space to place his bomb. Otherwise, a hammer is hardly an effective weapon against this." He tapped the sturdy metal sides and the maze of insulated wiring.

"It was enough damage to ruin it," Andrews grumbled.

Sergeant Fletcher smiled. "The guy murdered a machine!"

Leopold nodded. "And it cost him his life. I'm beginning to think it wasn't murder or suicide, Fletcher. I think he had the bomb on him and it just went off accidentally."

"But why was he smashing the machine?"

"He tried to get in first to service it and plant his bomb. When that failed, he had to break in. As to why . . . Well, there was a group called the Luddites over in England during the early nineteenth century who went around destroying the machines that were taking their jobs. Maybe Graham Hackis was losing his job to a computer."

Frank Andrews grunted and shuffled some folders on his desk. "He certainly cost us a pile of money. We had a rush marketing job that had to be completed by Monday."

Leopold glanced at the typewritten tag on the top folder. *Midwest Licensed Beverages, Inc.* He'd never heard of them. "Exactly what effect did his attack on your computer have, Mr. Andrews?"

"Well, the thing is wrecked. It would take a week to fix or replace it—maybe longer. Which means we won't be able to complete our market survey for this client."

"Couldn't your people do it without the machine?"

He gave Leopold a disdainful look. "It would take a year to check all the statistics without a computer."

"So your client will have to go elsewhere. To somebody in New York?"

"It's not as simple as that. We had the job partly done. And there's a time factor involved."

Leopold nodded. "All right. We may want to talk to you again later."

They left Andrews Research and walked quickly across the sunlit street to their car. Sergeant Fletcher lighted a cigarette. "What do you think, Captain? Back to headquarters?"

Leopold scowled at the sky. "Hackis had a wife. Let's go talk to her."

The dead man had lived on a

quiet side street in an area of the city not yet affected by the creeping changes of urban renewal and civic progress. The houses were old, but generally neat, with narrow driveways and tiny detached garages standing as the chief evidence of another era. They found Mrs. Hackis dressed in black, in the livingroom of the house.

"I was on my way down to the undertaker," she said somberly. "There is so much to do."

"We'll only keep you a few moments, Mrs. Hackis." Leopold was always awkward with the families of the dead. "There are a few questions about your husband."

"I can't understand any of it," she mumbled. "I just can't understand it." She was a flustered woman who might have been pretty under different circumstances. Leopold judged her age at about thirty, though the bleached hair might be putting him off by a few years.

"What did your husband do, Mrs. Hackis?" Leopold asked. "For a living?"

"He had his own little business. Electronics, he liked to call it, though a lot of the time he was just fixing people's radios and television sets."

"Where was his shop?"

"He worked down in our basement."

"Could we see it, Mrs. Hackis?"

She hesitated and then nodded. "Of course. I'm so upset. I had to take the children over to a neighbor's. They're too young to understand."

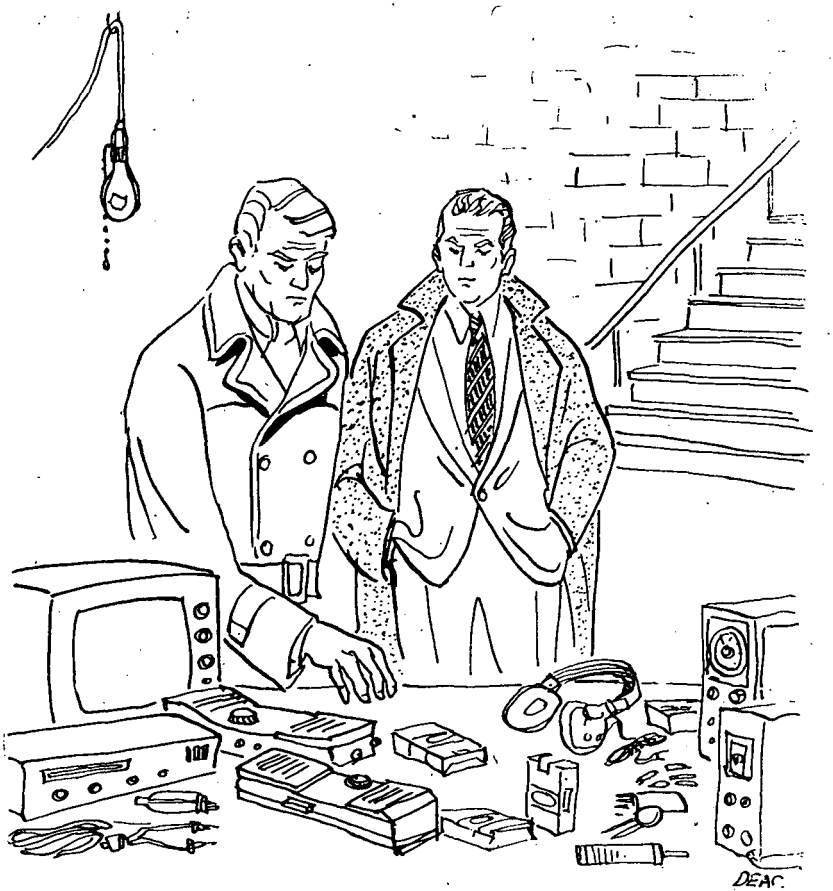
Leopold and Fletcher followed her down squeaky wooden steps to a low-ceilinged basement and the cluttered workshop that had been Graham Hackis' abode. The place was a hodgepodge of transistors and tubes, with the glare of a single naked bulb lending an air of harshness to the setting. Leopold picked up a dismantled pair of walkie-talkie radios, operated on citizens' wavelengths, and studied them with some care. Then his attention was attracted to several packs of cigarettes. They were empty, and some had been carefully refitted with tiny electronic equipment.

"What do you think, Captain?"

Leopold carefully held up a little tube. "I think this is fulminate of mercury. We'd better take it with us. And these cigarette packs."

"I can't understand it," Mrs. Hackis said when they were back upstairs. "Graham wasn't the sort to get into trouble. I didn't even know he was in jail, and then they came and told me he'd been killed. I thought he was out of town last night."

"Did he have much money, Mrs.



Hackis? Especially recent money that he couldn't account for?"

"No," she answered slowly. "Not really. All he had was his insurance and a small savings account."

"Do you have any record of whom he was doing work for? Those things in the basement?"

She thought about it, scratching her blonde hair. "He mentioned some company. *Legal* something, I forget the name. I thought that's where he was last night."

"Do you remember anybody's name?"

"There was a Mr. Beaver. I couldn't forget that name."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hackis. You've been a great help."

"Do you think he was murdered, Captain Leopold?" The question seemed to disturb her.

"At this point we think it was some sort of accident, but we can't be certain."

They left her standing at the front door and drove back to headquarters. The hour was growing late, and the dusk of a February evening was already settling over the city. Leopold felt tired. He wondered what he was looking for in the case, and whether it was worth looking at all.

"Should we mark it closed, Captain?" Fletcher asked back at the office.

Leopold sighed. "I suppose so. But first, do a little checking on this Beaver fellow. He might be a lawyer. Let me know."

Finally alone, Leopold puttered about the office. He picked up the afternoon paper and read the reporter's version of the death, a sensational account that hinted at dark deeds. There was a separate story about the wrecking of the computer, with a picture of Frank Andrews, looking unhappy. At the bottom of the page another article caught his eye: *Last Dry State Goes Wet Next Month.* He was just starting to read it when Fletcher returned.

"I found Beaver, Captain. But he's no lawyer."

"Get him in. I want to talk to him, whatever he is."

After a while, Leopold went upstairs to the cell block. The air was still heavy with the odor of singed steel, and a pair of prisoners were scrubbing down the cell where Hackis had died. Leopold walked by them in search of Sergeant Lamb, but discovered he was out to dinner. He looked around for a familiar face and recognized the blue-eyed officer who'd told him of the explosion that morning.

"I'm Leopold. You were here this morning?"

The young man nodded. "Officer Stevenson, sir. I checked the prisoner in last night, too."

"You searched him?"

"Well . . . you know. Just a preliminary thing."

"I'd like to see what he had on him."

Stevenson led the way to a bank of small lockers. He opened one and withdrew a heavy manila envelope. "Let's see; wallet, watch, belt, keys, the usual things and this little transistor radio."

Leopold picked up the radio and examined it. He noticed the slender aerial that pulled from its case but when he turned the dial, no sound came. "How about cigarettes?" he asked.

The policeman shrugged. "We usually let them keep cigarettes. At least the first night or so."

"Did he have any?"

"I think he had a pack."

Leopold ran a finger over his chapped lips. "Did you let him have his one phone call after he was brought in?"

"Sure. I told him he could call his lawyer, but he didn't."

Leopold had a sudden wild thought. "He didn't by any chance phone a man named Beaver, did he?"

"Beaver? No, he called his wife."

Leopold felt let down. "All right. Thank you, Officer."

He went back downstairs to his office and sent someone out for a sandwich. The case didn't warrant all this time, really. It was a simple thing—except that he didn't know why Graham Hackis had tried to murder that machine.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Fletcher returned with a balding businessman who answered to the name of Aaron Beaver. He had narrow eyes and a sort of hesitant manner that might have masked almost anything.

"Sit down, Mr. Beaver. You can leave us, Fletcher. I just want to talk to Mr. Beaver for a bit."

"I hope it's important, Captain. He said it couldn't wait until morning."

Leopold, leaning back in his chair, decided he didn't like Aaron Beaver. "It's important. You've probably heard that Graham Hackis is dead," Leopold explained. "I call that important."

"Who?"

"Graham Hackis. He was doing some work for you."

"I don't believe I know the name."

"What business are you in, Mr. Beaver?"

"Legal beverages. I'm a liquor wholesaler."

Something stirred in the back of Leopold's memory. "What's the name of your company?"

"Beaver Brands, Inc."

"Your business around here?"

"We're nationwide."

"I see. Did you ever hear of a firm called Midwest Licensed Beverages?"

Aaron Beaver did not answer immediately. His eyes narrowed to slits and he put his hand into his breast pocket. It came out holding a thin white envelope which he placed on the desk between them.

"There's twenty thousand dollars in that envelope, Captain. Twenty $1000 bills. Call it a contribution to your pension fund."

Leopold stared at the envelope, unable to believe the words. "Are you offering me a bribe, Mr. Beaver?"

"Of course not."

"I could have you in a cell for a trick like that."

"But you won't. What is it, two years' pay? Two years, Captain.

Think about it for a moment."

"What am I supposed to do for it?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

Beaver smiled then, and it was the smile that finally got to Leopold. He jabbed the buzzer on his desk and waited for Sergeant Fletcher to arrive. Then he said, "Fletcher, Mr. Beaver just offered me a bribe. I want him arrested."

Beaver was still smiling. "You're making a mistake, Captain."

Leopold sighed and turned away. "We'll see." He was feeling very tired.

In the morning, the phone was ringing as Leopold entered his office. He shed his topcoat and picked up the phone.

"Leopold, this is the commissioner."

Leopold knew the voice, even though he'd only met the man twice. "Yes, sir."

"What's all this foolishness about arresting Aaron Beaver?"

"It's not foolishness, sir. He offered me a bribe to go slow on this bombing investigation."

"Look, Captain, I've always had very good reports on you. Very good, indeed. But this sort of thing is unworthy of you. It just gets the department into a big mess. Beaver has some powerful friends, here and in New York. He was lunching with a midwestern governor just two days ago, for example."

"I'll bet he was."

"He told his lawyer he offered you a contribution for the police pension fund. He's given donations before. You'd never be able to prove it was a bribe."

Leopold sighed into the receiver. "He's out on bail. What more does he want?"

"Dismiss the charge, Captain, before you make fools of us all."

"Is that an order, sir?"

"Do I have to make it an order, Captain?"

"Twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money," Leopold said, and hung up.

He went to the window and looked out at the city, at the February mists and the patches of dirty snow left over from the last storm. It was his city, but sometimes he wondered if it were worth the trouble.

Then he went to work. He located the New York office of Midwest Licensed Beverages and put in a call to the president. He talked for some time, and then he phoned Frank Andrews at Andrews Research. After a time, he sent Fletcher out for coffee and then went back to the telephone. He dug out a copy of the previous afternoon's newspaper and finished reading an article which had interested him. Finally, he put through a call to

the governor of a midwestern state.

In the afternoon, late in the day, Leopold called them all to his office. Aaron Beaver was there, and the commissioner, and Fletcher. He'd tried to get Frank Andrews, too, but the man was in New York, trying to lease a new machine.

"I'll try to make this brief," Leopold said, seeing the commissioner already growing restless. "I've decided to dismiss the charges against Mr. Beaver in connection with the bribery attempt, and I've sent word to the courts. Your bond will be returned to you."

The balding man smiled and started to rise, but Leopold waved him down again. "However, there is another matter—the matter of the destruction of a computer belonging to the Andrews Research people."

"What have I to do with that?"

"Do I have to spell it out, Mr. Beaver? The papers have been reporting since November that the last dry state has finally voted to allow the sale of alcoholic beverages. It starts next month, doesn't it?"

"That's no secret," Beaver said, but his voice cracked a bit.

"Five million people; that's quite a market opening up all of a sudden. How much money is that in a year's time? What share of a six million dollar industry, Mr. Beaver, would you have sewed up?"

"Get to the point."

"The point is that I talked to the president of Midwest Licensed Beverages this morning. He told me he was locked in a marketing struggle with Beaver Brands for control of the entire state. The one who could complete his marketing surveys first and get his distribution centers set could open up the whole state. I also talked to the governor of the state. He verified the fact that you were the only wholesaler so far to approach him with a marketing plan."

"Is that a crime?"

Leopold went on. "I remembered seeing a folder for Midwest Licensed Beverages at Andrews Research, and Frank Andrews confirmed that they were running a market survey for Midwest at the time Graham Hackis ruined the machine. You knew, Mr. Beaver, that your company would surely get the territory if no other competitors could complete their surveys on time. Of course the state wouldn't give you a monopoly, but if you were first in, you'd be hard to dislodge. Especially if you spread around some of those thousand dollar bills."

Beaver was out of his chair. "I've had enough of that!"

"You hired Graham Hackis, an electronics expert, to place a bomb

in the Andrews computer. He was supposed to do it while servicing the machine, but when that didn't work he broke into the office at night to plant the bomb. Because he'd smashed open the computer, the police thought his only weapon was a hammer. They didn't search him well enough to find the mercury bomb hidden in a fake cigarette pack. Hackis planned to set it off by radio waves from a little transmitter he also carried."

"How do you know all this?" the commissioner asked.

"Because I examined the basement workshop in Hackis' home. He had a duplicate of the cigarette pack bomb. And one of our men, Stevenson, took the transmitter from him when he was arrested."

"You think the explosion was an accident?"

"Of a sort," Leopold said. "I'll get to that later. Right now we have Mr. Beaver here, who was employing Hackis."

"Can you prove it?" the commissioner asked, frowning.

"The dead man's wife can testify to his connection with Beaver. And Mr. Andrews will tell about the damage to his machine. I think we can make a pretty good case."

"Do you have anything to say, Mr. Beaver?"

"I have friends," he mumbled. "I thought you were one of them, Commissioner." Then, pausing at the door, he added, "The contribution to the pension fund still stands."

When he'd gone, the commissioner said, "I'll talk to the district attorney about presenting the case to the grand jury. I think there's a fairly good chance of getting an indictment, especially if you can find evidence of Beaver paying money to Hackis."

"That should be easy," Fletcher said. "I'll get on it in the morning."

"What about the explosion, Leopold?" the commissioner asked then. "The papers have been after us."

Leopold smiled at his reflection on the darkening window. "You should have thought about the newspapers before you asked me to lay off Beaver this morning."

"All right," the commissioner said, reddening. "What do I tell them now?"

Leopold leaned back in his chair. He always felt good at the end of a case. "Tell them this: tell them how Hackis was arrested and searched, and how the radio-controlled bomb, hidden in the cigarette pack, was missed by our officer. Obviously, Hackis wasn't about to admit he was carrying a bomb, so he left it on himself, even though the officer took the other part, the radio transmitter. Hackis

had assembled this bomb using parts from two walkie-talkie units, the kind that broadcast on citizens' wavelengths. They usually have a range of a mile or better, but with the short aerial hidden in the cigarette pack I doubt if they'd work more than a block away. That was far enough for Hackis to be out of the building when he blew up the computer, though, and that's all he needed."

"But *what* blew *him* up?" the commissioner demanded.

Leopold shrugged his shoulders. "Officer Stevenson thought the transmitter was a little radio, and when he got back to his desk he turned it on. That was the end for Hackis."

"I'll be damned!"

After the commissioner had left them, Fletcher slipped into his topcoat. "I'm going home, too. It's been a long day."

"A long one," Leopold said.

"You need me anymore, Captain?"

Leopold stared at him. "I'm lonely, Fletcher. Stay around for a while."

"What's up? You worried about that cop, Stevenson?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"The papers are going to say the case is closed, Fletcher. And that's when we're going to go to work and pin it on her."

"Huh?"

"Mrs. Hackis. She said she didn't know her husband was in jail, but he phoned her after he was arrested. She knew, all right. In the basement, I found a duplicate of the cigarette-pack bomb, but there was no duplicate transmitter. She'd already removed that. He phoned her and told her what happened and maybe told her the bomb was still on him; then Mrs. Hackis went down to the basement and got the duplicate transmitter and went down and stood outside the jail and turned it on and blew her husband to bits. I suppose she figured it was an opportunity she couldn't miss. I think I even saw her out the window that night, looking up at the cells."

"What'll we do?"

"Give her a little more rope. Dig up a motive. Watch her. Let her think she's safe, and then we pounce."

"What a way to kill a guy!" Fletcher said.

Leopold got to his feet. "None of them are good ways. Come on, let's go find some coffee."

There seems to be some justification here that practice in little things leads to greater.

THE DOGLEG ON THE 12th HOLE

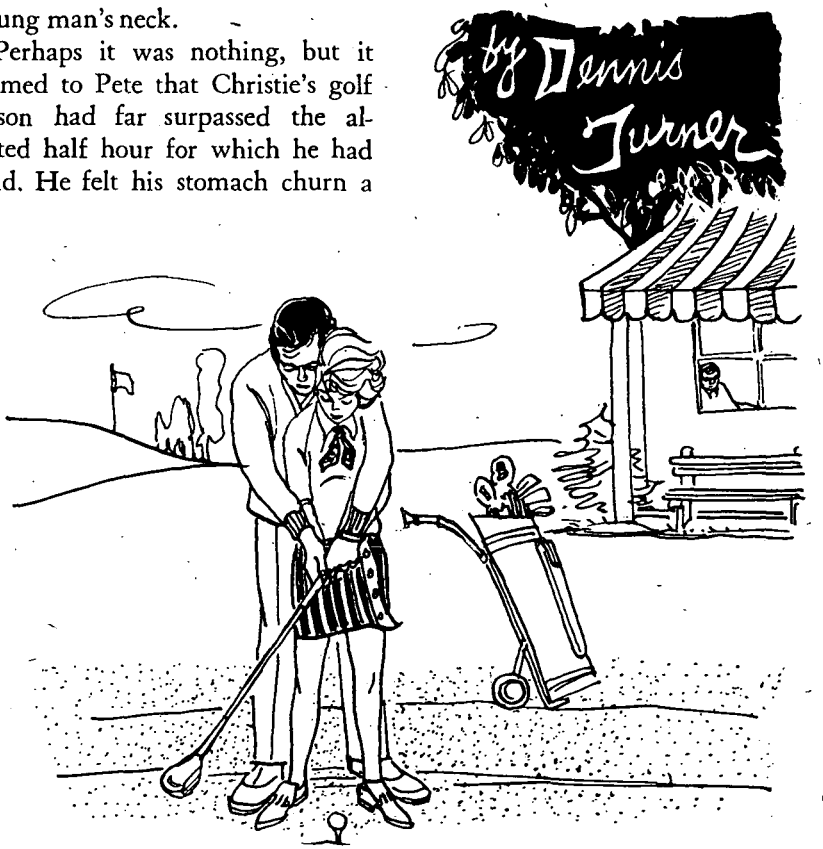
PETE GALAZKA had an itch. If he had been an ordinary man, a simple thing like an itch on the ball of his foot would have posed no problems, but Pete wasn't an ordinary man. At the age of thirty-five, Pete Galazka was an even six feet tall, weighed 297 pounds bone-dry, and was insanely jealous. Consequently, not only was it exceptionally difficult for Pete to bend down and scratch his foot under the table, but it proved to be a feat beyond endurance for him to accomplish without taking his eyes off his wife.

Her swing is perfect, he thought. Her stance was wide and straight, her hips moved sensuously at the command of her backswing, and she thrust them forward in what Pete considered to be an inexcusable over-reaction, considering the ball bounced no more than thirty feet in front of her. The young golf pro standing beside her seemed strangely satisfied, and he nodded his head approvingly as he went behind her and slowly wrapped his arms around her.

Pete felt an uncontrollable urge to break from his chair, dash to the clubhouse door, and wrap his

umber three wood around the oung man's neck.

Perhaps it was nothing, but it emed to Pete that Christie's golf sson had far surpassed the al-tted half hour for which he had aid. He felt his stomach churn a



ttle as Danny took Christie's ands in his own to demonstrate he proper grip.

Pete Galazka hadn't always been at. In the back of his mind was he nagging thought that Christie ad married him for his money, vhich was true enough. The more ie thought about it, the more he vorried. The more he saw her with other men, even though it could be under the most innocent of circumstances, the more jealous he became. He soon discovered that the only way he could control his jealousy was by focusing his mind on something else, so Pete Galazka had focused on potatoes, large juicy steaks, cakes, pies, assorted goodies, and hamburgers.

No, Pete had not always been fat. It was only on his wedding day that he began eating his heart out.

Now, as he sat at the round oak table, his eyes steadily fixed on his beautiful wife, he felt an uncontrollable desire for some of Willy's onion rings.

"Keep your head down and bring your left foot in a little," Danny said lightly as he tapped his foot against Christie's. "That's better."

"Is he still watching?" she asked, keeping her eye on the ball.

"Of course."

"Well," she said, watching Danny place a ball on the tee in front of her, "we've got to make a decision."

"Divorce."

"Don't be absurd. He'd cut me off without a cent."

"Now swing back easy . . . Keep that arm straight! That's better. Then it's the dogleg on the twelfth."

She brought her arms down in a perfect arc and sent the ball scurrying across the green fairway until it came to rest twenty feet to her left. "I don't know, Danny. I never . . . Well, I never thought about killing him, you know."

"I promise you'll be rid of him for life."

She attacked the ball again, this time missing it and sending her club flying a good thirty fee straight down the fairway.

"Well, that's the best driv you've had all day," he said as h began gathering up the balls tha were scattered within a ten foo perimeter around them. "Now, lis ten this time, because it's going t be the last time I bring it up."

"All right, all right. But if thi doesn't work, Danny, I'm through with lessons."

Taking her arm, he began lead ing her slowly back to the club house. "At seven o'clock tomorrow morning, you tee off on the tenth hole—"

"I can't get him out here at that time in the morning. He hates golf! He'd no more come out here than—"

"What's the one reason he'd consent to playing golf at seven in the morning?"

"Nothing."

"You, love. You. If you tell him you're golfing at seven in the morning, I'll bet you a basket of balls that he's going to be right with you. What's he doing here today? He's been sitting up in that blasted clubhouse doing nothing but straining his eyeballs all day."

"OK, so we're teed off."

"All right. Now, nobody's going to be on the back nine at seven o'clock. Even if they started at six on the first tee, they couldn't possi-

bly be on the back nine by seven. So you play the tenth. Take your time, you don't have to rush anything. Then you play the eleventh. It's just a par three and you'll be through it in no time. Now, the twelfth has a dogleg to the right. It juts out and is surrounded on the left and in back of the green by trees. But on the right of the green, the river meanders in right in that spot. Now, once you've driven the first two hundred yards, you're then cut off from view from every other hole. The trees jut out on the left and that covers you from the first nine. The trees behind the green cover you from the rest of the back nine. There's just you, Tubs, the river . . . and me."

"And where are you?"

"Waiting by the river, my love, my sturdy body pressed tightly against the bank, just waiting for your little ball to plop onto the sand beside me."

"And?"

"Then you just make sure you talk Big Daddy into climbing down the gentle bank to retrieve your precious ball."

"And if he won't?"

"He will, dear, because you'll refuse to continue if you have to lose another stroke by playing a new ball. You'll pout, you'll refuse to speak to him and, above all, you'll tell him that when I see your score I'll insist that you take another lesson."

"That'll do it."

"You bet your sweet putter it will. So Pops climbs down the embankment where, with a little bump on the head from my trusty nine iron, and with all the grace of a two-ton pickup, he loses his footing and slips right into the water where he does, unfortunately, drown his poor self, presumably in a futile attempt to retrieve your lost ball."

Dipping his last onion ring in a pool of ketchup, Pete watched his wife and the young pro enter the room. "Well, my dear," he said as he wiped the ketchup from the corners of his mouth, "how was your lesson?"

"Rewarding, my love," she answered, bending slightly to kiss him on his forehead. "Danny's teaching me things I never thought possible before."

"Well, I guess the money's worth it, then."

"More than worth it," Danny said, smiling slightly.

"Well, when is it my turn?"

"What, dear?" Christie asked, turning back to Pete, who was just beginning to rise from the table.

"I said, 'When is it my turn?' I signed up for a lesson with you at three-thirty this afternoon, and here it is already four o'clock."

"A lesson?" Danny asked him.

"Of course. Listen, I just bought fifteen bucks' worth of balls, even had my name printed on them. You don't think I'm going to spend that much money on balls if I don't plan to take some lessons and learn this game, do you?"

"No. No, of course not. Tell me, Mr. Galazka, just what seems to be the trouble?"

"What?"

"Well, I mean, what area do you think you need to concentrate on? Your grip? Your stance? What?"

"I don't know, really. You see, I have this terrible slice. Every time I tee off, the ball flies to the right."

"Uh huh," Danny mumbled, staring down at Christie. "You slice, you say."

"That's right. So, I thought some lessons might be in order; you know, loosen me up a little. Maybe you can tell me what I'm doing wrong."

Danny, with a quick wink to the bewildered young wife, turned to Pete and nodded his head. "Yes, sir, I think you're right, Mr. Galazka. A few lessons might do you good. Might just take that slice right out of your swing and turn you into a real pro."

"That's what I thought, so I signed up for this afternoon. The sooner the better, I always—"

"Well, that's the trouble, you see," Danny said. "This afternoon is already shot, but I have a better idea. I have tomorrow morning at nine o'clock open, and I think I have just the remedy you need, Mr. Galazka."

"Well, good. Good."

"Usually, when I deal with slicers, I like to get them after they've already had a round of golf, you know what I mean? That way you're loosened up, you've just played nine, and you can tell me exactly where your ball was going. Then we can work from there."

"I have to play a round before the lesson?"

"That's the only way." Danny nodded vigorously. "I wouldn't touch you otherwise. Limbers you up, gives you some firsthand experience with your troubles. Makes it a lot easier on both of us, believe me."

"I'd have to have breakfast first, of course."

"Of course," Danny added, smiling.

"That means I'd have to get out here by . . ."

"Seven o'clock, I'd say."

"Seven o'clock." Pete paused for a moment and turned to Christie, who had dipped her finger in the puddle of ketchup and was now slowly licking it. "I'd—I'd hate to leave Mrs. Galazka alone . . ."

"That's a point," Danny broke

in, narrowing his eyes in an attempt to get Christie's attention. "That certainly is a point you've got there, Mr. Galazka."

Slowly Christie looked up from her finger and looked first at Danny and then at her husband. "Don't worry, dear. There's nothing I'd like better than to play a round of golf with you before breakfast."

"Oh, I'd have to eat first."

"Then it's settled," Danny added, slightly backing away from them.

"Fine, fine," Pete said. "I'll see you at nine, then."

"Oh, one other thing," Danny called back from the door. "Play the back nine. It's a little easier on beginners."

The following morning Pete and Christie were poised at the tenth tee, clubs in hand. Pete brought one of his new balls, *Peter Galazka* printed on it in bright red, matched it with a red tee, and waited patiently for Christie to hit the first drive. Her swing was beautiful, but the ball managed to dribble only a few feet in front of her.

"Wrong club," she mumbled as she passed him on her way back to her golf cart.

Pete bent down slowly, stretching his arm out in front of him, and managed to place his ball on the tee without disturbing his breakfast. He took a couple of practice swings with his driver, then stepped up to the ball.

"Keep your eye on the ball, dear," Christie called to him from the cart.

Confidently, he brought his arms back in a slow, steady arc, holding their position for a moment, then let his full weight carry his force through, and his club slammed into the ball with incredible power. The ball shot straight ahead of him in a beautiful, steady rise until it was about fifty feet out. Then it suddenly changed direction, as if it had come to a detour, and with a ninety-degree angle—a feat that Peter Galazka thought was surely impossible in midair—the ball drove with fantastic force over onto the eleventh fairway, to the right of the tenth tee.

"I told him," Pete said, slamming the head of his club into the grass. "I should have had a lesson first. I'm going to spend the whole time chasing those balls all over this course."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Christie said as she passed him with her cart. "It's only the first hole. You never know what can happen."

But it continued to happen. Pete found his ball on the eleventh fairway. With his number two wood he took a powerful hack at

it, sending it directly toward the tenth fairway where it belonged, but again the ball seemed to stop in midflight, change its mind, and make a quick dash to the right.

Christie finished the tenth hole, a par four, with a seven—not counting the three times the ball only moved three or four inches. By the time Pete had finally made it to within chipping distance of the green, his first-hole score stood at nine.

"I can't go on," he said wearily as he collapsed on the bench at the eleventh tee. "If he'd given me a lesson first, he could have straightened out this slice, and I could go around this course in half the score."

"He knows what he's doing, don't you worry about that," she said as she watched her ball shoot straight up and come down with resounding force twenty-five feet in front of her. "He knows what he's doing."

"I slice on every drive, and I think it's his job to correct that, don't you?"

"Don't worry, dear. After today, you'll never slice again."

"I hope you're right," he said, tapping the tee in with his foot. "I just hope you're right."

Pete sliced his drive on the eleventh, and his second shot, but by this time he was exhausted enough not to care about searching for the maverick ball. He merely counted it lost, put down another ball with his name on it, and started chipping his way toward the green.

"What did you get on the eleventh?" Christie asked, scribbling a six beside her name.

"Counting the lost balls?"

"Of course."

"Ten."

"Ten on a par three. You're doing great, Peter, just great."

"I told you. It's that slice every time."

"Quiet! I'm driving," she said at the twelfth. This time she managed to drive a good hundred feet straight as an arrow, but only a fraction of the way toward the dogleg that lay two hundred yards in front of her. "Your turn. And keep your eye on the ball."

Pete swung with all his might, bringing the force of three hundred badly distributed pounds smashing against the surface of the ball. With a frantic scream the ball shot into the air, high and straight above him, and with lightning speed. It continued onward and upward, and for the first time in his golfing career Pete Galazka thought he had really smacked a good one. It continued its mad flight for at least a hundred yards, and then with sure predictability, the ball carrying Peter Galazka's

name on it changed its mind and arched abruptly to the right, around the dogleg.

"You'll never find that one," Christie chuckled as she passed him. "Might as well use another one."

Again, Pete began chipping his way toward the twelfth green.

As she drew closer to the dogleg, Christie could feel her breath coming in short, quick gasps. The dogleg was just up ahead, and to the right was the river, and Danny.

Pete took out his seven iron and, with a deep-throated grunt, hacked his way toward the green by another twenty feet.

Christie stood over her ball, her sweating hands coldly clutching her number seven iron. She waited until Pete's back was turned to her, and then she swung back just slightly, changed her stance and chipped her ball expertly off the fairway and down the embankment. "Oh dear," she yelled, perhaps a little too loudly.

"Wha . . . what?" Pete asked, turning around and facing her.

"My ball!" She pointed. "I hit it over the embankment."

"Well, that's a lost one!" he yelled, then turned and stood over his fourth golf ball that morning.

"No!" she screamed back to him.

"What? I'm trying to hit this blasted ball, if you don't mind."

Perspiration began dripping down her neck now and forming a damp ring on her collar. "I mean . . . Well, I haven't lost a ball all morning and I'd hate to start now!" Her voice seemed to her to fill the entire course and come echoing back from all directions.

"Well, join the club," he chuckled, and whacked at the ball, sending it toward the general direction of the green, but also leaving a divot large enough to wear as a muffler.

"You listen to me, Peter! I haven't lost a ball all morning, and I'm not about to do it now. I want you to get it for me!"

"What?"

"I said to get it!"

"It's in the river!"

"It's not in the river, it's in the bloody sand!"

"How do you know, I thought you said it—"

"Well, I know, that's all. I—I just know. Now, I'm asking you for the last time to go and get my ball!"

"I certainly don't understand why you're getting so excited over one lousy little ball. I'll gladly give you one of mine."

Christie felt the perspiration dripping down her sides now, and she suddenly couldn't control the slight twitch in her right eyebrow. "I don't want your stupid ball! I

want my ball! Are you going to get it for me or am I going to have to stomp off this course and never speak to you again!"

"All right, my love. All right." Pete leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. "If your ball means that much to you, I'll get it for you."

She managed a weak, somewhat quivering smile. "Thank you."

With his nine iron in hand, he walked over to the embankment and disappeared down its side.

Christie stood stiffly in the same spot where he had left her. She twisted around to see if anyone were in sight, but she could see no one. She waited, nervously pulling at a loose strand of hair that hung down the side of her head and tickled her ear. Then, suddenly, there was a shout.

"Christie! Christie!"

"It's done," she said to herself as she ran toward the embankment. "It's done!" And she felt a freedom overtake her as she drew closer to the river. She was only a few feet away, and then she was there.

She stifled a scream and felt her stomach suddenly turn around inside. She sank to one knee in an attempt to stop the dizziness from throwing her down the embankment.

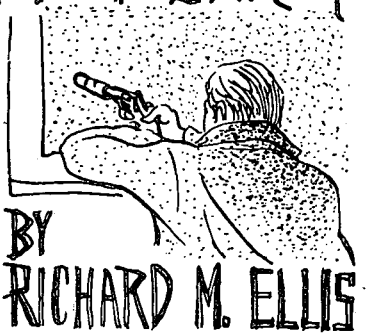
Standing next to the water, his mouth agape in total shock, his hand so tightly clenched around his nine iron that it had turned white around the knuckles, was Peter Galazka. He stared back at his wife, shaking his head numbly from side to side.

Danny lay face down in the water. His mouth was just barely an inch under the surface of the lapping river, and his head bobbed lightly with the undulating rhythm of the water. The rest of his body lay stiffly dead on the sand. His left temple was swollen and badly bruised. Lying next to his shoulder was a clean, white golf ball with Peter Galazka's name printed on it in bold red letters.

Peter looked up at his wife, and then down at the stiffening body of the young pro. "It's that blasted slice," he said to himself softly. Then, turning back to Christie, he called up to her, "It was that blasted slice!"

Perfection is rare, but one may rest assured he came as close as possible.

A POSSIBILITY OF ERROR



BY RICHARD M. ELLIS

To be on the safe side, Edgar Remmick got there early. He crouched on the fire escape in the rain and windswept early evening darkness, breathing rather heavily after the three-floor climb up from the alley.

After a moment he turned to the window. It was unlocked. Even though this fact saved him the bother of jimmying it open, Remmick sighed with a touch of exasperation. Considering the value of some of the items within the dark apartment beyond the window and the sleaziness of the neighborhood, one would think that Patty Blake would at least lock her bedroom window.

But not Patty.

Remmick twitched aside the drapes and peered into the warm, perfumed blackness. He did not intend to enter if he could avoid it. Almost at once he saw that there was no need. A faint, ghostly yellow glow hung in the darkness some distance from where he stood outside the window. The glow would be the specially treated light-switch plate just to the right of the apartment's front door. Since he could see it, he knew the bedroom door was open, and also the door at the far end of the short hallway opening into the livingroom.

Remmick knelt on the wet iron of the fire escape. He took from his trench coat pocket the long-barreled .22 caliber pistol he had purchased a few days before, and from another pocket the silencer that he

had picked up at an obscure pawnshop in the city's skid row district. He clamped the silencer onto the muzzle of the pistol. Then, resting his left forearm on the windowsill, he laid the barrel of the pistol across it.

Sometime within the next quarter-hour or so, the apartment door would open. Patty Blake would be silhouetted there for a moment—long enough—against the bright light of the third-floor corridor behind her. She would have no more chance than a clay pigeon at a shooting gallery.

Remmick waited, with the rain pelting down from the black sky and the blustery wind rattling the lids of garbage cans in the black canyon of the alley below him; with the cloying scent of Patty Blake's perfume in his nostrils. The perfume had once been as erotically exciting to him as the girl who wore it in such lavish quantities. But no more.

He waited, and thought about his wife Stella. It was for Stella that he was here. Dear, sweet, patient Stella. How could he ever have been such a fool? To risk losing Stella—his lifelong love—for something as transitory and meaningless as a furtive affair with a shallow-brained blonde half his age; Patty Blake, a gum-chewing, wide-eyed, big-breasted creature whose only possible purpose in life was to afford momentary pleasure to middle-aged business executives with more money than common sense. Remmick had no doubt that he was far from the first of his breed to pay little Patty's bills.

But he would be the last.

The nerve of her—the unmitigated nerve. After all he had done for her—the gifts, the regular weekly bundle of cash—and she showed her gratitude by threatening blackmail when he had made it clear a few nights ago that the affair was ended.

It had never occurred to Remmick that she might make trouble. Even now the memory set his heart to pounding and his gloved hands trembling with rage.

The infantile smile on her pouting red lips, the flutter of her eyelashes, and the cold words: "Uh uh, lover. I want you around, you know? Everything just like it is. Or else I'm afraid I'd have to go see your old lady—what's her name. I'd hate to do it, but . . ."

But she would do it; of that Remmick was now sure.

The very next day following that night, Remmick had gone home from his office to find Stella lying across the bed in her bedroom, her eyes swollen from weeping. She had received an anonymous, obscene phone call—and the voice

spouting the filth had been a young woman's voice.

For some time before that, Remmick had been uneasily aware that Stella suspected things in spite of all his precautions to protect her from knowledge of his occasional peccadilloes. Yet her suspicions were one thing, and the distinct possibility of having it thrown in her face by Patty Blake was quite another.

That Remmick could not, and would not, allow.

He was left with a choice of unpleasant courses of action. To him the least unpleasant was murder, though he hardly thought of disposing of Patty Blake in those terms. Ridding himself of a nuisance was more like it.

At first he thought of poison. He even managed to obtain a lethal dose of cyanide, encased in a thick gelatin capsule. But how to administer the poison was something else. Patty was, naturally enough, on her guard.

No, poison was not satisfactory; there were too many possibilities for error. And Remmick did not intend to make any errors, anymore than he allowed errors from himself or his employees in his business office.

He thought of other ways, but all contained flaws.

Then he read in the newspapers, to which he had turned for inspiration, that a part of the city was having the latest in a long series of unprovoked sniper attacks on women. This particular sniper, armed with a .22, had the habit of firing through windows at women who had neglected to draw their window shades at night . . . and the part of the city affected was not far removed from the apartment building wherein he had established Patty Blake.

He tossed aside the newspaper and then, moments later, picked it up again to check the weather forecast. It called for clear weather for the next day, with a chance for rain in the days after that.

Today the rain had come; rain and wind, and now darkness, to cover his movements along the half-deserted streets, down the alley and up the slippery iron fire escape.

He waited, rather enjoying his discomfort, for it was in a good cause. He was in a way atoning for his foolish actions in the past, and he would make it up to Stella in other ways.

He murmured into the whine of the wind, "I've learned my lesson, darling. From now on, it's you—and only you."

Perhaps he could take Stella on a long trip, a sort of second honeymoon. Why not?

Suddenly, a slash of yellow light

in the darkness beyond jerked him back to the present and the business at hand. The apartment's front door was opening.

He had not expected Patty quite so soon. He knew that she always had dinner at a restaurant downtown, always arriving home within minutes of eight o'clock. She was a little early.

So much the better.

He squeezed one eye shut, with the other sighted along the barrel of his gun, now faintly visible in the light from the doorway. There she was, hesitating on the threshold, her raincoated figure blackly silhouetted against the light, raising one arm now to fumble for the switch inside the apartment.

Remmick fired. The .22 made no more noise than a clap of the hands. The woman jolted back, throwing up her arms. He fired again and again into the black figure which slowly sagged to its knees, then sprawled forward, motionless.

Aiming carefully, Remmick put two more slugs into the body. Not that they were needed; he was an excellent shot, and he was confident that his first bullet would have done the job . . .

It was eight-thirty and the rain was lessening when he turned his car into the driveway beside his suburban home. He noticed with some surprise that his wife's car was not in its usual space in the double garage.

Probably she had driven over to the shopping center for something or other.

Remmick sat in his car for a moment, checking back on his movements. After stripping down the gun to its component parts, he had tossed it into the river that ran not far from his homeward route.

There was nothing to connect him to the death of Patty Blake; nothing to show that he had even known the girl. He had taken care to keep their relationship a secret, even to the point of surreptitiously wiping away any fingerprints he might have left on objects he had touched during his clandestine visits to her place. Of course, that had been done with only normal prudence—not with any idea that he might one day murder the creature. But the end results were the same: no possible connection between Edgar Remmick and Patty Blake.

He was humming cheerfully as he left his car and entered his house. Almost the first thing he saw was the note propped on the little table in the livingroom, the table where Stella habitually placed the day's mail.

The note was in Stella's writing. He was still humming under his breath as he picked it up and be-

gan to read the message from her.

Then words, phrases, leaped up from the scribbled page: *Sorry, but can't take any more . . . I know all about Miss Blake . . . followed you . . . I must face her . . . have it out with her . . . I found the key . . .*

Remmick made a whinnying, groaning sound, remembering that he had taken the key to Patty's apartment off his ring that morning and tucked the key under a pile of socks in his bureau.

. . . the key, and am going now to see her. If she is not in, I will enter the apartment and wait for her . . . must settle this . . . I love you too much, Edgar, to lose you without a fight . . .

The note fell from Remmick's suddenly numb hands, and drifted slowly to the carpet.

"No," he whispered; then shouted, "No! It couldn't have been! It couldn't!"

And yet, hadn't the woman's figure in the doorway been just a shade too tall, a shade too narrow for Patty Blake? There had been something about it—something that even as he had fired had impressed him vaguely as being wrong. He had forgotten the impression, but now it loomed larger and larger in his seething thoughts.

He had killed his wife, Stella.

It was as simple, and as deadly final, as that.

In a daze he walked through the empty rooms of the empty house. He paused only once, long enough to take the capsule of cyanide from its hiding place in his den; from there he returned to the livingroom. He reread the last part of Stella's note through tear-dimmed eyes. He swallowed the capsule. It would take a few moments for the gelatin coating to dissolve in his stomach. Then the end would be mercifully swift.

Now—*now*—there was no possibility of error. None.

He waited, breathing loudly in the stillness, reading: *I love you . . . Edgar . . . I love you . . .*

There was the sound of a key in the door. Stella walked into the room, her hair glistening with drops of moisture, her coat damp from the rain. She saw him and stopped short.

"Oh. I—I was hoping I'd get home before you. In time to destroy that note." She sighed. "I didn't go, Edgar. I lost my courage at the last moment, and . . . Edgar? Is something wrong? Are you ill?"

He was.

A gold watch may have its uses, but it is the intangible reward which cannot be lost.

FAREWELL GESTURE

DETECTIVE DOUG TEMPLE got his first inkling of the case as he passed the open squad-room door on his way out of the station house. What piqued his curiosity primarily was the number of men assembled in the squad room. Actually, Doug shouldn't even have been in the building, but the records clerk had loused up some of the papers pertinent to Doug's retirement, and he'd had to come in and sign a new set. On a sudden hunch, Doug took a seat just inside the door, his back to the wall. At the far end of the room the commissioner, Chief Muldoon, and Hal Tobin, from the FBI, sat behind an elevated table. The final report had been given and the chief rose and faced the gathering.

"Well, that wraps it up, men. The five kilos of heroin did *not* come in on the *Singapore Mail*. So the problem now belongs to either San Francisco or Seattle. Let's get back to work."

Doug leaned back in his chair, eyes closed, and ran the bit of information through his mind.

"What's the matter, Doug, do we bore you?" a voice gibed gently.

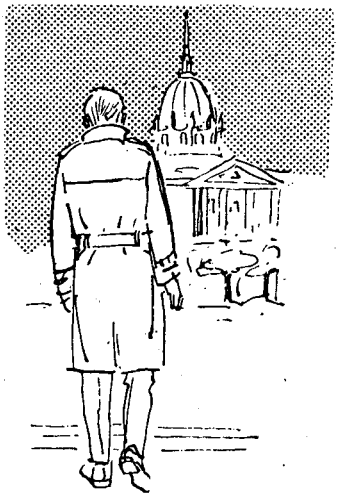
Doug opened his eyes slowly, a faint grin playing around his mouth. "Not really, Henderson. It's just that the thought of hanging up my gun and badge and turning the city over to you scares me. I shut out the sight every chance I get."

Henderson was one of the new breed of lawmen. Somewhere in

by GEORGE GROVER KIPP

his late twenties, he was blond, crew cut and college educated. He grinned at Doug and passed through the door with the others.

When Chief Muldoon remained alone at the far end of the room, Doug brought his lanky frame erect and moved to the table. He scanned the reports lying there, then scratched his chin thoughtfully. "You were expecting a shipment of heroin on the *Singapore Mail*. How come I never heard about it?"



Muldoon shuffled the papers into a pile. "It was strictly a short-notice deal. We just got word ourselves as the ship docked. You were too far out in the boondocks looking for a getaway car to get here on time. Henderson hit Terminal One with two squads of men and gave the ship a real going-over, but she was clean. One truck had been loaded, but they overtook it at the corner of Holcomb and Second and escorted it back to the terminal. Like the ship, it was clean." The chief leaned back in his chair and shook his head hopelessly at Doug. "Why don't you ease off a bit? According to my figures you've got something like seventy-two hours left out of thirty-three years. Day after tomorrow you're sixty-five. You get the pension, the rocking chair, the whole bit. Then you'll *have* to turn Chinatown, the warehouse district, and the waterfront over to somebody else."

Doug nodded soberly, his pale blue eyes intent. The very thought of retiring left a cold knot in his stomach. "But not today. And since I'm a cop for seventy-two more hours, give me a rundown on this heroin thing."

"It's fairly simple," the chief said indifferently. "An Interpol agent

followed the shipments from the border of Nepal and India to the south of France, where he was almost wiped out in an automobile accident. He was in a coma, in critical condition, for several weeks. When he regained consciousness he got a list of the ships that were in the port of Marseilles that day, ships that were headed this way. There were four of them and the *Singapore Mail* was the first of the four to arrive. The other three are slated to arrive during the next three days. Two of them go to Frisco, the other to Seattle. According to the Interpol agent, the shipment consists of five kilos."

Doug's brows rose perceptively. "Five kilos means real big operators are pulling the strings on the operation. Why don't I ease off a bit like you suggested and snoop around on this thing?"

The chief shook his head despairingly. "What is there about that part of town that gets to you, Doug?"

The detective thumbed his hat back and grinned. "Sentiment, I guess. My first job with the force was to help break a narco ring down there. That was in nineteen thirty-seven, the biggest case in the city's history. We scooped up two kilos and seven hoods on that one. Uh, what was on the truck the boys stopped at Holcomb and Second?" he asked offhandedly.

Muldoon shuffled through the papers. "Wire. Reels of steel wire from Kobe, Japan. Weston Aluminum uses it in the cores of their electric cables. And before you point out that the truck was off course, Henderson already did that. The driver said he was on his way to get a cup of coffee. When his rig checked out clean, there was no reason to doubt his word."

"There's just one small flaw in the picture," Doug said slowly, "and it's right there in Henderson's report—the part where the truck turned right onto Lander and then left onto Second Street. As near as I can figure it, the truck was completely out of sight for something like thirty seconds."

The chief's jaw sagged. "Aw, come on, now, Doug. I've known you a lot of years and I've never known you to split hairs before. Thirty *seconds?* You *must* be kidding."

Doug stared out the window to where storm clouds were falling into formation for their march on the city. "The highway runs straight from the docks, and anybody in that truck could have seen the police cars coming up behind them. There would have been enough traffic at that hour to slow our boys up for a good thirty seconds after the truck turned onto

Lander. Just for the hell of it, let's assume the dope *was* on that truck. A hood running scared with five kilos of horse under his arm could cover a helluva stretch of real estate in thirty seconds."

Muldoon threw up his hands in surrender. "So you've spent a lifetime prowling Chinatown and the warehouse district, and you're going to use this deal as an excuse to go back one last time. All right, go. Giving you a free rein for the last three days sure won't break the city, and you've earned that much. Go on. Get out of here."

Doug touched a finger to the brim of his hat and moved toward the door, his mind probing the various aspects of the case. An Interpol agent involved in a near-fatal accident while pursuing five kilos of pure heroin? It was possible, of course, but the odds were against the accident really being an accident.

"Don't prowl down too many dark alleys," Muldoon called as Doug reached the door. "I'd hate to have to tell your beautiful granddaughter that after thirty-three years on the winning team you went out and bought yourself a slab in the morgue."

Mention of Jenny brought a warm smile to Doug's lean features. When Doug's son and daughter-in-law died in the plane crash, Jenny had been a knobby-kneed eleven year old. She'd been with Doug and Emma five years when cancer took Emma away. Now there were just the two of them.

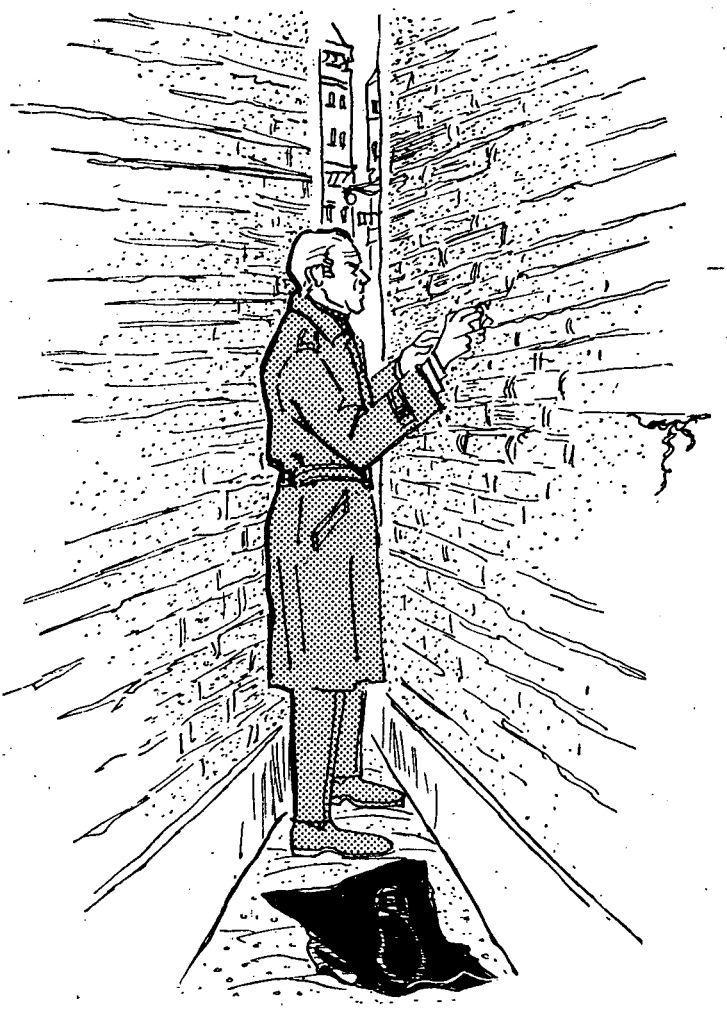
"Don't worry about Jenny," Doug called to Muldoon. "She's a junior in college now and going with a fourth-year law student. She's a real levelheaded kid."

Doug drove the route the truck had taken from the *Singapore Mail*, then circled back to Terminal One and drove it a second time. After completing a third such trip, he parked his car at Holcomb and Second, where the truck had been stopped, and began walking. The wind had come up, giving fair warning of the storm that was moving in. Eddies of dust whipped around his legs and pirouetted crazily across the street as he paused at the corner of Lander and Second and studied the towering rows of warehouses that lined the streets.

He backtracked slowly toward the car, his eyes noting every detail. Midway along the block he passed an opening, barely eighteen inches wide, between two of the buildings. Then he moved back and stared into the opening, his eyes squinted in deep thought. He went to his car and got a flashlight.

Moving sideways into the open-

ing, his chest to one building, his back to the other, he inched his way along. He halted twice to gather a minute smattering of fibers clinging to the craggy tongues of dried mortar protruding from between the bricks, and once to pick up a piece of tarred roofing paper. When he could find nothing else that interested him, he drove back to the station and turned the fibers in to the lab for an analysis.



When he returned from having a fast cup of coffee in the squad room, the technician had the report waiting for him. "Alpaca fibers, Doug. Dusty yellow in color, sort of a dried mustard shade, and expensive. Offhand, I'd say they came from a sweater in the fifty-dollar class."

Doug nodded a silent thanks and returned thoughtfully to his car. With the piece of roofing paper in his hand he began a tour of the better shoe shops. At his sixth stop the clerk studied the distinctive sole print on the veneer of tar coating the paper, then disappeared into the back room. He returned with a pair of heavy brogues in his hand. "This is the shoe that made the print. One of our better items. Size seven."

Doug studied the points of similarity between the sole and the print on the tar paper. "How much do they sell for?"

"Eighty-five dollars a copy," the clerk said indifferently.

Doug thanked the man and moved out the door. The furrows in his brow deepened as he walked back to his car. Fifty-dollar sweaters and eighty-five-dollar shoes . . . They didn't go with the scroungy hole between the two warehouses at all. Back at the station Doug leaned back in his chair, eyes closed in deep thought.

"I don't know why you'd want to retire and leave such a soft touch," the chief's voice broke into his reverie. "You never had it so good."

Doug opened his eyes and came slowly erect. "Did Henderson run a check on the guy driving the truck this morning?"

Muldoon shook his head. "There wasn't any sense in it after the truck turned out to be clean." He grinned. "Why don't you give it up?"

Doug rose and stretched. "I suppose I would if I was half smart, but the possibilities inherent in those thirty seconds still intrigue me. Besides, I've helped keep this town clean for too many years to turn my back now. There's probably nothing in it, but I'll push it a little farther before I sign off. What was the truck driver's name?"

"Orchard," Muldoon said. "Harry Orchard."

Doug caught up with Harry Orchard at a pre-stress firm on the edge of town. The trucker was waiting for a crane to load his truck with concrete blocks. At Doug's question he shook his crewcut blond head wearily. "Now it's a passenger? Well, I didn't have a passenger this morning, just like I didn't have any contraband. I'm beginning to wonder about you

guys. I've got a beautiful wife, two beautiful daughters, and a nice home. I have to keep scratching to make the payments, but I do make them, and with legitimately earned dough."

Doug had checked Harry Orchard thoroughly and then driven past the Orchard home before setting out in search of the man. There'd been nothing anywhere to suggest the trucker was dishonest. "It's like this," Doug said slowly. "I'm running a double check on the matter, sort of playing a real long shot. I'm looking for a guy about five-six or seven, as near as I can figure his size. He probably weighs a hundred and fifty pounds, and goes in for expensive shoes and alpaca sweaters."

Orchard shook his head. "He can have the alpaca sweaters. My wife's brother has five of them—his status symbols, no less. He's tried to get me into the used car business with him so I could wear them, too, but who needs them? I was thinking of him this morning on the pier when the photographer came by. He was wearing an alpaca sweater."

"Photographer?" Doug prodded softly.

Orchard looked toward the crane but it was still loading the truck ahead of him. "He came along the pier this morning when my truck was being loaded. He had a camera around his neck and the leather carrying case slung over his shoulder. About all I really noticed, though, was the alpaca sweater. It reminded me of the brother-in-law."

"Build me a picture of the photographer," Doug invited, his voice still soft.

Orchard squinted in concentration, then his eyes widened comically. "He was just about the size guy you said you were looking for—about five-foot-six, a hundred and fifty pounds. He was somewhere between thirty and thirty-five and real swarthy."

"His sweater?" Doug probed.

"Kind of an off-color yellow. Say a dull, brownish yellow."

"Would you know him if you saw him again?" Doug asked.

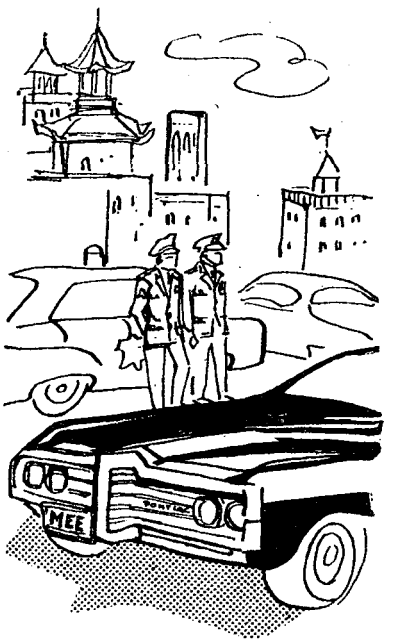
"You'd better believe it," Orchard said emphatically. "He was a real sourpuss. He was at the corner of the warehouse watching two cops in the parking lot when I said, 'Don't give your right name,' but he didn't appreciate it at all. I worked with an old ex-con once and that's what he'd say every time he saw a police car or heard a siren. I just said it out of habit."

"There were two police officers in the Terminal One parking lot *before* you drove away?" Doug asked warily.

Orchard turned to check the crane again. "Yup. Two of them. They were parked beside a dark green Pontiac. The way they were leaning against their patrol car, I got the impression they were waiting for somebody to show."

"You didn't happen to notice the license number of the sedan?" Doug persisted.

The trucker waited until a loaded truck groaned past. "Nope. But the letters in front of the number were MEE, and there was one of those big stuffed snakes lying in the back window. I wouldn't have remembered the letters, but some of them stick in your mind—MEE . . . JUG . . . PIP . . . PAP." Orchard crawled into his truck and moved toward the crane.



Back at the station, Doug called both daily newspapers and also six weeklies in the outlying districts, but none of them had sent a photographer to meet the *Singapore Mail*. "Probably a free-lancer," one of the editors suggested.

Moving down the hall, Doug halted at the dispatcher's desk. "One of our cars was parked in the Terminal One parking lot this morning *before* the raid on the *Singapore Mail*. Find out who was riding it and get them in here."

From the dispatcher's desk Doug proceeded to the record room and began thumbing through the files. He was still looking for a hood with a love of fine clothing when two officers entered the room. One was fiftyish and stocky, the other slim and just out of the rookie class. "You send for us, Doug?" the older man asked.

Doug shoved the file drawer shut. "Yeah, I sent for you. You guys were parked in the Terminal One parking lot this morning, Larsen. Sometime before the raid on the *Singapore Mail*. Why?"

Larsen hooked a thumb at his companion. "Because Jonesy here has a big thing going with the sexy blonde who drives the canteen

truck. It comes time for a coffee break, we always manage to find the little white wagon. Sometimes we even manage to find it at lunch time." Larsen's eyes slitted. "Somebody put in a complaint or something?"

Doug emitted a soft chuckle. "No complaints, Larsen. But I should have suspected a dame figured in the picture. I *must* be getting old. What I wanted to see you about was the car you were parked next to, the dark green job. What can you tell me about it?"

Larsen scratched his head thoughtfully. "Not much, I'm afraid. It had one of those big stuffed snakes in the back window, and the back seat was loaded with camera accessories and boxes of film. There must have been two, three hundred dollars' worth of stuff. When I saw all that stuff I checked the car to see if it was locked. It was. About then the call came in on the radio to hit Terminal One, so we just stayed where we were and waited for the other cars to show up."

"You didn't happen to notice a small, dark guy in a yellowish sweater, with a camera hanging around his neck?"

When both men shook their heads, Doug wasn't the least bit disappointed. As closely as he'd been able to figure it, the man with the camera had scrambled onto the back of Harry Orchard's truck as it pulled away from the pier. Hidden behind the reels of wire, it would have been simple for the man to spot the police cars coming up behind the truck. In his mind's eye Doug could see the hood, eyes wide with fear as the police cars edged closer. The man had been doomed, unable to get off the speeding truck in the freeway traffic; then had come the real fluke—Harry Orchard had turned off the freeway to get a cup of coffee. It couldn't have been timed better for the character on the back of the truck. He'd bailed off and cut out bare seconds ahead of the police.

Larsen studied Doug for a minute. "You got something going, Doug? Something to do with that raid on the *Singapore Mail*?"

"I could have," Doug said slowly. "But right at the minute all I've got to go on is intuition." He described the man who had been on the pier that morning. "He goes in for eighty-five-dollar shoes and fifty-dollar sweaters—and maybe million-dollar packages of heroin." Doug checked his watch. "Time to call it a day. Maybe I can find him in the files tomorrow."

Doug was watching the evening news and Jenny was at the kitchen table, bent over her homework, when the telephone rang. It was

Larsen. "Doug? After I got home I got to thinking about a slob who might fill the bill for you. I couldn't figure why you hadn't mentioned him, and then it came to me that you didn't know him. He heisted a loan office five years ago the first of last May. Harcourt and I busted him before he got three blocks. If that was him on the pier this morning, I can understand why he was making himself inconspicuous. I'm the last guy on earth he'd want to see."

Five years ago the first of May . . . Doug had been off for two weeks then. There was the funeral and all that goes with it, and then the search for a suitable lady to stay with Jenny for a while. "Thanks, Larsen. What was the guy's name?"

"Rinaldi," Larsen said. "Joey Rinaldi."

Rain driven by a north wind was hitting the window in great splashy drops the next day as Doug leaned back in his chair and studied the file on Joseph Albert Rinaldi. Rinaldi had been busted four times in his life, three times upstate and once locally. According to the file his last parole had expired six months earlier. Doug put five other photographs in with Rinaldi's and set out to find Harry Orchard.

The trucker was back at the prestress plant waiting for another load of concrete blocks. He went through the pictures like he was dealing cards and stuck his finger right between Joey Rinaldi's eyes. "That's him. Old sourpuss himself."

Doug's next stop was at the office of Harrison White. He found him in a closet puttering with an electric percolator. The two men had had a speaking acquaintance for years. Doug handed White the picture of Joey. "You were his parole officer, Harrison. What can you tell me about him?"

White fumbled around on a shelf for a pair of cups. "I had a feeling about Joey. I didn't think he'd make it."

Doug reached for a chair. "I didn't say he'd done anything wrong, Harrison."

White arched a critical brow. "Of course not. You're looking for him to award him a merit badge." He poured two coffees and handed one to Doug. "He had a good job hopping bells at the Savoy-West. The pay wasn't much, but the tips were terrific. He was going with a damn fine girl, had a wardrobe you wouldn't believe, and was driving a brand-new car. The day his parole ended he quit the job and moved out of his pad. There hasn't been any sign of him since. It figured that somebody would be along looking for him."

Doug spooned his coffee silently. "What kind of car?"

"Olds," White said. "Pale blue. It was a real beauty. A lot better than what I'm driving."

"And the girl?" Doug said gently.

"Margaret Eleanor Ellis, a leggy blonde. She's a secretary-photographer for Foss Real Estate in the Hawthorne Building. You've seen their ads in the Sunday supplement."

Doug nodded understandingly. A girl with the initials MEE, who was going with Joey Rinaldi, was also a photographer. Doug thanked the parole officer and made his way back to his car. The rain was half-frozen slush now, and coming in more on the horizontal than the vertical. Doug reached the Bureau of Motor Vehicles just before noon and checked the files. Margaret Eleanor Ellis owned a dark green sixty-nine Pontiac, license number MEE-2114. The number on Joey Rinaldi's new Olds was JAR-7262.

"And why," Doug mused aloud, "would a guy with a new car go out and borrow a car?" He moved on to the dispatcher's desk and left a description of both cars. "But don't have either car picked up," he said pointedly. "Just give me a buzz when they're spotted. The green car should be in a parking lot by the Hawthorne Building. Have somebody check at the lot."

When no report had come in on either car by a quarter to five, Doug shrugged into his raincoat and reached for his hat. He passed the squad room and continued on down the hall. He found Muldoon behind his desk, glowering at a prodigious pile of paper work. "Any word on the three ships yet?"

The chief chomped disgustedly on his cigar. "The two slated for Frisco have both arrived, and they were clean. That passes the ball to the boys in Seattle. You satisfy your curiosity on this thing yet?"

Doug shook his head. "Not really. I've got a collection of disconnected pieces. Not enough to make a case, but enough to keep working on."

Muldoon took the cigar out of his mouth. "Jenny called a while ago and said to tell you to be sure and wear your rubbers, and that the pork chops would be ready at five-thirty."

Doug grinned. "That girl is having one helluva time raising me."

His first stop the following morning was the dispatcher's desk. The girl's sedan had been parked at the Hawthorne Building at eight-thirty that morning. There was still no sign of Rinaldi's Olds. Doug went to his desk, but at ten o'clock he grabbed his hat and coat

and headed for his car. For a while he simply drove as the traffic dictated on the ice-slickened streets. Then he found himself on the fringes of Chinatown. On a sudden impulse he parked the car before a towering office building and took the elevator to the top. From the roof he stared out over the panorama spread out in the wind and cold. He'd come to love the warehouse district, the ships and piers, and the hidden crannies of Chinatown that could have been lifted right out of old Hong Kong. Finally, he turned away.

The call was coming over the radio as he opened his car door; the Olds was moving north on Third with an unmarked car a half-block to its rear. Doug grabbed the speaker and gave his call number. "Temple here. I'm at the corner of Third and Dixon. I'll pick up the tail as they go by." Three minutes later he slipped into the flow of traffic two cars back from the Olds, but he'd managed to get a good look as the car went past him. Joey Rinaldi was behind the wheel. The other guy was a stranger to Doug.

Doug kept a discreet distance to the rear. At the parking lot of a posh hotel, Rinaldi turned in and let his passenger out. Almost leaping from his own car, Doug made it to the lobby in time to see the man collect a key at the front desk. When he disappeared into an elevator, Doug flashed his badge at the desk clerk. "The big guy in the sloppy gray suit who just got a key, who is he and what's his room number?"

"Room nine-eighteen," the clerk said. He turned to the files. "He's listed as Samuel Greene, Chicago."

Warning the clerk to maintain a discreet silence, Doug headed for the manager's office. The official listened attentively, then nodded agreeably. When Samuel Greene left his room an hour later and entered the coffee shop in the lobby, the manager let Doug into room nine-eighteen and witnessed his acquisition of a water glass from the bathroom. Then he dutifully replaced it with another. Doug made a swift examination of the room, but it was clean.

Twenty minutes later he handed the water glass, carefully wrapped, to the sergeant in the fingerprint bureau. "Get a make on these as fast as you can."

He checked his watch. Twelve o'clock . . . five hours left in a lifetime behind a badge.

He had *almost* all the pieces to the puzzle but *almost* didn't get it. The big piece, the location of the heroin, was still missing, and without it the rest of the puzzle was a bust.

He returned slowly to his car,

running the matter through his mind as the cold wind swirled around him. Then, on a sudden hunch, he returned to the hotel. The manager was on his way to lunch, but he returned to his office and listened to Doug's request. Then he punched a button on the intercom and told some unseen person what he wanted. A few minutes later a leggy, black-haired secretary placed a folder on his desk.

The manager thumbed through it rapidly. "Mr. Greene wired for reservations from Chicago at six o'clock yesterday afternoon. His time of arrival was to be at six o'clock this morning."

Doug nodded slowly. "Which means he came in on a plane that landed here about five-thirty this morning. . ." He left the office and found a pay phone in the lobby.

Three different female voices guided him through the strange world of the airport before he found his man, Wesley Farmer, manager. "Wes? Doug Temple here. Could you check out the planes that landed about five-thirty this morning and see which one a Samuel Greene was on? It should be a flight from Chicago. And find out what, if any, arrangements he's made for his return trip." He gave Farmer the pay phone number. "Call me back here as soon as you find out. It's quite important."

Twenty minutes later the phone rang. "Doug? Your man Greene came in on flight six oh six which landed at five-twenty-two this morning, and he's got a reservation for a return flight at four-thirty this afternoon on flight six-twenty, Northwest Orient."

"Thanks," Doug said, and after Farmer hung up he dialed the number of the police detail stationed at the airport. After explaining what he wanted to the officer in charge, Doug returned to the lobby. With a newspaper in his hands he kept watch on the man called Samuel Greene, still feeding his face in the coffee shop. Shortly, Greene crossed the lobby and entered an elevator. Doug checked his watch and settled back to wait. At a little after three Greene emerged from the elevator, suitcase in hand. When he moved through the big front doors and onto the street, Doug sauntered along behind him. At the corner Joey Rinaldi was waiting in his car.

Doug hurried to the parking lot, executed a swift turn with his own car and fell in behind Rinaldi's. One thing was bugging him: was Greene in on the five-kilo caper, or was he somebody else altogether? It was a possibility that had given him some bad moments. He was pondering the distasteful thought

for the tenth time, when Rinaldi swung west, directly away from the street leading to the airport. Keeping well back of the car, Doug followed it to a large apartment house in the west hills. Both men got out and entered the building, Greene carrying his suitcase. They reappeared minutes later, got into the car and began moving back across town.

"So far, so good," Doug breathed relievedly to himself. He pulled the speaker from its bracket and gave a description of the Olds to the airport detail, adding that he would be right behind the suspects and not to move in on them until he gave the signal.

When Joey eased his car into a parking slot on the south side of the hangar, Doug stabbed the brakes, jerked the emergency and hit the ground at a run. He could see four men from the airport detachment converging on the Olds.

Doug reached the car first. He jerked the door open with his left hand, his gun in his right. "You're under arrest," he told a white-faced Joey Rinaldi calmly.

The man called Samuel Greene eased his right hand inside his coat, but the door on his side opened and a police revolver nudged him meaningfully below the right ear. He slumped resignedly in the seat, then cut loose a torrent of invective that scorched the ears.

Both men were relieved of their guns and handcuffed together in the back of Doug's car while he examined the contents of the suitcase. Then, with one of the airport guards in the back seat with Rinaldi and Greene, he tossed the suitcase into the front seat and headed the car uptown.

Most of the men from both day shift and swing shift were in the squad room when Doug came through the door. Silence fell swiftly over the room. Muldoon was at the head table with the commissioner and FBI agent Tobin. Finally Muldoon growled loudly, "Where in hell have you been?"

"Why? Is something up?" Doug asked slowly.

Muldoon waved a sheet of paper at him, "This is what's up—the report on the fingerprints that were on the water glass. They belong to one of the biggest Mafioso dope merchants in the business. The bureau's been after him for years. We were afraid you'd gone after him alone."

Tobin cut in pointedly, "The guy has a reputation for being real mean in a pinch."

Doug accepted a cup of steaming coffee from someone. "I'm growing old, Chief, not stupid. I assume the sudden appearance of this top

narco dealer jibes with what *wasn't* found on the ship that just docked in Seattle."

The bleak look in Muldoon's eyes was answer enough. "She was clean. But you've got your teeth into something juicy, or did you win that set of fingerprints in a church raffle?"

Doug started at the beginning and filled them in on his activities of the last three days. They hung on his words as if mesmerized.

When he was through talking, Henderson scratched his head in wonderment. "And the thirty seconds the truck was out of our sight was *all* you had to go on in the beginning?"

Doug sipped his coffee. "That's the size of it. I really wasn't sure anything had happened, but I knew that it *could* have. I just kept checking on the possibilities."

"But you were shooting in the dark all the way," Henderson said slowly.

"I wasn't in the dark very long," Doug said, "not after Harry Orchard identified Joey Rinaldi as the man on the pier. If he'd been a legitimate photographer he'd have walked right up to Larsen and his partner instead of lurking around the corner and spying on them. Excons who have really gone straight get a boot out of rubbing shoulders with cops. They can't be touched, and they like the feeling."

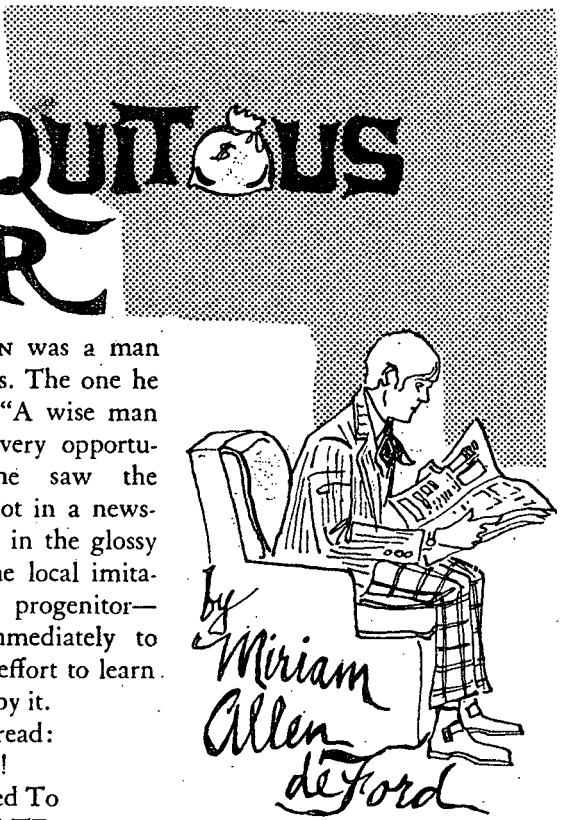
Muldoon's Irish features broadened into an admiring smile. "You've wrapped it up beautifully, Doug. Two men and five kilos." He turned to address the others. "You can get to work now, or go on home. We're through here."

Doug stood up and quietly handed his gun and badge to Muldoon. He felt naked as he walked toward the door. Then the men behind him began moving, some home to their families, the others out into the concrete jungles for their tour of duty. A faint smile uptilted the corners of Doug's mouth, and he kept walking, not looking back. Outside on the steps he paused. The wind had died down and the melodious chime in the courthouse tower across the street resounded five times.

Beyond the tower the dirty gray clouds were giving way to a patch of blue.

Fore-warned fore-armed, quoth the ubiquitous Don Quixote, yet not everyone is so omnisciently endowed.

THE UBIQUITOUS HEIR



ELWOOD HARRINGTON was a man who followed mottoes. The one he most cherished was: "A wise man takes advantage of every opportunity." So when he saw the advertisement—and not in a newspaper, mind you, but in the glossy weekly which was the local imitator of its New York progenitor—his mind began immediately to whir and click in an effort to learn how he could benefit by it.

The advertisement read:

HEIRS!
Do You Need To
ANTICIPATE
Your Legacy?
Consult
EXPECTATIONS, INC.

The ad included a phone number.

Well, he *was* an heir, and he certainly could use a sizable anticipation. In fact, ever since he could remember, he had lived on benefactions from his uncle's fortune.

When Aunt Mary died, he would inherit all of Uncle Henry's estate; all she had was a life income from it. The trouble was that Aunt Mary kept on living and the estate kept on staying out of his hands.

To be sure, Aunt Mary was 83 to his 37, but she was disgustingly hale and hearty, and she had just announced triumphantly that her doctor had assured her there was no reason why she should not become a centenarian. When she told Elwood this good news, he suggested that, this being so, the least she could do would be to increase his allowance in return for his patience in waiting so long but, much as she doted on her late husband's orphan nephew, she had proved unexpectedly obdurate. Far from increasing it, she retorted, since she was going to need all the money she could get when extreme old age brought the need of more comforts and attendance, she intended to reduce it. She even suggested, though mildly, that perhaps dear Elwood ought to supplement his allowance by finding some paying employment.

He was outraged, but he knew better than to let it show. Instead, he began to search for means to disprove the doctor's judgment. It was at that moment that his eye fell on the advertisement. As he pondered it, an inspiration came to him. He called the phone number.

Expectations, Inc. gave him an office address and an appointment.

Elwood was at once pleased, surprised, and apprehensive to find that he was being ushered into a luxurious suite of offices, handed from secretary to secretary, and finally conducted into the holy of holies, a magnificent room commanded by a huge mahogany desk, behind which sat a small, chubby, bald, elderly man whom he recognized instantly. It was none other than the eminent Ward Randall, multimillionaire, financial power, and civic leader, whose name appeared with boring regularity in the gossip columns of both the local newspapers.

Randall greeted him with cordiality. He glanced at a note before him which apparently had been delivered while Elwood was being routed from station to station along the way.

"Ah," he said amiably, "I see that my little venture is bearing fruit."

"You are Expectations, Inc.?" Elwood asked in awe.

Randall laughed. "I should hardly say that. Expectations, Inc. is, or I hope will be, my new hobby. Every man should have a hobby, don't you agree?"

The follower of mottoes agreed wholeheartedly.

"Up to now, the nearest I've ever

had to one was reading detective novels—I guess I've read four or five a week for years—but they're beginning to pall. I'd like to have another hobby in which I could take a more active part, one more in my own line, so to speak, but naturally one based on sound business principles. Money invested, even in a hobby, must be invested wisely.

"Perhaps, before we go into details about your own inquiry, you would like me to give you an idea of how the thing works?"

"Very much so."

"Well, I was in London recently, and in talking to an acquaintance there, a very hardheaded and successful businessman, he happened to mention a species of transaction common in England for centuries, but which never seems to have caught on here. I mean the anticipation of inheritance. Are you at all familiar with it?"

Elwood searched his mind for a vague bit of forgotten lore from his college days. "I seem to remember that when a young man was heir to a fortune but had a stingy or alienated father who kept him meanwhile on short commons, he was able to borrow pretty heavily until, in the course of time, his legacy came to him."

"Exactly. And since under British law fortunes of that kind are usually entailed, there was no risk involved for the lender. He would be sure to get his money back eventually, with very decent interest. But here, where a son, for example, can always be disinherited, that isn't feasible.

"In fact, even in England, with most modern fortunes being, so to speak, self-made, they too had to work out a new system. That was what my acquaintance described to me, and I decided to try it here, with the added spice of its bit of a gamble. Merely for amusement, of course."

Elwood surveyed with envy a career in which lending money to heirs could be considered a mere amusement, a change from one's really serious financial affairs. Well, he was quite willing to amuse Mr. Randall, but he had better find out first how much he would be expected to pay for providing the entertainment.

"At a pretty heavy rate of interest, I suppose?" he ventured.

"Oh, not so much. On a sliding scale, according to the amount advanced—say 10 to 25 percent. After all, one might have to wait a long time for returns. Then one would have to take into consideration the age and state of health of the legator; and the sex—women have a longer life expectancy than men. Yours is—"

"An aunt. An aunt by marriage. It is my father's only brother's estate. It comes to me when she dies."

"I see. And how old is the lady?"

"Eighty-three."

Randall raised his eyebrows.

"But surely a young man like you could get along for the two or three years she probably has left without—anticipating?"

Elwood explained about the doctor's verdict.

"But even so—I should tell you, of course, that despite the faint gambling aura which gives a touch of piquancy to this little hobby of mine, I should have to safeguard it as I would any other investment. In other words, I take a slight risk in waiting for my money—I might die before your aunt, or you might—but short of such acts of God, I should have to make sure of the soundness of the loan."

"How?" asked Elwood, his heart sinking.

"I should want a report on your own physical condition. Be sure that you are not suffering from a bad heart, for instance, or have a history of confinement for mental trouble—"

"That's OK."

"And then—by the way, what's the approximate size of your inheritance? I should have to verify that too, of course. And how much of it would you then want anticipated?"

"Uncle Henry left about a million and a half. He died 14 years ago, and Aunt Mary has lived, in very good style, on the income. It is well invested in gilt-edged bonds and good stocks, and no matter how long she lives, I don't think she'll have to touch much of the principal."

"Fine. And how much of it do you want advanced?"

Elwood had done quite a lot of figuring on that. He didn't really believe the doctor's prediction, but let's say it was right. That meant 17 years yet to go—heavens, he'd be practically an old man himself by then!—and he needed substantially more than his present income to take care of him, plus a good lump sum right away for a private enterprise.

He cleared his throat, and said, "What I'd thought of, sir, was about $150,000."

Randall didn't order him out, as he had half-expected.

"Hm. Well, that's rather a large order, but it could be arranged. After all, you're the first to answer my advertisement, and you're entitled to special service."

"And the interest?"

"Your aunt's advanced age would bring that down, but the sum you have in mind would bring it up. Shall we say 20 per-

ent? Just in one payment—no nnual accrual."

Elwood was certainly in no position to argue.

"And finally," said Randall, "I hall," (Ha, Elwood noted, so it's shall" now instead of "should"!), want to know for what purpose ou wish such a large sum now."

"But surely if everything else is ll right—it's rather a private natter . . ."

"Be reasonable, Mr. Harrington. wouldn't invest $150,000 in stock f a company without investigating verything first about the business, vould I? Anything you say will, of ourse, be strictly between ourelves; I'm sure I'm not unknown o you, and you can rely on my eeping any secret. But suppose, ay, you were wanted by the poice—on the lam, as the detective ovels put it—"

"I can assure you I'm not!"

"Don't take offense, I'm just redicating the unlikely. I could ind out very quickly if you were. Or if you wanted it to smuggle lope or diamonds."

This time Elwood laughed and Randall joined him.

"I'm quite sure it's nothing like hat, or you'd never have come to ne. You'd have got your money in less aboveboard place. So what *do* ou want it for?"

Elwood smiled broadly. "Well, I'll tell you. I'll need quite a bit to make my getaway to some safe country without an extradition treaty after I've murdered my aunt."

"*Touché*," said Randall. "I guess I deserved that. But you can't murder your aunt—the murderer can't inherit from his victim."

"Ah, but I shan't be inheriting from her. I'm inheriting, after her death, from my uncle, and he died comfortably in a hospital of entirely natural causes."

"OK, OK, let it go. I can make a guess, with a good-looking young fellow like you. It's a girl, isn't it, who refuses to wait indefinitely and won't marry you while you're poor?"

Elwood smiled again. "I'll take a Fifth on that," he said. "I'll stand on my first reply."

"All right, we'll start the wheels rolling. I have an appointment now for some rather more important business than my private hobby. Give me your address and I'll send you a list of the data I need. Then I'll get my own verification going, and let you know when I've made my decision."

"Thank you, sir." Elwood stood up. Randall reached across the desk and shook his hand heartily. "It oughtn't to take more than a week or two. Good luck."

"And good luck to you, sir. I

hope some more people answer your ad—even better risks than I am."

"Oh, I shan't want very many. I can't tie up too much of my liquid assets till one or two of my first speculations work out. Just an old man's diversion. In fact, I have a sizable bet with my friend in London on whether anyone would even apply seriously, and now I can phone him that I've won it. So it's I who should be thanking you."

On which affable note they parted, Randall to keep his appointment and Elwood to go to see Aunt Mary promptly, to be a good boy and accept the cut in his allowance without any sign of resentment. If she were to find out that he had been borrowing ahead—and he wouldn't put it past Randall to check up on her personally, though of course he'd never mention the sum involved—he'd better get there first and make it sound like a favor to her so she wouldn't be upset. After all, she was a sensible old girl, it meant nothing to her how he spent his money after she was dead, and he might even be plausible enough to make her admire his enterprise and be grateful for his having spared her the expense of his allowance.

Nothing of importance could be done until he had undergone the inquiry and received the advance, but he had his passport renewed and selected the most prosperou and livable of the few civilize countries with which the Unite States has no extradition treaty Then, methodical by nature, h made all the preliminary prepara tions possible; if he could not ye take any practical steps, he coul learn exactly what must be don about Swiss banking, and hous rentals in the capital city of hi choice, and study some of the fine points of law and chemistry.

In the meantime, he led his usua life of social activity without an serious attachments—there woul be plenty of attractive girls for a rich man where he was going—and paid assiduous attention to Aun Mary. As he had half-hoped, when he had shown her the advertisement and given her a delicate, expurgated account of his negotiations (she was vastly impressed by his contact with the fabulous Ward Randall), she was loud in praise of his generous desire to leave her income intact. Intact, for he assured her, against her not too strong protest, that as soon as he received the money he would relieve her of paying him any allowance at all.

"And I shall get along very well for more years than you'll need, as I devoutly hope, to become 100 years old or more."

"Dear boy, you are always so

thoughtful, and so considerate."

Elwood also paid a few visits to pharmacists in various towns outside the city.

He took pains to make sure that Aunt Mary would not suffer. He was never cruel; Uncle Henry and Aunt Mary had been very kind to him from his orphaned childhood, and he had been fond of them both, as much as he could be fond of anyone but himself. But 83 was surely long enough to stick around, and though he might have lived according to his standards for quite a while, still in a way she owed him something for forcing him into even temporary exile.

He would be the first suspect, naturally; hence the necessity to reach a land without an extradition treaty, and stay there until they found out there was absolutely no evidence against him. That might take a long time. It was also quite possible that no suspicion of murder would ever arise, but he was taking no chances. He smiled as he recalled his colloquy with Randall. He would make no secret of his destination, so they could not accuse him of having concocted an alibi. He would be easy to locate when the will was probated, and he could answer any inquiry. He was thoroughly protected. All he had to do now was to wait for the payment.

It came, with no difficulties, in less than two weeks. In Randall's office again, the last papers were signed and the certified check handed over.

"I'll be doing a bit of traveling for a while," Elwood commented lightly as they parted. "Probably in South America. But I'll keep you informed of my address, wherever I am."

"What, no wedding bells?" said Randall archly.

"I told you I wanted the money for a getaway after I murdered my aunt, didn't I?" Elwood smiled.

Randall chuckled. They parted on the best of terms.

To Aunt Mary, too, Elwood told his plans for travel.

"I'll miss you, dear," she said.

"I'll miss you, too. But you'll always have my address, and you must be sure to write. I promise to answer every letter I get from you."

With all preparations made, the day before his departure he came for a farewell visit.

"I hate to see you leave, Elwood," she said. "After all, I'm not so young anymore, and if you stay away too long I might not be here when you come home again."

"Nonsense," Elwood protested stoutly. "You'll be waiting for me at the airport. Oh, I almost forgot—here's a little going-away

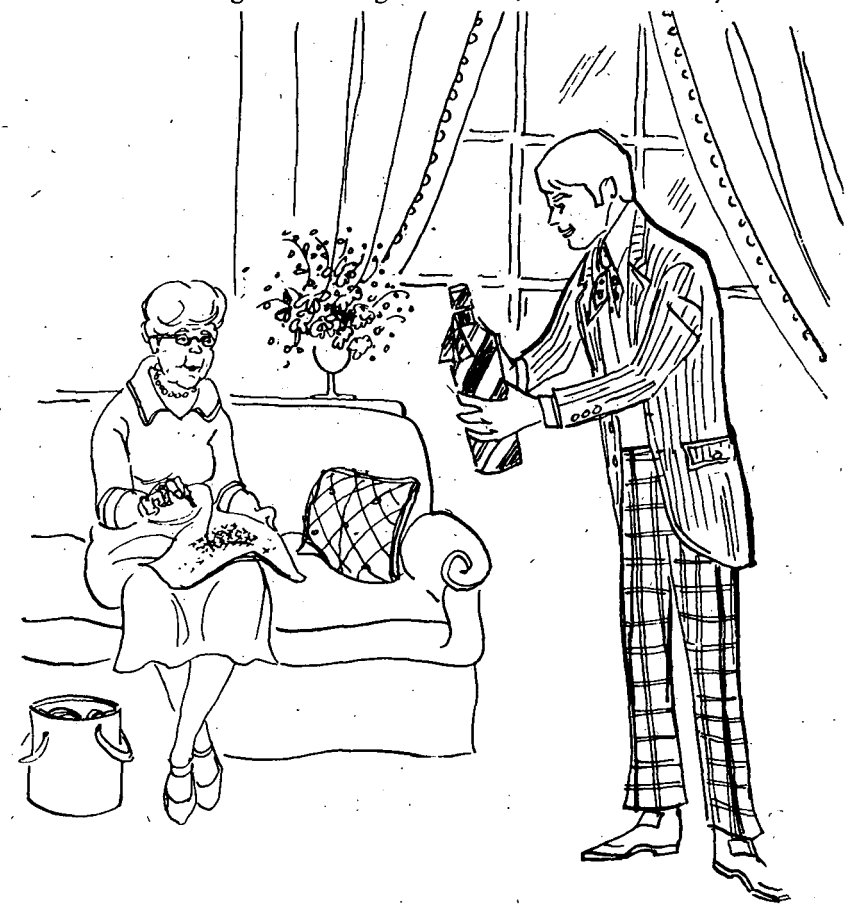
present. Some more of your favorite cream sherry."

"Why, Elwood, *I'm* the one who should be giving *you* a present. How thoughtful of you, my dear! I do like a small glass of sherry every night before I go to sleep."

Which one of the servants, Elwood mused, might be grilled first, and before too long? He brought out the fancily wrapped bottle with some pride; nobody would ever be able to discern that it had been super-carefully opened and reclosed.

"I have half a bottle left of the one you gave me before, so I'll keep this till I've finished that," his aunt told him.

"Do that, and drink to my health, wherever I am by then."



"Oh, I shall, just as I know you'll be drinking somewhere to mine."

He felt very safe. The probable publicity he could not help, but there was nobody here whose opinion he valued—what a joke it would be on old Ward Randall—and where he was going it might even romanticize him.

He had been settled for nearly two weeks in the penthouse suite of the most posh hotel in the capital of his chosen country, when the news came.

It was not, as he had more or less dreaded, in the form of newspaper headlines, or an official inquiry, but in a telegram from his aunt's lawyer, informing him that she had died in her sleep the night before. He telephoned the lawyer immediately, was told that her doctor had signed the death certificate giving those old standbys, old age and heart failure, as the cause, that her funeral would be held two days later, and that under the circumstances, the lawyer agreed, it would not be necessary for Mr. Harrington to return for it. The lawyer would keep in touch, as soon as the old lady's will was entered for probate.

So far, very much so good. Perhaps he had even been precipitate in leaving at all, Elwood considered, though it had seemed advisable to be able to prove that he was some thousands of miles away when Aunt Mary died. If everything was going so easily, he reflected, he had been a fool not to try to attend to the matter long ago, instead of waiting to be sparked by Randall's advertisement. If nothing else, he would have saved that 20 percent interest when his uncle's estate was handed over to him. A good, ingenuous fellow, that old lawyer of Aunt Mary's, and he would keep him on.

It was the next day that another phone call almost alarmed him.

"Look here, I don't like this at all, Mr. Harrington," Ward Randall sputtered.

"You don't like what?"

"Your aunt's dying so suddenly, right after I paid that advance over to you and right after you've buried yourself for some reason in some obscure corner of South America."

"Just what are you implying, Mr. Randall?" Elwood's tone was icy.

"Well, it looks bad, damn it. You assured me she was in perfect health."

"You mean it looks bad that the heart of an 83-year-old woman should give out quietly? She died in her sleep, remember. Her doctor isn't infallible, is he?"

"I know, but—"

"You were very lucky in your first venture in your new hobby,

Mr. Randall. If I'd had any intimation that I'd lose my aunt so soon—and please don't forget that I was devoted to her, and that it was partly to spare her that, with her approval, I anticipated some of my uncle's legacy—I should certainly never have answered your advertisement. As it is, you'll get your loan back much earlier than either of us expected—I believe it takes a year or so to distribute an inheritance—and you'll get $30,000 to boot. I only wish I'd had the prescience to save myself that much. And I suppose you realize that I was far away when she died."

Randall should have caved in after that, but then one does not become a financial tycoon without being stubborn and persistent beyond all reason. Randall was shaken, but he would not let go.

"Well, I think it's only fair to tell you, Mr. Harrington, that I'm not satisfied about the way this thing has happened so soon. How do I know you didn't do something before you left to make sure she wouldn't keep going much longer?"

"Such as what?" asked Elwood sarcastically. "Such as rigging a gun to go off in her bedroom and then seeing to it that the gun and the bullet and the wound all disappeared? I just told you that if I'd had any idea Aunt Mary was going to go so soon I'd never have applied for your money."

"Well, how do I know you didn't leave some poisoned pills or something for her to take? That kind of thing happens all the time in detective novels."

That was getting rather too near the bone. Elwood winced. If Randall started hinting at something like the sherry, Elwood would have to play his ace card—and Randall proceeded to do just that.

"Well, if everything's on the up and up, you'll have no objection to my putting my mind at rest. I intend to hire a very discreet private operator—I've used him before in several delicate financial transactions—and have him do a bit of rummaging around for me. If he finds everything is OK, I'll be pleased as you can be.

"But look, Mr. Harrington, here's another thing. Just grant there's even a possibility that I'm right and that you did arrange for your aunt to eat or drink something you'd had poisoned; then suppose one of that staff of servants in that big house got curious or greedy and tried some of the stuff. I can realize you might have had a motive to do away with your aunt, but you'd surely not want some other innocent person to die too, would you?"

"How? By swallowing one of my aunt's sleeping pills or whatever other idiotic thing you've dreamed up? You've really read too many detective novels. Mr. Randall."

"Or by stealing a drink of brandy or wine or something," said Randall obstinately.

So it had to be the ace card.

"Listen to me very carefully, Mr. Randall," Elwood said coldly. "If you accused me falsely of murdering my aunt, I could of course sue you for more than I'm inheriting from my uncle. But I wouldn't do that. If you ever make the least accusation against me to the police, or to anyone else that would lead to an accusation to the police, do you know what I'm going to do?"

"What?" At last the old fool was beginning to sound apprehensive.

"I'll come back and stand trial, extradition or no extradition." (Like fun he would. But let Randall believe him.) "And I'll plead guilty, whether I am or not; this is no confession, and if it were I'd repudiate it. And I'd hale *you* in as an accessory before the fact."

"You'd—what? Why, you young whippersnapper, I'm going to—"

"How's your memory, Mr. Randall?" Elwood inquired smoothly. "I told you, in your office, that I wanted the money to make a getaway after I'd murdered my aunt. I told you that on two different occasions. I didn't take it back either time. And you accepted it, whether or not you really thought I was joking. For all I know, you believed me and said nothing because it would mean you'd get your money back soon with all that interest. In other words, you were aware of what I was planning to do, and you neither warned my aunt nor informed the authorities. That makes you my accessory.

"Oh, I imagine that with just my word against yours, you'd never be convicted. But it would cost you a lot of money, and it would make you the laughingstock of the city. It would destroy the great Ward Randall image forever."

Without waiting for the jabbering at the other end of the phone to resolve itself into words, Elwood gently hung up.

Come . . . let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out. —*Thackeray*

SAM'S ZIEGFELD FOLLY

A HUSH DESCENDED upon the customers and clerks in Sonia's Goody Two Shoes Shop on East Fiftieth Street in New York City. The flamboyant cause of the hush stood poised in the store's doorway like a jet about to take wing or a transatlantic liner about to heave itself into a snug berth. Her name was Rhoda Lavelle. She was, as she liked to put it, "old enough to know better but young enough not to care."

Sam Margate looked up from his customer's trim ankle and waved in Rhoda's direction. She took it as the cue she seemed to have been waiting for. With one hand on an ample hip, the other stretched forward as if reaching out to Sam, she flounced down the ramp into the midst of the mainly teen-age girls being fitted for shoes. The shop's

recorded music—raucous acid-rock—accompanied her entrance. To it, she gave a not very subtle bump and then a rather wicked grind. Her fox fur jiggled on her shoulders. The rings on her fat fingers glittered with gaudy fire beneath the psychedelic lights of the store. On she came, her dyed red hair blazing her trail through the unfamiliar young country she was invading. Her rouged cheeks and brightly reddened lips were her guiding beacons.

Snickers. Whispers.

Rhoda, if she heard them, gave no sign. With a happy smile on her too heavily powdered face, she came waltzing up to Sam, her hand still outstretched, her fingers flickering.

"Hello, Rhoda," Sam said, rising. "Nice to see you."

"Hey, Sam, they're hot stuff!" she bellowed, pointing to the cut-

away shoes he had been fitting on his customer, a girl who might have been twenty but who looked more like fifteen. "Do you suppose you have my size in stock?"

Sam took her hand and gave it a weak shake.

She sat down next to the girl and adjusted her fur. "Take your time, Sam, honey." She proceeded to cross her legs ostentatiously, putting her black net stockings on display and smiling valiantly at no one in particular.

Sam, as he bent down to fasten the straps of the shoes, said to the girl, "They look marvelous. They're *you*!"

After some minutes of deliberation, his customer decided she would take them. Sam boxed the shoes, wrote out the sales check and returned to where Rhoda sat waiting for him.

"I saw you pull that fast one," she declared slyly, giving him a wink as he sat down on the fitting stool in front of her. "You squeezed her ankle. Twice!"

"Now, Rhoda, you know that's not true."

"Well, I just bet you wish it was! Hey, don't look so sad! Do you always look so sad when you meet up with an old friend and neighbor?"

"It's my natural-born basset eyes. Can't help it." *Old friend*. Well, it was true. He had met Rhoda centuries ago when she had been one of the famed Ziegfeld girls, and he had been immediately transformed into an ardent stage-door Johnny.

He had pursued her; she had eluded him. She liked him a lot—she always told him that—but she was, after all, "show business" and he was a shoe clerk and "oil and water didn't mix." He had finally managed to accept the fact that, in Rhoda's world, shoe clerks didn't marry show girls. But he never for a moment gave up hoping.

As the years passed, he came to think of Rhoda as his Ziegfeld folly, a part of the fun and pain of being young. He guessed he still loved her even now although there were no more stage doors and no more dancing until dawn. He had never married. Rhoda had married twice. The most recent time was a year ago, when she had married Max Lavelle just four months after her first husband, a singer, had died and left her, as she put it, "a rich grass widow."

Max *was* "show business." He played the piano in a seedy little Bronx bar called The Happy Haven. Max and Rhoda lived in the neighborhood of the bar in a shabby apartment building that had no doorman and a superintendent who lived like a hermit in the basement. When the apartment next to theirs became vacant, Rhoda had telephoned Sam and suggested he move in—it was rent-controlled. He did. That had been three months ago.

"Show me a sexy number, Sam," Rhoda was saying.

"No. I've told you before, Rhoda, lots of times."

"Told me what?"

"That you should wear oxfords. What you need is a good sturdy shoe, one that will support your, uh, weight, properly."

Storm clouds gathered on Rhoda's face. Sam saw the hurricane warnings flying in her eyes but he stuck to his story. She should definitely wear oxfords. Her varicose veins . . .

She chose to ignore him. "Something silly, Sam. Something giddy. I feel giddy. I feel positively girlish!"

Sam gave up and went to the stock room. When he returned, he sat down on his fitting stool and opened the box he had brought back with him.

"*Oooohhhh*!" Rhoda exclaimed, bending over to examine the shiny shoes he had revealed. She touched their bows and fingered their brilliant buttons. "I love pistachio!"

He removed her red right shoe and replaced it with the pistachio number.

"Too big," she promptly protested.

"It's your size. I know it by heart."

"Too big. Get me a size smaller."

Back to the stock room. Back to

Rhoda with the pistachio shoes.

He used his shoehorn to help her struggle into the too-small shoes. He watched as she tottered to her feet and stood in front of the floor mirror.

She lifted her satin skirt and posed. Stiffly, she pointed first one foot, then the other—first this way, then that. "They're just the thing, Sam. They make me look twenty years younger. I'll take 'em!" She collapsed into the chair and Sam removed the shoes. He thought she suppressed a sigh of relief.

When he returned with the wrapped box, she asked him if he could get away for a few minutes. He told her he could. They went around the corner to the soda fountain. Rhoda ordered a banana split. Sam had a cola.

When she had devoured the banana split, Rhoda sat back in the booth and looked at him. "I went to the sawbones again this afternoon."

"What did he say this time?"

She shrugged, looked away for a moment, and then, "The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be, and that's a fact."

"He said that?"

"No, but that's what I gathered from all his fancy talk. Why, I can remember the time I used to stay up till dawn. Me and all my stage-door Johnnys used to make the rounds of all the clubs and end up walking along under the Third Avenue El with the sun coming up and . . ." She reached for her purse. "He changed my medicine. Gave me a new prescription which I got to get filled. I'm supposed to take the new pills every three hours too—just like the old ones." She pulled out the prescription blank and squinted at it. "I wonder what it says."

Sam glanced at the indecipherable writing. He suspected that it contained the secret that he also suspected Rhoda knew—the secret of the vanishing trick that all the years seemed to know so well.

"I remember," Rhoda said quietly, "the good old days, Sam. Remember me coming down all those golden staircases? I used to hold my head high under those hot lights and the feathers in my costume were all the colors of the rainbow. Hey, did I ever tell you what Flo Ziegfeld himself said to me once?"

"Yes, you did."

But she wasn't listening to Sam, or talking to him either. She was talking to one of her long-lost Johnnys. "He said, 'Rhoda, when you come down that staircase, you light up Broadway all the way from the Battery to the Bronx.' He said that to me, he really did."

"I believe you, Rhoda. You were

always sensational. I remember."

Her eyes glowed and she smiled at Sam. "And you were always there, Sam, with flowers and those sad basset eyes of yours. I just never knew how much . . ." She looked away for a moment and then said, "Are you going to The Happy Haven tonight? It's Saturday, you know." She nudged him in the ribs. "You can sleep late tomorrow."

"I might," he replied.

"Live it up, why not? We can lift a few for old time's sake."

Yes, he thought, for old time's sake. He paid the check and followed her out of the soda fountain.

She waved a good-bye. "I've got to hustle now and get this prescription filled and buy some groceries—see you later tonight. Is it a date?"

"It's a date, Rhoda." He stood there a moment watching her barge ahead into life, burdened with her prescription and her memories.

That night in his apartment, Sam put a frozen dinner into the oven and set the timer that was built into the stove. While his dinner was heating, he read the evening paper. He was in the middle of a story about an apartment robbery which had occurred the night before when the shouting began next door in Rhoda's apartment.

He tried to keep his mind on the story he was reading but found he could not. Max Lavelle was shouting at Rhoda. His words were almost perfectly clear. The walls separating the apartments were, Sam thought, about as soundproof as pasteboard.

". . . Barbara's not my girlfriend!"

"I saw you last night . . . she's a tramp . . . why do you . . . ?"

"Shut up! If I want tramps, I don't have far to go to find one!" Max yelled.

". . . if you mean Sam Margate, he's just a friend of mine . . ."

". . . deserve one another."

"I should have . . . he asked me more than once . . . too good for me . . ."

"Ask *him*!"

"I'll . . . change my will . . . my insurance . . . cancel . . . then where'd you be, you and that . . . !" Rhoda screamed back.

Sam sprang to his feet as the timer on his stove began to ring loudly, signaling that his dinner was ready. He shut the kitchen door to muffle the angry sounds from the Lavelle apartment and silently ate his dinner of tasteless chicken.

An hour later, he heard the parrot in the Branigan apartment loudly squawk its song about a

peg-leg sailor. He looked up, half expecting to see the parrot sitting in the same room with him, staring at him with its evil eyes.

He heard the Lavelles' apartment door slam. He listened to Rhoda singing her way down the hall, "*A tisket, a tasket, a green and yellow basket . . .*"

He would go to The Happy Haven, he decided.

When he arrived there, he looked around for Rhoda but she was not in sight. He sat down at the bar and ordered a beer. In the middle of the circular bar, sprouting like a big black mushroom from a raised platform, was Max's piano, playerless at the moment.

Someone's hands suddenly covered his eyes from behind. He didn't have to guess who it was. He recognized the strong perfume, but he played the game. "The Queen of Sheba?" A giggle in response. "Raquel Welch?" A roar of delight and the taking away of ten soft fingers.

"It's *me*!" Rhoda exclaimed as she sat down on the stool next to him. "I was powdering my nose. Hey, I'm glad you could come."

"Where else would he go?" boomed a rough male voice suddenly.

They both turned to find Max Lavelle standing behind them.

"Have a beer with us, hon," Rhoda suggested good-naturedly.

"How are you, Max?" Sam decided to ignore the snide remark Max had made. He stared at the man facing him, at his pale face and feral eyes, at his full lips that always seemed to be slightly moist. There was a faint smell of medicine about the man. Perhaps it was the hair oil he used.

"Excuse me," Max said. "There's someone I have to see. Have fun, you two."

They watched him walk around the bar and sit down beside a lacquered blonde in an aquamarine sweater that showcased, for all the world to see, two of her very noticeable assets.

"Well, she's young, I'll say that for her," Rhoda quipped rather sadly.

"I hate his guts," Sam said, surprised at himself, unused to telling the truth about his own feelings.

"It's not his fault," Rhoda said. "Listen, Sam. Take a good look at me."

He did.

"What do you see?"

"The Queen of Sheba," he said, giving a false grin, trying hard to keep it light.

She shook her head. "A loser, that's what you see. My first marriage was bad news too. He was arrested for shipping drugs out of Mexico. He died in prison—but

you know all about that, Sam."

"I never understood why you didn't divorce him during all those years."

Rhoda gave him a puzzled glance. "How could I? He was awful good to me before they busted him. I couldn't let him down like that."

"Well, at least he left you a lot of money."

"So what's money if you don't have . . ." She looked across the bar at Max and the blonde sitting beside him. "Seems like I always pick the wrong guys. Now you take Max, for example. Why, my first husband wasn't cold in his grave before I up and married Max. You know something, Sam? The trouble with me is I *need* somebody, only I always pick the wrong ones. Max—well, he happened to be around and willing. I told myself it didn't matter a hoot nor holler that he was years younger than me or that my money might . . . Oh, the hell with it! Let's have us another beer!"

Sam ordered two beers and then said, "Did you tell Max what the doctor said today?"

"No. I didn't even tell him that I went to the old quack again."

"Why not? Rhoda, you should have."

"He'd only laugh, that's all. Listen, you know how I set the timer on the stove so I'll know when to take my next pill?"

"I can hear it like it was in my own place. Our walls are made of tissue paper."

"Well, Max says the timer drives him crazy. Every three hours, he says. At three, six, nine, twelve—day and night for the past six months." She paused a moment. "But I need to set the thing or I'm liable to forget to take my pill, and I'm afraid to forget. Who knows what might happen? Anyway, you want I should tell him the racket's going to go on?" She shook her head vigorously.

Max began to play. His first selection was *Melancholy Baby*. He kept tossing amused glances at Rhoda throughout the piece. The next one was a tune by a currently popular rock group—*Gonna Get Me Some Lovin'*.

"I'd say he's trying to tell me something," Rhoda remarked wryly, "and I guess I get the message."

"Leave him!" Sam snapped suddenly.

Rhoda gave him a shocked glance. "Leave him? For what?"

"For me," he said solemnly.

She reached out and put her hand over his own. "Too late, Sam. I told you I was a loser. I'm always missing planes, seems like.

And when I do catch one, it seems I never get to travel first-class. The trouble with me is, I'm just a dumb old broad."

Max was playing something that Sam recognized. He couldn't recall the title but he knew the words—*"One of these days, you're going to miss me, baby."*

He suggested to Rhoda that they have another beer but she said it was getting late and she needed her beauty sleep. She opened her purse, took out her bottle of pills and let out a moan of dismay.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked.

"Only two left. I forgot to get my prescription filled this afternoon."

"Give it to me. I'll get it filled first thing in the morning. The drugstore down the block opens at eight, even on Sunday."

She sighed. "Tomorrow's your only day to sleep late, Sam."

He held out his hand and she gave him the prescription blank she fished out of her purse. "Come on," he said, "I'll walk you home."

"Stay and enjoy yourself. Nobody's going to bother an old bat like me."

He took her arm and guided her toward the door, painfully aware of the fact that she was wearing the pitiful pistachio shoes he had sold her earlier in the day.

They arrived at her apartment just before midnight. While Rhoda took one of her pills with a glass of water, Sam set the stove timer for three hours. A moment later, he told her good night. At the door, she gave him a thin smile.

Back in his own apartment, he undressed and got into bed. He turned and tossed but found he couldn't sleep. Instead of sheep, he found himself counting pistachio shoes. He was still awake at three o'clock when he heard Rhoda's timer begin to ring. He heard her getting up to take her last pill. He reached out and set his alarm clock for seven-thirty so that he could get to the drugstore to have her prescription filled first thing in the morning.

Finally, sleep came to him. When the ringing sounded in his ears, he reached out for the alarm clock only to discover that it was not the source of the sound. He sat up in bed and listened. *Ding, ding, ding, ding* . . . Rhoda's timer! He looked at his clock. Six a.m. As the ringing of the timer continued, he felt a chill course through him. He got out of bed, dressed quickly and went out into the hall and began to pound on the door of Rhoda's apartment. Inside, the timer continued to ring.

"Somebody smothered her with her own pillow," Detective Bru-

nelli was telling a reporter an hour later in Rhoda's apartment.

Sam sat on a chair in the livingroom, stunned. He had watched them carry her lifeless body out on a stretcher after he had summoned the building superintendent to unlock the door and find out why the timer kept ringing and ringing.

"You locate Mr. Lavelle yet?" Brunelli asked a colleague.

"Yeah, the bartender at The Happy Haven put us on to him. Seems he spent the last few hours after the bar closed with a Miss Barbara Tremayne. We sent a man to pick them both up at her place."

Sam felt a wild fury seize him but it died in an icy bath of determination.

When Max appeared some thirty minutes later, Sam watched him burst into the apartment, shout Rhoda's name, muster a few tears. While the detectives were busy questioning Max and Barbara, who had followed him into the apartment, Sam made his way to the bathroom unnoticed. He found what he was looking for in the medicine cabinet, slipped it into his pocket and returned to the livingroom.

"I feel rotten!" Max was moaning, his head in his hands. "I shouldn't have taken Miss Tremayne home. I should have been here with my wife!"

Sam said, "You *were* here, Max."

Everyone in the room—Max, Barbara, the detectives—turned to face him, questions in their eyes and on their faces.

"You were here, Max," Sam repeated. "Sometime after three o'clock. Sometime after Rhoda took her last pill."

"What's this all about, Mr. Margate?" Detective Brunelli asked.

"It's an almost perfect crime," Sam answered.

"It was probably an addict," Max said. "Some of Rhoda's jewelry is missing. An addict probably broke in and Rhoda surprised him and he killed her."

"You're no addict, Max," Sam said coldly.

"Explain yourself, Mr. Margate," Brunelli said.

"Rhoda Lavelle took pills every three hours, as Max knew," Sam said. "At three o'clock, six, nine, twelve and so on—every day and night for the past six months. She had the habit of setting the stove timer to remind her to take her next pill. Well, yesterday she went to her doctor and he gave her a prescription for some new pills but she forgot to have it filled. She gave it to me last night to take to the drugstore this morning. Here it is." Sam reached in his pocket and handed the prescription to Brunelli.

"My wife's pills have nothing to

do with this!" Max bellowed out.

Brunelli glared at him and he fell silent.

Sam said, "I walked Mrs. Lavelle home from The Happy Haven last night. She took a pill when she got home—her next to last one—at midnight. I set her stove timer so it would ring at three o'clock. When it went off, I heard it. I heard her get up and take her last pill. Sometime between three and six, Max Lavelle came home, killed her and returned to Miss Tremayne's place to wait for the body to be discovered."

"I'll sue you for libel!" Max shouted, shaking a fist at Sam.

"Detective Brunelli," Sam continued calmly, "ask yourself why Mrs. Lavelle would have set the timer at three o'clock for three hours later when she knew she had no more pills to take. No, it was Max who set the timer after he killed her—so it would ring at six o'clock as usual. He wanted everything to appear normal. He figured Rhoda had just forgotten to set it herself. The only flaw in his plan was the fact that he didn't know Rhoda had run out of pills." Sam reached in his pocket and took out the empty pill bottle which he handed to Brunelli. Then Sam pointed at Barbara. "Miss Tremayne was supposed to provide Max with an alibi. She's an accessory to murder!"

Barbara took a step backward as if she were about to flee. "Max, you idiot!" she cried.

"Shut up!" Max roared at her. "Don't—!"

"You said it would work—that you'd get all her money. You said it was foolproof!"

Brunelli said, "I think we'd better go down to the precinct station, Mr. Lavelle. You too, Miss Tremayne. I want to warn you both that you don't have to say anything and that you have a right to call a lawyer."

Sam followed them out of the apartment after promising Brunelli that he would be available if there were any more questions.

He entered his own apartment and sat down. Through the mist that clouded his eyes he saw, not his familiar drab walls, but a golden staircase. Coming down it toward him was the most beautiful girl in the world in a costume covered with feathers that blazed in every color of the rainbow. Swallowing hard, he began to applaud as he had done so many times before.

To the unwary, mere probability fosters credibility.

NIGHT CALL

I WAS LATE for my own dinner gathering because I'd agreed to a newspaper interview explaining how I'd become president of the investment firm of Bart & Company by the age of thirty. I answered the questions too abruptly and without enough thought, for I knew that Freddie fretted when I was late for dinner. Cissy Regent and Andy Kinder would also be waiting, since it was going to be another Hood Society dinner, and this particular assignment appeared to be especially intriguing.

With the interview in my office finally over, I left the building quickly to claim my car from the

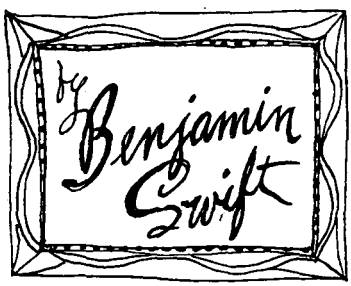
garage I use on Montgomery Street. I drove up to my apartment house high on Russian Hill, and minutes later I was sitting down at the massive oak dining table beside a broad window which overlooks San Francisco Bay, where lights of Golden Gate Bridge lace across dark water.

"How are you, Cissy?" I asked the beautiful green-eyed girl on my right.

"Lovely, David," she said, giving me her knowing smile. "You're busy, busy?"

I nodded as Freddie, looking reproachful, his usual white smile failing to light his Filipino features, put down my martini. "Thanks, Freddie."

"Good thing I chose a stew," he said accusingly.



"Sorry," I said, as he gave me his back and returned to the kitchen.

Andy Kinder, on my left, grinned. He is even bigger than I, with a wide rugged-looking face and an untamed thatch of gray-brown hair, looking for all the world like a lumberjack instead of the crack corporate lawyer he really is.

Cissy put a cigarette into a long holder she favors. I leaned over to light it, aware of the rare, subtle perfume that meant Cissy. She was wearing a wildly colored Mexican-styled maxi, and no stranger would have trouble deciding that she was, indeed, a topflight fashion designer. "Thank you, darling," she said softly.

We raised our glasses, and I felt that faint excitement I always achieved just before beginning a new Hood Society assignment. Broker, lawyer, designer—we had everything in the world to lose if it ever went wrong. But none of us could live without the challenge, and when the challenge had been met successfully, there was an inner reward that was even greater than those very tangible rewards we gave to those who had been wronged.

We drank. Then I said, "You mentioned on the phone there's a Cézanne involved, Cissy?"

She nodded; she always made the contact with the investigative branch of the Society. Then, using her incredible memory, she delivered the accumulated information to Andy and me.

"Most interesting," Andy said. "And someone killed in a collision?

Then robbed?" There was that note of incredulity in Andy's bass voice that he always displays when confronted with any sort of despicable action on the part of another human being.

"All true," Cissy said. "So—first the accident. Carl Schrubin, a sixty-nine-year-old widower, was living in a cabin just off Skyline Boulevard on the Peninsula with his four-year-old granddaughter named Debby. When they started widening the highway up there, Schrubin was forced to move. He found a small apartment in Los Gatos. Then, one evening late last summer, he packed every single thing he owned into his old pickup—and left the cabin, Debby beside him. He chose an old twisting road leading down from Skyline to get to Los Gatos. It isn't used a lot, but that night somebody else was using it, coming up from the lower Peninsula in his big, old sedan. Joyriding, apparently, and drinking while he was doing it."

"Then?" I asked.

"He slammed into Carl Schrubin's truck. Normally, you know, a truck is going to come out ahead in a collision like that, but Schrubin's was ready to fall apart. The sedan was one of those large, heavy cars built like a tank. When it was over, Carl Schrubin was dead and the little girl, who was thrown out, was unconscious on the blacktop. We've found out since, through our investigators, that the person who hit them wasn't even scratched, and his sedan got only a few more dents than it already had. After the collision he decided to lift Schrubin's wallet and take what things appealed to him from the bed of the pickup before anyone else came along."

"Now, wait just a minute!" Andy said angrily. "Do you mean to say that this beggar killed the old man, robbed him, and then left a four-year-old girl lying unconscious on the blacktop?" His eyes were dark and condemning.

"That's how she was found when the next car arrived," Cissy said. "She came to, finally, not really injured—beyond a few scars she'll carry the rest of her life."

Andy shook his head grimly. "Do you know who he is?"

"Yes," Cissy nodded. "Our investigation started when our people read a newspaper story about the collision of the truck with an unknown second vehicle. It took a lot of time and a lot of work, but they were finally able to match up a number of small things: a description of the sedan someone had seen near the bottom of that road where the collision happened, a fragment of a license someone remembered, a description of a man drinking in

a tavern nearest that road before the accident happened. So one, two, three, four, our people at last screwed it down to the identity of a man named Gary Nunes, aged twenty-seven, living in Redwood City."

"Gary Nunes," Andy said tensely. "And he can't be touched?"

"Not by the law. There isn't enough evidence to make half a case that way even if we gave the police all of the information we've collected."

"But enough for us?" I asked.

"Yes," Cissy said. "If we count the Cézanne, which was apparently included in the things Nunes stole from the old man's truck."

"I think we'd better go back a way," I said. "I mean, how in the devil did a Cézanne painting get into that truck in the first place?"

"Carl Schrubin had an only son named Ralph," Cissy said. "Motherless during his adolescence, he was a steady juvenile problem. He dropped out of high school in his junior year, then managed to join the Army. He wound up in Germany where he served out his hitch and came back with a pregnant German bride. A year after the baby girl was born, her mother ran off with a bachelor neighbor."

"People," Andy said in disgust.

Cissy shrugged and went on: "Ralph drank and wenched around until the juvenile authorities moved in on behalf of the baby. Then the grandfather—Carl Schrubin—offered to take care of the child. He had the time, love and inclination, so it seemed to work out. Which was fortunate, because about then Ralph was arrested for manslaughter. A true beastie, it seems. He'd been getting into brawls ever since he was old enough to swing on somebody. Finally he killed a man in a bar and is presently in San Quentin for having done so. He's still causing trouble, as a matter of fact. Just before the collision that killed his father, he went for somebody with a knife in the prison commissary. He may *never* get out of there. But needless to say, he wants to, and desperately—he naturally knows that Cézanne had to have been stolen from his father's truck after the accident. Even though Carl Schrubin didn't know he had a fortune to take care of in the form of that painting, he never threw a single thing away in his life. His son knew that, which is exactly why he left the painting with his father. Only now . . ."

Freddie returned, still looking hurt. He deposited a large tureen on the table as well as a napkin-wrapped loaf of hot French bread. "Help yourself," he said shortly, and left.

I ladled out dishes of Freddie's extraordinary beef stew, passed the bread, then poured a dry red from a decanter Freddie had filled earlier. Cissy tasted the stew, closed her eyes in a pantomime of ecstasy, then tried the bread followed by a sip of the wine. "My, oh, my," she whispered.

"The simple things in life that count," I said.

"Especially if they're prepared by an artist," she replied.

"Damned good!" Andy said with gusto, lifting a large spoon of the stew.

He was right, and I began eating. But I was thinking about that Cézanne, wondering where it had come from. I asked Cissy.

"The bizarre part, I guess," she replied. "To track down all of the information, our people had to make use of all of their contacts—CID, FBI, the French government, in fact."

"Why the French government?" Andy asked.

"They're the rightful owners of the painting."

"But how did it wind up in that pickup?" I asked.

"Go back to World War Two," Cissy said, "when the painting was taken by the Germans during their occupation of France. They moved it to Munich. Then the building where it was stored was bombed and the people in charge killed. Some kids found it later—and a little girl took it home."

"Not knowing it was a Cézanne?" I said.

Cissy nodded. "Now move it up to nineteen sixty-five, when Ralph Schrubin was sent to Germany. The little girl who found the painting is now twenty-three years old."

"Ah!" Andy said. "And Ralph Schrubin married her."

"Exactly," Cissy said.

"Then, when he brought her to California, he also brought the painting?"

"Yes. He might have been a bum all of his life, but he had an odd compulsion toward art. He's done some really excellent drawings."

"But do you mean to say he knew a Cézanne when he saw one?" I asked with some disbelief.

"Well—he knew what *looked* like a Cézanne."

"I see," I nodded. "And so he had the painting checked by an expert?"

"Who confirmed that it was indeed a Cézanne. The expert then reported the matter to the proper people, knowing that the painting had been lost and that there was a large reward put on it by the French government—which is how we got the lead."

"But the expert didn't know who Ralph Schrubin was, of

course—his name and address."

"Just his description. It wasn't enough for other interested people. But it was for us."

"And now this despicable Gary Nunes has it," Andy said.

"Hanging on the wall of his livingroom, apparently."

"That makes me nervous," Andy said. "What's its value today?"

Cissy shrugged again. "A lot."

"What is the French government offering as reward?" I said.

"Eighty-five thousand."

"And it just hangs there in Nunes' livingroom," Andy said. "And he doesn't even know what he's got."

"Well . . . we're pretty certain that's it. Before Ralph Schrubin went to prison he reframed it and put a cheap Japanese silk over it. It was his big ace in the hole for the future. But now it'll take another expert to confirm the fact that it really is the Cézanne."

"You," I said to Cissy.

She nodded confidently.

"So," I said, "the entire problem is how to obtain the painting, return it to the French and claim the reward. Where's the little girl now, by the way?"

"An orphanage on the Peninsula," Cissy said. "She'll be adopted or sent to a foster home, however it works out—her father doesn't give a damn. Obviously neither does her mother, presumably gone forever."

"Well," Andy said, "I should think we'll want to place that reward money in trust anonymously. Then Debby can claim it when she's, say, eighteen. A little something against all of that bad luck."

"Yes," I agreed. "Something, anyway."

"But how do we do it?" Cissy asked.

Both of them looked at me because the doing was always my invention. I considered it; then said, "Just take it?"

"But this Nunes," Andy said. "Hit and run? Stealing from a man he killed? Leaving a baby lying on the road without calling for help? Where's the justice in only taking something he doesn't know is worth a fortune?"

"You sound vindictive, Andy," I said.

"Yes," he agreed. "The beggar deserves a jolt."

I turned to Cissy. "What's he like, aside from being a killer and a thief? I mean, how does he live?"

"Well, he's lazy, for one thing, living on unemployment compensation right now. He likes girls but he doesn't get a lot of action—not very good-looking, and he doesn't have money to attract them. So, according to the information I got, he just mostly sits and watches TV and gets positively

smashed at night all by himself."

I tasted my wine, then returned the glass carefully to the table. "Out cold?"

"Every night of the week."

"Give you any ideas?" Andy said.

I nodded, then told them what we were going to do.

The next night, wearing a poor-boy sweater, faded jeans and well-worn boots, I drove south out of the city on the freeway. Andy used up the seat to my right, and Cissy was tucked up tightly in the small rear seat. There was a lot of mist in the air, and the lights we were leaving behind looked faintly blurred.

I chose the inside lane of four lanes leading down the Peninsula and pressed down on the accelerator. I could see Cissy's face in the rear-view mirror, and she wore a small, pleased smile on her lovely mouth. For once she looked positively un-chic in cheap slacks, white blouse and a yellow cardigan. Andy stretched his long legs forward, looking relaxed now, but anticipatory. He was wearing khaki pants, nubbed work shoes and an old Navy pea jacket. The knit cap he wore on his head made him appear exactly like a refugee from a waterfront dive.

At the Redwood City area I swung off the freeway. Then I drove across El Camino to find Gary Nunes' small old house in an aging neighborhood. I drove slowly down the dimly lighted street so that we could examine the place. Shades were pulled in front, but I could see light spilling out from a side window.

I turned right at the next intersection and found an alley splitting the block in half. I stopped and said, "I think I should probably check the gentleman's condition."

Cissy and Andy remained in the car as I got out and hurried to the back of Gary Nunes' house. He'd left the door of his garage open. I switched on a small but powerful flashlight to see that his car was a fading tan and white sedan, at least twelve years old.

I turned off the light and moved carefully around the house to the unshaded window on the side. I peered in to find a room sparsely furnished with junk pieces. In a large chair re-covered with fading flowered cloth slumped the man that had to be Gary Nunes—dark, lank-looking, with a long thin chin. He wasn't quite out yet, just nodding dimly, hanging onto a jelly glass filled with red wine. He managed to get the glass up to his mouth, drink, then the glass tipped and wine spilled over his T-shirt. His head dropped back, and he began the sleep of the thoroughly

anesthetized, just as predicted.

I checked the rest of the room and saw the Japanese silk on a wall opposite Nunes. Then I went back to the car.

"Out?" Andy asked.

"Just."

"Will he come awake enough when we're ready?"

"We'll make sure he does. Cissy?"

"Let us proceed."

I put on a pair of thin leather gloves and opened the trunk to get an old paint can and a short-handled sledge wrapped in burlap, as well as Cissy's makeup kit. "Can you do it in the dark this way?" I asked.

"Expertly," she smiled.

I touched her cheek gently. "What would we do without you?"

"Perish."

I nodded. "Come on, Andy."

I looked at the luminous dial of my watch as we went along the alley: eleven-ten. The entire block had seemingly gone to sleep except for one baby who was howling ferociously somewhere near the other end of the alley.

"Garage open?" Andy asked.

"Yes."

"Kitchen?"

"We'll find out."

I checked at the window again. Nunes was securely out. Then I joined Andy in the garage. He said, "Car's open, but he took the keys with him."

"Then we'll sweat it out."

I took off the emergency brake and together we pushed the car backward into the alley. I unwrapped the burlap from the sledge and gave it to Andy, who carefully doubled the fabric over the front left fender and headlight. He nodded, a hazy figure in the night air.

I swung the sledge into burlap. Metal bent and broken glass tinkled. Andy removed the burlap, and I switched the flash on briefly. The headlight was smashed and the metal was convincingly crumpled. I opened the old paint can and poured some of its contents over the fender and headlight. We'd added a special agent, so it began drying to the surface immediately. I rewrapped the sledge and put it with the paint can in some weeds next to the alley.

I whistled softly. Moments later I heard the sound of Cissy's footsteps hurrying along the old concrete.

"Now for Mr. Nunes," Andy said.

We went back through the garage to the kitchen door. Andy tried the knob and found it locked. He leaned one large shoulder against the door. It made a crack-

ing sound and flew open. We went up into the kitchen which smelled of rotten apples and the contents of a gallon wine bottle on a sideboard, a quarter full. Andy poured the wine into the sink.

Then we went into the livingroom where I pulled the shade on the side window and turned the television set off. Nunes was still sprawled in his chair, snoring. Andy crossed the room and kicked him sharply in one ankle, then slapped him across a cheek.

Nunes' eyes opened, moist and uncomprehending. He looked at Andy dimly. "Wha . . .?"

"Maybe we need water," Andy said to me gruffly.

I went into the kitchen and found a large glass and filled it from a tap, then returned to give it to Andy. Andy threw the water in Nunes' face.

The man pushed himself upright, shaking his head. "Wha's going on here?" The pronunciation was mushy, but he was coming back to the world.

Andy stood large and threatening over him, appearing as ready for a bar brawl as any man ever had, in that waterfront costume. "Big trouble," he said, roughening his voice.

"What?"

"You. That's what you're in."

"I don' understand." He started to get up, then decided he couldn't.

"Is your car the tan and white sedan?" I asked.

He looked at me with bleary eyes. "It's in the garage."

"No," Andy said. "In the alley. Where you ran her down."

Nunes blinked once. Twice. He was getting more sober by the second. "Ran who what?" he managed.

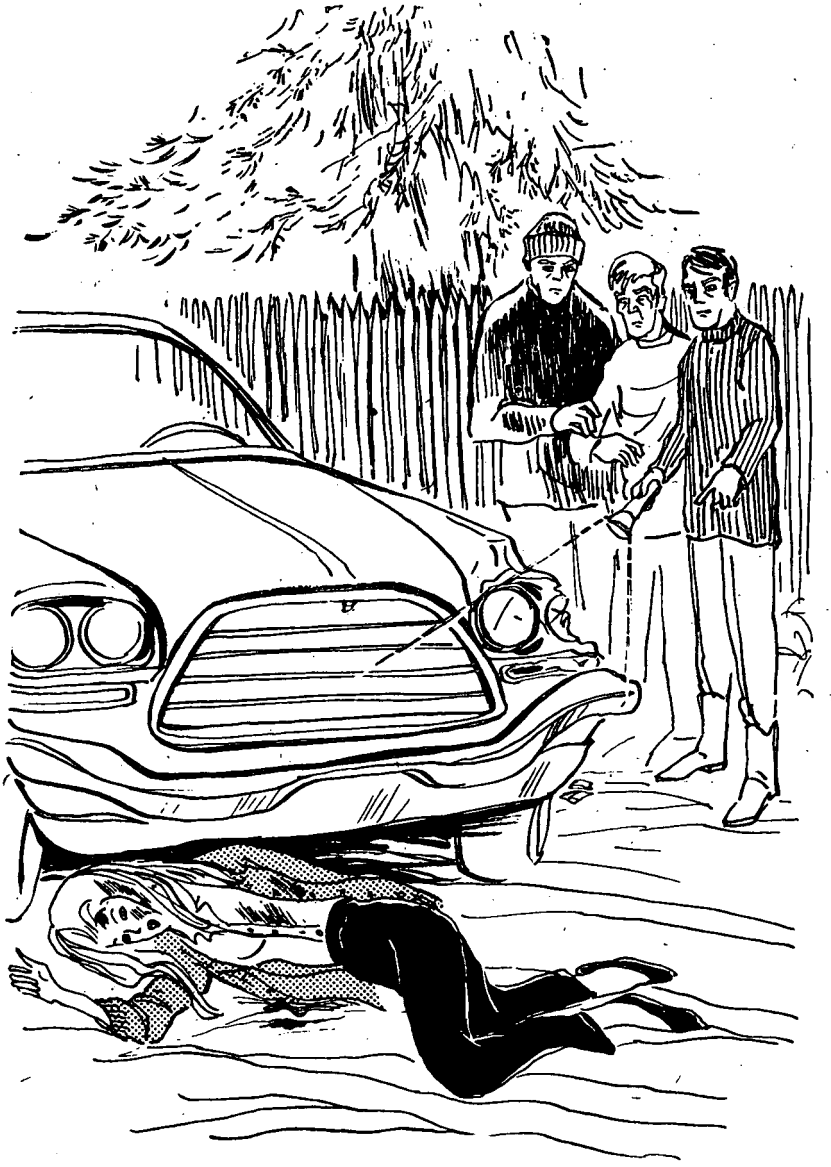
"Get up," Andy ordered.

"Who *are* you?"

"We happened to be using that alley behind this place to head home from a party and ran square into it. Now get up!" He caught Nunes' arm and pulled him to his feet. Nunes tried to free himself. I grabbed his other arm and we led him protesting through the kitchen, the garage, and out to the alley.

I turned on my flash again, illuminating Cissy lying half under the tan and white car. She was covered with the blood we'd gotten from a butcher shop and to which we'd added the fast-drying ingredient. Her blouse was bloody. Her face was bloody. Her hair was bloody. One arm was bent at an unnatural angle, creating the effect that it was broken. Her mouth gaped open. So did her eyes. I turned out the flash so that she could start breathing again.

"No!" Nunes whispered.



"Oh, yes," I said. We hustled him back into the house and let him sprawl into his chair again.

He wagged his head back and forth. "Never!"

"No?" Andy said accusingly.

"Didn't leave the house all night!"

"Not that you remember, anyway," I said.

"No!"

"A boozer like you?" Andy said. "Your wine bottle's empty. I figure you got up in a daze and backed the car out and ran her down on your way for more juice. Only once you'd hit her you just got out and stumbled back in here and went to sleep again. Where's your phone?"

"At the end of the sofa," I said.

Andy started toward it, but Nunes, shocked into almost total sobriety now, said, "What are you going to do?"

"Phone the police."

"You can't!"

Andy laughed a rolling bass. "Watch."

"But *why*?"

Andy smiled at me. "He wants to know why."

"Put it this way," I said. "Why *not*?"

Nunes looked frightened. "What do you *want*?"

"You mean to shut up about this?" Andy asked slowly.

"Yes!"

"And like," I said carefully, "if we also took care of the dead lady for you? Dump her off the San Mateo Bridge, for instance?"

Nunes doubled both hands and pressed them together. "Yes!"

"What's the offer?" Andy asked.

"I don't have much. But you can have it. *Anything*, if you'll just—"

Andy shook his head. "He hasn't got much and he wants us to forget reporting it and dump the lady in the bay as well. Some nerve, huh?"

"Lots," I nodded.

"Look!" Nunes said, getting out his wallet and removing currency with a trembling hand.

I took it and counted it. "Thirty-seven dollars. We're supposed to keep the law off you and take care of a body for thirty-seven dollars?" I shook my head, grinning.

He stripped off a gold watch from his wrist. "Here."

I examined it. Then I noticed a diamond ring on the little finger of his right hand. I was thinking about that night when he'd killed someone with his car—the old man—and left the little girl lying on the road. "The ring," I ordered.

"Listen . . . please. It was my mother's. I had it remounted, and—"

"Come on!"

He got it off and handed it to me.

"What else have you?" I asked.

"I don't have anything else!"

Andy began walking around the room, examining everything. Then he went into the single bedroom, and I could hear him opening and closing drawers. He came out with several more currency bills in his hand. "Shouldn't lie to us," he said to Nunes.

"I forgot! Honest!"

"How much?" I asked Andy.

"Eighty-five bucks."

"We haven't even got a good week's wage for this, yet."

Andy began moving around the room again. This time he stopped in front of the silk. "What's this?"

Nunes motioned a hand. "One of those oriental things."

"What's it worth?" Andy said.

Finally a crafty expression went into Nunes' eyes. "Well . . . I didn't want to tell you. I *wasn't* going to tell you. But—"

"Come on," Andy said impatiently.

"It's worth plenty!" Nunes said. "I inherited it, see? You guys take it. Right? Then we're even. Okay?"

Andy touched the silk and looked at me. "What do you think?"

"I don't know anything about stuff like that."

"Let's take what we can get," Andy said, and removed the frame from the wall. "Better'n nothing."

He started for the kitchen. I went with him.

"You guys promise?" Nunes called after us. "You won't tell the police? You'll get rid of her?"

"That's right," I said. "But this won't be the last time you'll hear from us. I mean, maybe we'll bury her, but she can always be dug up. And she's got some of the paint from your car on her. Did you happen to think about it that way?"

"Oh, now, listen . . ." Nunes said, looking sick.

Outside, I flashed the light again, lighting up Cissy still half under that car in the same position as before, just in case Nunes was watching from the house. We picked up her limp body and went down the alley, retrieving the sledge and paint can as we went.

"I'm freezing to death!" Cissy whispered.

We got her into the car. Minutes later I was back on the freeway, returning to San Francisco.

"That heater feels marvelous," Cissy said.

Andy turned to look back at her, grinning. "You've never looked more desirable, Cissy."

"So now I find out what kind of tastes you have, Andy. Very macabre. If I had a towel—"

"Soon enough," I said, feeling relaxed. "What do you think Nunes

will do with himself now, Andy?"

"Disappear," he said positively. "Pick up a new identity somewhere else."

I nodded. "That doesn't bother me at all. What I care about is that we brought it off."

"*If* it's the real Cézanne," Cissy said.

"Well, yes," I agreed. "And we'll know that pretty soon, won't we?"

In the city I drove directly to Cissy's apartment-studio on Post. We went up to her lavish livingroom, with its oils and fashion sketches. Cissy went to work removing the silk from the frame. Underneath was an oil painting with the vivid colors and great depths in the shadowing and that total stylistic early modernness which was the trademark of Cézanne. She spent a long time examining it, then said, "Yes."

I let out my breath. "Sure?"

"Sure enough," she nodded.

"Good," Andy boomed, grinning. He looked at Cissy again, and his grin disappeared. "I was joking before. But, really, would you get that stuff off, my dear? It's like a corpse walking around."

Cissy laughed musically. "But I had to know. David, dear?" she said to me. "Mix me a pink lady, please? While I'm coming alive again? And, oh, on the bar there—a picture of Debby."

As Cissy disappeared, Andy and I went to the bar. We looked at a color photograph of a beautiful four-year-old girl. She had long blonde hair and a small scar beside her mouth which did absolutely nothing to spoil her overall looks. She appeared to be just a little shy, and there was a sweet sort of sadness in her large brown eyes. I decided that she'd be in a new home in no time.

Andy nodded. "Be a beauty when she's about eighteen, won't she?"

"Yes. And I see her in college about then, don't you? Prettiest coed on campus?"

"Going to a prom?"

"With a gown as right for her as someone as expert as Cissy might design?"

"One thing's certain," Andy said as I began mixing drinks. "She'll be able to afford it, won't she?"

"Yes," I agreed. "That may not be everything. But it's something, anyway."

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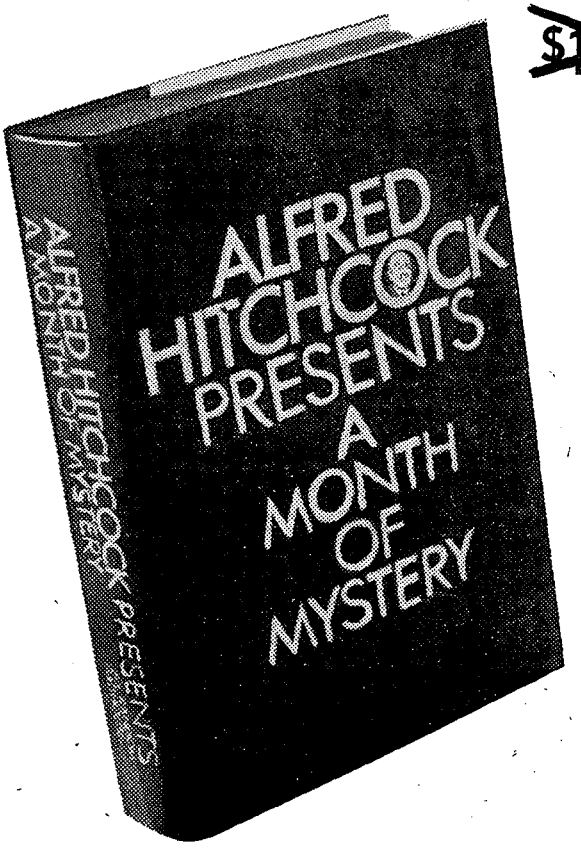

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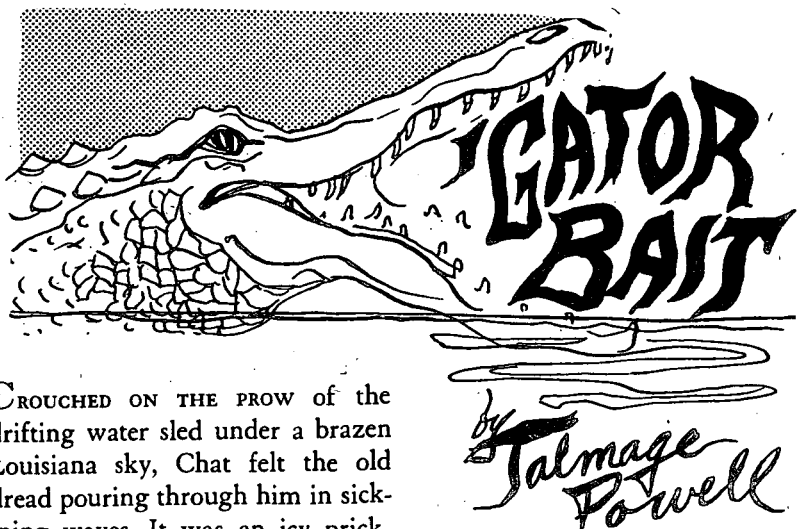
Some folk are convinced it's their bounden right to count the chickens before the hatching.



by Talmage Powell

CROUCHED ON THE PROW of the drifting water sled under a brazen Louisiana sky, Chat felt the old dread pouring through him in sickening waves. It was an icy prickling in his clammy, sun-leathered skin. It blurred his vision so that Fornier's Bayou seemed to swirl about him, the canebrakes, the hummocks of greasy green palmetto and saw grass, the towering fingers of heat-blasted gray cypress with their festoons of Spanish moss.

A thin, stringy-muscled, undersized thirteen, Chat clutched the scabrous, weathered gunwales and wallowed his tongue inside his mouth, wishing he could spit out the dry, cottony feeling.

He shivered, listening to the watery whisper as Lefevre, his stepfather, stood in the stern, poling the craft. They had inched into the bayou under power fifteen minutes ago. Lefevre had cut the throttle, kicking the air propeller to a stop in its wire-mesh cage. The slow, careful search for an alligator den had begun.

Within five minutes, Chat had spotted the wet hump, the protrusion of tangled twigs that meant 'gator. As if in supplication, a

nearly naked young figure clad in tattered jeans and dingy sneakers, he'd crouched with his lips forming a silent plea for Lefevre to miss the 'gator sign. More than anything, he'd wanted to go home today empty-handed, without a wetting.

The sled lurched from a hard jab of the pole. Chat slipped a glance over his shoulder. A big, strapping, Cajun figure in the stern, bending his dark, hairy weight against the pole, Lefevre split his tangle of black, wiry beard with a snag-toothed grin.

"We got us a skin, boy! Get ready. That 'gator is going to shed his hide!"

Lefevre's words seemed to hang in the muggy, primeval stillness. Chat closed his eyes, the dread in him sharpening until it felt like fishhooks in his stomach.

"Boy," Lefevre rumbled, "what's the matter with you? Get a move on! We got to wake that old 'gator up and get him mad enough to come roaring out of his den."

"I don't feel so good, Pa."

"Belly hurting again?"

"Yeah, Pa."

"Now, boy," Lefevre growled, "you just cut that sissy stuff out. Hear me? Ain't you ashamed? What's the matter with you, anyhow? Ain't you normal? Toutain's boy, and those twins of De Vaux, they take to 'gator baiting like it was candy. You going to be the only yellow-belly boy in the swamp?"

Chat clutched his stomach. "I can't help it, Pa."

Lefevre cleared his throat, making it a heavy sound of disgust and disparagement. "Boy, you lived on your ma's apron strings too long, just you and a woman. It's time you quit acting like a girl. Why, when I was your age, I couldn't wait to go 'gator baiting. I used to beg my pa. I used to prod them out for the pure hell fun of it. You need to change your attitude, boy. It's the greatest excitement in the world. Running a fox or treeing a coon don't hold a candle to it!"

"Yes, Pa." Somehow Chat managed to rise. His knees were weak with an inner trembling, but they supported him. Sparks of panic misted behind his eyes as he saw how close the sled had moved in.

"That's better," Lefevre said. He steadied the peeled-sapling pole with his left hand, bent down and pitched the coil of slender hemp rope that had lain at his feet.

Chat caught the line instinctively. He felt his hands forming the noose, slipping it about his shoulders, securing it under his armpits.

Then he was powerless to move further. "Pa, I swear I can't—"

"Enough!" Lefevre's voice was a

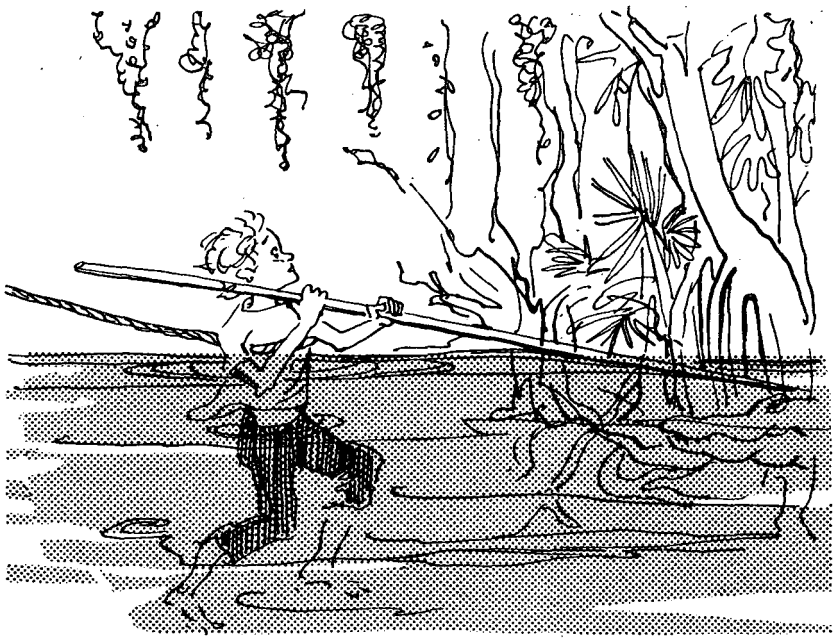
cruel, muted roar, thick with contempt for cowardice. "I've heard all the mealy-mouthing I'm going to! Now you get the hell in the water and roust that 'gator out or I'll whale the tar out of you."

Shivering, Chat slipped into the water. It was about shoulder deep, a turgid swath hampering his movements. He slipped the long wooden rod from its homemade wire brackets on the port side of the sled. He forced himself to move, taking slow steps on the soft bottom while Lefevre played out the hemp line and steadied the sled, elbow crooked about the pole.

The first rancid mustiness of the alligator's den came to Chat, choking his thin nostrils. Hesitantly, he lifted the hard wooden rod and poked in the direction of the den.

"In closer, boy!" Lefevre snarled. "You ain't playing pat-a-cake!"

The merciless sun seemed to hide as Chat edged forward. Holding the long rod with both hands just below water level, he snaked the tip into the barely visible mouth of the den. His heart was a motionless lump of ice as the rod searched and probed. He felt it strike scaly hide. Then a piece of it snapped as saw-toothed jaws clicked.



The water suddenly thrashed and boiled.

"Pa!" Chat screamed. He leaped backward. He felt the noose under his armpits pinch tight as Lefevre hauled in the line, hand over hand. Chat lost his footing, gagging on water pouring across his sun-bleached thatch and into his nose as Lefevre retrieved him like a wriggling minnow.

The man's strength swooped him into the air, dumped him onto the deck. Supporting himself half-prone and blowing water from his lungs, Chat saw Lefevre out of the corner of his eyes. The towering figure was leveling a thirty-aught-six rifle at the charging alligator. The brute came like a half-submerged log fired from a catapult, leaving an angry wake.

Grinning broadly, Lefevre squeezed the trigger. The rifle-crack jolted through Chat. He turned his face away from the sight of the rolling convulsions, the sudden redness in the black-surfaced swamp water, as the 'gator died.

Lefevre slapped his thigh and his happy guffaw rang like a delayed echo of the rifle shot. "Boy, I got me a skin! It'll fetch some fine black-market dollars so's a citified gent can wear hisself a hundred-buck pair of alligator shoes!"

Lefevre usually drank to success, and this night was no exception. In his small room, Chat lay sleepless on his pallet, watching the reflections of a kerosene lamp dance about the doorway as Lefevre sat alone, drinking at the rough plank table in the next room. The man was already talking to himself and singing snatches of old Cajun songs in a broken French patois. Chat could predict the next hours accurately. His stepfather would drink himself into a stupor and brief peace would come to the unpainted, clapboard shanty set high on its stilts beneath a hoary old willow tree.

Chat wanted to sleep, but each time he closed his eyes that moment returned, that harrowing instant when he was sure the 'gator would get him. He'd never heard of a 'gator-baiting kid being eaten up. Their daddies, or uncles, or whoever they were poaching with always snaked them out, but the knowledge didn't stop Chat's imagination from working. He could see the unwinking 'gator eyes, the cotton-like interior of the jaws, the cruel teeth.

He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. "I swear," he sobbed to himself, "I can't do it again."

If Ma were still here, he wouldn't have to; or Pa. His real pa had died so long ago from cottonmouth bite that Chat could hardly remember him, but he could recall

his father's contempt for the poachers, the black marketeers, the easy-dollar men who were killing off the alligators. Pa had been content to fish and hunt and go off for a few days at a time to work in the distant sawmill when he needed a hard dollar for sugar or gingham or coffee.

After Pa's death, there'd just been Chat and Ma. Life had been very hard. There were few people so far back up in Big Shandy Swamp, and little a boy and his mother could do for a hard dollar. Ma's sister, Aunt Mavis, had sent them a little money now and then, and they'd made out.

Then Lefevre had come courting in his secondhand suit and wrinkled necktie in the collar of his blue denim shirt. Chat suspected that Ma had married him because she felt her boy needed a father, a man about the place.

That hadn't worked out very well, either. Ma had got a terrible pain in her side and before they could pack her out to the half-dozen sunbaked, slab-and-tin buildings of Rickel's Crossing, much less a hospital, Ma had died from a ruptured appendix.

Aunt Mavis had come to the funeral, hugging Chat long and hard after it was over. She'd told Chat about the strange world far off yonder beyond the swamp, about Houston, Texas, where she made good money working as a waitress in a nice, clean restaurant, where she figured on marrying a fellow named Jim who drove a big trailer truck.

"He would've come," Aunt Mavis had said, "but he was on a cross-country haul when word reached me about Sis. You'd like Jim, little Chat, and he would think the world of you. So you try and get your stepdaddy to let you come and stay with us a while. Even live with us. You've always got a home with us, Chat."

Lefevre had squelched the idea before it could take root. "No dice, boy. I need you here, helping on the trap lines and fish nets and running of the house. You forget it, boy, quick and for good. This is your home. This is where you stay."

A short time after that, Lefevre had taken to poaching, an activity that made Chat far more valuable than a prime, blooded, redbone hound dog.

The day after his drinking bout, Lefevre stayed in bed, sick, calling out to Chat now and then to bring him endless quantities of drinking water. He was red-eyed and gray-faced beneath his wild bush of black beard. It was no time to cross him, and Chat spent the hours weeding the garden patch where

yams, corn, squash, and gourds grew.

The next morning, Lefevre was up and away early. Chat went fishing, content to be by himself, thankful he didn't run into the Toutain or De Vaux boys. They were always up to something, and when their paths crossed Chat's he was always in for some rough teasing.

He much preferred to think about Aunt Mavis, how kind and sweet she'd been, how nice she smelled when she'd hugged his neck. He wondered what her Jim looked like. He must be a fine fellow to rate a woman like Aunt Mavis. Chat suspected that they'd written him, perhaps even sent him a little money, but he had no way of knowing for sure. It was always Lefevre who went into Rickel's Crossing, end of the line for mail.

The following morning, Chat was awakened by the grip of Lefevre's heavy hand on his shoulder. The instant he opened his eyes, Lefevre's face, glowing with greed and excitement, filled his vision.

"Get a move on, boy! We got us a big one today." On one knee beside the pallet, Lefevre rubbed his palms and grinned in high glee. The morning light seemed to make every jet-black, curling hair about his ears, thick neck and heavy-boned face stand out individually. "Cut his sign working the trap lines yesterday. Almost under our noses, boy. Right over there in Berdine's Lagoon. Claw marks and belly drag say he's a whopper, twenty-five feet if he's an inch!"

"Pa, I don't feel so good," Chat managed.

Lefevre's grin faded. His face darkened. "Boy, how come you want to kill the real fine feeling of the day?"

"I can't help the way I feel, Pa."

"The devil you can't!" He grabbed Chat by the shoulder and flung him to his feet. "I've heard the last of this I'm going to, boy! It's time you got over it. You got a job of 'gator baiting to do, and you're going to do it! I'm going to bust the yellow streak—or break you. You understand that?"

"Yes, Pa." Teeth chattering, Chat snubbed the cord that belted his jeans.

"And don't you forget it," Lefevre warned. "Now you get in there and get ready. I've already cooked side meat and grits while you pampered your lazy head. You got exactly five minutes to eat your breakfast."

With pasty grits and greasy sowbelly wadded in his throat, Chat moved through a morning that didn't seem quite real. Details all stood out with a strangely sharp clarity as the sled moved through

the trackless, watery wastes. Low-hanging vines swayed, threatening. A curtain of gray Spanish moss clutched like cobwebs as Chat reached out to part them for the sled's passage. Cypress snags reared from the swirling water like sharp, hungry teeth. A five-foot cottonmouth slithered from a mangrove tangle and eeled beneath and past the water sled, a fearsome omen.

Flocks of birds and a long-legged white heron fluttered from jungle growth as the whirring air propeller shoved the sled along over grassy marsh, drawing no more draft than a surfboard.

The early sun was a torment, a glare filling the whole of the cloudless sky and stepping up the tempo of the mallets beating inside Chat's skull.

The lagoon opened before his gritty-eyed gaze, a long stretch of water with a surface like black glass, hemmed by palmetto, wild cabbage palms, high grass, and a few gnarled pines.

Lefevre cut the engine and the sled slipped forward silently as he began poling.

Crouched on the prow, Chat thought desperately: *Maybe we'll miss the den this time. Maybe the big bull won't be in it,* but he knew he was wrong. From the way Lefevre was tracking the water sled, Chat knew that his stepfather had located the den yesterday, when he'd cut the 'gator's sign, and he knew the bull would be here. He was emptily certain of it.

"All right, boy, over the side." Lefevre kept his voice down, but it quivered with eagerness.

Chat stood up, facing the man slowly. Lefevre had picked up the line, was tossing it to him.

Chat caught the thin rope. "Pa, are you sure this is the way it's got to be?"

Lefevre's mustache and beard shifted with the angry twisting of his mouth. "Don't start that again, boy! Fair warning, for the last time!"

"All right, Pa." Chat wriggled the lasso under his armpits, picked up his long prodding pole, and slipped into the water. It was deeper than he'd thought, claiming him to his chin. Pole upraised like a long, thin spear, he worked his way forward, buoyancy pulling the mucky bottom away from him at each step.

The den was straight ahead, just a few yards now. He could see the mouth of the huge nest just under the surface.

He stopped moving, settled, his sneakered feet firmly on the bottom. Glancing behind, he saw Lefevre, solid and spread-legged, play-

ing out the line until it dipped into the water.

"Come on, boy!" Lefevre bit out. "Get moving. Take up the slack. You're just about there."

"I can't, Pa." Chat spoke with head lifted, keeping his chin clear.

Lefevre worked the line in his hands. "Boy," he said in a low, deadly tone, "if you ain't moving before I can count to three . . ."

"You big overgrown fool," Chat said with a heat he'd never before displayed. "There's snags in here. You blind? Can't you see them sticking up here and yonder?"

"Snags in every swamp," Lefevre said. "You just get your foot loose and be quick about it."

Chat ducked, then reappeared with water spilling from his head. He twisted his face once more in Lefevre's direction. "Can't make it. You want your 'gator, you come in and free my ankle."

Lefevre measured the distance to the den with a glance. He hesitated. He cursed the delay. He threw the line down savagely. Then he slipped over the side and labored with slogging steps toward Chat, his eyes despising the boy for his awkwardness. He came to rest beside Chat. Again his small, black eyes flicked in the direction of the den.

"Just free my foot," Chat said, water lapping to his lips, "and then get back and take hold of the line. Please, Pa. Please hurry!"

With a final glower at Chat, Lefevre lowered his bulk beneath the surface. Chat saw his sinking shadow, felt the touch of Lefevre's hands on his leg.

Then, with a release of his hard, stringy muscles, Chat fired himself off the bottom. He stepped on Lefevre, bearing him down, the surprise of the action addling the man for a moment.

The long prod in Chat's hands shot into the den. It lashed the water. He felt it strike the lurking 'gator—once, twice, three times—with all the strength Chat could put behind it.

Lefevre spluttered up to the surface in the same instant the maddened bull charged from his lair with a bellow that jarred trees at the far end of the lagoon.

"Now, big man," Chat screamed, "let's see who's the best man in the swamp . . ." He gurgled the final word, surface diving with the agility of a young otter.

Lefevre stared into the enormity of cotton-lined jaws. He endured a fear-paralysis for one second before he broke and thrashed toward the water sled. He was one second too late.

Early the following Monday morning, Chat walked into Rickel's Crossing. His jeans and

red flannel shirt were washed clean. His freckled, snub-nosed face was scrubbed. His sun-bleached thatch was combed.

The village hunkered in its usual air of desertion, a couple of muddy pickup trucks parked on the narrow, dusty road that petered out here on the swamp's edge.

Chat spotted Mr. Fargo sitting in a cane-bottomed chair on the porch of his weathered general store. Mr. Fargo was dozing in the heat, a big, fat, bald-headed fellow whose short-sleeved shirt looked like an extra skin pasted on with sweat.

Chat halted at the porch rail, where whittlers had carved initials, notches, and little primitive resemblances to human faces.

Chat cleared his throat and Mr. Fargo opened his big, bulbous, blue eyes. "Well, hello there, Chat."

"How are you, Mr. Fargo?" Chat said politely, looking up from his stance in the dust.

"I'm just fine, boy, but I hear you been in a terrible experience. By the time you run and fetched the Toutains, wasn't much of your stepdaddy left to bury."

"No, sir." Chat cleared his throat. "But we give him a right fitten funeral. Now I reckon to go to Houston, Texas, and see my Aunt Mavis."

"That's a far piece, boy. You got any money for bus fare, grub, and such like?"

"I figure I can make it." With plenty to spare, Chat added to himself, feeling the three hundred dollars of poacher's money pinned beneath his shirt. Lefevre had kept his treasure trove in a fruit jar buried beneath the old willow tree.

"If you can't hitch a ride, boy," Mr. Fargo said, "you got a ten-mile walk down our back road to the highway where you can flag a bus. And it's a mighty hot day for walking."

"Not to me," Chat said. "I figure it's a real fine day for walking. Good-bye, Mr. Fargo."

"Good-bye, boy, and luck to you."

Chat nodded, turned, and set off down the road. He began whistling as he rounded the first bend in the road, and it was the note of a bird set free.

It generally does no harm to be neighborly; it may even do a smidgen of good.

WHEN MAUDIE PARSON showed up on the Starkweathers' doorstep one day, garbed in widow's weeds and looking not only washed out but as if she'd been hung up to dry in some distant arid place and there forgotten until an ill wind had blown her to Onoburg, Ora Starkweather regarded her with the stony distrust common to most people in that town, who were prone to be contentious, ill-mannered, and quarrelsome. The very name of the place was a monument to its negative atmosphere. It had been founded on a note of

wild optimism when oil was discovered in the swampy flats, and when the future citizens, dreaming of a towered metropolis and golden streets, had met to decide on a name for the town, each suggestion had been rejected with a resounding, "Oh, no!" The air had rung with a chorus of oh, no's until, worn out with wrangling, the group had acceded to the facetious suggestion of one of its members that the town be called Onoburg. This community sense of humor turned sour as soon as the grasshopper-shaped pumps went dry; the dreams died and so did the town, until the only inhabitants left were those who worked in the city ten miles away or were retired and couldn't afford to live elsewhere.

Homer Starkweather was an accountant five years from the age of retirement—to look at him one wondered if he'd make it; a thinner, whiter, frailer-looking man never walked the streets. His wife Ora was as big and hale as Homer was puny; she gave the appearance of swelling out from the waist to the ankles. Though the size of her underpinnings forced her to walk like a pregnant penguin, she affected sportive, childish mannerisms that clashed with her clumsy appearance. Standing in front of the imitation-brick-sided house, she would swish her skirt and wave farewell to callers with dainty-lady flutters of the wrist, crying out in a babyish voice, "By-eee . . . by-eee . . ." till the visitors' car was out of sight, whereupon she and Homer would discuss with malicious envy every garment the visitors had worn and every opinion they had expressed.

Ora—and Homer, too, since he had found it judicious to adopt his wife's more violent prejudices—hated the imitation-brick-sided house, hated the dismal foggy flats stretching bleakly away on all sides, hated Onoburg and everything and everyone in it. They had once dreamed of being able to move away after Homer retired, but were now faced with the fact that unless something extraordinary happened—something as unlikely as a resurgence of oil in the back yard—they were doomed to spend their golden years right there in Onoburg. They had clung to the hope of a windfall from the long-awaited demise of an old man whom Ora had always gushily called "my favowite, favowite unkie-poo" to his face, but whom in private she thought a disgusting old swine. The "favowite unkie-poo" may have been influenced, as Ora later insisted, by grasping relatives of closer kin, or he may have seen through Ora's blandishments;

in any event, he didn't leave them a penny. After that blow, bitterness permeated their lives as palpably as the noxious odors that rose eternally from the soggy flats around them.

Ora's manner softened a bit when it became apparent that Maudie Parson was a lady of humblest means and maidenly virtue, and still more when Mrs. Parson revealed she was planning to rent the upstairs flat of their only close neighbor, a newcomer himself, named Emil Grosse.

"Then you can tell me nothing of Mr. Grosse's character?"

"I just told you, dearie," said Ora, "he doesn't *have* a character—he *is* one. He's a loony! He shot at our poor little Bootsie for just going near his property. First thing he did when he moved in last month was to board up all the downstairs windows. He's about as neighborly as a caveman. What more do you need to know?"

"Oh, well . . . I gathered from my interview with him that he was somewhat—antisocial, yes. But I must confess I'd prefer a landlord who was aloof, shall we say—one must be charitable, you know—to one who was constantly intruding upon one's privacy. My nerves are somewhat delicate."

"But how would you dare sleep in the same house with him? He might creep upstairs and cut your throat some night. Or worse."

Mrs. Parson sighed, as if she had already experienced the worst that life could offer. "That would be economically impractical, would it not? He seems to have a horror of wasting anything—even space. Oh my, you should see his own flat."

Homer and Ora listened with delight to Mrs. Parson's account of the jumble of antiques, newspapers, and rags cluttered throughout the rooms.

"But there's a sad story in that man's past," she concluded. "Some terrible domestic tragedy, I'm sure of it."

After she had gone, the Starkweathers put her down as a silly, romantic mouse who would deserve whatever happened to her in that house of mystery, nor did they change their opinion in the following weeks. As there was nothing about the destitute widow to excite their envy or feed their rancor, they became quite chummy with her. Not only did she have a personal history deliciously chock-full of bad luck—dead lovers, diseased relatives, crooked lawyers, inept doctors, fires, floods, poisoned cats and lost chances—she was endowed with a narrative gift for recounting these calamities that would hold her new friends spellbound; and though she tactfully refrained from

evangelizing at the kitchen table, she was obviously a creature of the deepest and most active piety. Her naiveté and faith were nicely summed up by her disclosure to Homer that in her days of affluence she had attempted to order an automobile with stained glass windows!

"It seems," she recalled sadly, "there was some obscure statute that made it impossible. The salesman tried to comfort me by suggesting I wouldn't have known what was behind me, anyway. I told him I didn't believe in looking back. And I don't. Ever."

However scornful the Starkweathers were of Maudie Parson's romantic innocence, they were impressed by the effect the lady began to have on their reclusive neighbor. She had prevailed upon him to allow her to plant a few flowers about the weed-wild house, and when the lawn mower proved too much for her frail strength he actually came out and finished the job himself. Furthermore, a few days later Mrs. Parson was able to inform the Starkweathers that Mr. Grosse had accepted her invitation to come upstairs for a cup of tea.

"Maudie!" They were now on a first name basis. "How on earth do you *dare*?"

"Dare? Dare to be kind? That poor soul is famished for companionship."

"Then why does he shoot at dogs and keep his windows boarded up? That's hardly what I'd call the good neighbor policy."

Maudie laughed. "I'm afraid Mr. Grosse has his own conception of the good neighbor policy."

Ora told her she was too trusting.

"He does have a sweet little cat," said Maudie. "Surely that speaks well for his sympathies."

"Nonsense. All recluses have cats."

One day soon after this, Maudie announced she was giving a little tea party. "Just the four of us," she said. "You and Homer and Mr. Grosse and I."

"He wouldn't!"

"Oh, I'm not so sure. I haven't asked him yet, but I'm going to."

When Ora told Homer about this he made satirical remarks about his wife's interest. She wrenched her mouth into a cold smile. "Don't be so dense, Homer."

"Huh?"

"It can't do any harm to be neighborly."

"He shot at Bootsie."

"He hasn't any relations, you know. Not even distant cousins."

He looked at her. "So what? You want to adopt him?"

She pursed her lips. "I sort of think dear little Maudie's got *some*thing like that in mind, her-

self. She's conniving something."

To Ora's surprise the tea party became a reality, although there was more tea than party. The strident conviviality of the hostess created nothing in the way of a festive atmosphere, just as her culinary resources, which were quite as destitute as her finances, had created very little in the way of solid refreshments. Homer could not be prodded out of his glumness and Mr. Grosse, behind his whiskers, contributed nothing to the conversation beyond an occasional request for the cream.

The next day Maudie deplored her shortcomings as a cook. "Mr. Grosse does appreciate good food, I've found that out. I do wish I were as good a cook as you, Ora, dear."

"Maybe I ought to invite him over here for a meal," said Ora slyly.

"Oh, he wouldn't leave that house. Not for anything."

"What's he afraid of? Somebody's gonna walk off with his priceless antiques?"

Maudie looked thoughtful. "Well . . . no. I don't think it's so much the antiques . . ."

"Then what? The cat?"

Maudie smiled. "No! I don't know what it is."

If there was one thing Ora could do, it was smell a rat. Maudie was hiding something, and Ora began to resent the little widow's exaggerated air of discretion and her mincing pious withdrawals. Nevertheless, she listened breathlessly to the story of Mr. Grosse's past which Maudie was beginning to piece together. There had indeed, it appeared, been some sort of domestic misfortune, a mysterious boating accident in which Mr. Grosse's wife had figured tragically; stunned by grief, he had fled to the opposite end of the country, to the dreariest, ugliest place he could find. In short, to Onoburg.

Ora snorted. "And to think that *we* would give our eyeteeth to get *out* of this jerk town." Not that she believed the story; she was sure the old man was only pulling the wool over the romantic widow's eyes. "You can't tell me anyone who had the means to live elsewhere would settle down here."

"Oh, he has the means," replied Maudie, as if without thinking; then she cupped her hand over her lips, pretending to stifle a cough. Ora wasn't fooled. She perceived the telltale odor of the rodent.

"And just how do you know *that*?"

It was useless for Maudie to try to withhold anything. Ora could be a formidable adversary. The sweet-sour smiles and the baby talk and the delicate gestures could vanish

in an instant when she wanted something badly enough. That's when the bully emerged. Maudie was quickly intimidated.

"If I tell you," she said, "you must promise—you must give me your solemn word—never to tell anyone else. Not even Homer."

"Not even *Homer*?"

"Absolutely not. You must swear."

Crossing her fingers behind her back, Ora swore. Still it was necessary to coax and wheedle the story out of Maudie. What had happened, she said, was this: a couple of days before the tea party she had gone to the bank and cashed her meager welfare check, returned home and knocked on Emil Grosse's door to pay her rent. He let her in and took the money. They chatted for a few minutes and then she left. However, she was no sooner outside than the sight of the weedy garden reminded her of the packets of vegetable seeds she'd bought in town and had meant to get her landlord's approval to plant. Assuming he was still in the kitchen where she'd left him, she tapped lightly on the door. It was unlatched and swung open. As she stepped into the empty kitchen she heard the unmistakable sound of boards being pried loose from the floor. Curious, she tiptoed to the dining room door and peeked in. She saw Emil Grosse on his hands and knees with his back to her, lifting from beneath the raised floorboards a large oblong wooden box. As she watched, holding her breath, he had opened the lid of the box and put into it the money she'd given him.

"That's when I saw it," she said solemnly.

"Saw what?" Ora's voice was thick with excitement.

"All that money. More money than I've ever seen in one place. Stacks and stacks of it!"

"Stacks of—money?"

"Bundles of green bills. Oh, Ora, there must be a king's ransom under those floorboards. It scared me just to see it." She explained how she had fled trembling back to her own flat, strangely shocked by what she had seen.

Needless to say, Ora lost no time in conveying this news to Homer, and from that time on it was all they talked about. They would stand at the window and look out across the grassy patch of land between their house and Emil Grosse's with a sort of anguished yearning and reverence. For her part, Maudie seemed unwilling to make any further mention of the money, yet the subject was too fascinating to resist.

"Are you sure it was in a

wooden box?" Ora asked her. The smallest detail was not without interest.

"Oh, yes—wooden. Because I thought later how easy it would be for that house to catch on fire. All those rags and paper and furniture, just imagine. Why, that place would go up like kindling. Whoosh! And all that money along with it."

It seemed that some distant relative of Maudie's had once been rendered homeless by fire; she described the conflagration with her usual morbid gusto and assured Ora that nothing terrified her so much as fire. It became the recurrent theme of every conversation: Ora talked of the money, Maudie of fire.

In bed at night Ora would return to the subject, speak wistfully of how all that money was just lying over there under the floor with nobody getting any good out of it. Far more galling, of course, was the thought that Maudie might somehow get her hands on it. This idea was so unbearable, indeed, that Ora decided to do what she could to prevent such a thing happening. Acting on Maudie's tip about Emil Grosse's fondness for good cooking, Ora began taking him all sorts of goodies—and finally what amounted to entire meals. Diffident at first, Emil Grosse gradually came out of his shell to the extent of chatting quite amiably with Ora, while she dragged out all the tricks she had once employed with such ill effect on the "favowite unkie-poo."

She rather expected all this attention on her part would earn the ill will of Maudie Parson, but to her surprise she could detect not the slightest coolness in that good lady's manner. It was Homer, instead, who complained about Ora's running a free restaurant for the old miser, but she silenced him with hypocritical effusions on the duties of neighbors.

Certain dim and formless hopes began to take a more palpable shape when Maudie Parson announced she was moving. She had, she said, been invited to live with an invalid female relative in Seattle; it was her Christian duty, she felt, to accept. Ora put on a most convincing display of regret, embracing Maudie just before her taxi carried her away, then standing in the driveway doing her little penguin dance and fluttering her hanky in a farewell salute. "By-eee," she called. "By-eee . . ."

The next day they watched as a truck from the city came and took away Maudie's furniture, all carefully swathed in tarpaulins. The Starkweathers' attentiveness to the lonely miser became now more as-

siduous than ever. What they feared more than anything else was the advent of another lodger, perhaps another widow, one more aggressive and a better cook. Ora herself did not have much success in persuading Emil Grosse to become "part of our little family." The old man was quite happy to accept the edible offerings delivered to his back door, but never once did he invite either of the Starkweathers across the threshold, nor would he accept any of their fervent invitations to break bread under their own roof.

It must be admitted that the Starkweathers were not people of exceptional cunning; they were not clever, inventive or daring. Neither were they wicked. Their attentions to the miser Emil Grosse were guided by nothing more than a desperate, wistful hope that "something good" might accrue to their benefit by catering to their neighbor. This is not to say that in the solitude of their separate minds certain fantasies did not arise. These did not, however, involve violence of any kind. Their passive and basically docile natures did no more than entertain pictures of Emil Grosse quietly dying there among his rubbish, and of themselves discovering his body and then lifting up the floorboards and helping themselves to all that money. After all, who would have a better right to it?

This state of affairs might easily have gone on for years, with Emil Grosse occupying that niche of hope once filled by the "favowite unkie-poo." But this was not to be. There very soon came a day when Emil Grosse, too, shattered their dreams with news that he was

moving to Florida! The cold dank air from the flats gave him chronic attacks of bursitis. He was going down to Miami for a couple of weeks to see what sort of lodgings he could acquire. He asked Ora if they would look out for his cat.

"Oh . . . yes," she mumbled, still dazed. "Just bring him over."

Emil Grosse shook his head. "I'm afraid that dog of yours might tear him to pieces. I'll just leave my keys with you and you can come over twice a day and feed him."

When Ora reported this to Homer there was far more eloquence in the looks they exchanged than in Homer's tersely indifferent reply. The next day Emil Grosse brought over the keys to his front door. Ora held them in her moist, fat palm as he got in his ancient car and drove off. She waved her hanky after him, smiling fatuously, calling out, "By-eee . . . by-eee . . ."

Her heart was playing hopscotch on her ribs as she got supper that night.

"He gone?" said Homer.

Ora put her hand in her apron pocket and held up the keys.

Homer sat down to eat. For the first time in weeks the subjects of Emil Grosse and his money were not mentioned throughout the entire meal. It was not until later, in the livingroom, that Homer said, "You have to go over and feed the cat tonight?" He grinned slyly.

"Not till morning."

"You're not going over there tonight?"

"No."

They looked at each other again.

Presently, Homer dropped his newspaper. "Maybe we oughta go over and see if everything's okay."

"Everything's fine," she said, not looking up from her knitting.

"He says he's definitely going to be away two full weeks?"

"Two full weeks."

The next day was Saturday; Homer didn't have to go to work. Shortly after breakfast they started over to Emil's to feed the cat. It was raining, and mephitic, sewer-like odors drifted up from the flats. Homer held the umbrella high over Ora's head as she waddled through the tall wet grass. She should have gone around by the road, but a raging eagerness had possessed them both over the breakfast table, causing them now to plunge headlong through the grass, oblivious of the damage to shoes and stockings.

The downstairs windows were all securely boarded up, and there were two locks on the front door. Homer offered to unlock one, but Ora pushed him aside with ferocious eagerness.

Once inside they saw that Maudie's reports of the clutter were

not exaggerated. There were the stacks of newspapers, the heaps of rags, and a thick layer of dust on a jumble of furniture. If there were valuable antiques among all this junk Ora was not equipped to say; she had never in her life seen genuine antiques and wouldn't have recognized one if it hit her on the head—of which there was every danger as she clambered amid the piles of trash.

They examined everything with great thoroughness and in the dining room stood silently looking down at the carpet. When they had explored the whole place they went out, unspeaking, grave-eyed, locking the door behind them and starting back, this time along the muddy road. They were halfway home when Ora suddenly stopped.

"My gosh!"

"What's the matter?"

"We forgot all about the cat!"

Ora told Homer he'd have to go back and feed the animal; she was going home and put on dry stockings.

It seemed to be taking him all day. She began to fret. Maybe he couldn't find the beast. Maybe the old man didn't even have a cat; maybe he was playing some sort of insane trick on them.

When Homer finally came in she looked up at him with an accusing stare as he handed her the keys. He was wearing a proud little smile.

"I found it," he said.

"Where was it—in the cellar?"

"No! Right there where she said—under the floorboards."

"Homer!" She felt her heart playing hopscotch again. "I thought you meant the cat."

"Cat was sleeping under the kitchen stove."

"You mean you—"

"Rolled back the rug and pried 'em up."

"In a wooden box," she murmured.

"Yep. Long wooden box, right in there between the studs. I didn't count it. It would have taken hours. Really, Ora, there must be—why, there must be near to a hundred thousand dollars in that there box!"

"You put it back, didn't you?"

"You bet I did." It had evidently been as shattering an experience for him as it had been for Maudie, the sight of all that money. He didn't sleep a wink that night. Neither did Ora.

Though nothing was said or done for the next three days—the silence between them was as unnatural as in a house of mourning—they both knew they were merely postponing fate. Once Homer had pried up those boards, the stopwatch of the inevitable had been set in motion. On the fourth day

Homer asked Ora if she didn't want to have a peek at the money. She shook her head. "No. Why should I?"

"I figured it out," he said earnestly. "If I'd saved every cent I ever made since I started to work, I wouldn't have much more than what's in that there box. Forty years—and what have I got to show for it?"

She looked around with weary-eyed distaste. "This house. This elegant mansion we're stuck in for the rest of our lives—till they carry us out feet first."

Only two people who had lived together for a great many years could have planned something like that with scarcely a word being spoken, mostly just eye signals and innuendo.

It was bound to work. Fire would level the place to the ground.

"Unless the Fire Department gets there too fast," said Homer.

"The Fire Department won't know about it till it's too late." Indeed, no other house was anywhere in sight.

It happened in the middle of the night, three days before Emil Grosse was due back from Florida. It was Ora who "discovered" the blaze when she was awakened by Bootsie's growling. By then the house next door was an inferno. Firemen from two counties could do nothing to save it.

Oh, such an act the Starkweathers put on when Emil Grosse came home to nothing but smoldering foundations. They both wept. Really wept. Emil himself appeared too stricken even for speech. No one could offer a clue as to the fire's cause. Somebody suggested spontaneous combustion. Ora mentioned the possibility of mice chewing on the old wires. She was relieved to learn that the house itself and the antique furniture were insured. As for Emil Grosse, he seemed eager to get as far away from Onoburg as possible.

So once more Ora was standing in the driveway on those wobbly monoliths, daintily waving a sad farewell. "By-eee . . . by-eee . . ."

Not until after midnight, when they were sure there could be no chance intrusion, did Homer and Ora go down into their basement and begin to count the money.

About a week later, in a modest two-family frame house on a sparsely populated street in the town of Butternut, Montana, a clean-shaven, bespectacled man of late middle age, dressed in a sober gray worsted business suit, was engaged in a financial calculation not unrelated to the Starkweathers'. He was figuring the difference, once

the insurance policy was redeemed, between the cost of a cheap frame house in Onoburg, Pennsylvania, and the insurance payable as a result of its recent destruction by fire, along with, so it was claimed, several pieces of valuable antique furniture—furniture which in fact had been removed, under tarpaulins, the day after the upstairs tenant of the house had vacated. Anyone who might have been watching would naturally have assumed this furniture to have been the possessions of the departed tenant. The actual antiques, ready to be reinsured, were now in this very room: the man was sitting upon one, the woman on another.

While the man was doing his figuring, the woman, not much younger but whose blonde wig and artful makeup worked to her advantage, was concluding a telephone conversation with a Mr. Sprigg of the Rocky Mountain Insurance Agency.

"As soon as possible, yes, Mr. Sprigg. I've got an apartment full of antiques and I want to rent out my upstairs before the first of the month. Have a retired railroad man all set to move in . . . I see. Then I'll be covered right away . . . Good . . . No, that won't be necessary. So long as I'm covered you can just mail the policy when it's convenient . . . Fine . . . Yes, there'll be someone here at five. Look forward to meeting you . . . Don't mention it . . . Yes, I'm sure I'll be most happy here. Marvelous air . . ."

She hung up the phone and mixed them each a drink. "Exit Maudie Parson, indigent widow," she laughed. "Enter Alice Goodpure, female recluse."

He saluted her with his glass. "Exit Emil Grosse, male recluse. Enter Arthur Armstrong, ex-railroad engineer."

Now they both laughed, but the woman's smile wavered as she put down her glass. "Darling, how much longer can we get away with these masquerades?"

"How long? Why, as long as you and I are able to pick the right neighbors—and the right houses. As long as insurance companies keep selling policies. As long as human greed, curiosity and fear add up to arson by remote control. And as long as our handy little printing press holds up. You must admit, my dear, it's a damn sight less risky than trying to pass the stuff."

He leaned back and laughed even more heartily.

"Lord, I'd like to see that fat biddy's face when she finds out all but the top bills in that box are phony!"

Love is, of course, vicissitudinous, yet one often ponders the circumscription of its bonds.

FATAL CHARM

by C. B. Gilford

He had brought it home full, untouched, but the gin bottle was half empty now.

"What are you trying to do to me, Walter my love?" she asked coquettishly.

Jen's voice was a bit blurry, her eyes a bit misty. She must have been a bit warm too, for she had cast off her sweater and was resting both her bare, fat forearms on the table. Poor old Jen, her arms weren't too pretty anymore, and big thick blue veins stood out on her legs. He didn't like to look at her legs anymore at all.

"What are you trying to do to me, love?" she asked him again. As she leaned forward, her heavy bosom came to rest on the table. "Trying to get me upstairs, are you? You don't need gin to do that, you know."

No, he wasn't trying to get her upstairs, but he felt gentle and compassionate toward her nevertheless. Poor Jen. Nobody believed that blonde was the real color of her hair, and that black stuff she wore around her eyes . . . He hoped she wouldn't cry and make the stuff run down her cheeks.

Old Jen was tough. Maybe she

wouldn't cry, but at the moment he couldn't tell her his news, his plans. Maybe she was ready, but he hadn't the courage yet. He poured another inch of gin into each of their glasses.

"Love," she said to him, "if I drink any more of that, I won't be able to fix your supper. And I've something real nice for you tonight."

He didn't inquire what the something nice might be. "I had a late tea," he said, and swallowed half an inch of gin.

She sipped from her glass too, but beneath her smile was a little pucker of worry and concern. "Walter," she blurted suddenly, "you didn't get the sack, did you?"

He shook his head. It wasn't that he was such a coward. He was going to do the thing all right. It was just that the first announcement—breaking the ice—was so bloody hard to get started.

He drained his glass. If he drank any more now, he wouldn't be able to talk at all. Somebody had been brave for his sake, and he'd have to be brave. Just tonight, and it'd be all over.

"Jennifer," he began in what he intended to be a loud voice, but it came out soft and choked. "Jennifer, I'm leaving this house."

It was evident that she didn't believe him at first. She blinked and stared at him, certain that he was drunk, no more.

"I'm not drunk, Jennifer," he assured her, gathering a bit more courage as he went. "It's just what I told you. I'm leaving this house. I'm leaving you, Jennifer. Tonight. I could have phoned up and told you, or I could have posted a letter, but I owe you more than that, Jennifer. I wanted to tell you face to face."

She was stunned. Her lips trembled. Her pudgy cheeks sagged. She was beginning to believe. "What have I done?" she stammered after a moment.

"Nothing. You've done nothing, Jen. You're a fine woman. I've always said that. You're as good as they come, Jen. A good, faithful wife."

She groped desperately. "But you're leaving me. . ."

"Yes, I'm leaving."

"Where are you going?"

He'd known he'd have to tell her this part of it. She'd find out sooner or later. Perhaps their paths would even cross now and then. "It's another woman," he announced with the greatest reluctance.

"Another woman!" A totally blank look, no anger yet; no hurt. "Who? What's her name?"

"Doris Taggard."

"Doris . . . ?" Jen stopped,

stricken speechless for a moment.

Walter waited patiently. What worse blow is there to a woman's pride, to the very essence of her femininity, than to be told that she has been supplanted in the affections of the man she loves? Naturally such a blow cannot be absorbed in seconds or minutes.

"You mean . . ." Jen found her voice finally. "You mean the Doris Taggard that lives in Brandy Lane?"

"She's the one."

Jen tossed off her gin suddenly, but it was an automatic gesture. The stuff, even the taste, had no visible effect on her.

"Doris Taggard!"

"Yes . . ."

"You're leaving me, and going with her?"

"Yes."

"I mean permanent?"

"I'm afraid so, Jen."

"I saw you eyeing her a couple of times at the bingo."

"Yes."

"And in the pub, too."

"I didn't think you'd notice."

"Doris Taggard! Old Doris Taggard! You heard what I said, Walter, *old* Doris Taggard. She's older than I am, Walter, older than you."

"I suppose she is."

"And she weighs more than I do."

"Perhaps she does."

"She's no Cleopatra or Helen of Troy."

"Neither of them, Jen."

"What is it, then? Is she rich? She isn't that I've noticed. Is she going to keep you in luxury for the rest of your days, Walter?"

"I'm afraid not. I'll be staying with my old job, doing the same I've always done, going to the office in the morning, and . . ."

"And going home to her at night, instead of coming home to me. Do you want a divorce, Walter?"

"If it's convenient."

Jennifer poured herself another bit of gin, and drank it off with the same stoic disregard for its taste or effect. "Doris Taggard is a fat old woman, and she isn't rich," Jennifer ruminated. "Have you gone blind, Walter, or have you lost your mind? Which?"

"Neither." He'd have to tell her. It was only fair to tell her. Good, faithful Jen, she deserved that much at least.

"Why, Bill Taggard isn't cold in his grave yet," Jen was saying. "What kind of a man-eater is she? Why, she hasn't even gone through a decent period of mourning. How long is it old Bill's been dead? Less than a year . . ."

"That's it, Jen," he interrupted quickly, leaping at the opportunity. "That's the gist of it. Bill Taggard

being in his grave, I mean. He's there because of me."

Jen didn't understand. The blank look came again.

"Dorie's been fond of me for years, Jen. Don't ask me why. I couldn't tell you. But she's given me the eye, like you say. And she gave me a little word now and then too, on the sly. Little invitations, you might call them. And I always would say to her, 'You're a saucy, bold woman, Dorie Taggard, with a husband of your own, and with an eye out for other men.' And her answer would always be the same, 'Not an eye for men, Walter Grimes, just an eye for you.' And then one day, finally, after Bill's funeral, she told me something else. 'Bill doesn't stand between us anymore, Walter dear,' she said. 'I fed him arsenic. I'm a free woman now.' "

"Arsenic!" Jen gasped.

"Rat poison," Walter explained. "Don't you see, Jen?"

"No, I don't," she said.

"She killed Bill for my sake, Jen. She committed murder for me. It isn't every day you'll find a woman who will do that much for you."

"Thank God it isn't!"

"You still don't see, do you, Jen? Now I'm not saying it was a nice thing she did. Or a good thing. Or from the law's point of view, a legal thing. Or from poor Bill's point of view, a kind thing. But from my point of view, me, Walter Grimes, solicitor's clerk, forty-six years old and looking every day of it . . . to me, Jennifer, it was a very flattering thing."

She stared at him. She didn't reach for the gin bottle. She was past that now. "I never knew you took to flattery so much, Walter," she said.

"It's a bit on the romantic side, too," he said.

"You romantic, Walter?" She spoke as if it were news to her.

"I have my little moments," he said. "And this business of Dorie doing in old Bill, well, it touched me, I'll have to admit."

Jen shook her head. "You're a strange man, Walter Grimes," she said. She kept shaking her head for another minute. But then her mood changed swiftly. "Arsenic?" she asked him, with a spark of anger in her eyes.

"Right."

"What of the police?"

"They haven't shown any interest."

"I could tell them what you told me."

"It would only embarrass you if you did, Jen. They'd put it down as the ravings of a jealous woman. I'd deny it, of course, and so would Dorie."

Jen persisted, her eyes narrow-

ing. "They can dig Bill out of the ground. Arsenic stays in a body, you read that in the papers all the time. The police could prove Bill Taggard was poisoned."

Walter shook his head. "First you'd have to convince them to dig him up," he argued. "Bill didn't die in the prime of life, you know. Lads his age are popping off all around. Bill had stomach trouble for years. His health records would prove that. It would take some doing to get an order for an autopsy. More than just hearsay." He softened his voice. "Come on now, Jen. Don't try to fight it. It's the way things happen sometimes. People find new loves. Maybe you'll find one too."

The tears rose suddenly in Jen's eyes. In a moment they would overflow and make black streaks as they ran down her face. He didn't want to see her crying, so he rose hastily from his chair, crossed to the door and stood looking out through the glass toward the back garden where the summer dusk was coming down. Behind him, Jen was making great loud sniffles, blowing noisily in her handkerchief.

Well, let her have her bit of cry, he thought. Poor old Jen had a right to that much. In fact, he would have been hurt if his departure hadn't started a few tears. She went on with it for three or four minutes. He heard her opening her purse for a fresh handkerchief, and maybe she used her apron too.

Then, just as quickly as the torrent had begun, it ceased. It was safe now to turn around. What he saw was a ghastly sight, indeed. Jen's sagging cheeks were horribly black-streaked, her tight little blonde curls had wilted—but her lips were pressed firmly together. She was being brave.

"You won't stay to supper, I suppose?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I've a small valise already packed," he told her. "I can fetch the rest of my things some other time."

"You're really going, Walter?"

"I'm really going . . ."

The look she gave him then was so forlorn, so piteous, that his resolve nearly melted. He had thought he'd gotten through the worst of it, breaking the news, but the actual walking out took a bit of nerve too.

"Come on, old girl," he said, sitting down opposite her again, and dividing the remainder of the gin between their two glasses. "Let's drink to the good years we've had."

He lifted his glass in the toast, took a swallow. Jen sipped meekly. Her heart wasn't in it.

"You're not losing much," he

urged her on. "Let Dorie Taggard wait on me in my declining years. You've had the years of my youth, dear girl. Cheers!"

He drank desperately, not to bolster Jen's courage, but his own. He finished the gin, and then he couldn't stand the spectacle of Jen's sorrow any longer.

He left the kitchen, dashed into the hall, and up the narrow stairs. The valise was where he had hidden it under the bed. He hauled it out.

Then he looked for his hat, his best hat, to wear on the short but symbolic walk to Brandy Lane. He must think positively, of Dorie therefore, not of Jen. Dorie was the most affectionate woman in the whole world, and had proved it.

He checked his appearance in the mirror, set the hat at a more rakish angle. What qualities did he possess to attract the love of not one, but two women? None that he could see. But good show anyway, Walter Grimes, good show! Now get with it!

He went back downstairs.

It was at the bottom of the flight of stairs that the torpor seized him. He dropped the valise, then sat on the first step. He blinked his eyes. The dim hallway had turned a shade darker. He tipped back his hat brim, but that failed to improve his vision.

Then Jen was there, peering down solicitously. "What is it, love?" she asked.

"I don't quite know . . ."

She squeezed down beside him, her generous buttocks filling the rest of the narrow step. Her pudgy arm went round his shoulders.

"It's my sleeping powders, love," she whispered gently. "The whole prescription. Got it from the doctor just today. Emptied the lot into the gin."

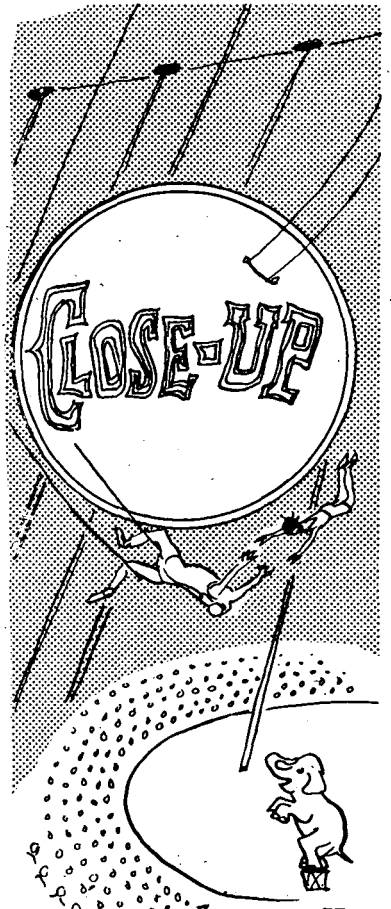
"When did you get the chance?" He asked the question without anger, only with curiosity.

"When you were at the door and your back was turned. Had 'em right there in my handbag. I made enough noise with my bawling so you never knew. I couldn't let you go over to Dorie Taggard's, now could I? She killed someone she didn't want. I'm killing someone I want very much. I love you more than she does, now don't I?"

Yes, he was loved, wasn't he? Good old Jen. He leaned his head on her shoulder.

"Go to sleep, dear boy," she soothed him. "Have a nice long sleep . . ."

Reputedly, base gains are the same as losses, for fraudulence belies belief.



CLOSE-UP

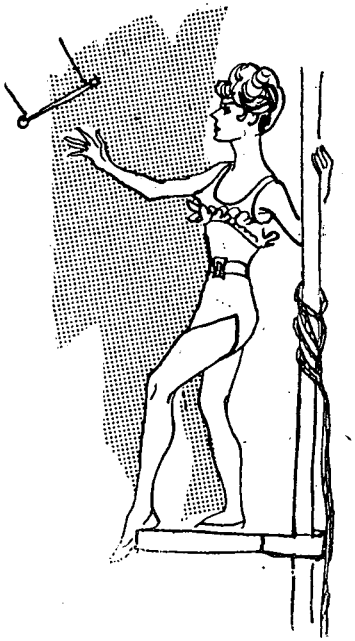
by Frank H. Olsen

RAY BREWSTER looked up from his crossword puzzle as he heard the words "Fielding Circus" and "accident" on the TV news. Brewster was chief adjuster for the Columbia Insurance Company, the firm that had written a quarter of a million dollar policy on the small circus troupe.

On his TV screen, he saw a film of "The Flying Zacharys" in action. Nick Zachary, the catcher, was hanging from his knees on the swinging trapeze, holding his sister-in-law, while his wife was on a little platform at the other end of the arena, about to perform her amazing triple-somersault flight through space.

The drums rolled and the crowd in the auditorium became hushed. Lola seemed to hesitate for an instant, then began her death-defying swing while her sister crossed over to the trapeze Lola had just left.

Coming out of her triple spin,



Lola reached out for her husband's waiting arms, but she was too far away, and her body passed below his. Frantically clawing the air, she plunged downward.

There was no safety net below—a feature that made the Zacharys' act more spectacular—but thanks to the good judgment of the network production staff, the actual impact was not shown on the air.

The solemn face of the newsman came back on the screen to finish the story. "Lola Zachary died instantly, but the audience was not told until the matinee performance was over. Tonight's performance, however, has been canceled, and the Fielding Circus, already in financial difficulties, now faces an uncertain future with the loss of its top act. Incidentally, the extraordinary film you just saw was shot by a documentary unit which had been traveling with the troupe. Their TV special, depicting the plight of small, independent circuses, will soon be shown on this network."

Brewster switched off the set and waited for his phone to ring. The expected call from his boss came an hour later, with instructions to catch the early morning flight to San Antonio.

A little before noon the following day, Ray Brewster was ushered into Carl Fielding's office, an air-conditioned, well-equipped trailer parked in back of the Civic Center in one corner of HemisFair Plaza.

The youthful-looking circus owner greeted his caller and introduced the dark-complexioned man who sat opposite him. "I want you to meet Lieutenant Juan Morales of the San Antonio Police Department."

"On official business, Lieutenant?" Brewster asked.

"Well, yes and no," the officer said in a Texas drawl. "Carl and I are old friends. We used to work together in the circus when we were kids. You know—watering the animals, selling popcorn—that

sort of thing that kids dream of."

"Most of the big circuses winter in Florida," the owner added. "But this is where my father started out and this is where I still come back after each season."

"Yep," the officer chimed in, "the Fieldings are well known here in San Antone. His brother is a well-known ophthalmologist, and his sister—"

Carl Fielding cut his friend off. "I'm sure Mr. Brewster is not here to hear about my family, Juan."

"That's right, Mr. Fielding," Brewster said as he took a seat and got down to business. "I'm here to investigate the accident."

"I can assure you," the lieutenant spoke up, "the police are satisfied that it *was* an accident."

"With all due respect," Brewster replied cautiously, "my company would like to be satisfied, too."

"The doctor who examined Lola said she died of a broken neck, a direct result of the fall," Fielding volunteered.

"We also checked the rigging," the lieutenant added. "Nick Zachary checked it out, too. Nothing had been tampered with."

"How about an autopsy?"

The officer pulled out a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. "A postmortem was performed, as your office had requested. I got a report just an hour ago."

"And does that show much?"

"Negative. No heart failure or other organic disorder."

"How about drugs or poison?"

"Nothing."

"There, you see?" said Fielding. "It *was* an accident! So I guess your company will have to part with $250,000!"

"Whoa!" Brewster interjected. "Each of your top performers was covered for fifty thousand in the event of accidental death while performing."

"But—"

"The quarter-million was only in case you were completely ruined, by a fire or other catastrophe."

"But now that I've lost my top act . . . I have nothing," the circus man said weakly. "It hasn't been easy for small troupes like ours."

"Well," said Brewster as he zipped his briefcase closed, "we'll discuss terms once I've approved payment. Meanwhile, I'd like to have a look around."

"Of course, help yourself. You'll find everyone inside the arena, packing. We're moving out in the morning. I'll join you in a little while. I'm waiting for an important long-distance call."

"And I've got to get back to headquarters," the police officer added as he rose and took his leave.

Brewster stepped down from the air-conditioned trailer and felt the

heat of the late August sun hit him squarely in the face. Why is it, he grumbled to himself, that he always got sent to places like Texas and Florida in summer and to Maine in the middle of winter?

Turning toward the Civic Center, he was stopped by a pretty young girl. Her firm grip on his forearm surprised him because of her small size.

"Are you the man from the insurance company?" she asked with a quiet urgency.

Brewster looked down into brown, penetrating eyes set in a slender face, topped by black hair that glistened in the bright Texas sun.

"Why, yes, I am."

"The word got around that you were here," she said.

"And you are . . . ?"

"Vikki Conrad. I am—" she stopped and corrected herself, "—*was* Lola Zachary's sister. I've got to talk to you about her death!"

Brewster continued to peer into her intense face. "Let's get out of this sun and get a cold drink somewhere."

"How about the top of the tower?" She pointed toward the tall concrete spire standing in the middle of the fair grounds. "There's a snack bar up there and you can enjoy a nice view at the same time."

Brewster shielded his eyes as he gazed at the familiar symbol of the 1968 fair. Drops of perspiration glistened on his forehead.

"*And* it's air-conditioned," the girl added.

"You just said the magic word," he said with a smile. "Let's go!"

The glass elevator rose swiftly and they were soon at the top, taking in the spectacular view. They circled the observation deck, with the girl pointing out the Alamo and other noteworthy sights. Then they entered the snack bar and found a table off to one side. Brewster ordered cold drinks and waited until the waitress returned with the order.

"Now, what is it you want to tell me, Miss Conrad?" he asked.

"Vikki," she corrected him. Then, after a brief pause: "My sister's death was not accidental!"

"Oh?" Brewster's eyebrows arched. "Do you have proof?"

"No. Nothing that would stand up in court, if that's what you mean. But I know that something happened to her yesterday. Lola wouldn't have missed that catch—she just wouldn't have!"

"Did you notice anything peculiar or different about your sister . . . before or during the performance?"

"No. I can't say that I— Wait a minute! I do! During the act,

while we were together on the platform, she said something."

"What was it?"

"It didn't make any sense to me. It sounded like . . . *hocus*."

"Hocus? Like in hocus-pocus?"

"That's what I thought she said."

"Did you get the feeling that she wasn't well?"

"No. But I just know that someone had done something to her to disturb her timing."

Brewster reached out and placed his hand tenderly on hers. "Vikki," he said softly, "the autopsy showed no sign of drugs or poison."

Vikki pulled away. "So, you're convinced it was an accident, too!"

"Well, let's face facts. Who would want your sister dead?"

"I can think of several."

"How about one to start?"

"Well, there's Mr. Boss-man himself, Carl Fielding," she replied with some malice.

Brewster pursed his lips. "Why would he want to kill his big star?"

"Because she was going to leave him at the end of the season. It's not general knowledge, although there's been plenty of whispering and speculation about it. Lola was offered star billing with the big time at a tremendous increase in salary."

"But your sister was part of an act. Weren't they going to take all three of you on?" Brewster asked.

"She also did a single. She'd been perfecting it for some time. Maybe you've seen her act on TV. She did acrobatics on the swinging trapeze—standing on her toes, hanging from her heels—that sort of thing. She was very good."

"How did her husband take the news? That she was leaving, I mean."

"Nick?" She lowered her eyes and stared into the half-empty glass before her. "My sister was not only breaking up the act, she was also walking out on her marriage."

"Did she have cause?"

"Nick loved Lola. He really did. But he had a strange way of showing it. You see, he has a bad temper and he drinks a lot. When he does—well, he isn't the gentlest man I know. He used to get real jealous, too."

"Your sister was an attractive woman."

"And much younger than Nick. He was always afraid of losing her."

"Could that be why they had marital troubles? Was there someone else?"

The young woman bit her lip and hesitated. "No, not really. Well, you'll probably hear about it from someone else so I might as well tell you how it really was."

"Please do."

"A couple of months ago, when Nick was being particularly nasty, Lola got so mad she wanted to get even. She knew how jealous he was, so she started making a play for Dum-Dum."

Brewster did a take. "I beg your pardon. Who did you say?"

Vikki had to smile. "Dum-Dum. Pete Sawyer, our lead clown. Pete was Gloria's boyfriend. That's Gloria Fellini, the lion tamer. But when Lola started making a play for him, Pete fell head over heels. He was willing to leave Gloria and the circus and run off with her."

"How did Miss Fellini take this?"

Vikki's eyes narrowed into slits. "Gloria can be as ferocious as her lions."

"Didn't your sister explain to Gloria?"

"Of course. But she didn't count on Pete getting so serious. She only wanted to make Nick jealous."

"Did Miss Fellini believe her?"

"I don't think so, especially after the rumors started going around that Lola was leaving Nick and the circus."

"And Mr. Sawyer?"

"He was the laughingstock of the whole crew."

Brewster reviewed this new information. "What you're saying, then, is that there were at least four people who wanted Lola dead."

"That's about it, Mr. Brewster."

"How about a fifth, Vikki? How about *you*? Aren't you going to be out of a job now?"

Vikki dismissed the charge lightly. "I wasn't an important part of the act. There had been several girls before me. I was only going to work until my fiancé graduates from college and we can get married."

Brewster regarded her carefully. Was she telling the truth? Or was this just the natural reaction of a grieved sister who was looking for a scapegoat? And if this was murder, how was it done? Well, he mused, there was only one way to find out . . . if only to make the girl feel better.

Fifteen minutes later, Vikki and Ray Brewster stepped into the arena and found themselves in the midst of the organized confusion that characterizes the dismantling of a circus. Half of the overhead rigging was down and stretched across the arena floor. Flags and banners were being rolled, portable chairs stacked, and the soft tanbark covering on the floor was being swept up.

Vikki pointed to a dark-complexioned, heavyset man standing in the middle of the ring. "There's Nick," she said as she called to her brother-in-law.

Brewster eyed the man critically,

decided he wouldn't want to tangle with him.

Vikki introduced the two men and told Nick the purpose of Brewster's presence.

"What do you think happened yesterday, Mr. Zachary?" the investigator asked.

"I don't know. I've asked myself that question a thousand times since it happened. There was no reason why she should have missed that catch. We had perfected that maneuver and performed it hundreds of times. She could have done it blindfolded." Suddenly an unexpected sob caught in the man's throat. "I tried to reach her! I tried! But she was too far away." He turned quickly and walked away.

Vikki stared after him and finally said, "I've never seen him like this before. He's really taking it very hard."

Or he's a good actor, Brewster told himself.

His private thought was punctuated by two roars that echoed through the arena. One came from the throat of a large animal. The other was a woman's voice, bellowing an order.

"That," said Vikki, "is our sweet and demure lion tamer, Gloria Fellini." They headed down a ramp to the menagerie area. "You'll notice when you meet her," Vikki continued, "that Gloria gets carried away with her work. She tries to tame every animal she meets, especially the two-legged male variety."

Brewster smiled. "Thanks for the warning."

They found Gloria inside one of the large cages, trying to get one of her animals inside a smaller cage. Her assistant was cowering outside the enclosure, ready to lower the bars after the beast had passed through the small opening.

Brewster watched the attractive woman work. She was almost catlike herself in her movements. And those eyes of hers! He had never seen such intense, mesmerizing orbs. No wonder she could get her lions to do her bidding. He wondered if she could hypnotize a bird out of a tree. Or, perhaps, an acrobat out of her trapeze?

He dismissed the silly thought as Gloria hopped out of the cage and acknowledged the introduction that Vikki had just made.

"Did you see the accident?" Brewster asked.

"No. I was down here getting my animals ready to go on." Her speaking voice was soft and demure, almost a purr. "I have to talk to my cats and get them ready to perform. It's become kind of a ritual. They expect it."

"Did you see Mrs. Zachary before she went on?"

"Only a fleeting glance as she walked by on her way to the arena floor."

"You didn't talk with her, then?" Brewster asked.

Gloria stared into his eyes for a full five seconds before answering. "Mr. Brewster, Lola Zachary and I had very little to talk about! Now if you'll excuse me," she concluded, "I have a lot of work to do." She dismissed them with a quick turn and went back to her pacing, watchful animals.

Vikki and Brewster continued along the concrete passageway that curved around the arena under the lower bank of seats. Passing a group of posters on the wall, Vikki pointed to one and said, "That's Dum-Dum in full costume."

The name of the character, Brewster guessed, came from the large pointed head which the clown had devised. Perched on top of the point was a miniature derby hat. He wore the inevitable round false nose and on his extremities he had large rubber hands and feet.

"That's quite a getup," he remarked. "It must take him a long time to get into it."

"It sure does. That pointed head is made of foam rubber. It straps under his chin but he has to cover it with makeup so it will blend in with his own skin. He even has to get someone to tie on those false hands."

Presently, they were standing outside the clown's dressing room. The door was open and the funny man himself, looking so ordinary in street clothes, was crawling around the floor on his hands and knees. Brewster almost expected to see Gloria standing over him with her whip.

"Is this a new part of your act?" Vikki asked.

The startled Sawyer looked up and, seeing Brewster, got to his feet. "It's those damned new contact lenses," he said. "I just lost one of them. The trouble is, they're so small that I need the lenses in order to find them!"

A glint of light caught Brewster's eye. "I think I see it." He reached down and picked up the concave piece of plastic.

"Oh, thank you," said Sawyer, returning the elusive lens to its little case. "I don't think I'll ever get used to them."

Vikki made the introductions and explained again Brewster's purpose in being there.

"What can you tell me about the accident?" the investigator asked.

"Nothing much. I didn't really see it. I was busy playing to the audience. When I heard their screams, I turned around just in time to—" he swallowed hard, "—

to see her hit the floor. It was terrible! Just awful!"

Brewster felt he was wasting his time. He was trying to chase down clues that didn't exist, but the girl was hoping for a miracle, so he might as well humor her.

It was obvious that Sawyer was trying hard to hide his genuine grief for the dead girl. Further questioning convinced Brewster that the clown did not suspect foul play.

They left Pete Sawyer and continued down the narrow hallway, stopping at another open door. "This was Lola and Nick's room. Mine's next door."

They stepped inside and Brewster was thankful for an excuse to sit down. His feet were getting tired.

The dressing room, like the others, was no more than a cubicle. There were two dressing tables in this one, each with a large mirror framed by soft-white light bulbs. There was no mistaking which had been Lola's. The one closest to the door was covered with cold cream jars, pancake makeup, hair curlers, eye-liner pencils and two boxes of paper tissues. In the clutter, something caught Brewster's trained eye. A pale red splotch had stained one corner of the white hand towel that served as the dressing table cover. The same red color had also stained the label on a small glass bottle setting there.

"What happened here?" Brewster asked casually.

"Lola overturned a bottle of nail polish the other day. She and Nick were arguing and he got her upset."

Brewster picked up the bottle. It was a well-known brand of eyewash with an eyedropper built into the lid. "Did your sister use this a lot?"

"She was having trouble with her eyes. They were getting irritated and red. She thought she was becoming allergic to a particular brand of makeup."

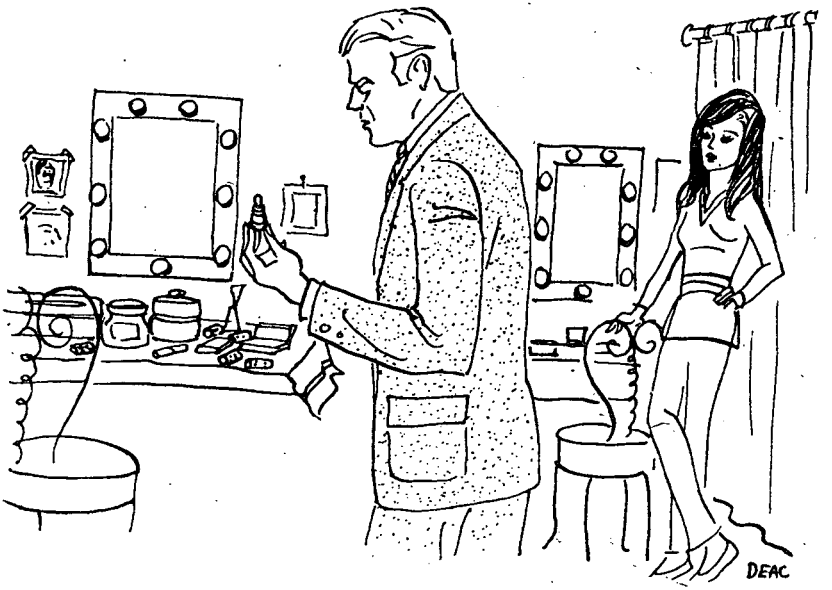
Brewster mulled on this for a moment. "Did she use the eyedrops before she performed?"

"She'd use it several times a day, but always before she went on. She said it soothed and cleared her eyes."

A word nudged its way into Brewster's brain, a word that Vikki had mentioned previously. It started the wheels turning. It was a crazy notion, a farfetched idea, but he decided to pursue it. At least, he would be earning his salary. And if the hunch should prove true . . .

As they turned to leave, he picked up the little bottle and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

Back in the arena again, Brewster spotted the film crew photographing the dismantling oper-



ations, and he thought of another idea he wanted to pursue.

He thanked the girl for her help, assured her that he would do what he could to investigate her theory, and promised to let her know as soon as he learned anything. She squeezed his hand, uttered an almost inaudible thank-you, and left.

Brewster waited until the film crew had completed a shot, then introduced himself to the producer, a red-haired man named Simon Turner. The investigator asked if he could see all the footage that had been shot the day before. The film man was happy to oblige and gave Brewster the name and address of a film lab in town. "Suppose I meet you there around six o'clock?"

Brewster said that would be fine and left. On his way out, he consulted the yellow pages of the telephone directory and got the name and address of an analytical laboratory. He dropped off the bottle from Lola's dressing table, asked for a chemical analysis and instructed them to phone the report to his hotel.

At five minutes to six, a taxi deposited him outside the Century Film Labs, a sprawling one-story building on the outskirts of the city. Simon Turner had gotten

there before him and had the screening room all set up.

"What you saw on TV last night," Turner explained before they started, "was a hastily edited section we slapped together for the early evening news shows. What you'll see now are the complete takes from both cameras. You see, we used one camera with a wide-angle lens to cover the overall action and another one, with a zoom lens, for the close-ups."

The lights were turned off and the projector in the booth began unfolding the fateful moments before Lola's untimely death.

The first section of film had captured most of their spectacular act, culminating in the finale that Brewster had seen on television. He winced when Lola's body hit the floor.

The screen went blank, then lit up again with scenes photographed with the other camera. Brewster saw several close-ups of the audience, first applauding, then peering up with anxious faces. The camera finally showed the two girls standing on their perch. He saw Lola say something to her sister just before Vikki swung out of the picture. Lola looked frightened, almost frantic, as she stood alone high above the floor.

"Can you stop the film?" Brewster asked.

Simon Turner gave the order that brought the projector to a flickering halt.

"Now go back about ten seconds and run that part again."

The instructions were carried out and the scene was replayed. Brewster's suspicions were confirmed. Blown up on the large movie screen in sharp detail, he noticed something that had been lost on the small, fuzzy TV screen. Lola was blinking her eyes frantically. Fumbling to grab the empty trapeze as it swung back, she got up on the higher step of the platform, prepared to leap, hesitated while still blinking, then took off.

That brief hesitation had, no doubt, upset the carefully-timed sequence and caused her to be too far away for the catch.

Brewster stood up, cutting off the light from the projector. "Thank you, Mr. Turner," he said, "that was very helpful."

He got back to his hotel room in time to receive the call from the laboratory.

"We tested the liquid in the bottle," the voice announced, "and it contained just what the label said, ordinary eyewash. The ingredients matched the list on the label. Nothing more, nothing less."

"There was still some liquid left in the eyedropper," Brewster reminded him.

"We did as you requested," the voice continued. "We tested that separately."

"And?"

"We found *mydriacil.*"

"What is that, in nontechnical language?"

"It's a drug used by some eye specialists to dilate the pupils before an eye examination."

Brewster thanked the man and hung up. He immediately placed a call to police headquarters, made an urgent request of Lieutenant Morales, and replaced the receiver.

As he waited, Brewster paced the hotel room. The pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall into place. He was chagrined to think that he had been about to authorize payment of the insurance policy.

Presently, the phone sounded again.

"You were right," Lieutenant Morales told him. "Lola's eyes showed excessive dilation."

Brewster instructed the police officer to meet him at the fair grounds. Then he took the elevator to the lobby, bought a pack of cookies in the hotel drugstore to pacify his growing hunger pangs, asked some questions of the pharmacist, and jumped into a cab.

HemisFair Plaza adjoins the downtown area so the ride took only ten minutes, despite the evening traffic. He found Lieutenant Morales waiting for him outside the trailer office.

The circus owner was on the telephone when the two men stepped inside. Seeing the serious, intent look on both faces, Carl Fielding quickly terminated the call and turned his attention to the pair.

"I'm afraid I have bad news for you, Mr. Fielding," Brewster began.

The investigator noticed a tiny nerve in the corner of Fielding's eye begin to twitch. "What is it?" the circus man asked.

"My company is not going to pay off on your policy."

Fielding's reaction was immediate. "But it was an accident," he shouted. "We all saw it! It happened in front of thousands of people!"

"What you saw was the result of a cleverly-planned murder!"

"I don't get you," the police officer said.

"This afternoon," Brewster explained, "I saw all the film of the accident that Turner and his crew shot. A close-up of Lola revealed that, about halfway through the act, she started blinking her eyes."

"So?" Fielding interjected.

"Her sister told me that about this same time she said something to her, a word that sounded like

hocus. I think those facts mesh."

The two men looked blankly at each other.

"What she probably said," Brewster went on, "was *focus*. 'I can't focus.' Something was happening to her eyes and she didn't know what it was."

"She'd been having trouble with her eyes lately," Fielding volunteered. "Something to do with her makeup—an allergy or something."

Brewster nodded. "That's why she started using eyedrops. I had that bottle of eyewash analyzed after I left here this afternoon."

Fielding said nothing.

"The contents were what they were supposed to be. *But* . . ." he paused for effect, "there was still some liquid left in the eyedropper and that was *not* eyewash."

"What was it?" Fielding asked.

"A preparation used by eye doctors to dilate a patient's eyes before an examination."

Carl Fielding jumped up, sending his chair crashing into the wall. "Pete Sawyer!" he shouted. "He recently had an eye examination and just got contact lenses!"

"That was the first thing I thought of, too," Brewster said, "but I did a little checking. Mydriacil—that's the name of the drug—is administered in the doctor's office. Just one drop in each eye and the pupils dilate in about twenty minutes. So the chances that Pete Sawyer got his hands on some of the stuff are very slim."

Fielding had another idea. "Maybe the examination gave him the idea and he bought some in a drugstore."

"I checked that possibility, too. Mydriacil is not available in drugstores. It is sold by pharmaceutical houses directly to eye specialists."

Lieutenant Morales spoke up. "You sound as if you know who did it."

"I do," Brewster replied. "But let's get back to the bottle of eyedrops that I found on Lola's dressing table. The culprit had originally intended to put the mydriacil into a similar bottle, but there was a hitch. A couple of days before, Lola had spilled nail polish and some of it had splashed on the eyewash bottle. So our felon's job became a little complicated. First, he had to get his hands on the original bottle, empty it and fill it with the drug. Then, during the performance, he had to empty the bottle again and refill it with the original eyewash. What he forgot, of course, was that there was still some of the mydriacil left in the eyedropper, kept there by air pressure."

"Anyone in the circus could have made the switch," Fielding exclaimed.

"Not during the performance." Lieutenant Morales cut in. "How do you know the switch was made then? Why not later?"

"I'm sure the killer wanted to get rid of the evidence as soon as he could, and he might not have had an opportunity later, with everyone milling around."

"Nick could have made the switch any time. It was his dressing room."

"He was one of the suspects," Brewster acknowledged, "but the question still remains: where and how did he get the drug? As for the others, Gloria Fellini was busy with her animals at the time of the accident, and Pete Sawyer was performing before the crowds. Even if he could have slipped away for a moment, he would not have been able to pour the liquid back into the bottle with those clumsy fake hands he wears. But there was one person who was not directly involved with the performance. That person could wander freely around backstage and not be suspected, probably not even be noticed because it was just natural for him to be there. That person was you, Mr. Fielding."

The circus owner and his friend were both stunned speechless.

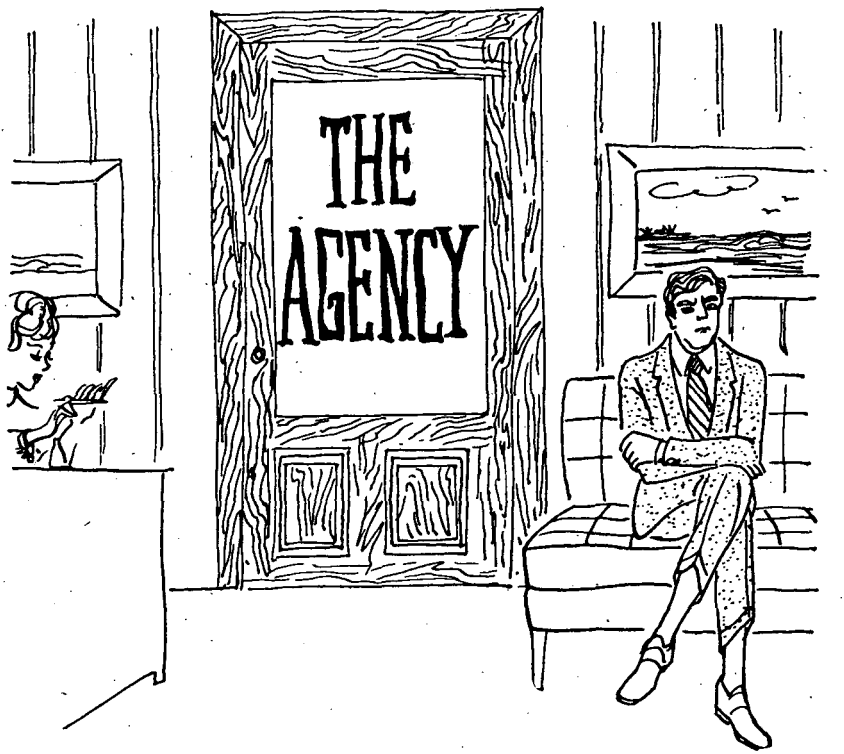
"You were the only one who could have obtained the eyedrops without any trouble," Brewster went on. "Your brother is an ophthalmologist—an eye specialist—who lives right here in San Antonio. I have you to thank, Lieutenant, for that information. Incidentally, an ophthalmologist is the only kind of eye doctor who is allowed to administer mydriacil."

Morales turned slowly toward his friend. He waited for a denial, but Fielding was silent. Finally he spoke: "I had to do it, Juan. She was going to leave me and I would have lost everything. I had to have that insurance money! Don't you see? It was the only way out that I had!"

Brewster let himself out and paused for a moment on the trailer steps. The early evening air had cooled considerably and there was a gentle breeze wafting across the fair grounds. He consulted his watch. He could still catch a late jet back to New York. But why rush? There was an attractive girl who would be glad to show him the sights of San Antonio and who could recommend the best restaurant in town.

He went looking for Vikki. He had a lot to tell her.

The success which eludes one this day frequently emerges on the morrow—and vice versa.



THE OFFICE told Charlie very little about the Agency. The furniture was typical; in the past months he'd seen enough to know—tables, lamps, a litho seascape, a couple of chairs, and a stiff couch upholstered in simulated leather. It was very cool when you first sat down, but the longer you sat the warmer you got; if you didn't get up and walk around, when time came for the interview you'd show sweat streaks, which said very little for your supposedly high intelligence.

But what difference does that make? Charlie wondered. He had been the rounds looking for a position, had written scores of letters, had badgered his professors to wire their closest friends, but the answer was always the same: *"Sorry stop philosophy market glutted stop."*

Stop! Yes, dammit, he'd been stopped in his tracks; all dressed up with a doctorate, a wife and two kids, and no place to go.

Charlie studied the receptionist located to the left of a door marked *J. Smith, Private.* Even *she* had a job. Of course, she was prettier. Now she was doing her nails. When he'd entered thirty minutes earlier, she was fixing her face, which was quite lovely in a heart-shaped, show-girlish way. As she filed her nails she shrilly hummed a tune straight out of the top ten.

"Will I have to wait much longer?" Charlie asked.

She smiled sweetly and replied, "Mr. Smith is in conference."

Charlie moved to a cooler spot on the couch. Conference? He was probably giving some other guy *his* job! That was the agency's business. At least Tom Grimes said so.

by W.S. Doxey

Bumping into Tom like that, the day before, was a hell of a coincidence. Hadn't seen each other since '66, when both were seniors. Tom was crazy then—drank, raised so much ruckus he almost busted out. Now he was doing very well for himself. Over drinks, he told Charlie just how well—but it hadn't been easy at first; never was.

"I was in the same spot as you," Tom said. "No job, no prospects. I was ready to throw in the towel when I heard about the Agency."

"Agency? Which agency?" Charlie asked.

"The *Agency* Agency," Tom said. "It's a big outfit, syndicated coast-to-coast, but very confidential. No public advertising. Their fee's damned high—one thousand in cash, no checks—but they give a money-back guarantee. Besides, the cost is deductible. Here, I'll give you their number. You've got nothing to lose."

A thousand dollars to get a job! Charlie spent a sleepless night trying to determine what to do. On his own, he'd gotten nowhere. With an agency working for him? Their terms were reasonable.

At breakfast, when his wife reminded him they were going into the last of their savings, he decided. He called the number and made an

appointment. Then, to show himself he meant business and had confidence, he stopped at the bank and withdrew ten one-hundred dollar bills, leaving a fantastic balance of $18.34. *If this plan fails,* he thought, *at least I've got enough for a cheap pistol, and the stick-up field is wide open.*

Now, as he watched Miss Chorus Secretary of 1971 smooth a nasty wrinkle from her perky sweater, he wondered if maybe he hadn't been set up. Here he sat with a cool thousand in his pocket. Any minute the door would slam open and in would amble a couple of hoods, saying, "Okay, pal—"

The door opened, silently. A young man wearing a dark suit, a regimental-striped tie, and a smile from sideburn to sideburn practically skipped out of the office. Then a buzzer sounded and the secretary said, "Sir, Mr. Smith will see you now."

Charlie saw Mr. Smith waiting for him just inside the door. A short, slender young man, Smith wore a double-breasted blazer, which to Charlie seemed too snug, and bell-bottom slacks which seemed too loose. His large, tinted glasses were more fitting for a skeet range than an office. *But who am I—a loser—to judge?* Charlie wondered.

Smith introduced himself, warmly shook Charlie's hand, and seated him in a comfortable armchair before his desk.

"We're so glad you've called upon the Agency," he said.

"Yes, well, Tom Grimes—"

"Good man, Grimes. Very capable. He felt so concerned about your predicament that he called last night and gave me a few facts." Smith glanced at a pad on his desk. "Charles Baxter, Ph.D. in modern philosophy, aged 27, married, two children." He looked up and smiled. "Sound like you?"

Charlie laughed. "Yes, unfortunately. But you omitted the most important fact. Occupation: unemployed."

"A temporary condition, now that you're with the Agency. After Tom called, I considered some possibilities for you. Industry seems out—not that corporate heads aren't philosophical. I try to read Sartre's *The Stranger* once a year. Your best bet is the academic. Do you know Forest View College? It's a small, liberal arts school about thirty miles south of the city."

"Yes, I interviewed for a position there," said Charlie. "They told me that last year they hired a man in my field. His name's Golden, I believe. Do they need someone else?"

"Openings occur and the Agency fills them," said Smith. "Would you be interested in Forest View?"

Interested? Did he now have a choice after so many rejections, wondered Charlie. Forest View was the school of which he and his wife had dreamed. The town in which it was located was small and pleasant, a nice place to raise kids.

"I'm very interested in Forest View," he said.

"Good," said Smith, rising and extending his hand. "The arrangements will take three days. Please leave your résumé and one thousand dollars in cash with the secretary."

"The Agency doesn't waste time, does it?" Charlie said, with a happy smile.

"Time, like everything else, is money," said Smith. "Don't call us. We'll call you."

During the next two days Charlie had four fruitless interviews. On the third day, he pleaded general fatigue before his wife and was granted a day off from making the rounds. As he relaxed on the sofa after lunch, the doubts that had been lurking in his mind since he handed the secretary the last of his savings pounced like wolves into the open. Suddenly, he knew he had been taken. Smith was a phony! Yes, why hadn't he seen it? The crook had tried to be so knowledgeable! Had said he read Sartre's *The Stranger*! Camus was rolling in his grave, and—

The phone rang. He jumped up.

An urbane voice identified itself as belonging to a Dr. Stulkes, dean of Forest View College. He wasted no time coming to the point. "Doctor Baxter, are you still interested in a position at Forest View?"

"Yes, yes I am!" cried Charlie.

"Can you start tomorrow?"

"*Tomorrow?* Why, of course. But isn't this rather short notice?"

"Doctor Golden gave no notice whatsoever."

"Golden left?"

"You might say that," the dean replied. "The evening papers will have the complete story, *with* photographs, I fear."

"Photographs?" said Charlie. "I don't understand."

"To be candid, Doctor Baxter, Professor Golden was arrested this morning and charged with possession and sale of narcotics. He was on an LSD trip when the police carried him away. Needless to say, Forest View sympathizes with Professor Golden, but his usefulness here is at an end. By the way, Baxter, you don't indulge in such *exotic* activities, do you?"

"No, sir. Why, I don't even smoke."

"Yes, good. Of course, neither did Golden. But all of this hardly concerns you. Can you drive out today and sign a contract?"

Charlie drove out immediately and as he was putting his signature to the crisp document giving him Golden's position, his joy was somewhat dulled by the thought of the man he was replacing. Poor devil! What would happen to him?

The dean was understanding but noncommittal. "Misfortunes of this nature occur more frequently than you'd suspect," he said. "Last year, for example, we had one suicide, one nervous breakdown, a total disability caused by a hit-and-run accident—driver was never apprehended—and, oh, yes, a full professor named Creighton simply disappeared, vanished without a trace—and ours is a relatively small school. But the same happenings occur in every industry. Perhaps it's due to the unsettled times in which we live."

Charlie agreed. Life was tougher than ever. But the Agency had saved his life, even if Smith didn't know his Sartre from his Camus. He owed them more than the paltry thousand he'd paid: a debt of gratitude.

When Charlie returned to the city he gave Smith a call and thanked him for his help.

"But this isn't necessary," Smith said. "Our job is to place capable men in suitable positions as fast as they become available. The Agency considers you very capable, Doctor Baxter. We expect great things of you in due time, and we plan to be part of your success."

Before Charlie broke the connection, Smith told him that when he became interested in advancing to, say, a deanship, be sure to get in touch.

Dear Fans:

It is always a pleasure to welcome new members into the ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, and it is very rewarding to hear from our enthusiastic and loyal present members.

Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:

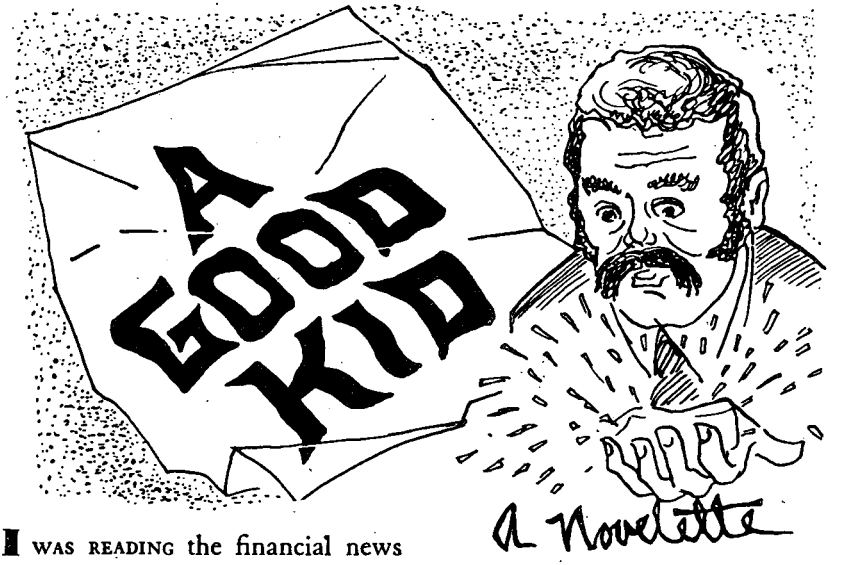
ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, P.O. Box 5425, Sherman Oaks, California 91401

I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

When trouble looms, unfortunately, communication lines seem most susceptible to short circuits.



I WAS READING the financial news in the evening paper when Garcia called. It was ten-thirty at night; I'd been waiting for his call ever since dinner.

"He's here," Garcia said. There was satisfaction in his tone, as though he were personally responsible for Goosens' arrival. "Holed up in the Continental. Fourth floor. Room 429."

I put down the paper. "Good," I said. "Did you pick him up at the airport?"

"Like you told me. Flight 918. No trouble at all."

I nodded. My information from Amsterdam had been solid. "How'd he act?"

"Nervous. He got out of the airplane last and hurried to catch up

by James Holding

with the other passengers. Stayed close to the crowd while he waited for his luggage."

"How'd he come into town? Taxi?"

"No, he waited for one of those limousine jobs."

"He's carrying his line, then." I felt excitement beginning to build inside me. "That's the way they act when there's a package in their vest pocket." I paused. "How'd you spot his room?"

Garcia bragged a little. "I got there ahead of him. Once his limousine hit town, it headed for the Point, so the Continental seemed the best bet. I took a shortcut and was in the lobby when he checked in. I overheard the desk clerk give him 429."

"Nice work," I said. I meant it. His ability to sense things like that beforehand was Garcia's greatest asset. "He didn't turn anything in to the hotel strongbox?"

"Not a thing. I watched him for that. He went up to his room and hasn't been down since."

"Then they're still with him," I said.

"He had his dinner sent up to his room." Garcia laughed. "Roast beef and a baked potato with sour cream." I didn't question his accuracy. Garcia had ways of finding out such things, having been a bellboy himself.

"Where's the car?" I asked him.

"The lot behind the Gateway Building. I had to move pretty fast to make the hotel ahead of him, Pete."

I thought for a minute. "Listen. Keep an eye on him till I get there. We've got to know for sure that he doesn't come down to the desk or have any visitors in his room. For sure."

"No problem. I can see his room from the fourth floor fire door."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes. Meet me in the Fiesta Bar if he's still in his room alone." The Fiesta Bar is dimly lighted, and you can see the hotel desk from there.

"Right." Garcia hung up.

I packed the few things I had with me into my briefcase. It didn't take five minutes. I glanced around the hotel room before I left to make sure I hadn't missed anything. Then I went down to the lobby and checked out. I wasn't using my right name at the Carillon.

It was a nice spring night, so I walked the half mile to the Continental Hotel. My briefcase didn't weigh much, and I didn't want any taxi driver to remember me.

Garcia was waiting for me on a banquette seat close to the glass doors of the Fiesta Bar. He was ordering a drink as I walked in.

I said to the waiter, "I'll take one, too, please. Martini on the

rocks with a twist, nice and dry."

The waiter went off and I sat down and winked at Garcia. He looked slightly ridiculous in his long sideburns and straggling mustache. "Well?" I said.

"Still in his room. Alone."

"Good. This is the big one, Garcia. The one we've been training for."

Garcia's mustache lifted as he smiled. "About time, too, Pete." I couldn't blame him for being impatient.

The waiter came back with our drinks. Garcia was having one of his sickening grasshoppers. He lifted it toward me. "Luck," he said.

I took a quarter of my martini. "When you finish your drink, go pick up the car from the Gateway lot. Bring it around and park facing south where you can see the hotel entrance. Keep the engine running, and when you see me come out of here, start toward me. I'll cross the street to be clear of the doorman's station. Pick me up there. Okay?"

"Sure." Garcia was nervous now. He drank the rest of his grasshopper as though it was water on an August day.

"Take it easy, Garcia," I said. "This is going to be a breeze."

I stood up, leaving half my martini. I didn't want much alcohol between Goosens and me. "I'll try not to be long," I said. "You pay the bar check on your way out." I picked up my briefcase and pushed through the glass doors of the bar to the hotel lobby.

Nobody as tall and skinny as Goosens had come near the hotel desk during the few minutes we'd been watching from the bar, so I took an elevator to the fifth floor and walked down the fire stairs to the fourth. I opened the door a crack and looked out at the fourth floor corridor that stretched in front of me. Room 429 was two doors up on the left-hand side.

I took my thin gloves out of my briefcase and put them on. Nobody was in sight in the corridor. I stepped out into it, looked both ways, still saw nobody, and knocked on the door of 429.

After a pause, his voice reached me through the door. "What is it?"

"Cablegram, sir." I could hear him put a hand on the door chain inside but he didn't open the door.

"Cablegram?" He'd naturally be pretty careful.

"Yes, sir." I waited a few seconds, then added, "From Holland."

That did it. He took down the chain and opened the door and I pushed in, shoving him back with my briefcase against his chest. It was like shoving a skeleton dressed

in pajamas. Two lamps were on in the room. He'd been reading the newspaper in the armchair. He still had the sports section in his hand.

I closed the door behind me as he backed up, off balance. I didn't worry about him making a move for the telephone between the twin beds because his eyes, big and scared, were on my gun.

I said, "Relax," and saw his eyes change as they came up to my face. I'd hoped he wouldn't recognize me, but he did.

He said in a breathy voice, "Wait a minute! Aren't you Piet Westervelt?"

I cut in, "Never mind. I'll take your diamonds."

He was thin and scared but he had guts. "They're in the hotel safe."

I shook my head at him. "No. We've watched you." My eyes went around the room. A pocket-size zippered dispatch case was lying on his dresser next to a regimental striped necktie. Goosens saw what I was looking at and his eyes turned sick.

My silencer kept the gun noise down to not much more than a man clearing his throat. I went over and picked up the dispatch case and kneaded its contents through the soft leather. I could feel the diamonds.

Goosens was a bundle of loose bones on the hotel carpet. He made a little movement with his legs and tried to say something but couldn't get it out. My bullet had taken him through the cheek.

I put the gun into my topcoat pocket and opened my briefcase and shoved Goosens' little dispatch case in on top of my dirty shirt. Then I took another look at Goosens.

He was finished. I stooped down and grabbed him and hauled him over to the nearest twin bed and shoved him under it. He was so skinny that he slid under easily, and the bedspread, hanging down to the floor, hid him completely. I half apologized to him as I straightened the bedspread. He must have known that being a diamond salesman was a high-risk occupation.

I looked for blood on the carpet where he went down, but there wasn't any—one advantage of a small gun. The bullet sometimes stays in. They might not find Goosens for days, if things broke lucky. Twelve hours anyway, even at the worst; plenty of time for Garcia and me.

I checked the room to see that I hadn't left any sign behind me. Then I cracked the door quietly. The corridor outside was as deserted as a tomb, so I stepped out, pulled the door of 429 shut be-


Sports

hind me, and hung the *Do Not Disturb* sign over the outside knob.

I made the fire door in two seconds, went through it and down the stairs to the second floor. I walked along the second floor corridor to the elevators, sank my gloves under two inches of sand in the cigarette urn there, rang, and waited for a down car. In a minute or so, one stopped for me. Two fancy blondes in mink stoles and costume jewelry gave me the patronizing eye as I stepped in with them. I wondered what they'd think if they knew I had three hundred and seventy thousand dollars' worth of diamonds in my briefcase.

I came out of the elevator with the blondes into a milling crowd of conventioneers that was dispersing in the lobby after a get-together dinner. I left the hotel by the front entrance and nobody gave me a glance, not even the doorman who was standing fifty yards away, whistling up a cab for a couple of drunks I'd seen in the Fiesta Bar earlier.

Garcia drifted up in the car just as I reached the curb across the street. He was leaning over, holding the door open an inch. I slid into the front seat beside him without the car ever coming to a halt. Garcia headed for the bridge that would take us across the river to the interstate highway going west.

He had a job holding back until we were safely out of town. He kept his mind on his driving, though, for a good twenty minutes before he asked me anything.

When the car was sailing along at sixty and it was pretty plain we were in the clear, Garcia asked, "Did you get them, Pete?"

I tapped the briefcase. "I got them."

He blew out breath. "Great. Any trouble with Goosens?"

"Not a bit. He handed them over like a little lamb." I worked to keep my voice even, for I had the feeling it would come out shrill if I didn't. "Hold back a little, Garcia. We don't want to be picked up on a lousy traffic violation."

Garcia laughed. "I'm excited, but not that excited. I'm five miles below the limit. Tell me about the diamonds." He was all ears.

"He had them in a leather dispatch case on top of his dresser."

"He must be a fool."

I nodded.

"Are they worth as much as you figured, Pete?"

"The diamonds? I haven't looked yet. But I'd say yes. Or more." I gave him a grin. "Try to get this through your thick head, Garcia. We've got it made. Big."

He snuggled back into the seat cushion happily. "I'd like to see the

damn things. We've been working on this heist for so long."

"Let's wait till we're a little farther from the action, all right?"

"Whatever you say."

I began to peel off the false eyebrows. The gum stuck and pulled out some of my own eyebrows with it. I threw away the strips of wax I'd had behind my ears to make them stick out. Then I spread my handkerchief on top of the briefcase in my lap and leaned over and popped out the brown contact lenses onto the handkerchief. I didn't expect I'd have any more use for them; my eyes are blue. I tossed the brown lenses out the car window.

Garcia watched me. "Now you look more like yourself."

"Yeah. After I wash the dye out of my hair."

"I can hardly wait to shed these damn sideburns."

"And the mustache," I said. "That crazy, straggly mustache." We found ourselves laughing, as though we'd just heard a very funny joke. I guess we were both a little silly with relief and letdown.

We drove west as fast as we figured was safe. Garcia was full of questions.

"Goosens just passed you his diamonds without a peep?"

"What else could he do? You don't argue with a gun."

"I know. But you'd think a guy who travels around all over the place with diamonds in his pocket would show a little more . . ."

I was patient with him. "Listen. I've told you before, you do something dangerous long enough, and it doesn't seem dangerous anymore. You get so used to it you get careless. A diamond salesman is like that. He knows his job is dangerous, sure. He knows he's a prime target for robbery, because diamonds are the best loot in the world. I told you that."

"Yeah. Because they're small, valuable and untraceable."

"Well," I said, "almost untraceable. The man who cuts a stone can identify it later if the diamond is big enough, say four, four-and-a-half carats or more. Otherwise, no. Anyway, the salesman knows he's likely to be robbed. But he also knows his diamonds are insured pretty good, too, and that the Jeweler's Security Alliance is on his side, along with the FBI and about a million cops, more or less. And he doesn't get robbed for a long time, so sometimes he doesn't bother to be careful. Like tonight. Goosens figured he was safe when he made the hotel room with his line."

Garcia laughed. "I don't think I'd like to be a diamond salesman."

"Think of the fringe benefits."

"Like what? Being knocked cold and robbed every so often?"

"Some of these boys," I told him, "pull down almost a hundred grand a year."

"For selling diamonds?"

"Yeah."

"Who needs it?" Garcia said. "We did better than that tonight in fifteen minutes." He gave me a sideways look. "How come you know so much about diamonds and salesmen, Pete?"

"I used to be in the business," I said.

I tried to take a nap but I was edgy and couldn't get to sleep. Garcia switched on the radio. There wasn't anything about us on the midnight news, or about Goosens, either. Too soon.

Garcia said, "Well, that's a relief."

I said, "I'll drive for a while. I can't sleep. You might as well catch a few winks."

He pulled up on the shoulder, got out and walked around the front of the car. I slid over into the driver's seat. When he got into the passenger seat, I handed him the briefcase. "You can hold that. It'll give you pleasant dreams."

He took the briefcase and said, "We must have covered a hundred miles already. How about taking a look?"

"Why not?" I was anxious to see them myself. "Go on. Open it up."

I pulled out onto the highway again and drove on west while Garcia opened the briefcase on his knees. Traffic was light going our way.

Garcia lifted the briefcase lid and took out the diamonds in their zippered envelope. The zipper was locked shut. That didn't bother Garcia. He slit the leather alongside the zipper with his pocketknife and dumped a lot of little tissue paper folders out of the envelope into the briefcase on top of my dirty shirt. Each of the tissue paper twists had figures written on it in ink.

"Divided by weights," I said. "Open up a few if you want to have a look."

He opened a twist of tissue paper and there were a couple of dozen beauties sparkling under the dashboard light. It was a pretty thing to see. I kept my eye on the road and our speed at a steady sixty, but I kept grabbing a look at the diamonds every few seconds, too. Garcia opened up more of the paper twists.

He was popeyed. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Man!" he said over and over. "Man!" He'd open a paper twist, hold it under the dashlight, admire the fire of the stones and say, "Man!" Then he'd fold up the paper again

and put it back in Goosens' dispatch case.

Along about the fifth packet of diamonds, he said something besides "Man!" He said, "When Goosens reports this, there'll sure be hell to pay."

I thought it was all right to tell him now, especially with the sight of the diamonds to brace him up. I said, "Goosens isn't going to report it, kid. He's dead."

Garcia looked up from the diamonds. His face was soft with shock. "What?"

"I had to shoot him, but don't take it too big. I hid him under the bed and hung a *Do Not Disturb* sign on his door when I left. We ought to have at least until checkout time tomorrow . . . today . . . before anybody finds him."

"You told me you'd just slug him and tie him up," Garcia said. "What happened?"

"He recognized me. Called me by name. Even with the brown eyes, false eyebrows and bat ears. So I had to shoot him."

"Oh." Garcia folded up a packet of diamonds and started to unfold another. "You knew him before, huh?" he said. "You didn't tell me that."

"It didn't mean anything, not till last night. Then it meant too much to pass up. In a thing as big as this, we can't afford to leave any witnesses behind us who can finger us to the cops."

"I guess not."

I watched the road. "Look at it this way. Those stones you're looking at are worth three hundred and seventy grand, according to the word from Amsterdam. We won't get that much for them in California, of course. Maybe a hundred and a quarter. But all the same, split that two ways and figure if your cut isn't worth it."

Garcia looked at another paper of diamonds. He didn't say anything.

I said, "Besides, Goosens got it from *me*. You didn't hurt anyone."

Garcia brightened up. "That's right. And I guess there wasn't anything else you could do if he knew who you were."

"He knew me, all right, from the old days. We'd never feel safe again if I hadn't cooled him. So forget it."

"Okay, Pete." He moved a paper of diamonds around under the dashlight and said, "Man!" again. Then he said, "Why didn't you tell me about the killing before?" He sounded hurt.

I told him the truth. "I thought it might bug you, Garcia, and I wanted you cool till we were in the clear."

He nodded. He could under-

stand the need for that, all right.

Changing the subject, I said, "Have you seen enough to satisfy you?"

"I could look at these things all night and never get tired of it!"

"I know. Me, too. But we want to get rid of them as soon as we can."

"Get rid of them?" He was surprised. I hadn't told him about this, either.

"Yeah. We'll mail them ahead to California the next town we hit."

"How do we do that in the middle of the night? And what for?"

"The diamonds will be red-hot as soon as Goosens is found. Better we don't have them on us for the next few days."

"Who are we mailing them to?" His eyes glinted. "Half of them are mine."

I grinned at him. "There's a mailing box and some sealing tape in the briefcase. The box is already addressed and stamped and ready to go. All you have to do is put the diamonds inside the box, seal it up with the tape, and read the address on the box. Does that answer your questions?"

He rummaged around in the briefcase and came up with the mailing box and tape I'd prepared some days ago. He read the address on the box. "Who's Henry Anters?" the kid wanted to know.

"Either you or me," I told him. "A phony name I dreamed up to mail the ice to in San Francisco. It's General Delivery. We call for the package when we get there. Simple."

Garcia nodded and dumped the papers of diamonds out of Goosens' slit dispatch case into the mailing box and sealed it up. The next town we went through, he dropped the box into the chute of one of those postboxes they had in front of the post office on the main street. The post office was dark and we didn't see anybody on the street. It was past two in the morning.

A minute later, Garcia dropped Goosens' leather envelope into a litter box on a corner. Then he grunted and squirmed down in his seat and leaned his head back and got quiet. Pretty soon I heard him breathing heavily, almost snoring. I looked over at him. He'd pulled off his sideburns and mustache and he looked a lot younger without them, less like a sharpie.

He'd taken the news, that he was accessory to murder, pretty good for a kid. Anyway, better he learned it from me than from a radio bulletin after they found Goosens' body. Maybe his share of the diamonds would make up to him for it. I hoped so. He was a good

kid. It was a lousy break for both of us that Goosens recognized me, because you can't run fast enough or far enough to get clear after a job as big as this one if you leave a witness behind you who knows you pulled it.

I looked at the gasoline gauge and saw we had a quarter of a tank left. I figured to stop at the next open station and fill up, because you never know where your next gallon is coming from in the middle of the night. I drove for another hour. Garcia was sleeping like a baby beside me. Once his head rolled sideways and even that didn't wake him up. He didn't come to until I turned into a 24-hour gas station in a place called Veneta, near the state line, and pulled up beside the premium pump. Then Garcia opened one eye, yawned, stretched and looked out the window.

"Where's this?" he asked me.

I told him. He nodded and climbed out of the car. "Never heard of the place," he said, "but I guess they have a men's room, anyway." He headed for it.

An old fellow in a golf cap came out of the station and asked what he could do for us. "Fill it up with premium," I said. "And check the oil."

Garcia came back from the men's room and put a dime in the cola machine and said, "You want one, Pete?"

I told him no. The old boy in the cap opened up the hood of the car and groped around for the oil stick. When he showed it to me, it registered full. I asked him to check the water in the battery. Then I went to the men's room myself. It seemed like a long evening.

When I came out, Garcia was standing at the back of the car, jawing with the old gas-jockey, who was hanging up the hose. "Seventeen gallons on the nose," the man reported. "It's filled right up."

I paid him cash for gasoline.

"Want me to drive a while?" Garcia asked me.

"Go ahead. I'll try for a nap again."

We climbed in the car and got going. Garcia said, "The old boy told me we had sixty miles of two-lane before we pick up the interstate again."

"We won't pick up any more interstates," I said. "Secondary roads from now on. The interstate gave us a flying start, but it's on the interstates they'll start looking for us after they find Goosens."

We didn't say anything more after that for quite a while. I leaned back and tried to relax and take a nap but I couldn't seem to unwind, somehow. Instead of getting looser,

I was getting tighter. I couldn't figure why. We'd come more than two hundred miles; we'd got rid of the stones; it was a safe bet Goosens' body wasn't found yet. The way it looked, we were home free. All the same, something was nagging at me.

I kept remembering Goosens' legs moving against the red hotel rug, and I kept wondering what he'd tried to say before he cashed in. It didn't make a lot of difference. He couldn't say anything to anybody anymore. The cops would never learn about me from him. The only safe witness was a dead one in a job as big as this.

I didn't move or open my eyes, but that's when it first hit me . . . the realization that even with Goosens dead, I wasn't completely in the clear. I give you my word it never occurred to me before that minute. Otherwise I wouldn't have shot my mouth off like a sinner at confession. Believe me, I felt sick.

There was hardly any traffic on our two-lane road. It was getting on for four in the morning now. The road kind of wandered around as though it couldn't make up its mind which direction to go, through farm country, patches of woods, up to a hilltop, down again. For about six miles it ran alongside a little river through a twisting gully. The gully was black as your hat. Every few hundred yards the road went over a culvert that drained off the water from the hillside on one side of us into the river on the other.

I sat up in my seat and said, "Damn it all, I can't get to sleep."

"Nerves." Garcia smiled without turning his head.

"Could be, I guess. Anyway, pull up when you come to a good place and I'll drive."

Garcia pulled up where the road widened a little on a short straightaway. He got out of the car and walked around the front end. Our headlights were on. They probably blinded him a little because he didn't notice that I hadn't slid over under the wheel. When he opened the door on my side, I said, "I'm sorry, kid," and shot him. The bullet took him under the chin and angled up. He was dead before he knew what hit him. I was glad of that. He was a good kid.

I couldn't see any headlights coming either direction, so I turned off our own. I got out of the car, then, and took Garcia by the slack of his jacket and dragged him along the shoulder of the road to where one of those culverts went under it about twenty yards ahead. I went down into the runoff ditch with him and looked at the culvert. It was maybe three feet in diameter and there was plenty of room for

Garcia in it. He wouldn't block the flow of water unless there was a flood. I went through his clothes and took his wallet and everything else he had on him that might give a hint who he was. Then I fed him into the upper end of the culvert and worked him along it until he was out of sight. I left him lying there in about three inches of water and went back to the car.

Still no cars in either direction; my luck was holding up. I took my gun out of my topcoat pocket and heaved it as far as I could out into the river. Then I got Garcia's plastic airplane bag out of the trunk, put his wallet and other stuff in it along with a couple of good-sized rocks from the side of the road to weight it, and slung the whole business into the river after my gun. Finally, I got behind the wheel, turned on my headlights and took off. It would be a long time before they found Garcia, and when they did, it would take them another long time to identify him.

I felt bad about Garcia. You can't work with a kid that long without getting to like him. If only Goosens hadn't recognized me, Garcia would still be alive. I tried to cheer myself by thinking that when I added Garcia's share of the diamonds to mine, I could live it up with the best of them for quite a few years to come. After an hour or so I began to feel a lot better. I even thought that if Garcia were still here to drive me, I could get to sleep at last. Isn't that the way it goes?

I kept on at a steady clip and pretty soon I picked up the interstate that Garcia had mentioned. After a few miles on that, I left it and angled southwest to cut between Cincinnati and Indianapolis and then went northwest again to pick up U.S. 36. I didn't hurry but I didn't loaf, either.

By seven the next morning I was over four hundred miles away from where Goosens was hiding under his bed, and the signs all pointed to another nice spring day.

I stopped for breakfast at a diner fifty miles west of Indianapolis. I needed coffee to keep me awake now. I wasn't hungry but I had a Danish with the third cup of coffee, just to be eating something. Two hours after that, at a wide place in the road called Danforth, I stopped and had the gas tank topped off again. That car used gas like it was going out of style. I thought maybe I'd buy another make of car next time. Then I remembered that I'd soon have enough money so I wouldn't give a damn how many miles to a gallon I got. I drove on west.

A couple of miles east of Springfield's city limits I ran into a

roadblock. Two patrol cars were pulled up on the shoulder of the road with their red flashers going. A cop beside the road waved me down. I pulled over and stopped.

The cop, a big guy in highway patrol uniform, walked up to my window and said, "Good morning," in a polite voice.

I said, "Hi," in a voice just as polite as his.

"Would you mind getting out of the car?"

"Getting out?" I was surprised. "What for?"

"Will you please get out?" He was still polite, and opened the door of my car like a silent invitation. There was another uniformed man behind him. A guy in plain clothes with a crooked nose came up on the other side of my car. The traffic went swishing by us on the highway. A third patrolman was waving the cars through.

Whatever they were after, they weren't fooling. I said, "Why not?" and stepped out of the car.

"Put your hands on the roof of the car and stand quiet," the cop said.

I did what he told me. I could feel his hands going over me. They patted my pockets, my belt line, up and down my legs, under each arm. I was glad I'd tossed my gun into that river back in Ohio.

The cop said over the top of the car to the plainclothes boy with the crooked nose, "He's clean, Al."

Al came around the car and said, also politely, "If your arms are getting tired you can turn around now. Would you mind letting us see your car registration and driver's license?"

I dug them out of my wallet and handed them over.

Reading from them, Al said, "Peter Westervelt, San Francisco. Is that you?"

"That's me."

"Is this your address?"

I nodded yes.

"What is it?" he said then, holding the cards so I couldn't see them.

I told him. He didn't look surprised that I knew my own address. He didn't look happy, either. Maybe he thought I'd stolen the car, complete with owner's cards.

I said, "What's the problem, boys? Or is it a secret?"

The uniformed cop said, "We're sorry we can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

Al took over. "We don't know, ourselves," he confessed. He was pretty sore at somebody, and I didn't think it was me. "What happened is, we got word from the highway patrol up the line to stop a blue car with California license plates 156-E-290. And that's you."

I said, "That's me."

Al said, "We kind of understood you were armed and desperate." He wasn't exactly apologizing but it sounded pretty lame.

I leaned against the car. "That patrol up the line must be out of its skull. What would give them a screwy idea like that?"

He looked back up the road. "Maybe we'll find out now. Here it comes."

A cruiser pulled up behind us. A uniformed cop jumped out of it and came running up to us. He looked at me. "You got him?" He was fat and out of breath.

"We got him." From Al's voice, this was the guy he was sore at. "And where did you get that jazz you put on the air about him?"

The fat cop muttered something too low for me to hear, and Al said to the patrol officer beside me, "Keep an eye on him, Joe." Then he went off a little way with the fat cop and they held a conference. Every once in a while one of them would look at me. I watched them but I couldn't tell what they were talking about.

In a couple of minutes, the fat cop handed something to Al, went back and climbed in his cruiser, made a fast U-turn and started back east. Al came back to me.

He gave me a funny look. "Are you in a hurry, Mr. Westervelt?"

"I am, as a matter of fact."

"Too much of a hurry to stop off for an hour while we try to clear this up?"

"Clear what up?"

"Offhand, I'd say it's a joke of some kind, Mr. Westervelt. I'd like to check it out, though, if you'll cooperate by coming to headquarters for a little while."

"Why should I?" I was feeling edgy again. "You charging me with anything?"

"I can charge you with going sixty in a thirty-five mile zone, if you want it that way."

"This is no thirty-five mile zone. That sign right there says sixty."

"I can't quite read it from here." Al was bland as cream.

I said, "All right, damn it, I'll come. But hurry it up, will you? If it's a joke, it's a lousy one."

Al said, "That's sensible. I'll drive your car, if you don't mind." He got behind the wheel. One of the uniformed cops got in the back seat. "You ride beside me, Mr. Westervelt," Al said.

I got in and Al waved to the other cops beside the road and yelled, "Thanks," as we went by them.

I didn't say anything. I sat there and tried to figure out what the hell went on. As far as I could see, there wasn't any handle sticking out anywhere behind me that they could have grabbed to tie me up

with Goosens or the diamonds or Garcia. All the same, I was edgy. You can understand that. I wasn't exactly an innocent citizen even if I was sure they couldn't pin anything on me, but they tell me that even innocent citizens feel uneasy when they deal with cops.

Al took me to a neat squad room at police headquarters, sat me down in a straight chair with a couple of six-months-old magazines, and left me with the uniformed patrolman who was supposed to see that I kept on cooperating, I guess.

As it turned out, it didn't take an hour. Al, the cop told me, was a Lieutenant Randall of Homicide, and he sent for me in forty-five minutes. The uniformed cop guided me to Al's shoe-box office. There was only one dirty window in the room, and Al was sitting behind a beat-up desk in a swivel chair that squeaked every time he moved. I sat down in a chair across from him without being asked. I tried to make something out of the expression on his face but I couldn't. There wasn't any expression on it.

He said, "Well, Mr. Westervelt, it wasn't a joke after all. I was wrong."

I felt a rush of relief. "I'm glad we've got that settled. Can I go now?"

He swung his chair. It squealed like a rat in pain. "Not just yet, no. We're holding you."

The relief went away. "For what?"

"Suspicion of murder, armed robbery and grand larceny, among other things." He kept his eyes on me. "How does that grab you for openers?"

"Now *you're* joking," I said.

"Far from it."

I took in a breath and said, "Who am I supposed to have murdered?"

"A diamond salesman named Goosens." He came out with it as if announcing that it was going to rain. The words hit me like rain . . . cold rain.

I said, "I never heard of him."

"No? Then there's somebody named John Garcia."

"Him, either."

"And somebody named Henry Anters."

I got out my handkerchief and wiped my upper lip.

Al said, "I'm not going to con you, Westervelt. We've got you good."

"For what? I haven't done anything, I keep telling you."

He tipped up the dog-eared blotter on his desk and pulled out a dirty piece of paper. It had writing on it. "A service station attendant in Danforth found this inside the

cap of your gas tank this morning," he told me. He held it up. "The service station attendant called the Highway Patrol and they alerted everybody from Danforth to Pittsfield. Including us."

"What is it?" I asked.

Al grinned. "It's a message from Garcia."

I told him again, "I never heard of any Garcia."

"Let me read it to you." Al folded the paper up so two big words printed on it in pencil showed on top. "See that? CALL POLICE! That's what was staring the service station attendant right in the eye when he took off your gas cap this morning in Danforth. While you were in the men's room, he took out the note and read the rest of it."

"What's it say?" I felt rotten all of a sudden.

"It says, 'This man is a killer. Check room 429, Continental Hotel, Pittsburgh. Also Henry Anters, General Delivery, San Francisco.' And it's signed 'John Garcia'."

I dabbed at my lip again.

Al said, "I've been in touch with Pittsburgh. When I asked them to check room 429 at the Continental Hotel, they found a man named Goosens under the bed, shot to death. A diamond salesman, by his papers. I've also been in touch with the wholesaler he worked for, who says Goosens flew into Pittsburgh last night with three hundred and seventy thousand dollars' worth of diamonds. Pittsburgh says there's no sign of diamonds in his room or on his body."

I thought back. Garcia . . . while we got gas in Veneta, that first time, Garcia had gone to the men's room first, then me. Garcia must have written the note in there, then stuck it into the gas cap while I was in the can. I remembered he was standing at the back of the car, jawing with the old man when I came out.

Al went on, "I'd say that this John Garcia's note checked out pretty good so far, wouldn't you?" Then he added in a hurry, "Don't answer that. I'm advising you of your constitutional rights now. You don't need to answer any questions I ask if you don't want to. And you have the right to have a lawyer present if you want one."

"Who, me?" I said. "What would I want a lawyer for? Ask me anything you like. I haven't done anything. And I don't know what this is all about."

"Never heard of Henry Anters?"

I shook my head. They could never connect me with that name.

"The post office in San Francisco is going to hold anything that arrives in that name. I talked to them, too."

"You have been busy, haven't you?" I had it worked out now. I stretched. "But you've got nothing you can hold me on. I told you once, I'll tell you again, I never heard of Goosens, Garcia, or any diamonds. And nobody can prove I did. A crank note put into a man's gas cap by some nut doesn't prove he's a killer or a diamond thief. And you damn well know it."

Al said, "You sure you never heard of Garcia, eh?"

"Again. I never heard of him."

Al gazed out his dirty office window. "My guess is, Garcia was in on the heist with you. If you killed Goosens during the stickup, maybe Garcia realized all of a sudden what a rough guy he was hooked to, and he figured maybe he was next on your list." His eyes came back to me. "Was he?"

He didn't expect an answer. I didn't give him one. He said, "If you want my opinion, you did know Garcia. And he knew you."

I thought to myself, he did at that, better than I knew him. All the same, he hadn't been as cute as he thought with his little note in the gas cap. Because note or no note, there was nothing to prove a connection between me and Goosens; or between me and Henry Anters; or between me and Garcia. My gun was on the bottom of a river; Garcia's things ditto and his body missing; the diamonds were in the mail and would never be called for now by Henry Anters in San Francisco. I felt bad about that. Garcia had fouled me up there. But unless the police could tie me in with the diamonds, they had no case at all that I could see.

Al could have been reading my mind. He put his hand into the middle drawer of his desk and brought out two diamonds. He cupped them in the palm of his hand and held them for me to see. "Look what we found in the gas tank of your car," he said.

I didn't have much heart for it, but I kept trying. I said, "What are they?"

"Diamonds." He tossed them and caught them again.

"In my gas tank?"

"Yes."

"Either you're framing me or you're kidding," I said.

The look he gave me would cut grease. "I'm not framing you, and I don't kid with killers. I used to be on robbery detail, and I recognized this paper Garcia wrote his note on as a wrapper for unmounted gems. So I had your gas tank drained just for the hell of it, see? I figured if Garcia put a diamond wrapper in your gas tank, maybe he put the diamonds themselves there, too. You can see I was right."

"What do they weigh?" I asked.

He tapped Garcia's note. "The jeweler's notation here says they're five-carat stones."

That slammed the door. If they'd been smaller, I still had a chance. No expert could have identified them as part of Goosens' line, but with five-carat stones, the man who cut them could identify them in two minutes. I'd told Garcia that, I remembered now, and he'd used the information to cut my throat.

Those two diamonds tied me in with Goosens—but tight—and with Garcia, too. Because it stands to reason nobody is going to show up with two big diamonds, stolen from a murdered salesman, in his gas tank unless he's been mixed up in the action somehow, and especially not with Garcia's letter of explanation in the same gas tank.

Garcia . . . I kept thinking about him. The only time he could have palmed the packet of big diamonds was when he was getting the box ready to mail, and that meant he knew I was going to kill him before I knew it myself—before the thought even entered my head.

"This Garcia must have been quite a boy," Al said to nobody in particular. I noticed he used the past tense.

I thought to myself, Garcia *was* a good kid, except for one thing: his creepy way of knowing beforehand what was going to happen next.

Maybe some of it had rubbed off on me, because I already knew what Al was going to say next.

He said, "You want that lawyer now, Westervelt? What do you say?"

I didn't say anything. What was the use?

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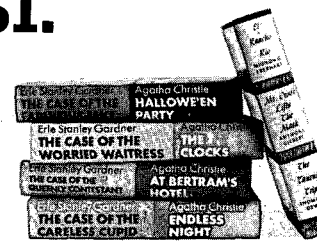

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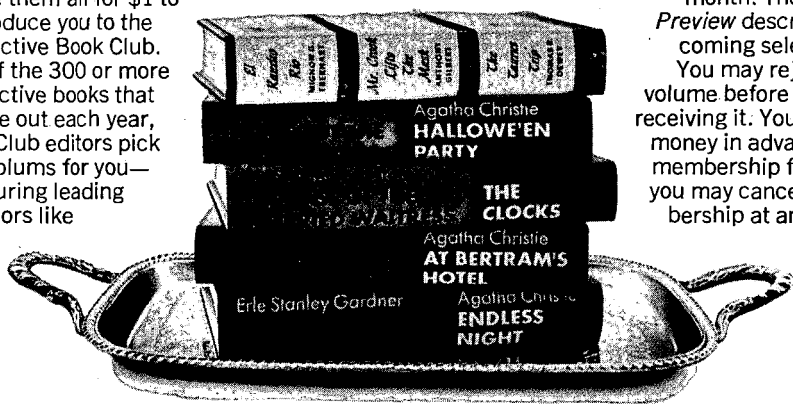

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