ALFRED

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HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

April 1971

Dear Reader:

If your thoughts in spring turn to matters other than affection and tenderness, Anthony Marsh stands ready to oblige with *The Candidate*, the April premier to a host of macabre new tales that culminate with another anti-love potion, *Double Target*, an outstanding novelette by Alberto N. Martín.

Between these fine stories lie more tonics than one could hope to find in a medicine show. Take *Human Jetsam* by Patrick O'Keeffe, *Fillies in the Spring* by Gary Brandner, *The Indians Were Here First* by Waldo Carlton Wright, and *Hot Rock* by James McKimmey . . .

Try a dose of *Sketch Me a Thief* by Clayton Matthews, *A Gallon of Gas* by William Brittain, *A Small Down Payment* by Stephen Wasylyk, *Muggers' Moon* by Bill Pronzini . . .

There are more spring pick-me-ups which will not let you down. You may never feel quite the same again.

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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What is an honor to some may be gross misfortune to another.

THE CANDIDATE

I WAS BOTH awed and puzzled over my presence in the Blue Room. There were many other meeting places in the magnificent Hotel Escador: assembly rooms, banquet halls, and so on, all available to the public. As a reporter I had frequented most of them. The Blue Room, however, was kept for very exclusive gatherings, and this was my first visit there.

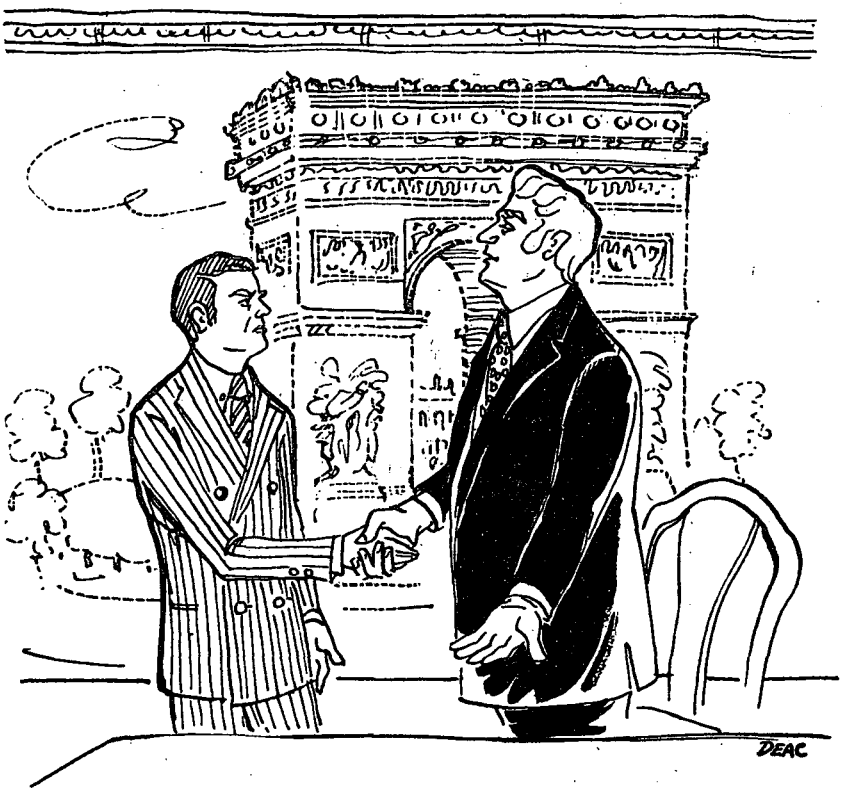
It was obvious how the room got its name. Though its walls were painted a light cream color, three of them were adorned with enormous murals in a dark blue monotone. Three ancient capitals of the world, London, Paris and Rome, were represented; London by Trafalgar Square with Nelson's Column at its center, shortened and squat, else it would have gone through the ceiling; Paris by the Etoile, a huge, baroque-looking Arc de Triomphe in the foreground; and as for Rome, what else but the steps and facade of St. Peter's, the famous colonnades fanning out like the wings of a giant bird pushing into the far corners of the room.

The other wall was blank. I was

glad; one more capital would have been too much. A pair of heavy folding doors opened into it at one end. The remainder of the wall was traversed by a long bar. That's where I sat sipping my cold, diluted bourbon. A middle-aged man with thick gray hair and dark-rimmed spectacles sat near me at the bar. He introduced himself briefly as Dr. Santani. I told him my name, and we went back to our drinks.

I watched my boss, Sam Twinney, who stood in the middle of the room. He was responsible for my being there that evening. At lunch time I had found myself alone with him in his office. That did not happen too often, and now I am convinced that it must have been contrived. He looked up from a report he was reading.

"You know, Elliot, we meet in the Blue Room at eight this evening."



This was news to me; I was curious as to who the "we" represented, but when I tried to question him he was suddenly engrossed once more in his report, and I knew I was being dismissed. He was no more available the rest of the day, so here I was. I wondered why Sam was not at the bar with me. To use the popular parlance, he had a drinking problem, which was all too common knowledge at the *Record*. Then it dawned on me that he had shown no evidence of imbibing for at least a month. This also was surprising, for Sam was one of the most frustrated men I knew. He was associate news editor, and there wasn't a hope in Hades that he would ever get one more inch of promotion. He was young enough to be full of ambition still, but too old to find another post elsewhere, at least not in a paper of the caliber of the *Record*. It was owned by the Torence family, a tough, prolific bunch that kept the family circle closely knit. The present editor-in-chief was Phillip Torence; the manager and their top aides were all Torences, and whenever one of them died or got himself elected to Congress there was a whole line of Torence replicas ready to step into their place. As Sam had once confided to us when the spirits were strong in him, "Always a bridesmaid, but never a blushing bride."

I knew the man to whom Sam was talking, Markham Burnett, the attorney, a strange fellow in his own way. Massive in build, like a grizzly bear towering over Sam, he was said to have a brilliant mind. We reporters often asked each other why he had not specialized in corporate or estate law, any sphere where he would not be called upon to speak in public. But some inexplicable, masochistic urge obliged him to take on trial cases. I had often seen him in court, wooden-tongued, his shoulders stooped over the table in front of him, staring down at his papers, while the judge looked away in embarrassment and the jury shuffled their feet and studied their nails; he had the hide of a grizzly bear, too. Before that evening I had never realized how tall he was. Now he stood erect, masterful and completely self-possessed.

It was nearly eight o'clock, and several other men came in, including Donald Robertson, one of the local councilmen, and Charlie Dovecote, a co-worker of mine. Charlie was in charge of the art department, which meant that he cut up photographs and helped arrange the layout. I had not dared to approach Sam, but Charlie went over boldly and was introduced to Markham Burnett. Encouraged by

his example, I was just about to follow when the attorney raised his arm like a mast and sailed to one end of the long dining table. This was the signal for the other men to take their places—apparently it was to be an all male gathering—and I trailed after Dr. Santani to the opposite end of the table. I had St. Peter's behind me, while Markham Burnett had his back to the Etoile. Sam Twinney took a place halfway down, facing Trafalgar Square, and Charlie Dovecote sat opposite him. In a few seconds the waiters were there, asking for our orders.

While we ate, Dr. Santani talked freely about himself. He was a family physician, well established, financially secure. I felt envious. Then he said unexpectedly, "I don't have to tell you, of course, it's all utterly futile."

Something in the atmosphere warned me not to show surprise. "In what way?" I asked guardedly.

"I never wanted this sort of life. I wanted to do research, but it's too late now." He leaned over confidentially. "I'm convinced I could have found the cure for cancer. Think of it, I could have made a name for myself as famous as Louis Pasteur's."

I agreed with him. "You certainly would."

He pushed his plate away and looked at me clinically. "And what about you, Mr. Pride—have I got the name right?"

"Yes," I said, "Elliot Pride."

"What's your problem, Mr. Pride? Why don't you like being a reporter? What great ambition did you have instead?"

The man must have been psychic; I'd forgotten all about it myself, at least I thought I had. "I wanted to be a poet," I confessed.

He looked ecstatic. "A poet. You dabble in the arts, Mr. Pride, the fair sister of the sciences. I can understand. Compared with that, being a reporter must indeed seem like hackwork. But you look so young to have made the final decision."

"I am thirty-two," I said. "What final decision?"

He looked at me benignly. "You wouldn't be here tonight, Mr. Pride, if you didn't know what I was referring to."

This remark made sense by the strange process of reasoning which had been instilled into me since lunch time that day. I deemed it wise not to reply.

"When did you find out that you couldn't be a poet?" he asked.

"Three years ago."

"Most unusual," he said.

The waiters were clearing the table, pouring the coffee and collecting the money for the meal. I explained to Dr. Santani what had

happened. I had left the university with a master's degree in English, but this had not helped in my poetry career, so I took a part-time job in the school of journalism, hoping it would leave me time for my poetry. Then some of my students decided to put out a magazine and asked me for a contribution. Naturally, I obliged with a poem. This wasn't exactly how I had hoped to be published, but nevertheless, I put everything I had into it. Then I sat back and waited for the reaction. None came; it seemed as though nobody had even read it. I was devastated. This was the final, unkindest cut. That was when I threw my dreams out the window and went to work full-time for the *Record*.

He nodded knowingly. "That's the pattern. You are young, but that is definitely the pattern."

The waiters had completed their work and disappeared. We were cut off from the world by the heavy wooden doors of the Blue Room. Markham Burnett stood up, tall and impressive. By a trick of perspective, the Arc de Triomphe appeared to be draped over his broad shoulders like an ornamental collar.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I think we can begin."

There was a force and vibrancy in his voice I had never heard before. The room was immediately silent, all eyes looking up at him.

"It is my pleasure, first of all, to introduce two additional members to our group. As you are aware, by our rules, each one of us has the privilege of introducing just one new member. I see this evening that two of you have chosen to exercise that privilege. One of the newcomers is already familiar to me, Mr. Elliot Pride, who is a reporter for that excellent newspaper, the *Record*. Would you kindly stand up, Mr. Pride."

I had no intention of joining this or any other group whose purpose I did not know, but I was hypnotized by this unfamiliar, dominant Markham Burnett. I got up, completely confused, executed an awkward bow, and dropped back hurriedly into my chair, trying to catch the eye of my sponsor. But Sam Twinney kept his gaze fixed on the blue picture of Trafalgar Square. In this strange organization it seemed to be against the rules for him to recognize me.

Markham Burnett turned his attention to Charlie. "I have only briefly made the other gentleman's acquaintance. Would you, sir, kindly stand up and give us your name and your profession."

Charlie got to his feet eagerly, pushing his chair back. "My name is Charles Dovecote. I also work

for the *Record* in the art department." He sat down again. As in my own case, there was no stir, no applause, just the solemn nodding of heads up and down the table. They were indeed a strange collection.

"I see that we now have three representatives from the *Record*." Markham Burnett's bushy eyebrows knitted together and he stared down at Sam Twinney, but Sam still kept his eyes fixed on the mural in front of him.

I waited for the established procedures, formal nomination of the new members, perhaps a word of recommendation from their sponsors, some semblance of the democratic process; this would give me a chance to explain that there was possibly some error in my case. But this group had other ways of doing business. The chairman was already moving ahead like a powerful, well-oiled machine.

"It is unnecessary to say much to our new members since they have both been fully briefed by their respective sponsors regarding our objectives and procedures. It also goes without saying that we have the tacit assurance of the sponsors that these gentlemen are duly qualified to join us. Owing to the very special nature of our enterprise, we do not ask who knows whom or who has sponsored whom; we rely entirely upon your integrity and upon the common bond between us. Permit me, gentlemen, to bid you welcome to our deliberations."

He encompassed Charlie and me in a regal nod, then cast a meaningful glance at the doors sealing the room. "As you will observe, we meet free from the glare of public scrutiny. No written records are kept of our proceedings, we need no secretary and, as your sponsors have doubtless instructed you, no discussion of our transactions is permitted beyond these walls. The merest hint of our activities might be sufficient to vitiate our most carefully laid plans. Above all, we must screen ourselves from the unwelcome attentions of the law. The objective of this group is to promote a candidate for our own supreme sacred purpose, but alas, only a minute segment of mankind is sufficiently advanced to accept this proposition which appears to us self-evident. I have delved carefully into the law and I have to report with regret that our activities at this stage would be classified as a conspiracy; to use the crude legalistic jargon of our times, a conspiracy to commit a felony."

His speech stopped abruptly, and he sat down. The door had been pushed open, and a waiter came in with a fresh flask of coffee. Markham Burnett enveloped him in a

glare that should have turned him instantly to stone, but the unwitting man, conscious only of the flask in his hand and his own flat feet, padded across the room and started to refill the empty cups. Freed from the chairman's magnetism, this should have been my opportunity to get up and make my escape, but the thought made me feel ridiculous and ungracious. Besides, I was truly fascinated by this metamorphosed Markham Burnett. His tongue had been transmuted from wood to gold. If he could have addressed himself to a court of law the way he had spoken to us he could with certainty have demanded any verdict he chose.

I tried again to catch Sam Twinney's attention, but he continued to act as though I were not there. Clearly he was not my sponsor. I had no doubt he had sponsored Charlie Dovecote, and had briefed him fully, for Charlie was obviously completely at home in this gathering while I was floundering at the periphery, searching for clues as to what it was all about. Officially, Sam could only sponsor one new member; I, therefore, was present without a sponsor.

While the waiter was in the room all the men remained silent. Even Dr. Santani, sitting next to me, appeared inhibited. I pondered his earlier remark about a pattern, a pattern into which I apparently fitted, and it started to make sense. There was the doctor himself, a successful family physician, highly discontented because he had wanted to do research, mourning the fame that had been filched from him. Councilman Robertson, sitting next to him, had wanted to be mayor for twenty years and now was forced to retire from active politics because his health was failing. There was Markham Burnett, a frustrated trial lawyer, my boss, Sam Twinney, an able man who would never rise above his present position halfway up the ladder. My own problem now burned again with renewed vigor. Charlie Dovecote, too; he was a thwarted, embittered genius if I ever knew one.

I had worked at the *Record* quite a while before I got to know Charlie. He did his photo cutting in seclusion in the basement. I went down to look for him one day as I wanted a particular arrangement of pictures to go with a special article I was working on. He did not hear me come in; he was too engrossed in his project, a double-life-size sketch in charcoal, just head and shoulders, of our editor, Phillip Torence. Charlie was startled. Obviously he would have liked to hide the drawing from me, but it was too late. Phillip Torence

looked out at us wearing his best hard-nosed expression, or rather the combined hard-nosed expressions of the whole Torence clan. It reminded me of a picture of one of the Borgias.

Charlie could only stare at me with suspicion as if I might have been a spy descending on him from one of the editorial offices above.

"That's a darned good drawing," I told him warmly.

"You think so?" he said, still suspicious.

"You know darned well it is. What's a fellow with your talents doing down in this dungeon cutting up photographs? You ought to be out in the bright sunlight producing fabulous works of art."

He frowned like a man in pain. "It wouldn't work. I did want to be a portrait painter, but it wouldn't work."

"But you're a genius," I argued. "In those few lines you've summed up the characters of three generations of Torences."

He drew back his lips. "If you were Phillip Torence, would you buy that picture?"

"Most definitely," I said, slyly, "just so that I could destroy it."

"You see what I mean," he snapped. "Now, what was it you came down here to talk to me about?"

Yes, Charlie Dovecote fitted into the pattern, and so, I assume, did every other man in the room. The waiter went on pouring the coffee, blithely unaware of the withering look on the chairman's face until he came close to him. Then the flask slipped from his hand, though fortunately it was practically empty, and he fled from the room in panic, slamming the great wooden doors behind him.

Markham Burnett stood up, still glaring. "I must apologize for the interruption, gentlemen. I can assure you it will not happen again; I shall speak to the management. I was about to observe that in spite of any legal quibbles it is our firm resolve to proceed with the selection of our candidate, and then to take all possible steps to see that he is duly installed in the unique, historical position that awaits him. Every man present tonight qualifies for that high office. Unfortunately, by its very nature, one man and one man alone can attain it. That man, however, will be the representative of this group, our surrogate. Through his transcendent success we shall all achieve our own fulfillment."

There were smiles or grimaces of enthusiasm on every face. He went on. "Because of our very special situation, we are a group without written constitution or bylaws. We

need no officers. It is purely by chance that I, as one of the founding members, have taken it upon myself to conduct our meetings. The only other member of our group who performs any regular duties is Mr. Sam Twinney. By virtue of his position in the newsroom of the *Record*, he is able to keep us informed of the state of the tally before the figures are released to the public at large, and this gives us an invaluable advantage over anyone who would compete with us. We are extremely indebted to Mr. Twinney."

There was a solemn nodding of heads along the table acknowledging this debt to Sam. The chairman addressed him. "Would you like to announce the present state of the tally, Mr. Twinney."

"When I left the office it was 993," Sam said, without getting up.

The chairman pressed his thick lips together. "It is mounting at a rapid rate. We must make some immediate decisions. Firstly, as to membership—the time will soon be on us; we must close the rolls. Our two new members bring our number up to seventeen. That will be adequate for our purpose. There will be no further admissions."

No one questioned this. There was no motion, no seconder, no vote. Robert's Rules of Order did not operate in this strange conclave; they communicated by telepathy. The measure was passed.

After a moment's thought the chairman continued. "Secondly, the date for our next meeting. I think it will be safe to fix it one week from now. However, should I find the tally rising faster than I have projected, I shall convene an emergency meeting at an earlier date. Come prepared next time to select our candidate, though of course we shall not do this unless it is absolutely necessary. We are all men of high determination, but we are also creatures of flesh and blood. The strain, the responsibility of this historic burden can only be borne for a limited time by any man, however dedicated he may be."

Again there was no discussion. Markham Burnett brought his hand down sharply on the table. "Gentlemen, at eight o'clock in this room one week from now. If there are any changes in our plans you will be notified through your usual contacts."

There was no fraternizing after the meeting, and in a few minutes the Blue Room was cleared. I had hoped to glean some more details about the club, but even Dr. Santani had disappeared while I looked away. I followed after them slowly and drove home to my bachelor's apartment.

As I closed the door behind me I

felt suddenly chilled. I switched on the electric heater and reached for a bottle of bourbon.

My hand trembled with the first few sips. The meeting I had just left, conducted with impeccable propriety by a group of respected citizens, nevertheless had a terrifying undertone. They were grim men, determined to inscribe some bold mark in history. The bumbling Markham Burnett had emerged as a sinister mastermind; I would never forget the look that had shriveled that hapless waiter. There had been talk of conspiracy and felony. What did they have in mind, political assassination, blowing up some national building? Whatever it was, I wanted no part of it.

I finished my first glass of bourbon, and my thinking began to change. I poured another; the room was getting warmer. Like me, all these men were self-confessed failures, but joining the club had done something for them. The change in Markham Burnett was phenomenal. Sam Twinney had stopped drinking. Charlie Dovecote, long grown fat, flabby and taciturn, had walked that evening with a lighter step than I had ever seen. They were all men with a purpose. Without even knowing the full story of the club, I had observed some subtle changes in myself. Now I filled my glass again.

Still, I was entitled to know what I was involved in. Why shouldn't I get the full briefing? I would tackle Sam Twinney about it in the morning. He may or may not have considered himself my sponsor but, dammit, he had got me into the club and it was his responsibility to tell me what was going on. My plans grew bolder as the level of bourbon dropped. In the morning I would contrive the confrontation even if I had to throw everybody else out of the office. By this time I could hardly hold my head up. I undressed clumsily and fell into bed.

I was awakened several times by a vicious storm that smacked the rain against the windows and threatened to shake them out of their frames. I left for the office a little later than usual and had to drive with great caution because the drains had overflowed, flooding the streets. I went straight to Sam's office, but he was not there, and he did not put in an appearance all morning. At noon we found out what had happened. He had slipped down his front steps and broken a leg, and now he was in the hospital. I could not get out to see him until evening.

I found him in a ward with two other patients, his leg encased in a heavy cast from the foot to the hip

and his face still twitching with pain. Half the newspaper staff were traipsing in and out offering their condolences. This was no place to discuss a secret society.

I was able to ask him how long he was going to stay.

"The doctor says at least two weeks," he answered grimly, "and even then he won't guarantee the results. It's broken in three places."

That left only Charlie Dovecote. I cornered him alone in his basement the next morning, and he turned on me as though I had perpetrated some hideous blasphemy. "Don't you know the rules?" he hissed. "Not a word about the club outside the Blue Room."

For the next few days I kept going only by topping myself up with bourbon. I ignored the rain, which saturated me every time I went out, and continued blindly with my work. Some of my reports that week were pretty wild, the sort that usually bring letters to the editor in truckloads, but in the confusion caused by Sam's absence they went through. Whenever the bourbon wore off I was ravaged by doubts. What place did I have in this group of desperate men? I wasn't in the market for historical felony. But could I get out? Without uttering a word I had become a member of the club and had been sworn to secrecy into the bargain. Would these men permit me to escape? Each time I soothed my doubts with more bourbon.

I stayed at home on the day of the meeting in order to dry out internally and externally, and when I arrived in the Blue Room that evening I must have appeared reasonably presentable. Markham Burnett, with an overstuffed briefcase hanging from his right arm, was in the middle of the room talking to two other members. I heard him say, "I received word from Sam Twinney a short while ago. The tally has risen to 996. It's getting close, but we won't have to do anything tonight." He walked to the head of the table and sat down. The rest of us joined him, occupying the same places as before. Sam's chair remained conspicuously vacant.

"Pity about poor Sam Twinney," Dr. Santani said to me with faint satisfaction in his voice. Then he started to tell me about a research project he had planned, but which he could never hope to carry out. It seemed to act as some sort of therapy for him.

The meal ended, and the headwaiter was the last to leave. He had ordered extra jugs of coffee and closed the heavy doors with a flourish, a sign to us that we would not be disturbed this time. Markham Burnett had evidently spoken

to the management. When he was sure the doors were sealed, he rose up inside his frame of the Arc de Triomphe.

"Good evening, gentlemen, we meet again. There is no new business to discuss this evening, merely to confirm what most of you know already. The tally now stands at 996. Unfortunately, Mr. Twinney cannot be with us here tonight. He is presently in hospital indisposed. But the wires are still open to him. The time is imminent but not yet upon us. It does mean, however, that it will be imperative for us to meet again at the same hour tomorrow."

The door swung open, and Sam Twinney almost fell into the room. He pushed his heavy cast in front of him, aided by a pair of crutches he had not yet learned to use properly. His face was deathly pale and twisted with pain.

"I damned near had to post bail to get out of that damned hospital." He stopped halfway to catch his breath, then croaked, "Two more in the last hour. That brings the tally up to 998."

"Please, take your seat," said the chairman without changing his expression. He waited while Sam propelled himself the rest of the way across the polished floor and slumped into his chair, letting the crutches fall beside him with a clatter, incongruous in the still room.

Markham Burnett picked up his briefcase and rested it on the table. "We can delay no longer. There may be other individuals, heaven knows, other organizations like our own, dedicated to the same purpose. We shall proceed with our selection forthwith. The crucial hour may be tomorrow, even tonight."

From the briefcase he extracted a large black box, then a green cloth bag whose contents he emptied onto the table in front of him. They were all identical white wooden balls the size of marbles. He carefully picked out the only odd one, which was bright red, and held it up between his fingers like a rare ruby. "Gentlemen, there are sixteen white balls but only one of this color. The man who draws this is our candidate."

Sam's face was twitching as though he were about to convulse. He grabbed the edge of the table and hauled himself halfway up. "I thought we were going to do it by a show of hands, an open election. That's what we arranged. This way it's nothing but a lottery."

The chairman looked down at him coldly. "I am sorry, Mr. Twinney, but recent events have persuaded me that such a method might lead us into some vulgar political maneuvering, perhaps the

use of undue influence. I consider that my method is less vulnerable to abuse."

Sam looked desperately at Charlie, then at me. Charlie opened his mouth as if to support him, but closed it again under the chairman's stern gaze. As for me, I didn't even try to get into the act. Why should I? All the other faces remained absolutely impassive, and after a moment Sam subsided into his chair, grimacing at his own impotence. In its own incomparable fashion, the membership had voted him down.

Markham Burnett dropped the balls into the box, fastened the lid, and rattled them around. He pointed to a circular hole on one side of the box. "I shall present this to each man in turn. He will take out one ball, hold it in his hand without looking at it or showing it, and place it behind his back."

Everyone except Sam nodded that he was now ready to proceed. The chairman rattled the box once more, then offered it to the man on his right who rose, thrust his hand through the hole and withdrew a ball. From the other end of the table I could see the light glistening on his taut knuckles as he swung the hand behind him while he remained standing. The second man did the same thing, and the third, going through this routine motion as though they had rehearsed it. Charlie Dovecote's loose jowl was set when his turn came. The chairman moved unhurriedly down the table in my direction. He came to Councilman Robertson, Dr. Santani, then to me. I felt a mystical calm as I grasped the wooden ball and placed it behind my back. The chairman began to move up the other side of the table. When he reached Sam's side, Sam made no attempt to stand up, and for an instant I thought he was going to refuse to participate. Then he darted his hand through the hole and snatched out a ball, keeping his eyes glued on Markham Burnett all the time.

The chairman arrived back at his own place, and there was only one ball left. He took it out very deliberately and held his closed hand straight in front of him, facing upwards. All the other arms swung around to the front, and Markham Burnett opened his hand to reveal a gleaming white ball. Almost in the same instant the rest of us opened our hands. A rapid glance up and down the table showed me nothing but white balls. I had no need to look at my own hand to know what it contained; I could feel it burning a hole into my palm. I wanted to cast the loathesome thing away and run from the room, but Markham Burnett's eyes

were focused on me. I could not move. He spoke in his richest tones.

"Mr. Pride, would you kindly step up to the head of the table."

I let the red ball roll onto the cloth and began my walk. All heads followed me except Sam Twinney's; he concentrated furiously on Nelson's Column in front of him as if he would have liked to topple it.

I reached Markham Burnett's end of the table and stood facing him. He grasped my hand with enormous strength and said, "Congratulations, Mr. Pride. My heartiest congratulations. Gentlemen, I give you your duly elected candidate, Mr. Elliot Pride."

The men got to their feet, formed a line and filed past me, each one shaking my hand and offering me his congratulations in a subdued voice. Here and there I caught a quick smile, but it was a symbol of tension, not joy. Sam Twinney did not join the line. He remained weighted down in his seat, glowering at the painting on the wall.

The men were back in their places; I still stood at Markham Burnett's side. He allowed a full minute of total silence to elapse, then started his address.

"Gentlemen, you have chosen your candidate, and no one can challenge the validity of his election. I know that each one of you joined this club hoping that you might now be standing in his place, but only one person can attain the singular eminence for which we have selected him. For the rest of us, our task is to ensure that he fulfills his mission. From now on we must work as a unified, disciplined band. There is no room for the minutest error. When you leave this room you will all repair to your homes and remain there on a standby basis so that your contacts can reach you without delay. As soon as you receive the word, you will drive immediately to the northwest corner of the parking lot of this hotel. You will take care to make yourselves as inconspicuous as possible. Mr. Twinney will resume his post, and I myself will undertake to inform our candidate and conduct him personally to the appointed place."

In a few moments the Blue Room was empty except for Markham Burnett, Sam and myself. Sam was slumped in his chair looking tired and beaten. "I'll call a cab and have you taken to the newsroom," Markham Burnett said. Then he took my arm and led me out to the lobby. "Go back to your apartment. I'll get in touch with you there."

Outside, a fresh storm was blow-

ing up, the wind, rising in gusts, spattering the rain against the hollow-sounding bodies of the parked cars. I climbed into my own weatherworn model and drove home, not knowing how I got there. As soon as I closed the door behind me, I wished I hadn't. I should have gone somewhere else; gotten lost; left town until this macabre game had played itself out. They could find themselves some other patsy. I poured myself a generous drink of bourbon and sat down feeling that this couldn't really be happening. A week ago I had innocently attended a sedate social gathering. Now I was the key member of a group of eccentrics, appointed to perpetrate some world-shattering felony for them. It was ridiculous, preposterous.

I emptied my glass, and the situation felt less strange. I had several refills, then fell asleep in my chair.

The phone woke me. It took me some seconds to realize where I was before I picked it up. Markham Burnett was speaking to me as though he were addressing the club. "The tally now stands at 999. I'm coming right over for you. Please be ready."

He hung up, and I looked at my watch. It was exactly 5:35. I was cold, sober, and in complete panic. I dashed into the bedroom and started piling clothes, anything that came into my hands, into a suitcase till it was stuffed full. I was kneeling on it, trying with impatient fingers to fasten the locks, when the door buzzer sounded. It couldn't be Markham Burnett; he lived on the other side of town. But when I opened the door, there he stood, dressed in a heavy coat, his thick features expressionless, dark hat pulled firmly onto his head. I guessed where he had been. There is a hotel opposite the apartment house and he had kept vigil on the lobby all night. I put on my own coat and hat and walked down in front of him, perspiring. It was still dark outside, and the wind blew freezing rain into our faces. His car was parked at the curb, and I started toward it mechanically, but he said, "No, you take your own car, don't you remember? It has to be left there, your visiting card to the world. Once our mission is achieved, there must be no more secrecy."

He took shelter momentarily just inside the garage door while I backed out. As I passed him, he raised his hand in a grandiose salute. "You go ahead. I'll be right behind you."

I drove down to the Escador, and the whole time I could see his headlights, the beam up, blinding me whenever they flashed into my mirror. All thoughts of escape had

left me now. I was like a rabbit trapped in the hypnotic stare of a snake. His headlights prodded me all the way to the hotel and came closer still as I made the turn onto the deserted parking lot. We drove across it diagonally, ignoring the marked lanes, and pulled up with his car almost touching mine. We got out. The other cars were huddled together in one corner, their drivers behind the wheels. Only Sam Twinney, hatless and with a wild expression in his eyes, was out in the rain. His leg cast had gone soft so that it squished on the asphalt as he stumbled in our direction. The other men left their cars and formed a knot around us.

Markham Burnett spoke rapidly but with sharp precision. "We have no time to lose. Take only three cars; it will be a bit crowded coming back, but we shall manage. For the trip there I shall drive our candidate in his own car. There will be room for two others at the back; who will it be?"

He looked quickly at me first, then at the faces around him. No one answered. I was indifferent, and the others were not ready for the question. He made the decision for them. "I think your two coworkers would be the obvious gentlemen to escort you. Mr. Twinney, Mr. Dovecote, would you kindly step this way."

Sam held back sullenly, but Charlie took his arm and began to assist him into my car. Markham Burnett took the wheel. No longer my own master, I got in beside him, and we moved off while Sam with his cast and his clumsy crutches was still trying to organize himself on the back seat. The road was wet and the solid rain obscured our view, but Markham Burnett drove straight on as though it were bright daylight. I looked back at the dim lights following us, and at that moment I was thrown violently against the door as we took a curve much too quickly. After that I kept my eyes on the road ahead.

We drove for a number of miles, then joined the freeway. Here we met other cars groping their way cautiously through the blinding rain, but our cortege took to the middle of the road and passed them by at top speed. Markham Burnett's features were set hard and his huge hands spread over the steering wheel, keeping us on a steady course on the crest of the road. We were approaching the lead-on to the bridge, the imposing structure of stone and steel spanning the wide waterway that divides our region into northern and southern shores.

The rain gushed endlessly from solid dark clouds, but here and

there a gap occurred through which we could see smudges of uncertain light. As we reached the open bridge, the car was jolted violently by the crosswind that blows in from the ocean, and Markham Burnett had to grip the wheel tight to prevent us from being blown across the center line. He kept doggedly on, then halfway across the bridge he suddenly slowed down, pulled over to the curb and stopped. He turned to me, his eyes glowing. "This will be the ideal place."

I looked around. The other cars were drawing up behind us, dimming their lights.

"I said this is the place," he repeated impatiently. He leaned heavily against me, but I remained rooted to my seat. I could hear Charlie struggling with the door behind me, trying to force it open against the wind. It gave way suddenly, and a spray of icy particles blew in, slapping against the side of my neck.

Markham Burnett shouted at me furiously. "Will you get out! This is no time to dawdle." Then his head jerked around. "Dammit, we may be too late."

He pointed to a small sports car barely visible through the mist and rain, parked against the opposite footway. Without regard for any traffic that might be passing by, he flung open his door and started across the road. My own door was yanked open; Charlie grabbed my arm and dragged me out. The full force of the wind caught us, and we found ourselves hurtling across the road in the wake of our frantic leader, the rest of the pack close behind us.

The car was empty, and the driver, a pathetic figure in a long, heavy coat, was already at the iron-studded parapet, almost crushed against it by the force of the gale. It was like watching a puppet; the arms worked their way up in strained, jerky movements, groping for an overhead girder, then dragged the body up stiffly onto the narrow ledge. Markham Burnett reached it as it crouched there precariously, and at that instant the wind caught the hem of the coat, flinging it high to reveal two slim, stockinged legs and the frill of feminine garments. He made a grab for her ankles, but she sailed away like a sea gull before the wind, leaving in his hand a delicately fashioned high-heeled shoe.

He spun around, looking like some grotesque monster in the dirty gray light. "Damn. Damn. A ridiculous, stupid female. If only we hadn't dawdled, and had gotten here one minute earlier. Madam One Thousand, I salute you, or is it Miss One Thousand, some

frustrated spinster, I'll wager? Pah!" He spat coarsely into the space she had occupied a few seconds earlier, flinging the shoe after her, and in that unguarded moment the gale tore his hat off, sending it in the path of the shoe, a final humiliating tribute to his frail, unknown vanquisher. As we watched it disappear, Sam Twinney came up, his crutches slipping wildly over the wet pavement.

Markham Burnett turned on me, his teeth bared. "We can still claim the glory. Who will know whether she was number one thousand or number one thousand and one?" He raised his powerful arms as if he were prepared to lift me bodily and hurl me over the parapet.

Sam Twinney jabbed at him with a crutch and screamed, "You can't do that, Markham. Don't forget I'm a newspaperman. I'll see that this story is written exactly how it happened."

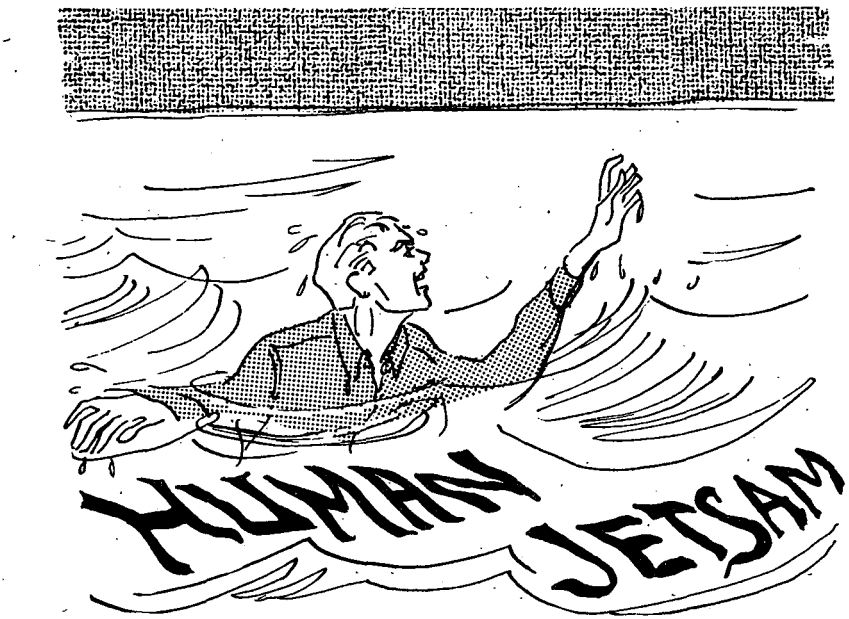
For several horrible seconds Markham Burnett stood there, his arms held high, staring from face to face. No one made a move; this time he was the beaten man. He sagged forward, transformed to the old Markham Burnett of the courtroom. Keeping his bare head low, he started back across the road, leaning his ungainly bulk against the wind. Sam's cast was a soggy, useless mess by now; Charlie and Dr. Santani had to carry him back to one of the cars. The other men piled in after them, and in a moment they were gone, leaving me, their discarded candidate, soaked to the skin by the merciless rain. As soon as my senses returned I fought my way back to my own car, made an illegal U-turn and drove back to my apartment.

That was three weeks ago. My bones are still chilled, and the cough threatens to tear my chest apart. The doctor cannot understand why my progress is so slow. I shall never return to the *Record* or any other paper. If I survive I shall go back to my poetry, even if I have to starve in a garret. One thing I know in my soul; I can no longer afford the easy luxury of failure. It does things to the human mind which the mind itself cannot encompass.

The self-reliant man, if one defers to Emerson, must also be a nonconformist.

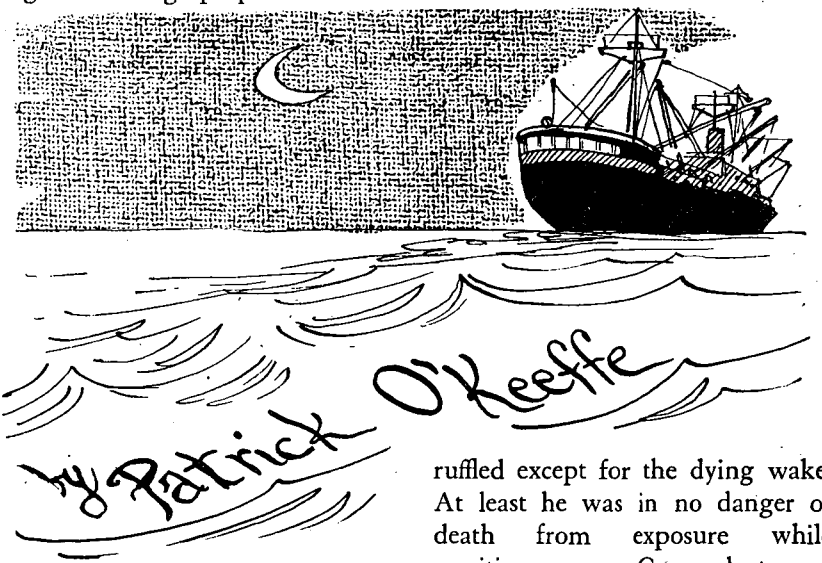
WHEN GROMACK came up from the engine room shortly after midnight he trudged out to the after-well deck to try to cool off before going along to the galley for milk and a sandwich. It was close to a hundred and ten down below, and his khaki shirt was sticking to his back. On deck, with a following wind of the same speed as the ship, it was almost like being in a dead calm.

Gromack folded his bare arms along the top of the chest-high bulwark and leaned on them limply, tired from his four-hour watch. There was no moon, and only a scattering of dim stars spangled the overcast sky; no lights of other vessels were in sight. Gromack stared down into the darkness, hearing but not yet seeing the wash churned by the freighter's passage through the Caribbean Sea.



Suddenly he was seized by the ankles from behind and swung clear off his feet. He was a slim man, but the full weight of his light body was thrown onto his arms, trapping them and preventing him from clutching at the bulwark. With his chest as a pivot, he was swiveled by the legs parallel to the bulwark and swiftly toppled overboard.

As he hurtled downward, he had a terrifying mental vision of the huge thrashing propeller blades.



by Patrick O'Keeffe

His body hit the sea with the full force of the ship's fifteen knots. Half stunned, he kicked back to the surface, gasping and spewing brine. He heard the thundering of the propeller and struck out madly away from it. The noise dwindled. That horror was past.

Gromack trod water, brushing the drops from his eyes, searching the darkness. He caught a glimpse of the white stern light, receding into the blackness. It would come back. Someone would have seen him go overboard. He'd be hard to find, even with the searchlight, but it would be his luck to be spotted on the first run back, before a shark got to him.

The sea was warm, and unruffled except for the dying wake. At least he was in no danger of death from exposure while awaiting rescue. Gromack turned on his back and floated, to conserve his strength. He kicked himself upright at intervals, peering into the night in all directions, now unsure which was the right one. It would take time for someone to rush to

the bridge, more time for the ship to come round.

After what seemed an endless cycle of treading water and floating, without a glimpse of approaching red and green lights or a sweeping searchlight beam, Gromack's spirits died. He'd been deluding himself with false hopes. It had been too dark for anyone to see him go overboard except the man who threw him over.

But why? Why had someone wished to drown him? He hadn't been in the ship more than two days. He'd joined her in what was practically a pier-head jump, a complete stranger to all hands. He'd had no rows, no trouble of any kind; there'd been no former shipmates with an old grudge to work off. Gromack gazed up in helpless rage at the few stray stars, stars he had become familiar with on clear nights at sea—Sirius, Betelgeuse, Rigel. The next time they crossed the sky, he'd be gone.

As minute followed minute and he remained afloat and unattacked, Gromack's spirits revived. Perhaps there were no sharks in his immediate vicinity. If he could manage to keep afloat until dawn, he'd stand some chance of pulling through. There was scant hope of being picked up before daylight, for passing vessels wouldn't see him in the dark, might even run him down, and unless one passed close at hand, the odds were against making himself heard.

Gromack began lightening himself. His engine-room shoes were loose-fitting loafers and easily dragged off; he unbuckled his belt and worked out of his dungaree trousers, and then out of his shirt. He turned onto his back again. It would be a long four or five hours to sunrise. Until it was light enough to see his wristwatch, he'd have to guess at the time by the stars.

Gromack bitterly regretted having joined the *Lempa*. His previous ship, a tanker out of Galveston, had landed him in San Juan with double pneumonia. When fit for sea again, he'd agreed to the agent's request that he waive his right to a passage back to Galveston and to sign on the *Lempa* instead. Her third assistant engineer had been beaten up outside a nightclub on the previous night, and her sailing was being delayed indefinitely while a replacement was sought. It would be only for a short trip, from Puerto Rico across to Colombian ports and thence to New York. Then, they said, he'd be free to return to his regular tanker company.

Single, with no parents or other relatives dependent on him, Gromack had been content to drift

from one line to another as third assistant—freighters, tankers, fruiters, passenger ships—but of late, he'd been thinking it was about time he settled down and the Ponce Line was a good outfit. It was a tough company to get into; they'd hardly look at you if you didn't hold a chief's license. Doing them this favor could lead to a steady job with the line.

Steady job! What it had got him was the deep six, ditched overboard like a length of unwanted dunnage. Gromack almost wept with rage.

The night dragged on with dispiriting slowness; the few faint stars showed no sign of fading into a sky turning gray with approaching dawn. Once, when Gromack came upright and stared into the darkness, he saw the red side-light of a vessel in the distance. In misery, he watched it disappear, then turned onto his back again. The water was feeling less warm, and he was getting touches of cramp. His strength was failing, and he'd come off watch dog-tired. The odds had been against him from the beginning, he realized.

He became drowsy, keeping afloat more by instinctive than by willed effort. It must be about four o'clock, he estimated wearily; another long hour or so to sunrise. He began dozing fitfully, finally realized he was no longer in darkness. It was daylight at last.

He kicked himself upright. A red sliver of sun was already on his horizon, which was not much more than a mile or so distant at surface level. The wide expanse of gray water surrounding him was a dismal emptiness.

All at once something shot over his head, skimmed along the surface, and disappeared in a splash; then another and another, until it was like a volley of silver arrows. It came to him that they were flying fish. He'd heard that they leaped from the sea when pursued by a foe. This one might be a barracuda.

Gromack began thrashing the sea frantically with arms and legs to scare off the deadly fish. The effort cost him strength. He felt himself submerging, brine flooding his mouth and nostrils. He kicked and clawed back to the surface, retching and vomiting salt water. He came to rest on his back again, struggling for breath, seething with blind hatred for the man who had brought about this agony.

The sea became quiet again. The sun was growing into a great fireball. There was no wind, no sound except the gentle lapping of water against his face. It lulled him back to sleepiness.

Presently he began hearing a faint rhythmic sound, as if in a

strange dream. It grew louder, and finally stirred him to response. He trod water, blinking weakly. His eyes came to focus on a small two-masted schooner, a foresail up but hanging limp. Through his bleary eyes, raw from brine, she had the haze-like appearance of a mirage, but the sound was real—the chugging of an auxiliary engine.

She was heading in his direction, would pass close at hand. The sight roused him from his languor. He flung up an arm, waving frenziedly. He flailed the sea to make himself seen, knowing that a man in the ocean is as inconspicuous as a fly in a pond. He stopped to look. There was no sign of movement around the schooner's wheelhouse.

Gromack made out the misty figure of a boy up in the bows, apparently flaking down some ropes. Gromack shouted. The boy remained absorbed in his work. The voice had perhaps been lost in the noise of the engine. Gromack shouted again and beat the sea to a froth, choking and spluttering as the salt water splashed into his mouth. The boy gave no sign of having heard. The little vessel was now almost abeam of Gromack. What was perhaps his only hope of remaining alive was slipping by.

Gromack lacked the strength to swim toward the schooner. He drew on the little that remained to yell and scream himself hoarse. At last the boy heard. He straightened up and looked aft, as if thinking he was being hailed from the wheelhouse. Gromack shrieked like a madman. The boy looked out over the sea, his head veering like a radar scanner, seeking the voice. Gromack's vocal cords broke down. He flailed the sea hysterically.

The boy spotted him. For what was an agonizingly long moment, he stood gaping, then started running toward the wheelhouse, pointing seaward. Gromack went under. With fast-ebbing strength, he fought back to the surface.

The schooner had gone by, but she was coming round. Gromack became vaguely aware of a bright blue hull drifting down upon him, and presently arms were hauling him up over the low bulwark.

The auxiliary schooner was a Venezuelan coasting vessel bound from Aruba to the Colombian port of Cartagena. When she reached port, the local Ponce Line agents took Gromack under their wing and provided him with clothing, money, and hotel room to await the arrival of the *Lempa*. She was due in a few days, to load coffee for New York. Gromack received with grim satisfaction word that he was to rejoin the *Lempa*. His ordeal in the sea had imbued him with vengefulness for the man

who had inflicted it upon him, and a determination to find him.

On returning aboard, Gromack found his room and belongings undisturbed. As was to be more or less expected, the *Lempa* had been unable to find a replacement for him in her other foreign ports of call, and his room had remained unoccupied. The first and second assistants had doubled up to share his watch between them. The captain had been notified by radiogram that Gromack had been picked up, but with no mention of having been thrown overboard. When he questioned Gromack, with the chief engineer present, he was shocked by Gromack's account of the attempt on his life.

"When you were reported missing at breakfast time, I turned back to look for you. I figured you'd fallen overboard somehow or other, or even jumped over, but this—" The captain shook his head incredulously. "There's been no trouble on board, not to my knowledge anyway; certainly none that would make a man want to commit murder."

"There's certainly someone on board who wanted to murder me, and may still want to," replied Gromack.

"It puzzles me," said the chief engineer, a slender man like Gromack. "Mr. Gromack was getting along well with the other engineers and the men in his watch."

"Perhaps he was mistaken for someone else," suggested the captain.

"It was no mistake," said Gromack grimly. "I did a lot of thinking about it the last few days. Someone was laying for me out on the after-well deck that night. I couldn't see him, because my eyes hadn't yet adjusted to the darkness. But he could see me, and he knew well who I was, because he couldn't have missed seeing my face when I stepped out of the lighted passageway door."

"You have no idea who it could have been?"

"It could have been anyone—mate, sailor, steward, fireman, even the little chief cook, for that matter. It doesn't take a big man to swing me off my feet. Unless someone on day work stayed up to get me, it was probably a man who came off the eight-to-midnight watch, deck or engine. I mean to find out who it was, and when I do, he's going to know it."

The captain, a chubby, timorous man, frowned. "Now don't go round accusing men right and left and causing trouble, or taking the law into your own hands. Leave it for the Coast Guard or the FBI. Till then, just stay away from the ship's side after dark."

"If he tries that again, he won't find me a sitting duck next time," vowed Gromack.

In the hearty reception given to Gromack by various shipmates, he detected nothing but goodwill. Each man who came up to him to shake his hand voiced what seemed genuine anger toward his unknown assailant.

"Sonuvabeech!" said Gonzales, his big oiler, during their watch that night. He drew a thick finger across his throat. "You show heem to me."

"Leave him to me," said Gromack. "What I can't figure is what he has against me."

His remark failed to elicit any mention of malice that might have been expressed in the hearing of the oiler. Gonzales said, "That ees what all black gang say. They say you pretty nice guy."

When Gromack was relieved by the second assistant at midnight, it was raining on deck, so he went along to the galley. He was surprised to find the baker preparing to mix the dough for the breakfast rolls. Gromack wondered why he was up and working at this time of the night, instead of being in his bunk.

"Piling up the overtime?" said Gromack, grinning.

The baker drew a scoopful of flour from the bin. "Sometimes I caint get to sleep. So I turn out and work. No overtime, worse luck!"

Gromack wondered if the baker had turned out on the night he was thrown overboard. He'd check with the chief cook in the morning. Gromack took a sandwich and a carton of milk from the refrigerator and carried them along to his room.

When he was called at seven o'clock for breakfast, the ship was pitching gently to a light head swell. As Gromack stood shaving before the mirror, oblivious of the creaking woodwork and the clack of things loose in drawers and on shelves, he thought he heard an odd rubbing sound behind the sheathing below the mirror. Ordinarily, he would have dismissed it as something that had got loose and of no consequence; but with his mind alert for the least sign of anything that might point to a reason for the attempt on his life, he stopped scraping his face and listened intently.

He heard it again, a faint sound of something rubbing against the inside of the sheathing as the ship rose and fell. The sides of the room were built of wood, white-enameled, but the one with the two portholes, facing on the upper deck, was also part of the steel house enclosing the entire engineers' quarters. The steel plating was sheathed

with wood to match the other sides. The mirror was mounted between the two portholes, above the washbasin.

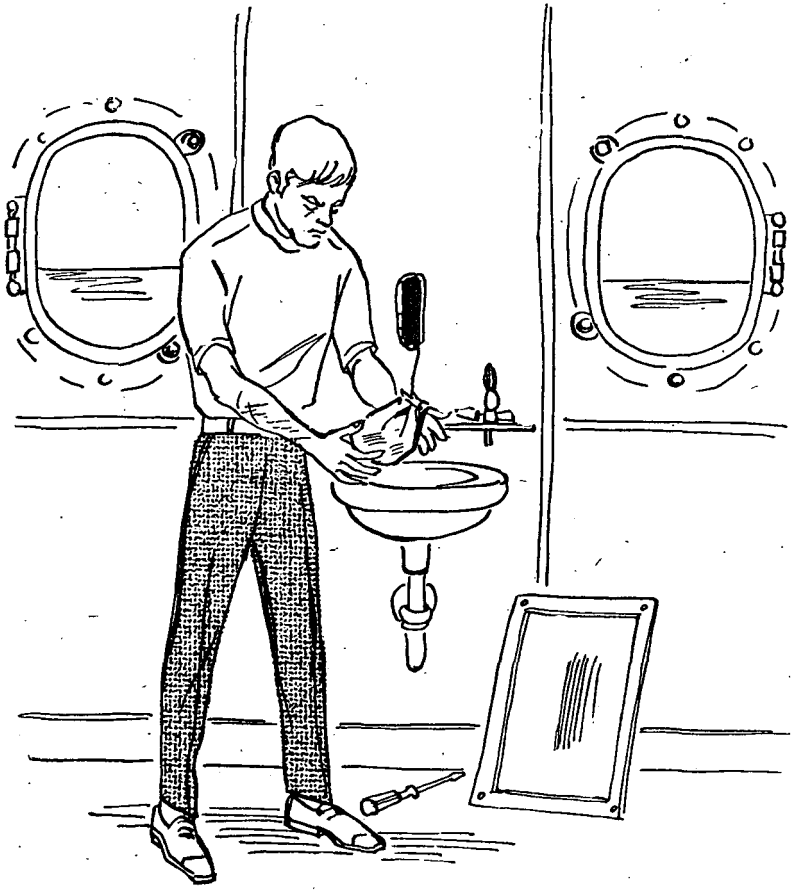
Gromack hurriedly finished shaving. Taking a screwdriver from his tool drawer, he removed the mirror. It was as he had suspected. A hole had been cut into the wood behind the mirror, giving access to the narrow space between the sheathing and the steel shell. Gromack felt inside. His fingers came into contact with a wire, hanging from a hook screwed into the wood. He hauled it up. Attached to the lower end was a flat plastic bag. It was this that swung like a pendulum along the wood each time the ship dipped.

Gromack unhooked the wire and carried the bag to his desk. Untying a nylon cord knotted around the mouth, he drew out a glassine bag filled with a fluffy white powder that looked as if it had come right out of the baker's bin in the galley.

Gromack had read enough of the recent magazine and newspaper publicity given to the illicit traffic in narcotics to make a safe guess at the true nature of that white powder. Nor was he seeing a quantity of it for the first time. During a forenoon watch of his alongside a Philadelphia pier, a squad of customs searchers equipped with flashlights, mirrors on poles, and other search aids had climbed down to the engine room and fanned out. They were obviously acting on a tip, since they were covering a single area. A mirror revealed a canvas bag hidden on a stretch of overhead cables. It was opened at the watch engineer's desk, and one of the searchers commented that the bag held about a kilo of pure heroin, bought in Europe for around four thousand dollars, worth five times that, wholesale, in Philadelphia, and close to half a million by the time it was cut for the pushers on the streets.

Gromack estimated the glassine bag held about the same quantity, just over two pounds. It must have been smuggled aboard in San Juan, before Jard, the last third assistant, was beaten; it was unlikely that it would have been cached after it became known that someone else would be occupying the room and might discover it.

What Gromack had read about the drug traffic, with its long history of misery and death among addicts, the robberies and murders they committed for the money to buy drugs, the murder of cheats and double-crossers among the traffickers, had filled him with loathing for any who enriched themselves in the ugly racket. Discovering that it was one of them



who had tried to murder him intensified his vengefulness. He had solved half the mystery, the motive; now for the other half, the man.

Gromack glanced at the alarm clock atop the desk. There was barely time for breakfast and changing into his engine-room clothes. He quickly slipped the glassine bag inside the plastic bag, hung them back behind the sheathing, and replaced the mirror. During his forenoon watch below, he'd think over what to do about them.

At coffee time in the engine room, Gromack felt out Gonzales on Jard. His predecessor, he felt

positive, was involved in the smuggling, with a murderous partner. Since so much money was connected with it, the pair were probably smuggling for some dope ring on commission. From what he'd read, he could picture the probable setup: Jard's partner smuggled the plastic bag aboard in San Juan, and Jard hid it in the hole he'd cut behind the mirror; the partner smuggled it ashore in New York, left it at a secret drop and picked up the money at another, under a code that could bring swift death to violators. Jard's partner was well qualified to enforce it in their behalf.

Gromack had gathered from the other engineers that Jard was a high-flier who bragged about the big nightclubs and discotheques he went to, the dames who fell for him, and the top-name restaurants to which he took them. It was the general opinion in the engineers' messroom that Jard was beaten in San Juan for trying to pick up the wrong girl.

"How did you make out with Mr. Jard?" Gromack asked his big oiler.

Gonzales grimaced. "All time he say I loaf on job. He loaf plenty heemself. He leave plenty job for second assistant."

Gromack had already heard that complaint direct from the second assistant. Gromack probed further. "He was a high-stepper ashore, I hear. He must have a rich girlfriend."

Gonzales shrugged. "He say he have plenty luck in casino."

That was as good an explanation as any for an abundance of cash. "He doesn't seem to have been buddies with anyone on board," said Gromack.

"All time he go ashore by heemself."

Gromack mused that evidently Jard and his smuggling buddy didn't let their partnership show socially.

Gonzales asked, "You know eef Mr. Jard come back here, on board *Lempa*?"

"There's been no word about him by radio. He may be out of hospital and waiting for the ship in New York."

Gonzales gave him a rueful look. "I hope you stay."

Gromack would have liked to cheer his big oiler by telling him that Jard wouldn't be coming back if he had anything to do with it, but Jard, he was sure, would do his damnedest to get back to the *Lempa*. He'd been in her over a year, and if he'd been smuggling dope all that time, he must be piling up a sizable bank account—his partner, too. That was undoubtedly another reason for throwing him

overboard, to keep the job open for Jard.

Long before his forenoon watch came to an end, Gromack had made up his mind what to do about the plastic bag. It would amount to taking the law into his own hands, but there were lots of holes in the law that vermin like Jard and his partner could slip through. His way, if it worked, would be swifter and surer. Gromack, his ordeal in the sea still a nightmarish memory, felt a grim satisfaction at the prospect. He'd go about it after he came off watch at midnight, when the galley was deserted. If the baker was working late again, he'd wait for him to turn in.

The *Lempa* tied up to her East River pier shortly after noon on her scheduled arrival day. Gromack was called to the captain's room and questioned by a Coast Guard officer and an FBI special agent. He told them that he could give them no further information about his assailant beyond what they had read in the official log.

"You told the captain you meant to find out who he was," the FBI agent reminded him.

"The captain advised me to leave it to you," said Gromack. "I kept away from the ship's side, too."

"There was no further attempt on your life?"

"No. Maybe that was because I guarded against it. Besides avoiding the ship's side at night, I also locked my door before turning in."

"And you're still in the dark for a motive?"

Gromack shrugged. "It looks like some guy just didn't want me around. You take it from there."

When Gromack returned to the engineers' quarters, overalled customs searchers were roaming through them. As he passed the chief engineer's room, the chief called him in.

"Jard's out of hospital. He cabled the port engineer he'll fly up in time to sign on sailing day. The port engineer wants you to stand by till then. I put in a good word for you. If Jard doesn't make it, you'll be going out again as third assistant." The chief paused. "That's if you don't think this ship's not a safe bet."

"Thanks for the recommendation, Chief. I'll stay around. If I scared that easy, I wouldn't have rejoined her in Cartagena."

As Gromack went along to his room, he realized that if all turned out as he expected, Jard wouldn't be signing on again, and while the opportunity was open, he might as well settle down in the Ponce Line and get somewhere.

One of the customs searchers followed Gromack into his room, ask-

ing, "All purchases made abroad declared?"

"Everything's on the manifest," Gromack assured him.

The searcher then began what Gromack guessed to be a routine spot-search of living quarters. The man opened drawers and rummaged through them, shining his flashlight into spaces under bottom drawers; he opened empty suitcases, felt among suits and coats hanging in the clothes locker, going through the usual procedure of looking for undeclared dutiable purchases—liquor, perfume, cameras, transistor radios.

The searcher swept the room with a final glance and then, with a satisfied nod to Gromack, he went out, pausing to scrawl a chalk mark on the door as a sign that the room had been searched.

A shore engineer kept the night donkey watches in port, so Gromack was free for the evening. He sauntered down the gangway around six o'clock, confident that his departure was being duly noted by someone with a key to his room. He took the subway to Grand Central and went to a movie, picking a double feature to allow plenty of time for someone to enter his room and take down the mirror. In two or three days, he might know who that one was.

Three mornings later, on sailing day, Gromack's big oiler had not returned aboard by the time Gromack went below after breakfast. Halfway through the forenoon, the chief engineer came into the engine room, where Gromack was overhauling a sanitary-line pump.

"Gonzales was found murdered last night in a vacant lot on the East Side," the chief told him gravely.

Gromack stood up, wiping his oily hands. "Mugged?"

"From the district and the way he was murdered, the police think it might be a narcotics slaying. His throat was slashed. They came aboard a while ago to check his room for dope."

"Did they find any?"

"No, and I didn't think they would. I can't imagine Gonzales mixed up in the dope racket."

Or Jard either, thought Gromack. Aloud, he said, "You never know about people."

So it was Gonzales! The big oiler had hurried up to the deck ahead of him that night in the Caribbean, while he was turning the watch over to the second assistant. The dislike for Jard was a pretense to cover their partnership. It was ironic that, when indicating how he would deal with Gromack's assailant, Gonzales had drawn a finger across his throat. Well, he had it coming to him.

There was still Jard, who was every bit as guilty in the foul dope racket as Gonzales, and perhaps even of the attempt on his life, Gromack suspected, if Gonzales had managed to see Jard in hospital before the *Lempa* sailed and got his approval.

Gromack was lounging on the settee with a magazine when Jard breezed into the room that afternoon, wearing an expensive-looking yellow sport coat with a large bright tie. Two English leather suitcases hung from his long arms.

"You must be Gromack," he said cheerily, dropping the bags and extending a hand.

Gromack rose, ignoring the hand. "Did you hear about Gonzales?"

"Gonzales? You mean my oiler?" Jard's blond face showed concern. "What about him? I just got here in a taxi straight from the airport."

"He was found last night on the East Side with his throat cut. Take my tip and get out of this town fast."

Jard turned pale. He glanced at the mirror; then stared at Gromack. "Say, who—"

"Don't stop to ask who, what, or how I know. The men who took care of Gonzales for double-crossing them are looking for his partner. Take the first taxi back to the airport while your windpipe is in one piece."

Jard's eyes filled with fright and he grabbed for the bags. Gromack caught a glimpse of his blanched face hurrying past the portholes. Jard was getting off with his life, but he'd be living in fear of losing it for a long time to come. Too, he had been eliminated from the dope racket and he'd probably spend his days puzzling over the double cross. Even if he knew, he'd never guess, anymore than Gonzales was likely to have guessed when confronted with the evidence, that the glassine bag had been emptied down a toilet and refilled from the baker's bin in the galley of the *Lempa*.

Gromack picked up the magazine and lounged back on the settee again, to wait for the chief engineer to tell him he'd be signing on.

It comes to mind that the advent of spring invariably does produce a sudden rash of colorful scarves—or hats—or gloves . . .

Fillies in the Spring

by Gary Brandner

IN THE Homestretch Bar, a block from Hollywood Park racetrack, it was as dark as a mine. Here and there a customer hunched close to a red-shaded candle, squinting at the fine print of the *Daily Racing Form*. In a booth along the wall, a slim, long-jawed man spoke in a taut voice to the other two men and the woman who sat with him.

"All right, folks, let's go over it one last time." Dallas Gaghan pointed the end of his thin cigar at a huge, smiling man. "Richard?"

The big man's smile widened as he answered. "I'm in my seat in Section A, even with the finish line, away up at the top of the grandstand. As soon as the fifth race is over, I step into the aisle, where I can see down to the parking lot through the opening in the back of the stands. I wave my program in the air the same number of times as the number of the winning horse."

"Good." Gaghan moved his cigar pointer to a sour little man with a dozen strands of hair pasted crosswise on his skull. "Carl?"

"I'm sitting in my car in the

parking lot—not inside enjoying the races, like some people."

"You know why we're doing it this way, Carl," Gaghan soothed. "Richard will be much easier to see up there than you would be. If there were public telephones inside the track we wouldn't need a man in the parking lot. But there aren't, so you're it. Just be happy that we've fixed you up with the only '49 car in town with a phone in it."

"Big deal. So far I've had three wrong numbers and some guy trying to sell me a cemetery plot."

"Never mind that. The only call that counts is the one you're going to make today."

"So I watch for Richard to wave his program," Carl went on grumpily. "I count the number of waves, then I call the Royal Cafe in Downey and give Marlene the winner."

"Fine, fine." Gaghan rubbed his long, gambler's hands together, then he turned to the girl. "Are you all ready with your business, honey?"

The dimpled blonde turned her enormous blue eyes on Gaghan. "I'm sitting in the Royal beside the cashier, where the phone is. In my purse I've got ten different-colored scarves, one for each horse in the race."

"Sure you remember the color code?" Gaghan interrupted. "Black for number one, white is two, green three, orange four—"

"Not only do I have it written down, I put myself to sleep every night this week saying it over in my head. So, as soon as Carl calls, I take the phone and he gives me the winner. Then I put on the scarf with the right color, leave the cafe, and walk up the street."

"Perfect, love. Meanwhile, I will be across the street in the illegal betting shop of my friend, Artie Slyker. When you have walked about thirty feet upstream from the Royal you will be where I can see you. I will spot the color of your scarf and know the winner of the fifth race just minutes after the horse crosses the finish line. By then, if Richard's kid brother has done his job, Slyker's will have had a short blackout just as the order of finish was supposed to come over the wire."

"The kid will come through," the big man said. "I told him if he let us down I'd sit on him."

"Then it's up to me to talk Slyker into letting me past-post a bet," Gaghan said.

"That strikes me as being the hard part," Carl said.

Marlene moved closer to Gaghan. "Relax," she said. "Dallas could charm a cop out of his badge. You wait, he'll have that hawk-nosed bookie begging him to put

the money down. Take my word."

"Speaking of the money," Carl said, "did you get it where I'm afraid you got it?"

Gaghan's smile faded. "Yeah, Bull Rozzo. Where else was I going to get ten grand? I don't think the Bank of America would go for it."

"Sure, but ten percent interest? Per day?"

"So it costs us a thousand. I only need the money one day. Just long enough to let Slyker hold it for a few minutes. We can skim Bull Rozzo's cut off the top of our profits and hardly notice it."

"Okay, it's your neck, I guess. I don't have to remind you what happened to a couple of people who missed their payments to Bull Rozzo."

"No, Carl, you don't have to remind me," Gaghan said. He looked at his watch. "It's one o'clock. Post time for the fifth race is three forty-five. Richard, you can go on over to the track any time now. Cheer for a long shot. Marlene, you might as well start for Downey. If you're all in place early, there'll be less chance of an accident."

Richard finished his beer. Marlene kissed Gaghan on the cheek. They walked out of the Homestretch and went their separate ways.

Gaghan said, "I'm going to get to Slyker's between the fourth and fifth races. You can head over to the parking lot when you're ready, Carl. Just be set when Richard waves that program."

"Don't worry, I'll be ready." He leaned across the table confidentially. "Dal, are you sure you can trust the broad? You haven't known her very long."

"Long enough."

"Plenty of times I've heard you say, 'Don't bet fillies in the spring.'"

"There are always exceptions," Gaghan said. "Besides, Marlene has nothing to gain by crossing us."

"Maybe. But there are plenty of guys we know that you could have got to do the walk-by."

"Carl, I told you before why it's important that we use somebody Slyker's never met. He knows by sight any of the guys around here that I'd trust with the job. If he spotted somebody he recognized strolling by his window at the same time I'm trying to past-post a bet, he'd figure something was up and slam the book on me fast. Marlene is new in town and Slyker won't know her."

"So she says," the little man muttered. "Velda would have been just as good."

"We've been all over this, Carl, and I don't want to hear any more

about Velda. I know she works right there at the Royal, but don't forget it's just half a block from Slyker's. It's possible that Slyker knows who she is, no matter what she tells you." Gaghan smiles. "And if you want one more reason—because it's my idea, we're using my girlfriend instead of yours."

"Ah, you're right, Dal. I worry too much."

Gaghan reached over and clapped the little man's bony shoulder. "That's all right, buddy. Every successful organization needs a worrier."

"Dal, I did something you're not going to like." When Gaghan said nothing, the little man went on. "I told Velda about the plan and asked her to back it up. She's got ten scarves too, the same colors as Marlene's. When I call, I'll give Velda the winner before I talk to Marlene. If Marlene puts on the right scarf, there's no problem. If she happens to put on some other color, Velda will follow her out, wearing the right one herself. I just thought it would give us a little insurance."

Gaghan's face was expressionless for a long moment, then he relaxed into a grin. "What the hell, it can't hurt us."

Carl let out his breath in a relieved sigh. "And if Marlene's on the level, you won't even see Velda. It'll work out fine."

"Good enough. I'll see you later."

Carl gave him a half-salute and watched the tall gambler stride out the door.

Later, as Gaghan drove across Los Angeles, a tiny moth of anxiety fluttered for attention at the back of his mind. He could neither pin it down nor brush it away.

In Downey, a glimpse of Marlene's blonde head through the window of the Royal Cafe made him feel easier. He drove to the end of the block, parked, and walked back to an inconspicuous clapboard house set back from the street.

Gaghan walked up on the porch and gave the door buzzer a series of punches. After a minute a bald-headed man appeared, studied his face, and admitted him through two doors into what used to be the livingroom.

A waist-high counter ran the width of the house. In front of it about a dozen men sat at card tables, studying the *Racing Form* and making notes.

On the other side of the counter a man read aloud in a flat voice from a clattering teletype machine. Another chalked figures and names of horses on a blackboard. A third man stood with his arms folded, surveying the room. He had a bent beak of a nose and deep waves of satiny black hair. When he saw

Gaghan his mouth smiled, showing small, straight teeth.

"Look who's here," he said. "First time in a month. This is quite an honor for my little store, Mr. Gaghan."

"The honor is mine, Artie," Gaghan said. "What's new with horses and women?"

"I let guys like you worry about horses. All I do is add up numbers. Women I never discuss during business hours." Artie Slyker touched a hand to his glossy hair and winked. "Plenty of time to keep them happy after the last race."

"No doubt. I hope you've got plenty of cash on hand. I figure on taking most of it with me today."

"Now look what you've done, you've given me the shakes," Slyker said. "Tell me, is this as good as your rent-payer last month? I think that donkey's still running."

Gaghan's answer was interrupted by the toneless voice of the man at the teletype. "In the ninth race at Pimlico, Glad Hatter finished first, Montredo second, and Tolliver third."

Slyker rubbed his arched nose with a crafty forefinger. "There's the one you should have been on," he said. "That baby should pay twenty plus change, unless the odds dropped at post time. We'll know in five minutes, when the tote prices come over the wire."

"Who cares? You know I don't believe in those eastern tracks. I think they're just names you bookies made up to take more money away from honest horse players."

"Okay, plunger, who's your hot one today? And how much you going to chunk in—twenty whole dollars?"

"How about ten big ones?" Gaghan said levelly. Before Slyker could get his smirk in place, Gaghan pulled an envelope from his inside pocket and slipped out a packet of bills, thumbing them into a green fan. "Twenty pictures of William McKinley."

Slyker's only show of emotion was a slight narrowing of the eyes. "Good for you. How do you want to lay it?"

"On the front end. All of it."

Slyker looked at the big clock that hung over the blackboard. "If you want to get down for the fifth, you got five minutes."

"Just let me make a couple of last-minute calculations. Wouldn't want to overlook anything." Gaghan took a copy of the *Form* from the counter and strolled toward the window.

The minutes ticked by. Gaghan's skin prickled. His hands left moist prints on the paper.

"They're at the gate for the fifth at Hollywood Park," the reader in-

toned. "They're ready to go."

"How about it, Gaghan?" Slyker said. "Last call."

The lights went out.

The chattering of the teletype ceased.

For a moment the room was paralyzed. Then the men behind the counter were all moving at once, bumping into each other and swearing.

Gaghan peeled an edge of curtain away from the window and stared at the stretch of sidewalk across the street. *Come on, girl,* his mind shouted. Endless seconds crawled by.

Slyker's voice cut through the gloom. "Somebody check the circuit-breaker box."

The back door banged.

Then Marlene came into sight. Gaghan thought she had never looked more beautiful. She walked proudly, with her chin held high to display the black scarf. *Number one—Money Magnet.*

The lights came on.

The teletype stuttered to life.

The chalk-man came in from the back. "It was the breaker box, all right. The main was flipped to off. I saw some kid just going over the fence."

"This neighborhood is going to pot," Slyker said.

"I've got my horse," Gaghan said.

"You're too late. The race is over."

"Did you get the finish?"

Slyker checked the yellow paper unrolling from the machine. "No, dammit. That's just when the power went off."

"The official results with the prices will come over in a few minutes," Gaghan said, talking fast. "Let me make my bet before then."

Slyker tilted his head back and peered along his curving nose at the gambler. "Are you asking me to let you past-post a ten-grand bet?"

"Why not, Artie? We're twenty miles from the track. The race was over just minutes ago. There's no way any of us could know who won. How about it?"

The other men in the room, Slyker's assistants and horse players alike, turned to watch the bookie.

"You're on," he said suddenly. "Just this one time, for ten grand. What's your horse?"

Gaghan had his lips together to pronounce the name when a movement on the sidewalk caught his eye. There, buxom, round-hipped Velda walked swiftly in the direction Marlene had gone seconds before. At her throat was a bright orange scarf. *Number four—Storm Boy.*

A series of thoughts flashed through the gambler's mind like

subliminal projections on a screen:

Has Marlene crossed me?

Or could Velda be working with Slyker?

Bull Rozzo is waiting for his money.

One of the women is a liar.

Which one?

"Come on, Gaghan," Slyker snapped. "If you're going to put that bundle on somebody's nose, you gotta tell me the name."

At that moment, Gaghan's moth of anxiety flitted into sight and the gambler caught it.

He told Slyker the horse's name and dropped the packet of bills on the counter. The bookie swept the money out of sight. His neat little teeth glinted in a tight smile.

The teletype began to stammer. Gaghan and Slyker jumped as though somebody had fired a machine gun. The clattering continued for fifteen seconds, and was followed by another fifteen seconds of tomb-like silence. Then the man at the machine read:

"In the fifth at Hollywood Park—the winner was Storm Boy. He paid eight-eighty, six-eighty, and four-twenty. Second was Householder—"

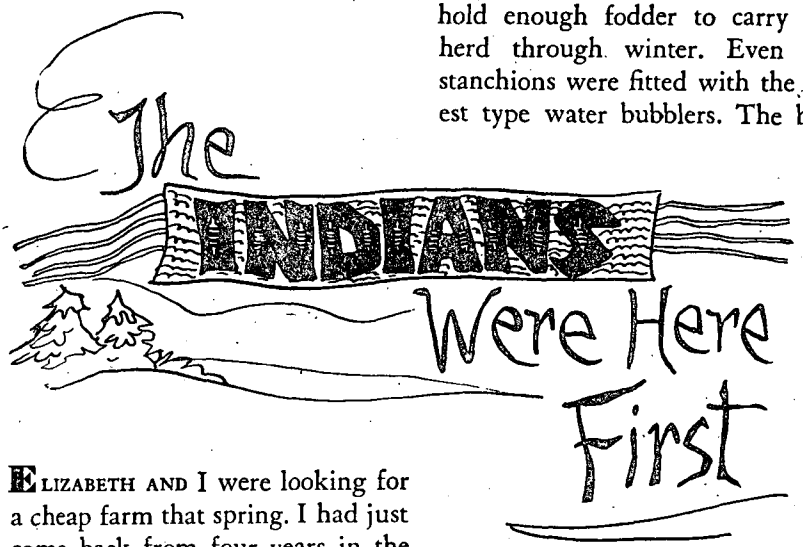
Gaghan's ears tuned out the rest as he walked unsteadily to the counter and stared into the eyes of the bookie. A shock of understanding passed between the men.

Back at his car, Gaghan slid in behind the steering wheel and moved off in the direction of Inglewood. Then he doubled back and drove slowly around the block. As he passed in front of Slyker's place again he saw Marlene up on the porch, jabbing at the buzzer. She was still wearing the black scarf.

Gaghan gunned the engine away from there. He touched the bulge made in his pocket by forty-four thousand dollars, and he guessed that Marlene's reunion with Slyker wouldn't be as much fun as she thought. The gambler shuddered at how close he had come to missing Marlene's accurate reference to the hawk nose of a man she said she'd never seen.

That's what you got, he reflected, for betting fillies in the spring.

One may, in fact, find herein some persuasion for giving the country back to the Indians.



ELIZABETH AND I were looking for a cheap farm that spring. I had just come back from four years in the boondocks, itching to get back to dairying.

Elizabeth's father had sold his Lancaster County farm. He had staked us to his herd of holsteins and taken off for Florida. The new owner had agreed to board our cows until I could get my own farm.

At first I couldn't understand why this Vermont acreage lay abandoned. The giant red barn was framed with stout oak timbers. The empty mows and silo would hold enough fodder to carry the herd through winter. Even the stanchions were fitted with the latest type water bubblers. The broken blades on the windmill was the answer to my question.

"There's a free-flowing spring that supplies the farmhouse," Thomas Strout, the Stowe realtor, assured me. "Nate Cresswell can patch up the windmill so you'll have plenty of water for a herd of fifty."

So we signed the bank mortgage and moved in the bed, kitchen table and a few chairs we had

stored for the four years Elizabeth lived with her father.

Nate came out to look at the windmill. It took him and his helper a week to weld the new blades in place, but when the old reciprocating pump turned over, it spewed up only a thin stream of muddy water. I began to realize why the former owner had deserted the two hundred acres.

"You'll have to drill," Nate said, after he cleaned the filter. "I'll get old Komus to dowse for you."

"Dowse, what's that?" I asked, wondering if it would be expensive.

"It's the way to find underground water. Old Komus is good at it."

I was in a bind. Without adequate water, all my plans for a profitable dairy dried up. Nate brought the old Indian that Saturday morning in his pickup truck. Old Komus crawled down stiffly, the bowleggedest Indian I ever saw.

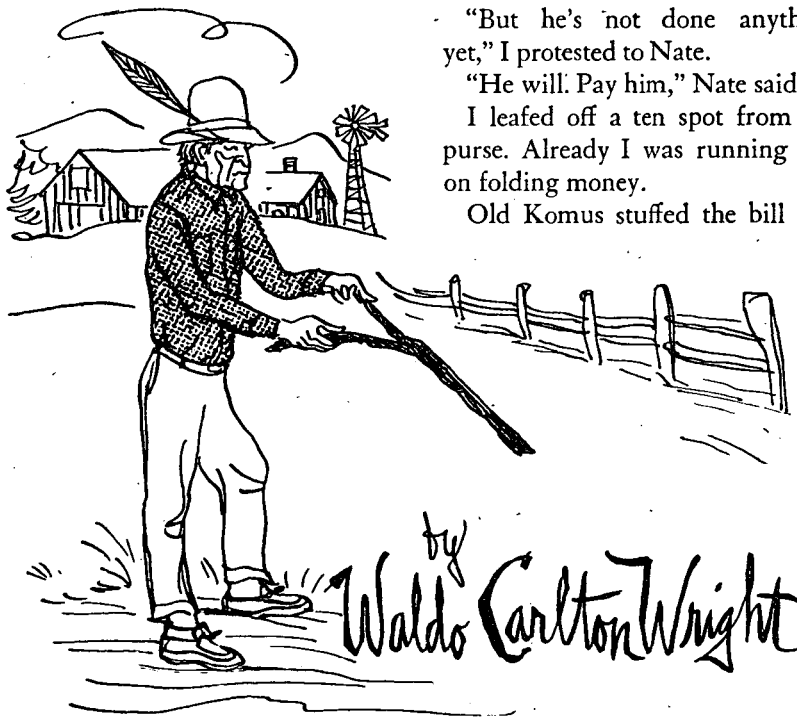
"Pay ten dollar," he said, sticking out a claw-like hand.

"But he's not done anything yet," I protested to Nate.

"He will. Pay him," Nate said.

I leafed off a ten spot from my purse. Already I was running low on folding money.

Old Komus stuffed the bill into



by Waldo Carlton Wright

the breast pocket of his faded red shirt. He walked over to the willow tree and cut a forked stick. Then he pulled down his hat with the turkey feather sticking in the brim. Grabbing the prongs of the willow, he let the heavier end stick out straight ahead.

"Now he's all set to dowse for you," Nate said. "Watch the end of the stick."

The Indian took off toward the barn, pacing with his moccasins through the spring grass. He moved as if he heard distant drums and was keeping step. Halfway to the barn, he turned and headed toward the pine ridge.

Suddenly he stopped, dug the heel of his moccasin into the soil. When I came up with Nate, I could see the end of the twig bobbing as if an unseen hand had reached up from deep underground, was tugging at it, trying to pull the stick out of the Indian's hand.

"Here dig," the Indian said. His face was as wrinkled as a turtle's neck. "Plenty sweet water."

"Good, Komus." Nate drove in a stake. "Come on, I'll take you back to your hogan."

"Hold on a minute," I said. "How can you be sure you'll find water under that spot?"

The old Indian turned toward me. For a moment I thought he was going to hit me with the willow.

"Stick say forty paces down." He pointed. "Ten dollar."

"Look," I said. "I already paid you. I'm not one of those rich playboy farmers."

"Pay him the other ten," Nate said. "If there's water, it's worth it."

I peeled off another ten, feeling I was being taken. Old Komus stuffed the bill beside the other one in his faded shirt, pulled down his hat over the wrinkled forehead and crawled up on the seat of Nate's pickup.

"I'll bring the rig over Monday and start drilling," Nate promised.

Within five days I learned the old Indian had been right. At ninety feet Nate struck a free-flowing vein. That was exactly the forty paces down old Komus had predicted.

"Your well flows twenty gallons a minute," Nate bragged as his helper laid the last length of pipe to the barn. "Best vein I've struck in many a year."

The next week I had the thirty holsteins carted up from Lancaster. By the end of the first week I was able to set out the first five cans of chilled milk. Jake Reininger hauled them to the Dairy League plant at Waverly.

"Paying that old Indian twenty

bucks was the best investment we made," I told Elizabeth when I showed her the first milk check.

That afternoon, while I was cleaning the stalls and putting down fresh straw, a gaunt figure in a red shirt and battered black hat appeared in the entryway. It was old Komus.

"You get water?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks to your dowsing," I said, feeling friendly. "You must show me how you do it sometime."

"Huh," he said. "Water rent ten dollars."

"I already paid you twice for the dowsing," I said, realizing this wasn't a friendly visit.

"I own water," he said, not looking at me but at the cows.

"Wait a minute," I said. "This is my farm. And the water goes with it."

He shook his head as if he had been through this same argument with other farmers, many times.

"Huh, white man steal land. Red man own water. You pay ten dollars."

"On your way, off my land," I said, now thoroughly angry at his trying to blackmail me.

I saw his hand move toward the hip pocket of his faded jeans and I expected him to pull his barlow knife on me. Instead, he drew out a bandanna kerchief, blew his nose like a foghorn. He was crying.

"You sorry," he said. Then he turned and walked to the shaggy pony he had hitched at the rail fence. He slowly mounted bareback and jogged down the lane, his legs flapping like corncobs on a windy day.

A few mornings later Jake Reininger tooted his horn. Jake always stopped at the foot of the hill to pick up the cans of milk. I walked down, wondering what was on his mind.

"You interested in adding twenty purebreds to your herd?" I had the impression he was trying to increase his hauling fee.

"Might be," I said. "Someone selling out?"

"Jake Sloniker, next place to yours." Reininger shook out a cigarette, offered me a light. "He's sold the farm to some retired Army man who doesn't want the herd."

"Thanks for the tip," I said. "I'll drive over this afternoon."

The Sloniker farm lay a half mile up the lane beyond the pine woods; nothing fancy, just a red barn, wagon shed and white farmhouse, but plenty of land. An expensive car was parked by the picket fence.

Colonel Horace Tildon came out of the barn. In his new jeans he looked like a retired farmer. Yes, he was interested in selling the holsteins; some fifteen milkers and ten

heifers to freshen in October.

That's the way I added the first up-country cows to my herd. There was plenty of lush pasture. The milkers soon added more cans for Reininger to deliver to the League. The heifers developed swollen bellies with their unborn calves.

The first of May brought us our largest milk check.

"Now we can afford to have water piped into the kitchen," Elizabeth said. "I'm tired of carrying water from the springhouse like some pioneer wife."

"And I'm for installing a bathroom. Let's live it up a little." I grabbed her in my arms, whirled around in happiness.

That afternoon a pony came jogging up the lane. Old Komus threw the reins over the railing of the picket fence.

"Water rent, thirty dollars." He stuck out his claw-like hand.

"Get back on your pony," I said, standing in the doorway. "I'm not being held up by any crazy Indian."

"Better pay him," Elizabeth said as she came in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. "I don't want any trouble with an Indian."

"Thirty dollars," Komus said, looking at my wife.

"Get going," I ordered. "And if you come around here again, I'll take a potshot at you, I promise."

"Huh, Komus curse water." Then he wheeled, crawled on his pony and jogged down the lane beyond the pine woods.

"Something makes me feel you should have paid him," Elizabeth said. "I don't want any trouble."

The next night I got awake about two o'clock and heard the clop-clop of hooves padding down the lane. From the bedroom window I could see nothing in the fog, but the next morning the cows seemed edgy when I slipped the surge milkers on the udders.

Saturday morning when I went out, I heard the pump running and the cows bawling. There was no water in any of the bubblers. I checked the filter screen. It was choked with sand. Even after I cleaned it, only a thin stream of muddy water came from the open faucet. I phoned Cresswell.

He drove over in the pickup that afternoon, checked the filter and the intake line. "Water level's fallen," he said with the finality of a doctor telling the patient the worst. "I'll have to drill deeper."

"How do you know that'll do any good?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't," he said. "It's a gamble."

I told him about old Komus and his threat.

"He collects from every new

farmer. I sure hope you paid him."

"Why should I?" I said. "You drilled the well, piped in the water."

"Oddly enough, the Indian Affairs lawyer says in the original purchase from the Algonquins, they retained mineral rights."

"That doesn't include water rights," I said. "When can you start drilling?"

"Tomorrow."

"Meanwhile, where do I water my herd?"

"Your neighbor, Tildon, has built a soil conservation pond." Cresswell crawled back on his pickup. "He'll probably let you use that, for a week or so."

Since I had visited the Sloniker place, Colonel Tildon had erected a quonset hut beyond the barn for his tractors. A bulldozer was gouging out land for a second pond farther up the hill. I found the retired Army man sitting at a desk in the old livingroom, studying a section map of the county.

"Hello, Simpson," he said, pulling his bifocals down on his nose to look me over. "I was just thinking of driving over to see you."

"I have a problem, Colonel." I felt as apologetic as if I were asking top brass for a promotion to sergeant. "My well's gone dry. I wonder if you would let me water my herd at your pond for a few days, just till my new water is in."

"Simpson, the other dairy farmers around here say you're fighting a losing battle." He ran a pudgy finger along the contour line between our farms. "This land is headed back to the dust bowl. All it's fit for is skiing and raising Christmas trees."

His expert-come-lately attitude brushed me the wrong way. "Not in my book, Colonel," I said, wondering why my voice quavered. "Cresswell is drilling deeper."

"And you'll go deeper in debt," he said. "Why not let me take over the mortgage and you move back to Lancaster County where you'll have a fighting chance?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I'll pay you for letting me water my cows here for a few days."

"No charge to a neighbor," he said, turning back to studying his map. "But think over my offer."

It was a nuisance to drive the herd over to the pond those hot mornings and evenings. Eight of my best milkers went dry. Cresswell drilled forty feet deeper into a lower vein and installed a new jet pump. The fifth morning the bubblers in the stanchions were brimming with clear water. I was back in the dairy business.

The lush pasture on the lower quarter kept the cows contented through June, but with no rain, the

July sun dried up the grass. I had to haul more feed from the mill.

The first of August brought a small milk check—and old Komus on his shaggy pony. He stood in the doorway, a hand outstretched.

"Water rent. Sixty dollar." He sounded like a crow cawing from the upper branch of a dead tree.

I shook my head, feeling this was becoming funny. "Get off my back," I said. "I told you before, no water rent."

"Huh, Komus put double curse on water." He turned, mounted the old pony and vanished down the lane.

"You should have paid him," Elizabeth said as she turned from the sink where she was washing the breakfast dishes.

"What's with you?" I asked. "Your face is as red as an Indian's Don't you feel well?"

"Been scrubbing too much." Her voice sounded tired. "I just don't want any trouble with the Indian."

That night her fever grew worse. Her moaning awakened me around two o'clock. "The Indian," she mumbled in her sleep. "He's burning down the house. He'll set fire to the barn."

"Nonsense," I said, shaking her shoulder. Her nightgown was wet with perspiration. I soaked filter pads in cold water, laid them on her forehead. I phoned Dr. Mann, the young Bedford doctor, and he drove out the next morning.

"Your wife's contracted typhoid," he said, holding up the thermometer to the window.

"Why, no one gets that anymore." I sat down quickly in a kitchen chair.

"Have you had your spring tested?" he asked.

"It can't be the spring," I said, thinking of old Komus and his curse.

"I've given her a shot of penicillin," the young doctor said. "Start boiling the water. I'll see if Mrs. Sloniker can come out to lend you a hand with your wife."

Each day Elizabeth grew worse. Then Reininger brought back full milk cans from the League.

"Sorry to be returning these." He sounded like an undertaker returning a corpse to the next of kin. "Your herd's developed Bang's disease. You better have the vet check at once."

I phoned Doc Stone and he came over that evening.

"Can't be sure it's mastitis until I get back the lab report." He pressed pus from my prize holstein's swollen teats. "But it looks as if you're in trouble."

"This is all I need," I said. "My wife down with typhoid, half my cows sick."

He looked at me, then slowly wiped the shaft of his thermometer on the sleeve of his wool shirt. "You know, Simpson, I'm not a superstitious person myself, but if I were in your shoes, I'd make peace with old Komus."

"You think he really can bring on a curse?"

"Who knows?" He snapped shut the lugs of his black satchel. "This is how it went with the farmer who lived here before you bought the place. He wouldn't pay either. He went broke and his wife died."

After I drove Mrs. Sloniker back to Bedford, I found Elizabeth sitting up in her Boston rocker.

"What are you doing up?" I asked. "You should be in bed."

"James," her hands were trembling, "old Komus came to see me. Right after you and Mrs. Sloniker drove away."

"What did he want, money?"

"No, he just walked in, placed his hand on my forehead and said, 'Poor squaw.'"

"That was all he said?"

"Yes, then he took a bottle from his blouse, poured out a spoonful and nodded for me to swallow it."

"And you did?"

"I was scared not to."

"That was a crazy thing to do."

"Don't scold me, James." She began to cry.

I slid down on the arm of the rocker, slipped my arm around her, kissed her cheek. It felt cold.

"You did right," I said. "Just get well again."

The next morning the fever was back and she lay moaning on the bed I had fixed for her on the old couch in the livingroom. When Dr. Mann came, I told him about the medicine the old Indian had given her.

"Probably snakeroot," he said, smelling the bottle. "It acts like that, stops the fever for twelve hours, then worsens it. Just see she doesn't take any more of it."

That afternoon Doc Stone appeared with the lab report. "It's mastitis. Probably from the water. You'll have to block off your present well. Drill deeper."

"That's all I need," I said. "Another bill with Cresswell."

"Can't be helped," he said. "Only way you'll clear up the condition."

So I phoned Cresswell.

"Drilling deeper won't do any good, Simpson," he said. "If I were you, I'd pay the Indian."

"Where does he live?"

"Off the Benton Road, this side of Somerset. You'll see a hogan in the pine woods."

When I went into the house I found Elizabeth sitting in the rocker by the window. In one hand she held a little bottle, in the other an empty spoon. She was

staring toward the pine woods. When I touched her shoulder, she screamed.

"Elizabeth," I shook her shoulder. "You mustn't take any more of that stuff. Dr. Mann says it's some sort of poison."

"Old Komus said I was to take it. So I did, all of it." She turned the bottle upside down. Only a few drops of the black juice trickled out.

"James, promise me something." She turned away, staring toward the old cemetery in the pine woods.

"Anything," I said, kneeling and placing my arm around her thin body. "Only get well."

"Pay our debt to the Indian," she whispered.

"I promise," I said. My hands itched to circle old Komus' withered neck, watch his cataract-filmed eyes pop out like birds' eggs on his wrinkled cheeks.

Elizabeth didn't seem to hear me. She sat quietly, slowly shaking her head. "Pay the water rent, James. Promise."

When Mrs. Sloniker arrived after lunch, I took seventy dollars from the box on the kitchen shelf and drove over toward Somerset. On the Benton Road I came to the pine woods. There I parked the car, headed up a tanbark path. Beyond the ledge I spotted the shack with the corrugated roof. A ribbon of blue smoke waved upward from the cinder-block chimney.

Old Komus was squatting on a rock before the batten door of his ramshackle hogan, smoking a clay pipe. It smelled more like peyote than tobacco. "Squaw better?" he asked, knocking the ashes from the pipe bowl against the stone.

"You win." I felt licked, handing him the seven ten-dollar bills. "Here's the water rent. Take off your curse."

He grinned and reached out his hand. "Too many white men make much bad water," he said, folding his arms. "Make squaw sick."

"But I need water, much water for cows." I found myself talking pidgin English, trying to make him understand how desperate I was.

He shrugged his shoulders, stuffed the bills into the pocket of his faded shirt. "Soon plenty sweet water." The turkey feather in his hat nodded the way a medicine man waves a dried snakeroot. Then he turned and disappeared inside his hogan.

I drove over to see Cresswell. He was out in the toolshed, threading pipe.

"Well, I paid the Indian my last seventy dollars." I had to tell someone.

"That was using your head." Cresswell picked up an oil can, ran

a thin brown ribbon over the die. "What did he say?"

"Just, soon plenty sweet water."

"You'll have it." Cresswell grabbed the die-cutter handles, gave them a twist, then stopped. "Want me to lend you a hundred bucks until you get your next milk check?"

"That would be right neighborly," I said. "But how do I know I'll be able to hold out? The water may be shut off again."

He shook his head. "Old Komus keeps his promises, better than some white men I know."

"But how does he do it, shut off the water like he had a control valve back of his hogan?" That was what puzzled me.

"All of us wonder about that," he said. "All I know is that he can put some kind of Indian curse on the underground stream."

Elizabeth was sitting up in her rocker when I returned. She smiled and I stooped over and kissed her cheek.

"You've done what I asked, paid old Komus," she said. "About an hour ago I felt much better."

I could see that the fever had broken. She bent over and took out the baby jacket from her knitting basket. "Now I can finish this."

Suddenly I, too, felt my worries were over. I went out to the barn and cleaned the filters. Before I finished there was a rumbling in the pipe and the water spurted out as if it had just been turned on. It gave off a slight sulfur smell, but the test showed it was crystal clear, as if it came from a virgin mountain stream high in the Vermont hills.

Within ten days the mastitis had cleared up in my herd and I was back in the dairy business. By the end of September I was able to pay back the loan from Cresswell.

After that, the old Indian never came back to collect the water rent. The next March a Federal survey party found him stretched out like a mummy, frozen stiff on a cot in his hogan. On the floor lay several empty bottles, his turkey-feather hat and the dowsing stick.

Yet some nights I hear his pony clomping up the road toward the barn and the next morning the cows always seem restless, as if during the night something had been prowling around their bubblers to be sure they had plenty of sweet water. On mornings like that the bubblers stink of sulfur.

If at first one succeeds, other tries are assured.

HOT ROCK

by James McKimmey

A SHARP, CHILLING WIND blew fog across London. The portly man, wearing a dark duster-length overcoat with a fur collar and a homburg fitted squarely on his bald head, closed the door of his small shop on Chandos Place and locked it. When he had escorted the mink-clad woman into the waiting cab, the fog had obliterated gold lettering on the door of the shop which read: *Henry Thornwall Esq., Jeweler.*

Henry leaned forward, patting an inside pocket to make certain that he had not, in the tension of what they were doing, forgotten his examining glass, then gave the driver an address near the Thames. He leaned back with a sigh.

Street lamps flashed against the face of his companion. She looked young from a distance, but on closer examination it was obvious that she was middle-aged, heavily made up, rich and, right now, very excited.

She put a hand on Henry's

plump wrist, squeezing fingers glittering with rings. "How dangerous is this, Henry?"

Henry shook his head. "I wish I knew, Madam. It's not my . . . ah . . . accustomed . . . well, you know."

"I know," she said softly, a waver in her voice. "But the Sional, Henry!"

"Shhh." He looked ahead at the driver.

"For twenty thousand pounds!" She tapped her large purse. "And it's worth double that!"

"Shhh, shhh," went Henry.

The cab moved ahead, the driver making his way through the murk as though by magic. Henry leaned sideways and put his mouth close to her ear. "It's all happened so quickly. Tell me again what he said on the telephone."

"He *whispered*, Henry," she said softly.

"Yes, quite," Henry nodded. "What did he whisper, then?"

"That he had the Sional Diamond and would sell it to me for twenty thousand pounds if I would meet him at the address you've given the driver—with the money."

Henry nodded again. "And that name he gave himself?"

"The Cockroach." She shuddered. "I said I'd do what he asked if I were allowed to bring you to examine the stone. But why do you suppose he has chosen me, Henry?"

Henry shrugged. "Mrs. Peter Sterling-Bahr?"

"I suppose it's obvious, isn't it? Peter would die if he knew. But he won't find out. He never pays any attention to *my* money. Unless something happens that . . ."

Henry put a hand into the right pocket of his coat and pulled out a small chrome-plated pistol. It reflected lights they were passing as he checked it.

"*Henry*!" the woman said.

Henry returned the pistol to his pocket. "Chaps like this . . . I don't know. They whisper so you can't get a good chance at their accent so you might know something that way. They constantly run underground like sewer rats. I, well, thought it might prove comforting."

The woman touched Henry's hand again. "I never thought of you as being so heroic, Henry. I'll make it up to you. I promise."

"*Ma*dam," Henry said gently. He smiled. Then the smile disappeared. "And we are here, I'm afraid."

They moved toward an old warehouse in the wind-driven fog as the cab's taillights abruptly disappeared.

"Shouldn't we have kept him?" Mrs. Peter Sterling-Bahr asked.

"I shouldn't think so," Henry said. "His license may already have been observed. We wouldn't want you followed to the hotel where you're going to put it, you know."

"Of course. Oh, Henry," she said, hugging his arm, "what would I do without you?"

"Let's, ah, complete the business first, Madam. Then . . ." His voice trailed away as they stopped before a closed wooden door. Henry put his hand on the latch, paused, took a breath, then opened it. There was a yellow crack of light far across a large high-ceilinged room. Henry dug into the left-hand pocket of his coat and produced a small flashlight.

"You thought of everything, didn't you, Henry?" the woman whispered.

"I rather hope so, anyway," Henry said as they moved forward following the small beam of light.

"I'm trembling, Henry."

He squeezed her hand.

They arrived at the door where light was escaping below on the dusty wooden floor. Again Henry took a breath, then turned the handle. They looked in at a small figure seated at an old desk beneath a naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling of a small room; long and greasy-looking hair with streaks of gray hung shoulder-length; metal-rimmed glasses with tinted lenses decorated a face that looked surprisingly boyish; the suit was wide-shouldered, gray and pin-striped; delicate hands rested on either side of a wide-brimmed fedora placed on the desk.

Henry and the woman stood in absolute silence, staring.

"Madam Sterling-Bahr?" came the throaty whisper. "I am The Cockroach."

The woman managed to nod.

The Cockroach curled a slender finger and motioned them forward. They went to the desk and stood looking at the tinted glasses reflecting light from the bulb above. The Cockroach removed a small revolver from a pocket. The woman turned in alarm just in time to see that Henry had also gotten out his pistol. The two weapons pointed at each other.

"No nonsense, you understand," Henry said in a controlled voice, and adoration showed in the woman's eyes.

The Cockroach stared at the chrome pistol for some time, then drew out from a pocket a small object wrapped in velvet. The fabric was worked loose, exposing a magnificent briolette-cut diamond. The woman drew her breath in, blinking. Henry's eyes narrowed. "May I?" he asked.

The Cockroach shrugged, and Henry carefully placed his pistol in

the woman's hand, saying, "Don't hesitate to pull the trigger, my dear, if he should become cute in any fashion."

"Oh, Henry," the woman breathed, but she held the pistol firmly as Henry got out his jeweler's loupe and fitted it to his eye and examined the stone at length. Finally he nodded. He returned it to the velvet and put away his examining glass. "Yes, indeed." He reclaimed his pistol from the woman.

"*Is* it?" she asked.

"Most assuredly."

"Money," The Cockroach whispered.

When the transaction had been completed and the diamond was in the woman's purse, Henry said, "Shall we, then?"

He began backing toward the door, pistol in hand, and the woman went with him. In the large outer room, they made their way through darkness. "I'd use the torch," Henry said quietly, "but I shouldn't want him to go out the back door of that room and up into the loft somewhere where he could shoot at it."

"Dear God," the woman whispered.

They finally fumbled their way outside into a shroud of cold. Then they hurried along the sidewalk. It seemed an eternity, but at last they were able to find a free cab. As they got in, Henry gave the address of a club near Piccadilly Circus. He put an arm around the woman's fur-covered shoulders, feeling her trembling.

"Foolish place to go, rather," he said. "Too many theatrical types, and worse. But I do have a membership."

"Must we go there?" she asked. "Can't I simply go straight to the hotel, then—"

He shook his head. "Beggar might be following. Best to put him off."

"Of course," she said. "I think I'm falling in love with you, Henry."

"Mr. Peter Sterling-Bahr would not like that, I suspect."

"But I shouldn't care," the woman said, holding Henry's hand tightly.

They went upstairs to an informal room which hummed with conversation as members stood and sat about. Henry ordered a gin and orange for both of them. The woman sipped hers, face looking pale.

"Henry," she said, "the Sional! In my purse!"

"Yes, Madam. We seem to have done it."

"Not madam, Henry. Not ever again. Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth," Henry nodded, test-

ing the sound of it. He repeated it.

She had removed her coat, and it was spread on the sofa beside her. Her dress was black, her jewelry was notable, and her legs looked much younger than the rest of her as she crossed them and gave Henry that same look she'd shown in the warehouse near the river.

"You couldn't go with me to the hotel?" she asked.

"I should rather like to, certainly," he said.

"You couldn't come after I've checked in—please, dear Henry!"

"I should like that, indeed, Elizabeth. But—"

"Later, then?" she said. "Some other day or night?"

"I shall require you to remember that."

"I shall. And how do I do it at the hotel, again?"

"Ask them to put the item you have in your purse into safekeeping for the night."

"But if I went home instead—"

He shook his head. "With your husband on business in Paris—"

"But the servants," she said. "Surely—"

"Blighter may already be in with one of them. I would rather trust the Ritz, my dear," he said positively. "A formidably reliable establishment. Then, tomorrow, I shall acompany you to the vault. I think we might go now, if you've finished your drink," he suggested.

They returned to the street where Henry obtained yet another cab. He directed it to the misty glitter of Piccadilly Circus and said to the woman, "Much better if you get out and walk to the hotel rather than taking another cab. If someone should be following this one, they'll continue, I think. When we next stop with the traffic, simply get out and join the crowd on the sidewalk. I'll call you at the hotel the second I've gotten home."

"I do hate leaving you, Henry."

Henry smiled. "I hate leaving you, Elizabeth." He touched her, then said, "Now, my dear."

She got out swiftly and hurried toward the crowded sidewalk where neon cut through swirls of reflecting fog. The cab moved on, and Henry looked through the back window just as a small figure in a pin-striped suit, wearing tinted glasses and a wide-brimmed fedora over long greasy hair, came up to Elizabeth. An arm was put around her waist, and she was drawn toward a dark doorway. Her mouth opened as though she might be screaming, but Henry, looking away and settling back in his seat, guessed that she wasn't making a sound.

When he reached his flat, the telephone was ringing. He lifted it,

saying, "Henry Thornwall here."

"Oh, Henry!" Mrs. Peter Sterling-Bahr said in anguish. "How could it have happened!"

"Are you all right?" he asked with concern.

"Not hurt. Not physically. But he just came up on me on the sidewalk the minute I got out of the cab. He put his arm around me and whispered he had his gun pointed at me and made me go into a doorway where he got the stone out of my purse and ran off! What could I do! It's stolen! I couldn't . . . Oh, Henry! How could he have followed us? In the fog? Two cabs? The club? And yet be there on the sidewalk, waiting . . . Henry?"

"I don't *know* how," Henry breathed. "I rather . . . thought I'd been so clever. But I guess I'm no good at that sort of thing. Oh, damn, Elizabeth. Dreadful, altogether."

"Dreadful, yes," she said limply. "Yes, it is. What do I do now, Henry?"

"Go home, I should think. Have something to drink. Try to forget it."

"Is that really all there is for me to do now?" she said wearily. "Henry, is that all?"

"I rather think," he said slowly, "that it is."

Twenty minutes later, Henry's door buzzer sounded. When he opened the door, he saw no one on the stoop. Then he looked behind the bushes and saw the small figure wearing the wide-brimmed hat and tinted glasses standing beside the wall. Henry reached out and pulled the figure in and closed the door. "And here you are, my dear," he said fondly, then kissed a boyish forehead.

The sound of the shower stopped in the bath off Henry's comfortable bedroom. Henry stood in the adjoining study by the bar mixing two Scotches with soda. When his visitor, an extraordinarily beautiful creature with thick blonde hair, came out of the bedroom, he could see the suit, hat, glasses and wig on the bed beside the carelessly dropped currency. The girl was dressed now in a satin negligee. She smiled beautifully as she crossed to Henry and put her arms around his neck.

"Oh, darling," she said, "it was so smooth, wasn't it?"

"Practice makes perfect, doesn't it?" he said, kissing her boyish forehead again.

The person who mingles duty with pleasure frequently carries his point with expertise.

OFFICER MILES HUDSON was daydreaming, the police cruiser idling along close to the curb, when a shrill scream almost shattered his eardrums. He automatically toed the brake pedal, and the squad car slowed, nosing into the curb. It was early in the morning, about ten, and Bay City sweltered in August heat, the sea breeze off the Pacific not in yet.

In his three years on the Bay City Police Force, Miles had observed some strange things, but what he saw now won the prize. Pounding up the sidewalk, about a half block ahead, was a man lugging an ancient cash register almost as big as a television set. He lurched from side to side with each step.

Running after him, in a white nylon uniform, was a small blonde. Her skirt was mini-short, revealing a pair of marvelous legs.

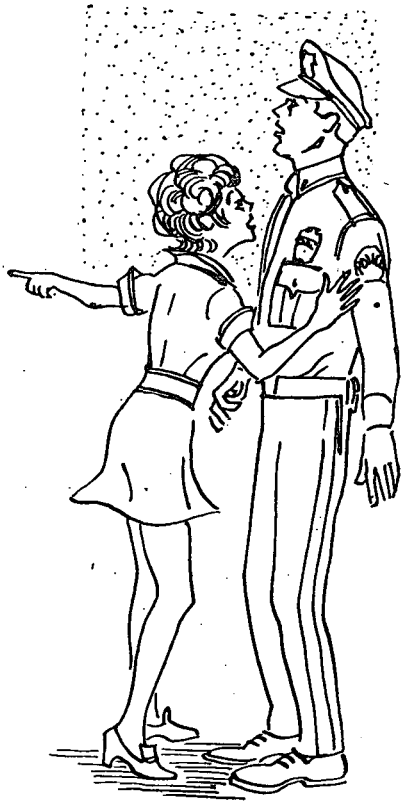
While Miles sat frozen, staring at those legs, she saw the squad car and veered straight for it. Miles started to get out.

The girl was already talking. "That man! He stole—"

By this time Miles had unfolded his six-feet-four. The girl skidded to a stop before him, her gaze striking him somewhere around the rib cage.

She tilted her head back and gaped up at him. "Goodness! You're big, you're huge!"

"Yes, ma'am." Miles took a second to observe that her eyes were



the color of fresh limes and that the rest of her was as lovely as the legs. Belatedly, he remembered his official capacity. "What's the trouble, miss?"

She whirled half around and lev-

eled an arm dramatically at the man with the cash register. "Stop that thief!"

Miles took off, fast on his feet for a man his size. The blocks on Ocean Front were unusually long, and the cash-register thief already had a good start. Miles knew that Chief Law would have his hide in strips for not giving chase immediately on sighting the perpetrator. While this thought raced through his mind, Miles had unflapped and drawn his gun.

"Halt," he yelled, "or I'll fire!"

The thief sped on unchecked.

Miles aimed well over his head and fired.

The thief plowed to a stop, dropped the register with a clatter, and then ran on, ducking around the corner.

By the time Miles reached the

corner, the thief had disappeared. Miles hesitated by the register. The short street dead-ended at a boardwalk running north and south along the beach. The area along there was a maze of small beach cottages and concession stands. His quarry had already vanished like a rabbit in a warren.

Besides, the perpetrator had dropped his loot. What was more important, to protect a taxpayer's property or set off in futile pursuit of an unsuccessful thief?

Miles heard an echo of Chief Law's bellow, "The taxpayers of this burg pay our salaries, Hudson. They come first, understand?"

Miles holstered his gun, picked up the register, which seemed undamaged, and started back toward the girl. She waited beside the squad car. A few curious people had popped out of buildings along the street. Sly grins appeared at the sight of a hulking man in a gray uniform carrying an antique cash register under his arm like a bundle of laundry.

The blonde girl *was* a tiny thing, Miles realized as he loomed over her. He liked his girls tall and leggy, but there was something about this one that made him want to tuck her under his other arm and stride up the street.

The feeling increased when she said, in a voice small with awe, "You were just wonderful, officer."

"Thank you, miss," Miles said gruffly. "Where did he steal this from?"

"Oh . . ." She pointed. "There, Rene's Beauty Salon."

Miles started off, the girl skipping to keep up with his long strides.

She chattered, "It's my job to open up the shop, you see. Rene doesn't come in until eleven. That's our first appointment. I was in back. I heard the bell tinkle and I came up front just in time to see him run out the door, carrying the register. Can you imagine? I'm Nancy Charles. What's your name, officer?"

All this was spoken without a pause for breath. Miles introduced himself, then stepped into Rene's Beauty Salon. The salon was modern, not in keeping with the register. In the front waiting area were several comfortable chairs, a low table laden with women's magazines. Miles saw the faint, dusty imprint on the counter where the register had stood, and he replaced it. The rear of the salon was dim, with an aisle leading back, a succession of semi-booths on both sides, with hair dryers in each.

"What happened, Nancy? Why are the police here?" a husky voice demanded breathlessly.

The woman in the doorway was

big, fortyish, dressed in a flowered print a trifle too gaudy, and wore much jangling jewelry. "Nancy? Why the cops?"

"Rene, you would never believe . . ." Nancy took two steps toward the newcomer. "Officer Hudson, this is Rene Aurand . . . Rene, some man walked in here bold as brass, picked up the cash register and ran out with it. If this nice officer hadn't happened along in the nick—"

Rene Aurand was already striding toward the counter. "Why would anyone want to steal that monstrosity?" She walked behind the register, punched a key, and a bell rang. She rummaged through it for a moment, then looked up at Miles with her first smile. "Nothing seems to be missing. I leave only a little change in here overnight, just enough for Nancy to open up in the mornings. This old thing . . ." She slammed the drawer shut and patted the register fondly. "People are always asking me why I don't get a new one. Well, it's my dollar bill. You know how some business people frame their first dollar? I had this monstrosity when I opened my first salon fifteen years ago."

"I understand, ma'am." Miles took out his notebook and turned to Nancy. "Now, miss, if you'll just describe the thief?"

She looked startled. "Oh, I couldn't do that!"

"Why not? Didn't you get a look at him?"

"Oh, I got a good look at him. I yelled at him and he turned back for just a few seconds in the doorway. It's just that I'm no darned good at describing people." She brightened. "But I can sketch him for you."

"Sketch him!" Chief Law bellowed.

"Well, you see, she's trying to become an artist, Chief," Miles said uneasily. "She claims she can draw what he looks like much more accurately than she could ever describe him."

Chief Law's bulging blue eyes narrowed dangerously. "Are you putting me on, Hudson? If you are, I swear I'll . . ." The chief's constant near-apoplexy, he swore, was due to the bunch of incompetent officers with whom he had to work.

Miles said, "I'm not putting you on, Chief. Nancy says that people with artistic talent see things and people differently from the rest of us and can only do justice to it on canvas."

"Hogwash! Pure, unadulterated hogwash!"

Looking at it several blocks removed from Nancy's exciting pres-

ence, Miles was forced to agree, but at the time she had expounded her theory, it had seemed perfectly logical.

"Anyway, I fail to see what difference it makes." Chief Law ran a blunt-fingered hand through sparse gray hair. "This Rene got her register back okay, didn't she? So why should we run around after some penny-ante thief who didn't even score?"

"But a crime *was* committed, Chief. Don't you think we should follow it up? After all, Rene Aurand is a taxpayer."

"Follow it up, sure, if she insists. But don't devote a great deal of time to it."

Of course, Rene Aurand hadn't insisted it be followed up; but she hadn't *not* insisted, either, and there was Nancy's sketch she had promised to have ready for Miles later in the day.

Miles went to see Nancy at the end of his shift, out of uniform. She had an apartment over a garage, right on the beach. It had two bedrooms, one of which had been turned into a studio.

Nancy greeted him from the top of the stairway, attired in a paint-smeared smock. Her narrow face blazed with a smile. "Officer Hudson! You're just in time. I just finished the sketch!"

"Miles, please. I'm off duty now," he announced with a grin.

"Are you?" Her smile grew vague. "I thought a policeman was never off duty."

"That's true, in a way. That's why I'm here." Which wasn't true, of course. He was there to see Nancy.

Nancy led the way through the feminine clutter of the apartment to the studio. Canvases, some complete, some incomplete, were stacked on the floor and hung on the walls. At least Miles assumed some were unfinished. They were modern, psychedelic, weird, so who could tell?

Nancy showed him to an easel on which stood a sketch done in heavy charcoal strokes. She had caught a surprising amount of detail. It was a mouse-face, with receding hair, a small button nose that seemed, oddly, to twitch, two incisors sharp as fangs, and a weak chin. Miles had no doubt but that he would recognize the subject of the sketch if he ever saw him, and if the face weren't something out of Nancy's imagination.

After all, Nancy herself admitted she had seen the thief's face for only a few seconds. Miles had a hunch it might be a mistake to bring that up. Instead, he said cautiously, "I'm surprised you got it all down. It's what . . . Seven now? Only a few hours since you saw

him and you're only home a little while."

"Two hours; long enough, since it was all up here." She tapped her forehead.

"Have you had dinner?"

His abruptness startled her. "Why, I . . . No, not yet."

"Then have dinner with me. In payment for the sketch." He grinned. "Bay City's budget doesn't provide for items like that."

It was a nice, cozy, lengthy dinner, at a seafood place on the beach. They exchanged vital statistics: Nancy, coming to California from the Midwest, hoping to become an artist, having to work meanwhile; Miles, a native Californian, always wanting to be a cop, which he did after his two years in the service. Neither was married, engaged, or currently in love.

"How long have you been a beauty operator?"

"A little over a year."

Miles reached for the check. "Does Rene have a good business?"

"She didn't have until about a year ago. She owed everybody. I thought she would have to close the shop. Then things began to improve. She's got everybody paid up now."

The restaurant was within walking distance of Nancy's apartment. Walking back past Rene's Beauty Salon, Nancy suddenly clutched at his arm. "Miles, there's no light in the shop!"

He glanced at the salon. "So?"

"But there's always a night light left on. It was on when we came past earlier!"

"You sure? I didn't look."

"I'm sure! Miles?"

Miles suppressed a sigh. A bulb could be burned out, there could be several explanations, but he knew that nothing less than an investigation would satisfy her. Since he was off duty, he wasn't even carrying a gun. He said firmly, "Then let's see. You stay here, Nancy."

"Oh, no, you don't! You're not leaving me out here by myself!"

Since he thought the chance of danger very remote, he didn't argue with her. When he touched the door he found it open a couple of inches and apprehension suddenly drummed along his nerve-ends.

Nancy whispered in his ear. "See, I told you!"

He gestured. "You stay outside now, you hear?"

"The light switch is on the right as you go in."

Miles took a deep breath. What he was about to do was counter to proper police procedure, and would probably cause Chief Law to have a stroke if he knew, but somehow

the idea of calling for reinforcements, with Nancy right there, didn't appeal to him. He slammed the door all the way open with his foot and entered in a weaving crouch. No flash of gunfire, nothing. Feeling slightly foolish, Miles strained his ears. Not a sound.

He fumbled along the wall for the switch. Light blazed down from the ceiling. Nothing moved in the salon, nothing seemed out of place. Certainly the cash register was where he'd left it that morning. He said over his shoulder, "If anyone's been here, he's come and gone. I'd better call—"

A piercing scream cut him off. Nancy, eyes round as saucers, stood in the doorway, pointing toward the rear.

Miles saw, then, a figure slumped down in one of the chairs under a dryer; a man, the cash register thief—or at least an exact image of the man in the sketch.

He was dead, a neat, almost bloodless bullet hole between his eyes. Miles touched his face with a forefinger, and the head rolled loosely. His skin was cold to the touch. Something about the dead man bothered Miles. It was summer, the evening quite warm, yet the corpse was wearing a long-sleeved shirt. Miles pulled up the sleeve and nodded to himself at the sight of the needle marks, some old scars, others recent and scabbed over.

He muttered, "The poor guy was hooked."

Nancy, who had regained some of her composure, approached timidly. "Hooked?"

"A junkie, a dope addict. Probably why he tried to steal the register this morning."

"But how on earth could a dope addict have the strength to tote a heavy thing like that cash register?"

"A junkie desperate enough for a fix has the strength of two men his size. You'd be surprised at the things they can do when needs be."

Chief Law, when he arrived, was as angry as Miles had ever seen him. Red-faced and roaring, he stomped about the salon. "I've been chief in Bay City for ten years and this is the first homicide we've had!" He glared at Miles as though holding him personally responsible. "And not a single blasted clue!"

It was now close to midnight, and they had combed the salon thoroughly without turning up a thing. The dead man had been taken away. They knew the murder gun was small caliber, just how small would have to wait until the autopsy, but that information would be of no value unless they located the weapon. The killing had apparently taken place some-

time between six, when the salon closed, and eight-thirty, the time Miles and Nancy discovered the body. There was one factor more puzzling than the others. There was no sign of forced entry. How had the thief gotten in?

Nancy had been questioned without adding anything new. Rene Aurand had been called down and questioned also. She didn't know the dead man, had never seen him. She had closed the salon as usual at six, after ushering the last customer out. She could discover nothing missing or out of place in the salon and could offer no explanation for the man being killed there. Both women had left together an hour ago, and Chief Law and Miles were alone in the salon now.

One fact they had: The dead man's identity, Peter Franks. A quick check had revealed that Franks had been arrested in Los Angeles twice for possession of narcotics and had served one prison sentence for peddling narcotics.

"Which tells us nothing!" Chief Law snarled. "So he was a junkie! Who would want to kill a junkie? No motive, that's what we've got. Why was he here in the first place?"

"Well, he stole the cash register this morning," Miles said, mildly. "Maybe he came back to try again. We found eighty-seven cents in his pocket, hardly enough for a fix. He was after money for a heroin buy, I should think."

"*You* think? You know what I think? I think that girl, that Nancy, is somehow involved!"

"Nancy? But what motive could she possibly have?"

"If I knew that, I could wrap up the case. We only have her word that he was the one who stole the cash register this morning."

"But I saw the sketch she made. It's a dead likeness." Miles winced at the aptness of the phrase.

"That only proves she *knew* this Franks, not that he was the thief. What if she took advantage of some nut trying to steal the register, then fooled you into thinking her sketch was of the thief, setting up the murder all along? Ever think of that?"

"Nancy isn't capable of something like that!"

"Oh, no? Because she's young and good-looking? Let me tell you something, Hudson. I was on the LA force for fifteen years before I took this job. We arrested a little old lady once who looked sweet enough to be my mother. Turned out she was one of these Lonely Heart killers. She'd done in five husbands. So don't tell me this girl couldn't have done it because she doesn't *look* like a killer!" Chief

Law turned away with a snort. "It's way past my bedtime. I'll get a fresh start in the morning."

Ten minutes later Miles stood before the locked beauty salon and watched Chief Law drive away with a screech of tires. He hadn't offered Miles a ride home. It didn't matter. The moment the chief's car was out of sight, Miles started toward Nancy's apartment. It was quite late now, she was probably already in bed. But the things Chief Law had said had started Miles' thoughts moving in a direction he didn't like.

There was a light on in her studio. He paused for a moment in indecision, then thumbed the bell. After a little the buzzer sounded. Miles pushed the door open.

Nancy, in slacks and a sweater, stood framed in the doorway at the top of the stairs, a dim light behind her. She squinted down at him. "Oh . . . Miles. It's awfully late and . . ."

"I know, but I have to talk to you. It's important."

She hesitated for a moment, glancing back over her shoulder. "All right, Miles. Come on up."

She turned back inside and wasn't in sight when he reached the top of the stairs. The livingroom was dark, the only light coming from the studio down the hall.

"I'm back here, Miles." Her voice reached him faintly.

He started back, feeling his way in the dimness, stumbling over a footstool. In the studio Nancy was at the easel, sketching.

"I had this idea for a painting, and I had to get the concept down before it escaped me." She looked at him over the easel and laughed somewhat nervously. "I do that sometimes, staying up half the night. Crazy, huh?"

She was pale, her face without makeup, and she seemed tense. Miles went toward her, searching for words to frame what he had to say. He stopped across the easel from her.

"I just left Chief Law. He seems to think you know more about the killing than you told us."

She glanced up at him briefly, then went on sketching. "Me? What would I know?"

"He thinks you knew the dead man before, that's why you were able to sketch him so well. Then you lured him into the salon tonight and killed him."

"What earthly reason would I have to do that?"

"That has him stumped. I have a theory about why the thief came back, why he tried to steal the register this morning. We identified him, by the way. He was an addict, as I'd suspected. He had served

time for dope peddling." Miles walked around the easel. "I think there is, or was, a cache of heroin hidden in that register. That's why he tried to steal it. I think dope is being peddled out of that salon." He was staring intently at the sketch on which Nancy was working.

Without looking up, she said, "And you think I'm the one doing the peddling?"

Miles let his breath go with a gusty sigh. "No, I don't think that." He raised his voice. "It's you, isn't it, Miss Aurand? You've been selling heroin out of there, and you killed Franks, didn't you?"

He centered his gaze on the doorway. Then Rene Aurand stepped out of the shadowed hallway, a small gun in her gloved hand. "Yes, cop, I killed that crazy junkie!" Her eyes glittered feverishly.

Nancy sagged against Miles, clutching at his arm. "You idiot, why did you stay? I intended for you to go for help!" She shivered. "She was going to kill me, Miles, and leave the gun here, the same one that killed that man! The police would think the same person killed us both."

Miles supported her with an arm around her waist, his gaze never leaving Rene Aurand, who was advancing toward them. He said, "Franks was pushing for you, wasn't he?"

The woman stopped a few feet away. "I should have known better than to trust a junkie! He owed me money, and I wouldn't give him a fix until he paid me. He knew my stash was in that register, he didn't know exactly where. And I knew he'd be back tonight, if he didn't make a connection today. He didn't, he didn't have the money for a buy. So he came back, and I was waiting for him. I had to kill him!"

"No, you didn't," Miles said gently. "For someone in the business, you don't know much about junkies, do you? A junkie will never reveal the source of his supply to the police. All you needed to do was give him a shot and he'd have turned gentle as a kitten."

"But he was raving, screaming all sorts of threats at me!"

"If he had gone yesterday and all day today without a fix, he was in withdrawal. A man in withdrawal *is* raving, almost out of his head. You still didn't have to kill him. All you had to do was give him a fix." Miles sighed. "So now what? You going to shoot us, too?"

Rene Aurand took another step forward. "What else can I do? I don't want to, but I have no choice."

"You'll never carry it off."

"I can only try. What more can they do to me for killing three than one?" She raised the gun. "This gun is stolen, can't be traced to—"

Without any warning, Miles slammed his foot into the easel stand, sending it careening into the woman. She was knocked off balance, the gun going off once, the bullet pinging harmlessly into the ceiling. Miles rushed her, plucking the gun from her hand.

Rene Aurand collapsed without a struggle, sobbing wildly. Miles stood over her, bouncing the gun in his hand. He glanced down as Nancy approached. "How did you catch on?" he asked.

"A couple of things began to add up. You know I told you she wasn't doing too well until a year ago? Then, all of a sudden, she began paying all her creditors. Riding home with her tonight, I thought back and realized there hadn't been any real increase in business, and I remembered what you said about that man being a dope addict. I remembered how sometimes women would rush into the shop and talk to Rene in whispers, then hurry out. They seemed nervous, distraught. Rene always told me they were making future appointments. And another thin . . . A couple of the old customer stopped coming, just like that. Th story was, they were in a san tarium somewhere."

Miles nodded. "In for the cure. He frowned. "And you jus blurted all this out to her?"

"Well . . ." Her color rose. "I just sort of came out. I wasn' thinking. You know how I ru on."

"That wasn't very smart. Yo could be dead now," Miles said se verely. Then he grinned. "But ye I do know how you run on."

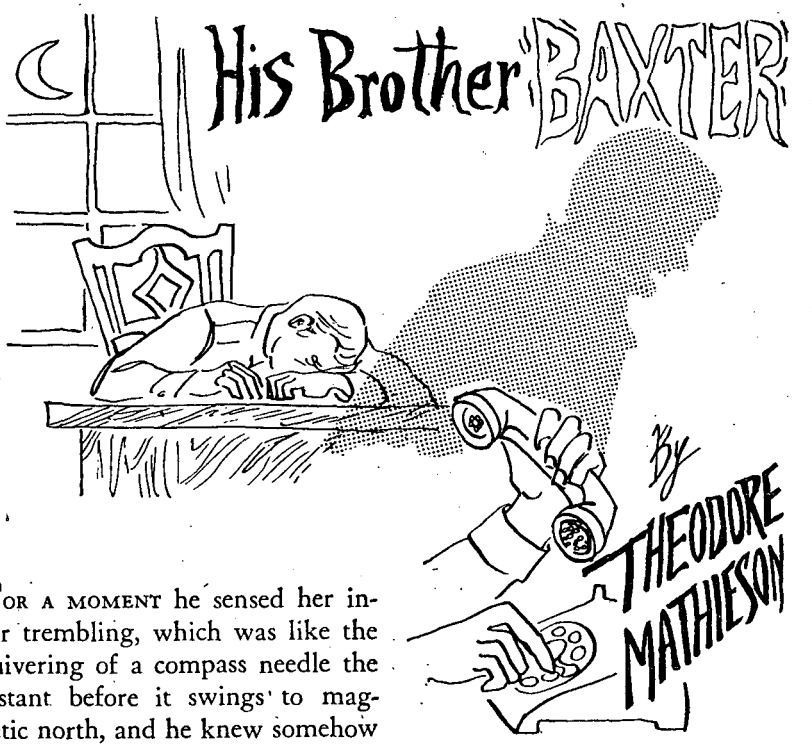
Rene Aurand spoke suddenly The flow of tears had stopped "How did you know I was here Nancy didn't say anything to tip you off, I listened carefully."

"She didn't have to *say* any thing," Miles said with a chuckle

He stooped and picked up th sketch on which Nancy had bee working. It was the sketch of th thief she'd done earlier in the day but something had been added Franks' eyes were now closed, a bullet hole between them, and i the background was a woman wit a gun. This part of the sketch wa far from complete, but there were enough details to make the woma recognizable as Rene Aurand.

The bonds of brotherhood are, at times, difficult to wrench apart.

His Brother BAXTER



By THEODORE MATHIESON

FOR A MOMENT he sensed her inner trembling, which was like the quivering of a compass needle the instant before it swings to magnetic north, and he knew somehow that on her answer depended his future—and his life.

"I'm sorry, Carl," she said softly, "but I can't marry you."

"That isn't north!" he cried. She looked at him with a trace of alarm.

"I mean . . . there's something bugging your decision, Nancy. I know we've known each other only a few weeks, but you wouldn't have gone out with me as often if . . . Haven't you enjoyed it as much as I have? The concerts, the shows, the lectures, our . . . talks? I know you care for me. I

can feel it; and I love you as I've never loved anyone!"

"Yes, I care for you, Carl. But I've made up my mind."

"Is there someone else?"

"You know there isn't."

"Then *why*?"

When she didn't answer, he bowed his head and murmured: "My brother?"

She moved silently to her apartment window and looked down into the city street. The sunlight, diluted by wisps of high fog, bathed her face in a lambent glow, like a spiritual aura, so that as he stared at her, there flashed across his mind a line from a poem he'd known long ago: *I love thee with a love I seemed to lose with my lost saints.*

"Nancy!" he cried, and going to her he tried to put his arms around her, but she struggled free.

"Don't do that again, Carl."

"But why? What has my brother got to do with us?"

"How can you ask that?"

He didn't answer. After almost every date he'd had with her, Baxter had rung her up and called her filthy names, told her unspeakable lies about him. Somehow he, Carl, had always been able to talk her into going out with him again, but it had become increasingly difficult, and now she made it sound as if it were the end for them.

"My brother isn't responsible," he said finally.

"That's obvious. I've waited and thought . . . Oh, Carl, can't you see? I was sure you'd put an end to it, for our sakes, but the calls have continued, and I know I don't want to marry a man who can't protect me against vicious attacks from his own brother!"

"It's more than that, isn't it?"

"I've wondered about your inability to stop him. Does he have some kind of hold over you?"

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

"You never do, and that has bothered me, too. Can't you see—"

"It's bad enough to have him hanging around my neck!" he cried, his words gushing out as if an impediment had been removed. "I've taken care of him, supported him, and he's paid me with nothing but trouble. More than one job I've lost because of his interference. He's jealous, vain, egocentric and sadistic, Nancy. I've had to put up with a lifetime of him!"

"But why?"

"He was my . . . mother's favorite. I know she suspected he was no good, but before she died she told me she wanted me to look after him."

"It was asking too much of you, Carl. Baxter sounds unbalanced. It would be kinder, I think, if you'd had him put away, where he could

neither harm himself nor ruin your life."

"I did have him committed to a sanitarium a few years ago, and what a relief it was to be rid of him. It was the best year of my life; but they released him as cured, and he came back to live with me."

"If they judged him competent, why didn't you tell him, once and for all, to get out, to leave you alone?"

"Baxter is used to having his own way," he said miserably. "It's hard to talk to him."

"I'm sorry, Carl. Truly sorry. I wish I could help."

"If you'll just say there's hope for us."

"No. And this is the last time I shall see you. The very last."

Going down in the elevator, knowing that for Nancy it was indeed the end, and that a vital part of his life had just died, a rage rose in him so strong that he growled in his throat, and the operator turned to look at him.

There was so much he hadn't told Nancy, although she was shrewd enough to sense the unnatural bond that had existed between him and Baxter ever since they were children, as well as the ascendancy Baxter had usurped.

"You're my doormat," his brother had said. "I can wipe my feet on you any time I like. And you know why? Not only because I was mother's favorite, but because I know you inside out, and how phony you are. Conservative draftsman with the black tie and pinstripe suit? Who're you fooling?"

When he'd denounced Baxter for calling Nancy and speaking filth, Baxter had sneered. "It's no more than she deserves, Carl. Is that the kind of woman you want to marry?"

"She's had lovers before me. She didn't try to hide it. But it doesn't matter. I love her!"

"You leave it to me. Mother wouldn't have approved of your tying up with a girl like Nancy!"

Carl had struck out at Baxter then, with an insane desire to maim or kill, but his brother had only laughed because he'd always been stronger than Carl, and he'd handled him easily.

On leaving Nancy's apartment, Carl decided to walk home, and instead of bypassing St. Christopher's Cathedral as he usually did, he stopped in to visit, kneeling in the shadows near the confessionals where, in a niche, an icon of the Virgin blessed the air. He remembered when he was very little how his mother had taken him and his brother once to a Christmas Eve Mass, and he'd enjoyed the pageantry and the organ music, and

then his brother had gotten them into trouble by ripping pages from the missal.

"Please, God, let Baxter be there when I get home," he prayed, "so that the strength you give me this moment is still with me!"

But when Carl reached his studio apartment, there was no one there. For hours he walked the floor, waiting for his brother to come. Around midnight, he rang up Nancy.

"Sorry if I awakened you," he said. "Even though you've made up your mind about me, I want you to know I'm waiting for Baxter, and I'll have it out with him tonight. He hasn't called? Good. I'll see he won't bother you anymore!"

When daylight crept into the apartment, Carl was at his desk, sleeping with his head on his arms. When he awoke it was full daylight. He phoned his office and told them he was ill. It was Saturday. He waited until noon for Baxter to appear, and then the waiting became unbearable, for he realized his confidence was flagging.

"It's got to be a showdown," he mumbled, and opening a bureau drawer, he took out an old .38 revolver that had once belonged to his father, that shadowy figure whom his mother often referred to in a disparaging tone as "a huntin' and fishin' kind of man." He'd died when Carl was three or four, and his mother probably wouldn't have kept his gun, if she hadn't wanted to protect herself and Baxter in that lonely old house in Redwood City.

The feel of the loaded gun gave him renewed confidence. "Just let him come now," he said.

But his brother stayed away all that afternoon. In the evening, Carl went pub crawling, careful to drink no more than a beer in each place, sitting silently on a stool waiting for Baxter to come. He didn't have to look around. There was a kind of ESP that existed between him and Baxter that alerted Carl when his brother was nearby. In his mind's eye he could see Baxter's fat, sweaty face, with the fleshy, mobile lips, and how his insinuating eyes would light up at the sight of Carl sitting there.

When midnight came and Baxter had still not shown, Carl went home to bed and fell asleep exhausted. At dawn he awoke. It was Sunday, and as he lay listening to the muted sounds of traffic, he suddenly knew what he would do.

Around ten o'clock he went to Mass at St. Christopher's and prayed again for strength. The gun was in his pocket. After Mass he took a bus and rode out to Golden Gate Park. Sundays, Baxter often came out here and loitered around

in the children's playground area.

The playground was fairly full, and cries of children rose above the calliope music of a merry-go-round. He circled the men's rest rooms once, and even looked inside. Then he went and sat down on a sequestered bench nearby.

The day wore on, and suddenly he knew he'd been right. His brother was coming. He looked up as Baxter sat down beside him, grinning that evil greeting of his. Carl felt himself go suddenly weak.

"You looking for me?" Baxter demanded.

"You've ruined all my chances with Nancy, do you know that?"

"I've done you a favor."

"If you saw me shot down in the street for rape, you'd still say you'd done me a favor."

Baxter waved airily around him. "Isn't it better to be your own man, Carl? To do as you wish? Not to be tied down to a wife and a home?"

"No, damn you, it isn't. Do you think I want to be a degenerate like you, who comes out here eyeing little children?" he shouted.

"Now, now, isn't this like the pot calling the kettle black?"

Once again the rage surged up in Carl, and he rose and stood over his brother, his hand grasping the gun in his pocket.

"I don't care what you found out about Nancy. She held out a hope for me that was like a sunrise! And you took it away with your damned filth. You took it away, Baxter. Why couldn't you let me alone?"

"Don't you know?"

"Stop. I won't listen!"

"It's time you faced the truth, Carl. Maybe Nancy really has helped you to do it!"

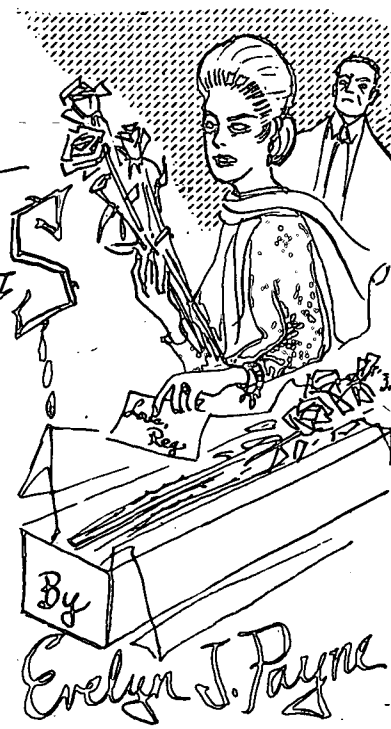
"Stop!"

"Too late now. It's never been Baxter . . . not even in the sanitarium. It's *always* been Carl—and only Carl—right from the beginning, because mother never had two children, you know. Only one."

In the split second between the time Carl put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger, he knew his other self had spoken the truth.

The most exquisite of gifts can be tainted by the blemish of anonymity.

Say it with ROSES



By Evelyn J. Payne

THE HOUSE WAS SILENT as the sound of the ambulance faded into the distance. Sheriff Lee Kinchelo, leaning against the bookcase, looked around. The sitting room, very tastefully furnished, was as different as possible from the rest of the old-fashioned house. The moonlight, streaming in through the open window, revealed Larry Pennington, his black hair just barely silvered at the temples, his still handsome face taut with a lawyer's wary protectiveness, and Fay Veryan, who had just shot her husband. Red-eyed and pale, she was a very attractive woman who looked younger than village gossip said she was. Her upper arms were still firm and rounded and her throat, that other giveaway, was smooth and unwrinkled; but that was to be expected of a former

actress and consultant for a line of famous cosmetics. It was not hard to understand why Martin Veryan had succumbed to matrimony for the fourth time.

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Veryan, I'd like to hear the whole story again. This is where it happened?" Kinchelo said.

Fay nodded wearily. "The servants were off tonight. They sleep in the village, but when we eat at home they're usually around till about 10. Tonight, though, Martin had suggested that we go into Dallas for dinner and to see that movie that's causing so much talk. But about 6 o'clock, when I was getting dressed, he called back and said that a Mr. Leroux, a Belgian with whom he'd had some business dealings, had decided to leave tomorrow, so he—Martin, I mean—would have to talk to him tonight and would I mind if we postponed the dinner and show till some other time."

"Leroux? Why, he was supposed to have left two days ago," Pennington put in, puzzled.

Fay shrugged. "Anyway, Martin said he'd spend the night at the hotel there."

"And did you mind, Mrs. Veryan?"

She shook her head. "We'd been out a good deal lately. I had some letters to write and it seemed pleasant to be alone for a change. I made myself a sandwich and drank a glass of milk, listened to the news on TV. Then I locked up the house downstairs and came up here. I wrote my letters." She gestured toward a pile of stamped and addressed envelopes on the desk. "I did some mending, fixed my nails—oh, just fooled around. I went to bed around 10, and then a couple of hours later something woke me. My first thought was that Martin had decided to come home after all, but there were no lights on anywhere, and he always turns—turned on every light in the house, even if I were asleep. He—well, he was rather thoughtless sometimes."

Kinchelo nodded. He really hadn't known Veryan at all, but his reputation fitted with what she was saying.

"Then I heard a sound. It seemed to come from the roof of the porch." She gestured toward the open window. "At first I thought it might be the cat."

"Your cat?" he asked.

"No, just a stray that hangs around here. It climbs up the trellis onto the porch roof. I got up, came to the bedroom door," she waved at the door through which an unmade bed could be partly seen, "and I-I saw this man at the window. I thought maybe it might be

a detective M-Martin had put on my trail, like he did with his other wives, but then I decided that a detective would hardly be climbing into the house."

"How was he dressed?"

"I couldn't see his face—that was in shadow, but the moonlight slanted in enough to show that he-he had a beard and l-long hair—" She drew a deep agonized breath, obviously fighting for control, and Pennington put a hand on her shoulder.

"Look, Kinchelo, Fay—Mrs. Veryan has had an awful shock," he pointed out. "Couldn't this wait till morning?"

"No, Larry, let me tell it. Maybe if I do, then I can begin to forget it a little," she said, wiping her eyes. "He had on a T-shirt, and I got scared, remembering the description they'd given on TV of that hippie that shot those two old women. And I-I thought about the gun."

"How did you happen to have it?" Kinchelo asked.

"Oh, Martin was fond of target shooting, and he bought me the thing. I didn't care much about shooting, but he insisted I learn. And he-he made me keep it in my bedroom because the house is so isolated."

"He was right about that," Pennington commented.

"You didn't think about calling the police?"

"I wanted to, but the phone is out in the hall, and I was afraid the m-man might see me crossing the room. I got out the pistol and cocked it. It-it made a little noise but I guess he didn't hear it because he-he was raising the window, and then he started to climb in. I tried to warn him, tell him I would shoot, but the words wouldn't come out, and I—the gun went off. He—he stood there a second, and I just kept on firing, and all of a sudden he slumped and then he began to roll d-down the roof. I-I can still hear that sound!"

She broke down completely, and Pennington put an arm around her shoulders and said angrily, "That's enough, Kinchelo. Torturing a woman this way. She's told you twice how it happened. What more do you want? Come on, Fay, I'm going to take you to the hospital, get the doctor to give you a sedative."

Back at his office, after a few hours' sleep and a good breakfast, Kinchelo talked things over with Sam Shutes, his deputy.

"I only met Veryan a couple of times, but he seems to have been a real screwball. What about it?"

"He was as weird as a three-dollar bill," said the stocky, balding Sam with emphasis. "I knew him

pretty well in high school and he was peculiar even then, but after that car accident he really went off the beam. Oh, he made plenty of money and he was prominent both here and in Dallas, but—"

"What about the accident?"

"Well, it was years ago, and he was about 19. He went through the windshield when the car went off the road. Maybe he hit his head and that did something to him, but I always sort of thought it was all those scars on his face."

"Why didn't he have plastic surgery?" Kinchelo asked.

Sam shrugged. "Plastic surgery wasn't so common then, and his folks were still alive. They were churchy, real strict, and they believed that you had to take what the Lord sent and bear with it, no matter what. They did get him a hook in place of the hand he lost, the left one, I think. Martin wasn't so hot on the church-going, though. Maybe it was just love me, love my scars."

"Umm. Now, what about those marriages of his?"

"Seems like Martin couldn't stand being married and he couldn't stand not being married, if you get what I mean," Sam said. "He'd marry, then he'd be so jealous that he'd get detectives to shadow the woman, and even if she came out clean, he'd still be so miserable that he'd be glad to give her a divorce, pay plenty to get rid of her. Why, it cost him a million dollars apiece for the first three. Funny thing was, there were plenty of women who'd have been glad to marry him—he had a lot of charm, he was smart and well-educated, and, of course, all that money. I guess this wife was lucky—she gets the whole thing unless he changed his will again."

"Changed his will?" Kinchelo paused in the act of rolling a cigarette.

"Oh, every time he got married, he'd will everything to his wife, whoever she was, and then when he started getting too jealous, he'd leave it all to Archie, his nephew."

Pennington, freshly shaved and dressed in another expensive suit, erupted through the door. Kinchelo offered him a chair, but he preferred to pace up and down, chain-smoking as he talked.

"This is shocking, Sheriff, shocking. Of course, you can't hold Fay. No jury in the country would—"

"How did she happen to marry Veryan? She's not from around here, is she?" Kinchelo asked, tipping his chair back against the wall and hooking his feet into the rungs.

"It was my doing. I've known Fay ever since high school, but I hadn't seen her in years—she'd

been living in New Orleans—until I ran into her on the street in Dallas about a year ago. She was a consultant with Ravissante Cosmetics and was demonstrating the products, or whatever consultants do, at one of the big stores. We went to lunch and ran into Martin. I introduced them, and I wish to hell I hadn't. He fell like a ton of bricks and followed her around the country till she agreed to marry him. Oh, I warned her, told her about his other marriages and how jealous and mean he could be. But he was intelligent and attractive when he exerted himself, and I guess the money and social position appealed to Fay. Anyway, she thought she could make it work, and I rather thought so, too, if anyone could. For one thing, she's older—his other wives were just kids, really—and she'd been married before—her husband was killed in Korea—and, well, she hasn't had too easy a life. After six months of marriage Martin seemed to be relaxing. He had even suggested having a big party, when those damn flowers began coming—"

"Flowers!" The legs of Kinchelo's chair hit the floor with a bang.

"Oh, some joker sent an order to Tilton, the florist, for a dozen red roses to be sent to Fay every week, with a card signed *Love, Reg.* Martin went to pieces, accused her of everything in the book, even though she'd hardly been out of his sight for six months. Fay denied ever knowing anyone named Reg, although I thought it was possible it might be some character she had known during her acting days. Anyway, she absolutely insisted that Martin have a detective check it out, but all he could find was that Tilton had received a typewritten letter, mailed in Dallas, with fifty dollars in old tens in it. The detective even checked out the various typewriters available to anyone connected in any way with the family. Even mine. I talked to Tilton myself, persuaded him it was a gag and got him to stop sending the roses, but the damage was done. Martin was like a wild man. Fay couldn't even say hello to me without his blowing up, and I am—was *his* lawyer. I finally decided that Archie did it."

"Oh, Veryan's nephew. But I thought he was away at college."

"Yes, but not far enough away. He's one of these long-haired, bearded, dirty ones, spends half his time demonstrating. I wouldn't even be surprised to hear that he'd thrown a bomb or two. You know the type. Anyway, I discovered that he and a friend had been in Dallas the weekend that the roses were or-

dered, and they were either drunk or hopped up. He doesn't remember a damn thing—drew a blank on the whole two days they were there, and so did his friend. Or so they say."

"Had Veryan set detectives to watching his wife?"

Pennington shrugged and sat down. "Probably, but he didn't tell me about it, because I gave him hell, told him I was advising Fay to sue for divorce—and I did—because I could see that the wrangling and suspicion were getting her down. But she was stubborn, said she was going to try to bring him to his senses. I rather thought she might, till yesterday morning when he came to my office and began talking about changing his will. I really let him have it then, and he said he'd take his law business elsewhere, and I said take it and be damned."

"It would have meant a big loss to you?"

The lawyer shook his head. "Not all that much. The company business is handled by a firm in Dallas. He just used me for divorces and wills and such."

"Did he hint at the possibility of this masquerade?"

"He did not! Don't you think I would have warned Fay if I'd dreamed of such a thing?" Pennington looked hard at the other man. "Why the devil are you harping on this bit about the roses? It was an accident, pure and simple, her shooting him. Or maybe it would be more correct to say it was his own damn fault."

The cook, the maid and the chauffeur-handyman were unanimous in their support of Fay Veryan. She was a fine woman and she'd been sorely tried by her husband. Even before the flowers came, he had been demanding and difficult; afterwards, well, they just didn't see how she stood it.

Tilton was only too glad to hand over the envelope and the note and the rest of the money. He said, "I was home sick with the flu that week or the flowers would never have been sent. I've known Martin a long time. But my assistant is new in town, and she just went ahead and filled the order. I had already put a stop to it before Pennington talked to me."

The envelope and note had been typed on a machine with the A badly out of line and a C that didn't hit as hard as the other keys. The expert whom Kinchelo consulted said it was an old machine, elite type.

Archie Veryan was small and grimy, with a dirty, blond beard, far-out clothes, and halitosis. He sneered at Martin. "Dirty capitalist, served him right." Nor did he have

a good word for Fay, although she had gone to the trouble to invite him to visit them whenever he liked. "Cozying up to me," he said scornfully, "I didn't even answer."

Then he inquired anxiously whether Martin had made a new will and under his scorn Kinchelo discerned apprehension. Archie was, he proudly admitted, a poet and tossed the sheriff a copy of one of his efforts, a page full of mostly four-letter words, not, however, typed on the machine Kinchelo was seeking. Mention of the roses produced nothing but a string of obscenities. The sheriff, realizing that if Archie had written the note he could have borrowed a typewriter from any one of 10,000 students, gave up and went back home.

Fay Veryan was still in the hospital, so the big house was deserted that night when Kinchelo and Sam went out there. In the upstairs sitting room, with the lights off, it looked much as it must have the night before with the moonlight streaming in through the window and making a big white patch on the floor.

Kinchelo examined the window carefully, then said, "Sam, you're about Veryan's size. Climb out on the porch roof and make like you're him for a few minutes."

Sam climbed through the window and lifted his arms as though raising the window. The moonlight made a silver streak along the left side of his head and all down his left arm and hand, but the face was in blackest shadow.

"Now, Sam, come back in."

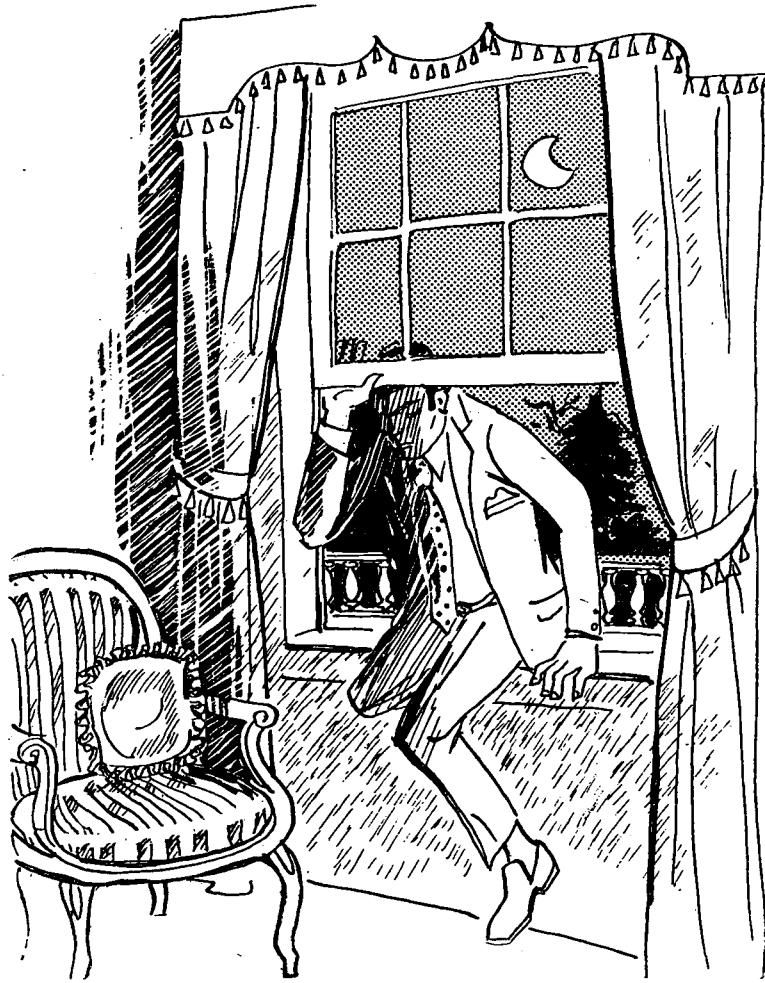
The deputy spread his arms wide, grasped the windowsill with both hands and clambered through.

"You believe her now, Kinch?"

"It's a cinch she couldn't have recognized his face," he replied and turned on the light.

For the next hour they went through Fay's papers and such of Martin's as were there. Finally, they came across the address of a bookstore in New York, and it had an A out of line and a C hitting too lightly, but there was no clue as to its source.

The next day was a busy one. Kinchelo talked at length to the phone company. He chatted with an old friend, who just happened to be the superintendent of the apartment house in which Pennington lived and who, recalling past favors, was not averse to letting him look through the lawyer's apartment and some boxes Archie Veryan had stored there. Then the sheriff spent some time going through Martin Veryan's papers in his office in Dallas, including re-



ports from and checks to a certain detective agency. It was interesting to discover that the agency had never discovered anything out of line about the conduct of any of Veryan's wives, including Fay. Sam flew to New Orleans and back, wasting no time there.

The day of the funeral the widow looked sad and beautiful in black with just a little white at the throat and she behaved with just the proper dignity. Archie Veryan, somewhat cleaner and more deco-

rously dressed, was there, biting his fingernails and muttering. Pennington, wearing a black arm band, hovered over Fay, and the sheriff watched them all.

He and Sam followed when the three returned to the Veryan house. Fay looked a little surprised, but she graciously invited them all into the downstairs drawing room, a vast cavern full of out-of-date riches, Victorian furniture heavy with carving and fat with black horsehair, set off by hair wreaths, whatnots, and maroon velvet draperies.

"It's awful, isn't it?" she said frankly. "Martin wouldn't let me do a thing to it."

"A museum would give its eyeteeth for it. Just sell them the whole thing. It's yours now, Fay," Pennington said, putting his briefcase on the table.

She seated herself in a big chair. Archie took off his shoes and sprawled on a sofa. Sam stood negligently by the door, leaning against the wall so that his gun was well hidden by his coat. Kinchelo drifted to a spot where he could observe them all.

The will was simple. Except for moderate bequests to servants, the local church, a couple of charities, and a hundred thousand dollars to Archie, everything went to Fay.

"Frankly, I'm surprised," she said when Pennington finished. "I supposed he had drawn up another will."

"He did mention it once, but as far as I can find out he didn't do anything about it," said the lawyer.

Archie made a couple of profane comments about lousy capitalists, but he seemed greatly relieved.

"And now, Sheriff Kinchelo, shall I hold out my hands for the handcuffs?" Fay inquired impudently.

The lawyer laughed. "It was an accident, and nothing more, but I understand that the sheriff has spent a good deal of time and some of the taxpayers' money, anyhow."

"The roses bothered me," Kinchelo admitted.

"But they had nothing to do with it," Archie cried, beginning to look anxious again.

"Oh, yes, they did. If it hadn't been for them, Martin might not have been goaded into spying on his wife and he might still be alive," the sheriff pointed out drily.

Pennington said scornfully, "So you say, but Martin was following the same old pattern—"

"Hush, Larry," Fay put in eagerly. "Those roses caused me so much trouble that I'd like to know just what he did find out about them."

In the pause that followed, tension began to build, seeping in qui-

etly like gas, accumulating slowly until time for the explosion. Kinchelo felt it and looked at Sam, who hitched around casually to make his gun handier. Archie thrust shaking hands between his knees. Fay sat straighter, lighted another cigarette, and even Pennington shifted uneasily.

"I know who sent them," Kinchelo said slowly. "I even found the typewriter on which the letter to the florist was written."

"Oh, man!" Archie sank back against the sofa and closed his eyes.

"Yours, Pennington."

"Larry's?" Fay demanded incredulously.

"That's idiotic!" the lawyer exclaimed. "That detective compared the letter with my machine, and they weren't even the same make."

"I know that. You just never happened to let him see that beat-up old portable you've got stashed away in the closet in your apartment."

Pennington started, paled, and then, collecting himself, said carelessly, "Well, there's no law against sending flowers to a lady."

"Damn you, Pennington," Archie sputtered. "You let me worry myself sick about those flowers."

Fay hissed angrily, "You—you louse, trying to break up my marriage. You put me through hell!"

"Is it so awful that I should have fallen in love with you myself, Fay?" Pennington asked gently. "I did, you know, and I tried my best to warn you against Martin."

"Never mind the act. I know that the whole thing was a put-up job," Kinchelo said. "After watching Veryan shell out a million dollars apiece to three wives, Pennington, you decided you might as well get in on some of the gravy, so you got in touch with your old friend—she was Mrs. Hempstead then. Oh, there's a record of your calls to her in New Orleans, beginning about a year and a half ago, and her ex-landlady identified your picture as that of a man who visited Mrs. Hempstead several times. The idea was that she would marry Veryan and when he got jealous to the point of demanding a divorce, as he usually did, then you and the lady would split the proceeds between you. This time, no doubt, the price would have been higher."

"That's what you say, but you can't prove it." Pennington lighted a cigarette with care.

"Everything worked fine until she crossed you up by deciding she liked being Mrs. Martin Veryan," the sheriff continued. "So you sent the flowers to make him jealous. You kept working on him, prodding him, perhaps you even suggested the idea of spying on her—"

"I wondered about that. Martin

was more apt to hire his dirty work done," Fay put in. She was very pale and quiet, with the stillness of a cat about to spring.

Sam moved a little closer.

Pennington knocked the ashes off his cigarette and said nonchalantly, "Granting that you can prove any of this, which I seriously doubt, what have you got? Nothing, absolutely nothing. *I* didn't kill him."

Fay flung herself at him, raking his face with her nails and screaming, "You fixed it so I'd kill him!"

Sam pulled her away, while the lawyer mopped his blood-streaked face.

Kinchelo said firmly, "Oh, no, Mrs. Veryan, you knew it was your husband when you shot him."

She stopped in mid-scream and glared at him. "I did not and you can't prove I did."

"I grant you that his appearance on the roof was a complete surprise and that you didn't recognize him at first," he went on.

"I *never* recognized him!"

"Oh, yes, you did because his left side was toward you and you couldn't help seeing that hook of his—"

"No, no!" She put her hands over her ears.

"He hooked it over the sill to climb in—there are marks on the sill—and it was probably that which kept him upright after the first shot. As he slumped, the hook scratched the wood of the sill," he went on.

Tears streamed down Fay's face, but she seemed unaware of them, just kept shaking her head.

"I can understand why you were furious at him for spying on you in person after you had tried so hard, and no doubt a jury will take that into consideration," Kinchelo added.

She took out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "Oh, I was so mad. I felt unclean. The detective had been bad enough, but Martin spying on me— Yes, I killed him."

"As for you, Pennington," the sheriff said, "the county attorney might be able to think up some charge, and in any event, the bar association will probably take a very dim view of your activities."

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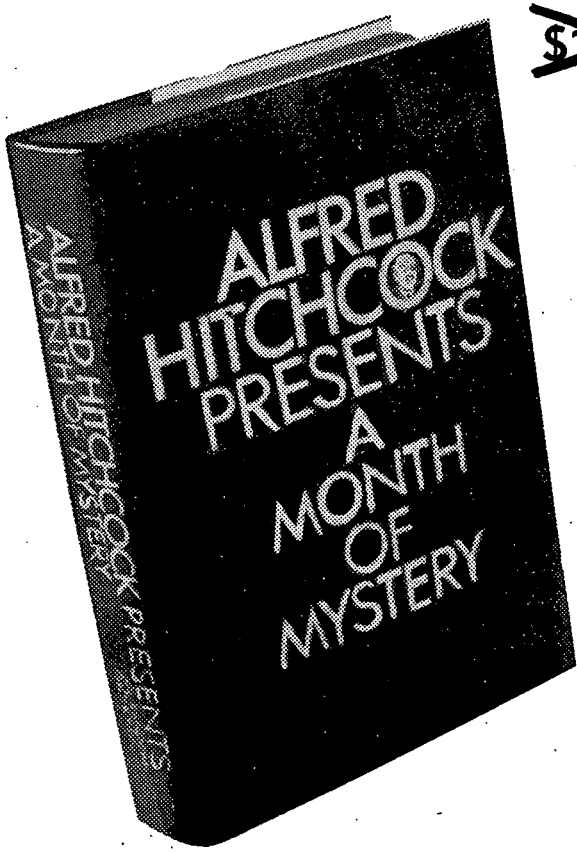

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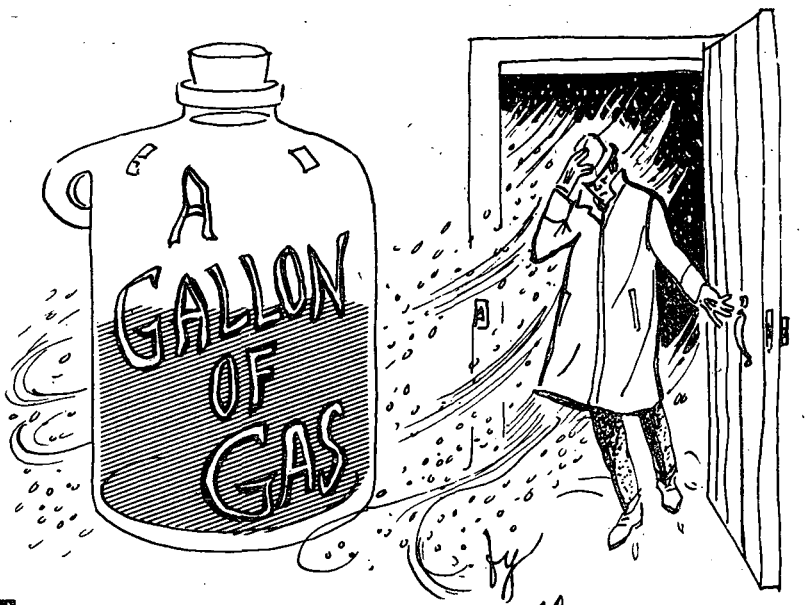


by William Brittain

THE LEGS OF Sy Cottle's chair scraped on the rough-hewn plank floor as he got up, walked to the iron stove in the center of the room and rammed another piece of wood into the blazing fire. It was going to be a cold, stormy night. Already he could hear the north wind sighing through the mountain pines, and wet, heavy snowflakes spattering against the front window.

It'd be a hellish night for anyone caught outside. In spite of the heat from the stove, Sy felt a shiver run along his spine as he returned to his perusal of the mail-order catalog by the light of the kerosene lamp.

He didn't hear the first gentle tapping on the building's front door; it was masked by the keening wind. The second time, the knocking was louder and more urgent. Sy looked up in surprise from a two-page spread of hunting shirts. What kind of tomfool would come to such a deserted part of the mountains on a night like this?

It took some time to undo the rusty latch of the front door, and meanwhile the knocking grew to a loud pounding. Finally he was able to swing the door open on protesting hinges, and a figure rushed inside in a flurry of snow.

The man wore a gray snap-brim hat and a light raincoat. His shoes, once fashionably stitched and highly polished, were now two lumps of mud and wet leather. He went to the glowing stove and began rubbing his hands, soaking up the heat gratefully.

City feller, thought Sy.

"It's c-cold out there," said the man through chattering teeth.

"Yeah," answered Sy and then was silent. No sense wasting words till he found out what the man wanted.

The man began peeling off his sodden coat. "My name's John Da . . ." There was a long pause. "John Dace," he said finally.

"Uh huh. I'm Sy Cottle. Somethin' I can do for you?" he asked.

"Gas. I need gas for my car. It ran dry about eight miles back." Dace waved a hand to indicate the direction from which he'd come. "I had to walk."

"I see. Lucky you came this way. The nearest place in the other direction is Cedar Village, and that's twenty-five miles from here. You could have froze to death before you got there."

"I know," said Dace. "We stopped in Cedar Village on the way. But about the gas . . ."

"What makes you think I've got any gas around here?"

"Why, I saw the pumps outside, and I thought . . ."

"Too bad you couldn't have seen 'em in daylight," said Sy, shaking his head. "Rusted solid, both of 'em. I haven't pumped a gallon of gas in the last seven years. When the state put in that new six-lane highway over in the next valley, it about put me out of business. Sometimes two, three weeks go by without my even seeing a car on this road, especially in the winter. It's all a body can do to earn enough money to stay alive."

"But . . ." Dace's face was a study in panic. "But I've got to get some gas."

Sy scratched the stubble on his face and took a battered cigar from his shirt pocket. "That's the trouble

with you city fellers," he said, scratching a wooden match on the table and lighting the cigar. "Always in a hurry. Now, the highway boys'll be around by this road in another week or so. They'll give you a tow."

"No! You don't understand. I've got to have the gas now. Tonight!"

"I see." Sy eyed his visitor shrewdly. "How come it's so all-fired important for you to get your car movin' tonight?"

"My wife—she's waiting for me in the car. She could freeze to death before morning."

"Um." Sy considered this for several seconds. "That does put a new face on the matter," he said.

"Look, old-timer," snapped Dace. "If you've got gas here I need a couple of gallons. If not . . ." He reached for his coat.

"Won't do you no good to leave here," said Sy. "Especially with the snow pickin' up the way it is. Like I told you, Cedar Village is twenty-five miles back the way you come."

"Then I'll go on."

"The nearest place on up the road belongs to Steve Sweeney," said Sy complacently. "He runs a small airport, so he'd probably have some gas you could buy." He sucked slowly on the glowing cigar. "Course, it is seventeen miles from here . . ."

Dace looked about him like a trapped animal. "I'll—I'll walk back and get Helen," he said in a shaking voice, "and bring her here."

Sy got up from the chair and sauntered to the window. "That's sixteen miles you'd be walkin', round trip," he said softly. "You'd probably make it to the car all right. But comin' back? I dunno. Especially with a woman. Ever see anybody that was froze to death, mister?"

"But I've got to do something!" moaned Dace.

"That's true," said Sy. "Well, maybe—just maybe I got some gas in a drum out back. I might be willin' to sell you a little, seein' as my truck's up on blocks for the winter with the tires off and the radiator drained."

"You've got gas?" Dace breathed a long sigh, and his tense body relaxed. "I'll buy some. Two gallons ought to be enough." He reached into a hip pocket and drew out a wallet.

"Just a minute, mister."

"What's the matter?"

"Have you given any thought to how you're going to carry this gas? You can't just pour it in your pocket, you know."

"Why, can't I just borrow a jug or something?"

"I don't set much store by havin' my stuff borrowed," said Sy. "But I

might be willing to sell you a jug. This one right here, for instance." He reached down and pulled a glass container from underneath the table.

Dace smiled wryly. "Okay, old-timer," he said. "I suppose you've got to make a little on this, too. How much for the jug?"

"Five dollars."

"Well, that's kind of expensive, a gallon of gas for five dollars. Especially since I'll be needing two of them. But I guess when you're out here in the middle of nowhere, you have to fleece the tourists while the getting is good. Here, you old robber." Dace took a ten-dollar bill from the wallet and extended it toward Sy.

Sy ignored the money and looked Dace straight in the eye. "I don't think you got the drift of what I told you," he said flatly. "The five dollars—that's for the jug. It don't include the gas."

"What! Five dollars for that thing—and no gas? Why, I could pick one up in any store in the world for a quarter."

"That's true. What store you plannin' on visitin' tonight?"

Dace stared at the window, where a crust of snow had formed over the glass. He clenched his fists in impotent fury. "How—how much for the gas?" he asked finally.

Sy flicked a glance at Dace's wallet. "Oh, seein' as you've been so pleasant about the whole thing, and bein' in distress and all . . . Let's say fifty dollars a gallon."

"Fifty dollars! Hell, that's highway robbery!"

"The price of gas is goin' up," Sy said calmly.

"That's not funny," replied Dace.

"Wasn't meant to be. Just a statement of fact."

Desperately, Dace flipped through the bills in his wallet. "Damn!" he muttered finally. "I've only got sixty dollars here."

"Well, that'll buy you a gallon, and—figuring the cost of the jug—you'll have five dollars to keep," smiled Sy. "I won't charge you nothin' for warmin' yourself at the stove."

"That's real decent of you," snarled Dace. "But I've got to have two gallons."

"But it don't look like you can pay for 'em," said Sy. "Unless your wife's got some money on her. Speakin' of that, she must be gettin' mighty cold out in that car."

"Look, two gallons. Please. I—I'll give you my watch." Dace began tearing at the strap on his wrist.

"Don't need a watch. Time don't mean much in these parts. But if I was you, I'd be gettin' back to the car with that gas. The snow seems

to be gettin' worse. Then on your way back here, you decide whether you want to buy more gas or stay on here until somebody passes by. I can give you a good deal on a room with grub thrown in. Daily or weekly rates."

Without waiting for a reply, Sy took the empty jug into the rear of the building and filled it from a large gasoline drum. When he returned, Dace had already put on his coat.

"Here's your money," Dace snarled, extending a fistful of bills. "I hope you choke on it."

"That ain't no way to talk to a man who saved your life," grinned Sy. He took the money and counted it carefully. "Fifty-five dollars. It's been a pleasure doin' business with you. I wish I could give you a lift, but like I said, my truck's laid up for the winter. I guess I can expect you back in about two, three hours. That right, Mr. Dace?"

With a shouted oath, Dace threw open the door and walked out into the howling storm.

It was nearly midnight, and the wind and snow had stopped, when Sy heard the crunching of automobile tires outside the building. He opened the door and watched Dace get out of the car and approach, followed by a slender woman dressed in light clothing which was almost no protection against the frosty air. As they entered the building and huddled near the stove, Sy could see that their lips were blue with cold.

"This is Helen—my wife," said Dace by way of introduction. "I told her about the gas you were—eh—kind enough to sell me."

"Always glad to be of service," Sy said with a smile. "You two decide whether you want to buy another gallon?"

"I've got some money," said Helen in a soft voice. "We'll take the gas."

"Good, good. Only thing is, the price went up again. A gallon costs sixty-five dollars now. Course, you can use the jug you already bought, so that's a saving right there."

Helen opened her purse. "This ought to pay for the gas," she said, tossing a small bundle toward Sy. It fell to the floor with a faint thump.

Sy bent to examine the packet, and Dace heard him gasp with surprise. "Why, all the money in here!"

"That's what you wanted, isn't it?" asked Helen.

"Yeah, but . . . Wait a minute. On this paper strap it says . . ."

Sy looked up in surprise, and straight into the muzzle of the revolver which Dace had pointed at him.

"It says 'Bank of Cedar Village', doesn't it, old-timer?" said Dace. "And we've got a lot more bundles like that out in the trunk of the car. I told you we'd been in Cedar Village, but I didn't tell you why."

"You—you robbed the bank up there." Sy gasped in sudden realization. "But you said you didn't have no more money when you was here before," he accused them.

"You don't think I'd be crazy enough to carry it on me while I was walking, did you?" grinned Dace. "No telling what kind of characters I'd meet on these back roads."

"Look, Mr. Dace," Sy said, looking wide-eyed at the gun. "There don't nobody have to know you was here. I—I can keep my mouth shut for—for—"

"For how much, old-timer? I'm sorry, but your prices are kind of high. I've got a better way of handling you. Helen, get some of that wire that's hanging on the wall there and tie him up."

"Should I gag him?"

Dace shook his head. "Let him shout. From what he's told me, there won't be anybody along this way for at least a couple of days. We'll have plenty of time to get away from here."

In moments, Sy was tied securely to the chair. He could feel the copper wire biting into his wrists, and he knew it would be impossible to free himself without assistance. His feet were wired off the floor to the rungs of the chair, effectively preventing him from shifting his position.

"We'll take the gas now," said Dace, looking down at him. "All we need."

Sy remained silent.

"Two gallons," mused Dace. "That's all it would have taken."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Sy.

"We knew all about that airport you mentioned when we planned this job," explained Dace. "Just seventeen miles up the road from here. We figured to take this back road while the police were looking for us on the highway. A pilot who's a friend of mine was going to land a small plane at the airport, and we'd be out of these hills before anyone could come near us."

"But you had to forget to gas up the car before the heist," taunted Helen.

"That's right. So we ran out of gas. If you'd sold me only two gallons, old-timer, we could have made it to the airport without stopping here again. But you got greedy, so we had to bring the car back here or risk running dry farther up the road. And in the meantime, how were we to know you hadn't heard about the robbery on the radio or something?"

"But I swear I didn't hear anything," gasped Sy. "I don't even own a radio, that's the truth."

"Sorry, old-timer, but we had no way of knowing that. And it's a little late now for it to make any difference."

The car was quickly filled with gas, and Helen went outside. Dace took an extra moment to examine the wires that bound his captive.

"Mr. Dace?" said Sy in a hoarse whisper.

"Yeah?"

"It usually gets awful cold after a snowstorm in these hills."

"So I've heard."

"Sometimes it goes below zero. And the fire in that stove is good for only a few more hours."

"You're probably right about that."

"I'll freeze to death, Mr. Dace."

"You didn't seem too worried when it was my wife out in the cold."

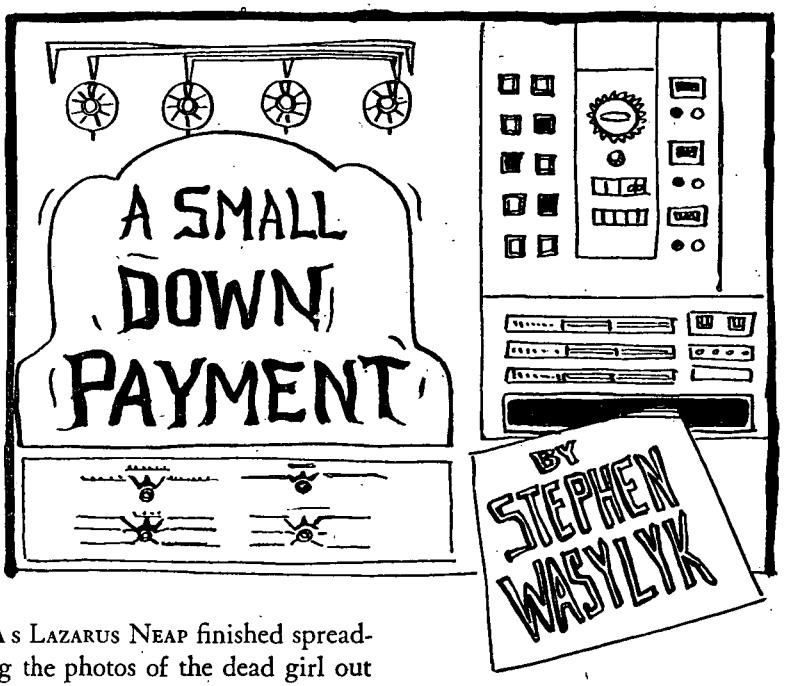
"Dying is a pretty high price to pay just for gypping you out of an extra gallon of gasoline."

"Well, it's like you said, old-timer."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The price of gas is going up."

Basic patterns, unfortunately, are frequently disrupted, rather than ameliorated, by subliminal embroidery.



As Lazarus Neap finished spreading the photos of the dead girl out on his desk, a gust of wind from the open window spun several of them to the floor.

Neap sighed. Even the little things weren't working out this week.

It had begun on Monday. Arbosh, a rookie detective, had been assigned to Neap, and he and Arbosh had been sent to pick up a burglary suspect who had not taken kindly to being arrested. Arbosh's lack of experience had cost Neap a smashing fist high on his right cheek that left a jagged tear that throbbed occasionally and had swelled his eye half shut.

Hardly the best-looking detective sergeant on the force ordinarily, the stitches and swollen cheek gave him a leering Satanic look.

Then on Tuesday, a young woman named Ann Cheyney had been found strangled in her apartment. After twenty-four hours, Neap still didn't have an inkling of a lead. The girl, only twenty-two, had lived alone, had few friends and worked as a secretary for a small law firm. No one in the garden-type apartment where she had lived had seen or heard anything.

Now, on Wednesday, there was another strangled girl. The lieutenant, working shorthanded, had given that one to Neap too, because he had once worked on the park detail and the body had been found alongside one of the park roads where it had evidently been thrown from a passing car. The road through the park was little used, deserted late at night, and the gravel on the shoulder showed no tire marks. Again Neap had nothing with which to work.

Neap slid the window down, closing out the warmth of the early afternoon spring day, and rearranged his photos. *This one is worse than the other,* he mused. *We don't even know her name.*

He studied the photos, struck by the superficial resemblance of his unknown Jane Doe to Ann Cheyney. Both had been young, with straight long blonde hair, and both had been rather plain, even in death. Neap wondered if there could be some connection between the two killings. The preliminary report on Jane Doe indicated she had been strangled in much the same manner as Ann Cheyney.

Arbosh, a smile on his round face, came in swinging a woman's handbag by its long strap. He deposited it carefully on the photos. "Look what they found in the park."

Neap almost smiled. "Near the body?"

"About a half mile away in a field, as if it had been tossed from a car."

Neap looked at him suspiciously. "You handle it at all?"

"Nobody did. We thought there might be prints on that smooth leather. You want to take it to the lab?"

"Right now," growled Neap. "I don't even want to open it here."

It took Short, the lab technician, only a few minutes to find one print that wasn't smeared. "Even that isn't good," he said. "You'll never use it in court."

"I'm not surprised," said Neap. "Let's find out who it belongs to."

Short slipped on a pair of cotton gloves and emptied the bag on the

table. Among the usual contents was a plastic identification badge for a Center City department store and a wallet with a change purse.

Short picked up the identification badge carefully. "If this belonged to your Jane Doe, her name was Needa Stone." He checked the contents of the wallet. "No robbery, and it couldn't have been a purse-snatching. The money's still here."

"That wallet have an ID card?" asked Arbosh.

Short nodded. "Needa Stone, one twenty-seven South Twelfth."

"I know the place," said Neap. "A couple of apartments above a delicatessen."

"You think this belonged to our Jane Doe?" asked Arbosh.

"I'd bet on it. Let's take a pictu e over there and see."

"I'll tag all this stuff and check it for prints," said Short.

"Give it the full treatment. We need all the help we can get."

Neap was right about the address in the wallet. The building was old, the delicatessen squeezed between a multilevel garage and a hotel. The name "Stone" above a mailbox in a foyer indicated the girl had occupied the second floor rear.

They found the delicatessen owner arranging cold cuts in the meat case. "How are you, Mr. Satinsky?" Neap said, waving a hand.

Satinsky, a stooped old man, smiled. "Welcome, Lazarus. We don't see you around here since you became a detective. Who hit you in the face?"

"It's a long story." Neap introduced Arbosh and handed Satinsky the photo. "This one of your tenants?"

"That's Miss Stone." Satinsky peered at the picture closely, understanding washing over his wrinkled face. "She's dead?"

"She's dead. Maybe you could go down to the morgue and identify her."

"No," said Satinsky. "I would like to help but I cannot leave. You understand. How did she die?"

Neap told him.

The old man shook his head. "You catch the killer, Lazarus. She was a nice girl."

"She have any friends or relatives?"

"Friends, a few. Young girls like herself. No men. Relatives, I do not know."

"Did you see her last night?"

"No. I do not think she came home. She would have stopped in to pick up some things. She did not last night."

"We'd like to see her apartment," said Arbosh.

Neap considered. He had no choice but to let Arbosh loose and

see what he could do. "I'll check the apartment," he said. "You take the car to where she worked, see what their personnel records show and see if you can find any friends. We still need someone to identify the body. If you can find a volunteer, bring him back to the office."

Arbosh nodded. "I'll do what I can."

The apartment was small; a livingroom, bedroom, bathroom and kitchenette. The furniture could have been purchased used and had seen many years of wear since.

Needa Stone had made some attempt to imprint her personality on the apartment, but failed. The curtains on the windows and the prints on the walls did nothing for the room except point up its shabbiness.

Curious, reflected Neap. There really wasn't much difference between this apartment and Ann Cheyney's. Lonely young women must have the same life-style, and drab apartments were part of it.

He moved into the bedroom. The bed was neatly made, undisturbed. Neap opened the closet, fingering through the meager collection of dresses. The bedroom yielded nothing.

The bathroom rated no more than a minute; neither did the kitchenette. Needa Stone had been a neat person.

Back in the livingroom, he thoughtlessly fingered the bruise on his cheek and winced. If there was anything in the apartment of use to him, it had to be here.

There was a battered sofa along one wall, a small TV facing an easy chair, a hi-fi set along another wall and a small desk in the corner. A bookshelf alongside the desk was overflowing with paperbacks and magazines. *Another similarity,* thought Neap. Ann Cheyney's apartment had plenty of reading material.

Neap moved to the desk. It had two drawers. The upper one held an unlocked metal cash box with nothing inside except a personal checkbook and a bankbook. Neap fanned through the check stubs. The checks written for her apartment and utilities were easy to spot along with a few made out to the department store and a few made out to cash. One puzzled Neap. For twenty-five dollars, it was made out simply to *Date.* He put the checkbook aside.

The bankbook indicated Needa Stone had faithfully saved ten dollars a week.

Neap bit his lip gently. Other than the amounts, he had found the same setup in the other apartment; the personal checkbook with a small balance, a bankbook showing regular deposits. The sim-

ilar pattern disturbed him. There was little difference, if any, between the two young women who had been strangled. It was almost as if they knew each other and had mutually decided to follow a certain routine.

He closed the bankbook and opened the lower drawer, pulling out an expandable, accordion-pleated file. It yielded canceled checks that told him nothing new except that the check made out to *Date* hadn't been returned. Neap made a note of the number and the bank. He closed the desk, hoping he would have better luck with the neighbors.

It didn't take long. The tenant in the front apartment turned out to be a hard-of-hearing old woman who knew Needa Stone only enough to nod to, and had seen or heard nothing the previous evening. Neap glanced at his watch. He'd have to send Arbosh back to canvass the neighborhood thoroughly if nothing else turned up.

The afternoon had turned colder, the sun gone behind a heavy cloud cover, and the cool wind stung the laceration on his cheek.

Neap decided to walk back to headquarters. He was passing the bank Needa Stone used for her checking account when he remembered the stub marked *Date*. He turned in and was directed to a vice-president named Dial who couldn't have been more cooperative. It took Dial only one phone call to locate the check somewhere in the bank's records office.

"It is made out to Date, Incorporated," he said.

Neap frowned. "Never heard of it."

Dial smiled. "It is my understanding that Date, Incorporated is a computer dating service. Men and women send in their applications and for a fee, the company will match them with a compatible member of the opposite sex. I really don't know too much about it, other than it is very popular at the moment. There are several firms in town advertising such a service."

Neap wrote the name in his notebook. "The check has been cashed?"

"At least three weeks ago."

Neap thanked him, thinking that Needa Stone must have been very lonely and desperate for male company to pay twenty-five dollars to a firm that promised her a date.

He had reached the door of the squad room when he stopped, mentally cursing himself as an idiot.

Arbosh was at his desk, talking to a pretty young woman. "This is Terry Hutton," he said. "A friend of Miss Stone's. She has identified the body at the morgue."

Neap smiled at Terry Hutton, who looked as if she had been crying and was ready to start again. "How well did you know Needa Stone?"

"Quite well. We worked together."

"Any idea where she went last night?"

"She said something about a date, but she didn't mention the man's name. She was very excited about it because she didn't go out much."

"Did she say anything at all about the man?"

"There wasn't much she could say, I guess. I gathered that it was a blind date."

"He was to pick her up at her apartment?"

"No. She was to meet him after work at the eagle."

Arbosh grunted and Neap knew why. In the center of the ground floor of the department store where Needa Stone had worked, a large bronze eagle dominated the wide center aisle. It was a natural meeting place and had been used by thousands of people through the years. With the shopping crowds milling around, it was unlikely that a man and a young woman would attract attention.

"You have any idea who arranged the date or how it was arranged?"

"She didn't say," she replied.

"Did she ever mention Date, Incorporated?"

"I never heard of it."

She could contribute nothing else and Neap had the feeling he was looking at another blank wall, but this one had a little chink in it labeled Date, Inc.

He watched her walk out, male heads in the room pivoting with her passage, thinking that she at least would require no assistance in meeting a man.

"You find anything else at the department store?" he asked Arbosh.

"Next of kin on the personnel record shows an aunt living upstate. I've already arranged for her to be notified. How about you?"

Neap told him about Date, Inc.

"You think she got this date through them?"

"It's worth checking. Look up their address and let's go over there."

Date, Inc. was on the fifteenth floor of one of the newer office buildings in Center City.

Arbosh raised his eyebrows when they left the elevator. "I never would have thought loneliness would pay this well."

Neap grinned. "It's a big city with a lot of people who ignore each other." He held his badge out to the mini-skirted young recep-

tionist. "I'd like to see someone in charge."

"What is it in reference to?" she asked brightly.

Somewhere Neap had acquired a headache to go with his throbbing cheek. He leaned over the desk. "Just get someone out here," he said softly.

The girl's smile faded, she picked up the phone and spoke briefly. "Mr. Owen will be out shortly," she said primly.

The only word Neap could think of for Owen was dapper. From the top of his carefully barbered head to the tips of his gleaming shoes, Owen looked like he had just stepped out of a men's store window. He looked at Neap's swollen cheek with distaste.

"Can I help you?" Even the voice was carefully polished.

No one should be so perfect, thought Neap, annoyed. He explained. "You have a Needa Stone among your clients?"

Owen beckoned them into his office. "I'll have it looked up." He pressed a buzzer on his desk, another young girl came in, he told her what he wanted and she disappeared.

"How does your service work?" asked Arbosh.

Owen smiled. "Very simply. People who subscribe fill out an application. We code the information and feed it into a computer where it is stored. If you, for instance, also subscribe, we will code the information on your application and request the computer to print out the names and addresses of young women with similar personality characteristics. That's all there is to it."

"How about screening people?" asked Neap. "You could get applications from unstable personalities."

"Our questionnaire is scientifically designed to weed out people like that," said Owen.

"I'm sure it is," said Neap dryly as the young woman came in and handed Owen a card.

"Miss Stone was given the name of a Carver Hoopes," said Owen.

"Was Hoopes given her name?" asked Neap.

"Yes, indeed. That is how our particular system works. We provide the names to each of the subscribers. From then on it is their responsibility to get together."

"I'd like you to pull Hoopes' card," said Neap carefully.

Owen looked at him steadily. "You have a reason?"

"I have a reason."

Owen nodded to the girl, who left. "We like to consider our files as confidential," he said.

"I could easily get a court order," said Neap. "This way saves a great

deal of time for all, however."

"I hope you find what you want."

Neap shrugged. "We'll see."

The girl came back with another card.

Owen glanced at it. "Mr. Hoopes was given three names. An Ann Cheyney, a Miss Stone and a Donna Whitford."

Arbosh whistled softly as Neap leaned back, no longer feeling like an idiot.

"You've found something interesting?" asked Owen.

"Two of those young women have been found strangled," said Neap. "It has to be a little more than coincidence."

Owen leaned back. "It is rather odd."

"We need the addresses of Hoopes and the third girl," said Neap.

"I suppose I have no choice," said Owen.

"None," said Neap grimly.

"Mr. Hoopes' address is listed as the Crescent Hotel at Seventh and South. Miss Whitford is at 1417 Monrovia."

Arbosh wrote them in his notebook. "I'm curious," he said. "Why would Hoopes receive three names and the Stone girl only one?"

"The fee, naturally," said Owen stiffly. "Mr. Hoopes paid more. The young lady paid only a small down payment under a special program."

"Would any other man have been given the names of these three young women?"

Owen spoke reluctantly. "Not in that combination. You see, the computer responses are arranged—"

He was wasting his polished voice on an empty chair. Neap was halfway out the door.

Arbosh had trouble keeping up with Neap's long strides. "You sure ended that in a hurry."

"Couldn't take him any longer," said Neap quietly. "Too smooth, trying too hard to sell us that it is all very scientific and legitimate, but I'll take the old village matchmaker every time. At least he knew who he was dealing with, and he didn't ask for down payments or money in advance. Something about this setup doesn't feel right. These services may be completely clean, but remind me to check with Davis in Bunco about this one."

"Where do we go first?"

"The hotel. If Hoopes does have a date with the Whitford girl tonight, and I think he does, it's too early yet. She probably works until five."

"One thing we know about Hoopes," said Arbosh. "If he lives at the Crescent, he can't have much money."

"Don't leap to conclusions.

Maybe his address isn't important to him."

The clerk at the desk of the Crescent was small, narrow-shouldered, with closely cropped black hair and thick glasses. He was reading a paperback book that featured a nude man and woman on the cover. A sign on the desk said his name was E. G. Bauer.

Neap asked for Hoopes.

Bauer dropped the book, hesitated, took off his glasses and polished them slowly. "Mr. Hoopes is no longer with us. He checked out today."

"Just our luck," muttered Arbosh.

"Did he leave a forwarding address?" Neap asked.

Bauer smiled. "People who stay here never do."

Arbosh pulled out his notebook. "What did he look like?"

Bauer hooked his glasses over his ears. "That's hard to say."

"You saw him, didn't you?"

"Only a few times. What I meant was, there was nothing distinctive about Hoopes. He looked like many other men."

"We can do without the editorial comment," growled Neap.

"Average height," said Bauer hastily. "Long brown hair. Maybe twenty-five. Big shoulders, looks like an athlete."

"What color eyes?"

Bauer smiled. "I don't pay attention to the color of men's eyes."

Neap chuckled. "Anything unusual about him that you can remember?"

"Nothing. I told you. He looked like a million other men."

"He either owned a car or rented one," said Neap. "You ever notice?"

Bauer shook his head. "I'm afraid I like to read too much. If it can't come up to the front desk, I don't see it." He indicated his glasses. "And even then I can't see too well."

"I may want to talk to you again," said Neap. "When do you go off duty?"

"Five o'clock. I stay here at the hotel. I'll be glad to help in any way I can."

"You can help now," said Neap, kneading the back of his neck. "Do you have any aspirin?"

Outside, Arbosh looked at him closely. "You should have listened to the doc and taken a day or two off."

"You explain how and I'll be glad to do it. Right now, we have to get to this Whitford girl and see if she has a date tonight with Hoopes."

Arbosh expertly wheeled the car through traffic. "Maybe he called her first and she's already had a

date with him," he thought aloud.

"In that case, she'll be able to give us a good description but I doubt that it has happened yet or she would be dead. He went after the other two on successive nights and I'm betting he's seeing her tonight. Maybe he checked out because he's thinking of moving on. It would be the smart thing."

"If he's the man who did the killings, he's planned it well. You think it's the first time?"

"Who knows? He seems to have a big hate for a certain type of young woman. These dating services can serve them up to him on a silver platter."

Arbosh glanced at his watch. "It's a little too early for the Whitford girl to be home if she works until five."

"The way things have been going, she probably has moved," muttered Neap.

Monrovia Street was cobblestoned and hardly wide enough for the car. Once a fashionable address, time had changed it to an inexpensive, convenient place for young people to live, the two-story houses converted to first and second floor apartments. Donna Whitford was listed for the second floor.

Neap punched the bell, heard it ring somewhere upstairs and waited, not really expecting an answer. He tried again, thinking that all they could do would be to wait until the girl showed up. Then the thought came that she might not come home.

He held his finger on the bell for the first floor.

The door was opened slightly by a slim blonde teen-ager who peered cautiously out at them.

Neap held the badge for her to see clearly in the twilight. "We're looking for Donna Whitford."

"I heard you ringing. She won't be home until late."

Neap felt his nerves tighten. "Do you know where I can find her?"

"She's meeting a date somewhere."

Arbosh said something under his breath.

Neap glanced at his watch. It was almost five. "You know where she works?"

The teen-ager nodded.

"Can you get her on the phone for us?"

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "I'm not supposed to let anyone in."

"You may be doing Miss Whitford a big service."

"Wait here," she said, closing the door.

"Great confidence in her police force," said Arbosh.

"We're not in uniform," Neap pointed out, "and the tin could be

faked. Besides, would you trust anyone who looks the way I do now?"

The door opened again. "She's already gone," said the girl.

"You sure you don't know where we could find her?" asked Neap. "Think. Did she mention anything at all about where she was meeting her date?"

The girl shook her head. "I told you I don't know."

"Tell us what she looks like," said Arbosh.

"She's a little taller than I. She wears her hair in a ponytail."

"Blonde, brunette, red hair?"

"Blonde hair and brown eyes."

Neap grunted. He should have known. "What did she wear today?"

"I didn't see her go out."

Neap thanked her, motioned Arbosh into the car, then sat tenderly fingering his cheek. It still throbbed a little but the aspirin had driven away the headache.

"What now?" asked Arbosh. "And before you say it, I'll bet two to one we don't get very far with it."

"If you were Hoopes, where would you meet her?"

"It's a big city. Besides, we don't know if it is Hoopes she's meeting."

"You want to take a chance that it isn't?"

"No," admitted Arbosh. "I guess we'll have to find her. The question is, how? He could have reserved a table at some restaurant and is meeting her there."

"I don't think he wants to be noticed that much," Neap said slowly. "He'd want to meet her someplace where people wouldn't notice him. He might also want to size her up first if it's a blind date."

Arbosh was silent. Neap hoped he would pick up the lead he had tossed him.

"The eagle again," Arbosh said finally.

Neap smiled. "I think so. He's used it before and it fits the pattern."

The department store was big, taking up an entire city block. The eagle, bronzed and benign, was situated in the center of the first floor, surrounded by a court that was filled with people; some passing through, others waiting.

Neap looked around. The first floor above them was a low balcony, one part of which was a paperback book department. He beckoned Arbosh. They mounted the stairs and walked through the book racks to the rail overlooking the court. From here they could watch without being noticed, yet they were not so far away that they couldn't run down the stairs to intercept someone in the court below.

They studied the people waiting.

"I think we hit it," said Arbosh, pointing. "The one in the purple coat."

Neap peered closely at the girl. She could have been the sister of Needa Stone. "I think so."

"We could go down and ask her."

"No point. We just might scare him away if he's watching."

"This is ridiculous," said Arbosh. "We're watching a girl we *think* is Donna Whitford, while waiting for a man we've never seen to show up."

Neap grunted. "We can't be wrong all the time."

"If we are wrong, a girl might die tonight."

"I know that as well as you," snapped Neap. "If you have any other suggestions, I'll be glad to listen."

Arbosh moved away from the expression on Neap's battered face. He glanced around the book department, reached out and touched Neap's elbow. "Look who is here."

Neap turned. Almost hidden behind the head-high bookshelves was Bauer, the clerk from the Crescent Hotel, studying book titles.

Neap looked down into the court, then studied Bauer for a moment before reaching him with quick strides. "What are you doing here?"

Bauer almost dropped the book he was holding. "Looking for something to read. This place has the best selection in town."

Neap grasped his arm firmly. "We're looking for Carver Hoopes. You can help. You've seen him, we haven't."

Bauer tried to pull away. "I don't want to get involved in anything."

"You're already involved." Neap pulled him to the railing and pointed. "All you have to do is tell us if you see him down there."

Bauer straightened his glasses and peered downward. "I can't see too well."

"Strain your eyes," said Neap harshly.

The girl with the ponytail and wearing the purple coat had moved impatiently from one side of the eagle to the other. Neap held out his watch. They had been here for a half hour and no one had approached her.

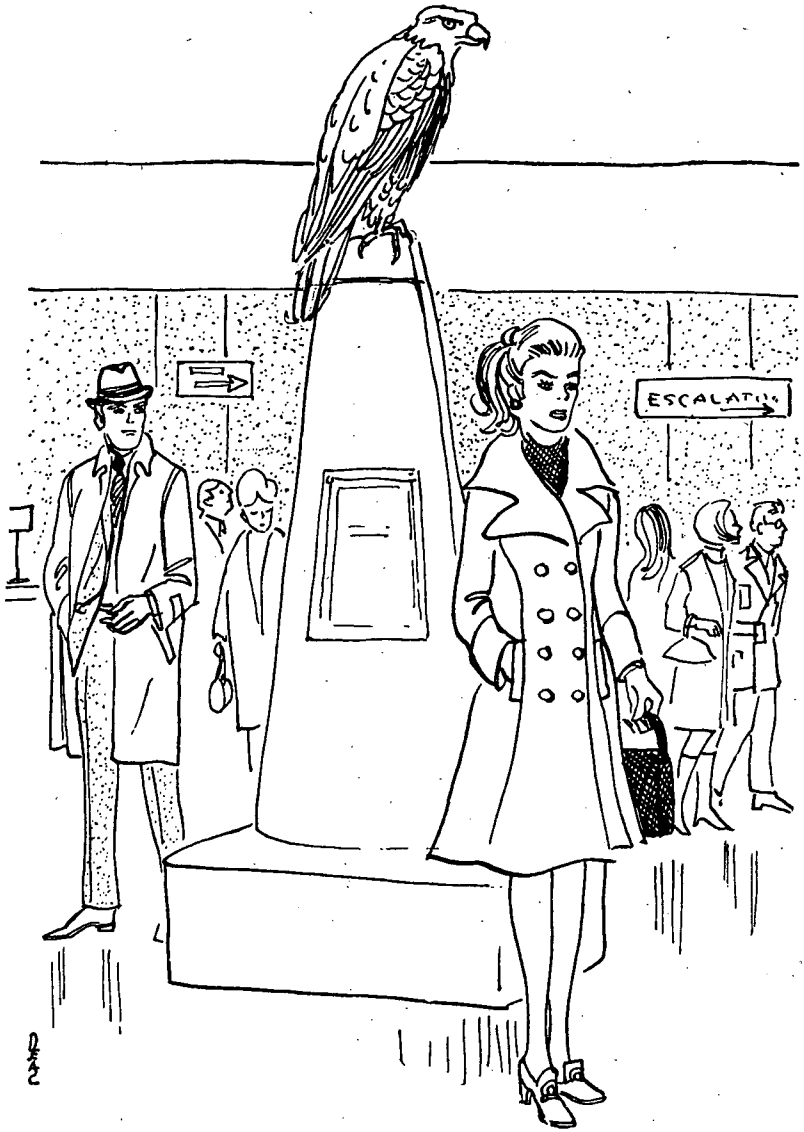
A broad-shouldered young man wearing a tan coat had taken up a position on the opposite side of the eagle, eyeing the girl occasionally.

Neap stiffened, pointing him out to Bauer. "Is that Hoopes?"

"Too far for me to see well," complained Bauer.

Neap took his arm again. "Then we'll take a closer look."

He led Bauer down the stairs to the main floor and positioned him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in an aisle close to the broad-shouldered man. "Can you see now?"

Bauer squinted. "It might be him. The light isn't too good."

The broad-shouldered man moved, slowly approaching the girl.

"The light is great!" whispered Neap fiercely. "Take a good look!"

"He's wearing a hat," said Bauer doubtfully. "I never saw him wearing a hat."

Neap stood indecisively. The young man was talking to the girl.

"What shall we do?" asked Arbosh. "If they move out, we could lose them in this crowd."

Neap made a decision. "It's time Hoopes showed up, and who else would approach her?" He and Arbosh moved in on the couple.

Neap held out his badge. "Miss Whitford?"

Puzzled, the girl nodded.

Neap breathed a sigh of relief and spun on the young man. "Your name Hoopes?"

The young man looked bewildered. He shook his head. "What's the matter?"

Neap turned back to the girl. "You were to meet a man named Hoopes here?"

Surprised, she nodded.

"You ever meet him before?"

She shook her head.

"Then you don't know if this is Hoopes or not?"

Her eyes widened. "He could be."

The young man tried to pull away from Arbosh. "Take your hands off me!"

"Take it easy," snapped Neap. "You're in trouble."

"What for? All I did was try to pick her up."

"For more than that, Hoopes."

"My name isn't Hoopes. It's Foster."

"Look," said Neap wearily, "she had a blind date with a man named Hoopes. You show up and begin talking to her and then say you're not Hoopes. Can you explain that?"

"There's nothing to explain. I saw her standing there and figured I had nothing to lose. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, if true. You're just going to have to prove it."

"Even if he is Hoopes," said Donna Whitford, "what difference does it make? We have a date."

"No, we don't!" yelled Foster. "I never saw you before!"

Her mouth worked. She tearfully spun on Neap. "See what you've done?"

Neap looked at the curious crowd and sighed. "We're not going to settle it here. We'll talk about it at headquarters." He turned to Arbosh. "Get Bauer. We'll take him along."

Arbosh scanned the crowd. "He's gone."

Neap had the horrible feeling that it was all wrong again, that the bad luck which had haunted him all week was still working full time. He glared at Arbosh. "As soon as we get back, put on an all points on him."

Two hours later, the young man was still insisting he wasn't Hoopes and he wanted a lawyer. All he knew about Ann Cheyney and Needa Stone was what he'd read in the paper, he'd never subscribed to Date, Inc., and he had alibis for Monday and Tuesday nights which Arbosh was checking.

Donna Whitford went home after Neap had explained his interest in Hoopes, leaving Neap with the feeling that she blamed him for ruining her evening and that if Hoopes were to show up, she'd be only too happy to go out with him. She had given Neap a statement saying that Hoopes had called her and his voice was deep and pleasant.

"He talked like an educated man," she said, sighing. "He was very smooth."

That certainly didn't sound like Foster to Neap, so he wasn't surprised when Arbosh arrived with Foster's brother.

"Foster is legit," he said. "No chance of being Hoopes. His alibis for both of those nights are tight."

The brother spent ten minutes telling Neap what he thought of the police force in general and Neap in particular.

After they had gone, Neap sat glumly staring out the window. His headache was back again and his cheek hurt.

Arbosh offered him a cup of coffee. "We haven't eaten all day."

"I'm not hungry. I've lost my appetite."

"At least we saved Donna Whitford," Arbosh said comfortingly. "We still have a chance to pick up Hoopes. I put out an APB on him. He'll turn up somewhere."

"We should have had him," said Neap. "He should have been in our hands."

"He probably never showed up."

Neap shook his head. "If I read him right, he showed up. He must have seen all the excitement and taken off. We moved too soon. If we had waited, the Whitford girl would have turned Foster away once she found out he wasn't Hoopes."

"We couldn't take that chance," said Arbosh. "Bauer should have been of more help. Too bad he can't see well."

"The more I think of it, the more I wonder. With all the reading he seems to do, his eyes can't be that bad," said Neap grimly.

"But you haven't found him yet?"

"He's not at the hotel. I have everybody looking for him."

"He's a funny one," said Neap.

He and Arbosh looked at each other.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" asked Arbosh.

"He could have used the name Hoopes and the hotel as his address, knowing he could intercept the mail," said Neap slowly.

"And it was a very convenient coincidence that he happened to be in the store at the time Hoopes was supposed to be there."

"That little guy just *might* be Hoopes," said Neap. "The way things have been going lately nothing would surprise me."

Arbosh stood up. "The question is, where is he now? Where would a guy like that go? Do you think he left town?"

"No reason for that. As far as he knows, we don't suspect him of being Hoopes. He'll take his time about leaving."

"He's probably sitting somewhere laughing at us."

"Not him. A guy like that has no sense of humor. Right now, he's feeling frustrated because we kept him from the Whitford girl. That would be uppermost in his mind. To him it's unfinished business."

"I remember one like that before," said Arbosh. "Didn't have a ghost of a chance of pulling it off but with that one-track mind of his, he had to try."

"Maybe this one will have to try, too," said Neap, kicking his chair back. "I just hope that Whitford girl believed me when I told her about Hoopes. She seemed to act as if I didn't know what I was talking about."

Monrovia Street by day was quiet and charming. At night it was too quiet and deserted, lit only by a couple of widely spaced, old-fashioned, feeble street lights. Neap noted that all the first-floor windows were either barred or shuttered. A lot could happen on this street without anyone noticing.

Neap hit the bell to Donna Whitford's apartment, received no answer although a dim light outlined the window. He probed gently at the door and it swung open. A flight of stairs stretched upward, lit by an inefficient wall fixture. Neap went up two at a time. At the head of the stairs was a landing and another door. To hell with protocol, he decided. He turned the knob and pushed. It was unlocked.

Then he saw the two figures in the semidarkness of the room.

Donna Whitford's eyes were wide and staring, fixed on him with a desperate pleading above a broad hand clamped over her

mouth. The man's other arm was wrapped around her waist, his face half hidden by her head, and then she kicked out in an effort to break loose and knocked over the single lamp on the low table. The room went dark.

Neap sensed, rather than heard, the swift rush coming out of the black room and ducked too late. A fist smashed against his swollen cheek and Neap gasped. Behind him, still on the stairway, Arbosh yelled.

Neap's right fist smashed out, catching the man in the stomach. He followed with a left hook that carried all his weight and the frustrations of the past three days. He felt a shooting pain from his fist as it landed on something hard, and the man pitched past him into the hall.

Neap leaned against the wall, holding his numbed left hand, looking down at Owen, the man from Date, Inc.

A shaky Donna Whitford came to the door. "He said he wanted to talk to me about a refund. I had no way of knowing . . ."

"Neither did the other girls," said Neap.

Arbosh looked up at him. "We weren't so smart either."

Neap's appetite came back after everything had been wrapped up and he and Arbosh sat down to the first meal they'd had that day. His left hand splinted and bandaged, his right cheek more swollen than ever and his right eye closed, Neap sat staring at the steak the waitress had brought.

"What's wrong?" asked Arbosh.

"I thought my luck had changed. I asked for rare. I got medium."

"Send it back."

"No chance. With my losing streak, they'd probably burn it."

"We didn't do so badly," argued Arbosh. "We did catch up with a guy who killed two women and almost killed a third."

"We're the world's greatest detectives," said Neap sarcastically. "I never even considered Owen, yet sitting in that office he had access to every girl who subscribed to the dating service. He could pick and choose the ones he wanted."

"I still don't get it," said Arbosh. "A man like that . . ."

"Forget it," advised Neap. "Just catch them. Don't try to analyze them or you'll go out of your mind. Some headshrinker may find out what he had against lonely young blondes and then again he may not. We're out of it."

"Funny he picked the three that were sent to Hoopes."

"Not so funny. He figured to use Hoopes as a cover, and we bought it. The one thing he didn't know was that there was no Hoopes. It

was Bauer using the name because of some fool notion that Carleton Hoopes sounded more romantic than his own. Of course he never received any names. Owen saw to it they were never sent."

"Owen had a lot of nerve. He knew we were looking for Hoopes and the Whitford girl, yet he showed up at the eagle anyway to see what would happen. If we hadn't been there, he'd have kept the date and the Whitford girl would be dead."

"I told you these people don't think the way we do. He had to try to prove something by killing her. That's why he went to her apartment. You can save yourself a lot of effort if you don't try to figure them out." He sliced at his steak. "I was too busy to follow it up, but where did they find Bauer?"

Arbosh chuckled. "A couple of the boys picked him up as he left the public library, of all places. One of the other guys took his statement. He said he almost fainted when we came looking for Hoopes so he gave us that description of Hoopes from a book he was reading. Then when we collared him in the department store to identify a guy who never existed, all he could do was claim he couldn't see him well and disappear the first chance he had."

Neap chewed painfully. "I guess the Whitford girl has had enough of dating services. She'll probably be content to die an old maid."

"Don't count on it. Maybe that computer works. The last I saw of her, she and Bauer were holding hands and discussing books. I've seen worse-looking couples."

Neap sighed and pushed his plate away. His bandaged left hand made it difficult to cut the steak and his right cheek made it too painful to chew. Even if Arbosh had worked out pretty well, it had not been the best three days of his life.

"It doesn't happen very often," he said.

"What's that?" asked Arbosh.

"Donna Whitford made a small down payment for some excitement and romance. She's one of the few to get her money's worth."

In many an instance there is more to a case than meets the eye.

EAR WITNESS

by Carl Henry Rathjen

HESTER DORSEY heard the muffled shot that morning a few moments after she left George Caston's loan office in Valley View. Thinking it was merely an automobile backfire from farther along Main Street, she continued on toward her father's drive-in where she carhopped.

The shot startled Max, the barber, who was shaving around a customer's ear. A man, waiting for a haircut, gestured toward the wall which separated the barbershop and loan office, and said, "It was in there! Do you suppose it's a holdup?"

, If it was, Max didn't intend to walk into it. Still, Caston had been helpful with a loan when the shop needed new chairs. Max stepped outside and peered gingerly into the loan office window. The secretary wasn't at her desk nor was she by the file cabinets. Farther back, a

light shone into a narrow hallway from Caston's private office. Max opened the front door.

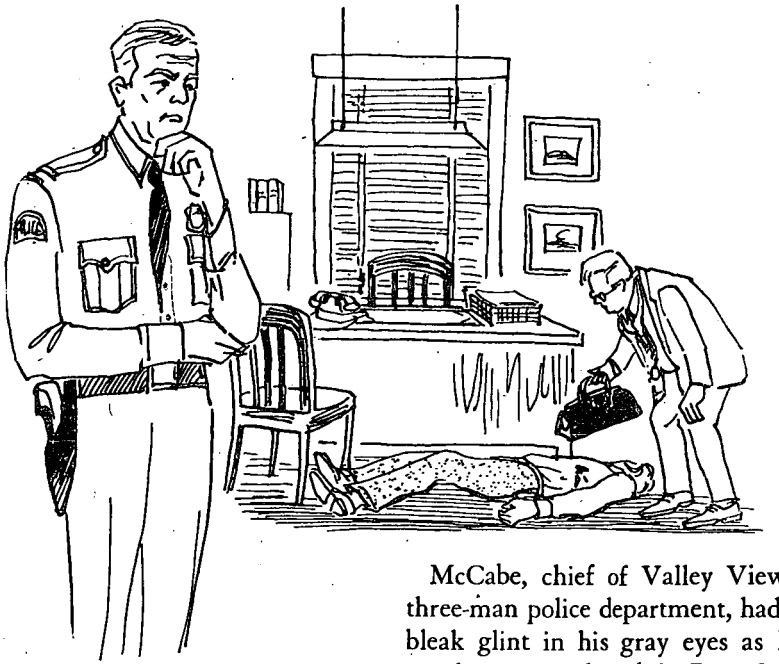
"George?" he called. There was no answer. High heels clacked behind him. Turning, he saw Edith Myers, Caston's young brunette secretary, returning from her coffee break.

"Hello, Max. Something we can do for you?"

Max shook his head. "I . . . heard a noise in here, Edie." He went in ahead of her.

Puzzled, she followed him, and when she looked past him into the inner office she screamed. Easing her back, Max called to his assistant barber and customers who were coming in the front door.

"Call city hall and get Police Chief McCabe."



McCabe, chief of Valley View's three-man police department, had a bleak glint in his gray eyes as he stood to one side while Doc Coolidge examined the body. He recalled how generous Caston had been, helping him with hospital bills when one of McCabe's three motherless children had been seriously ill.

"Straight through the heart," the physician murmured, shaking his

gray head. "It looks like suicide, Mac, but George wasn't the type to—"

McCabe interrupted, pointing to specks of powder burns on Caston's shirt. "To leave a pattern like that, the gun had to be at least two feet from his chest. It would be pretty awkward and unnatural for a suicide to hold a gun that far out and crook his wrist around enough for a straight heart-shot."

Doc Coolidge agreed. "George had the beginnings of arthritis, too, which would have hampered his wrist. Yet it's his own gun, Mac."

"Someone knew where to find it," McCabe declared grimly. That had to be it. There were no signs of a struggle to suggest the gun had been wrested from Caston. McCabe turned as Knapperman, one of his regulars, came hurrying in. "Check along the alley. Someone might have seen the killer leaving by the rear door."

McCabe went to the front office where Edith Myers sobbed at her desk.

"What about the safe and cash drawer?" he asked.

"Both were locked," she said brokenly. "Nothing missing."

McCabe didn't let that rule out holdup. The shooting might have prevented completion of the job.

"Who was George scheduled to see this morning?"

She shook her head. "No one that I know of." She pointed to a slip of paper and some currency under a weight on her desk. "Hester Dorsey must have made a payment to Mr. Caston while I was out on my coffee break. She and her father had a loan to buy a new grill for the drive-in."

McCabe grimaced slightly, recalling the problems of other cases which had involved Hester Dorsey. Maybe he could avoid having to depend on her. He asked Edith Myers to compile a list of people who were slow in making payments or were overly delinquent, but it didn't seem likely to her that any of them would resort to murder.

McCabe went next door to the barbershop. "Max, Edith Myers went out on her coffee break at ten o'clock. Caston was shot at ten-seventeen. Did you notice anyone go into the office during that time?"

Max was silent a moment. "All I remember is Hester Dorsey coming out a few moments before the shot sounded."

Frowning, McCabe stood beside the barber's chair and looked out the window. "If you were standing here—" he began.

Max interrupted. "I would have had my back to the window, wouldn't have seen anyone passing the shop or coming to Caston's

from the other direction, either."

McCabe nodded, but still hoped to find a witness other than Hester Dorsey. "Who was your customer just before ten-seventeen?"

"Jack Stokey." Max smiled. "He was afraid Hester was going to come in here. She's sort of been chasing him since he's become a widower."

"He was in the chair from ten o'clock on?" McCabe asked.

Max frowned, recalling. "No, not quite. I remember now, the ten o'clock news had just come on the radio and Harry Hailey, getting out of the chair, said something about some more blankety-blank taxes on businessmen."

McCabe stood outside the loan office while Caston's body was removed, then walked down the street to Hailey's Hardware Store. Harry Hailey, tall, face deeply lined, shook his prematurely graying head.

"I wish I had seen the louse for you, Mac. George and I grew up together, used to be partners here before he went into the lending business." He rubbed his eyes. "I was up late last night—another of my wife's fancy parties. Guess I fell asleep in the chair while Max was giving me a trim."

McCabe checked with other business people in the neighborhood, but no one had noticed any comings and goings at the loan office. Knapperman reported he'd found no one along the alley who had witnessed the killer's getaway. Ordering him back to patrol, McCabe drove his station wagon across town to see Jack Stokey, who had been in the barber's chair when the killing occurred.

"Guess I was lucky twice," he said to McCabe. "All I saw was Hester, who just waved a package at me and didn't come in to latch onto my ear, and Max didn't slice it off when he jumped at the sound of the shot."

So, sighing with a mixture of reluctance and determination, McCabe drove to Dorsey's drive-in. Hester was busy with a couple of cars. McCabe went inside to the counter. Jake Dorsey, Hester's thick-bodied father, slid a cup of coffee to him and spoke past his inevitable match stick.

"If it's any of my business, how's it going about George Caston?"

McCabe nodded toward the grill. "I understand you had a loan on that, and Hester made a payment to Caston this morning. Did she have anything special to say when she got back?"

"She always has plenty to say," Dorsey retorted, "and none of it's special."

"Daddy!" chided Hester, swinging her reedy body and tray of

dirty dishes up to the counter. "Hi, Mac! Have you heard the awful news about George Caston being shot?"

Dorsey snarled. "If he didn't know George had been shot he might figure you'd yakked him to death. Now shut up and listen. Mac wants to ask you something."

"Hester," McCabe began quietly, "Caston was shot just after you left his office."

She gasped. "Then it wasn't a backfire that I heard!"

"As you left the office," McCabe asked, "did you notice anyone in the vicinity?"

"I saw Jack Stokey and Max, the barber."

"Who did you see outside, on the street?" McCabe prompted patiently.

Hester pursed her over-crimsoned lips. "I saw you." Dorsey raised his eyebrows at McCabe. Hester went on. "At least it was your car, driving across Main Street about a block away, toward city hall. I assume you were driving it."

"I was, and thanks for the alibi," McCabe said dryly. "All right, so maybe we can be pretty sure that no one ducked into the office as you left. That means that whoever killed Caston may have been inside already or slipped in through the back door, though it's usually kept locked throughout the day . . ."

Hester said, "Why, of course! Now I remember, there *was* a man in the back office when I was in the front office." Her eyes grew big. "And if Mr. Caston was killed right after I left, that means I know who did it!"

McCabe tensed. "Who?"

"I don't know."

Dorsey slapped the counter. "You just told us you did know who!"

"I mean," Hester cried, "I could hear them talking sort of angry but I couldn't see who it was before Mr. Caston came out to me. That's what I mean: I know who was there, but I don't know who."

"So you just heard them talking, sort of angry," McCabe emphasized. "Did you get any inkling of what they were talking about?"

"Not exactly. But," Hester went on positively, "I do know that the man with Mr. Caston was a sailor."

Dorsey growled. "Why didn't you say that the first time around? I was in the Navy once, so see if you can remember something about his uniform or insignia to help tab this down closer."

"Daddy, I didn't say he was in uniform. I didn't see him so I don't know if he was wearing—"

McCabe moved his hand to check Dorsey's retort. "Hester, just

how did you know he was a sailor?"

"Because of something Mr. Caston must have said to him, or rather something he said in reply to something Mr. Caston must have said to him just before I came in."

Dorsey rolled his eyes. "Hang on, mate," he said to Mac. "She'll get her keel under her sooner or later, maybe."

McCabe watched Hester. "What did you hear the man say that gave you the impression he was a sailor?"

Hester thought a moment. "I can't remember the exact words but it was something about a ship, that he wasn't going to let Mr. Caston send him to some kind of a ship. I definitely heard the word ship, but I didn't catch what kind of a ship it was."

Dorsey muttered. "Battleship? Troopship? Landing ship?"

"Maybe it wasn't Navy," McCabe said. "Cargo ship? Passenger? Cruise? Motorship?" Hester shook her head to every suggestion. "Let's skip it for the moment," McCabe sighed. "Did you overhear anything else they said?"

"Well . . . as Mr. Caston was leaving the back office to come out to me, he said to the man, 'You've steered your last crooked course with me and now I'm going to lower the boom,'" Hester said.

So there was the motive, McCabe thought, staring at Hester.

"Did Caston realize you might have overheard? Did he make any comment?" McCabe asked.

"Yes. He asked how the new grill was performing and I told him it wasn't burnt in yet and Daddy was burning hamburgers and got so mad at himself he broke a spatula and—"

McCabe stood up resignedly. "Thanks, Hester. I'll see if what you've told me will lead anywhere. Meanwhile, try to remember some more."

Dorsey snapped at her. "Mac wants facts, nothing from your imagination."

"But, Daddy, you *did* break a spatula because—"

McCabe paused by the door, feeling he had overlooked something, but whatever it was, it had spun away while interrogating Hester. He drove back to the loan office to get the list of delinquent borrowers that Edith Myers had promised to compile. He was surprised at some of the names of people he'd thought were well-off financially, but none of them seemed like possible suspects. Yet you could never tell.

"Maybe you can help me, Edie," he said to Caston's secretary. "Whoever killed Caston may be

someone from right here in town. I feel sure of that because the desk was wiped clean of fingerprints. He must have done that while Caston was out front with Hester. He wouldn't have had time for that after he fired the shot that drew Max to the front window. And another thing, he's someone who has been in here before, because he knew where to find Caston's gun."

Edith Myers shook her head. "That's all so general, Mr. McCabe. It could fit so many people."

"Except for this detail," McCabe added. "I've got reason to believe that the man I'm after is a sailor."

Her face blanched. He reached out to catch her in case she fainted.

"What is it, Edie?"

"Nothing," she stammered, turning away. Her hands fluttered. A diamond glinted on her left hand. "If you don't need me for anything else, Mr. McCabe—"

"Just a moment, Edie," he said firmly. "Why did you become so upset when I mentioned a sailor?"

"It was nothing. It's just that the whole morning has been . . . so upsetting. I guess it just all caught up to me."

McCabe studied her, then he pointed to the diamond ring. "Who's the lucky fellow, Edie?"

She hesitated, then murmured, "Allen Peppersall."

McCabe squinted slightly. "Didn't I see a piece in the paper a week or so ago that he's home on leave from the Navy?" He saw her shoulders tense. "Edie, what's the link between George Caston and Allen Peppersall?"

"Nothing," she cried. "Please believe me. I don't know what you're trying to prove."

"I think you do, Edie," he said quietly, "and it will sound better if you tell me instead of my finding out some other way."

She stood up, resting her hand on the desk for support. "No! You *can't* be thinking that Al would have had anything to do with . . . what happened here this morning."

McCabe let her have a bad moment of silence. "I'm willing to listen to arguments, Edie. Now, what about Al and your boss?"

She sat down. After a moment she spoke. "Al's hitch is up in the Navy. He wants . . . to get married . . . and reenlist. I don't want him to. Mr. Caston knew all about it. He liked Al and said he might be able to set Al up in business here in town if he didn't go back to the Navy."

"What business?" McCabe asked.

"Mr. Caston didn't say. Just that he had to get something ironed out first, but he was pretty positive it would work out. I thought it would mean a good future for Al,

whatever it was, because he doesn't have a trade or profession. He went right from high school into the Navy."

McCabe glanced toward the back office. "So there have been discussions here about it." Edith Myers nodded. McCabe watched her. "Was Al interested?"

She hesitated. "He . . . Al, I mean . . . he . . ."

"Regarded it as interference from your boss?" McCabe suggested. He went on sharply. "Did you neglect to tell me earlier that you knew Al had an appointment to see Caston this morning?"

She began crying. "Oh, please, Mr. McCabe! No, he didn't have an appointment. He couldn't have done something so horrible!"

"But," McCabe persisted, "you think he might have come here without an appointment. Why?" She shook her head, crying. McCabe couldn't get her to reply. He made a guess at the answer. "Was it because Al was supposed to meet you at your coffee break and he didn't show up?"

Her crying became uncontrollable. McCabe didn't enjoy the triumph of this lead, but that was police work.

"Close up the office, Edie. I'll drive you home."

"I don't want to go home. I want to see—"

"You can see Al later. I prefer to talk alone with him first."

At a house on the east side of town a young fellow with dark crew cut answered the door, wearing a green sport shirt, gray slacks. Music came from a stereo in the background.

"Allen Peppersall?" McCabe inquired, then came right to the point when he got a nod. "What did you do this morning when you didn't meet Edith Myers at her coffee break?"

Al Peppersall met McCabe's eye. "Mind if I ask what business it is of yours?"

"Her boss was killed, murdered, during that time," McCabe replied. "Now, do you mind if—" He moved quickly to block the doorway as Peppersall started to come out.

"Let me by, Chief. She's going to need me."

"I just took her home. She's all right." McCabe stood firm. Al Peppersall finally moved back and turned down the volume of the stereo. McCabe entered and closed the door. "Now, once again, Al, why didn't you meet her for coffee?"

"We had a row about her boss last night. I thought she was too willing to let him make *our* decisions about the future." Al shrugged. "I guess the truth of it is, it

was mostly my pride, feeling that his offer to set me up in business was too much like charity. I figured if I reenlisted I could learn a trade, stand on my own feet. Then, thinking it over after our spat last night—" Peppersall paused and looked intently at McCabe. "Just how deep am I in this? Maybe I shouldn't be talking to you before I see a lawyer?"

McCabe smiled slightly. "That's up to you. But I think you're trying to draw me away from Edith. Don't bother, son. I've got a witness who places the killing on a man."

Peppersall studied that over a moment. "Okay, I'll take a chance and talk, then. As I was saying, I thought it over since last night and figured it might be a good deal at that, and if it was, I'd surprise Edie with the news that I had agreed to accept Caston's offer. So I phoned him at his home this morning. He told me to call him a little later, about ten o'clock at the office. Maybe he'd have something definite to tell me then about future plans."

McCabe frowned. "At ten o'clock did you phone or go to the office?"

"I phoned, but I can't prove it, Chief. I was home here alone."

McCabe breathed hard. "What did Caston say when you phoned him there at ten o'clock, then?"

"Correction, Chief. It was more like a couple of minutes past ten."

McCabe held up his hand for a moment's silence. If Al Peppersall had phoned at the time he claimed, then Edith Myers had already left for her coffee break, and if Al Peppersall hadn't gone to the loan office himself, then it meant that someone—Hester's sailor!—was already there or might have entered during the phone call, *if* there was a phone call.

McCabe kept his voice casual. "What did Caston say to you on the phone?"

"That he was busy, straightening out some details right at that moment. He would call me back. I've been waiting here for his call."

It sounded truthful, McCabe decided, but it could also be a clever attempt to establish a flimsy alibi. "What was the deal Caston was going to offer you?" he asked.

Peppersall shrugged. "We hadn't got that far in any of our talks, and before this morning I wasn't interested. All he'd said was that he was going to get control of a local business and he thought I had the initiative to manage it for him, first on a share basis, and eventually it would be mine for Edie's and my future."

McCabe shot the next question abruptly. "How did you know

where his gun was, Peppersall?"

"I didn't." The answer was just as abrupt. "And maybe I do need a lawyer, Chief?"

"Not to make up with Edie." McCabe studied him. "I'm not promising you anything, son. Will you give me your word you won't try to leave town? All right, have you got a car or do you want me to drive you to Edie's?"

"I'll get there, Chief. You just get me squared away, if you can."

McCabe drove to Caston's home. A neighbor answered the door.

"Tell Mrs. Caston," he explained, "that I don't like to bother her at a time like this, but if she could possibly answer a couple of questions—"

She was stoutish, red-eyed, looking suddenly older.

"Mrs. Caston, I'm trying to find information about someone in town who may have received unusual help from your husband."

"That would be most everybody," she said softly. "George was like that, not at all like most folks think of someone in the money-lending business. He wasn't a Shylock."

"I know," McCabe agreed. "He was generous in allowing leeway when it was needed, but I think that in at least one case he was too lenient, and advantage was taken of him. He was overheard this morning telling someone that he'd been cheated once too often. Would you have any idea who that would be?"

She slowly moved her head from side to side. "George never discussed business at home. He felt that having to borrow money was a confidential matter, too personal to be mentioned even to me. Of course it was different when he was in the other business. Then he'd always tell me about what had happened and who had been in. I missed that, but understood when he opened the loan office."

McCabe chose words carefully. "I think that the financial matters I have in mind were so personal that they were never placed in the office files for Edith Myers to see. Anyway, the name I have in mind is not on a list she gave me. It's probably a long-standing situation, one that began before he got actively into the lending business and continued after that. So perhaps you *might* know about it . . ."

She stared at McCabe. A startled light began to show in her eyes. "You don't mean . . ."

McCabe waited until he realized he would have to finish it for her. "If I'm wrong, Mrs. Caston, then we'll both forget that I brought up the subject. The name I have in mind is . . . Harry Hailey, his former partner in the hardware."

He knew he'd tabbed it when she closed her eyes and nodded slightly. "Outwardly, George had given up the hardware business to open the loan office, but he was a silent partner with Harry Hailey. He was always at Harry to pay more attention to business, and over the years kept letting him have money to make it more successful. But it was always like pouring good money after bad until we began to wonder if . . . Mr. McCabe, you don't really think that this morning—"

"It's becoming more than thinking, Mrs. Caston. I will know for sure as soon as I tie up a loose end or two."

Driving hurriedly to Dorsey's drive-in, he drew Hester and her father to one side.

"Just one quick question, Hester. I forgot to ask you earlier. You made another call this morning besides Caston's. You were carrying a package. Could it have been something you'd bought at the hardware store?"

"Yes, it was a new spatula to replace the one Daddy broke when—"

"And you went there before you went to Caston's, right?" She nodded bewilderedly. "Did you see Harry Hailey in the store?"

"No-o-o," Hester said slowly. "When I chatted with the clerk—"

"Yakked," Dorsey corrected her.

"—I think she mentioned," Hester went on determinedly, "that he was up at the barber's getting a haircut."

"And," McCabe suggested with gray eyes glinting, "you didn't meet or see Hailey on your way from the hardware store to Caston's?" She shook her head and was about to speak.

Dorsey waved the spatula. "That's enough. Don't bother Mac with the unimportant things you did see."

A few minutes later McCabe entered the hardware store and walked toward Hailey, who was rearranging scanty stock to make it look like more than it was.

"How's it going, Mac?"

"I'm there," McCabe said quietly. "I've got every piece, except one, in place. When Max was finishing up your haircut at ten o'clock, you saw Edith Myers leaving Caston's office. Outside, you glanced in and saw that Caston was alone. Max was busy getting his next customer settled in the chair, and neither of them saw you duck into Caston's office to try to talk him out of cracking down on you."

"Cracking down for what?" Hailey demanded.

"For getting money from him but not putting it into the business."

"Who the devil told you that tall tale?"

"It doesn't matter," McCabe said curtly. "An auditing of the books will—"

Hailey whipped around to lunge toward the rear of the store. McCabe moved quickly, giving a sidewise kick to Hailey's right foot so it hooked behind the left leg and made Hailey trip himself, sprawling to the floor. McCabe held him down, handcuffing and frisking him.

Late that afternoon, before the supper rush, McCabe went to Dorsey's drive-in.

"Thanks to Hester's lead," he said to Dorsey, "it's becoming pretty well set for the district attorney."

Dorsey mouthed the match stick. "Don't tell her that, Mac, or she'll be yakking to everybody that—"

"I heard him, Daddy," Hester interrupted. "I was an ear witness again."

"And a helpful one the first time," agreed McCabe, ignoring Dorsey's glower. "Except for one thing you had wrong, Hester."

"What was that, Mac?" she said.

"About a sailor in Caston's office. Harry Hailey has never been in the Navy, has never been aboard any ship, nothing larger than an outboard boat for fishing."

"But, Mac," she insisted, "I distinctly heard him tell Mr. Caston that he wasn't going to be sent back to a ship."

McCabe shook his head. "You heard him say that he wasn't going to stand for Caston taking him to court to get their business differences settled. He knew that the court would probably decide the business belonged to Caston. In other words, pending a court decision, he wasn't going to stand for Caston asking the court to put the business, and Hailey, into a receivership!"

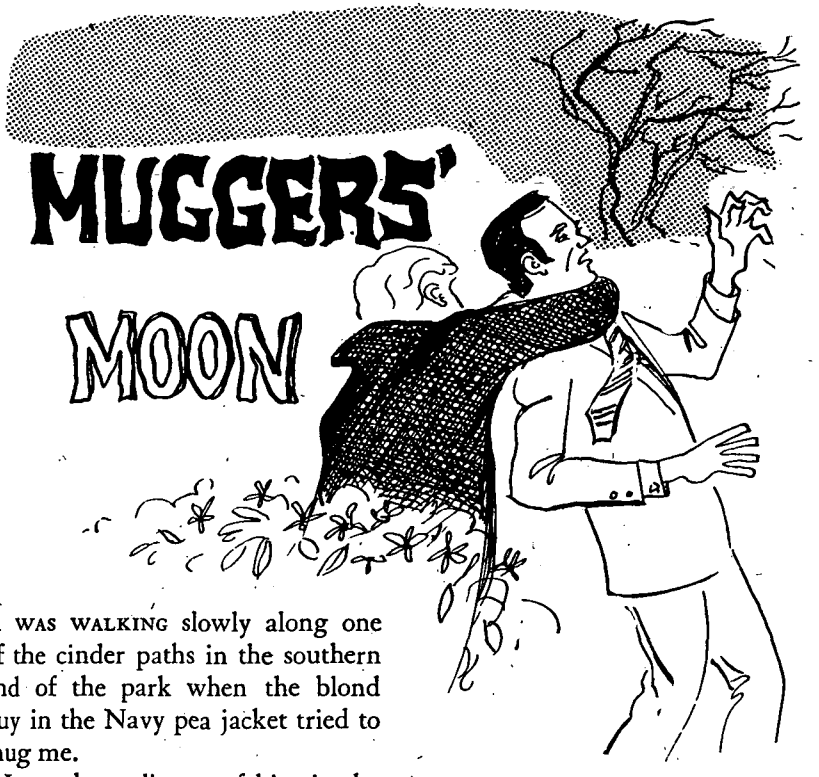
"That proves it!" Hester exclaimed. "That's the kind of a ship I heard him mention. But I thought—"

"Skip it," Dorsey growled. "I'm feeling seasick. How about you, Mac?"

McCabe nodded. "I think some black coffee would help."

He who waits for praise may lose the prize.

MUGGERS' MOON



I WAS WALKING slowly along one of the cinder paths in the southern end of the park when the blond guy in the Navy pea jacket tried to mug me.

I caught a glimpse of him in the pale moonlight as he came out of the night-blooming jasmine that bordered the path on one side, but before I could react he threw an arm around my neck and put a sharp knee in the small of my back. Pain lanced across my throat and suddenly there was no more air in my lungs. Bright white lights flashed in back of my eyes. I felt myself being bent backwards. In another second he would have had me.

I had just enough time to piston

my left elbow back. He took it under the wishbone, and air exploded against the back of my neck. I gave him another one and felt his arm loosen around my throat; then I had *him*. I twisted off his knee, wrenching my head down, and I

was free. His face was a mask of surprise and pain. I hit him with a right, and a left, very fast, and he went down and stayed there. He wasn't going anywhere for a while.

I stood over him, trying to pull breath into my aching lungs and rubbing my throat where he'd held me. My ears were ringing, and my face was mottled with the near-asphyxia. The damned bum!

I was still standing over him, gasping for breath, when this big uniformed patrolman came running up out of nowhere. He had his service revolver ready in his right hand, and a flashlight with a bright yellow beam slicing the darkness in his left. He put the light on me. "What the hell's going on here?"

I raised my hand against the glare. "Where'd you come from?" I asked him.

"Never mind that." He swung the flash down to the mugger lying on the ground, and then brought it up to me again. "What happened here?"

I rubbed my throat. "I was coming along the path when he jumped me out of that jasmine."

"Tried to mug you?"

"Yeah."

"How'd you get him?"

"Some elementary judo."

"Nice work."

"I'm trained for it, same as you," I said, and I let him see the badge and identification in the leather case in my coat pocket. "I'm Andrews, with the Twenty-ninth Detective Squad on the other side of the park."

"A dick," the patrolman said. He put his revolver away and lowered the flash. "Well, well! What are you doing here this time of night?"

"I'm on special assignment with your precinct on this mugger case," I told him. "There's four of us spread through the park."

"Nobody lets us poor foot jockeys in on anything."

"You think we got nothing bet-

ter to do than tell you guys about every stakeout we go on?"

"Okay, okay."

"How'd you get here so fast, anyway?"

"I was rousting a vag sleeping on one of the benches over near the fountain," the patrolman said. "Heard all the noise from the path here. Lucky thing, you know? I mean, he could have put you out before you had the chance to use that judo. If he had, I would've been right on top of him."

"Sure," I said. I was still having difficulty breathing.

"How's your throat?"

"He damned near crushed my windpipe."

"Just like those two women."

"Yeah."

The patrolman went to one knee beside the mugger and looked him over. He was young and well set up, with huge hands that had thick blond hair growing on their backs. He wore black denims and black leather boots along with the pea jacket. The patrolman said, "Big and plenty strong, looks like. You figure this is the guy, Andrews? The one the papers are calling the Night Stalker?"

"Looks that way," I said. "The technique is just right. We'll find out for certain when we get him to the Squad."

The patrolman nodded. He turned the mugger over and ran a quick frisk and didn't find any weapons. He took a thin cowhide wallet out of the back pocket of the denims and shone his flash on it. "Name's David Lee," he said. "You make him?"

I shook my head.

"Lives over on Madison, a few blocks from here," the patrolman said. "Can you beat that? Right in our own back yard."

"Yeah," I said.

He got to his feet and took off his cap and looked up at the thin lunar sliver in the dark sky—a mugger's moon. "Man, I sure hope he's the one."

"That makes two of us."

"The whole city is in a panic over this rash of muggings, especially with those two dames dead and the one guy critical in the hospital. Been sixteen assaults up to now, hasn't it?"

"That's right," I said. "Sixteen."

"There's a lot of parks in this city," the patrolman said, "and he's hit a different one almost every time. He's smart, all right. We'll play hell catching him if it isn't this baby here."

"He's the one," I said. "He's got to be."

"I hope you're right, Andrews."

"Sure," I said. "Listen, you watch him while I go over to the precinct house. The captain's going to want

to set up for plenty of publicity on this pinch before we bring him in."

"Well, I don't know . . ."

"You'd like to get your name in the papers, wouldn't you?"

The patrolman's face brightened. "You mean you'll let me share in a little of the glory?"

"Why not? It might mean a promotion for both of us."

"Hell, Andrews, that's damned nice of you."

I shrugged. "Just don't let him get away, that's all."

The patrolman unhooked handcuffs from his belt. "You don't have to worry none about that."

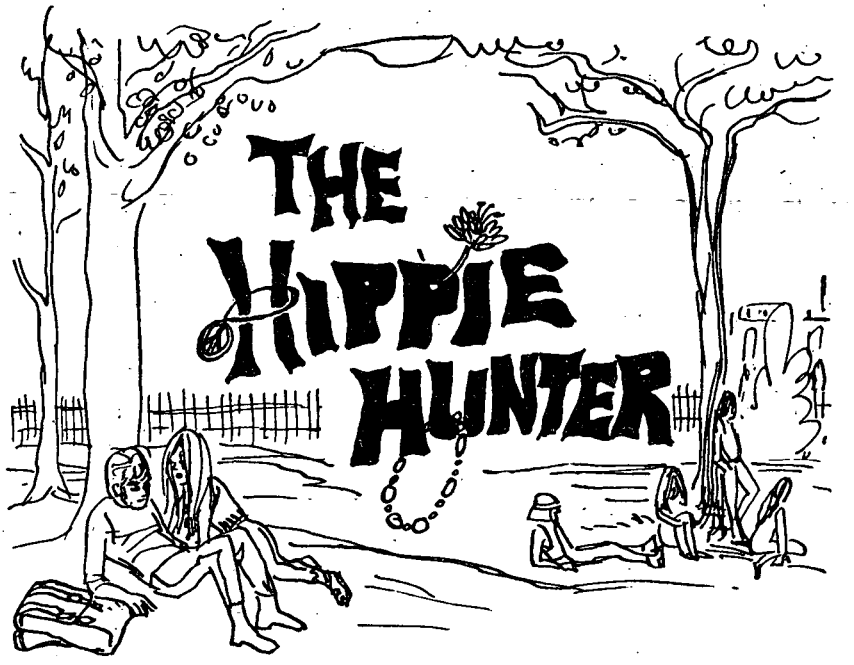
I left him and went walking back toward the fountain. There, I cut across the grass and came out of the park on Dunhill Street. I headed west and downtown—away from the precinct house.

That had been too damned close, I thought. If I'd just been Mr. Average Citizen, that patrolman would have taken me in to sign a complaint; and in the bright fluorescent lights at the precinct house they'd likely have noticed the theatrical disguise I was wearing—one of several I use when I'm working—and demanded an explanation. I've got an assault record in two cities down South, and once they ran a routine fingerprint check on me I'd have been a dead goose, brother.

It's a lucky thing I had that police badge and ID, all right.

But it's an even luckier thing that Number Seventeen, the guy I'd mugged ten minutes before that stupid blond amateur jumped me, had been an off-duty detective on his way home through the park.

There may be some substance, indeed, to the theory that the ultimate in stalking one's quarry is not in apprehending it but in the pursuit itself.



HER NAME WAS GLADYS. She was from Milwaukee and she looked the way Elke Sommer might if you dragged her through a sooty chimney on the way to a rooftop love-in. The face wasn't bad, if you ignored the dirt, and the figure seemed sensational, what you could see of it under all those dirty clothes. But, somehow, she just wasn't my whiff of tea.

Unfortunately, I was stuck with her here on historic Boston Common, in the hope that she could assist me in finding my quarry. I was, in fact, neck-deep in hippies, practically choking on their lingo, long hair and odd odors. There was one thing that saved me, though: I just kept clinging gamily to the belief that grime does not pay.

Gamily; yea, verily, and I mean the word in its gamiest connotation, because nobody was likely to mistake *me* for Mr. Clean, either. Frankly, I smelled. My whiskers were sprouting in their peculiar patchy way and my hair

was meticulously uncombed. I was scraped and bruised and on the run. I didn't even *feel* like the same Jay Hunter who yesterday had locked up the office in Pennsylvania to carry out an old man's impossible assignment.

Gladys, of course, was part of that job—at least, I thought she was—but now, looking down into her blue eyes, I wondered if maybe this wasn't just one more fine mess into which I'd gotten myself. I mean, her beads weren't bad. Even normal girls wear beads, and the bracelets, too; but that grubby blouse, those dirty jeans, that leather vest . . .

"Kiss me," she said, tossing her stringy blonde hair.

"Kiss you?"

"Mmmm. Don't you want to?"

"Well . . . ah . . . I mean, it's not that I don't—"

Just then somebody grabbed my greasy collar and hauled me into an upright position—no easy task, since I am on the beefy side, an ex-Marine, a trained fighter, a virtual tiger when enraged. I am, in point of fact, a private sleuth who stands six-one in his stalking feet.

Naturally, though, when the guy has me by a couple of inches, he can manage it. This one towered over me by a full head and he did it with a disgusting amount of ease.

"Jay Hunter?" he asked with a gentle smile.

You can bet I was happy to see that smile. Yessir, boy. It was dark, but I could make out the love beads around his size eighteen neck, and there was something—a flower, actually—in his long, flowing hair. Well, I even got to thinking that this job might not be so tough after all.

I nodded pleasantly to show him that I was, indeed, Jay Hunter, the fellow who'd traveled hundreds of miles just to be here, who'd come with vital tidings, who'd—

"I'll give you one free swing," he said, "and then I'm going to kill you."

Ah, the Love Generation; young, idealistic. Ironically, I'd gotten mixed up with them through a senior citizen named Frederick Brasill who had walked into my office yesterday morning, toting with him a newspaper clipping, an old cardboard box and the aforementioned impossible request.

At the time, I'd been pondering the state of my finances, thinking about my year-old convertible and wondering where its next set of front tires was coming from. Except for that—said finances being more a village than a state—I probably would have offered the gentleman my sympathies and a consolatory good-bye, particularly since he'd come right to the point.

He had folded himself carefully into the chair on the other side of my desk, gazed at me with surprisingly alert black eyes, and said: "Young man, I want you to find my grandson. More than that, I want you to bring him back here to Bucks County."

"He's in trouble?" I asked.

My would-be client snorted. "He's a whatchacallit. A hippie. At least, I think he is."

"You think?"

The old man fished the clipping from his pocket and passed it across to me. It had been torn from a newspaper and showed a group of scruffy boys and girls squatting on a patch of grass, identified in the caption as part of Boston Common. The accompanying story detailed the hippie invasion of that historic old park and paid particular attention to a midnight melee with the city's gendarmerie.

"You see that big fellow on the right?" Mr. Brasill asked. "That's him. I'm sure it is. Even with the hair and the beard, I still know my only grandson."

I glanced at the photo and had no trouble picking out the guy in question. With the long hair, the broad face and the air of assurance, he might almost have been Prince Valiant.

"What makes you think he'll come back with me?" I asked.

"That, Mr. Hunter, is your problem. But let me tell you the whole story before you make up your mind. My grandson—his name, by the way, is Gerald Brasill—has been missing for the better part of two years, ever since he left the Navy. He's a good boy, basically; bright, a take-charge sort. The kind

need to run our company now hat . . . well, now that his father s dead."

"Your company? That would ɔe—?"

He answered with a nod. "Bras-ll & Son, yes. I started it here in 3righton many years ago, longer han seems possible now. I made ny son a partner, of course. Jerry, ny grandson, worked with us ummers while he was going to ollege. Learned the business and howed real potential . . ." He topped and seemed to have slipped ɔack into memories.

"What happened to his father?"

He shook off the reverie and ıodded again. "Yes, that was last ear. An auto crash. My son was illed instantly; my daughter-in-aw was in a coma for ten days and lied in the hospital. By that time, erry had left the Navy and dis-ıppeared. He didn't come home af-er his discharge and he's never so nuch as written a postcard. I don't ɔelieve he knows his parents . . . ɔassed away."

I thought about it. Much as I ould use a client, I didn't see what could do to help. For one thing, I vasn't licensed to operate in Mas-achusetts. For another, it seemed ertain that Jerry Brasill wouldn't eturn with me even if I succeeded n finding him. I offered these ob-ections, but the old man simply smiled and handed me the worn cardboard box he'd been holding in his lap.

Inside was a ceramic lamp base topped by a cone which was dotted with tiny colored lights. The cone was covered with stuff that looked like white excelsior. It was, I cleverly deduced, a white electric Christmas tree. I looked up, blankly. After all, it was hot outside—August, in fact—not really the season to be jollied.

The gentleman smiled again. "You give him that," he said.

So, that very afternoon, I had found me some raggedy clothes—not hard to do in a place like Brighton, Bucks County's mecca for kooks of every persuasion—and had hied me off to the land of the cod, the bastion of the bean. I went, in short, to Boston.

True, I didn't look like a bona fide hippie, but I'd run around the block a couple of times to generate a good sweat, and I'd worked in front of the bathroom mirror for a full ten minutes to make my dark brown hair look as horrible as possible. I even left the deodorant at home and covered the three-hundred-odd miles with the convertible's air-conditioning turned off. I mean, what more could the youth of America ask?

At any rate, by the time I hauled the car off the Southeast Ex-

pressway and headed up Lincoln Street, I *felt* like a hippie. The guy in the parking garage at Winthrop Square gave me a sour look, too, so I knew all the effort wasn't wasted. I slipped the knapsack onto my back, locked the car and went whistling on my way. It was the whistling, I think, that got me into trouble.

Summer Street narrows and changes its name to Winter at the intersection of Washington, but there wasn't a bit of difference in the temperature. If anything, the night air moved less and the muggy heat seemed more oppressive, so I walked the block to Tremont Street and the Boston Common as quickly a possible, still whistling, still sort of getting into character.

There was traffic, of course, the usual big-city bustle. For that reason, I paid no attention to the honk of a horn on the street behind me. Naturally, though, when the squad car pulled to the curb and a meaty cop leaned out to yell: "Hey, you!" I turned to give him my attention.

"Me?"

"You," he answered. "And where is The Happy Whistler off to now?"

"Uh . . ." I said. "Well, Officer—"

"Off to join your playmates on the Common, wasn't it? Okay, ge in the car. Come on. No argu ments."

"But I was just . . . that is, have to—" I didn't, come to think of it, know just *what* I had to do So I got into the car.

"Now then," said his partner be hind the wheel, "name and ad dress?"

"What is this? You arresting me?" I began to wish I hadn' managed to get so well into charac ter.

"You got a job? Any money?"

Money? Yeah; I'd hidden it in my locked car just in case one o those pacifistic types in the Com mon succeeded in rolling me; and since I wasn't licensed as an in vestigator in this commonwealth I'd decided to avoid trouble by carefully leaving all such identi fication behind. Thus, while I wa working, I couldn't very well tel the cops about it.

"Well, no," I said. "Not exactly."

"Not exactly what?" said the first cop. "Not exactly a job or no exactly money?"

"Er . . . not exactly either."

The one behind the wheel nod ded sadly. "That's what we thought. And here you are thinkin' you can just breeze into town and do it any place you please. You and a couple thousand like you. Well, you ain't gonna."

I guess I blinked. "Huh?"

"Bed down on the Common," said the first cop. "Or the Public Garden. Live in litter like a—"

"Huh?" I said again.

"You're under arrest," said the second cop as we pulled away from the curb.

"Arrest?" I said dumbly. "What for?"

"Vagrancy," said Number One and Two, this time in chorus.

The tank was not a particularly pleasant place to be. It was green and hot and smelly. It reminded me a lot of myself.

I hadn't really expected to wind up here. In fact, I'd been reasonably sure I could explain things, if only I could see somebody in authority; somebody, say, like the shift captain. As it turned out, I didn't get past the desk sergeant.

His name was O'Hearn and he listened sympathetically when I told him I was here on an errand for a friend who had seen his grandson's picture in the paper, that I was only *disguised* as a hippie, that I *did* have money and a car and all the rest. Things were going beautifully until I mentioned the grandson's name.

O'Hearn did a double take. *"Who?"*

"Jerry Brasill," I told him again.

The cops from the patrol car looked at each other, and the sergeant's eyes squinted down at the same time that his jaw dropped toward his chest. "That's quite a story," he said. "Now you wouldn't happen to have anything strange in that knapsack there, would you? Like narcotics, for instance?"

It hit me hard. Narcotics! I hadn't even thought about that one, but now I could see the possibility: an old man with a hokey story, a dumb detective for a runner, and oodles of big trouble. Oh, boy! Because there was, indeed, something very strange in that knapsack there.

One of the cops from the squad car stammered that they hadn't yet searched me. That won him the sergeant's withering glare, but by that time I was doing some stammering myself.

"Sergeant," I said. "Uh . . . Sergeant O'Hearn . . . Really, I'm not—that is, I don't *think* I am . . . Well, what I mean is I *could* be, but it would be better if you didn't . . . uh . . . look in there. Really it would. If I were you—"

Of course they went ahead and looked anyway, and when they pulled out the white electric Christmas tree, all my hopes went right up the flue.

"Well," said O'Hearn sarcastically, "this little old man you were doing the favor for—he wasn't Santa Claus, by chance?"

Yeah, I was sunk, all right, and it was all my own fault. I should have known. The tree would be stuffed with heroin. I was convinced of it. Maybe the excelsior-covered cone itself was some sort of cleverly molded drug. I'd go to jail—for a long time; for *years* even. I had to do something. I had to escape. Or—

"Nothing here," said Cop Number One. "No dope in the sack, Sarge. Looks like he's clean."

O'Hearn swept my grubby attire with a squinty gaze and wrinkled his nose at the aroma. "That," he said, "is one thing he ain't. But we'll give him one more chance."

My spirits soared. I *wasn't* running dope, and the old man *had* been telling the truth. I didn't even have to escape! All I had to do was answer O'Hearn's next question and I'd be free as a nudist's navel. "Anything, Sergeant. Ask away."

"Yeah. Well, so far, all we got on you is vagrancy, but you say you have some money locked up in a car. Okay, what kind of car and where is it?"

My spirits sighed, stalled and fluttered back to earth. I stood there in my shabby rags and said miserably: "Would you believe a year-old convertible?"

I knew he wouldn't.

They kept me in that smelly tank in the bowels of the cell block for the next eighteen hours. That is, they kept me there when they weren't questioning me about Jerry Brasill, about my relations with him, what I knew about him; questions that seemed to go on interminably. But I didn't crack. No, sir, I just kept telling the truth.

Finally, at six p.m. of the next day, I got to see somebody with lots of authority—a deputy police commissioner, no less.

At the time, I was sitting in that same hard chair in the same bare room and telling, perhaps for the twentieth time, my same sad tale. So you might say I was surprised when one of my three inquisitors introduced me to the distinguished, well-manicured gentleman.

"I have a proposition for you," the commissioner said, pulling up a chair.

"A, ummm . . . who?" You also might say I was punchy.

"It's this way: we have a whopping big problem with those hippies on the Common. We want them out. Maybe you can help."

I started to laugh. It was the first really funny thing I'd heard in quite a while.

"I gather," he continued, "that you've never met their leader?"

"I didn't even know they *had* one. Thought they were free spirits, that kind of stuff."

The commissioner snorted. "No

operation as big as this—a mass movement into town, a determination to hold their ground even when it comes to pitched battles with police—no operation of that sort can succeed without some sort of guiding light."

I nodded. "But I still don't follow this proposition stuff."

"We want you to find their leader and take him out of the action."

I stared at him. "How am I supposed to do that?"

The commissioner smiled. "It's what you came to do in the first place, isn't it? Find Jerry Brasill?"

Minutes later, one of the two cops in the patrol car said, "Okay, you ready?"

I sighed. "I guess so. But I keep thinking this is going to hurt me more than it does you."

Then I launched a fist into his face, yanked open the door of the moving cruiser and like to killed myself on the hard surface of Tremont Street.

There was a screech as tires bit into hot pavement, and I heard horns blaring and a yell from the cop behind the wheel. All of this while I was rolling into the gutter and springing to my feet for a mad dash across the plaza and into the sanctuary of hippiedom. I had, at last, reached Boston Common.

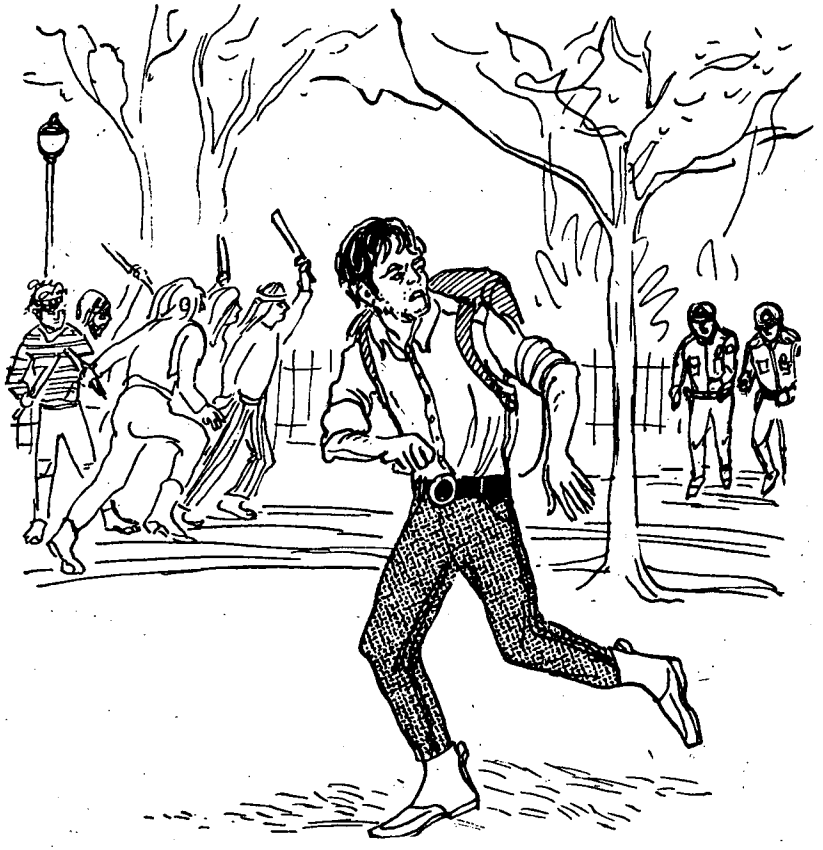
It was a plan, of course. I didn't like it, but it was either this or thirty days in the workhouse. That had been the implied threat. I knew they'd found my car, but they were conveniently pretending they hadn't.

According to the commissioner, efforts to penetrate the encampment had failed. One man actually had managed to locate Jerry Brasill, but that, too, had been an unfortunate experience. The cop couldn't remember exactly what happened, but he'd been found sitting on a curb the next morning, zonked out of his skull on LSD.

So now they were hustling *me* into the lie-in's den. I heard a shot somewhere behind me—fired into the air, I hoped—and kept right on going, haring down a path among the trees. I was no more than thirty yards into the park when a cheer went up around me and the unwashed denizens closed ranks to intimidate my pursuer with sticks, catcalls, and an occasional rock. Truly, I thought, I had arrived.

I sat down on the grass, panting copiously. I surveyed my scrapes and bruises and ran a hand over the itchy stubble on my chin. Then I took a look around.

The mob was breaking up, most members drifting back to their family groups, but a delegation seemed to be heading in my direction. Near me, a couple with a



baby was busy building a fire in the center of a small camp site that was paved primarily with mashed beer cans.

"Hey, man!" It was the leader of the delegation. "Hey, wow, what was all that?"

I creaked to my feet and faked a grin. "Fuzz. I was on my way here last night and they busted me for a vagrant. Just the usual, man."

"Yeah, but just now?" He was about twenty-two, skinny and slightly pasty. Behind him were three others, all sprouting gobs of hair, all wearing beads and gewgaws and something-else clothes, and every one of them had ring-around-the-collar all the way to his toes.

I shrugged. "They were running me out of town. I talked 'em into going this way so I could at least get a look at the Common. When we went by, I smacked one on the jaw and jumped out. That's all."

"That's *all*?" he said, chuckling. "Hey, baby, that's *great* is what it is!"

"Symbolic," said one of the others.

"Huh?" I'd said that a lot lately.

"Symbolic, man," said the leader of the band. "You know, a real *physical* whack at The Establishment."

It went on like that for a while, and then I told them the main reason I'd come was the picture in the paper. I hauled out the clipping and pointed to the old man's grandson. "Looks like a guy I was in the Navy with," I lied. "Jerry Brasill. You know him?"

The eyes went all squinty—much like Sergeant O'Hearn's, I thought—then flicked from the picture to me and back again.

"Yeah," said the pasty one. "Jerry was uptight about this. Some jerk took it with a telephoto. That was before things got so hairy, though."

I looked at the betressed quartet. "Hairy?"

"Before they tried to roust us. They'd never get a shot of him now, boy."

"He's in hiding?" I asked.

The eyes came back up and fixed me with a long stare. "Where'd you say you knew him?" he said.

"Uh . . . boot camp. Bainbridge, Maryland. Sure would like to see him again."

The guy nodded. "Yeah, well, you make yourself at home. Pick out a patch of grass. Maybe he'll look you up. You need anything? Food? Some acid?"

I shook my head. Acid—LSD, if you prefer—was one thing I could do without. This visit to Boston was about as much of a trip as I could stand.

"Oh, hey, there is something," I said. "I got a nasty scrape on the knee when I piled out of that patrol car. You got a bandage?"

He grinned and they walked away. *No compassion,* I thought, which just shows how wrong you can be about people. True, I didn't get a bandage—but they did send me Gladys.

I was sitting there mulling my next move when she appeared. One moment I was alone in the dusk, the next she was sticking her blonde head around a tree trunk, waving a bottle of whiskey and saying, "Hi, I'm Gladys. They said I'd find you here."

I fixed a happy eye on that bottle. Not LSD, no; but whiskey? Well, now. "They?" I said distractedly.

"The boys—Zack and Simmy."

"Zack? Simmy?" I watched her cross the grass, noting that she had a rather stupendous figure under those nutty clothes and all that dirt. She sat down and parts of that figure jiggled joyfully.

"They said I should nurse you."

"They what? They didn't! The boys said *that*?"

She traded the jiggle for a giggle. "Silly. They said I'm supposed to be a bandage or something."

"Oh. Oh, yeah. *Those* boys."

"You look all right to me, though."

"But I'm not," I said, reaching for the whiskey bottle. "I may be seriously injured, bleeding to death, in fact."

"Hey," she said, "that's for cuts and things—you're not supposed to *drink* it."

I wiped my chin and smacked my lips. "Internally, that's what. Yessir, bleeding internally from all that rolling around. So I have to treat it that way, don't I? Internally, I mean."

"Well . . ."

"Here, have one."

She shook her head. "I don't drink. Except beer sometimes."

I sighed. Here we were under a tree in the dark, surrounded by dirt and drugs and I don't know what all, and she didn't drink.

Ah, well. I had another healthy belt and we chattered away at each other some more. She eased back onto the grass and I looked down into her eyes. Things ran through my mind. *Another fine mess . . . Kiss her?* Stuff like that.

Then I was yanked to my feet and some bearded giant was telling me he'd give me one free swing before he killed me . . .

There wasn't any mystery about his identity. Even in the dark, I could see that Prince Valiant hair and the broad, handsome face, but he was a damn sight bigger in person than the news clipping had led me to believe.

Gladys gasped something about not hurting me, and I felt like echoing the sentiment. In fact, I felt so much like it that I said, "Jerry . . . uh, don't be hasty."

"One swing," he answered.

"Look, I came here just to see you."

"Yeah. So did the other police finks. But you guys just never learn, do you? Okay, this time we'll give you an example you won't forget."

I hit him. He'd stepped in close and I figured he'd worked himself up to a point where he might forget about that promised free swing. So I pressed the advantage with a hard right to the jaw.

It rocked him pretty good. He

even took a step backwards. Then he grinned and took two steps forward. My hand hurt like the devil.

"Jerry," I said, "Your *grandfather* sent me!"

It was a red blossom. Pretty psychedelic colors mixed with the ringing pain. Somebody said, "*Oooof*!" That was Gladys and I was sprawled beside her on the ground. I waited for the shooting asterisks to stop making like fireworks in the black air, and then I looked up and tried again. "Jerry," I said, "I don't want to hurt you." It even sounded stupid to me. "What I mean," I added, "is that your grandfather wants you to come back. To run the business."

He reached down to pick me up—no doubt because he wanted to knock me down again—but I locked one foot behind his heel and rammed the other against his kneecap and he went down with a thud. I scrambled to my feet, sailed through the air and landed with both knees on his chest.

"Will you listen?" I screamed. "What makes you think the cops sent me?"

He snorted and hit me in the nose again, but by that time I was hanging onto his neck. "Fink!" he yelled. "I know the cops brought you here! And you told Zack you knew me in boot camp at Bainbridge—" He stopped for a moment and rolled over on top of me.

"That's . . . unh! . . . that's right," I said with an effort.

"Hah! The Navy closed the Bainbridge boot camp a couple of years before I enlisted."

Well, you can't win 'em all. I got my hands free and hurled thumbs at his eyes, doing no serious damage but at least getting out of his grip. "Okay," I panted as we faced each other on our knees. "Okay, so I lied."

"And the cops—you're lyin' about that, too, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah," I said. "They did send me, but—"

He yelled something that wasn't English—maybe it was karate, I don't know—and lunged at me again. I managed to catch his fist, though. Yessir, I caught it right in the eye.

I cuffed him on the ear and we rolled over. He punched me in the stomach and I hit him on the shoulder. It was a sure bet he'd win on points, if nothing else.

"Look," I mumbled, "your grandfather . . . sent me. *Before* the cops! Will you *listen*?"

"Yow!" Hah, I'd got him a good one that time.

I followed up with a one-two, but he hit me with a three-four and then I was on the ground looking up at him again.

"What is this?" he huffed.

"What's all this grandfather jazz?"

So I told him in bits and pieces, bleeding in between. When I was done, he stood there with his hands at his sides and there were tears in his eyes—or sweat; it was hard to tell.

"You're not making this up?" he asked quietly.

"Take a peek in the knapsack. I don't know what it is, but he said I should give it to you."

He did. He pulled out that stupid white electric Christmas tree and sat there on the grass staring at it. This time there was no mistake—those were tears on his cheeks.

I dragged myself painfully over to Gladys and she handed me the bottle without a word.

"Jerry?" I said.

He nodded. "I'll go with you."

That was more than a month ago, and things have changed. Jerry has traded his beads for a business suit (albeit a purple one) and is busily boosting sales of his company's products—cuff links and tie bars.

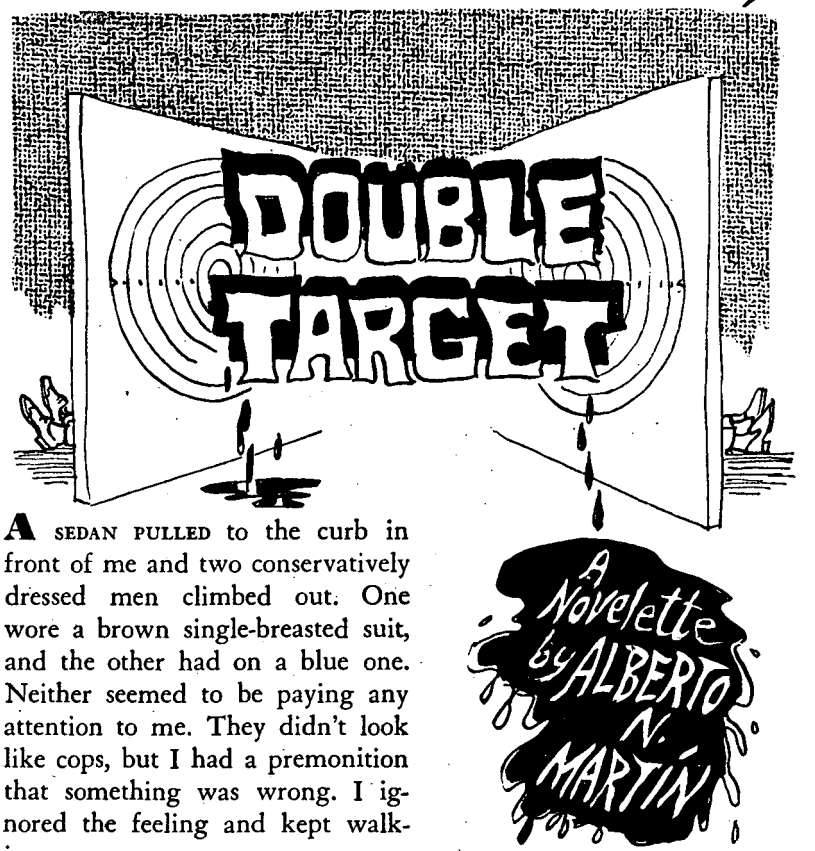
The Boston cops, according to news reports, have managed to clear out their city parks and make it safe for muggers again, and I have a letter of commendation for my efforts—in addition to having all charges dropped. Jerry's grandfather paid me my normally fantastic fee and the convertible now has its new set of front rubber. Even my black eye is gone.

Jerry long since has explained the electric tree gambit, telling me on our trip back here to Brighton how he'd always had a 'thing' for its twinkling lights, how much he'd loved the silly little excelsior cone when it was perched atop his grandmother's ancient radio every Christmas. It was, he'd said, the essence of kidhood and home.

He had explained, too, his growing disenchantment with the dying hippie scene. He was, in his own words, "Not selling out but buying in."

So things seem to have worked the way they should. The best item, of course, is Jerry's secretary. We have another date tonight. She's pretty and stacked and well-scrubbed. Her name is Gladys and she loves me. Maybe it's the beard; either that or my beads.

Many readers will recall that Pandora, too, was possessed of an insatiable curiosity.



A SEDAN PULLED to the curb in front of me and two conservatively dressed men climbed out. One wore a brown single-breasted suit, and the other had on a blue one. Neither seemed to be paying any attention to me. They didn't look like cops, but I had a premonition that something was wrong. I ignored the feeling and kept walking.

I specialize in a form of endeavor where good instincts are at a premium; but at the same time I can't afford to let myself be spooked by something no more substantial than imagination. I'd seen too many good men end up ducking and running every time a shoe salesman approached wearing the kind of dull, striped necktie F.B.I.

men seem to favor. There's such a thing as being too careful, and I had long before made up my mind it wasn't going to happen to me.

Of course, if I had been on my way to or from a job instead of heading for a nearby restaurant, instinct would have been in charge. I would have dashed across the street and lost myself in the early evening crowd before the two men could get me sandwiched between them. If . . . but *if* is a big, big word.

I didn't lose myself, and they did get me between them. The next thing I knew they were pointing snub-nosed revolvers at my hipbones and the one in the blue suit said: "Police officers! Get over against the wall—" he indicated a nearby building with a nod of his head, "—and assume the position."

I gave him my "Who, me?" look, but he didn't go for it.

"Come on, come on! Up against the wall." He gave me a push to get me started, being careful not to come between me and his partner while herding me to the wall, and he kept his pistol close to his body. "Lean forward, hands and feet wide apart—spread them fingers," he ordered ungrammatically. Then he put his weapon away and ran his hands over my torso in a quick frisk while his partner kept me covered and told the spectators to keep moving.

When blue suit had satisfied himself that I carried nothing more lethal than a package of cigarettes, he twisted my arms behind my back and snapped a pair of handcuffs on my wrists. Another push propelled me halfway to their car. He waited while his partner ran around to get behind the wheel, then he opened the rear door and gave me another of his helpful shoves. I fell to my knees on the rear floor and he slammed the door behind me.

Inside the car his partner placed a hand flat against my face and pushed. I ended up sitting on my heels with my back to the car door. Blue suit took his place beside the driver and looked back at me as the car pulled into traffic. It was all very swift and efficient—if you overlook the fact that blue suit hadn't found my pistol when he searched me.

Except for a short stretch behind penitentiary walls, I've carried a pistol every day of my life since I was a teen-ager. The only thing that has varied is my choice of weapon and where I carried it. Now I had a tiny Spanish-made .22 automatic in my right sock and a set of four handcuff keys in a special pocket under my belt at the small of my back. It took me about fifteen seconds to get the keys into my hand and another ten to find

the correct key and remove the bracelet from my right wrist.

Then I waited. Since the car was traveling about forty miles per hour and the inside door handles had been removed, I had no choice except to wait. We drove for about fifteen minutes, then the car stopped in front of the large overhead door of a warehouse. The driver tapped the horn twice, paused, and tapped it again. The door began to rise. I couldn't see much, but I could see enough to know this wasn't a police station.

"You're not cops, are you," I said. It wasn't a question.

"No," blue suit admitted. "We're not, and you're not as tough as we were told you'd be, either." He sounded pleased with himself and he had a right to be. It's no small trick to snatch a man off a crowded street without making a lot of waves.

The driver pulled through the opening, and I wrapped my fingers around the .22 and slid the safety off. The car inched along slowly and came to a stop between two large tractor trailers.

Because they weren't police, I had no idea what came next. The only thing I could be sure of was that I'd probably never get a better chance to free myself. Later, I might get no chance at all. As soon as the driver leaned forward and cut the ignition, I placed my pistol at the nape of blue suit's neck and pulled the trigger. At the sound of the shot, the driver twisted toward me, clawing at his jacket in an effort to reach his revolver. I shot him in the right eye and he sprawled across his partner's body.

The .22 didn't make much more noise than a hand clap, but what little noise it did make was muffled by the closed car. I leaned over the back of the seat, relieved the dead men of their weapons, then shoved them out of the way with my foot, crawled over the seat, and let myself out of the car.

The only sound I could hear was the motor for the overhead door, but that soon stopped as the door slammed closed, blocking my retreat. I cursed myself for being too slow and moved cautiously to where I could get a better view of the floor. Several trucks were parked against one wall and packing cases were stacked in orderly rows. I could see no one—but somebody had operated the door, so I couldn't be alone.

Then I spotted a wooden stairway and followed it with my eyes. It led to an office high above the warehouse floor. There was light showing through the office window and also through a glass panel in its door. It didn't take a Dick Tracy to figure out that's where the

door control was—and the person who had been operating it.

If the warehouse had been crowded with people I might have been content to escape without looking for a bonus; but as things stood, I decided I might have a chance to take care of the loose end in the office and find out what was going on at the same time.

I ran to the steps and started climbing them two at a time. Since someone was expected, I didn't worry about making noise. However, I did keep a tight grip on the two snub-nosed revolvers and I watched the office window as I went up.

When I reached the office door I glanced quickly through the glass panel, then opened the door and stepped inside. The room contained several cheap metal desks and filing cabinets. There was a man sitting at one of the desks, talking on the telephone, his back toward me.

Even though he was seated, I could tell he was a small man. I doubted he would stand over five feet. His narrow shoulders were covered by a suit made from one of the expensive fabrics, the kind that's shiny when new instead of after years of wear. There was a large sapphire ring on the little finger of the hand holding the phone, and I was sure it wasn't synthetic. He was the type who never applies for credit cards because he *likes* to carry a roll of bills. From where I stood, twenty feet from him, I could smell money.

He was saying something cryptic about the "usual cargo" at the "usual time" at the "usual place" for the "usual price." His voice was well-modulated and firm, the voice of a man used to being listened to and obeyed. After a few seconds he hung up the phone. "How'd it go?" he asked as he turned toward me.

It would be hard to say which of us concealed his surprise the better. His eyes narrowed for a moment when he saw I wasn't the person he'd expected, then his lips parted in a smile that seemed genuinely pleased. My stomach muscles tightened when I recognized his face, and I wished someone would explain the rules of the game before we played any further.

The man was Isaac Roman and his face was familiar to anyone who had ever owned a TV set or read an article about organized crime. He had occupied the witness chair during dozens of Congressional investigations during the past twenty years and never once revealed more than his name, address, and an intimate knowledge of the Fifth Amendment. His dark curly hair, deep-set eyes, ex-

ceptionally thin lips and square jaw were as well-known as the features of many movie stars; and like an actor's, his smile was no certain indication of what was going on behind his eyes.

I took a step to one side, putting a solid wall at my back. "Everything went fine," I said, answering his question.

He crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, continuing to smile. "You're a difficult man to contact, Mr. Hauser," he said, calling me by one of my old names, one I hadn't used in five years.

"I try to be," I answered.

"Well, after trying to reach you for two weeks, I'm happy I was finally able to attract your attention."

Someone had been leaving messages for me across the country, but I had ignored them. I had just completed some "work" in New York and had promised myself a vacation. Besides, the messages had come on too strongly. I hadn't known it was Isaac Roman putting out the call, but it wouldn't have made any difference. The only tunes I dance to are the ones I compose and play myself.

Something told me I should just kill Roman and leave, but my curiosity had been aroused. From where I stood I was able to see out the office window. I had a good view of the stairway and most of the warehouse floor. Everything was quiet. I decided to listen to his proposition. I had control of the situation and could always follow my first impulse later.

"Okay, now you have my attention. What do you want with me?" I asked him.

"I have a job for you."

"I'm not looking for work, least of all a burglary."

He looked startled. "How did you know I wanted you for a burglary?"

I can usually tell what people want from me by the name they use when they find me. The last time I had used the name 'Hauser' I had organized a team of experts and we'd made a good thing out of cracking department store safes. That is, it was a good thing until we ran into some bad luck one cold winter night in Cleveland and my team got shot up. I got away with a whole skin and a reputation for being a modern Jimmy Valentine, but I hadn't used the name since.

I ignored Roman's question and asked one of my own instead. "How did you know where to find me?"

"When you didn't answer any of the feelers I put out, I contacted everyone I could find who'd ever been in touch with you. One of

your friends told me you'd called him from here in Miami, so I had my boys out looking for you. They found you a couple of days ago, but double checked to be sure you were the right man."

I'd made only one call from Miami. Now, I mentally wiped away the number because I'd never call it again; one thing I didn't need was big-mouthed friends.

The revolvers were still in my hands, pointing at Roman. I dropped one into the left-hand pocket of my coat and crossed my arms across my chest, tucking the second weapon out of sight. If you're planning to shoot someone, the only thing more deceptive than shaking his hand is putting your weapons away.

"You went to a lot of trouble for nothing," I said, tightening my grip on the pistol. "I've worked *with* people, but I don't work *for* people. You made a mistake, and the two guys you sent after me will never get over it."

I guess he saw where the conversation was leading because he quickly said, "A hundred and fifty thousand dollars—I guarantee you that much, maybe more—and you're the boss of the operation. I'll lay it all out, give you all the information, and then you take it from there any way you want to handle it."

I didn't need money, but a hundred and fifty big ones isn't money; that's capital. Only a fool turns down capital without hearing the whole story. I pulled a chair away from a nearby desk and straddled it backwards. I kept the pistol in my hand, but I let it hang casually from my fingers.

"Okay, fill me in," I said.

"It's very simple," Roman said. "I have a score for you, a burglary score. I have copies of the building plans, the vault plans, and all the wiring diagrams—everything you'll need to figure the best way to take it off—and I'll guarantee you at least a hundred and fifty thousand. If you get any less than that, I'll make up the difference."

"And if I walk away with more?"

"That's yours, too. I guarantee a minimum of one hundred and fifty thousand, but you can keep all you can get."

I put the second weapon away. "It sounds good," I admitted, "but where do you come in? What's in it for you?"

"Your target, Mr. Hauser, will be a bank vault. It contains a couple of money chests, holding the tellers' cash drawers, and a couple of hundred safe-deposit boxes. In addition to the other information, I will also give you the numbers of three of the boxes.

When you empty them, you may keep the contents, but I want a count, an accurate inventory, of what each box held before you emptied it. That and your promise never to say who gave you this score is all I want."

"Okay," I said. "You've got a deal. If the score can be made, you'll get your count."

We stood up and shook hands, sealing the bargain.

Roman looked at me quizzically. "Aren't you curious why I want a count of the boxes?" he asked.

"Sure I am. I'm even more curious why you sent out an SOS for me when you have plenty of your own people who could handle a job like this, but I figure you'd have told me if you thought I needed to know—and you can be sure I wouldn't have agreed to anything if *I* thought I needed to know. Keep your little secret. I'll probably figure it out for myself. If not, it probably isn't important."

Roman pushed the button to raise the warehouse door and he and I walked down the steps together. I left him with the mess in the sedan to dispose of and, as a gauge of how badly he needed me, he didn't complain. I flagged a cab a couple of blocks away and returned to my hotel.

The next morning a messenger delivered the bank plans and I received another surprise; the vault Roman wanted burgled was in New Orleans, not Miami. I bought a cheap car, put my suitcases into it and began driving. Every time I stopped for gas or a sandwich I studied the plans, and while I drove I thought about them. I seem to do my best thinking behind the wheel of a car. By the time I reached New Orleans I had the whole caper figured out in a way I could handle without help. The time it took me to drive there had been time well spent.

I checked into a hotel and began a check of some of the data Isaac Roman had given me. I figured it was probably as accurate as any I'd ever received, but the vault wasn't going to be any richer because I took more risks. I decided to double check all the things that could be verified fairly easily.

At the end of the week I had confirmed that there was no watchman in the building, I had pinpointed the locations of most of the alarm wiring, and I was certain of the time-setting of the huge vault door. Roman had supplied me with all the information I'd need. Someone had done a very thorough job of casing.

Never one to hurry, I spent most of the next week rechecking the things I'd already confirmed and picking up the equipment I'd need.

Then, when I was ready to move, I got a phone call from Roman. I hadn't contacted him since leaving Miami and I was using a new name at my hotel, but that hadn't hindered him.

"It's been almost two weeks, Hauser," he said without preliminaries. "Just how long is this going to take?"

"As long as I want it to take," I answered. "I don't remember you saying anything about a time limit."

"I didn't, but aren't you dragging it out? It took me a long time to locate you, and I'd like to have an inventory of those boxes as soon as I can get it."

"Okay, I'll call you sometime in the next few days and tell you what you want to hear. Satisfied?"

He was and he hung up. I planned to visit the bank that night, but I didn't tell him that. Not that I was worried about him knowing, but I never trust anyone very much.

I got busy. I showered and shaved and put on a dark suit with a white shirt and tie. Anyone seeing me would never guess I was on my way to break into a bank vault, and that was the whole idea.

The bank was located on the ground floor of a downtown office building. After nine in the evening the building was closed and there was no watchman, but there were several alarms, designed to reveal the presence of any intruder, located throughout the building. No one would have had difficulty getting inside but, once there, he was almost certain to make an alarm go off.

When I first studied the wiring diagrams of the building I thought I'd have to bring in an expert to knock out the alarm systems for me. Then I gave the problem more thought and realized it wasn't necessary. The alarms were a handicap only if they could keep me from getting into the vault and getting away afterward. In this case I was almost certain to trip an alarm, even though I would do my best to avoid it, and I had no idea what would happen after that, but I was fairly certain no one was going to catch me.

It took me two trips to carry my equipment to the top of an adjoining building. Then I took everything to the roof of the bank building. Things got a little hairy at one point where I had to make an eight-foot leap six stories above a litter-filled alley; but heights don't bother me much and I keep in condition. When I had everything piled on the roof of the bank, I wasn't even breathing hard.

There was a door leading down into the building, but it was both

locked and bugged. I passed it up and went to the small building that housed the mechanism for the building's elevators. This was neither locked nor bugged, and was the one big weakness in the bank's security arrangements.

Inside, I removed four sheet-metal screws from a section of the tin floor and made an opening to the elevator shaft large enough to admit me. I shined a light around and located a metal ladder fastened to the shaft wall, right where it was supposed to be.

Three elevators normally rode side by side in the shaft, but all three were parked at the ground level. If any of them was activated, an alarm would be sounded. The result would be the same if any of the doors leading to the shaft were forced open. To avoid sending out an alarm, I had to confine my activities to the shaft. This was no handicap, however, because at the street level the wall of the elevator shaft was also the rear wall of the bank vault. I wouldn't have to leave the shaft until I was ready to enter the vault.

The job of taking my equipment down the shaft and depositing it on top of one of the elevators was as much work as it had been to get it to the roof, requiring several trips up and down the steel ladder. Before making the last trip down, I replaced the section of floor above my head and fastened it from below with the sheet-metal screws. Now I was sealed inside the shaft until I decided to emerge again—or until someone came in looking for me.

Elevators always have an emergency exit door in their roofs. I raised the door of the elevator nearest the wall of the vault, lowered my equipment to the floor of the car, leaving the door open to provide ventilation, and got to work.

I found the light switch on the car's control board and turned on the overhead light. Then I unscrewed one of the three-by-seven-foot panels making up the side of the car, thereby exposing the reinforced concrete wall of the vault. Next, I cut the heads from the screws I'd removed and glued them back in place on the panel with contact cement. So far, so good.

I removed the light bulb in the roof of the car, installed a two-way fixture, and replaced it again. Now that I had a source of power, I plugged in my masonry drill and attacked the wall. The vault wall was fourteen inches thick, but the drill cut into it like a hot knife through butter. I soon had it honeycombed with holes. I couldn't penetrate the vault because it was lined with quarter-inch steel plate,

but I was able to go completely through the concrete.

There was a one-foot space between the vault wall and where the wall of the car had been. Most of the chips and debris from the drilling fell into this gap and ended at the bottom of the shaft. When I got to work with a ten-pound sledge, breaking up the honeycomb that remained, I dropped this concrete into the opening, too.

Now I had exposed the latticework of reinforcing rods that were all that kept me from the steel vault liner. I disconnected the drill and wound the cord around it. I wouldn't need it again. I then plugged in a hand-vacuum cleaner and began to repair the mess I'd made in the car. Anything too large to be sucked into the cleaner I swept over the edge to the bottom of the shaft. As soon as I'd removed all traces of the cement, I ran the cleaner over my clothes to remove the white dust that had settled on me, then pulled the plug and laid the vacuum cleaner beside the drill.

Like all the tools except the drill, my acetylene outfit was small and compact. The hose was only six feet long, the gauges were miniature, the acetylene was carried in a small propane tank and the oxygen was held by a pair of skin-diving tanks. It was big enough to do the job required, but not much more.

I adjusted the gauges and lit the cutting torch. It had a hot violet flame that turned the reinforcement rods to water. When I heated them and squeezed the oxygen handle, the metal grew red, then yellow, then ruptured and ran before the invisible jet of oxygen. The cluster of steel rod that separated me from the vault liner was soon just short lengths of twisted scrap metal resting at the bottom of the shaft.

Now I had reached the final obstacle, the steel liner. From my side, it looked like just another steel plate, but I knew from the diagrams Isaac Roman had provided that there was little chance that I could cut through it without setting off an alarm. I connected my second oxygen tank, readjusted my torch, and sliced through the liner in one long cut, following the edge of the hole in the concrete.

When the piece was cut free, I kicked it away from me and it fell into the vault with a sound like a Chinese gong. Now I had to move fast. I didn't know how many minutes or seconds I had before the police would be crawling over the building and I had to make sure they didn't find anything.

I snatched up my equipment and threw it through the opening and

into the vault. Then I sprayed the inside of the car with an air freshener and closed the emergency exit in the roof. After that I switched off the car's light and backed into the vault, carrying the wall panel. The last thing I did was fasten the panel in place, using half a dozen powerful magnets. From inside the car there was nothing to show that the panel had been removed, and it was almost as securely fastened as it would have been with screws.

Then I waited, but not for long. It seemed I had no more than taken a seat on one of the vault's money chests, and lighted a much-needed cigarette, than the sound of running feet and shouting voices reached me through the hole to the shaft. They knew it was the vault alarm that had been sounded, but they checked the entire building anyhow. Then, when they had examined the vault door and could find nothing wrong, they went over the building again while they tried to decide what to do.

Sitting by the opening, I had plenty to which to listen. There's something about being cooped up in an elevator that makes excited people talkative. They talked and talked, wondering what their next move should be, and most of what they said was carried along the shaft to me.

I wondered what their next move would be, too, but I didn't see where there was much they could do. I figured they would eventually decide the alarm had been the result of some malfunction in the system, and go away. They went away, all right, but they left a watchman behind.

Even that wouldn't have been too bad, but they took hours to make the decision. A glance at my wristwatch told me I had only an hour and a half before the bank vault was due to open. What was worse, the building itself would be opened in half an hour. I could have easily reset the timing mechanism on the vault door to keep people out, but there was no way I could keep people out of the building or prevent them from using the elevators. I decided, too late, that I should have waited until the weekend when I'd have had more time. My escape route would be gone in half an hour.

Now I had to race the clock and, because of the guard, worry about making noise, too. Since I wouldn't have time to do anything with the bank's money chests, I turned to the rows of safe-deposit boxes. I had barely time to punch open the ones Roman wanted inventoried and still leave myself a small margin for safety.

I went to the first box, took a short grip on the sledge, placed a

U-shaped punch over the twin locks, and swung the hammer. In the confined space of the vault it sounded like a bomb going off, but one blow was all it took to smash the locks.

I had promised Roman a count, but I had never planned to waste time counting in the vault. Instead, I had brought three canvas sacks, each with a number on its side, so I could keep the contents separate until I could take time later to make an inventory. I pulled out the box, lifted the cover, and poured bundles of hundred-dollar bills into the first sack.

I followed the same procedure at the second and third boxes. Except that box number three required two blows of the sledgehammer instead of only one, the result was the same; each box produced from thirty to forty bundles of hundred-dollar bills. I looked at the long rows of boxes still unopened and it took all my willpower to force myself to drop the tools, tie the three sacks together for easy carrying, and turn my back on the boxes. Then, leaving all the tools behind except a screwdriver and an eighteen-inch crowbar, I returned to the entrance hole I'd made.

The elevator was again parked at that level. The magnets I'd used to hold the car's wall panel in place were too strong for me to pull loose, so I knocked them aside with the crowbar until I was able to kick the panel out of my way.

I could picture the guard inside the bank pressing his ear to the vault door, and perhaps even hearing an indistinct sound or two. If I'd continued to bang on the rows of safe-deposit boxes, I might have made enough noise to arouse his suspicion and cause another search of the building. As it was, he'd have heard more noise if he'd been stationed in the building lobby outside the elevator doors. Inside the bank where he was, we were separated by too much solid concrete and steel for sound to carry well.

The police hadn't turned out the elevator light. When I looked at it I saw that I had forgotten to remove my two-way fixture. A small mistake, but it could have been a costly one. Luckily none of the police noticed it was there or wondered *why* it was there. One sharp-eyed cop might have earned himself a promotion.

I pushed open the emergency door in the elevator roof, tossed the money bags up, then pulled myself through the opening after them. My journey up the steel ladder was much easier than any of the earlier trips when I was returning for tools. There's something about carrying a sackful of money that washes away fatigue.

When I reached the roof I dropped the screwdriver and crowbar. I had only needed them in case some emergency came up while I was still trapped in the shaft. Then I peeled off the surgeon's rubber gloves I'd been wearing all evening. My hands had been sweating inside the thin rubber and the flesh of my fingers was all puckered from the moisture, giving them the same texture as prunes. I put the gloves in my pocket, and got moving. It was daylight and, though I still didn't look like a burglar, I was sure I looked like a man who'd had a long, hard night.

On the way to my car I decided to leave New Orleans without returning to the hotel. There was nothing there that couldn't be replaced with one or two of the bills in the sacks. I could stop at a motel somewhere along the road, count the score, and telephone Roman from there. If his connections were anywhere near as good as they appeared to be, he might already know the alarm at the bank had gone off during the night. He was probably sitting near his phone waiting for the inventory.

When I opened the car door, tossed the money onto the seat, and settled myself behind the wheel, I discovered just how good Roman's connections were. A man straightened up from a slouched position on the seat behind me and said, "Mr. Roman wants to talk to you, fella."

I turned around to find one of the quiet-dressing types Roman seemed to favor. While I stared at him, he took out a pack of cigarettes, put one between his lips and lighted it. As an afterthought he offered the pack to me.

Just then, his partner opened the door next to me and said, "Slide over, buddy. I'll drive."

I slid over. "How'd you know where to find me?"

"We didn't," the one in back said, "but Mr. Roman told us you have a girlfriend who lives around here and gave us a description of your car and your license number. That's all it took. We found your car and waited for you."

"Yeah, nothin' to it," the driver agreed with a wide grin. He started the engine and put the car in gear. "That girl of yours must be somethin'. You look like you've really been wiped out."

The two were so friendly it was sickening. There were no weapons waved under my nose, and they didn't put their hands on me, but the fact that they'd come at me from two directions showed that they thought there was at least some chance of resistance. Roman must have warned them to be firm but friendly, and not to scare me. He

didn't want me over-reacting again and leaving him with another mess to clean up.

I found it interesting that Roman had told them the story about me visiting a girlfriend. They were just flunkies, and he shouldn't have offered any explanations to them. The fact that he did showed he didn't want to connect me with the burglary, once it was reported. This, by extension, meant that he didn't want to be connected with the burglary through me.

"Hey, I'm in no shape for a long drive," I said, hoping for a chance to stash the money sacks before going to see Roman. "Let's stop at my hotel first so I can change clothes."

"No need for that, buddy," the driver said. "We're not goin' far. Mr. Roman isn't in Miami. He flew across the Gulf yesterday."

So I sat there with the money sacks wedged between me and the door and tried to enjoy the ride. It was like trying to enjoy having a tooth pulled without an anesthetic. There was something I didn't know, something I had to find out. I had been too quick in deciding it didn't matter why Roman wanted an inventory of those boxes. If it was this important to him, it *had* to be important to me, too. After all, he'd given the job of getting it for him to me instead of assigning someone in his organization, and there had to be a good reason for that.

Once I started thinking about it, the answer to the puzzle came quickly. The only possible reason he could have for calling me in was to keep his organization from knowing he was behind the caper. He had proved that when he'd given his boys the "girlfriend" story. He must have been afraid his part in the job would become gossip within the organization; and if he was afraid of that, the owner or owners of the three boxes had to be in the organization, too. Roman was too high in the mob to fear someone who wasn't himself a powerful figure.

That left only one more question—why? Why did he want to know the contents of the boxes? He had asked for a "count," so he had expected there to be cash, but he hadn't known how much or he wouldn't have thought it necessary to make a guarantee of a hundred and fifty thousand. So, if the amount of cash was the big factor, Isaac Roman had wanted to check on someone who might be holding out on the organization; or he had wanted to gauge a rival's power by finding out how much of a cash reserve the man kept, or weaken him by taking his ready cash.

It was my guess he was measur-

ing the strength of some rival and, since I was sure I was sitting next to half a million or more, it was a rival that Roman had been dangerously underestimating. If Roman's guarantee was any indication, and I was sure it was, then Mr. X was over three times as powerful as Roman expected, just as the actual score was over three times as great as Roman's guarantee.

Of course, this was all conjecture. The only things I could be sure of were that I had stolen far more than Roman had expected me to find and that Roman had set up one of his partners when he gave me the information for the bank burglary. It's certain he wouldn't want to be known as a man who sets up his partners, and that explained the secrecy.

So the magnitude of the score could have either of two effects. If Roman was checking up on a suspected cheat, his success in finding such a big one would cancel his questionable tactics and he wouldn't be worried about being found out. On the other hand, if Roman had been checking on a rival, which I thought more likely, the size of the score was going to scare hell out of him. Isaac Roman was a powerful man, but I doubted that he kept a half-million in cash on hand. A lot of people can raise that much, but few can afford to keep that much ready for use at a moment's notice.

Right then I wished I had been allowed to give Roman the count over the telephone. It occurred to me that if Roman had put himself in a bad position, I had stepped into a worse one. If it turned out Roman had something to hide, something to fear, so did I—Roman. He wouldn't want me to do any talking and there was only one way to insure my silence.

We were on the highway north of the city now, and the driver slowed the car and made a right turn at the entrance to a new motel. From its sign I could see it was one of a large chain that had been opening up across the country. It looked as though Roman's friends didn't put all their money in safe-deposit boxes. We drove past the main building where the registration office and restaurant were located and parked at the far end of one wing. Only one other car was nearby, so I figured that was Roman's.

I got out of the car and carried the canvas sacks into the unit, with Roman's boys behind me. It was like no motel room I'd ever seen. From the outside the unit looked like all the others in the line, but it had been furnished as an office. Isaac Roman sat behind a kidney-

shaped desk, talking to another one of his men.

As soon as he saw me, he dismissed his flunkies. "Wait in the other room," he said. "I'll call you when I want you."

When they were gone I untied the sacks and dumped the bundles of money onto the polished desk, one at a time. Roman counted the bundles of hundreds—each had a paper band with a five and three zeros—and as the total grew higher his thin lips grew thinner.

The last bundle brought the total to five hundred and eighty-five thousand, and Roman had no more lips than a fish. He looked like a man who had reached for a piece of rope and grabbed a rattlesnake instead.

I was in the same position he was. Soon he was going to see that certain secrecy could be had only if I were out of the way. For my part, I had already figured out that I had to eliminate Roman somehow without bringing the wrath of the organization down on me. Right then I was weighing my chances of getting my hands on the little creep's neck and squeezing the life out of him without alerting his boys.

Roman placed the money back in one of the sacks and pushed it toward me. I picked it up and started around the desk with a broad smile on my face and my hand held out as though I intended to shake hands with him.

I had taken only two steps when the door burst open behind me and his boys rushed into the room. Roman must have had a signal buzzer under his desk. I turned to face them, clawing for my pistol, but I never made it. The lights went out instead.

When I came to I found myself propped in a chair with Roman's three boys around me. He was sitting on the edge of his desk. His face was split by a triumphant grin that I was sure was caused more by relief than pleasure. I wasn't going to be a problem to him much longer.

My head felt as though a spike had been driven into it behind my right ear. I tried to say a few appropriate words of Anglo-Saxon and found that my mouth was covered by a wide strip of adhesive tape. My hands were cuffed behind my back so tightly my fingers felt numb. For a day that had started out well, it had turned black in a hurry.

I felt sick, but the things Roman had in his hands made me feel sicker. He had the .38 I'd been carrying in a belt holster, the .22 from my sock, and the handcuff keys from the special pocket under my belt. I didn't have any aces any-

more; Isaac Roman held them all.

"Behind the motel there's a ditch that the contractor has been filling in. After I leave, I want you to take him back there and plant him," Roman ordered. "That shouldn't take more than half an hour. Then I want you all to deliver a suitcase for me."

Roman hopped off the desk and

left the room with the swaggering stride many small men have, taking with him the bulging canvas sack and my toys. He reappeared in a few minutes and placed a medium-sized suitcase on the desk. "When you've put him out of the way, take this to my office in the city." He looked at his watch. "It's nine-thirty now. You should be able to deliver it by eleven, right?"

"Sure, boss," one agreed, and the others nodded their heads.

As soon as Roman was gone, the one who had driven my car took command. "Pete," he said, "you keep an eye on him while Jack moves the car around to the back door and I get some burlap sacks to wrap him in."

Pete was the one who'd been with Roman when I arrived. He was about my size and had a mean look, something like a doctor who enjoys amputations.

I heard the two men outside exchange a few words, then the car door slammed and the engine started. I stood up, turned to Pete, and made a lot of noise through my nose as though I were trying to talk. He came up to me and grabbed my necktie with one hand while he slapped my face with deliberation. "Shut your mouth, sucker," he ordered between swings. "Shut it and keep it shut."

I brought my knee up into his groin with so much force it hurt me when it connected. When my foot touched the floor again, I did a little skip and brought the knee up with even greater force, this time catching him full in the face as he doubled over in pain. I heard his nose cartilage break and he went over backward, flailing the air with his arms. I took a step forward, launched myself into the air, and came down on his head with both heels.

With my hands chained behind me, it was impossible for me to keep my balance. I fell to the right and rolled, then scrambled to my feet again and whirled to face him, preparing to lash out with my feet.

He was still on his back with his arms thrown wide. His face was smeared with blood from his smashed nose and the places where my heels had struck. A thin trickle of blood was running from one ear, but it stopped as I watched. It didn't look as though he'd be putting his hands on me or anyone else again.

I wasn't out of trouble, yet. As long as my hands were behind me, I couldn't expect to defend myself against anyone who was prepared. I bent forward at the waist and pulled my wrists down to the level of my knees. Then I sat down on the floor and worked one leg and then the other through the loop

formed by my arms. Easy enough.

Once I had my hands in front of me I didn't feel quite so vulnerable. I knelt beside the body and went over it quickly. There was no handcuff key, but there was a .45 automatic. I'm not greedy; I settled for that.

A few moments later when the rear door opened and the one who'd moved the car came in, I was ready. "It's all set," he said, and then he saw me and what used to be Pete. He kept walking into the room, but he slowed rapidly like a toy whose battery had run down.

I waved the .45 and rattled the handcuff chain. "Do you have the key for these?" I kept my voice low because I didn't know where number three might be.

His eyes were popping from their sockets and his mouth was hanging slightly open. He shook his head rapidly from side to side.

"Turn around and face the wall," I ordered in the same quiet voice. You don't have to talk loudly when you have a gun in your hand.

He turned and I came up behind him. I raised the pistol high in the air and brought it down on his head. The .45 was one of the short-barreled, lightweight models, so I leaned on it to be sure it'd do the job. I must have leaned a little too much because there was a sound like a pumpkin being hit with a hammer and I had another corpse on my hands.

Number two didn't have the key I needed, but he had another pistol. I took it from the body and tucked it in the waistband of my trousers. When number three came in, clutching an arm load of burlap sacks to his chest, I was ready for him. I kicked the door shut and told him to freeze.

Instead, he dropped his right hand toward his side, and I pulled the trigger on the .45. The bullet slammed him into the wall, but he didn't go down. He grunted once and shook his head, then dropped the pile of burlap.

"Jeez," he said, disbelievingly. "You shot me." He put his hand to his chest and closed his eyes. After a couple of seconds he opened his eyes again and looked at the palm of his hand. His jaw dropped in amazement when there was no blood. He tore open his shirt, uncovering a red bruise the size of a grapefruit. Apparently, the .45 slug had spent itself in the heavy burlap.

"Take your pistol out with your left hand and drop it on the rug," I ordered.

He did as he was told, then ignored me and went back to fingering the bruise on his chest, acting

as though he actually thought it would get a chance to heal. I interrupted his ministrations long enough to get the handcuff key and take the bracelets off my wrists. Then I marched him into the bathroom and cuffed him to the shower head.

I spent the next ten minutes giving him a thorough pistol-whipping. I beat him long after he had passed out, not because it felt good to me, but because it was necessary. I might have felt a little sorry for him if he hadn't been so willing to wrap me in rags and dump me into a ditch a short while before.

I left him hanging limply, but alive, from the shower head, and went back to Roman's office. I turned on the TV in one corner and was lucky enough to catch the tail end of a news broadcast. The police theorized that the bank burglars had been frightened away because only three boxes had been opened. I wondered what the man who owned the boxes thought.

The suitcase Roman had left was still on the desk. If my guess was right, I wouldn't be traveling empty-handed. The case was just about large enough to carry the bundles of hundreds. Why else would he have ordered all three of his flunkies to deliver it?

I laid the case on its side and broke open the snaps. As I expected, when I lifted the lid I found the thing stuffed with bundles of hundreds. I removed two bundles, tore off the paper bands, and threw the money around the room. Hundred-dollar bills soon littered the rug and a few rested on the bodies of Pete and his friend. I turned back to the suitcase and tore the bands from the remaining bundles; however, this time I left the currency in the case and dropped only the wrappers to the floor.

When I was satisfied with the stage setting, I closed the case and set it on the floor near the rear door. Then I dragged number three back into the room and propped him in a chair with his hands cuffed behind him. His face was cut and swollen, and his nose was smashed, forcing the unconscious man to drag air into his lungs past his split lips and broken teeth.

He didn't look much like me, but then he didn't look much like anything human. Anyone seeing only his picture wouldn't be sure which of us was missing. In this case, "anyone" was Roman; and by the time he could get his machinery in motion, I expected him to have more important things on his mind than looking for me—things like trying to stay alive.

I carried a wastebasket to the center of the room and set fire to a

few scraps of paper that were in it, then held the pile of burlap over the flame long enough to get it ignited and stuffed it into the mouth of the basket. The smoldering burlap began to generate a dense cloud of white smoke.

There was a telephone directory next to the phone on the desk. It took only a few seconds to find the number of the local fire department and report smoke coming from one of the motel units. Then I opened a window so the smoke would lead them to the right spot, picked up the suitcase, and dashed out the back way to my car.

By the time the firemen arrived, I was halfway to New Orleans. By the time they had called the police to the scene, I was in New Orleans; and by the time the affair at the motel made the news broadcasts, I was at the airport, boarding the first flight out.

The police wouldn't be able to make much sense out of what they found, but someone else would. Some high-ranking hood was going to add the hundred-dollar bills, the organization men at the motel, and the burglary of his safe-deposit boxes, and come up with Isaac Roman. Soon after that, Isaac Roman would have a fatal accident. I was as certain of that as I was of anything in the world.

The ten thousand dollars I had scattered around the office at the motel was a high price to pay for Roman's death, but I was satisfied. In fact, right then, while I was waiting for my flight to take off and the memory of Isaac Roman was fresh in my mind, I'd have been willing to pay more.

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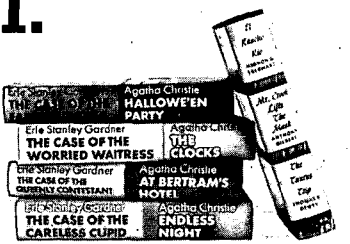

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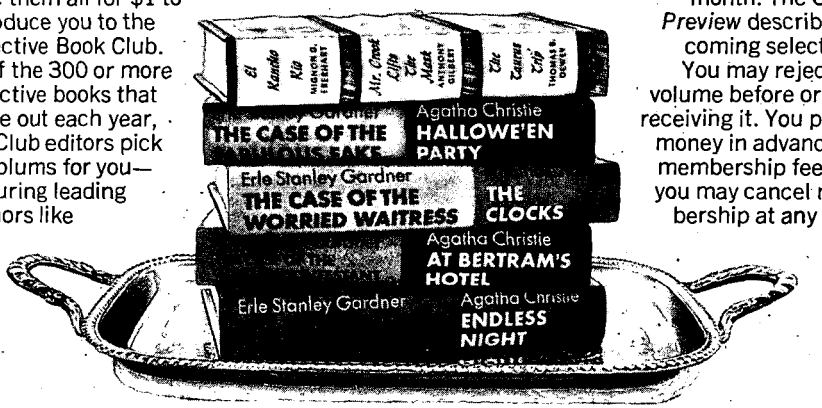

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