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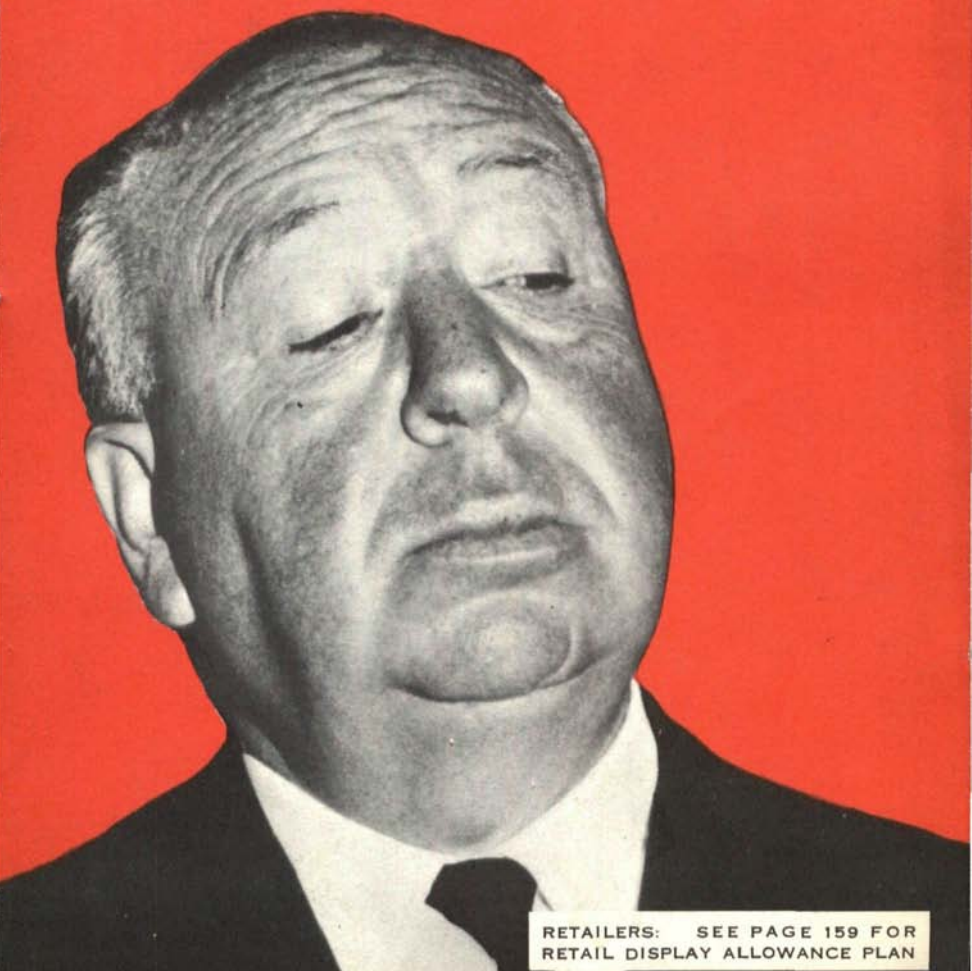
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



RETAILERS: SEE PAGE 159 FOR RETAIL DISPLAY ALLOWANCE PLAN

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

May 1971

Dear Reader:

If you survived another April Fools' Day unscathed, you are more fortunate than some of those singled out for the consequences in the new stories herein. Not every victim, however, discovers his error is fatal. For example, it is eye-*opening* for one who finally sees, in the fascinating novelette *Slay the Wicked* by Frank Sisk, that things were not nearly as normal as they seemed.

Games with varying stakes are also played in *Climax Alley* by Edward D. Hoch, *The Lion's Share* by Albert Avellano, *The Final Reel* by John Lutz, *Roadblock* by Jack Foxx, and *The Play's the Thing* by Robert Bloch.

Other deceptions are revealed by more of your favorites: Earle N. Lord, Talmage Powell, Arthur Porges, James Holding, Richard M. Ellis, Carroll Mayers, Ron Goulart, and Arthur Moore.

Altogether, these gentlemen plot the last word in skulduggery for any season. Your taste for mystery and suspense is about to be sated for another month.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 16, NO. 5 MAY 1971

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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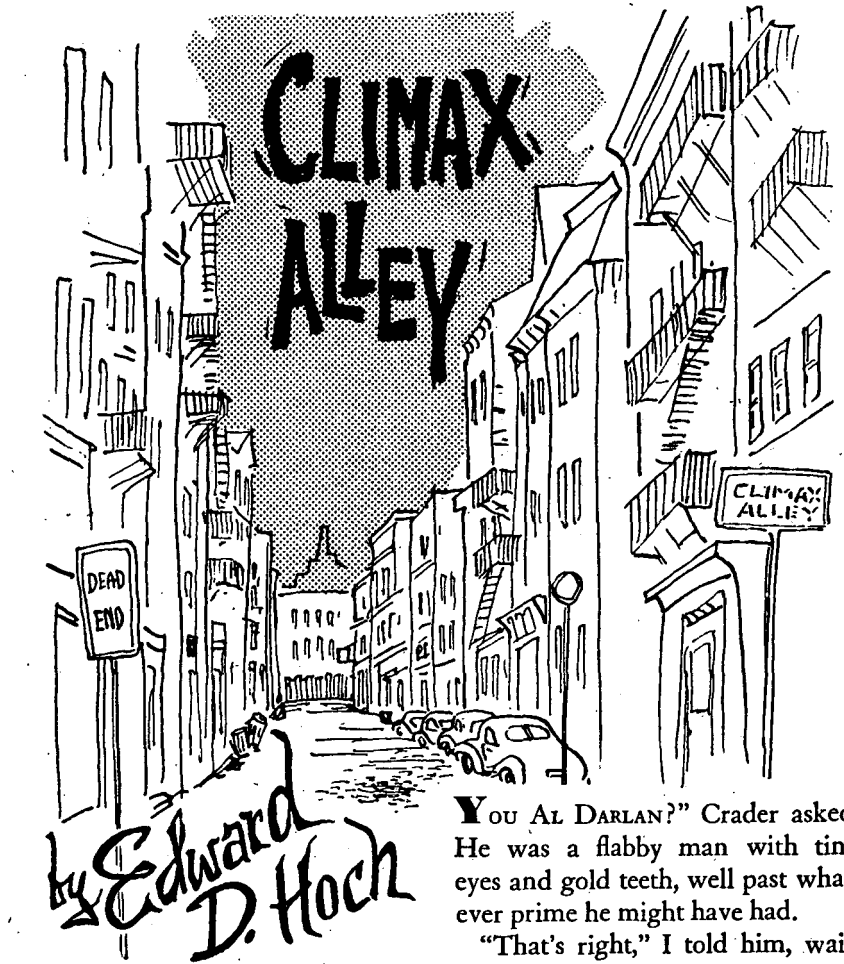
I subscribe to the observation that this is a shrinking world—particularly for the oppressor.



by Edward D. Hoch

"You Al Darlan?" Crader asked. He was a flabby man with tiny eyes and gold teeth, well past whatever prime he might have had.

"That's right," I told him, waiting until he stepped aside to let me

into the shabby hotel room he seemed to be guarding.

"I heard you were dead."

"Well, I'm not."

"Or retired."

"Not that, either."

He eyed me more carefully as I went by him and took a chair. Then he sat down on the unmade bed opposite me and said, "You're older than I figured."

"Not so old for a retired dead man. What's the job, Mr. Crader? I can get a medical report from my doctor."

"Look, I heard you were a good private investigator."

"For this town I'm good."

"My name is Earl Crader."

"You told me that much on the phone." I was getting tired of playing games.

He blinked his tiny eyes and went on. "I'm the district sales manager for Mid-Continent Magazine Sales, out in Kansas City. We have teams of people selling door-to-door subscriptions."

I grunted. "Have a little trouble with the police occasionally, don't you?"

"That was the other outfit, before the agencies adopted a new code of ethics."

"Yeah."

"Hell, I'm hiring you to keep us out of trouble!"

"What kind of trouble, Mr. Crader?" I asked him rather curtly.

"We're working this town now, for the next two weeks. One of the teams is under the supervision of a group captain named Stevenson. Rex Stevenson. He's something of a broken-down actor. Anyway, there've been reports from other cities of a rash of house burglaries in areas canvassed by Stevenson's team. I had a detective from Cleveland come all the way out to Kansas City to talk to me about it."

"Did he arrest you?"

"Whose side are you on, anyway? No, he didn't arrest me. I don't know nothing about house burglaries, in Cleveland or anywhere else. But the company said it was my job to find out, before the police did."

"You suspect Stevenson is using his sales people to case wealthy neighborhoods and then going in a few days later after the loot?"

Crader shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "That's what we want to hire you for. To find out. I can't ask the police here to investigate my own people."

"And if I catch Rexy with his paw in the safe?"

"I'll handle it."

"All right," I decided. Business wasn't that good, so I couldn't afford to turn anyone away. "Give me a list of the areas his team is hitting. I should have a report for

you by tomorrow. Preliminary, at least."

"Don't tell him I'm in town, if you have to talk to him. He thinks I'm back in K.C."

I nodded. "The charge is fifty a day plus expenses. And I'll need a hundred in advance."

He wrote out a check and I wished I'd made it more. "I hear you're good, Darlan."

"You told me."

"No police, whatever happens."

"I'll do what I can," I told him, and left.

I drove out to Callaway Street that afternoon and spent an hour cruising around, watching the magazine subscription teams at work. Generally they were given one or two streets each, reporting to a shadowy man who stayed under cover in a powder blue convertible. I was especially attracted to one long-haired blonde, who moved with confidence along the street, passing the sun-streaked lawns with their occasional sprinklers, pausing only at the best houses. She seemed to equate a two-car garage and a Caddy in the driveway with a possible market for her wares, and it just could be that this fit in with Crader's suspicions.

I followed her down a dead-end street and watched while she visited a house at the very end—a rambling white ranch with a roof of red tile. It looked especially promising, either way, with a Lincoln in the driveway, a swimming pool around back, and enough tall bushes to screen it effectively from its neighbors. I decided it was the sort of house a burglar would love. Or a magazine sales girl.

She was inside for about ten minutes, and when she left I waited a while and then went up the winding brick walk myself. I had to start somewhere and this looked like a good bet. When nobody answered my ring I started around back toward the pool. People that rich didn't stay in the house on hot July afternoons, not with a pool in the back yard.

"Hold it right there!" a voice barked, and I felt the muzzle of a gun poke me behind the right ear.

"I'm holding."

The man frisked me effortlessly and removed the 9mm Walther automatic from beneath my left shoulder. "Foreign!" he grunted. "What in hell are you—a spy?"

"Maybe you'd better take me to your boss," I suggested. "I don't deal with hired hands."

"Straight ahead, wise guy!"

I walked through a final hedge of bushes to the pool I'd glimpsed from the street. There was only one person at it, an elderly white-haired man who looked as if he'd

be lucky to last out the summer. He was bundled in a sweater and a lap robe, despite the temperature in the high eighties.

"What's this, Rainy?" he asked the man with the gun.

"I found him snooping around, Mr. Palatto."

I moved over to the side of the pool and stood between them. Rainy was a cheap hood type with sideburns and greasy hair. I disliked him on sight, but then I might have been prejudiced since he was holding a gun on me.

"Who is he?" Palatto barked, still not addressing me.

"Don't know, but I saw the bulge under his arm and figured I'd better take him."

"I'll have to start looking for a new tailor," I said. "I didn't know my bulges showed."

Palatto turned his eyes on me. Looking at him there, and at his hired gunman beside me, I didn't have to ask what he was. It was spelled out all over him. "Who are you, mister?" he asked, in the voice of a man used to asking questions and getting prompt answers.

"I was passing by and thought I'd stop for a swim."

"Mister, Rainy here can crease your skull for you a few times before we call the cops. It makes no difference to me."

"The name's Al Darlan. Private investigator," I explained quickly.

"I don't know you."

"A lot of people don't. That's why business is so bad."

"Who sent you here, wise guy?"

"No one you know. A fellow named Earl Crader who's in the magazine business. I'm checking the neighborhood and I just happened to pick your house. I wanted to ask about the girl who just left."

Palatto snorted. "The girl selling magazines? You carry a gun for that?"

I tried to moisten my lips with a dry tongue. "Yes."

"Show me your identification."

I passed the wallet to him and he glanced at it, then gave it back. "Sit down, Mr. Darlan."

I settled into a folding lawn chair next to the pool and said, "I'll take my gun back too."

The old man grinned, showing yellowed teeth. "Rainy will return it on your way out." Then, to the hood, "That's all, Rainy. I'll call if I want you."

"What are you so afraid of?" I asked.

He was silent for a moment, and then he answered. "Death, I suppose. Maybe everybody gets afraid of it at my age."

"I'm only interested in the girl, not the Mafia."

His old eyes flashed at the word, and for a moment I wondered if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he might have a gun under the lap robe. "No Mafia. I am not Sicilian. I could never have risen high in their ranks."

"And yet you live here in fear of your life."

"At the end of all these years, I can't look back on my life without realizing all the wrongs I've done people. Maybe when you're my age you'll realize it too. When I shoulda been going to high school, I was out on the streets of Chicago, fighting in the newspaper circulation wars. I worked for Capone in the Twenties. Once he sent me to England to kill somebody. He was being paid by the Irish Republican Army."

I gazed down at the water of the swimming pool, watching the little windswept ripples, wishing this man facing me could write a book about it instead of telling me his life story. "I'm only interested in the girl," I said.

"You are not the first one to come to me for help, Mr. Darlan. I still have companions, friends—even in the Mafia you mention."

"About the girl . . ."

"A man of my age does not interest himself in five-year magazine subscriptions. I sent her on her way."

I stood up. "Tell Rainy to be on guard tonight. There's just a chance she might have been casing the place for a real house burglar."

The old man grinned his gold-tooth grin. "He'd find a surprise here, wouldn't he?"

"I have to be going."

The old eyes crinkled to slits against the afternoon sun. "I asked before why you carried the gun. Private investigators don't usually carry them on routine checks."

I sighed and figured what the hell—it was a day for swapping autobiographies. "A few years back I was going to retire, get myself an honest job like everyone else. Only I got talked into taking one more case. Just one more before I called it quits. I didn't carry a gun on that one, and a girl shot me in the stomach. I came damned close to dying. Some people thought I had died."

"And you're back at it?"

"I'm back at it."

The old man shook his head. "You're like me. Maybe you'll end up like me."

"Sitting by a swimming pool?"

"There are worse things." He held out his hand. "If you ever need help, remember Pop Palatto."

"I will."

I was walking away when he called after me. "Darlan—you know anything about bugs? Electronic listening gadgets and telephone taps?"

"I used to fool around with

them," I admitted, adding pointedly, "back when they were legal."

He nodded. "Maybe I can throw some business your way."

I walked through the hedge again and found Rainy waiting to return my Walther. "You don't miss a thing, do you?"

"I'm paid not to," he said.

I went back to my car and drove slowly away.

It took me another twenty minutes of cruising before I picked up the girl again, clutching a briefcase to her breasts as she hurried toward a little shopping center at the edge of the residential district. It was nearly four, and I figured she was calling it quits for the day. She stopped for a minute in a drugstore, then came out and went next door to a little bar called the *Silver Star*. I parked the car and followed her in.

It was a typical neighborhood place, with seedy bar stools and a couple of guys playing a miniature billiards game of some sort. The bartender was reading a racing form, but he put it away when I sat down. Maybe he wasn't used to afternoon customers in suits and ties.

I ordered a glass of draft beer and carried it over to the booth by the window where the girl was sitting. If the bartender had any objections, he didn't voice them.

"Hello there," I greeted the girl.

She looked up, appraisingly. "Am I supposed to know you, mister?"

I slid into the booth opposite her. "You called on a house this afternoon. A big ranch with a swimming pool. There was an old man out by the pool, a Mr. Palatto."

"I called on a lot of houses."

"You remember this one."

"Maybe." She was drinking something with orange slices and cherries in it. "You a detective?" she asked, taking a sip.

I showed her my card. "You're employed by Mid-Continent?"

She looked me over and decided she could go into her spiel. "Not really employed by them. I'm Marcie Jones, and I'm entered in a contest they're having. We travel around trying to earn points for poise and grooming and good manners. The people vote for us if they like us."

I nodded. "And they vote by subscribing to your magazines for four or five years. You can cut the con game with me, Miss Jones. I've heard them all."

She brushed back her long blonde hair with her hands, revealing a pale, pretty face with small, carefully formed features. Just then, she didn't look like a con girl. She looked like a virgin princess about to bestow her favor on

some worthy knight. "It's no con game, really! I'm proving something to myself, that I can make it out in the world, away from West Branch, Texas, where I came from."

"It's one hell of a way to be doing it, sister."

"This is just a training program. They promised me an office job if I do well."

"I'll bet. Tell me about Rex Stevenson."

"Mr. Stevenson? He's my boss—my supervisor."

"What sort is he? Young, old?"

"Not much older than me. Maybe twenty-five or so. He handles a whole team of us in the . . . contest."

"Do you report to him every day, tell him what sort of houses you visited?"

"Sure! That's part of it."

"You describe the interiors of the houses?"

She shrugged and pulled her hair back again. "Sometimes he asks me a lot of questions. It's to train our powers of observation, he says."

"Yeah." I motioned toward her drink. "You always finish off your workday by drinking alone?"

"I'm not alone!"

"You were before I came."

"I'm waiting for Mr. Stevenson. Here he comes now!"

I froze at the table, not wanting to look. I hadn't planned on confronting him quite this soon, and was far from pleased by the prospect. A voice over my shoulder asked, "This guy bothering you, Marcie?"

"Hello, Mr. Stevenson! No, I guess not. He just sat down here and started asking me questions, that's all."

Stevenson slid into her side of the booth, facing me. He was a big

fellow with sandy hair and a dimpled chin. The girls probably thought he was cute, though I figured his age at closer to thirty than twenty-five. "What sort of questions?" he wanted to know.

I interrupted, cutting short her answer. "She called at the home of a man called Pop Palatto. He asked me to check on her."

He tilted his head to one side. "You're a private guard of some sort."

"You might say that."

"Look, we don't want any trouble. We just want to sell magazines."

"So I gathered." I slid out of the booth and stood up. "Enjoy your cocktails," I said and left them alone.

I went back to the little two-room office I used in the Grant Building and typed up my report of the day's activities. Then I stopped by Earl Crader's hotel and dropped it off. He was sitting by the window of his room, watching the sunset.

"This is a pretty dead town," he commented.

"I never said it wasn't."

"What'd you find out?"

"Not much. It's all in the report. I met Stevenson and talked to one of his girls, and even ran into a retired gangster. But there's no lead on the thefts yet. I'd take a wild guess and say you were right to suspect Stevenson, though it's too early to know for sure."

"Get some action, Darlan. I want to go back to Kansas City."

"I'll do what I can," I promised.

I went home to my apartment across town, planning to turn in early and be back in the neighborhood by the time Stevenson's crew started working. I figured he wouldn't try anything the first night, while they were still working the area, but I was barely in the door when the phone started ringing.

"Hello?" I answered cautiously.

"Darlan?"

"Yeah."

"This is Rainy. Mr. Palatto would like you to come out to the house right away."

"What about?"

"He just said it's important."

I wasn't in the habit of answering summonses from men like Palatto, but the call had my curiosity aroused. I told him I'd be out, and went back downstairs to the car. It was a warm night, with the usual summer evening drivers out in full force. I passed a carload of screaming teen-agers headed for the lake and tried to remember when I'd been young.

Twenty minutes later, I parked in front of the sprawling ranch on the dead-end street and went up to

the door. Rainy opened it before I could ring. "This way," he said, not bothering to ask for my gun.

The place was done in a style that could only be described as Chicago Gothic, with heavy red drapes cloaking the windows and red velvet coverings on much of the furniture. The walls were covered with a black and red flocked paper, which I couldn't resist feeling as I passed by. In an inner study, Pop Palatto himself awaited me, flanked by two large vases of artificial roses. The place might have made a nice nightclub. As a home it was somehow hard to believe.

"Ah, Al Darlan! I hope I didn't get you out of bed." He still sat, and still wore the lap robe, and I still wondered if there might be a gun under it.

"I don't turn in this early. What's up?"

"Sit down, sit down! Rainy, bring us some Scotch and water! You do drink Scotch, Mr. Darlan?"

"I drink it."

"Fine!" He ran a wrinkled hand through his thin white hair, seeming quite pleased with himself.

"What was it you wanted?" I urged again.

"To throw some business your way. You remember I asked you about your experience with electronic bugs. Well, there's a man arriving soon to talk to you about a job."

"I appreciate your recommending me on such short acquaintance," I said, "but I'll have to decide for myself whether to take on more work right now."

"Certainly. But I think this man can make it well worth your while. I'm talking about big money, Mr. Darlan."

"I'll listen to him. That's all I can promise."

He reached out and patted my knee, and suddenly he seemed like a father advising his son on a career. "Until I came to this town to live out my days, I never thought much about other people, Al—can I call you Al? I never thought much about anybody but myself. That guy in London was the first one I ever killed, close up so I could see his face. I came back to Chicago and Capone gave me a whole ward to control. Back in those days there was a little street in the ward called Climax Alley. It ran down to a dead end in back of a laundry, and I always steered clear of it. I had the damnedest feeling that I'd end my days there, being trapped and gunned down in Climax Alley. It was things like that I worried about, not things like marrying and raising a family and leaving some friends to mourn me. The girls at Lady Susie's were

the closest things to friends, and I never had any kids that I knew about. So now I live in this big house with all the money in the world, and I still need Rainy to frisk my guests."

"He didn't frisk me!"

"I told him not to, this time." His eyes crinkled a little.

Rainy entered to interrupt. "Haj Mufhu is here."

"Fine! Send him in!"

I turned toward the doorway, not knowing quite what to expect. Haj Mufhu was a short, middle-aged man in a conservative gray business suit. His features were dark and Arabic, and his neatly trimmed mustache and the languor of his eyes hinted that he might still be something of a desert sheik with the ladies.

"Al Darlan, this is my friend Haj Mufhu."

I shook hands and settled down opposite them, wondering what was coming next. I didn't have long to wait. Mufhu started talking, in perfect English, and came right to the point. "Mr. Darlan, I trust you can be of service in a matter involving the purchase of certain bits of electronic eavesdropping equipment. I understand you know of such things."

"I know enough to tell you they can now be sold only to recognized law enforcement agencies."

"But you could get them for me? In quantity?"

I thought about it. "Perhaps. There'd be some risk. How much of an order are we talking about?"

"I am authorized to spend up to thirty-five thousand dollars to obtain the equipment I need."

"Is it just equipment you need?"

Mufhu's eyes flashed. "What do you mean?"

"You came to Pop Palatto here. He's not in the electronics business." I was remembering Capone's men helping the Irish to kill the English, and I wondered if history was, in a sense, repeating itself.

"Mr. Palatto is an old friend," Mufhu insisted.

"An old friend," Palatto agreed, shooting me a daggered look.

"Maybe we should talk it over down at my office," I suggested. "I have some catalogs down there, and we can get a better idea of the exact equipment you need."

"Fine," Mufhu agreed, and Palatto seemed pleased at my sudden cooperation, too. It had gotten me off the hook for a while at least.

Rainy saw us to the door and I told Mufhu to follow me downtown in his own car. It was a little German import, and I wondered if there was anything political in his choice.

My building was deserted at that hour of the night, without even a

night elevator man to take us up. We climbed the four flights of stairs together, puffing toward the end, and he waited in the hallway catching his breath while I unlocked the frosted glass door and stepped into an office bathed by flashing neon from the hotel across the street.

I flipped on the light and beckoned him inside, going immediately to the file drawer where I kept old catalogs. "Here's what they were offering a few years ago," I said, "when it was still legal for a private citizen to buy the stuff."

"Ah!" He spread out the booklets on my desk and began poring over them. "May I mark these?" he asked at one point.

"Go ahead."

He made occasional checks as he went through the pages, while I tried to decide what to do. It was chancy and expensive buying the stuff direct, but I had a friend in the electronics business who might be able to help. If I could have the stuff made up special, duplicated from equipment I still had on hand, Mufhu would be satisfied and I might just get a little extra profit out of it for myself.

When Mufhu had completed his examination of the catalogs, we talked quantities, and then I suggested I phone him in a day or two. "You'll be staying in town?"

"Oh, yes." He grinned, showing teeth so perfect they must have been false. "I will be staying the week out."

He gave me his number at a little south-side hotel and I promised to be in touch. We walked down the stairs together, I saw him to his car and then went home to my own apartment for the second time that night.

I was drifting in that half-world between sleeping and waking when the telephone rang the next morning. I sat up and reached for it and mumbled something into it, and Earl Crader's voice came back at me. "Stevenson's gone. He left his hotel sometime during the night."

"How'd you find out?"

"One of the girls—a Marcie Jones—phoned our main office in Kansas City at eight o'clock and they phoned me."

"What time is it?" I asked, groping for my watch.

"After nine. Aren't you up yet?"

"I had a late night."

"I don't know what to do. Stevenson's team is helpless without his instructions. I'm going to have to show myself and take it over."

"Any sign what scared him off?"

"Not unless it was your scene in the bar yesterday."

"That wouldn't have done it."

"How could you have slept through that thunderstorm, Darlan?"

"If I put my mind to it I could sleep through the end of the world. Look, wait an hour and then turn up at their hotel. Say you flew right in from K.C. Meanwhile I'll check the police reports."

"For what?"

"To see if there were any big house burglaries last night."

I went down to headquarters and talked to a cop I knew, but there was nothing in the morning report. Either I was on the wrong track, or the robbery hadn't yet been reported. Next I phoned Palatto's house, but there was no answer. It was still drizzling a bit outside, and I hardly thought they'd be outside at the pool. I got in the car and drove out there.

The house looked dank and forbidding in the rain, nestled now behind bushes drooping with moisture. It was too wet going through the bushes to the pool, and I knew they wouldn't be there anyway, so I tried the front door. It was standing open about two inches. I slipped the Walther from under my arm and stepped inside.

I saw Rainy first. He was sprawled against the opposite wall, staring up at me with what was left of his face. The gun was an inch from his limp fingers, but it hadn't done him any good. Somebody had gotten him with a shotgun, from about the distance of the front door.

I stepped carefully around the blood and went into Palatto's study. One vase of roses was smashed on the floor, and the heavy red drapes were half torn from one window. Pop Palatto was over behind his desk, feet tangled in the lap robe. It had taken two or three blasts of the shotgun to finish him off, and his body was riddled with wounds. I checked under the robe but there was no gun. He'd bet his life on Rainy, and lost.

I looked around to see if anything had been taken, if there was any sign of robbery, but everything seemed in order. The killer had even picked up the discarded shotgun shells and taken them with him. I figured it had been an automatic, to get off that many shots, probably a 12 gauge.

That was when I should have called the police, but I didn't. I needed a little time, and I wouldn't get it sitting down at Headquarters answering questions for the rest of the day. I went outside, closing the door carefully behind me, hoping the neighbors hadn't seen me enter and leave.

Driving back downtown, I thought about Palatto and the end he'd come to. After staying out of

that alley all his life, it had finally found him.

I went first to the hotel where Haj Mufhu was staying, hoping that our late meeting had kept him in bed too. He wasn't in his room, but I struck it lucky and found him in the coffee shop next door, munching on a piece of dry toast.

"Ah! Mr. Darlan!"

I slid into the booth opposite him. "I want some straight answers, Mufhu. Where'd you go after you left me last night?"

"Go? To bed, my friend. Nowhere else."

"Not back out to Palatto's house?"

"No."

"He met with an accident last night. He and Rainy both."

"You mean they're dead?"

"Keep your voice down. The police don't know yet."

"What happened?"

"I thought you could tell me. It was somebody Rainy trusted. You're the only one I know that qualifies."

"You think *I* killed them?"

"I told him yesterday to be on his guard against a robbery attempt. He wouldn't have opened the door to just anybody."

"I know nothing about it. Palatto was my friend!"

"For how long?"

"I met him only a few days ago, but I had a letter of introduction from a mutual friend in New York."

"I'll bet. What did you want besides telephone taps and bugs? Did you want a few hired killers too?"

"I . . . I understood he could make arrangements for me."

"Sure you did."

"Only on a temporary basis, to train some of our own people."

"Ever fire an automatic shotgun, Haj?"

"A shotgun? No, of course not!"

I had to admit that somehow Mufhu didn't much fit my portrait of the cold, certain killer who'd gunned down Palatto and his bodyguard.

"All right." I slid out of the booth. "I'll be in touch."

"What about our deal?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "This other comes first now."

I left him still munching on the toast and drove to the hotel where the Mid-Continent people were staying. The lobby was cluttered with a dozen or so young people, a few of whom I'd seen in the neighborhood the previous day. The team was like a flock of sheep suddenly without its shepherd.

Marcie Jones wasn't among them, and I asked one of the pimply-faced boys about her. "She's upstairs with Crader," he volunteered. "Who are you?"

I went up without bothering to answer, checking for her room number on the way. Crader opened to my knock, and I found her sobbing on the bed, her long blonde hair almost hiding a tear-streaked face.

"What's her story?" I asked him.

"I don't *know* why he left," she sobbed in reply. "I don't *know*!" She saw me then, and remembered me from the bar. "What's *he* doing here? Who is he?"

"He's working for me, Marcie," Crader explained tonelessly.

"Any luck?"

"None, Darlan. Let's go next door and talk."

We left her alone and went into one of the boys' rooms. Crader sat on the bed opposite me, as he had when I first met him. "He was fooling around with her. I'm sure she knows something."

"I agree they were fooling around," I told him. "He wasn't just meeting her for a drink. Maybe she's in on the robbery bit."

"You want to have a go at her, Darlan?"

I nodded. "About that and something else. The police don't know it yet, but Palatto and his bodyguard were killed last night."

"*Killed!* You mean murdered?"

"I mean murdered. Both of them."

"You think Stevenson . . . ?"

"I don't know. There was no sign of robbery, but he might have panicked."

Crader nodded and fumbled nervously for a cigarette. "Something sure made him run. Think we should tell the police?"

"Let me see if I can pick up his trail first."

"I was just reading about Palatto in your report last night. I suppose he figured to die violently. What an odd way to end your days, you know? A swimming pool, a bodyguard, all that red velvet furniture, and he ends up dead. How was it done?"

"Shotgun. And it's about time I tipped the police, since I've been telling everyone about it."

I put in a call without leaving my name, and then went next door to Marcie's room. She'd stopped crying, but her face was still hidden and there was an air of sadness about her.

"What do you want now?"

"Still the same. Tell me where Stevenson went, and why?"

"I don't *know*!"

"You didn't see him last night?"

She was starting to cry again. "I went to his room during the thunderstorm. I was scared."

"Was he there?"

"Yes."

"You stayed with him?"

"Yes. Until after the thunder

stopped. Then I went back to my own room."

"And that was the last you saw of him?"

She nodded. "He was gone this morning, and so was his suitcase."

"How did he act when you were with him? Did he give any hint of running away?"

"No, nothing."

"Was he planning another robbery, Marcie?"

She turned her face away. "I don't know anything about that. I don't know what you're talking about."

"All right. How were you traveling? By car?"

"Yes. In four cars. He took one with him."

"He's in big trouble, Marcie. Don't you want to tell me where he's gone?"

"I don't *know*!"

"It's not just the robberies. Two men were murdered last night. At one of the houses you visited yesterday."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "I didn't . . ."

"The house at the end of the street. With the swimming pool, and all those bushes. You remember it, don't you? And you told Rex about it."

"He wouldn't kill anybody."

"Not unless he had to. Where is he, Marcie?"

She brushed back her hair, really frightened now. "I didn't want to help him, really! I didn't know he was going to kill anyone!"

"Where is he?"

She turned away, toward the window. Finally she answered, "He left me a note. It said to meet him tonight at the Rock Creek Motel, ten miles south of here."

I nodded. "You're doing the right thing."

"Will you tell the police?"

"I'll go out and talk to him myself. Don't worry."

I figured by the time night came she'd have had second thoughts about the whole thing, and would be on the phone to the motel warning him. The only thing to do was to drive out there now and wait for him to show up. If she was lying, I'd have wasted a day, but you have to trust somebody once in a while.

The Rock Creek Motel was a small but modern place on the banks of the creek that supplied its name. It was done all in red panels and tinted glass, with the mandatory swimming pool clearly visible to one side. I checked the parking lot to make certain his car wasn't already there, and then settled down to wait.

He showed at ten minutes to four that afternoon, driving a black compact instead of the fastback I'd

been watching for. He'd switched cars somewhere along the line, buying a new one or stealing it. He didn't bother checking in, but went directly to one of the rooms. He'd obviously checked in that morning and then gone off to change cars.

I knocked on the door and said I was the room clerk with a message. It should have fooled him, but it didn't. He opened the door with a gun in his hand. I shoved it aside and went in fast, knowing I couldn't last long against a man twenty years younger than me. The gun flew from his hand and we both went down hard on the floor. I tried to get my own gun out, but he pinned my arms in a bear hug.

Then suddenly he broke free and dived for the door. It was a foolish move. I grabbed hold of a heel and brought him down on his face. Before he could scramble up again I had the Walther out and aimed. "Slowly, boy, or I'll blast a hole in your kneecap." I bent to scoop up his gun and dropped it in my pocket.

"That bitch talked!" he snarled. "I thought I could trust her!"

I gave him a quick frisk, but he had no other weapon. "You can't trust anyone, Stevenson," I told him. "Why'd you run away?"

"Go to hell!"

"Look, they got you for robbery, and if you don't play ball they'll have you for murder, too. Why'd you run away?"

He brushed the hair from his forehead, looking scared for the first time. "I didn't kill anybody. All I did was rob a few houses. My boss phoned in the middle of the night and told me the police were on my trail. He said to get out of town, and I did."

"Your boss?"

"At Mid-Continent. Earl Crader in Kansas City."

"Yeah," I said. "It figures."

I found Crader back in the hotel room where I'd first met him. It was a case of hotel rooms, and I was getting tired of them.

He looked me over, probably taking in my bruised cheek, and asked, "Did you find Stevenson?"

"I found him, Crader. I'll bet you didn't figure on that, did you?"

"What do you mean?" he asked nervously.

"I mean that you gunned down Palatto and his bodyguard last night, Crader. Want to tell me why you did it?"

"You're nuts, Darlan! I didn't hire you to listen to your crap."

"It's no crap. Only a coincidence, I suppose. Of all the houses on that street, I picked Palatto's to check

on. And then I wrote my report about it and gave it to you. You recognized the name at once, though he hadn't seemed to know yours when I mentioned it. You bought a shotgun—one of the few weapons you can get in this state without a license—and probably rented a car to get out there in the middle of the night."

"Try proving any of that!"

"I think if the cops check over your past life they'll come up with the link they need. Kansas City and Chicago had links during Capone's day."

"Sure, and I would have been all of fifteen years old! Stevenson killed those two and then skipped town."

"Stevenson skipped town because you phoned in the middle of the night and said the cops were on his tail. I was pretty sure he was innocent when I started after him today. All those shotgun blasts didn't attract any neighbors, and I asked myself why. It wasn't the middle of the night, because Palatto and Rainy were still up when they got it. I figured maybe twelve or one o'clock—but then why didn't anybody hear it?"

"You tell me, wise guy."

"Because of the thunderstorm, of course. And the girl told me she went to Stevenson's hotel room during the storm because she was frightened. Since she had no reason to volunteer the information at that point unless it was true, I figured it pretty much cleared him. Not for certain, but pretty much."

"And it convicted me? How come?"

"I knew you were up during the storm because you mentioned it to me. And Rex says you were the one who told him to skip town. It also seems fairly certain he wouldn't have left a note for Marcie if he was fleeing a double murder rap."

"It's his word against mine."

"But I happen to believe him, Crader. It fits. You killed Palatto and then tried to set Stevenson running, figuring we'd think he'd been trying to rob the place. But it's not going to work. You made a mistake with me this morning. You were talking about reading my report on Palatto, and you mentioned the swimming pool and the red velvet furniture. I couldn't have described the furniture in my report, because I never got inside the house till last night—*after* I'd already given you the report to read. You could only have known the color of the furniture if you were in that house, Crader. In that house killing them."

He was starting to sweat now. "Maybe the girl told me."

"When? Why? They were both

by the pool. She didn't get inside, either. Think of another one, Crader."

He reached into his pocket, slowly, and withdrew a checkbook. "OK. How much?"

"I only take money from people I like."

"How much, damn it? A thousand, two thousand?"

"I asked why you did it, Crader."

He tossed down the checkbook. "My father had a dry cleaning business in Kansas City, back in the Thirties. Some of Palatto's goons tried to move in from Chicago. I guess he was always doing things like that after Capone made him a big shot. None of the dry cleaners would join his organization, so he had to make an example of somebody. They tossed a bomb one winter night, a week before Christmas. It killed my kid brother and crippled my father."

"All right."

"You wanted to know."

"It's a long time to carry a grudge."

"I almost got him once before, in Chicago. I was waiting outside his office, in an alley. I called to him as he passed, but he started running and I missed my chance."

"He was always afraid of alleys," I said.

"That was years ago. I'd pretty much forgotten about it till his name turned up in your report."

"How'd you manage to catch Rainy off guard?"

"I phoned first and said I worked with you. Told them you were sending me out with some photos for them to identify—photos of the girl. I had the shotgun under my raincoat. I tossed it in the lake afterwards, and returned the car I'd rented."

"I'm going to have to call the police," I told him quietly.

"Nuts to that!"

I reached for the phone and he made his move, not toward me but toward the door. I took out the Walther and put a bullet in the wall next to his head. He froze where he was while I dialed the cops.

After it was over, I remembered Haj Mufhu, and went down to his hotel to talk about telephone taps.

There is always someone behind us who, in reality, may be just a few steps ahead.

The LION'S Share

IT WAS SHORTLY before ten in the morning when I drove down the main street of Hollisville, Kansas and parked the four-year-old sedan in front of the Commercial Bank. Ahead of me, a business district of small specialty stores and offices extended for approximately three hundred yards on both sides of the street, then there were no more buildings and the street narrowed

to two lanes and stretched unbroken to the horizon. I looked back the way I had come and saw pretty much the same picture.

The main street was wide, about three times as wide as it had to be, showing that the town fathers had once had high hopes, but the lack of traffic and the washed-out look of the business store-fronts made it plain their hopes had never become reality. There were only half a dozen cars in view on the street and no more than nine or ten pedestrians moving listlessly along, in no hurry to get anyplace. Hollisville, Kansas was at the crossroads of Nothing and Nowhere. Only the knowledge that the bank was loaded with currency to cash the local farmers' harvest checks could have brought me there.

I got out of the car and paused on the sidewalk to light a cigarette. A kid in denims went by, and a few seconds later a pair of women in cotton-print dresses passed. Each glanced at me curiously, but they all were too polite to stare openly.

I was wearing a fawn-colored, double-breasted suit with large ivory buttons, and my trousers flared in wide bell bottoms. My shirt was pale-green silk with a high collar, and I wore a bright, five-inch-wide, pink-and-white-striped necktie, tied with a knot the size of a fist. In New York or L.A. no one would have given me a second glance, but in Hollisville, Kansas, men's clothing styles ran to denim trousers with riveted pockets and sport shirts, faded by strong soap and the sun to some indefinite neutral tone. And in Hollisville, men didn't have long yellow hair, cut to resemble a blond Prince Valiant, as I did.

When I was satisfied that I had been seen and would be remembered, I walked to the door of the bank and went inside. It was a small bank, hardly more than thirty feet square. There was a ten-by-fifteen-foot area in front of the three tellers' cages, and the rest of the floor space was taken up by desks and files—and the vault. Two of the tellers' cages were empty, but a woman in her mid-forties was behind the grille of the first cage.

"Mr. Dooley?" I said, following Charlie Miller's instructions to the letter. "I'd like to speak to Mr. Dooley."

She pointed past the last window where a low railing divided the floor. A heavyset man in a dark suit was sitting behind a desk talking to an old man wearing bib overalls. There was an empty wooden bench to the left of the gate in the railing.

"I'm sure Mr. Dooley will see you as soon as he's free," she said.

I followed her finger and took a seat on the bench. There was a sign on the gate reading *Emerson J. Dooley, Pres.* in gold letters. I turned slightly sideways and tried to catch his eye.

Dooley was about thirty-five or forty and about as many pounds overweight. He sat with his suit coat open, his swivel chair tilted back, a cigar between his thick lips, and his thumbs hooked in pockets of his vest, looking every bit like a cartoonist's conception of a crooked politician. He hadn't been able to button the bottom two buttons of the vest, indicating he'd either gained a lot of weight recently or he'd decided today was a good day to wear an old suit. I figured the latter was probably the case.

The farmer Dooley was talking to had stringy white hair and thick-knuckled, hairy, heavy-veined hands. He sat erect on a straight-backed chair beside the desk and conveyed an impression of far more dignity than the banker. In a low voice he was trying to explain why he had to have money for feed or seed—I couldn't quite hear which.

When Dooley noticed me, he cut the man off abruptly and terminated the interview. "Money is tight right now, Mr. Pride. Sorry I can't help you," he said, but he didn't look or sound sorry. He stood up and thrust a pudgy hand toward the farmer.

The man got wearily to his feet and wiped his hand against his overalls before giving it to Dooley. Dooley gave it one quick pump, then turned the man around and propelled him to the gate.

As the farmer moved past me and toward the bank entrance, Dooley turned his attention to me. "Yes?" he asked with his eyebrows raised inquiringly.

"I'm Joe Smith from Wichita," I said, giving the recognition signal.

"Oh, yes! Happy to meet you, Mr. Smith. I've been looking forward to your visit since our telephone conversation. The bank owns many choice properties in this area. I'm sure we'll be able to satisfy you." He spoke loudly for the woman teller's benefit, then addressed himself directly to her. "Hilda, would you mind going to the coffee shop and bringing us some coffee?" To all appearances, he was giving me the VIP treatment.

As soon as Dooley and I were alone, I opened my suit coat and drew my .45 automatic from the waistband of my trousers. I felt better with it in my hand. The hammer was at full-cock, and the manual safety was applied. If I needed the weapon, a flick of the thumb would make it ready for ac-

tion. "Where's the money?" I asked.

"In a canvas sack just inside the vault," he answered. "And be sure to rifle the teller's cage, too."

"Don't worry, I will. Turn around."

He started to turn, then hesitated. "Don't hit me too hard. Just enough to make this look good."

"Yeah, I know. Turn around . . ."

I laid the barrel of the automatic alongside his right ear with a little more force than necessary, then let my wrist bend and raked him with the gunsight, tearing a long gash in his scalp. He fell like a sack of potatoes tumbling from a loading dock, and lay at my feet. I leaned over him and gave him a second kiss with the pistol, this time for the old farmer.

After that, I stepped quickly to the open vault and snatched the canvas money bag from the floor. Without pausing, I moved to the teller's cage, pulled open a few drawers and let them fall to the floor. When I found the currency, I stuffed one of my suit-coat pockets with the larger denominations. Then I ran back around the way I'd come and left the bank, holding the canvas sack and my pistol in the same hand, close to my leg.

There was no one near when I crossed the sidewalk and climbed behind the wheel of the sedan. I placed the pistol and money sack on the seat beside me, put the car in gear, and drove rapidly away, picking up speed as I went. When I reached the spot where the road narrowed to two lanes, I was already doing fifty.

Ordinarily, the bank in Hollisville would have been impossible to rob successfully, even with all the cooperation I had been given. Charlie Miller made the difference. He had devised a perfect escape plan. Hollisville was far too isolated for any of the ordinary getaway procedures, but Miller had fixed it so that the earth would swallow me up—literally.

When I reached a place about six miles out, where the road dipped and Hollisville disappeared from my rear-view mirror, there was still no sign of pursuit. There was, however, a small bridge over a gully that had been cut by a narrow stream. I pumped my brakes and slowed. At the far side of the bridge I could see ruts made by numerous cars pulling across the soft shoulder of the road. I turned and followed them along the edge of the gully.

The normal rainfall throughout most of Kansas isn't enough to sustain trees—that's why the Kansas countryside seems so flat and empty—but I soon came to a small grove of elms nourished by the stream. They were the only trees within miles, and by night the spot was a popular lovers' lane. Now it was deserted except for Charlie Miller, who was parked in the shadow of the trees waiting for me.

I pulled up directly behind Miller's car and got out, carrying the money bag and tucking my pistol into my waistband. Miller

climbed out of his car and got busy attaching his tow-bar to the front of the getaway sedan. I stand five-ten and weigh a hundred and eighty. Miller weighed about the same, but he stood six-four without the high-heeled western boots he always wore, or his high-crowned Stetson. With them he looked like a flagpole without a flag.

I turned back to the sedan and removed the Kansas license tags and replaced them with Texas dealer's plates. When I was finished I joined Miller in the front seat of his car, carrying the Kansas plates and the loot. We drove away, towing the getaway car.

"Everything go all right?" Miller asked, speaking for the first time. We were away from the trees now and traveling along a gravel road between a pair of wheat fields.

I peeled off my suit coat and jammed the long-haired blond wig into one its pockets. I was sweating and the green silk shirt was sticking to my back. I took off the necktie and opened my collar. "Yeah, everything went fine," I answered. "Just the way you said it would."

That's what he wanted to hear and he looked pleased. We were passing a field that was lying fallow. He stopped and gave me a friendly punch on the arm while I gathered up the clothes, Kansas tags, and loot to take with me.

"I'll be back in five days, or as soon after that as it's safe," he said. "Y'all take care."

I got out and stood beside the car, facing him. The seconds seemed to stretch into hours, but I wasn't about to turn my back on him. I'm a lot of things, but I'm not crazy. Finally, he stepped on the accelerator and pulled away. I watched until the two cars were out of sight and the dust cloud they had made had settled. Then I walked into the center of the barren field, pushed aside two dirt-covered boards, and dropped into the hideout we had prepared several days before.

The dugout wasn't very large. In fact, I had been in bigger prison cells. I had all the comforts of home, though, including a radio, a portable TV and cold beer for as long as my ice held out. I'd be able to read, listen to the radio, and watch TV while the search was going on; and no one would come looking for me in the middle of a field where one glance would show them there was nothing to find.

When I pick up a hitchhiker, I don't let him drive; but, in effect, that's what Miller had done. I had the loot. I was in the driver's seat, and he had put me there. The only reason he could have had is that he needed someone to pull the rob-

bery who could never be mistaken for him. Once the robbery was over, however, and I had made my getaway, he didn't really need me anymore. The hole I sat in could easily be converted into a grave.

I decided to sleep by day and stay alert all night just in case Miller planned to return in three or four days instead of waiting five or more. The oldest man I ever knew was also the most careful. There was a lesson there, and I hadn't missed it.

In the meantime, I didn't let speculation about the future keep me from what I had to do in the present. I took off the rest of the clothes I'd worn in the robbery and buried them in a corner of the dugout. Then I put on denims and a sport shirt and got busy counting the loot. There was a little over forty-five thousand dollars. I divided it into three equal shares and put it into three money belts which I strapped on under my shirt. They made a bulge, but it was a comforting one.

One-third of the loot was to be mine. That was the agreement. The rest went to Charlie Miller. It was his plan and he'd participated, so he was entitled to the lion's share—especially so since he had to split with Dooley at the bank. I knew Dooley hadn't cooperated because it was be-kind-to-bank-robbers-week. He expected his cut.

Two days passed, and the search for the bank robber had lost some of its frenzy. There were search parties out, guided by light planes that pointed out likely hiding places for the bandit and his car. All roads out of the county had been closed before the robber could possibly have slipped by, and traffic was being watched carefully. No one doubted that the bandit would be found and the loot recovered. It was just a matter of time.

I had to smile. I was prepared to stay in the dugout for a month, if necessary. No search would last that long. I gave them a week at the outside; after that, they'd start coming up with theories to explain how I had managed to get away.

In the late afternoon of my fourth full day in the hole, the sky grew black, the winds picked up speed, and rain began to shower down in solid sheets. High winds and torrential rain were two things neither Miller nor I had taken into consideration. Soon the loose earth that covered the dugout had been blown and washed away, exposing the boards we'd placed across the top of the hole. Water poured over me, and even the canvas jacket I had on didn't keep me from being drenched to the skin.

In a matter of minutes, my shelter was turned into a hog wallow

and my sleeping bag had disappeared beneath inches of mud. I stuck my head out to look around and the wind chose the same moment to pick up some of the boards that made the roof. One of them struck me in the side of my head, and I fell to my knees, dazed.

When I got to my feet again, the entire roof was gone and the funnel of a tornado was moving toward me across the field. The next thing I knew I had been plucked from the ground like a weed and was sailing through the air. My flight ended abruptly when I crashed against something solid and felt a sharp pain in my right leg.

I came to, lying beside a fence post, probably one of those that surrounded the field I'd been hiding in. The storm had passed and the sky was clear. I could see the light of distant stars like pinholes in a black sheet. My right leg was twisted under me at an impossible angle, throbbing with pain, and I was shivering in my wet clothes.

It took me ten minutes to straighten the leg and position myself on my stomach. I nearly passed out a couple of times, but I had to get myself in a position to travel. I couldn't walk, so the only option I had was to crawl, if I didn't want to stay where I was.

I pulled myself to the gravel road, trying not to think about my bad leg. I had no idea where the nearest farmhouse was, so I turned right and began dragging myself along the shoulder of the road. I was hurt and I needed help. I was too full of pain to think of possible consequences.

There's no telling how far I crawled before I came to a rusted mailbox on a post by the side of the road. Dawn was breaking when I pushed open a gate and started to drag myself across a farmyard toward a dull brown building. There was an orange glow in the building's windows, so I knew whoever lived there was already up and about.

Just as I was about to call out, a large black dog came trotting around the side of the house. He charged for me at a run, barking and growling, and took the cuff of my right trouser leg in his teeth and pulled. The pain was excruciating, but mercifully short-lived because I passed out again.

When I wake up, I do it all at once. There is never a period of grogginess during which I get my bearings. One moment I am asleep; the next, I am completely awake and alert to everything around me. That's the way it has always been, and it has been an asset many times.

This time, however, I would

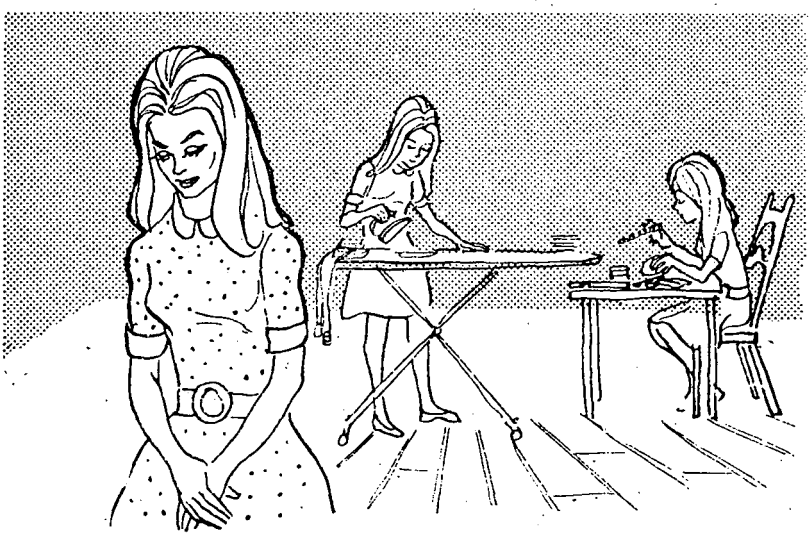
have preferred to have consciousness and awareness return slowly. Instead, I opened my eyes and I was back in the center of the action again without a moment to prepare myself.

I was in a large room in a double bed, naked except for a sheet that covered me. Some kind of splint and cast arrangement had been attached to my right leg. Three teen-aged girls in plain cotton dresses were also in the room. One sat at a small table with gun oil and patches, cleaning my .45 which lay field-stripped in front of her. Another had my money belts and was busy at an ironing board, ironing wet currency to dry it, and she had a stack of smooth, dry bills on one end of the board. The third girl stood beside the bed looking down at me.

All three were obviously sisters. They shared a strong family resemblance of oval faces dotted with freckles, and reddish-bronze hair. They were all about the same height and weight—five-five and a hundred and twenty pounds. They had the healthy appearance usually associated with country life, and if I had to choose one word to describe them it would be "capable." They had wholesome good looks and radiated a strong impression of competence.

"Our bank robber is awake," the girl beside me announced.

The others stopped what they had been doing and came to the bed. They smiled and said "Hi!" as



though we were being introduced at a church supper.

I didn't care for the familiar way they were treating me, my money and my pistol. "Where the hell are my clothes?" I demanded.

"Martha washed them and they're drying," one said, and the girl who had been ironing my money smiled, indicating she was Martha.

I put my hand on my bare chest. "How . . . ? Who . . . ?"

"Grandpa undressed you," Martha said, giggling behind her hand.

"He fixed your leg, too," another offered. "He knows all about animals."

"Animals?"

"People *are* animals, you know," she said defensively.

"Yes, most of the time," I agreed.

There didn't seem to be any alternatives open to me. I lay back against the pillows and relaxed.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"You're going to have to rest and get well," the first girl said. "Then Grandpa will help you leave the county."

It didn't make sense. Even if they were planning to take the loot instead of turning me in, I should have been buried behind the barn, not propped up in bed.

"I'm Judy," the amateur gunsmith said.

"I'm Martha," Martha said.

"I'm Alice," the last one said, then volunteered, "I'm the oldest."

"I'm Pete Spangler," I said, completing the introductions with a name I had pulled out of the air.

Just then there was the distinctive sound of a screen door slamming. A few seconds later a tall old man appeared in the open doorway. It was the farmer who had left the bank just before the robbery, and he seemed pleased to find me awake.

"Howdy, son," he said. "You've been asleep for a day and a half. Feelin' any better?"

It had been a long time since anyone had called me "son," but he was old enough to call almost anyone son and get away with it.

He turned to the girls in mock anger. "What are you three standing around for? Can't you see the man's hungry? Get out in the kitchen and fix him something."

There was the rustle of skirts, then I was alone with the old man.

"First of all, tell me about the robbery," he said.

"First of all, tell me who you are," I countered.

"Why, sure, son. I just thought the girls'd already told you. My name's Pride—Helmann Pride—and those three little girls are my granddaughters. They're fine girls. A real comfort to me."

I looked at my money stacked on

the ironing board and my dismantled pistol on the table nearby. "They may be a comfort to you," I said, "but they're driving me nuts."

He saw where I was looking. "You shouldn't say that, son. They're just tryin' to be helpful. We're all on your side."

"Why?"

"Because we don't like banks. Leastways, we don't like bankers."

I recalled that he had been trying to get a loan from Dooley. I shrugged. "Okay, what do you want to know about the robbery?"

The farmer sat on the edge of the bed. "Did Dooley squeal when you hit him?"

"Like a pig," I answered, telling him what he wanted to hear, and watching him rub his hands together appreciatively.

Then I decided it was my turn to ask questions. "Are you and the girls alone here?"

He nodded. "Their pa, my son, was killed in a tractor accident ten-eleven years ago. Their ma took sick and died a few months later. They've been with me ever since."

"You have a big place here?"

"Pretty big. You need a big farm nowadays."

"But you're having trouble making ends meet."

He nodded again. "But things'll work out," he said confidently. "I don't intend to die until all three of those little girls has gone to college and found a man."

I must have looked puzzled because he said, "I figure I have to send 'em to college. That's the best place for 'em to meet men who'll be able to take care of 'em."

The girls returned with a tray of food and one glance at it made me realize how hungry I was.

The old man disappeared for a few minutes and returned with a pile of newspapers. "Thought you might like to read about yourself," he said.

I read the papers while I ate. The first one was from the day of the robbery. It told how a flashily dressed gunman had held up the bank, brutally beaten banker Dooley and escaped with an undetermined amount of money. The next few papers detailed the efforts made to find the bandit until the tornado took over the front page.

The most recent paper was the real shocker, though. My dugout had been spotted from the air, and a search party had fished from the hole my sleeping bag and the clothes and wig worn in the robbery. The hunt for the bandit was back on the front page.

On page three there was an article telling how a Texas used-car dealer named Charles Miller had been killed in an auto accident. It was easy to imagine what had hap-

pened. He had read about the tornado and was rushing back to see how I'd made out, only in his haste he'd gotten careless and run head-on into a tractor-trailer.

I'd never cheat a partner, not even a snake like Dooley. I was trying to figure a good way to get half of the loot to him, since we two were the only ones left to share, when that became unnecessary. It was soon apparent he wasn't as honest as I was. The newspaper said that the bank examiners had totaled the missing money, and it had come to slightly over ninety thousand dollars. That was twice as much as I had taken, so Dooley already had his share. The bank loot was all mine.

The next day, men from the sheriff's office and the state highway patrol stopped at the farm to ask questions. Their arrival was announced by the black dog that greeted all strangers. Old man Pride and the girls told them they hadn't seen or heard a thing unusual—no strangers had been sighted, no abandoned cars had been found. The men poked around the barn for a few minutes and then left.

Agents of the FBI and the Kansas Bureau of Investigation came a few days later and stayed a few hours longer. They were much more thorough than the first group, but they received the same answers.

The old man invited them into the house for coffee, and I was able to overhear most of the conversation. It gave me a funny feeling to be sitting up in bed with my .45 on the sheet beside me while a few feet away were the people who were hunting for me the hardest. The money belts, stuffed with freshly ironed currency, were on the night stand beside me, so they would have had all the evidence they'd have needed.

When the investigators had left, the girls came to my room followed by their grandfather.

Judy sat on the side of the bed and picked up my pistol. She was the tomboy of the three and knew more about guns and hunting than I did. She weighed the weapon in her hand, then set it down again. "If I ask you a question, Pete, will you answer it?"

"Probably not," I said.

"We'd sure like to know what you did to make your getaway car disappear," Martha said.

"That's right," Alice agreed. "Will you tell us how you did it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a secret." There was nothing to gain by telling them about Miller's trick.

"Aw, you can tell us."

"If I tell, it wouldn't be a secret anymore," I told them.

"Please!"

The old man came to my rescue. "You girls quit bothering Pete. A man has to have some secrets. Now, go on out and take care of your chores."

I wondered how many secrets he had left after raising those girls. Very few of them, was my guess.

Six weeks after I had crawled into the farmyard, old man Pride removed the splints from my leg and I walked again. That night I strapped the money belts around my waist, put on my freshly laundered clothes, and climbed onto the seat beside him in his pickup truck. I wasn't in that big a hurry to leave, but Pride wouldn't have it any other way.

"Now that you're well, I can't have you around anymore," he said. "Those girls like you too much."

He drove me all the way to the bus station in Kansas City. The police had discontinued their roadblocks weeks before, so the trip was uneventful. He parked half a block from the entrance, and I opened my shirt and began to unbuckle one of the belts.

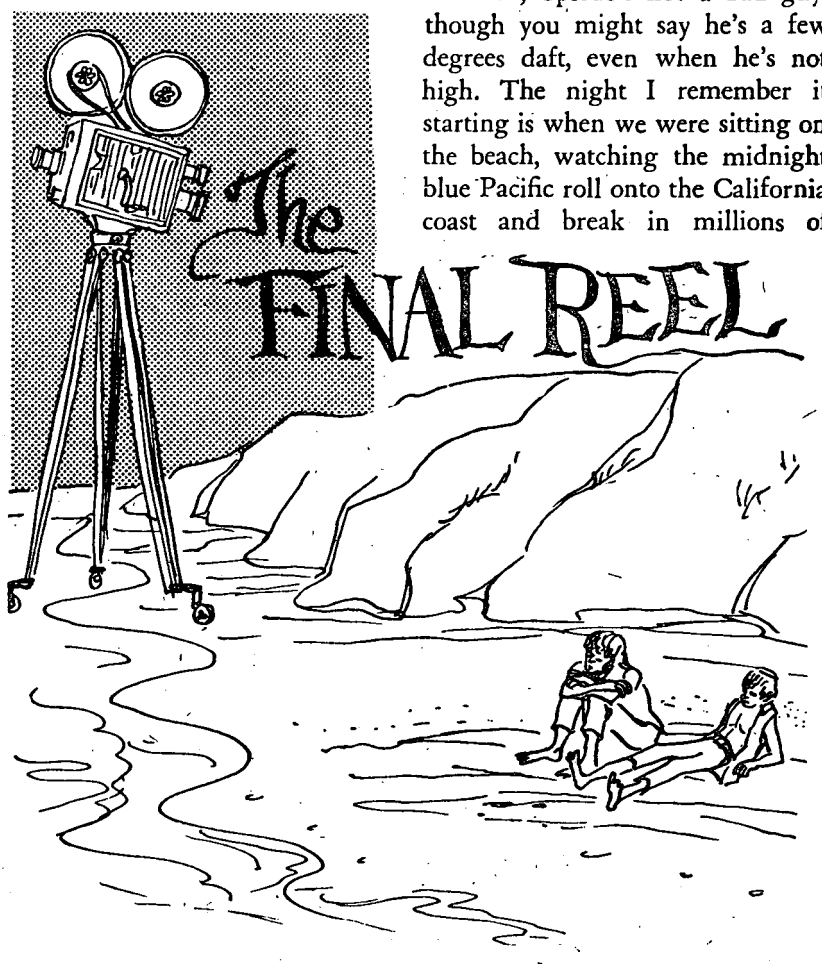
"I want to give you something for all the help you've been, Mr. Pride," I said.

He saw what I was doing and stopped me. "I don't want you to give me anything," he said. He seemed embarrassed. I tried to force the belt on him, but when I saw he really didn't want it, I stopped.

After checking into a hotel in St. Louis, I found out why he'd been embarrassed. I discovered that two of the money belts were stuffed with newspaper cut to the proper size. I'd have been embarrassed, too, if someone had offered to give me something I'd already stolen.

I was only slightly angry, though, and even that soon passed. Horses come in herds, wolves in packs, birds in flocks; but with lions you have a pride—a pride of lions. When I had time to think about it, I was pleased that old Helmann Pride had taken the lion's share. It seemed fitting, and he'd put it to good use.

Sometimes the games people play can be just a mite dangerous.



The FINAL REEL

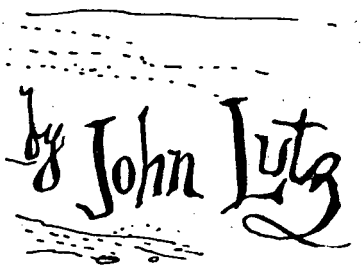
I MEAN, Spiedo's not a bad guy, though you might say he's a few degrees daft, even when he's not high. The night I remember it starting is when we were sitting on the beach, watching the midnight blue Pacific roll onto the California coast and break in millions of

white bubbles. Spiedo was coming down from wherever his pills had taken him, and he was sitting with his lean body doubled, his arms folded and resting on his drawn-up knees, his chin resting on his arms. He was looking out to sea.

"Pretty, isn't it?" I said, staring out in the same vague direction.

Spiedo shrugged, the night sea breeze whipping his beard. "Not when you stop to think about it," he said. "It's like a lot of other things, pretty until you stop and think what they're doing. That ocean's eating away at the shore, devouring it—that ocean's chawin' up California! If you look close you can see the teeth!"

I didn't pay much attention to this kind of talk. Spiedo talked like that a lot when he was coming back down, and he was always seeing teeth in the most unlikely places. Sometimes he'd swear something was going to attack him, and he'd strike first and hurt whatever or whoever it was. On some days



that was Spiedo, lean, hairy and mean.

I'd met Spiedo in Frisco, where he was living at a place called Zodiac Manor, a run-down pad shared by two dozen freaks and visited by the cops once a week. We both decided we didn't like it there, so we packed our nothings and moved out to the L. A. area. But now we were tired of that action too.

Something white was skittering down the deserted beach toward us, sailing and soaring low over the sand in a zigzagging kind of way. It startled both of us for a moment, though I don't know why, because when it got closer we saw it was just a half-folded sheet of newspaper. As it passed, Spiedo raised his foot and brought his heel down hard on the paper, pinning it into the sand as if he wanted it to feel pain. He sat for a while staring down at it, then he raised his foot and looked back out to sea while the sheet of paper spread like a sail to the wind and with a crinkling sound soared away behind and beyond us.

"I've got an idea for us," Spiedo said, running his fingertips through his long hair as if there was shampoo on his head.

"My ears are aimed at you," I told him.

"Stamps and curios," he said.

"Why not?" I tell him agreeably.

Spiedo straightened and fell backward to lie in the sand beneath the thousand bright stars. "You hear of King Murdoch?"

"Sure," I said, "the movie villain . . . real cornball."

"Used to be a leading man," Spiedo said. "Got all the girls. Now he's got all the loot."

"So?"

"So he put it all in a stamp collection and curios, little salable things, and yesterday he went to Europe."

"How do you know?"

"The paper tells me so."

That's what I mean about Spiedo being a few degrees daft, but only a few degrees. He'd read that paper by moonlight while I thought he was just sitting there coming down. There was always a half of Spiedo doing something you wouldn't expect.

"You want to steal his stamps and curios while he's gone," I said.

Spiedo nodded. "Sure. We find out where he lives, break in and take our share. Like that politician's place in Frisco, where we stole all that whiskey."

I remembered that and a few other places we'd broken into. "I don't know," I said, thinking about what Spiedo carried taped to the inside of his thigh.

"It's settled then," Spiedo said. "We go over the top tomorrow night for fun and profit. Man, that's an unbeatable combination!"

"Okay," I said, caught by Spiedo's exuberance. "We get the address tomorrow and creep."

"Look out there, Graham," Spiedo said suddenly, raising his head. He was pointing to some lights far out to sea. "Some crud rolling in green with his own yacht. Some crud with five bank accounts while most of us got nothing! That makes me sicker than a maggot!"

"How do you know it's not just a fishing boat or something?" I asked.

"I *know*!" Spiedo said, and his face was caught in the moonlight.

We sat for a while longer before Spiedo sighed, unfolded to his feet and brushed himself with stiffened fingers.

"In the meantime," he said, staring out at the ocean again, "let's find some place else to sleep. There are things moving in this sand."

I stood and the two of us walked up the beach toward our jalopy, the sea breeze gluing our clothes to our backs, gently pushing us away.

We found out where King Murdoch lived easy enough from one of those guided-tour places. They even showed us a picture of the

place, a huge mansion-like spread, located way out in the valley, lost and secluded. You should have seen Spiedo's eyes when he saw that picture. Break a needle in me if that wasn't a quarter of a million dollar pad! Only old, and fenced off all around with plenty of hedges and big trees you wouldn't expect to see growing there. All in all just the kind of place for what we had in mind. There and then I figured the whole thing just might work.

"What if there's a caretaker or somebody?" I asked Spiedo when we left the tour place.

"Caretaker?"

"Yeah, somebody King Murdoch left to watch the place. You don't just leave a pad like that and go flying off to Europe."

"You don't know these people," Spiedo assured me as we crossed the street quickly against the light. "Money's not to them what it is to you and me. Anyway, he's not flying, he's taking a slow steamship."

I felt even better then. That made it all the safer.

"Besides," Spiedo said, loping along the sidewalk, "big as that place is, he'd have to have a dozen caretakers to catch us creeping in and out."

So that evening we siphoned some gas from a gentleman's car and with our tank three quarters full we headed our bundle of dents out toward the valley. I can see it like I was looking out the windshield now, at the clouds way ahead of us, all low-hanging and purple because the sun had just set, and the way the land rolled, stretching away from us all different colors. I remember thinking it was beautiful. Lord, you can bet I wish now we'd never made that trip!

But that night I felt good, scared good, with my blood racing through my body and my mind burning like a Fourth of July sparkler.

King Murdoch's pad was secluded, nothing but secluded—and it was dark. There was a low brick wall covered with vines that ran all the way around the property, and there was some kind of iron railing on top of that. Spiedo pulled the car under some trees and doused the headlights and we looked closer at the place. It was two stories, built on a little rise, and the gables of the top story seemed real high against the sky that was almost completely black now. We waited there, watching, until well after midnight.

"There's nothing stirring there," Spiedo said, rubbing his beard. "If we're gonna do it let's go now."

I didn't answer as I got out of the car on my side and left the

door open an inch or so. I'd noticed that the long-bladed knife Spiedo usually carried taped to his leg was tucked in his belt now. There never had been anybody home when we'd made our earlier raids, but Spiedo always carried the knife. I knew that he really wanted somebody to be home . . . and that was the thing I dreaded.

I followed his sandaled footsteps across the black lawn and quickly, without the slightest hesitation, we scaled the brick wall, then the iron rail, and dropped down on the other side. Spiedo was breathing hard, and by what light there was I could see he was grinning.

"Like a big cherry," he said, "just waiting to be plucked."

I followed him toward the dark shape of the house and up a terrace onto a big patio. Off to our left I could barely make out a bathhouse and the glistening dark water of a wide swimming pool. The high-diving board towered over it like a scaffold.

With a quick glance around into the night, Spiedo used the handle of his knife to punch out a pane of glass in a French window. He reached through the broken pane and twisted the latch. Quickly, as if we were trying to get out of the rain or something, we stepped inside the house.

It was nothing but dark. Spiedo and I both reached into our pockets at the same time and brought out our little pen-lights that sent bright slim beams through the blackness.

"Okay, Graham," Spiedo said in an excited voice, "let's look around for that stamp collection."

He didn't mention the curios because we could see some of them in the beams of our lights: a dozen or so little figures on a wide shelf, mostly dwarfs and misshapen glass animals. As I followed Spiedo out of that room and into a long hall I felt the uneasiness for the first time. Looking back on it I think it was because it struck me there how smooth everything was turning out.

"Hey," Spiedo said, "we can turn on a light. There's nobody for a thousand miles."

He flicked the light switch of the room we'd just entered. It was a tremendous room, with some more curios in a big glass-fronted case. A high old secretary desk stood in one corner, with fancy carved bookshelves that would have almost reached the ceiling of an ordinary-sized room.

"Okay," Spiedo said, "let's find the stamps, then look around for whatever else we want."

"The stamps are upstairs in a safe," a voice said behind us.

I can tell you we both froze, I

mean cold! What was going on?

We turned around slow, and my whole body shook for a moment. It was King Murdoch, wearing a red dinner jacket, standing in the doorway and smiling that villainous smile that I remembered him smiling out of the big screen at me since I was a kid. And he was holding in his right hand, of all things, a long sword that made Spiedo's knife look good for nothing but spreading butter.

"We, uh, were just looking around . . ." Spiedo said.

"No," Murdoch said in a friendly voice, "you came to rob and pillage because you thought I was in Europe and the house was deserted. The 'European trip' item always draws people like you."

"I don't get you," Spiedo said, recovering some of his cool. "We knocked on the door, and when nobody answered we just came in to look around. Thought the place was abandoned or something."

"Don't waste our time with elaborate deceptions," King Murdoch said in his best Hollywood manner. "We've been expecting you—or someone like you."

"We?" I asked, finding my voice for the first time.

Then somebody came into the room behind King Murdoch and I almost dropped over. It was Otto Koph, the famous movie villain who usually played Nazi generals. Then four or five more people walked into the room, all of them with faces I remembered from some long ago leering at me from the big screen. There was Basil Kane, fat Roger Spade, and Gorvana, to name the ones I recognized within a few minutes. Gorvana kind of threw me with her bony vampire-like face because she was just standing there chewing gum, which I never saw her do in any of her horror movies.

Otto Koph was wearing a long, dark dressing gown, and he drew a gun out of one of the pockets and pointed it at us. "They'll do nicely," he said in his guttural snarl. Gorvana looked right at me with her starving smile and the whites of her eyes showing all around her pupils. She didn't have to snarl to scare me.

Four of the men moved in on us, and before Spiedo or I could even put up a struggle our hands were tied behind our backs and we were sitting on a long sofa with our ankles tied to the legs.

"What right you got to do this?" Spiedo asked in a squeaky voice. "What's going on at this pad?"

"You might say we have a little club," King Murdoch said with his famous leering grin. "Every so often we place small clues in the newspapers that might attract

someone like you to a big, rich, empty house."

"You mean all you movie stars are in this together?" I asked incredulously.

"Oh, no, no," Murdoch said. "Let's not give Hollywood a bad name. Only eight of us old-timers are in the club, all famous villains if I do say so myself." He turned casually to present his best profile. "Though I dare say at one time I had other roles, romantic ones."

"Okay," Spiedo said, "so what do you do now that you got us here? Call the men in blue?"

"Hah!" Otto Koph said thickly. "What we do is play our little game. That is what the club is all about."

"Game?" I could hear the edge of fear in my voice. Basil Kane was staring at me with his deep-set eyes, and Gorvana was smiling and

chewing rhythmically. Gruesome!

"Have you ever wondered," King Murdoch asked, "how often we have had to die on the screen? Between us we have met terrible deaths a hundred and forty-nine times, while the hero or heroine lived on to reap the rewards."

"Do you realize, young man, how sick we get of that?" Otto Koph asked.

"So?" Spiedo said, and I marveled at his insolence.

"So we formed this little club," King Murdoch said, "where, before the cameras, we recreate certain of our least favorite scenes—only this time we play slightly different roles in those scenes."

My body began to tremble. I could remember seeing stakes driven through Gorvana's heart at least three times.

"Hey, get serious," Spiedo said. "You can't mean what I think you mean. You can't!"

But they were ignoring us now, talking, as they say, animatedly among themselves like at one of those Hollywood parties you see films of. Several of them went to a small bar in a corner where fat Roger Spade was mixing drinks.

"I say let's roll the dice now," Otto Koph was saying to Basil Kane.

Kane flashed his famous lopsided sneer. "I'm ineligible this time. I won last time," he added gleefully.

"That's right," a familiar face I couldn't quite match with a name said brightly, "the French revolution scene with the guillotine!"

Basil Kane smiled broadly. "From *The Iron Lady*, 1945. One of my big money-makers."

"Waldo Jacobson directed that one, didn't he?" a voice asked.

"Yes, indeed," Basil Kane said, "a fine director."

"Most underrated," King Murdoch said. "He directed me in *The Walking Head*."

"Enough of this," Otto Koph insisted. "Let us roll the dice." He looked at me with a look I can never forget.

A chorus of voices sounded agreement, and everyone went to a small felt-covered table near the center of the room. Spiedo and I listened to the clatter of dice and the buzz of excited voices for about fifteen minutes.

Then all of them walked toward us, most of them smiling.

"I won," King Murdoch said, raising his martini glass in triumph. He pointed to Spiedo. "I choose the tall one, and the scene will be the last part of *Blood on the Caribbean*!"

"A great choice!" Otto Koph said, as the protesting Spiedo was yanked to his feet.

"Costumes!" the heavyset Roger

Spade yelled. "Let's get the pirate costumes!" He and the familiar face ran off together through a door at the far end of the room.

"Don't worry, honey," Gorvana whispered in my ear. "We won't forget about you."

I could tell by her voice she was drunk, and as she straightened, one of her metal snake bracelets dropped from her bony wrist onto the sofa next to me. I moved over so my body hid the coiled strip of silver and watched them lead the horrified Spiedo toward the door at the far end of the room. King Murdoch followed, leaving only Gorvana behind to watch me. While she stared at me, popping her gum, I worked the edge of the silver bracelet against the ropes binding my wrists. How many times in his earlier movies had I seen King Murdoch scraping objects against the ropes that bound *his* wrists?

The rope was frayed and almost ready to give when they all walked back into the room, so I stopped and sat perfectly still. King Murdoch was dressed in a flamboyant pirate outfit, and Spiedo, looking terrified and helpless, was dressed in a similar outfit, only not quite so dashing. I have to admit with his beard and all, he looked a lot like a real pirate.

"Remember *Blood on the Caribbean*?" King Murdoch asked. "How they made me walk the plank in the last reel, with all the gold strapped to me and with those big heavy boots that filled with water?"

I looked and with a sudden jolt of fear saw the heavy-looking sacks hanging from Spiedo's sewn-on belt, and he had on heavy, flare-top boots.

"To the swimming pool!" King Murdoch cried.

"To the pool!" Otto Koph echoed gaily, tossing down the rest of his drink and hurling the glass into the fireplace like he did in *Russian Winters*.

Spiedo glanced once over his shoulder at me, like I could help him, as they shoved him out through a door onto the patio.

"Come, Gorvana!" King Murdoch motioned with a swashbuckling wave of his laced arm. "The other one will keep."

Gorvana smiled at me and kind of danced after the others and I was alone, working desperately at the ropes that bound me.

I could hear snatches of conversation from the direction of the pool: "Set the lights up over there!" "I think this angle is best!" "Only one take, remember!" Laughter, and the sound of some kind of equipment being moved. Then the rope gave!

Frantically I untied the rope around my ankles, then made my way out of the room and back to the French windows where we'd broken in. As I slipped out into the night I heard someone call "Action!" and I peered through the hedges as I moved, crouching, away.

The area around the pool was brightly lighted, and where before I had heard voices there was now a deathly silence. Then I crouched even lower as I looked up and saw Spiedo and King Murdoch on the high diving board. Spiedo was facing Murdoch, his back to the pool and the end of the board, and both of them were holding swords.

"You've pillaged your last ship!" King Murdoch yelled in a clear and vibrant voice, and the minute they started dueling I saw that Spiedo's sword was rubber.

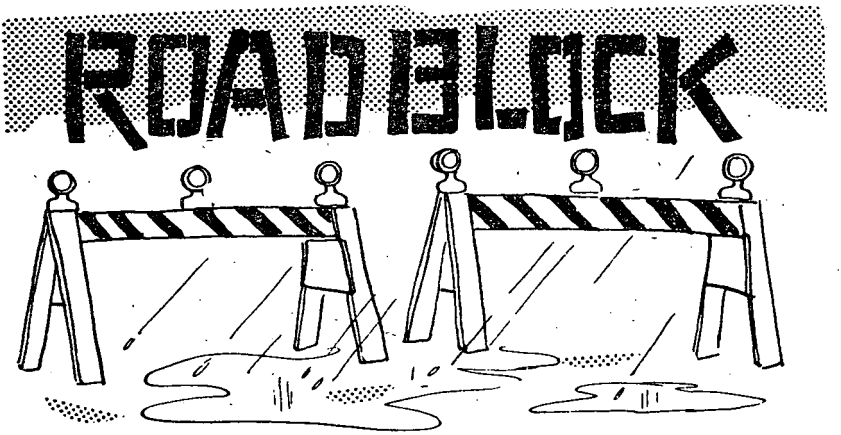
Just before I let myself slide down the terrace and run for the car I stopped to look behind me. Spiedo was flailing away desperately with the bendable sword, with only the toes of his massive boots clinging to the edge of the board. Suddenly King Murdoch lunged dramatically. I think the tip of his sword probably only pricked Spiedo's skin, but he was forced to step backward off the diving board. His scream ended in a splash as the weighted sacks and heavy costume must have dragged him to the bottom like he was made of lead. I heard King Murdoch yell something else as I ran for the car, and there was a generous round of applause.

Sometimes now when I'm asleep I see Gorvana smiling and chewing gum as she leans over me with a sharp-pointed wooden stake and a huge mallet. The mallet rises, falls! I try to move but I'm tied down, I'm tied *down*! There is a terrible sound I can't describe and then that same round of enthusiastic but polite applause and I'm awake, sweating like I never sweated.

I've thought of telling somebody about the whole thing, like the police, but then I'd be implicating myself in a crime. Anyway, nobody'd believe me—nobody! Except maybe you . . .

Everything can be put to some good use, it is said—even an ill wind.

ROADBLOCK



IT WAS NEAR MIDNIGHT, with heavy rain shining like sheets of cellophane food-wrap in the glare of the pickup's headlights, when we came on the roadblock.

They had it set up maybe fifty yards beyond a sharp bend, so that you didn't see it until you were starting out of the curve. There were two county patrol cruisers drawn into a V facing north, toward us, and two more twenty yards on the other side, V'd south. They had all the headlamps on, with the beams crossing one another like searchlights coning holes in the wet blackness of the night. In the center of the rough diamond fashioned by the four cruisers, I could see a couple of big wooden sawhorse barricades topped with flashing red blinkers.

I touched the brake easy, and we started coasting down. The kid slid over a little on the seat and put the hunting knife hard up against my rib cage. He said, "Damn! Now you say the wrong thing and I'll cut you, mister. They'll get me, but I'll cut you good before they do."

I turned my head briefly to look at him. His face, in the pale light from the dash, was starkly white; three or four days of stubble

flecked his chin and cheeks. He wasn't a kid, really, but he gave that impression—big and gangling, with a shock of dark hair that came down low over his forehead. He was dressed in a muddy pair of denims and a leather jacket and high-lace boots. He looked like he'd dropped off one of the freights that ran regularly through the swamp country a couple of miles to the west.

He'd hijacked me fifteen minutes before, four miles from Baldwin Corners. The storm had been raging for three days now, and parts of the road were flooded badly. I had been forced to slow

down to a crawl to negotiate a three-hundred yard area, because the lake-like expanse of water could have been as deep as two or three feet—there was no way of telling. The next thing I knew, the door on the passenger side of the pickup was being jerked open and the kid was there, sliding across the seat with the double-edged hunting knife in his right hand, telling me to keep my mouth shut and start driving.

I hadn't had much choice. I cleared the bad area and held the speed at a steady forty, wondering why the kid had commandeered me and the pickup, what it was he had done or was running from. He looked a little funny in the eyes, and I could feel my chest knotting up. I kept my mouth shut, all right; there was no telling what he might do with that knife.

Now I brought the pickup to a standstill ten yards from the V'd cruisers. There was a small area off on the right where you could swing around after you'd been cleared, but a patrolman in a black rain-slicker was standing there now with his hands hidden beneath the oilskin. I had the thought that he was holding a gun in one of them. I was having trouble breathing.

The front doors of one of the cruisers opened, and two more pa-

trolmen in similar slickers got out and came over to the pickup. One of them moved to one side through the slashing rain, keeping out of the headlight glare, and stood in the darkness watching us. The other came over to my window, carrying a six-cell flashlight.

I wound the glass down, and he clicked the flash on and put it inside the cab. I squinted against the brightness and put on as much of a puzzled smile as I could manage. "What seems to be the trouble, Officer?" My voice sounded strained in my ears.

"Where you heading?" he asked. His face, beneath the slicker's hood, was moon-shaped, grim and wary-eyed.

"Over to Sumner," I said.

"Not much happening in Sumner this time of night."

"That's a fact," I admitted, "but the passenger limited is due in from the capital at midnight, and I'm picking up my wife. Her ma took sick last week, and Anna's been caring for her."

He nodded. "What's your name?"

"Ben Mason."

"Got your driver's license?"

"Sure," I said. I dug in my hip pocket and took out my wallet, opening it as I held it up. He put the flash on it, nodded again, and then took the light off and let it fall on the kid. The kid wet his lips, tensed, holding the knife out of sight along his right leg, between there and the door.

The patrolman said, "Who's this?"

"My nephew, Gene," I answered quickly.

"He live on Grange Road, too?"

"With Anna and me."

"Grange Road's on the outskirts of Baldwin Corners, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"Don't suppose you saw a sign of anyone since you been out tonight."

"How so?"

"Prowling the roads, maybe hitchhiking."

I took a breath. "Can't say that I did," I told him. An idea had gotten into my head, but the thought of it started sweat flowing all along my body. Still, I knew I was going to try it; I kept thinking about that knife the kid had.

My left hand was resting on my thigh, and I began to move it slowly over and back to the door release lever, a fraction of an inch at a time. I said, trying to keep my voice steady, "Why the roadblock, Officer? What's happened?"

"Man was hit on the head and robbed in Baldwin Corners maybe three hours ago," the patrolman answered. "Diamond salesman from Chicago, passing through on his

way south. Guy who did it must have known the salesman's route, or been following him from Chicago, and figured Baldwin Corners was a good place to make his hit when the salesman stopped for the night. He got away with better than twenty thousand in uncut stones."

"Do you know who the robber is?"

"No, not yet," the patrolman said, "but it was one man, alone, driving a stolen sedan he had parked in back of the motel where the salesman was staying. He used a lead-weighted sap, but he didn't do such a thorough job. The salesman regained consciousness and started screaming, and that brought the motel manager and a few guests running, and the robber escaped through the rear. Nobody got much of a look at him, not even the salesman. We've had six different descriptions from six different witnesses."

I had my little finger on the door release now. I had to keep the patrolman talking. "Well, how come you're stopping regular traffic if this robber is driving a stolen sedan?"

"He isn't driving it anymore," he said. "We found it abandoned in a clump of trees not twenty minutes after he took off from the motel; threw a rod, nice as you please. No houses, nothing in the general vicinity of where we found the car, so we know he had to be on foot at least for a while—but that doesn't mean he couldn't have stolen another car or kidnapped somebody by pretending to be a hitchhiker."

"Man," I breathed softly, but I could feel my muscles cording tensely now. I had gotten all of my left hand on that door release, and my fingers closed tightly around it. All I had to do was shove it down, but I had no way of knowing how fast the kid was with his knife. I knew that he had been watching me closely the whole time I had been talking to the patrolman.

"Listen, Uncle Ben, maybe we'd better get going, huh?" the kid said suddenly. There was an edge of nervousness to his voice. "I mean, if the officer says it's okay. We got to pick up Aunt—"

He never finished it. As he talked, his eyes had flicked from me to the patrolman to see how he was reacting to the words, and that was all the opening I needed. I jammed the release down and pitched the full weight of my body against the door. It swung outward instantly, slamming the patrolman backward and down on the rain-puddled roadbed. I hit the pavement on my left shoulder and rolled and kept on rolling, yelling

the whole time, yelling with everything I had. "That's him, the man you want! He jumped into my truck with a knife! That's him!"

Everything seemed to happen at once. I rolled right off the road and over the side embankment, checking myself and pulling my head around so that I could see the pickup. The kid was half out of the open driver's door, and he had the hunting knife in his hand. Lying on his side on the roadbed, the moon-faced patrolman was digging for his service revolver from under his slicker, swinging the flashlight up with his other hand. Then two other six-cells snapped on, and doors on the cruisers were flying open, and men were shouting, running through the hammering rain.

The kid jumped out, finally, and stood at the side of the pickup looking wildly around him, still holding the hunting knife. The moon-faced patrolman fired twice from the hip, and the one on the other side had come running around to the front to fire a third shot. The kid went down and stayed there.

I took a deep breath and got slowly to my feet. The officers were grouping around the kid, looking down at him, and I went over there and stood next to the moon-faced one. I said in a shaky voice, "He slipped into my pickup when I slowed for a flooded section of roadway a few miles back. He put that knife on me and told me to shut up and just keep driving. He had a funny look in his eyes."

The patrolman nodded grimly. "Took a lot of guts to come out of that cab the way you just did, Mr. Mason." He put a hand on my shoulder. "He could have stuck you easy enough."

"The way his eyes looked, that's what he was planning on doing later anyway," I said. "I figured the odds were a hell of a lot better right here."

One of the other patrolmen dropped down beside the kid's body and searched him. "Nothing," he said. "No sign of the diamonds—not even a wallet. Pockets are clean."

The moon-faced patrolman said, "Take a look through the truck, Gil," and then, to me, "He have anything with him when he jumped you?"

"Nothing."

The one named Gil went through the pickup with his flashlight and came back shaking his head. The moon-faced patrolman asked me, "You remember exactly where he hijacked you?"

"Sure," I said, and I told him the location.

"He must have stashed the gems somewhere in the area, then. We'll

send a search party out when this damn rain lets up some."

They got a blanket from one of the cruisers and put it over the kid's body. Then one of them used his two-way, and I could hear him telling the county substation at Baldwin Corners that they'd caught the diamond thief and to send out an ambulance.

The moon-faced patrolman and I got into his cruiser, and I gave him a statement and signed it. Then I said, "Would it be all right if I went on to Sumner now? It's past midnight, and my wife's going to be at the station all alone, wondering what's happened to me and fretting to beat the devil. Besides that, I could sure use a drink. My nerves are still pretty twisted up."

"Sure, you go ahead," he said. "We'll be in touch if we need you again."

I thanked him and got into the pickup and eased it around the roadblock. Then I was pulling away, into the swallowing darkness and rain. It was five miles before I could breathe normally, and the tightness went out of my body.

I still couldn't believe I'd pulled it off—not the way tonight had gone.

First, I hadn't hit that salesman hard enough and he'd come to and started screaming. Then the damned sedan broke down, and I'd had to abandon it. Finally, after I'd stumbled across half a dozen fields before coming to a farmhouse, and then tied up and gagged the real Ben Mason before stealing his wallet and his pickup, that fool kid with the hunting knife had come out of nowhere.

I wondered again if he was running from something, and if so, what he'd done; or if maybe he was just a transient gone berserk. But it didn't make any difference now. One thing I knew for sure: he would have used that knife on me, sooner or later. That's why I had done what I did, taking that crazy chance back at the roadblock. Like I'd told the moon-faced patrolman, the odds were a hell of a lot better right there.

Even with twenty thousand dollars in uncut diamonds taped like a money belt around my middle.

In this complex and demanding world, would it be unseemly to suggest that one might become so engulfed by a role that he loses himself?

YOU ASK the impossible, gentlemen. I cannot name the greatest Hamlet.

In fifty years as a drama critic, I've seen them all—Barrymore, Gielgud, Howard, Redgrave, Olivier, Burton and a dozen more. I've seen the play in cut and uncut versions, in modern dress, in military uniform. There's been a black Hamlet, a female Hamlet, and I shouldn't be surprised to learn of a hippie Hamlet today, but I wouldn't presume to select the greatest portrayal of the role, or the greatest version of the play.

On the other hand, if you want to know about the most memorable performance *in* Hamlet, that's another story . . .

The Roaring Twenties are only a murmuring echo in our ears now, but once I heard them loud and clear. As a young man I was in the very center of their pandemonium—Chicago; the Chicago

of Hecht and MacArthur, of Bodenheim, Vincent Starrett and all the rest. Not that I traveled in such exalted company; I was only the second-string theatrical critic for a second-string paper, but I saw the plays and the players, and in

by Robert Bloch

that pre-depression era there was much to see. Shakespeare was a standby with the stars who travelled with their own repertory companies—Walter Hampden, Fritz Leiber, Richard Barrett. It was Barrett, of course, who played Hamlet.

If the name doesn't ring a bell today, it's not surprising. For some years it had evoked only the faintest tinkle in the hinterlands, where second-rate tragedians played their one-night stands "on the road," but then, for the first time, Richard Barrett brought his production to the big time, and in Chicago he really rang the bell.

He didn't have Hampden's voice, or Leiber's theatrical presence, and he didn't need such qualities; Barrett had other attributes. He was tall, slender, with a handsome profile, and although he was over thirty he looked leanly youthful in tights. In those days, actors like Barrett were called matinee idols, and the women adored them. In

Chicago, they loved Richard Barrett.

I discovered that for myself during my first meeting with him.

Frankly, I hadn't been much taken with his performance when I saw it. To me, Barrett was, as they said of John Wilkes Booth, more acrobat than actor. Physically, his Hamlet was superb, and his appearance lent visual conviction to a role usually played by puffy, potbellied, middle-aged men. But his reading was all emotion and no intellect; he ranted when he should have reflected, wailed when he should have whispered. In my review I didn't go so far as to say he was a ham, but I admit I suggested he might be more at home in the stockyards than the theatre.

Naturally, the ladies weren't pleased with my remarks. They wrote indignant letters to the editor, demanding my scalp or other portions of my anatomy by return mail, but instead of firing me, my boss suggested I interview Richard Barrett in person. He was hoping, of course, for a follow-up story to help build the paper's circulation.

I wasn't hoping for much of anything except that Barrett wouldn't punch me in the jaw.

We met by appointment for luncheon at Henrici's; if I was to have my jaw punched I might at least get a good meal on the expense account before losing the ability to swallow. As it turned out, I needn't have worried. Richard Barrett was most amiable when we met, and highly articulate.

As the luncheon progressed, each course was seasoned by his conversation. Over the appetizer he discussed Hamlet's father's ghost. With the salad he spoke of poor Ophelia. Along with the entree he served up a generous portion of opinion regarding Claudius and Gertrude, plus a side-order of Polonius. Dessert was topped with a helping of Horatio, and coffee and cigars were accompanied by a dissertation on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Then, settling back in his chair, the tall Shakespearean actor began to examine the psychology of Hamlet himself. What did I think of the old dispute, he demanded. Was it true that the Prince of Denmark, the melancholy Dane, was mad?

It was a question I was not prepared to answer. All I knew, at this point, was that Richard Barrett himself was mad—quite mad.

All that he said made sense, but he said too much. His intensity of interest, his total preoccupation, indicated a fanatic fixation.

Madness, I suppose, is an occupational hazard with all actors. "Real-

izing" the character, "losing oneself" in a role, can be dangerous, and of all the theatrical roles in history, Hamlet is the most complex and demanding. Actors have quit in the midst of successful runs rather than run the risk of a serious breakdown by continuing. Some performers have actually been dragged offstage in the middle of a scene because of their condition, and others have committed suicide. *To be or not to be* is more than a rhetorical question.

Richard Barrett was obsessed by matters extending far beyond the role itself. "I know your opinion of my work," he said, "but you're wrong. Completely wrong. If only I could make you understand . . ." He stared at me, and beyond me, his vision fixed on something far away—far away and long ago.

"Fifteen years," he murmured. "Fifteen years I've played the part. Played it? I've lived it, ever since I was a raw youngster in my teens. And why not? Hamlet was only a youngster himself—we see him grow to maturity before our very eyes as the play goes on. That's the secret of the character."

Barrett leaned forward. "Fifteen years." His eyes narrowed. "Fifteen years of split-weeks in tank towns; vermin in the dressing rooms, and vermin in the audiences too. What did they know of the terrors and the triumphs that shake men's souls? Hamlet is a locked room containing all the mysteries of the human spirit. For fifteen years I've sought the key. If Hamlet is mad, then all men are mad, because all of us search for a key that reveals the truth behind the mysteries. Shakespeare knew it when he wrote the part. I know it now when I play it. There's only one way to play Hamlet—not as a role, but as reality."

I nodded. There was a distorted logic behind what he said; even a madman knows enough to tell a hawk from a handsaw, though both the hawk's beak and the saw's teeth are equally sharp.

"That's why I'm ready now," Barrett said. "After fifteen years of preparation, I'm ready to give the world the definitive Hamlet. Next month I open on Broadway."

Broadway? This prancing, posturing nonentity playing Shakespeare on Broadway in the wake of Irving, Mansfield, Mantell and Forbes-Robertson?

"Don't smile," Barrett murmured. "I know you're wondering how it would be possible to mount a production, but that's all been arranged. There are others who believe in the Bard as I do; perhaps you've heard of Mrs. Myron McCullough?"

It was an idle question; everyone

in Chicago, knew the name of the wealthy widow whose late husband's industrial fortune had made her a leading patron of the arts.

"She has been kind enough to take an interest in the project," Barrett told me. "With her backing—"

He broke off, glancing up at the figure approaching our table; a curved, voluptuously slender figure that bore no resemblance to that of the elderly Mrs. Myron McCullough.

"What a pleasant surprise—" he began.

"I'll bet," said the woman. "After you stood me up on our lunch date."

She was young, and obviously attractive; perhaps a bit too obviously, because of her heavy makeup and the extreme brevity of her short-skirted orange dress.

Barrett met her frown with a smile as he performed the introductions. "Miss Goldie Connors," he said. "My protégée."

The name had a familiar ring, and then, as she grinned at me in greeting, I saw the glint of her left upper incisor—a gold tooth.

I'd heard about that gold tooth from fellow reporters. It was well-known to gentlemen of the press, and gentlemen of the police force, and gentlemen of Capone's underworld, and to many others, not necessarily gentlemen, who had enjoyed the pleasure of Goldie Connors' company. Gold-tooth Goldie had a certain reputation in the sporting world of Chicago, and it wasn't as a protégée.

"Pleased to meetcha," she told me. "Hope I'm not butting in."

"Do sit down." Barrett pulled out a chair for her. "I'm sorry about the mix-up. I meant to call."

"I'll bet." Goldie gave him what in those days was described as a dirty look. "You said you were gonna rehearse me—"

Barrett's smile froze as he turned to me. "Miss Connors is thinking of a theatrical career. I think she has certain possibilities."

"Possibilities?" Goldie turned to him quickly. "You promised! You said you'd give me a part, a good part. Like what's-her-name—Ophelia?"

"Of course." Barrett took her hand. "But this is neither the time nor the place—"

"Then you better make the time and find a place! I'm sick and tired of getting the runaround, understand?"

I didn't know about Barrett, but I understood one thing. I rose and nodded. "Please excuse me. I'm due back at the office. Thank you for the interview."

"Sorry you have to leave." Barrett wasn't sorry at all; he was

greatly relieved. "Will there be a story, do you think?"

"I'm writing one," I said. "The rest is up to my editor. Read the paper."

I did write the story, stressing in particular the emphasis Barrett placed on realism. BARRETT PROMISES REAL HAMLET FOR BROADWAY was my heading, but not my editor's.

"Old lady McCullough," he said. "That's your story!" And he rewrote it, with a new heading: MRS. MYRON McCULLOUGH TO FINANCE BARRETT'S BROADWAY BOW.

That's how it was printed, and that's how Richard Barrett read it. He wasn't the only one; the story created quite a stir. Mrs. McCullough was news in Chicago.

"Told you so," said my editor. "That's the angle. Now I hear Barrett's closing tomorrow night. He's doing a week in Milwaukee and then he heads straight for New York.

"Go out and catch him at his boardinghouse now. Here's the address. I want a follow-up on his plans for the Broadway opening. See if you can find out how he managed to get his hooks into the old gal so that she'd back the show. I understand he's quite a ladies' man. So get me all the gory details."

The dinginess of Barrett's quarters somewhat surprised me. It was a theatrical boardinghouse on the near North Side, the sort of place that catered to second-rate vaudeville performers and itinerant carny workers. But then Barrett was probably pinched for funds when he'd come here; not until he met Mrs. McCullough did his prospects improve. The meeting with his wealthy patroness was what I'd come to find out about—all the gory details.

I didn't get them. In fact, I got no details at all, for I went no farther than the hallway outside his door. That's where I heard the voices; in that shabby hallway, musty with the smell of failure, the stale odor of blighted hopes.

Goldie Connors' voice: "What are you trying to pull? I read the paper, all about those big plans of yours in New York. And here you been stalling me along, telling me there was no job because you couldn't get bookings—"

"Please!" Richard Barrett's voice, with an edge to it. "I intended to surprise you."

"Sure you did! By walking out on me. That's the surprise you figured on. Leaving me flat while you went off with that rich old bag you been romancing on the side."

"You keep her name out of this!"

Goldie's answering laugh was shrill, and I could imagine the glint of the gold tooth accompanying it. "That's what you tried to do—keep her name out of this, so I'd never know, or so she'd never know about me. That would queer your little deal in a hurry, wouldn't it? Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Richard Hamlet Barrett! You promised me a part in the show and now it's put up or shut up."

Barrett's voice was an anguished pleading. "Goldie, you don't understand! This is Broadway, the big chance I've waited for all these years. I can't risk using an inexperienced actress—"

"Then you'll risk something else. You'll risk having me go straight to your great lady and tell her just what's been going on between you and me!"

"Goldie—"

"When you leave town tomorrow night I'm going with you—with a signed contract for my part on Broadway. And that's final, understand?"

"All right. You win. You'll have your part."

"And not just one of those walk-on bits, either. It's got to be a decent part, a real one."

"A real part. I give you my word."

That's all I heard, and that's all I knew, until five days after Richard Barrett had left Chicago behind.

Sometime during the afternoon of that day, the landlady of the run-down boardinghouse scented an addition to the odors mingling in the musty hallway. She followed her nose to the locked door of what had been Barrett's room. Opening the door, she caught a glimpse of Barrett's battered old theatrical trunk, apparently abandoned upon his departure the day before. He'd shoved it almost out of sight under the bed, but she hauled it out and pried it open.

What confronted her then sent her screaming for the police.

What confronted the police became known in the city newsrooms, and what I learned there sent me racing to the boardinghouse.

There I confronted the contents of the trunk myself—the decapitated body of a woman. The head was missing. All I could think of, staring down at it, was my editor's earlier demand. "The gory details," I murmured.

The homicide sergeant glanced at me. His name was Emmett, Gordon Emmett. We'd met before.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

I told him.

By the time I finished my story we were halfway to the Northwestern Depot, and by the time he

finished questioning me, we had boarded the eight o'clock train for Milwaukee.

"Crazy," Emmett muttered. "A guy'd have to be crazy to do it."

"He's mad," I said. "No doubt about it. But there's more than madness involved. There's method, too. Don't forget, this was to be his big change, the opportunity he'd worked and waited for all these years. He couldn't afford to fail. So that knowledge, combined with a moment of insane impulse—"

"Maybe so," Emmett muttered. "But how can you prove it?"

That was the question hanging over us as we reached Milwaukee at ten o'clock of a wintry night, and no cab in sight. I whistled one up on the corner.

"Davidson Theatre," I said. "And hurry!"

It must have been ten-fifteen when we pulled up in the icy alley alongside the stage door, and twenty after ten by the time we'd gotten past the doorkeeper and elbowed our way backstage to the wings.

The performance had started promptly at eight-fifteen, and now a full house was centering its attention upon the opening scene of Act Five.

Here was the churchyard—the yawning grave, the two Clowns, Horatio, and Hamlet himself; a bright-eyed, burning Hamlet with feverish color in his cheeks and passionate power in his voice. For a moment I didn't even recognize Richard Barrett in his realization of the role. Somehow he'd managed to make the part come alive at last; this was the Prince of Denmark, and he was truly mad.

The First Clown tossed him a skull from the open grave and Hamlet lifted it to the light.

"Alas, poor Yorick," he said. "I knew him, Horatio—"

The skull turned slowly in his hand, and the footlights glittered over its grinning jaws in which a gold tooth gleamed . . .

Then we closed in.

Emmett had his murderer, and his proof.

And I? I had seen my most memorable performance in Hamlet: Goldie's . . .

Frequently the substance is lost by grasping at the shadow—but not always.

THE MAXNOME RIDDLE

by Earle N. Lord

My secretary-receptionist-fiancée, Beverly Wayne, leaned entrancingly against the doorjamb between my office and her waiting room, arched her eyebrows, and tossed her red tresses at me. "She is here, Michael, my boy. But before I show Miss Moneybags in, please be reminded that we are firmly engaged and that she is a murder suspect."

"She must be very pretty," I said.

Beverly smiled and raised one hand up to her throat. "Gorgeous she is, upstairs, but from here on down, gangbusters! Watch your step, Dr. Karlins. I shall be lurking just outside this thin door."

Clinical psychologists deserve a little fun, and since most of my clients in my West L.A. practice are about as exciting to observe as a dish of boiled spinach, this one was

bound to be interesting, gorgeous or not. I had never had a client worth several millions and suspected of murdering the source of the money.

Rising, I moved the chair by my desk out a bit when Elizabeth Anderson arrived. She was, indeed, a lovely girl, the kind who wins beauty contests. Her face, bearing, and figure would give her a sporting chance at the movies or television after winning the contests, but I'd read that she had taken a different course. After becoming Miss Nevada of 1970, she had become engaged to the young owner of several forests, lumber mills, and paper factories, and had withdrawn abruptly from the Miss America contest. He had rewritten his will to make her his sole heiress, in happy anticipation of a February wedding, but someone shot him in January and the latest tabloid word was that all the money was going to her, provided she did not get convicted of his murder.

She sat in the chair, adjusted her skirt, then gazed directly at me with the loveliest pair of violet-blue eyes that I had ever seen.

"I didn't want to come here, Dr. Karlins," she said with a shy smile. "My friend, Dean Ness, talked me into it. I don't think you can do anything for me, but Dean is very persuasive. He's hard to turn off when he gets an idea into that handsome head of his."

I had talked to Dean the night before. He was a man I'd known at college and met several times a year at parties and S.C. football and basketball games. He'd phoned to ask if I thought I could do anything for the girl. His story was that she was completely broken up about the death of the young millionaire and refused to start living her own life again. When I asked him what his interest in the matter was, he had been blunt.

"I want to marry the girl, damn it. I asked her to marry me before she ever met David Landmaier, and I want to marry her, still. I don't have much chance if she keeps mooning over the jerk's death. I can't compete with a ghost."

I told Ness that I could usually desensitize people to freeway phobias, airplane travel fears, and to cigarette withdrawal pangs, but that desensitization to death was quite another matter. However, I agreed to see the girl out of sheer curiosity more than anything else. I'd been reading about the case in the morning papers for weeks.

"I talked to Dean Ness last night," I said. "He thinks you grieve too much and too long."

She frowned slightly and made a little gesture as if she were waving

away a wisp of smoke in front of those incredible eyes. "Dean is confused. He thinks I'm mourning for poor David. What is really bothering me, Doctor, is the prospect of being convicted of David's murder. The police are convinced I had something to do with it. I haven't told Dean about that. I'm ashamed to."

I leaned back in my chair and thought about what I had read of the case. Miss Anderson's story was that she had been playing tennis at the time of the murder. The courts were just outside her apartment at the Westbay Club in West L.A. She claimed she suspected nothing when she first walked into her apartment, rackets in hand. Earlier, she had told David Landmaier to go in and mix himself a drink. When she did not see him in her livingroom and tried to enter the kitchenette, the swinging door pushed against his inert body. She was confused as to what happened next, but said she had not gotten a clear look at the scene in the kitchen. When she saw Landmaier's head and upper torso and a lot of blood, she backed up and started screaming. The papers went on to say that he had been shot with a small caliber weapon and had bled to death. Some shattered glassware seemed to indicate that Landmaier had been mixing two drinks when he was murdered. No one had been seen entering or leaving the apartment's two entrances except Elizabeth Anderson.

"Why do the police suspect you, Miss Anderson?" I asked. "From what I read, you have an excellent alibi. The girl you were playing tennis with—"

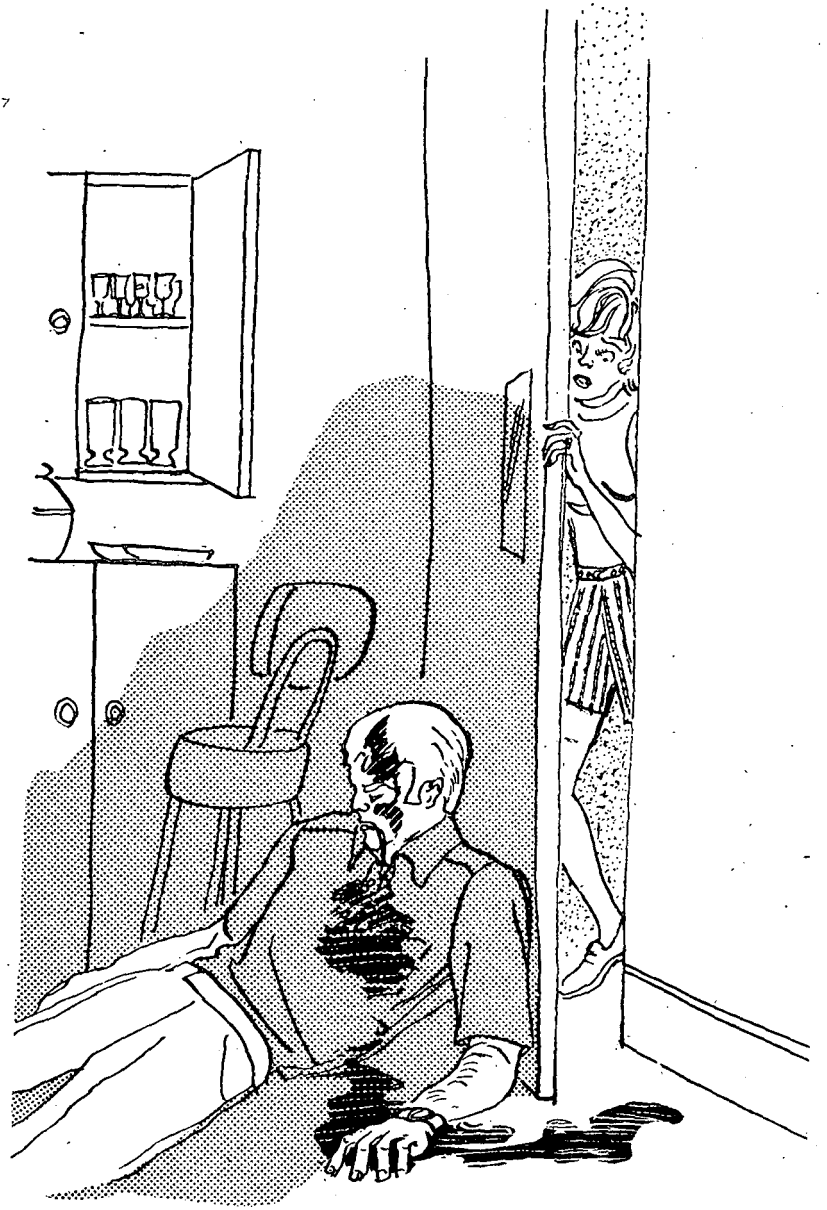
"Is an excellent friend of mine," she snapped. "David was a strange, eccentric, weird young man. He was worried that someone was going to marry him for his money, so he settled over a million dollars on me when we became engaged, against my wishes. He also insisted on making a new will leaving me all of his money. It's at least ten million after taxes. The police seem to think that can buy a lot of alibis."

"Suspicion is not enough. They have to have concrete evidence."

"They have some evidence which convinces them that I am guilty, and it's making them work around the clock to prove it. I was followed to your office. They follow me wherever I go."

I waited for several seconds while she stared angrily at a ceramic ash tray on my desk, then she went on.

"When I found they suspected me of shooting David, I volunteered for a lie detector test, even before I consulted a lawyer. It



made me furious to think that anyone would suspect me of murdering for money so I went down to Parker Center under my own power and took the test. It just made things worse."

Elizabeth Anderson turned that high-voltage glance on me again, but this time those incredible eyes were full of tears.

"When I got finished with the test, they said I had displayed guilty knowledge of the murder, and really began to crowd me. I could tell they were convinced that I had either done it myself or had it done, but they would not tell me what I had said that made them feel I was guilty."

"Do you have any idea what it could have been? You must have reacted to something they feel only the murderer or an accomplice could have known."

She glared at the ash tray again and began to clench and unclench her hands. "I've spent the last five days trying to figure out what I could have said. There were several odd words. The operator asked me if they meant anything to me, and they didn't. I'd never heard of any of them."

"Try to remember the words," I said softly.

"They were nonsense words like in Carroll's *Jabberwocky*, words like frabjious, calloo, callay, and maxnome. Then he asked me if I knew a lot of men and he rattled off about ten or fifteen names; names like Henry Mow, Randy Rome, and Max Tone. Funny thing! They all had single-syllable last names. But I didn't know any of them."

"You might have known one of them and forgotten. That would cause a reaction on the polygraph."

Elizabeth Anderson shrugged her shoulders and turned to me. "I don't see how you can possibly help me, Doctor, unless you could go to the police and find out what I did on that test that convinced them I'm guilty of David's murder. As my doctor, could you do that? Would they talk to you?"

"I could try, Miss Anderson. I don't think I can talk to the police directly, but I have a brother who knows the lieutenant in charge of the West L.A. area. They rode a patrol car together twenty years ago. I'll see if he can do anything for you."

We left it at that, and I went on with my practice for the rest of the afternoon. When we closed up for the day I drove over to my brother's bungalow in Mar Vista and had dinner with him and his family, then tossed the whole business into his ample lap.

Danny raised his bushy, gray eyebrows about a foot when I finished

my pitch to him. "You mean to say that you want *me* to ask Lieutenant William Steele how his boys are conducting a murder investigation. Mike, old buddies or not, I'd bounce twice and land in the Pacific, at least halfway to Hawaii. You know how he feels about private detectives interfering in police matters, and you, especially, know how he feels about you."

"I'm not asking you to inquire about the case, Danny. I want you to ask Steele if he would be willing to discuss those lie detector findings with me. As a clinical psychologist, I may be able to help the police. If the girl has guilty knowledge, I may be able to find out why for him. I have her permission to do this. He cannot ask her the questions that I can under therapeutic conditions."

"And he can't ask you to tell him or the court anything that will incriminate your patient."

"True enough, but if I can prove or show that there is an innocent cause for her so-called guilty reactions, wouldn't that help the case for him? He may be chasing the wrong fox."

Andy thought the matter over, then agreed to try.

Next morning, I was granted an interview with Steele at headquarters and went in to see him with profoundly mixed feelings. We had, it might be delicately put, a strained relationship. While going to college, I had done some work for my brother's private agency, and while in the army I had spent nearly a year in military intelligence doing investigative work. Steele had the false notion that I was now operating a clandestine, unlicensed detective agency in the middle of his district behind the facade of a clinical psychologist's office, so I was positive that if I had approached him directly about the Anderson girl, he would have blown a fuse.

Steele seated me carefully in a hard chair facing a battery of bright windows and tossed me his normal wintry glare.

"Andy tells me you have a legitimate interest in the Landmaier murder. You know how I feel about your playing Sam Spade in this district."

I set myself to hold onto my temper. "I'm a Philip Marlowe man, myself, Lieutenant. Miss Elizabeth Anderson is my patient. I am concerned with her as a doctor, only. I no longer work for my brother as an operative. I have risen far above that. I now clear about four dollars an hour instead of $3.75."

Steele smiled, which is usually the sign that he is going to wither someone.

"I would imagine that you would be making a fortune with all the crackpots we have in West L.A. We not only grow our own, but we attract them in droves from all over the continent."

"My problem is that most of the crackpots don't know they are crackpots, Lieutenant, and don't ask me for psychological help."

"Except when they get into serious trouble with the law." Steele wiped off the smile and reverted to his normal, cool, flat glare. "Your client doesn't need a psychologist, Karlins. She needs an excellent lawyer. Her emotional problem is that she is guilty as hell."

"She claims to be innocent, Steele, but realizes she fouled up that lie detector test. That is why I'm here. I want to talk with your psychometrist and inspect the tapes on the polygraph run. If the girl is innocent, I can save you trouble."

Steele surprised me then. He didn't get mad. He just frowned.

"Suppose she is guilty, as part of her test indicates? Will you help us then, Mr. Clinical Psychologist?" he asked softly.

"If she's guilty, you will have lost nothing. You can't use any of that polygraphic material in court. With the money she has behind her and the legal protection she can hire, you won't be able to pressure her into any confessions. If she's guilty, I'll drop out of the case and you will have lost nothing."

Steele swiveled his chair around and looked out the window for several seconds, then swung the chair back again to face me.

"Fair enough. I'll cooperate with you on these conditions. What you get from me and the polygraph technician does not go to the press. We're keeping a lid on some details of the case. Agreed?"

I nodded and he went right on. "I can give you what you are looking for. I don't think you will get anything more from the technician, but you are welcome to try. Your patient actually did fairly well on the test. She apparently does not know how the murder was committed or when it was committed. She did react, however, to something that the victim did as he was dying."

Steele swiveled the chair around to face his view of City Hall again and continued. "Here's the picture. The girl shoved the kitchen door open a few inches, saw the upper part of his body and some of the blood, let go of the swinging door, backed up and started yelling for help. She claims she never went all the way into the kitchen. When a neighbor went into it, Elizabeth Anderson says she was lying down on her livingroom couch with a

friend patting her on the head. Her claim, therefore, is that she never saw what had happened on the other side of that door.

"The neighbor who went into the kitchen—he's one of those tennis bums who live in places like that—swears he never told her anything about what *he* saw in there. He was afraid it would further upset her. As for the two officers that arrived a few minutes later, they used their heads and didn't say anything to her either. When the detectives got there, they buttoned up the room. Elizabeth Anderson never got into that kitchen until a week later, after it had been cleaned up. Then she moved out.

"Now, here's what I don't want the press to get. Landmaier was not shot, as those reporters printed in their stories. He was stabbed several times with a large kitchen knife. Before he died, he dipped his right index finger into a pool of his own blood and wrote a word on the asphalt tile alongside of him, a name or a word that isn't in any English dictionary. He printed it in all caps, M-A-X-N-O-M-E, then he died."

Steele paused a few seconds, then went on. "Your client apparently does not know that Landmaier was stabbed rather than shot. She is apparently telling the truth when she says she did not kill Landmaier, did not hire him killed, and does not know anything about how or why he was killed."

"But she responds to the word MAXNOME," I said to Steele's back.

He spun around to face me, his ice-blue eyes narrowed. "When that word was thrown at her, she had a mild positive reaction to it. When she was asked if she'd ever heard of it, and denied it, she had a bigger reaction. When she was asked if she knew him or knew what the word meant, she had another positive response, a strong one. She knows what that damn set of seven letters means, Dr. Karlins. David Landmaier was trying to tell us something, and she knows what it is. You tell her from me that if she doesn't tell us what it means that she is an accessory to the crime of murder."

"She may not know what it means on a conscious level."

"Then you start excavating vigorously into her unconscious levels and help her find out, Karlins."

I cleared my throat. "Before I do that, Lieutenant, can you tell me if there is a Max Nome? Does this person exist?"

"Not locally there isn't," Steele growled. "Nor in San Francisco, Oakland, San Diego, Seattle, New York, or Chicago. We found one in the Philadelphia phone di-

rectory, but he turned out to be an eighty-year-old retired steelworker. We have quizzed every one of Landmaier's friends and relatives. None of them ever heard of Max Nome. He's the biggest spook I ever chased."

Steele passed me on to the polygraph technician, but he was right. I found nothing more. The test had been administered properly. She had been given all kinds of neutral names and nonsense phrases to which to react. Only to that strange name had she responded.

I decided I needed some background information on David Landmaier and went to the morgue files of the L.A. *Times*. One of my S.C. chums got me in. I found they had very little on him other than the bare facts that he had inherited his fortune at the age of twenty-five and had quit his job as an anthropology lecturer in a state college to devote full time to his hobbies. These were listed as the raising of quarter horses in Nevada, giving benefit performances as a zany amateur magician, drag-racing modified sports cars in the L.A. area, and chasing girls all over the country.

I called Dean Ness and asked if I could talk to him about Landmaier and Elizabeth Anderson. He had just gotten home from his stock-broker's job in the Wilshire area. A few minutes later, I had a tall one in my hand and was sitting in an ultra-modern chair in his sumptuous livingroom, the kind of chair that I didn't think I'd be able to get out of without help.

Dean Ness sat cross-legged in the middle of the upholstered floor and frowned thoughtfully at me.

"How are things going for Elizabeth?" he asked gently. He spoke her name in the reverential tones that bankers usually reserve for discussing very large sums of money.

"Elizabeth is not quite ready to marry you, Dean. She is still grieving for David. Tell me, what do you know about him? I've got to learn more about him if I'm going to be able to help her. From what I've read and heard about him so far, he doesn't seem to be a real person. He's more like something out of a comic strip."

"David was not a real person, Mike. He was a mystical lost soul with more money than he knew what to do with. He was haunted by the fact that it came in faster than he could spend it. David was a tall, good-looking idiot with a gift for gab, who thought the planet Earth was a gigantic fun house full of pretty, willing girls, magic shows, and bright and shining race cars. I wouldn't have minded his good fortune and his

foolish antics and so on, but . . ."

"He took Elizabeth away from you," I said when he trailed off. "She seems to be a levelheaded girl. Was it all fun and games with her? Or was it the money?"

Dean smiled a twisted smile at me. "When he met Elizabeth, David professed to change. On the surface, he changed or he wouldn't have lasted ten minutes with her. She thinks people should do constructive work, so he gave benefit performances of his magic show, using Elizabeth as a pretty stage prop and attention diverter. He contributed his racing purses to her favorite charities. He stopped chasing the local talent here in Hollywood, flew to Vegas for that, instead. He even talked about establishing a foundation for medical research at U.S.C. But someone killed him first."

"Did you know many of his friends?"

"Elizabeth was kind to her exfiancé. I was invited to most of their parties. Sure, I knew a lot of David's friends. Why?"

"Ever meet one called Max?" I asked softly.

The effect was electric. Dean Ness almost dropped his pink daiquiri. His eyebrows rose half an inch and his mouth fell even more.

"The police asked me that. They inquired about a Max Rome or Nome or Mone, something like that. Who in hell is he? Did Elizabeth mention him to you?"

"No, but the police think she knows who he is. I don't think she does. But I hoped you would."

"Never heard of the silly weirdo, except from the police and you."

A phone rang in another room and while Ness answered it, I studied a silver-framed photograph of Elizabeth Anderson prominently displayed on an end table. It was inscribed, "Ever my love, Liz."

"Ever is a relative term," Dean Ness said over my shoulder when

he returned. "That was my eternal-love-until-she-met-something-better on the phone. Elizabeth wants you to come to dinner at her apartment at eight o'clock sharp, tonight. I was not invited. I told her you'd be there, chum."

"I might have had something else planned."

"When ten million dollars invites you, you couldn't possibly," Dean Ness said with a sour little smile. People persist in seeing the world through their own eyes, I reflected, as I left him brooding in a corner of his elegant apartment.

I phoned Beverly and gave her my apologies for the dinner we had planned to have together, then called Elizabeth Anderson at the unlisted number she had given me and asked her where she lived. She hadn't had the ten million long, but already was assuming that everyone knew where she was. It turned out to be a quiet little floor of a large apartment building, where she prepared me a simple meal of corned beef hash topped with a poached egg, then launched into a series of probing questions about my visit to the police. She apologized profusely for the size of the spread she was living in, saying that David had insisted that she start living in style before they were married. They had leased it before his death.

"You really don't know anything about a Max Nome," I said, and she shook her head and started weeping again. "Maybe you don't, girl, but your body knows him. I saw the readings from your polygraph test. Your blood pressure, pulse rate, and galvanic skin response all react to that crazy name. Don't worry about it. If it's as close to the surface as those readings indicate, I'm sure we can find its meaning."

She mixed me a double margarita and we walked down into a sunken conversation pit that had been dug out of the huge expanse of her livingroom floor.

"Tell me about the relationship between Dean and David and you. Were the two of them close friends at one time?"

"Very close. They worked together at Cal State as lecturers, shared an apartment in Santa Monica. Dean was the well-to-do one, then, and David the poor relation from the boondocks. They're second cousins, you know. They had no idea that David was going to inherit all of that money. When David had his shower of gold from a forgotten uncle in Washington, he moved out and started being the international playboy and jet-setter. Dean quit his job as an economics instructor and went to work instead as a stockbroker. I came into

the picture then, met Dean at a party, almost got engaged, then ran into David a few months later. It may sound very corny, but it's true. I was swept off my feet by David. He was Sir Galahad and Lancelot and James Bond and the Count of Monte Cristo all rolled into one."

"What was he like? I never met him, you know, but I've heard strange tales about him."

"They're probably all true. David delighted in surprising and startling people. I don't know exactly how he did everything, how he gathered the information, but he made it a point to find out little things about people before he met them, their birthdays, high schools, phone numbers, anniversaries, everything he could, then he'd spring these little isolated facts on them in casual conversation or while doing an impromptu magic display, and surprise everybody. I went to a party in Westwood with him and he told all the people in the room what their mother's maiden names were. He told me later he got the information from a credit bureau at a few dollars a head. Another time, he had a dinner in his apartment and served each one of his guests, all fourteen of them, his favorite entree and dessert. He wouldn't tell me at first how he managed to do things like that, but I found out later it was just hard work and drudgery. He would get the information and memorize it. When I became his stage assistant, I helped him with the lists and it was pure rote memory. But to the uninitiated, it was a miraculous thing. It really surprised and mystified them."

When she offered me another drink, I declined for two reasons. One was, I wanted to be able to climb out of that conversation pit. The first margarita had been that strong, and my head was buzzing. Secondly, I felt I had been given a clue to the mysterious Max Nome, and I wanted to break away from this beautiful, distracting girl and try to sort out our conversation mentally before the clue faded away. I left her abruptly and drove directly home, trying furiously to concentrate on what had been said, to review it so it would not die in my memory. All I managed to do at first was to give myself a headache.

I stayed up until one, jotting down everything I could recall, but it was no use. There was something buried in the mass of unrelated trivia, but I couldn't pull it out through the tequila fumes. I staggered to bed in a sleepy stupor, grimly thinking that if only I could have borrowed David Landmaier's fantastic memory, I could easily have dredged up the answer to the

Maxnome riddle and then some.

Then began one hell of a night. It commenced with a lulu of a nightmare in which I was pursued down some very dark and twisting streets by a faceless, ghostly monster brandishing a bloody kitchen knife and yelling "Maxnome" at me in eldritch howls.

I awoke in a cold sweat, hoping that it would be at least six in the morning so I could get out of bed. I found it was only three-fifteen. Trying desperately to go back to sleep, I was annoyed by an inane and idiotic phrase that began marching through my brain, back and forth like a huge saw. I tried to tell myself that clinical psychologists were supposed to be impervious to such nonsense, that people came to see me for help with silly problems. This line of reasoning failed to help and the phrase continued to saw back and forth through my aching brain tissue.

Max Nome has pneumonia, that was the silly phrase. I tried to ignore it, disprove it, forget it, or destroy it, but it would not leave my poor, tortured brain. I finally sat up, turned the lights on, and tried to reason it away. I was using therapeutic technique on myself!

I told myself firmly that I was a fool to ignore the phrase. According to standard, classical doctrine, my unconscious was trying to tell me something important, and the only road back to sanity and sound sleep was to work out what it was trying to tell me. The unconscious is a devious and tricky thing, I reminded myself. Theoretically, it seldom comes out into the open and states anything directly. Instead, it persists in sneaking up on meanings in a misleading and wily manner.

The key word was pneumonia. Perhaps it was a pun, I decided, after several moments of bleary-eyed pondering. What did pneumonia sound like? Like nothing on the planet Earth, I decided, and said the hell with Doctor Freud and his insane theories, turned off the lights and tried to go back to sleep. Just as I was drifting off, a wispy little voice whispered the word *mnemonic* into my left ear, and that sat me back up and turned the lights on again. *Mnemonic* was one of those words I never spoke out loud because it raised far too many eyebrows. Still half asleep and wondering how much tequila Elizabeth Anderson had gotten into that one margarita, I wearily asked my unconscious what could the word *mnemonic* possibly have to do with a weird character named Landmaier and a spook named Max Nome.

The answer woke me com-

pletely. Landmaier was an amateur magician and memory expert who did complicated mind-reading acts on a professional level. Memory experts depend heavily on mnemonic devices to help them remember things. When David Landmaier lay dying on a kitchen floor and tried to write out the name of his murderer, his dying brain might have played a trick on him. Instead of the man's name, it might have fed him one of the many mnemonic patterns that Landmaier associated with that particular name, a pattern off a list with which Elizabeth Anderson had once helped him. *Maxnome* could be a mnemonic device for remembering something about a man, something with seven letters in it—or seven digits.

I stared at the telephone beside my bed and picked it up gingerly, then dialed the letters M-A-X-N-O-M-E. I heard several rings, then the crisp, professional voice of an operator answered. "What number are you calling, please?"

"Just a minute," I mumbled foolishly, not knowing what number I was calling. I worked it out from the dial. "Operator, I want 629-6663."

Several of the longer seconds of my life dragged by, then the girl came back on. "That number has been changed to 629-4562."

I thanked the operator, then dialed the new number carefully. The phone rang seven times before it was answered by a sleepy, angry, and familiar voice.

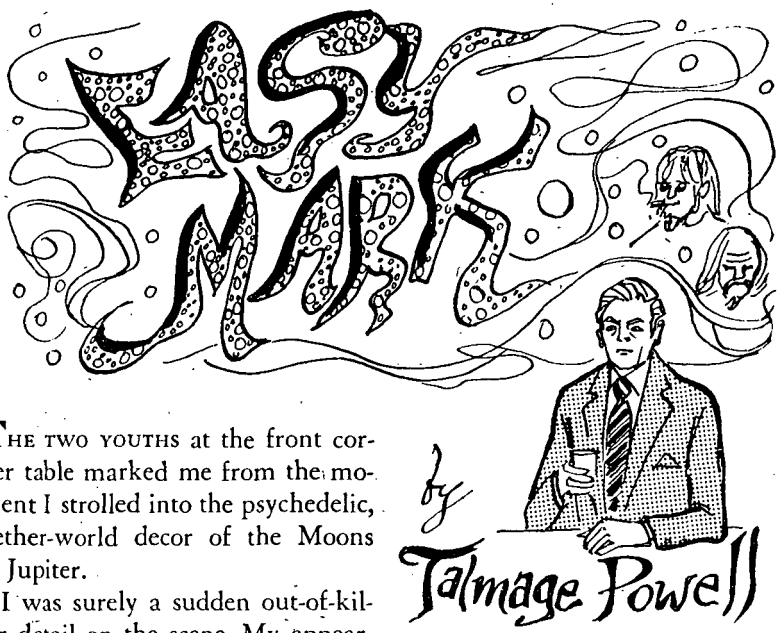
"This had better be damned important, fellow," he said. "Who's this?"

"It's your old friend, Mike Karlins," I said to Dean Ness. "I want to come over and see you about Elizabeth. I think I've worked out her problem."

"That's important enough." He sounded delighted. "Come right on over, old buddy. I'll pour you a double for that."

I told Dean I'd be right over, hung up, and stared sadly at the phone for a few seconds. "You'd better make it a triple, Dean," I said to the empty room, then picked up the phone again, and dialed the police.

The clothes that are said to "make" the man may also serve to "mark" him.



THE TWO YOUTHS at the front corner table marked me from the moment I strolled into the psychedelic, nether-world decor of the Moons of Jupiter.

I was surely a sudden out-of-kilter detail on the scene. My appearance stamped me as the most reprehensible of straights: businessman, establishment man; specter from the far side of the generation gap. Fortyish, brushed with gray at the temples, lean, conditioned from regular workouts, I was smoothly barbered, tailored in a two hundred dollar suit of English cut, with coordinated shirt and necktie.

A cool young hostess, blonde and topless, decided I was for real. She smiled a greeting to take me in tow and threaded a way through a dimly lighted, pot-smoke-hazed broken field of tables and hovering, pale faces. In passing, I drew a few glances, ranging from the sullen to the amused. Empty, bored young eyes lifted, noted the stranger, and dropped again to contemplation of existence and a

world they had rejected. I was of no more real interest than the movement of a shadow—except to the pair at the corner table. They studied every detail about me as I was seated and ordering a drink.

On the bandstand a four-piece rock group, as hairy as dusty and moth-eaten young gorillas, suddenly assailed the senses with electronic sound. The lighting came and went like a Gehenna fire, swirling faces from corpse-green to paranoid purple to jaundice yellow, cycling and recycling until the brain swam and burst from the brew of shattering sound and color.

Throughout the hard-rock number I had the impression that I was being discussed by the pair at the corner table. Their faces in the ghoulish glows turned toward me, turned away, drew close over the table as words blanketed by the music were exchanged.

The music shimmered to a long-drawn wail against a mad rhythmic background and slipped eerily to silence. The lighting settled to a twilight. There was a shifting of bodies and a ripple of applause.

I lifted my drink, covertly watching the pair rise from the corner table. I sensed a decision, and my palms became a little damp as they came toward me.

Their shadows streamed across my table. Suddenly they stopped.

"Hi, pops."

The taller, huskier one had spoken. I looked up. He was a strapping youth with a heavy-boned face lurking behind a heavy growth of thick black beard and wiry tresses that fell to his thick neck. He wore nondescript poplin slacks, dirty and wrinkled, and a leather vest that partially covered his massive, hairy chest. His swarthy, bare arms were corded and muscled like a weight lifter's.

The companion beside him was as tall, but much thinner, a fine-boned fellow. Tangled, unwashed locks of yellow and a sparse beard graced a narrow, almost delicate face and high-domed head. The smoldering eyes of a decadent poet peered from the shadows of large sockets. The thin-lipped mouth was faintly quirked, as if sardonic amusement was an habitual reaction.

"We sensed a loneliness," the poet said, "and would offer a friendly ear if you'd care to rap. Peace." He had a thin, nasal voice. His jerky delivery and the embers in his eyes were clues to a good high on drugs. Clad in a rumpled tie-dyed gaucho shirt that hung loose about greasy ducks, he slipped with unreal movements into a chair across the table.

"I'm Cleef," he said, "and my

boon companion is known as Willis."

Willis wiped a palm across his leather vest and extended his hand. "Into the pudding, man."

I saw no alternative at the moment but to shake his hand. His grip was modestly powerful. He pumped my hand once, then eased into the chair at my left.

"Pudding?" I inquired.

"As your group would put it," Cleef-the-poet said, "welcome to the club."

"I see. Well, thanks. Buy you fellows a drink?"

Willis' heavy mouth curled gently. "You're out of sight, pops. We don't ruin the belly with booze. But you might blow the price of a joint."

He lifted a muscle-lumped arm and signaled a waitress who was moving from a nearby table. She served them joints from an innocent-looking package bearing the brand name of a well-known cigarette. As Willis and Cleef fired the reefers, I ordered a second double Scotch. I figured I needed it.

Cleef drew deeply, half closing his eyes and holding the smoke until his lungs burned for air. Willis was a more conservative pothead, less greedy, less desperate for a turn-on. He puffed, inhaled, exhaled.

"What brings you to a place like this, pops?" Willis asked conversationally.

My gaze roamed the unreality of the room, returned to Willis' dark face. My shoulders made a vague movement. "I'm really not sure," I said.

"Hung-up man, ice cream man," the poet suggested.

"Ice cream?" I asked.

"Now and then user of drugs," Willis explained. "Ice cream habit."

I nodded, grinned slightly. "Thanks for the translation, but I haven't an ice cream habit. Just an occasional Scotch does it for me."

"Translate, extrapolate," Cleef rhymed. "Rap across the gap."

Willis reached and patted the back of my hand. "We'll try to talk your lingo, pops."

"Thanks. It would be less awkward."

The waitress came with my drink. Willis elaborately mused on her thin face and slender topless figure. The gesture on his part was almost pathetically obvious, a cover-up for his quick assessment of the thick wallet from which I paid the tab.

I lifted the Scotch. "Cheers." I rolled the first drops under my tongue for the taste. The liquor dispelled a little of the clammy chill inside me.

I set the glass down and studied it a moment. "I guess it was be-

cause of Camilla," I said finally.

"Come again?" Willis said.

"The reason I came in here," I said. "Dear Camilla . . . about the same age as some of the young women in here . . . early twenties . . . very beautiful."

Willis chuckled, eyes brightening. "Well, what do you know! The old boy has got himself a chick!"

"Straight man buys anything his little heart desires," Cleef said lazily.

I couldn't help the angry look I shot across the table. "It wasn't that way at all!"

"Easy, pops," Willis suggested mildly.

I lifted the glass and threw the remainder of the drink down my throat. "Well, it wasn't!"

"So okay."

"I want you to understand."

"Sure, pops. Don't blow your mind."

I took out a spotless Irish linen handkerchief and brushed the cold needles from my forehead. "Blow my mind . . . Sonny, that's just what I did, with Camilla. Couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, couldn't live without her. Went crazy if she glanced at another man. Never wanted her out of my sight . . ."

"Zap!" mumbled the poet. "What a king-sized hangup."

My vision cleared slightly. "At last you have voiced a truth. I became a different man, totally different, a stranger to myself."

"How'd you meet such a chick?" Willis asked with genuine interest.

I drew a breath. "In a place much like this. I— My wife had died. I was, you might say, in loose-ends bachelorhood. One evening I was entertaining a business client and his wife."

"How deadly dull," decided Cleef.

"She, the client's wife, had heard of a place similar to this one," I said, as if the poet hadn't interrupted. "She wanted to see the sights. She insisted we go, as a lark."

"But you, not the fellowship, were the bugs under the microscope," Cleef intoned sagely.

"Shut up." Willis glowered a look at his companion. "Let the man talk. Go on, pops."

"Go on?" I sagged morosely. "Where is there to go, after Camilla? With Camilla you have been all the way."

Willis' eyes glinted with a grain of fresh respect. "Tough, pops."

"Lovely while it lasted," I amended. "I met her that night, on the lark. We grooved, as I believe you would put it." I broke off, numbly, trying to relate the experience in my own mind to the "straight" sitting at the table with

Cleef and Willis. "Then she turned me off. It was nightmare. I pleaded. She reviled. I begged—and Camilla laughed . . ."

"And she split the scene?" Willis finished.

"Yes," I said, squeezing my eyes tight and seeing her face against the darkness; lovely face, mask-like face; face that could become cruel, unendurably cruel. "Yes, she split the scene." I wrapped it up in a whisper.

Willis scratched his beard and gave his head a short shake. "Who'd have believed it?" He lifted his eyes and looked about the Moons of Jupiter. "So it was the thought of Camilla that brought you in tonight?"

"You might say that," I agreed. I washed the final drop of Scotch from the glass against my lips. "You see, after Camilla, my home town was unbearable. I left. I've wandered, for a long way. It hasn't been easy."

"Looking for another Camilla," the poet said. "I should write about you, man, if it all wasn't so corny." Cleef half stood, drugged eyes flicking about the room. "Is she here tonight? Another Camilla? Do you see another Camilla, man?"

"There will never be another Camilla, sonny," I said. "Once is enough."

"So now you wander some more, pops?" Willis asked.

"Perhaps."

"Why don't we wander together, pops? Have a ball? Cleef and I have rapped about blowing this town. We'd like to see California, New Orleans, Miami when the chill winds blow."

"Dust to salve the itch in our feet," the poet supplied.

"That's right, pops," Willis nodded. "We yearn to roam. You got a car and dough."

"Sorry," I said, suddenly very sober, "but I don't think . . ."

"Man," Willis said, "you just think about Camilla." His heavy face had changed, hardened. He lifted his right hand almost to tabletop level. I saw the glint of dusky light on six inches of gleaming switchblade. I sat very still. This was the decision the pair had made when I'd strolled in and they'd pegged me for an easy mark.

"Let's go, pops," Willis said.

"All right," I swallowed drily. "I won't resist. You won't have to hurt me."

"That's good, pops. We don't want to hurt you. We're not stupid. Just the dough and the car, that's all."

We rose from the table and walked out of the Dantean room and onto a parking lot, Willis close

behind me with the tip of the knife against my back.

"It's the sporty little car right over there," I said. "Please . . . careful with the knife." I eased the wallet from my pocket, stripped it of cash, several hundred dollars, and handed the money to Willis.

His big hand closed over the bread. "Thanks, pops. And look, you ought to be more careful, wandering into places like the Moons of Jupiter."

"Seeking adventure, you found it," the poet surmised.

I handed the car keys to Willis. "That's it. You have got it. You've stripped me clean."

"So long, pops."

I saw the flash of his big fist. Conditioned as I was, even after Camilla, I could have handled him—both of them, Cleef posing no problem in a rough-and-tumble.

I took the punch on the chin, rolling with it just enough to keep from being knocked blotto. My knees crumpled. I fell on the darkly shadowed asphalt, stunned but not unconscious.

I heard Willis say: "That'll hold him while we split the scene."

I heard the poet intone: "Hail the open road!"

I heard the rush of their feet, the starting of the car, the sigh of engine as the car took them from the parking lot.

I got up and dusted myself off in time to see the taillights vanish around a distant street corner.

Good-bye Camilla's car . . . Bought with my money, but she'd done the shopping, chosen the model. Not even a fingerprint to connect the car to me; I'd wiped them away before entering the Moons of Jupiter.

I strolled to the street in order to find a taxicab several blocks from the scene.

Good-bye, Camilla . . .

I still had the smallest catch in my throat. I hadn't really meant to kill her when I struck her in that final moment of insane rage.

Farewell, Camilla . . . It was hard to cover my tracks and get rid of you, the evidence. I wonder when they will find you in the trunk of the car? California? New Orleans? At some service station in Alabama when the attendant moves from gas pump to the rear of the car and catches the first whiff of the ripening smell?

As for you, easy marks, you know not from where I came, or where I go, or even my name.

So enjoy the ride . . .

Many a time a missing object, deemed obscure by assumption, is unearthed by discernment.

WHILE IMMOBILIZED by a bad ankle, Chester Payne Middleton had discovered in himself a remarkable talent for armchair detective work of the sort for which Sherlock Holmes' indolent brother, Mycroft, had once, in fiction, been distinguished.

As a former professor of the history and philosophy of science, the old man had not only the necessary technical background but, what was more important and rare, the creative imagination that enabled him to combine a variety of apparently unrelated facts, and from their union, a solution of the problem.

In his earlier cases with Sergeant Burck, a one-time pupil of his, the professor had done at least some of the leg-work, having an eye for scientific evidence that only a field-trained naturalist of his quality could hope to possess.

It was one of life's typical ironies that when his ankle had healed, and he was once again able to get around at his normal pace of six miles an hour, Middleton found himself involved in a case where no leg-work was needed.

Burck himself emphasized the point by announcing ruefully: "I have all the pieces: suspect, motive, name and description of the murder weapon; time, place, and even a witness, and yet neither a clear picture of the whole situation, nor a safe case for the D.A. Now, isn't that something?"

"Sounds more like everything,"

Middleton said, his voice dry. "What could I possibly add to all that?"

"Only what you've given me before: a reasonable hypothesis that ties it together into a logical scheme."

"I'm not clear about what's needed. You have the man and the motive, if I understood you correctly. Time, place, weapon—"

"Not quite," Burck cut in. "I

spoke of the name and description of the weapon—but it wasn't found."

The professor raised his bushy eyebrows. "So? I didn't know that was so vital. Killers have disposed of their instruments before, and still were found guilty. The weapon can't be vital to an otherwise strong case, surely."

"Ordinarily, no. But this murder was carefully staged—I wish I knew all the props—to make finding the gun essential. Without it, our case has a serious weakness, and a good lawyer will leave the prosecution for dead, believe me."

"What was the weapon?" Middleton demanded.

"A piddling little .25 caliber automatic—a lady's peashooter."

"Don't underestimate it," the professor said. "At close range that type of gun is just as deadly as a magnum; no modern automatic is a peashooter; the design and new powders make even the smallest and lightest models into perfect killers."

"I know. How well I know! This one went almost through the victim's head, from front to back—the slug, I mean; not the gun."

"I'm glad you told me," Middleton said, his deep-set gray eyes twinkling briefly. Then, in a more serious vein: "Did the suspect get rid of the automatic before you arrested him?"

"No, or rather yes—but it's not that simple. If he'd had time to dispose of the gun, our case, oddly enough, would be strong enough, because of all the other circumstantial and eyewitness evidence. The point is, he was nabbed moments after the shooting, and yet had no gun—or I should say, no pistol of the right caliber; only a rifle—an Enfield."

"A rifle? But the victim was shot by a .25 automatic, you said."

"Look," the sergeant said, begin-

ning to sound guilty himself, "it's a weird business, and I'd better give you all the facts. I think I have them, even the ones that didn't seem to apply. I remembered your rule about gathering every bit of information, because nobody could tell what was important until the basic pattern had been established. Middleton's Law!" he added, with a feeble grin.

"You're confusing me with a certain TV detective," the old man said, his lips twitching for a moment. "Hardly a fair comparison."

"True," Burck admitted. "But you can certainly match him braincell for braincell—and that isn't easy, since he's quite fictional, and the writer can make him ten times life-size, while you're real and human."

"Descartes might not agree entirely, but we needn't go into that. Since you have all the facts—that tricky word again!—let me hear some of them."

"Right. Hear and see; I've photos, too, and the rifle, although that is certainly irrelevant."

"I'll reserve judgment on that point," Middleton said. "Now let's begin with a straightforward chronological narrative—if you please."

"Yes, sir. The victim was a man who called himself George Carpenter—real name Allen Cummings. He met the killer, Russell Targ, in the Plaza at midnight. Presumably Targ shot him with a .25 automatic, but managed to dispose of the gun within moments, because the police had been tipped off that a crime was to be attempted there, and arrived right after the shooting. Do you know the Plaza, Professor?"

"Of course; everybody in town does."

"Well, then you can picture the situation: a big concrete rectangle, two men in the middle, one dead, the other holding a rifle; no place to hide anything, and no pistol to be found. Yet the concrete is wet with dew, so that footprints can be checked, especially with oblique lighting. They show clearly that only the two men were there—before the police, that is—and that Targ never moved more than a few feet from the body. Ergo, how could he have used, and then hidden, a gun?"

"What did he say happened?"

"That he had an appointment with Cummings; private business. That before they exchanged more than a dozen words, somebody reached over his—Targ's—shoulder, and shot Cummings through the head. Before he knew what was happening, the killer was twenty yards away, and moving fast. Naturally, Targ tried to help Cummings, found he was dead,

and by that time the murderer was gone, and the police closing in."

Middleton shook his head slowly. "It's weird, all right. You spoke of a motive."

"Guesswork, but I'll bet I'm right. When we checked the victim's fingerprints, we found out that although all his identification gave his name as 'Carpenter', his real name was 'Cummings', and he was a deserter in World War II. More than that, he'd taken a big army payroll with him: ninety-plus thousands of dollars.

"More digging told us that Targ had been in the same outfit, as company clerk. After the war, Targ had gone into business for himself, and in a quiet way must have invested at least seventy-five thousand to do it. Yet before the war, he didn't have a dime; just a routine clerical worker. You see what I'm getting at."

"You imply," the professor said slowly, "that Cummings may have deserted, but that Targ really took the money."

"On the button! You're quick. Cummings was the company eight-ball; stupid, surly, dirty—a bad soldier; everybody's patsy. My guess is that he never knew until long after that he was considered a thief as well as a deserter. In any case, he was in no position to try to get cleared."

"How does Targ explain his post-war affluence?"

"Gambling. A lot of G.I.s piled up pretty good bank accounts that way. And in 1946 the Internal Revenue was understaffed and overworked; we can't prove him a liar now. Says he got into war surplus early, ran a modest stake up into a big one—partly true, the war surplus bit; he had such a business—and finally ended up a tycoon of sorts, with three sporting-goods stores."

"Why do you think he killed Cummings?"

"I figure Cummings spotted him, and threatened to kick up a fuss; to risk the desertion rap in order to expose Targ as the thief. Probably Targ set up a meet, promising to pay off big, and then murdered him."

"Wouldn't there be something in Cummings' effects to back up your theory?" Middleton asked.

"We didn't find anything. Maybe the meeting was arranged in a hurry; more likely, Cummings was as dumb as ever, and didn't even realize the risk he was running. He spent most of his time on KP and latrine duty while in the service; maybe that's why he deserted! Barely met the mental standards when they were scraping the barrel in 1944."

"And you're sure Targ didn't

use the rifle on him somehow."

"Absolutely. It's possible to send a used pistol slug through a rifle, but not without some casing around the smaller bullet; and there are other things that give the trick away. All the ballistics and penetration data prove Cummings was killed with a .25 caliber Browning; two-inch barrel; and nine and seven-tenths ounces in weight."

"I suppose," the professor said thoughtfully, "you think Targ himself phoned the police."

"That's exactly what I think. Just before meeting Cummings. He wanted a flock of witnesses there to testify he had no time to get rid of the automatic. He didn't know, of course, that the wet concrete would also back him up, but it does, I'm sorry to say."

"You spoke of witnesses."

"Only one, actually an accountant working late in one of the tall office buildings which surround the Plaza. He heard the shot. Says he heard two, but one must have been a backfire from some car on a nearby street."

"Hmm," Middleton muttered. Then he looked at Burck. "All right, let me have the reports, the pictures, and the rifle. I'll see what I can come up with. Phone me tomorrow afternoon, although obviously I can't promise a thing as of now, you know. Not a thing."

"Right," the sergeant said. He dumped his briefcase onto the big desk. "The rifle's in the car; I'll get it. By the way, Targ claimed he wanted to do some work on it at home—he has a shop there. After all, he handles a lot of guns in the main sporting-goods shop, and it sounded reasonable. I don't think the rifle is involved; we checked that out, as I said."

The professor made no reply to this, and Burck went out, returning in a few minutes with the rifle. He put it on the desk, and dropped an empty shell beside the stock.

"I had one wild idea," he said wistfully. "Targ could've tied that little gun to a balloon full of hydrogen or helium, and just let it sail out of the area."

"And no doubt you quickly spotted the objections—as I did," Middleton said in a gentle voice. "He'd have no control; the balloon could come down anywhere, and perhaps be reported, after which Targ would have no alibi at all. And there was the risk of being seen carrying a fully expanded sphere—a large one, to handle half a pound of metal—to the Plaza."

"That's right," the sergeant admitted. "Although if some kid in the skid-row area found the gun, nobody'd ever hear of it again."

"Targ couldn't count on that;

the balloon might come down in the busy district where the nightclubs and theatres are, or on some roof where a janitor might find it." He picked up the brass case. "What's this for?"

"Targ had proof-fired the rifle—that is, shot off a bullet with an extra-heavy charge of powder to test the action. No dealer will mess with a war-surplus rifle without such a check. Then he was taking it home to clean and try out one of his own ideas for remodeling. It makes sense, I must say."

"That it does," Middleton agreed. "I see the brass did split; he must have used a very heavy charge."

"I suppose," Burck said listlessly. "It was hard to open the breech, too. Well, I'll phone you tomorrow, Professor. Maybe you can make some sense out of it all; I sure can't."

"You underestimate yourself," was the sharp reply. "You've built up a strong, well-reasoned case with only one weak point. Obviously, Targ found a highly ingenious way to dispose of the small pistol. Except for that, you have him cold."

"Thanks," the sergeant said. "But that one flaw will ruin everything unless you can remove it." He looked quite dejected as he left.

When Burck had gone, Middleton sat down to review the evidence. One point needed immediate checking. It was one thing to take a rifle home, but why bring it to the meeting on the Plaza? Surely it was more normal to leave it in the car, but Targ had an answer to that, too. He hadn't driven, but walked, the night having been pleasant. He lived only two miles from his main store, where he usually presided. So there was no discrepancy there, the professor had to admit.

He studied the excellent photographs of the area. From the middle of the Plaza to the nearest building was just over a hundred yards. Targ could perhaps throw a small pistol that far, but so what? Burck's exhaustive search of the scene, directly after the killing, would have turned up the gun easily.

Middleton scrutinized the faint marks of the men's shoes. He was forced to accept the sergeant's verdict: nobody else had been near them, and Targ had not left the body; but there was one smaller mark, like that of a child's shoe, that puzzled him briefly. He guessed it was merely the butt of the rifle, which Targ must have rested on the ground at one point.

Shaking his head ruefully, the professor turned to the rifle. A careful examination of the weapon dis-

closed nothing significant or abnormal, nor did the cartridge case tell another story. It was beginning to look almost as if Burck's balloon notion might be the only way out. Yet Targ could not have risked so erratic a method of disposal. He had to *know* where the gun would be, so that he might recover it later, and really hide or destroy the thing.

Baffled, Middleton mixed a large dollop of his favorite tipple: bourbon, beer, and brown sugar. He sipped it while studying the pictures again. One hundred impossible yards to the nearest building; more to the others. The smallest—not the nearest, either—was five stories high: at least fifty feet. Not even Dizzy Dean of yore could throw eight ounces that far—over a hundred yards and then to the roof of a five-story building. The closer one was taller—eight stories. The professor sighed.

Yet the killer's behavior didn't quite add up. No matter how he explained it, the combination of a small-caliber pistol, supposedly wielded by an unknown man—who left no footprints!—and the powerful rifle, both at the scene of the crime, was simply unacceptable to Middleton. Why two weapons? Why?

He went over the testimony of the lone witness. Halperin had worked late on a difficult tax case. Heard two bangs; paid no attention until police sirens sounded. Then looked out. Saw Plaza fairly well, although shadowy. One man bending over body of another; apparently trying to revive him. Then cops entered scene.

Suddenly the professor's eyes narrowed. Why did Burck assume the second sound was a backfire; that wasn't scientific. Suppose there had been two shots? Well, what then? Surely the killer couldn't have missed at that range—and only one bullet in the victim's skull.

Two shots, Middleton reflected stubbornly; two guns. Something hovered tantalizingly just beyond the edge of his conscious mind. His eye fell again upon the brass shell-case, empty and split by a heavy overcharge, and then he straightened in his chair. Proof-firing be damned; that was a chimera, a blind. The truth was quite different, and amazingly simple.

He snatched the photos up from the desk. If he had been Targ, which building? The killer would expect to be held, perhaps for months. The regular office buildings were apt to be well-patrolled. What was left? Ah! The old Playhouse; it was used only rarely, and destined to be torn down in exactly nine months. About six stories

high—it wasn't built or divided like a modern building, so you couldn't say for sure—and quite perfect for Targ's purpose.

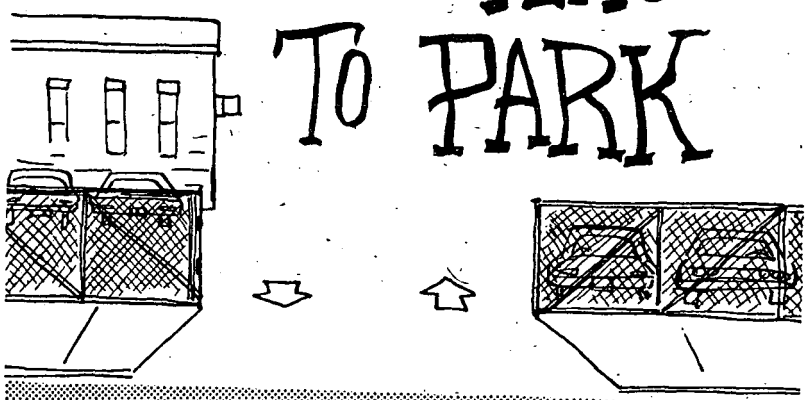
The professor's hand shot out for the phone. Burck would be home now, tired and discouraged, but still awake, no doubt. The news should cheer him.

"Middleton," the professor said when the sergeant answered. "I think I know where the gun is. Wait—one thing at a time. Tomorrow I'd like you to search the roof of the old Playhouse; yes, I said the roof." The phone twittered and buzzed until the old man cut in and said: "All right; I didn't intend to give all the details now, but if you're going to toss around until morning—

"Targ had the rifle loaded with an overcharged blank cartridge—that's right, blank. He'd done some calibrating first, no doubt. Probably he had a short stick ready, too. After killing Cummings, he rammed one end of the stick three inches or so into the rifle muzzle, and the other end into the pistol barrel. Like a grenade thrower—exactly. Then he put the rifle butt on the ground, aimed toward the Playhouse, and fired. The little automatic was blown up into the air and onto the roof of the Playhouse. Only an Enfield action could take that kind of strain; the cartridge split, at that. I think Targ picked that building because the gun would be safe on its roof for months; with the busy office buildings he couldn't be sure some janitor or inspector might not go over the roof. He didn't know the damp ground would ruin his story about another man; that's what really got you going, I imagine. Otherwise the missing gun wouldn't have seemed anything but confirmation, right? Well, you'll find the automatic up there—or on one of the other roofs, but I'm betting on this one." He listened with quiet amusement to some nice things, then said: "Thanks. Now have a good sleep. You don't suffer from somnambulism? Fine; otherwise I'd worry about a figure in pajamas walking the Playhouse roof! Good night." After which he finished his drink.

News may travel fast in a small town, but other things hardly at all.

A FUNNY PLACE TO PARK



by James Holding

I DIDN'T BELIEVE the kid at first. Janie, who took care of telephone and reception for us, had brought him in from out front and left him standing in my doorway.

"I want to see the sheriff," he said in a high voice. He had spiky red hair and big freckles on his face and crooked front teeth. I guess he was about ten years old.

I said, "I'm the sheriff, son, what can I do for you?"

He looked me over with serious brown eyes and said, "You ain't the sheriff. The sheriff's fat. I seen his picture in the paper."

Smart kid. I explained that I was the sheriff's deputy, and the sheriff wasn't there, and what could I do for him. Or *must* he see the sheriff in person?

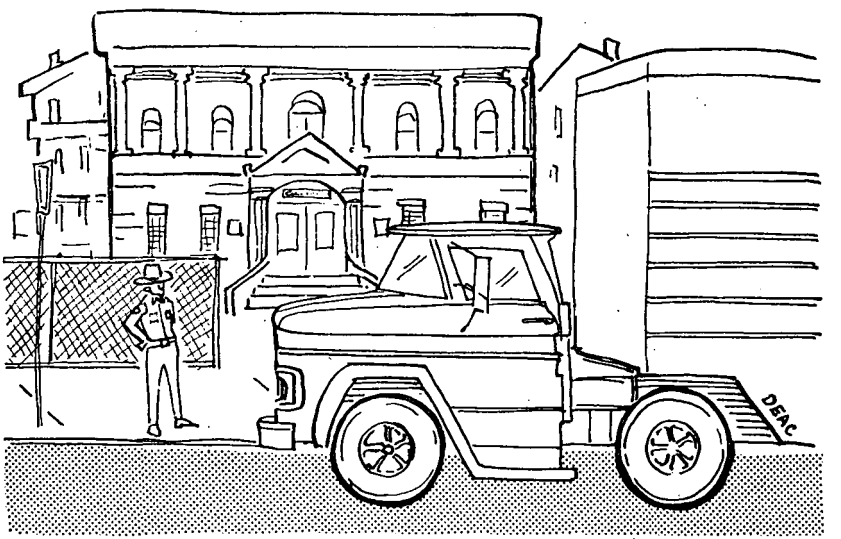
He considered this, then shook his head. "I guess you'll do. I wanted to tell the sheriff about these two men I seen just now."

"What two men?"

"I don't know who they are. They're tied up. With wire around their hands."

I sat up and gave him a really sharp look for the first time. "Wire around their hands?" I said. The kid watched too much TV.

"Yeah. Well, maybe not right around their hands. Around their wrists, kind of. I couldn't exactly tell when I passed them."



"Anyway, they were tied up, is that it?"

He nodded, and his eyes went blank, the way kids' do when

they're remembering something. "And they had stuff like adhesive tape across their mouths, too."

"Where was this, son?"

"Out by Donaldson's Crossroads."

That was two or three miles out of town in the middle of flat truck-farming acreage, where state highway 26 runs into County Line Road. It was outside the jurisdiction of the town police, all right. Our territory. So I said to the kid, "There's nothing at Donaldson's Crossroads, not even a gas station. You sure that's the place?"

"I live out there, don't I? I pass Donaldson's Crossroads every time I ride into town."

We seemed to be wandering from the subject, but it was a slow day and I had nothing better to do than jaw with the kid. "So you passed it today, is that right?"

"Sure. I been telling you. On my bike. And I saw these men all tied up."

"Where were they?"

"In the ditch. By that big pipe that goes under the road."

Some imagination. I nodded as though I believed him. "And you rode past on your bike?"

"Yep."

"Why didn't you stop? Maybe you could have helped them."

He shook his head solemnly. "Oh, no. I ain't supposed to get mixed up with any strange men, my mom says. Any time I'm alone and I see something that looks funny or scares me any, mom says I should tell the sheriff." He paused, troubled. "But you ain't the sheriff. He's fatter'n you."

"You already said that, son. How come nobody but you saw these two men, you suppose? Lots of cars go by there."

He shrugged. "I don't know." Then, after a second's thought, "I ride right next to the edge of the road on my bike. I could see down into the ditch."

"The ditch is pretty deep there, is that right? Under the culvert?"

"What's that?"

"The pipe that runs under the road."

"Yeah." He moved his head up and down. "That's where the men were. In the ditch. All tied up. With stuff over their mouths. Laying down."

He spoke with such earnestness that I almost believed him. But I said sternly, "You kids get a big charge out of playing jokes on the police, don't you? Makes you feel smart. Like on TV when the cops are all so dumb."

He said, "I ain't playing a joke. I'm only doing what mom told me." There was scorn in his high voice. "Well, I guess that's all. I'll go now." He turned around and

started out without a backward glance.

I called after him, "Wait a minute! You want to go out there with me and show me where you saw the men?"

He stopped. "Nope. Can't. I gotta go to the dentist by ten o'clock, my mom says."

"Who's your dentist?"

"Dr. Charles. He's going to fix these teeth." The kid bared his front teeth at me like a tiger yawning. They were crooked, all right.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Donald Start."

"Come back and sit down a minute, will you, Don?" He came back and sat down near my desk, giving our wall clock a worried look. It showed ten minutes to ten.

I picked up my phone and asked Janie to get me Dr. Charles' office on the line. When his nurse answered, I asked her if a Donald Start had an appointment at ten o'clock. She said yes, why, was he canceling? And I said no, he'll be there, and hung up.

Donald's serious and now slightly accusing eyes stayed pinned on me the whole time. When I hung up, he said, "I shoulda told the sheriff. You don't believe me."

I cleared my throat. "Sure I believe you. But you got to admit it sounds crazy. I'll go out there right now and check out your report." I stood up and so did Don. As we started for the door, a train rumbled by on the railroad embankment twenty yards south of our office. It sounded, as usual, like it was going to come busting right through the walls of my room. The ash tray on my desk did a little dance from the vibration.

When we could hear ourselves talk again, I said to Don, "Were these two men you saw still alive when you passed them? Could you tell that?" I *was* taking him seriously now. As far as I was concerned, that call to Dr. Charles' office had turned Don from a practical joker into a dutiful citizen of the county cooperating with the law.

"They were laying pretty still."

"I guess they wouldn't have tapes over their mouths if they were dead," I said. I patted him on the shoulder, man to man. "You can go ahead and go to your dentist now. And thanks for telling me about the men, Don. You did just right. I'll take care of them, don't worry."

"Okay." Now that I believed his story and was taking action, Don sounded more than a little disappointed that he couldn't go back to Donaldson's Crossroads with me. Kids hate to miss any excitement, especially if they're responsible for it, I guess. But Don's

mom was obviously the boss. When she said go to the dentist, Don went to the dentist, no matter how many tied-up men he saw lying in the ditch.

I told Janie where I was going and went outside. Don Start was just disappearing on his bike through the arch that carries Front Street under the railroad tracks. I figured if they straightened out those front teeth, the redhead would be a good-looking kid someday—provided he didn't let his hair grow down to his waist or something.

I was on the early trick that day, been in the office since six that morning, so it was good to get out and stretch my legs for a change. It was a bright cool Saturday in October, and I knew the foliage out in the country was real pretty by then, all splashed with autumn colors. You couldn't tell it in Circleville, though, especially on Front Street where the County Building was, because there wasn't a tree or a bush in sight, and the stores and buildings formed solid ranks on both sides of the street, leading traffic like a funnel down to the railroad embankment and through the underpass.

I walked up Front Street a ways toward where I'd parked my cruiser when I came on duty. We normally use the County Building parking lot, of course, but it doesn't open for business until seven each morning, and has a big steel gate locked across the entrance at night to keep out romantic couples and discourage car thieves who might try to borrow one of the county cars that are left in there at night. Whoever has the early trick in the sheriff's office usually leaves his car on the street.

Mine was hidden behind the big tractor-trailer that had parked right in front of me. The nose of the truck wasn't quite the required twenty feet from our parking lot entrance, I noticed, and I would have mentioned it to the driver, but there was nobody in the cab. Getting morning coffee at the Greek's across the street, probably.

I got in my car, pulled out around the truck, nosed into the parking lot entrance to turn around, and then headed north on Front Street for Donaldson's Crossroads.

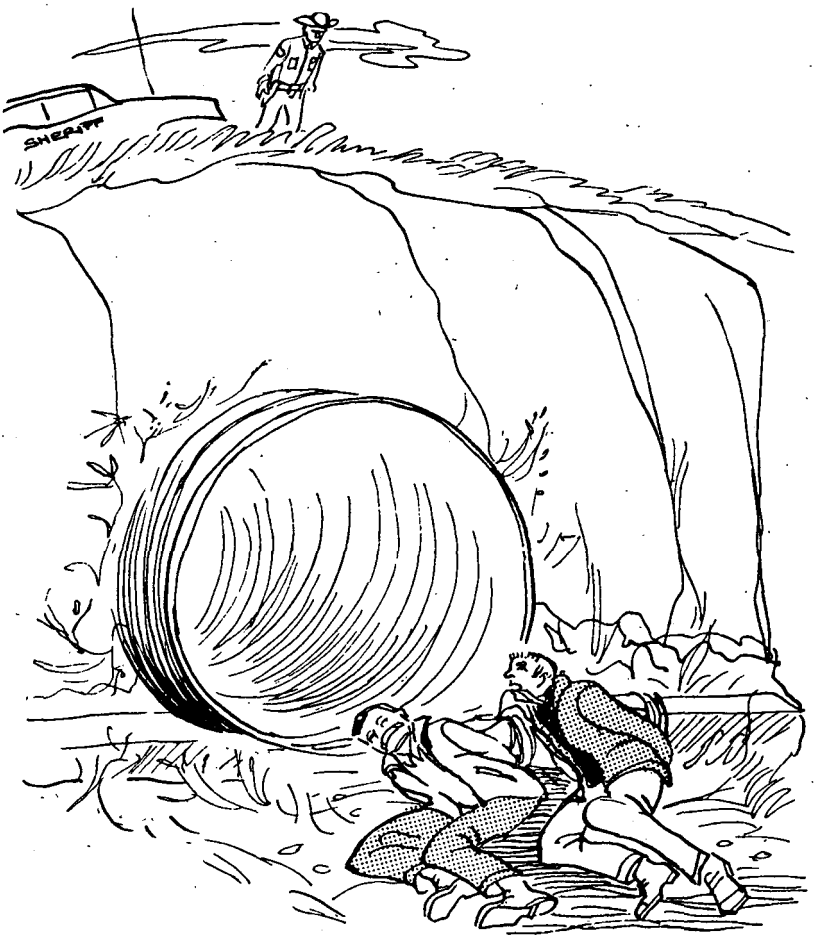
The Crossroads looked as deserted as a nagging wife when I got there. It's a T-intersection: highway 26, an old-fashioned two-lane road coming from the Tri-Cities over west of Circleville, dead-ends at our County Line Road there. If you turn south on County Line Road at the intersection, you come to Circleville. If you turn north, you run into the

big east-west turnpike to Chicago and New York.

I turned left onto highway 26 and drove 100 yards to the only culvert in sight, where I parked on the shoulder and started to get out. Before I got one foot on the ground, even, I heard a voice yelling from across the road. I crossed over—there wasn't a car in sight—and looked down into the ditch over the edge of the culvert bulkhead.

And there they were, just like the kid said.

Two guys with their wrists tied



behind them, lying on their sides, tethered by their wrist wires at ground level to the concrete piers that supported the culvert so they couldn't stand up. They had adhesive tape over their mouths, too, except one of them had managed to scrape one end of his gag loose by rubbing it on the ground, and he was the one who was yelling.

When I stuck my head over the edge of the culvert and he saw me, he said, "Brother, are we glad to see you!" He put a lot of heart into it, but his voice was hoarse like he'd been shouting a lot. I guess he had, come to think of it.

I waved a reassuring hand over the ditch and said, "Be right with you. I'll get the pliers out of my car." I got the pliers and slid down the steep bank into the culvert ditch. First thing I did was pull the tape off the second one's mouth. He worked his jaws around some, and spit, and then said, "Thanks. That kid on the bicycle send you?"

"Yeah. I'm from the sheriff's office. The kid reported to us." I was busy trying to unhitch them from the concrete piers.

"I about died when the kid went by without stopping," the first one said. "I knew he saw us. But he didn't stop, and I didn't have my gag loose then, so I couldn't yell to him."

"Wouldn't have done you any good anyway," I said, working on their wrist wires with my pliers. "The kid's mom don't want him getting mixed up with any strange men." I turned the first one's wrists loose. "You're gonna hurt for a spell," I warned him. "The wires were on there pretty tight."

The fellow just nodded, but stood up and stretched. He was dressed in blue jeans and a leather jacket and had a shock of black hair. I turned the second guy loose and he stood up, too. They both started rubbing some circulation back into their hands.

"Now then," I said, "what's the story, boys?"

The second fellow had hair about the color of creamery butter, crew cut, and was dressed just like the first one. His name was Pete. The dark one was Joe. Pete said, "We were hijacked."

I helped them climb up out of the ditch onto the road. "Truck drivers?"

"We were," Joe said, "until those fellows took our truck away from us this morning." He didn't actually say 'fellows,' but that's what he meant.

"Come on over and sit down in my car for a while," I said. "You been lying in that ditch very long?"

"Since quarter of six this morn-

ing is all," Pete said sarcastically.

They climbed into the back seat of my cruiser and sat back, still rubbing their hands together and doing some fancy cursing as the circulation began to return. I said, "How come nobody saw you except the kid?"

"Everybody driving east on the highway is slowing down for the stop sign at the intersection," Joe said, "and looking straight ahead, I guess. And everybody driving west is on the wrong side of the road to be able to see into the ditch. Even after I got my tape off, I couldn't make anybody hear me."

There were plenty of cars going by now, some of them slowing up out of curiosity like they do every time they see a police car. I said, "Well, I'm sorry this happened to you in our county. Want to tell me about it now?"

"We had a load of Universal TV color sets consigned to a distributor in Chicago," Pete said. "We're slowing for the stop sign at the intersection back there, just before daylight this morning, going to take a left for the turnpike, when this Chevy blazes past us and pulls up dead, right in the middle of the road, right here on this culvert. This road is narrow enough over the culvert so we can't squeeze by, so I pull up behind the Chevy, just barely managed to do it, too, without clobbering the damn fool good. The second I get the rig stopped, a guy in a silk stocking mask hops up onto the step of the cab and pokes a double-barrel shotgun in the window and says get down. And at the same time, another guy in a mask jerks open the door on Joe's side."

"He shows me an automatic pistol as big as a cannon and tells me to get down too." Joe ran a hand through his crew cut, scrubbing at his scalp.

"Then what?"

"Then we both get down," Joe said. "What else? You don't argue with that kind of firepower, at least we don't."

"While all this was going on, no other car passed or approached?"

"Nary a car," Joe said. "Was there, Pete?"

Pete shook his head. "Just before daylight there's never much traffic on these back-country secondaries," he said. "One guy held the shotgun on us. The other two wired us up, pushed us down into the ditch, made us lay down, and hitched us to those concrete pillar things."

"Wait a minute," I said. "There were three of them?"

"Sure. One waiting in the ditch on each side of the road when we stopped, and one driving the car that blocked us. He came back and helped tie us up. Then he went

back to his car and drove off, and the two others got into our truck and followed him."

"Which way did they turn on County Line Road?" I asked. I was beginning to get a kind of creepy feeling in my bones.

"Couldn't see them," Pete said, "but the rig noise faded off south."

My feeling was getting stronger. "Universal TV sets. Was the truck marked that way?"

"No. The trailer says 'Royal' on the sides. Royal Trucking in Chicago. We're just haulers for Universal, see."

"I said, "Stainless steel trailer body?"

"Aluminum," Pete said sourly. "And brand new, too. The boss will play hell about this."

I gave them the clincher. "What license number?"

"Illinois T24-783," Pete said. "She's got Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania plates, too, but I can't remember them."

"Illinois is enough," I said. "How you feeling by now, boys? Back in driving condition yet?"

They looked at me kind of funny, and didn't say anything.

"If so," I said, "we might as well go and pick up your stolen truck."

"You know where it is?"

"When I left town fifteen minutes ago, it was parked right in front of the sheriff's office," I said.

While we were driving back to Circleville, I quizzed them some more about the hijacking. "What color was the Chevy that blocked you off?"

"Black or dark blue with a white vinyl top. New model four-door," Pete answered promptly.

"Remember the license number?"

"Never saw it. Too busy stopping the rig. Wish I had, now."

"Joe?"

"Me neither," Joe said. "Probably covered up with mud or stolen, anyway. In the back window of the car was one of these stupid little dogs with a head that weaves around. I remember that."

"And with only one headrest," Pete added. "On the driver's side."

"How about the men? Anything you remember about them that might help us to identify them?"

"Silk stocking masks. All about the same size as Pete and me. Couldn't see much in the dark."

"Dark?"

"Sure. They reached in and turned off our lights soon as they stopped us. The car lights, too."

"I saw one thing," Pete remarked. "The guy who held the shotgun on us had a finger missing. Had his second finger through the trigger guard because his first finger was just a stump."

"Which hand?"

He thought for a moment. "Right hand."

"What about the shotgun?"

"Sixteen gauge, over-and-under," Pete said, "like I use for birds."

"Anything about their voices you'd remember?"

Pete shook his head, but Joe said, "Fellow who told me to climb down stuttered a little bit. Said 'G-g-get down,' like that. Course he may just been scared or excited."

"What would he be scared for?" Joe wanted to know. "We was the ones who was scared."

We were still a block away from the County Building, coming south on Front Street, when Pete leaned over the back of my seat and looked ahead and said to Joe, "There she is, Joe, sure as hell. That's our rig." He said in my ear, "You've got to be some kind of a terrific cop, Mister, I'll say that."

I said, "I just have an extra good memory, is all—for figures and stuff like that. I noticed the truck when I came out of the building to go rescue you boys, and I took in the license numbers and so on without even knowing it, I guess. That's the way my memory works."

I pulled into the County Building parking lot, saying, "First thing to do is see whether the TV sets are still there."

"Couldn't be," Joe said positively. "Else why leave the truck here? The load is either already stashed somewhere or transferred to another truck by now and long gone."

We got out of my cruiser and walked back to the truck. Pete unlocked the side door of the big trailer and stuck his head inside and said, "Well, I be damned! The TV's are still here!"

Joe couldn't believe it. Neither could I. I said, "The hijackers must've run out of gas."

Pete shook his head. "There was still forty gallons in the tank."

"Well," I said, "then you got to admit that this is a funny place to park a truckload of stolen TV sets."

"Wherever they parked them, we're damn glad to get them back!" Joe said.

"Come on into the office," I said, "and let me get down the details on this thing for my report. Then you can take off for Chicago."

We went inside. Twenty minutes later we came out again, and I held up traffic on Front Street for them while Pete jockeyed the big trailer backwards into our parking lot entrance far enough to turn the rig around and head it north for the turnpike and Chicago. It was a tight squeeze to get turned, but Pete finally got her straightened away. I got up on the cab step on

his side and said, "Now don't stop for any Chevys between here and Chicago, you hear?"

"Don't worry!" Pete said. "And thanks, Bill." They were calling me Bill now.

"So long, boys." I jumped down and the rig pulled away.

Johnny Martin, the police reporter for Circleville's only newspaper, was standing on the steps of the County Building when I started back into my office. He'd apparently been watching the whole thing, me holding up traffic while the truck turned around and so on. He said curiously, "What was that all about, Bill?"

I told him about the hijacking and the quick recovery of the stolen TV sets with a certain amount of pride, because I figured it was probably the fastest recovery of stolen goods on record, and that the sheriff's office could use a little good publicity with an election coming up. The Circleville *Chronicle*, Johnny's paper, had already declared for the opposition candidate and was always printing a lot of jazz about how inefficient the incumbent sheriff and his staff were, meaning me and my boss, Sheriff Blore.

I typed up a report of the hijacking and put it on the sheriff's desk for when he showed up, and all the time I felt kind of proud of myself, because, face it, the main reason the hijacked truck was found so quick was me and my good memory.

Yeah, I felt pretty proud—but only for a while. About twenty-four hours, as a matter of fact. Until Sheriff Blore came storming into my office the next day and put his sagging paunch up against the edge of my desk and said with unaccustomed venom even for him, "Bill, you're fired!" I could tell by the squint in his eye that he meant it, too.

I say eye, singular, because the sheriff only has one good eye. The other one's covered by a black eyepatch. But that one good eye can look mean enough for two. He's actually a pretty easygoing fellow for a sheriff; a lot of his meanness is put on for the benefit of the citizens who might be tempted to break the law in our county. This time, though, he wasn't putting anything on.

He had the morning *Chronicle* in one hand and his reading glasses in the other. I was afraid he'd break his glasses, he was squeezing them so tight.

He caught me by surprise. I said, "Me? What am I fired for?"

"You're fired for making the sheriff's office the laughingstock of this county," he barked at me. "That's what you're fired for!" He

put the newspaper down on my desk and pointed a finger as round and fat as a dollar cigar at a headline on page two. I hadn't had time to look at the paper yet. I read the headline: SHERIFF'S EFFICIENCY IMPROVES AS ELECTION NEARS.

"That's a compliment," I said. "That's good publicity for a change. What are you so steamed up about? Did you read my report about the hijacking?"

"Of course," he answered. "But read that article."

I read it. It told about how we had recovered the stolen TV sets almost as soon as they were reported missing. And where. Far from complimenting our office, the article suggested baldly that the sheriff was rigging a few little incidents as election time approached to make his office look good—instances of heads-up law enforcement calculated to give the lie to the opposition's accusations about the inefficiency of the sheriff's office. The recovery of the stolen television sets was broadly hinted to be one of these rigged incidents.

The sheriff glared at me. "They might as well say we *stole* the damn truck ourselves, just so we could impress the voters with how fast we found it!" He stuck his thumb under his eyepatch, pulled it out half an inch and let it snap back against his eye socket—a sure sign of almost unbearable irritation.

"Wow!" I said. "They're playing pretty rough."

"You gave them the story, didn't you?"

"Sure. To Johnny Martin yesterday. I figured it for good publicity. I never thought Johnny would twist the thing like this . . ."

The sheriff simmered down a little. "I suppose you didn't. But he has. And the radio station picked it up this morning on the eleven o'clock news. Same insinuations. As a result, we both look like crooked politicians trying to win an election." He snapped his eyepatch again. Then he said, "To give the *Chronicle* its due, it *is* a damn funny place for a stolen truck to be found by a sheriff's deputy . . . right outside his own office."

"Yeah." I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Why?" said the sheriff. "*Why* did they abandon the truck there? That's what we've got to know if we want to prove this article is wrong, Bill. Since you were so smart at locating the truck in a hurry, how about figuring out *why* it was left there? With its load intact?"

I looked up at him, five-foot-four and two hundred pounds topped

by a black eyepatch, and said, "Pete and Joe said whoever drove the truck away from Donaldson's Crossroads was a lousy driver. He sounded like gangbusters going through the gears, they said. So maybe they just figured the rig was too much for them to handle."

This brought a snort from him. "Even if that's the reason, it isn't worth a belch in a wind tunnel to us. I gotta have a *good* reason why the truck was left there, Bill. You're so damn observant," he sneered at me, pulling up his fat lip at one end, "maybe you can come up with an explanation people will believe!" He turned around and waddled into his own office.

I put my feet up on my desk and shut my eyes. Like I told the two truck drivers yesterday, I've got a pretty good memory. So I turned the switch on it, got my memories of the hijacking all in a row, and started to look them over one by one. Nothing turned up that gave me a clue to the big question—till I'd got almost to the end of the line.

Then, all of a sudden, it hit me. Breathing a big sigh of relief—because I didn't really want to get fired—I went over to the window to my office and raised the venetian shade far enough so I could look south a ways. Then I went into the sheriff's office and sat down on his old leather sofa with a solution.

He was surprised to see me so quick. "You haven't thought of something, Bill?"

"No," I kidded him, "I came in to resign so you can't fire me."

His one eye glared at me for a second. "Don't clown. This is serious."

"Well," I said, "I've figured it, Clint. The hijackers didn't run out of guts, and the truck didn't run out of gas. What happened was, it ran out of room." I grinned at him. "Right in front of our office."

"Room? I don't get it."

"I stepped up on the cab's step before they rolled away yesterday, and what do you think was painted on the trailer's body, right behind the driver's door?" I was dragging it out a little, to pay him back for firing me.

"What?"

"A warning."

He snapped his eyepatch. "What kind of warning, damn it?"

"It said: Caution. This is a high truck. Clearance thirteen feet."

"So?"

"So do you know the clearance of the Front Street underpass out there?" I jerked a thumb toward the railroad embankment.

"Hey!" He jumped. "The truck was too high to go through the underpass?"

"That's it. The clearance is only

twelve-foot-ten under there. I just looked at the sign out my window."

"Well, well, well!" His mind started ticking over smooth and easy. "So when the hijackers get the truck this far, they suddenly realize it won't go under the arch. They've got to turn around to get clear. But they can't turn that big rig around. The street's too narrow and our parking lot entrance is closed off for the night. So what's left? Back up to Worley's Gas Station where they might be able to turn? But they were lousy drivers and didn't dare try to back the rig. Backing up for any distance in one of those things is too tricky for anybody but a professional truck driver. So what's the only thing left to do? Park the truck right there and scram. How's that sound?"

"Sounds pretty," I said. "How's it sound to you?"

"I think you just got me reelected, Bill. Now we've got something to work with. I'll show the *Chronicle* who's inefficient around here!"

He was as good as his word. He may be fat around the middle, but there's no fat between his ears. For two days he was busier than a one-armed paperhanger, bustling in and out of the office, making phone calls, applying for warrants and I don't know what-all. On the third morning, he told me to call him a press conference.

That was a laugh. In Circleville we only have one newspaper and one radio station, so a press conference usually consists of two guys at the most: Johnny Martin from the *Chronicle* and Abe Calhoun from the radio station's news staff. Anyway, they both showed up at two o'clock as requested and I took them into the sheriff's office. He was behind his desk with a fresh eyepatch on. The rest of us sat down on his scruffy leather sofa.

He didn't waste any time. He said, "Howdy, boys, you both been giving me a hard time over that truck hijacking a few days ago, haven't you? Implying that this office has been rigging crimes in order to gain political advantage by solving them. You been making out that we're not only inefficient as hell, but crooked as well."

"Oh, now, wait a minute, Sheriff," Johnny began.

"Shut up," the sheriff said. "I want to tell you a few facts about that hijacking right now. Facts, I said. Not a lot of loose opinions like you boys throw around. First off, I want to say that if I wanted to, I could air a few loose opinions myself about that stolen truck being found in front of my office. For instance, that the setup was

arranged deliberately, not by this office to make us look good, but by our political opponents to make us look bad—just what you boys have been urging them to think. But I don't deal in groundless accusations. Facts only. Okay. First fact: that hijacked truck wasn't parked in front of this office because somebody wanted to needle the sheriff's office. It was parked there because it *had* to be parked there."

"How come?" Abe Calhoun asked without much interest. So far, the sheriff's spiel sounded like a pretty bad political speech.

Sheriff Blore told them about the clearance under the railroad on Front Street, just twenty yards from our office. They showed a little more interest at that.

"Now," he went on, "the sheriff of this county is supposed to do more than merely recover any property that's stolen. He's supposed to catch the thieves, right? In the case of the stolen TV sets, I've done that, too."

Now they really began to pay attention. Johnny Martin even got out some copy paper and a pencil.

The sheriff went on talking. "Before I tell you who hijacked that truck, I'm going to describe how I tracked down the criminals and what my reasoning was, so you'll see how an *efficient* police officer works." He snapped his eyepatch a couple of times for emphasis. "Okay? All right, one thing about the hijacking kind of stuck out like a sore thumb: that it was the work of amateurs, not professional hijackers. Leaving the drivers in the ditch, practically in plain view; bad timing in blocking the truck on the culvert so that they almost got their Chevy clobbered; silk stocking masks like a bunch of Halloween kids; the lousy driving of the one who handled the rig; these were all marks of an amateur operation. But the most striking of all was the fact that the hijackers didn't realize until too late that the truck wouldn't go under the railroad arch here on Front Street."

"How come they realized it at all?" Johnny Martin asked. "Why didn't they try to drive through?"

"Listen, it stands to reason that even if they were amateurs, they must have cased this job *some* beforehand, right? Because they seemed to know that Universal TV sets were trucked down highway 26 in Royal trucks twice a week from Tri-Cities to Chicago. And they seemed to know when the Royal trucks reached Donaldson's Crossroads. They'd cased the Crossroads, obviously, to plan where they'd block the truck and where they'd leave the drivers. And they'd certainly cased their getaway route beforehand, including the clearance

of the railroad underpass. Get it?"

Abe Calhoun said, "You aren't answering Johnny's question, Sheriff."

The sheriff gave him a mean grin. "I answered it, only you aren't efficient enough to see it, I guess. Look. The guys were expecting to hijack a load of TV sets in a truck just like all the other trucks that they'd seen hauling Universal sets down highway 26 to Donaldson's Crossroads. But because they were amateurs, and consequently very flustered and nervous when they pulled the actual hijacking, they didn't realize the truck they hijacked was brand new and *bigger* than the ones they'd based their planning on. Not until they saw the railroad underpass ahead of them, with its big sign saying, 'Clearance twelve feet ten inches,' did the driver suddenly recall the big words, 'High Truck', painted right behind his shoulder when he got into the hijacked truck. *Then* they realized they were sunk. And they abandoned the truck, load and all."

"Been me, I'd have brought up another truck small enough to fit under the railroad embankment, unloaded the big one and taken off again," Johnny said.

"The hijackers might have done just that," the sheriff said, smiling, "except for the time element."

Abe Calhoun caught on quick this time. "You mean it was daylight by the time they got this far, and they couldn't transfer the load right in front of the sheriff's office? Without somebody getting suspicious?" He snickered.

"Yeah," the sheriff said, "or recognizing them."

Johnny Martin gave in. "Who was it, Sheriff?" he asked. "Who did the hijacking? We'll admit you're efficient as all hell, so come on, tell us who the hijackers were."

"Shut up," the sheriff said. "You're going to hear this whole thing for the good of your souls, boys. Where was I?"

"Time element," Abe reminded him.

"Yeah. Well, the time element tipped me off to something else, too. The fact that this was a *local* crime. That is, committed by somebody in or around Circleville, or with accomplices here, at least."

"How did you figure that?" This was Johnny, taking notes now.

"When it got to be daylight, those two truck drivers in the ditch were going to be found before long," the sheriff said. "That was a cinch. And once they were found, an alarm would be out for the stolen truck almost at once. From that I figured the hijackers expected to get the truck off the roads and under cover by daylight, see? Only

the underpass fouled things up for them, stopped them from reaching their hideout with the truck before daylight. All right. Now, the very fact that they were using Front Street as a getaway route showed that they were local, too. Because Front Street runs onto highway 67 a quarter of a mile through the underpass, and highway 67 won't take you anywhere where you can get rid of fifty thousand dollars' worth of TV sets in a hurry. For that, you need Chicago or some big city where you got a big black market going. And highway 67 only leads to Dempsey City and a bunch of farms all over the southern part of the state. Are you with me so far?"

Abe and Johnny were nodding their heads. "We're with you," Abe said.

"Okay. I start wondering about this point: where would a hijacked truck be heading if it was going through the Front Street railroad arch? Obviously, for some place big enough to hide the truck while they're repainting it to disguise it, or transferring its load to other transport, or hiding the TV sets for later disposal. Right? So what do you think I found, four miles out highway 67? A big old barn of a building that would be just the ticket. And it's the only place between here and Dempsey City big enough to hide that truck in and for them to reach by daylight."

Abe and Johnny were frowning, trying to think of the place the sheriff meant.

He saved them the trouble. "Another funny thing was, this big old place was actually being used as an automobile body shop, with spray-painting equipment and such laying around all over the place."

"Weldon's Garage!" Johnny and Abe said together.

"That's exactly right. And auto painting equipment wasn't the only thing kicking around at Weldon's, either. I got me a search warrant and I personally gave the place the fine-tooth treatment. And I found the following items of interest. . ."

The sheriff paused while Johnny turned over his copy paper to get a clean side, and then he went on.

"Item: one Chevrolet four-door, dark blue, with white vinyl top, loose-necked toy dog hanging in back window, only one headrest in place, and registered to Arthur Weldon. Item: one double-barreled shotgun, sixteen-gauge, over-and-under. Item: one forty-five automatic pistol, empty but well-oiled, a war souvenir. Item: one man missing his right index finger, name of Arthur Weldon, Junior. And item: a slow-witted grease-monkey and boy-of-all-work

named Goose Hervey who stutters when he talks."

"Art Weldon and his boy!" Calhoun exclaimed. "And Goose Hervey! Where are they now, Sheriff?"

"In the county jail, that's where," said the sheriff, meaning our two barred rooms at the back of the County Building which are generally as empty as a teen-ager's belly. "Before they could stop him, Goose Hervey admitted the whole thing. He thought it was a great lark, the entire hijacking adventure."

"What'd they use poor Goose for?" Johnny said. "He's only half there."

"They needed somebody to drive the car. And Goose promised not to talk, of course. But he couldn't help boasting a little."

Johnny started to say, "Escobedo . . ." but the sheriff grinned a wolfish grin at him and said, "He had been informed of his rights and there was a lawyer present. Anything else?"

Abe said, "Why would the Weldons try to hijack a truckload of TV sets? They've got a pretty good business of their own going out there."

"Not good enough to pay off the twenty G's that Art is into the bookies for," the sheriff said. "Art, Junior, told us about that." He paused. "*Now* if you still think the sheriff of this county is crooked and inefficient, go ahead and say so in the paper and on the air. But if not, we think the only fair thing to do is to tell the story like it happened. Okay?"

Johnny and Abe got up. "We will," Johnny promised. "And say, sheriff, I'm sorry about those innuendos before. But you can't blame us too much for thinking that was a funny place to park a stolen truck."

They left. I gave it as my loose opinion to the sheriff that the press boys would make good on their promises.

They did, too. But do you know whose picture they used in the paper? Not the sheriff's, much to his disappointment, and not mine, even though I was the one who came up with the really tough answer.

No. They used the picture of that redheaded kid with the crooked teeth. Don Start.

Man in his wisdom is not unlike Pavlov's dog.

YES, IT IS TERRIBLE about the little girl, and I agree that it's a good thing they caught the murderer so quickly. They could hardly have missed him, though, since he was still wandering about the area in a daze, his clothes saturated with the little girl's blood, and the knife he'd used to butcher her was in his pocket. Terrible, yes.

Funny thing—I saw that fellow approach the little girl yesterday afternoon, right over there in front of the candy store. They talked for a few moments, the little girl hanging her head shyly, clutching her school books to her spindly chest, the man beaming down at her and offering her a paper sack full of candy. Then they crossed the street and entered the park here. They passed no more than twenty feet from this bench where you and I are sitting now. They didn't pay any attention to me—didn't even notice me, I'm sure.

The man was talking, gesturing, and the girl had a sort of anticipatory eagerness on her freckled little face. No doubt the fellow was telling her he had something marvelous to show her, if she would just come along.

I watched them out of sight as they went down that path yonder and into the trees, toward that hidden spot on the lake shore where the group of young people stum-

bled upon the little girl's mutilated body a couple of hours later.

Oh, it's not strange that I saw them. I sit here in the park almost every afternoon when the weather is good, reading a book and soaking up sunshine; often just sitting and watching the people pass by. My wife and I live in the block of apartments on the east side of the park and, since I made the mistake of retiring from business a year or so ago, I have nothing to do and too much time to do it in. So I sit in the park.

But that's neither here nor there.

The point is that yesterday afternoon I had a very good idea what was going to happen—and no, I'm not kidding.

You see, it wasn't the first time I'd seen that fellow. Bryson, his name is, a highly respected accountant employed by a firm downtown—bland and benign, never a breath of scandal attached to him. A regular pillar of virtue . . . until yesterday.

The first time I saw him—or I should say the first time I took any notice of him, since I'd been vaguely aware of him hanging around the park before that, from time to time—was early last summer. Three months ago, just about.

Anyway, that first occasion was a good deal like yesterday, except that the little girl he met wasn't on her way home from school; she was playing here in the park.

In those days I usually sat on a bench that was way over on the far side of the park from here, over by the kids' playground, where there are all the seesaws, slides and swings. My wife and I never had children, you see, and I sort of enjoyed just watching the kids at play over there.

You notice I put that in the past tense. I *did* enjoy watching them, until that day early last summer. Since then . . . But I'm rambling, like old duffers are inclined to do when they get an audience. Not that I'm all that old—I still can climb a flight of stairs without panting, and haven't had a bad spell of sickness in years. Fool to retire, I was.

What? Oh, yes. Get to the point.

That day, this fellow kind of sidled up to the little girl. She was about the same age as the one yesterday—seven or eight. Sandy hair, as I remember, and freckles. Very much the same.

Bryson—though of course I didn't know who he was then—Bryson looked at the girl intently for a minute, then he bent down over where she was playing, sort of off by herself, away from the other kids. He gave her a big grin.

"Hello," he said. "My goodness, I haven't seen you in I don't know

how long! How are your mother and father?"

The girl glanced up at him. "Fine."

"Good, good. But you don't remember me, do you? I'm a friend of your dad's. Why, I used to bounce you on my knee when you were no bigger than *that*." He snapped his fingers playfully.

Well, the girl was leery of him at first, but she began to warm up as he talked on about what great friends he and her parents were. It just happened, according to him, that he was on his way to get some ice cream, at the ice-cream stand in the park, over on the far side of the lake from the kids' playground. Would she like to come along? After a second's hesitation, she decided she would.

Me, I was close enough to hear all this, though I didn't pay too much attention at first . . . until the fellow called the little girl "Mary," and she giggled and said, "My name isn't Mary, silly. I'm Carol!"

The man, Bryson, laughed softly and said, "Of course. I was just teasing you, Carol. Come along . . ."

Well, they walked away, the little girl skipping along beside Bryson, and after a moment he took her hand and sort of urged her to move faster. Then, just before they passed out of sight among the shrubbery over there, the man looked back. He looked all around. His face was set and . . . gloating is the word that comes to mind. Gloating. . . .

It set alarm bells ringing in my head. I got up and looked around, myself. Naturally, there wasn't a park policeman in sight. In fact, the only other adults were some distance away; besides, I might just be making a fool of myself.

For all I knew, the man might be exactly what he said, but that expression on his face when he looked back . . . It wouldn't hurt to follow them through the woods and across the bridge that spans an arm of the lake there, and on to the ice-cream stand. So I did.

I hung back far enough to be out of sight on the path, which winds around through pretty thick shrubbery until it meets the main path that leads to the bridge. I could hear their voices up ahead of me, Bryson telling some jolly story and the little girl giggling from time to time.

Then I heard him say, "Here's the lake. I'll tell you what let's do. Let's cut through the trees here to the shore, and take off our shoes and cool our feet in the water for a few minutes. Wouldn't that be fun? Then we'll get our ice cream. Come on!"

Almost at once I could hear the

sounds of their pushing through the bushes that bordered the path, over toward the lake. Now, it was deserted in there right then. Except for the rustling, crackling noise of the man and the girl going through the undergrowth, I couldn't hear a sound—not even the cheep of a bird, or the hum of an insect. Just silence and shadows there, with the canopy of the trees shutting out most of the sunlight.

I might have been in some forest primeval, instead of a patch of woods in a park in the middle of a huge, bustling city. For the first time I began to get scared, but I pushed on, following. I got to the edge of the underbrush just in time to see the man helping the little girl take off her shoes, the two of them sitting on the grass at the edge of the water. He was still talking; she was still giggling, and calling him "Uncle Frank" now.

When he had her shoes off, he kept one of her feet in his right hand, and with his left hand he began to stroke her bare little leg. She had her head turned away, looking at something out on the lake, and she didn't notice when he took his hand from her leg and reached very slowly toward his hip pocket.

But I noticed. I was standing behind and kind of to one side of them, pretty well hidden in the bushes. I could see the man's face well enough, and what I saw written in his face was more than enough.

I jumped out and threw myself toward Bryson, before he could get the knife all the way out of his pocket. He saw me coming, but he didn't have time to do much more than give a startled whinny before I landed on top of him.

Meanwhile, the little girl rolled away and came to her feet, screaming. She screamed and screamed, while I did my damnedest to hold Bryson down on the ground and keep his hand away from that knife in his pocket.

It was bedlam: the girl screaming, me yelling for help, and before long Bryson blubbering, "Don't hurt me—don't, don't!"

Me hurt *him*. I could almost have laughed, if I'd had the breath for it.

By now the little girl was trying to help me, I thought, by pummeling away with her tiny fists. But she was hitting *me* more often than the struggling man on the ground, so I gave her a push back out of the way.

Then I heard shouts, and two uniformed park cops burst out of the brush. I was never so glad to see anyone in my life. I got up, gasping and shaking, and started to explain.

Bryson just lay there, arms wrapped around his head, whimpering—at first—until the little girl shrilled, "He's a bad man—he's an awful man—he tried to *hurt* me!"

You guessed it. She was pointing a tiny forefinger directly at *me* . . .

I'll say one thing for Bryson, he was fast on the uptake. He got up, mopping his slightly bruised and battered face on his shirt sleeve, and suddenly he was all righteous indignation.

It seems that *I* was the one who had lured the little girl here, and *he* had followed, arriving just in the nick of time. I kept waiting for the girl to calm down enough to tell the officers the truth, but she didn't. She just kept pointing at me, her sweet little freckled face twisted with outrage, and crying, "Bad man—bad old man!"

Well, that was that.

Sometime during the turmoil Bryson managed to slip away, and by the time—hours later—when the police finally began to have doubts that I was the guilty party after all, there was no trace of Bryson to be found. Of course, at that time, no one knew his name, or anything about him.

Meanwhile, that little girl—that little girl whose life I'd saved, as surely as I'm sitting here now—insisted that *I* was the man who'd tried to hurt her, long after her parents had made it clear they had no idea who the man in the park might have been, and that he was certainly no family friend. She kept on even long after she herself had been forced to admit that it was "Uncle Frank" who had suggested the walk in the woods beside the lake.

Yes, I managed to clear myself—finally.

Believe me, I didn't come to the park for several weeks after that, and since I have started coming again to sit in the afternoon sun, I've stayed far away from the kids' playground. You know . . . once bitten, twice shy.

What? Oh, good lord, no—it wasn't the same little girl that Bryson picked up yesterday afternoon. No, indeed. There was a resemblance, though. I suppose Bryson was attracted by little girls who had freckles and sandy hair.

Why didn't I *do* something yesterday? I did, my friend. I did what any sane man would do, given the circumstances.

I finished the chapter I was reading in my book and went home to a good dinner.

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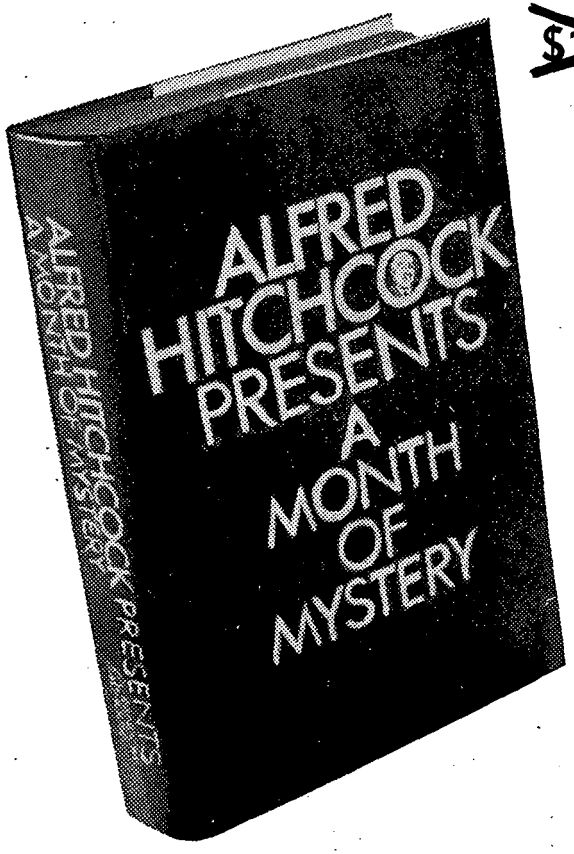

For details please see other side

There is nothing like a substantial concern for cats to produce a healthy kitty.

WORK SOMETHING OUT

by Carroll Mayers

MR. COULTER didn't live in the apartment complex, so he didn't patronize the public street-level cocktail lounge every night as some of the tenants did, but he came in fairly regularly. He showed up one rainy Tuesday evening when the

lounge was practically deserted, and took a stool at the end of the bar.

I built his customary gin and tonic. "Evening, Mr. Coulter."

"Hello, George," Mr. Coulter said shortly. He was a heavyset man in his late forties, good-looking, expensively suited. He headed a firm of top-level business consultants. Usually, he'd amplify his greeting with some pleasantry or gag, but tonight he plainly wasn't in the mood for banter. I retreated and started polishing glasses.

Mr. Coulter drank slowly, deliberately, as if it were a chore rather than a pleasure. His dark eyes regarded the back bar with stony concentration. Finally, his glass empty, he signaled for a refill; and, in due course, another.

I ventured a half-smile as I served him the third glass. "Something wrong, Mr. Coulter?"

He grunted, gaze still bleak. "You might say that."

"Anything I can do?"

"No," Mr. Coulter said bluntly. Then he added, "No offense, George—but it's not in your province."

I said, "Yes, sir," and went back to my polishing.

Mr. Coulter nursed his third drink as deliberately as the first two. At length, finished, he again beckoned me. I hefted the gin bottle, but Mr. Coulter shook his head. I moved down the bar. "Yes, sir?"

Mr. Coulter looked around briefly and ascertained that the lounge still was practically deserted, with nobody awaiting service. When he returned his attention to me, it was evident he'd decided to expound somewhat.

"Perhaps I was a bit off-base a moment ago, George," Mr. Coulter said. "Are you married?"

"Yes, sir," I told him.

"If you don't mind my asking, how do you and your wife get along?"

I said, "Pretty well as a team, I guess—if you overlook the few squabbles we have about the time we're devoting to our careers."

Mr. Coulter's brows arced. "Careers?"

I grinned. "Agnes is a receptionist in a law firm, but she fancies herself an actress; she's involved in every little-theatre group in town. Me, I try to write; some day I hope I'll sell some fiction."

Mr. Coulter nodded. "But you do understand each other?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

Mr. Coulter sighed. "You're lucky, George. Damned lucky. Mrs. Coulter doesn't understand me at all. That's trite, I know, but it's true. She's so infernally wrapped up in her club activities,

her charity affairs, she hardly knows I'm alive . . ." Mr. Coulter's words trailed off; his gaze left me, focused on his empty glass.

I felt I should say something. "That's too bad," I said.

My sober concurrence appeared to merit further discussion. Mr. Coulter's eyes lifted, locked with mine. "That's why I'm here. That's why I stop by here every Tuesday and Thursday," he said soberly. Then a shrewd glint showed in his dark gaze. "But I'm not telling you anything new. I'd say a smart young barkeep like you is pretty much privy to the whole building. You know about Miss Evers and me, don't you, George?"

I blinked. "Sir?"

"Gloria Evers—the blonde lovely in suite 4-C upstairs."

I spread my hands. "Look, Mr. Coulter—"

Mr. Coulter shook his head again. "I'm not drunk, if that's what you're thinking. On the other hand, I'm not sure why I'm suddenly talking like this." He stopped, swore softly. "But maybe I do. Maybe—just maybe—you'll have a suggestion I can use."

I said, "About Miss Evers, sir; I don't know what I should say . . ."

"I'll say it for you," Mr. Coulter said. "I've been paying Miss Evers' rent for five months. She's a considerate, affectionate young lady. It's not that I don't care for my wife, but we've lost touch—and Miss Evers fills a void I'd otherwise suffer." He eyed me directly. "Can you appreciate that, George?"

I said, "I guess so, only—"

Mr. Coulter wasn't through unburdening himself. "Then perhaps you'll have a thought as to what I should do with something like this." As he spoke, he withdrew a folded sheet of paper from his pocket, opened it on the bar.

The sheet was a letter, typewritten, undated and unsigned, and it read simply:

This is your last warning. Unless you immediately give up your sinful relationship with that shameless young woman, my next letter will go to your wife.

Mr. Coulter's direct look held. "Well?"

I said, "You mean there have been other letters like that?"

"Three," he told me. "One a week for the past three weeks, sent to me at my office." Mr. Coulter took back the letter. "Obviously, some frustrated, blue-nosed female has learned about Miss Evers and myself," he went on grimly. "She could be anyone, anywhere, of course, but I'm inclined to think there's a good possibility she's a tenant right here in the building. That's what I meant a moment ago. You know most of the ten-

ants; any idea who she might be?"

I chewed my lip. "Gee, Mr. Coulter, I don't like to mention names," I said after a moment. "For that matter, from the letter, it doesn't have to be a woman."

Mr. Coulter's conviction was strong. "It's a woman, all right," he muttered. "Some pious, moralistic female with a warped mind." Abruptly, that shrewd look returned to his gaze as he studied me. "Dammit, George, you *do* know someone, don't you?"

I tried to parry his question. "Even so, sir," I ventured, "what can you do? I mean, unless you stop seeing Miss Evers . . ."

Mr. Coulter drew a breath. "I have no inclination to stop seeing Miss Evers," he informed me heavily. "By the same token, no, I don't know what I can do about these letters. But if you have any thought at all as to who might be behind them, I'd like to hear it."

I hesitated again, finally said, "Strictly as a guess, it could be Miss Willoughby."

Mr. Coulter's small smile was without humor. "And who precisely is Miss Willoughby?"

"She's a maiden lady in her seventies, sir," I told him. "She has an apartment in this wing."

"An old maid!" Mr. Coulter said with quiet satisfaction. Then he added knowingly, "That 'guess' of yours—it's a little more than that, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," I admitted. "Miss Willoughby is . . . well, pretty straitlaced. The newsboy who serves the building told me she stopped taking the daily paper because she considered the movie ads salacious. And she complained to the theatre manager about a play my wife had a small role in; she maintained the theme was degenerate."

Mr. Coulter's mirthless smile came back. "She's the one!" he said tightly. "I *know* she's the one."

"But what can you do, sir?" I repeated. "Even if you confronted her—" I broke off.

Mr. Coulter gave me a sharp look. "Something, George?"

"Maybe," I said slowly. "I was just thinking about Miss Willoughby's cats."

"Cats?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "The old lady's crazy about cats. She has three favorites in the apartment with her, and she donates regularly to the SPCA for the special care of strays. I understand she's even made a provision in her will along those lines."

Mr. Coulter began to follow me. "You're suggesting I emulate her concern?"

"Maybe you could work something out," I hazarded. "If Miss

Willoughby is truly writing those letters and you contributed, say, a hundred dollars to her special SPCA fund—and she knew you'd done so—possibly she'd be more tolerant of your relationship with Miss Evers."

Mr. Coulter frowned. "Then she's a hypocrite as well as a bluenose!"

I said, "Not necessarily, sir. It could just be that with cats versus convention, her moral persuasion might come in second."

Mr. Coulter suddenly smiled, this time less bleakly. "Dammit, George, I believe you may have something." He took out his wallet. "We'll make it more than a hundred. Take me up and present me to your Miss Willoughby and we'll get this charade on the road."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Coulter," I said, "but I can't leave the lounge. Besides," and I glanced at my watch, "Miss Willoughby won't be in her apartment now. Every evening about this time she eats dinner in the cafeteria across the avenue."

Mr. Coulter's strong fingers drummed the bar. "She'd have no real reason to presume I suspect her," he mused, "but I feel she'd be less suspicious of my ploy if I were introduced by a third party . . ."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I think so too. Tomorrow's my day off—if you'd care to, we could drop over to the cafeteria about this hour and I could introduce you. I could make some explanation so that it would appear less obvious than a formal visit."

Mr. Coulter's smile wasn't bleak at all now. "I'd appreciate that, George," he said. He laid a ten-dollar bill on the bar. "Keep the breakage."

That would be a pleasure. "Yes, sir," I said. "Thank you, sir."

"There she is," I told Mr. Coulter the following evening, indicating a woman eating alone at a corner table.

Mr. Coulter grunted, but he managed to sublimate his true feelings, dredge up a set smile. We threaded our way across the cafeteria's dining area.

"Good evening, Miss Willoughby," I said.

"Oh, George. How nice to see you." Miss Willoughby's voice was thin but not unpleasant. Behind thick-lensed granny glasses, oddly again in vogue, her blue eyes danced pleasantly.

"You're very kind," I said, and then added, "Miss Willoughby, I'd like you to meet one of my customers, Mr. Coulter. Sir, Miss Willoughby."

Miss Willoughby's gray head bobbed pertly beneath a dated blue straw headpiece. "Mr. Coulter."

Mr. Coulter bowed. "My pleasure, Miss Willoughby."

I said, "Frankly, Miss Willoughby, until Mr. Coulter happened to mention it a few moments ago when I was going off duty, I didn't know he shared your special interest. That's why I brought him over here to meet you."

Miss Willoughby beamed. "My interest in cats, you mean? How fascinating. Won't you gentlemen sit down?"

Mr. Coulter took his cue. "I'm due for an appointment, Miss Willoughby," he said simply, "but the SPCA *is* one of my favorite charities, and when George mentioned the thoughtful work you're doing—with cats especially—I did want to take a moment to meet you." He paused, then went on, "Also, if I may, I'd like to contribute a little something to your own personal fund."

Miss Willoughby continued to beam, then gasped as Mr. Coulter pressed a clip of crisp bills into her hands. "Five hundred dollars! Oh, Mr. Coulter, I couldn't possibly accept that much."

"Of course you can," Mr. Coulter assured her.

"No. Really."

"Nonsense, dear lady. It's my pleasure."

Additional protests ensued on both sides, but finally we managed to break away with some grace. Out of earshot, Mr. Coulter's set smile faded as he muttered, "Now we'll see if her moral persuasion is worth five hundred dollars."

"*If* she's the one who's been writing you," I reminded him.

Mr. Coulter's conviction was as strong as ever. "She's the one, George. Depend on it."

Mr. Coulter didn't show up at the cocktail lounge for three weeks. When he finally did, early on a Thursday evening, he greeted me with a broad smile. "Hello, George."

"Gee, Mr. Coulter," I said, "I've sure been wondering. I mean, those letters—"

"They stopped. Period. Right after my contribution to your pious Miss Willoughby's cat fund."

"And Mrs. Coulter didn't get one?"

Mr. Coulter chuckled. "I certainly wouldn't still be seeing Miss Evers if she had."

I indicated my understanding. "I guess you were right, sir," I said. "It must have been Miss Willoughby."

Mr. Coulter sobered. "Of course it was; and I say again she's a damned hypocrite. Between mores and five hundred dollars, mores didn't stand a chance." Then Mr. Coulter

handed me an envelope. "Speaking of filthy lucre," he said, "there's a token of my appreciation, George. If it hadn't been for your inspiration, I'd never have resolved that impasse."

I opened the envelope; there were two new hundred-dollar bills inside.

"Gee, sir," I said, "that's not necessary—"

Mr. Coulter flapped a palm. "My pleasure, George," he told me as he turned to leave the lounge. "See you." The way he veered toward the elevator bank, I figured he was going up to visit Gloria Evers.

My wife Agnes and I had a quiet laugh when I showed her my two hundred dollar 'token'. "That's seven hundred for the kitty," I reminded her. "I told you if he got worked up enough over the possibility of his playing house with gorgeous Gloria being curtailed, he'd probably confide in the most likely guy on the premises."

"Namely you."

"In person."

Agnes smiled. "But if you didn't have a budding actress as a wife, exquisitely skilled with glasses, wig and makeup, to go with your script, where would you be?"

"Touché," I conceded. "Incidentally, keep those glasses and wig handy. An advertising exec who's been coming into the lounge regularly has a babe on the sixth floor on the fire."

Agnes tousled my hair. "Better send the first letter."

I grinned. "It's already sent."

As I told Mr. Coulter: Agnes and me, we make a good team.

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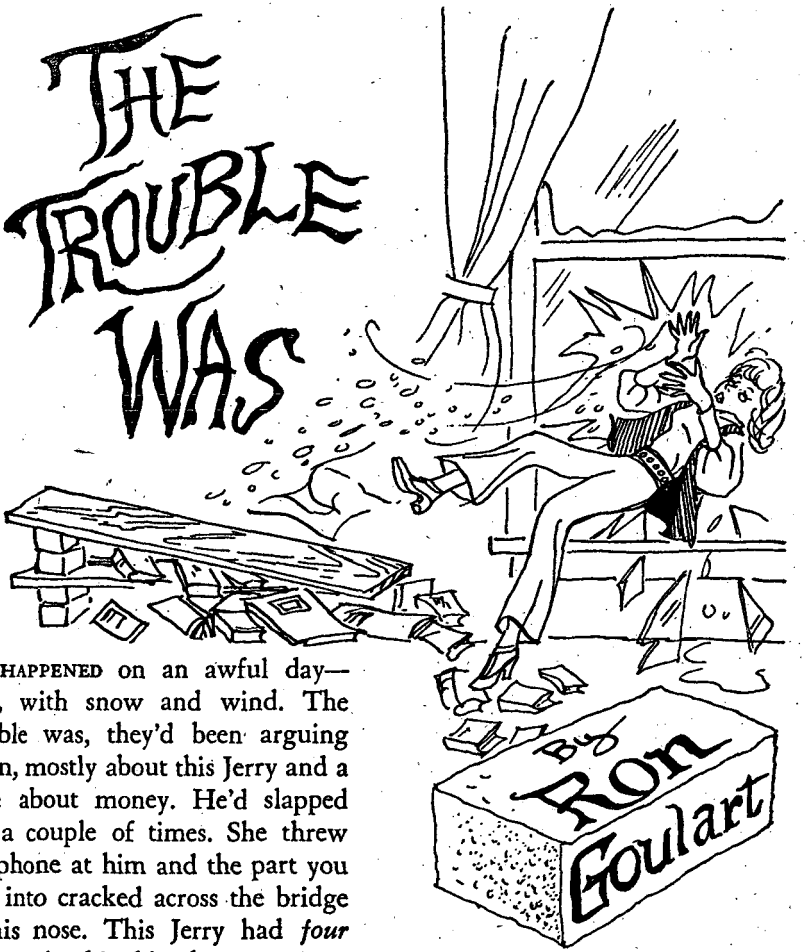
I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

Man can get into enough trouble on his own without "borrowing" it.

THE TROUBLE WAS



IT HAPPENED on an awful day—cold, with snow and wind. The trouble was, they'd been arguing again, mostly about this Jerry and a little about money. He'd slapped her a couple of times. She threw the phone at him and the part you talk into cracked across the bridge of his nose. This Jerry had *four* phones in his big house up on

Mountain Road, in colors that matched the decor, and he didn't have to worry about a few long-distance calls.

After she threw the phone, she heaved one of the bricks out of their makeshift bookcase. Seeing all his paperbacks and old college outlines go tumbling helter-skelter onto their secondhand rug made him somehow angrier than usual. He grabbed up the gray construction brick, which had crashed into the wicker magazine basket after missing him, and threw it straight back at her—something he didn't usually do.

The heavy gray brick knocked her in the head and she fell back, pushed by the force of the thrown brick, and smashed right on through the window. Wind and snow forged into their recreation room as she collapsed out on the snow-covered patio.

One of the troubles with living in the East was snow. He hated snow and the muddy slush that filled their hill-facing patio, so he didn't go out to see how she was. He figured she'd sulk out there for a while and then go off and spend the evening with this Jerry. The trouble was, he hadn't been able to stop that, not in all the past five months. She liked to tell him about it, this Jerry and his four-bedroom house up on Mountain Road, his income in six figures, his connections with people in local government and maybe even with some syndicate people. No, that wasn't maybe—that was for sure. She'd said just tonight that this Jerry was worried about being subpoenaed to testify at an upcoming hearing on organized crime.

He left her alone out there. In half an hour it was too cold in the rec room, even with the thermostat set at eighty and the portable heater on. He went to the broken window and called out to his wife. One of the few good things about their house was its distance from any neighbors. The main trouble with their old apartment in Brooklyn Heights had been that somebody always pounded on the floor or ceiling when they had one of their quarrels. Out here in this part of Connecticut there was nobody near enough to hear or care. "Come on in and help me rig up some way to patch this window," he shouted. "The whole house is freezing and there's all kinds of snow on the rug here."

He squinted out and saw her still sprawled in the drift, whiter than the snow and freckled all over with it. The overhead lighting that splashed out on her made her look like a flash photo. Then he realized she was dead.

He stayed at the broken win-

dow, vaguely bothered by the cold wind, watching her. He tried to make himself feel sorry or guilty, or even pitying. Instead, he felt relieved. She'd often said that was the trouble with him. No sympathy, no empathy. This Jerry was not like him. Maybe he did deal with the syndicate and with hoods, but he was a sympathetic person. Handsome, too, and not overweight. One of his own troubles was his weight, and the fact he wasn't handsome enough. She reminded him of it many times, telling him he was, according to some chart she'd seen in a women's magazine, twenty-six pounds too heavy and not handsome. Probably that was why he let her go off and spend time with this Jerry, and then come back late at night, or even not until the next morning, and tell him all about it. One of his troubles was he couldn't stop her from going and he couldn't even stop her from rubbing it in.

He watched the snow falling on her body and he decided he didn't want to go to prison over this. He didn't actually want to get into any trouble. He smiled. Another thing wrong with him, she'd said, was smiling at the wrong times. He kept smiling, thinking of a way to get out of this. He knew that often completely unpremeditated crimes were the easiest to cover up. Extemporizing on the spot, thieves and murderers had been able to fake something, some clever cover-up, which allowed them to go completely free.

Turning, not wanting to catch cold, he went into their kitchen and reached under the sink. He tugged out a pair of black rubber gloves from among boxes of detergent and put them on. Then he knelt and pulled out two big, folded, plastic garbage bags. The main trouble was getting rid of the body, but he'd figured that out in an instant while walking from the chilly rec room into the kitchen. He'd use this Jerry.

With the plastic garbage bags under his arm, he went into their bedroom and took his .32 revolver from the secret drawer in the night table. The trouble was, he wasn't sure if real hoods would use a gun of this caliber. Didn't they go in more for .38s and .45s? No matter. He had to use what was at hand. The gun was European, smuggled in when he came back from the service in 1959. There was no way to trace it.

Out on the patio he unfurled the plastic bags and put them over her body. There shouldn't be any snow on her if he was going to bring off what he had in mind. He picked up the brick and looked at it carefully. It would have to be cleaned

later tonight. Out in the garage he had a sheet of glass and from that he could cut a new pane to replace the one she'd fallen through. Yes, and he'd have to pick up all the fragments of glass, inside and out here in the snow, and brush away the indentations made by her body. No use worrying about these details yet. The only trouble was, he'd probably be up all night straightening things out. Whenever he was up all night, as he was when they had a particularly bad quarrel, he was irritable at work the next day.

He got her body into the big plastic sacks, one over her feet and legs and one over her head and torso. He got some plastic tape and sealed the bags where they joined at her waist. He carried her into the garage and put her into the trunk of their car, first spreading out newspapers. Then he went back into the house and got one of her winter coats and her purse, the one she would have taken with her tonight to go and see this Jerry. He left the lights on in the house and turned on the television set. He opened the garage, took off the gloves and stuffed them into a pocket of the warm mackinaw he'd put on. His prints should be on the steering wheel of his own car and he didn't want to smear any of hers. He backed the car out of the garage and drove on up their road. He gunned the motor too much on the curves, the way she always did. The few neighbors he passed would remember hearing that. The trouble was, how was he going to get this Jerry to let him in?

By the time he reached Mountain Road he'd figured a way. He parked beyond this Jerry's long, low, lighted house, on a narrow dirt road under some dark dead trees—the same place she'd park, probably, out of sight but not too far from the house. The house was wood and glass, a sprawling, California sort of place, really. There was only one other house on this stretch of the road and it was dark.

He took the plastic bags off her, folded them up and shoved them under his coat. He put his rubber gloves back on, hung her coat and purse over one arm, then lifted her body out and carried it along the snow-banked mountain roadway to this Jerry's house. He knew he'd probably leave footprints in the snow and that they might not be covered by morning, so he was wearing an old pair of rubber boots left behind by the previous tenant of their house. The only trouble with them was, they were three sizes too big. They gave a lopsided wobble to his walk as he carried his dead wife straight up to this Jerry's front door. The snow

was falling hard, swirling hundreds of prickly flakes around him.

He marched up the red stone stairs and elbowed the buzzer. Chimes sounded deep inside and then the door opened a slit, held with a bright brass chain. This was the first time he had seen this Jerry up close. A tall man, broad in the shoulders, tan. Not really that handsome though, eyes a little too small and nose a little too big.

"What in the hell is this?" asked Jerry.

"Are you alone?" He knew he must be if he were expecting her. Still, it paid to be cautious.

"Yes. I just got home." Jerry opened the door wider. "What's wrong with her?"

"There's been an accident. A serious accident, and she's badly hurt," he told this Jerry. "I'm her husband."

"I know."

"Listen, we've got to call an ambulance right away. The accident happened right up the road."

Jerry hesitated. "Well, bring her in. I don't want a big frumus going on. I can call a doctor I know. What kind of accident, and why are you with her?"

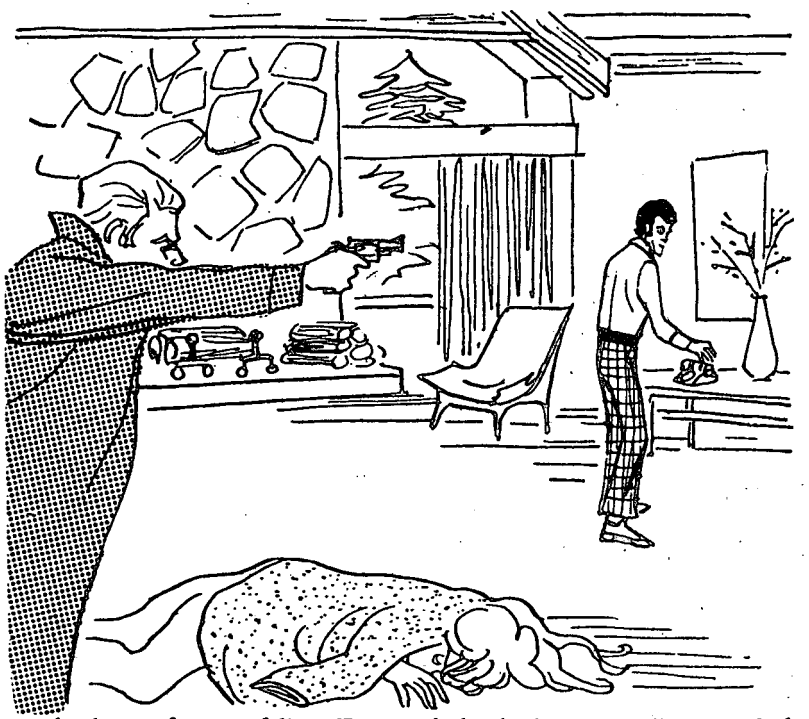
Inside, in the beam-ceilinged livingroom, he kicked the door shut behind him. Then he dropped her on the thick white rug in front of him.

This Jerry had been walking, thoughtfully, toward a tan phone. He turned now and started to ask an angry question.

He shot him three times with the revolver, carefully, not shaking, doing it quite calmly. The trouble with something like this was you could very easily get nervous and rattled. Two of the shots hit this Jerry in his chest and one got him in the shoulder. The man fell back and down sideways, blood growing all over the front of his blue chambray shirt. He hit the rug in an odd, soft way and his legs kicked out and one of his fleece-lined brown slippers flipped off. It skidded along the pale rug, leaving a faint line of red. Then this Jerry was dead.

He now dragged his wife closer to the man and then carefully shot her twice, to cover up what the brick had done. He stepped away from the two of them and looked around the big room. This had to look like a hood killing, quick and efficient, so there was no need to make it look as though there was much of a struggle. Still, if she died first, this Jerry might have had time to put up a little fight.

He walked over to a teakwood table and knocked over a big buff-colored ceramic lamp. Then, after that had crashed and the three-way bulb had popped, he decided to



shove the low sofa out of line. For good measure he tore one tan drape partly down—not one that anybody would notice from the road.

This Jerry wouldn't have let a killer in the front door. No, that wasn't the way a gangland killing went. He stomped through the expensive house and into the large white kitchen. Copper cookware hung from racks above the built-in stove and there was a butcher's block with a cleaver and an electric knife atop it. She'd told him about these things. The trouble with this job he had now, well, *one* of the troubles, was the salary. Working right in Connecticut had its advantages but you couldn't draw the kind of salary you could in New York City. He'd explained that to her often enough.

He went out the kitchen door and into a yard thick with snow. He made sure there was no car passing on the road, nothing around. He crept up to a kitchen window, reached up and smashed it in with a gloved fist. Maybe real hoods wouldn't be that flamboyant, but then again they might. Any-

way, this Jerry had said he'd only just come home, so a real hood could have broken in as noisily as he wanted after making certain no one was home. Sure, and then waited quietly.

As soon as this Jerry walked in, the real hood would have done it. But noticing the woman he would have decided to kill her too. Her first and then this Jerry. That was certainly plausible. A real hood might well do it that way, to be nasty maybe—to let this Jerry see her die.

To make things completely realistic he actually climbed through the kitchen window, crunching a boot right into the sink and smashing a brandy glass. He walked into the livingroom and checked it once more. He was still carrying the revolver in his hand. What would a real hood do? Leave the gun or take it? Take it, probably. The trouble was, he had to make this look completely like a real hood killing. From what she'd told him about this Jerry the man was really involved with the rackets. If this Jerry was going to be questioned by a commission on organized crime, the police would know about it. When the police found the two of them dead here they'd conclude it was a gang killing. This Jerry was killed to keep him quiet and the woman because she had the bad luck to be with him. It all sounded plausible.

What he had to do now was get back home and clean up everything there. When the police discovered the bodies and contacted him, there should be no trace of any quarrel. They'd probably get in touch with him while he was at work and the only trouble there was to look surprised in front of everybody. That shouldn't be too hard. He'd look shocked, stunned, maybe cry a little. No, don't cry. Men don't like to see another man cry. Show shock, pain, and, yes, admit that he knew his wife had been seeing another man. Other people must know about her, too; friends of this Jerry's. They'd back up that part.

He took one final look around and walked to the front door. Then he stopped, snapped his fingers. The car. He'd have to leave their car here. He'd made it look as though she were driving, so the car would have to stay. That would work out, because she really had spent nights here before, so the police wouldn't expect him to report the fact that she hadn't come home. The little Penn Central train station was only over the hill from their house. He walked there every morning.

The trouble was, if he walked all the way home now it would take a

lot of time. He needed time to clean up there. Maybe he could take Jerry's car. Would a real hood do that? Not likely. No, but suppose this Jerry had driven over to somewhere near their house and met his wife there. That was logical. Parked his car someplace, possibly down in the train station lot, and then rendezvoused with her. He'd come over to Mountain Road in her car. Yes, that was the sort of thing a couple of people meeting on the sly might well do.

He walked back to the dead man's body, bent and poked at his pockets with the barrel of the revolver. No keys jingled. He frowned, then spotted a ring of keys on the floor against the wall. They must have been on the teakwood table and fallen from there. He scooped them up in his gloved hands. Yes, these were the car keys. This Jerry had two cars, it looked like, one domestic and one foreign sports car. He smiled to himself.

He went cautiously out of the big house and walked around to the garage. The snow was still falling, straight down now through the cold darkness. He listened, heard nothing unusual, and opened the garage. There was a blue station wagon, still warm, in the shadowy garage, and a new sports car, low and gray. He looked at both cars and jingled the key ring on his gloved palm.

Might as well travel first class and take the sports car. He smiled again and got in. He put the key in the ignition and turned it.

The trouble was that this was the car the real hoods had wired with dynamite that afternoon.

All work and no play makes jack—a dull boy?

ME AND LEFT FOOT HAMISH are sitting in Katzie's Saloon and Jonesy, the flabby bartender, is saying like: "Dubois, I will lay you a silver-plated snare drum that—" when the announcer cuts in with a bomb.

Faceless Robert has been took.

Unknown hoods have heisted the Club 97 bank-bound boiler with the weekend receipts. Faceless is roaring like a ravished tiger, which he is.

What I mean is, Faceless is tough. He is so tough he is bolted together, under his clothes where it don't show. Nobody crosses him because he has an open account at Tortoni's Mortuary. Tortoni is a guy who moonlights at the slabs for his old pals when they are suddenly saddled with stiffs and need furtive funerals. Also, Faceless supplies him with embalming cement.

It is a bad scene, me and Jonesy and Left Foot all shaking in unison over this news. We are scared that Faceless will find out we have been breathing during the time he is suffering his loss. When Faceless suffers, he likes everyone to suffer. Mostly they do.

Left Foot, of course, is a poor pal in a pinch. His idea of a solution to anything is to sacrifice a chicken.

He is also the kind of a slob who knows when it is National Rowboat Week.

Jonesy, on the other hand, has a bigger mouth than the Mississippi; and he is not bright. One time, the store was out of white elephants and he bought an ivory owl.

I am stuck with these two because I am afraid to go home alone.

It is worse the next day. The word is out, and so are Faceless' hoods. He hates to lose a buck. All his roulette wheels are wired and he has a three-headed coin. But he wouldn't cheat a fly. Flies have no dough.

I am nursing a beer in Katzie's, late in the afternoon, when I get the phone call. Jonesy answers the bell and he cannot believe it is for me. The last time I got a call was when Batman was jailed for vag.

The guy on the other end is Rooty Meltzer, and he says I shouldn't let him down. I tell him it never crossed my mind. He gives me a funny little laugh and says, "Ha-ha, I knew you were OK."

Naturally I am surprised to hear from Rooty, because I am not as close to him as I am to the Queen of Bolivia. I also did not know that he knew my handle or hangout. He insists that I meet him pronto, and that he is not sure of anyone else but me. I say I am not that sure of tomorrow and he lays the funny little laugh on me again.

Rooty Meltzer is a klutz on the shady side of forty, and the steadiest thing about him is his feud with Faceless Robert. They hate each other so much that lightning would be damaged if it got between them. Rooty is just out of stir. I cannot imagine what he wants with me, but he offers to butter up the bread he casts on my waters.

So I go to see him, but I do not tell Jonesy, who is so curious he tries to have the call traced. He is so nosy he has three nostrils.

I wait till dark. Rooty is in a pad, a gloomy walk-up which is hard to find with a map. It is hardly more than a chair and couch, a cupboard and bed, and a slot for a gun barrel. Rooty is prison pale and is nursing a grudge. He thinks that Faceless is behind sending him upriver for a stretch. He is probably right.

"However," Rooty says, pushing me into a chair, "I am not trying to get even." He eyes me and clicks on a lamp so he can check my expression. "Dubois, you are my kind of guy."

I say thanks. I am not sure I want to be.

He says, "You are a joe who would not jim-jam a pal."

So I nod. I wonder if he wants me to drive the getaway car.

He whispers, "I picked you for a very important commish." He finds a bottle and pours me a small drink and watches me sip it. "Bottoms up, pal, and gimme your undivided. I have got a proposition to lay in your lap."

He drums his fingers on the bottle while I finish the liquid, then he grabs the glass. When he puts the bottle away, I get a glimpse of the gat under his arm. Rooty is being nice to me, but he is tough as a rhino with shinguards.

"In case you should decide to pass up dis golden opportunity," he says, talking out of the side of his mouth, "I don't want you should canary to the cats at Katzie's." He lays a hard look on me.

"Ohhhh, I w-w-wouldn't d-do that, Rooty."

"Course not, pal. I know dat. Otherwise I woulda picked some other bu—er—smart apple." He shifty-eyes the room, tugs on the drapes which are already tight, and slips a sack out of a sideboard. He pushes it into my hands.

"Here's the proposish, Dubois. Open de sack."

I peek into it and almost fall over with astonishment. Rooty is ready and props me up. He knew I would do this. I take a deep breath to steady my tremors. The sack is packed with green-gelt geetus. The picture on the top C note is Ben Franklin. I stare at him and he peers at me over his ironbound specs. Neither of us says anything, but my mouth is open farther than his.

"OK, dis is a secret, dis loot," Rooty says, whispering again. "I want you should sit on it for me for a week. Can do?"

"L-l-loot?"

"Lissen, I can't take it to a bank, huh? Dey ask them dumb questions. I want you should be my safe-deposit box. Nobody should know." He snaps his fingers to make my eyes focus. "Nobody knows, nobody gets wise, huh, Dubois? We got us a deal, pard?"

I am still trying to get my breath back. The paper sack is hot in my hands. Rooty tilts my head back and peers into my pupils, speaking very patient and slow. "The fuzz might have the serial numbers, you dig? Ha-ha. All you gotta do is stash the sack with your spare shirt. I come after it in a week."

I nod and clutch the cash. I feel numb.

He grins like a lion who has just found a lamb in his glove compartment. "You are a right guy, Dubois. And dis is for your trouble." He presses a wad of greenies into my moist fist. Then he reaches down the bottle and gives me another glop of knee-straightener.

When I finally stagger out of the pad he follows me to the stairs and pats me on the head. When I look at him he is examining his rodney with a great show of being casual.

"De last guy who crossed me is —" He stops and lays the funny little laugh on me. "I'll see you inna week, Dubois."

It is very hard for me to go down the stairs because I am sweating so much. At the first landing I look back and he is still standing there fondling the rod.

"Pal," he says, "I can tell you are the right apple to hold my jack." Then the funny little laugh, and he disappears.

When he shuts the door it is dark in the hallway and I am suddenly very lonely; just me and the sack of bread. I scuttle into the night, avoiding lights. It takes me an hour to walk home to Mrs. Sherpy's boardinghouse where I live. Then I lock the door and begin to breathe a little.

Only I choke up when I count the loot. It takes an hour, there is so much of it, and besides my hands are sweaty and the greenies stick together. I have to swallow a lot to keep my fluttering pump in its place. I have never seen so much dough. There is thirty-two thousand smackeroonies in the sack.

I am scared stiff.

Rooty has give me five twenties. I put one in my pocket and four in my shoe. Then I jam all the berries back in the bag and hide it under my pillow. It pooches out. I shove the sack under the bed behind the cantaloupes. Then I change my mind and reach it up on the top shelf of the closet behind my soup cans, but nowhere seems like the right spot.

However, whilst I am trembling and trying each nook and niche, I pause and reflect that only me and Rooty knows I possess this moolah, and he will not bruit it about, and I am a clam-type cookie, so what is there to worry? Maybe no one will notice I got permanent goosebumps.

So I smooth the pillow over the fat sack, make the bed nice and neat and ease out, locking the door behind me. Only then I tarry and pause again and re-reflect. Up to now I have never locked the door—what's to hide? It will be suspicious.

Mrs. Sherpy is one of the world's great nosy snoops. If the door is locked, and she discovers it—which she will do because she palms knobs—then she will know there is something inside she should see. She will skeleton-key her way inside and her long nose will pierce the sack like a bayonet because she can smell the minty tang of scratch-of-the-realm through armor

plate. Her little wallet-shaped eyes will glitter and she will take the sack and the next boat to Budapest, in that order—and a week is not enough head start on Rooty.

Unlocking the door, I slide back in and sit on the bag. Me and it must not be parted. I do not want a mole's-eye view of daisy roots for good. Like permanent.

So I stay and sigh and sprawl on the sack. I did not realize this problem would arise. During the day I eat two cantaloupes and a can of soup while I cudgel my smarts very hard. Mostly what I decide is that eating soup with a fork is murder.

It is a long night, and in the morning while I am still snoring, Mrs. Sherpy opens the door a crack and shouts at me. "The cops looking for you, Dubois?"

I say they aren't, that I know of. She thinks it is funny that I didn't go out. I hug the sack and tell her to beat it.

"It's daylight out."

"That ain't my fault," I say.

She opens the door wide enough to get both beady eyes focused on me. "Jonesy says you got a phone call," she accuses.

That makes me twitch. She is examining the room like a burglar. I yell at her that I got my rights, but I know she thinks that I have found the Holy Grail. Jonesy has planted a seed in the weed garden between her ears. If I had hung out the flag of the Mafia she would not be more suspicious.

I shove into my clothes, grab the sack, which I hide under my coat, and slip down to the street. I can feel her eyeballs on my back, and I know that she will frisk my room and make each moth turn out its pockets. Mrs. Sherpy invented slithering. Her ears have keyhole marks on them.

At Katzie's Saloon, Jonesy is biting his tongue, doing yesterday's crossword puzzle—they are easier when he has the answers. He twitches his skimpy moustache at me. " 'Lo, Dubois, what you got in the sack?"

"A motorcycle," I say, and he brightens for a second, then he frowns.

"Faceless and some of his boys was in. They heard about your phone call."

"You didn't have to tell him," I yell.

"You mean it was important?" He leans over the bar; he is desperate to know.

"It didn't have nothing to do with Faceless. It was—" I bite my tongue. He clouds up.

"That your lunch in the sack?"

"No, it's—" I catch myself again, and lay the twenty on the bar. "Gimme a beer."

Jonesy stares at the Jackson and

forgets to breathe. "Where'd you get a twenty? Faceless says his loot was mostly twenties . . ."

"This ain't his loot!" I yell. "I got it from—"

His ears are flapping. "You didn't have no clams the last time you was here."

"Yeah, this is today," I inform him.

Jonesy draws a lager and slides it under my nose. He smiles like a weasel with a winning hand. "Faceless is looking for them bandits like Satan snatching souls. What you got in the bag?" he says.

"Nothing's in the bag!"

"Sure, sure, a sack of nothing." Jonesy picks his teeth with his finger. "Faceless lost a real wad. You know how much?"

I shake my head, and nibble the Milwaukee dew.

"Thirty-two thou."

I gulp and gasp. "Thirty-two thousand bucks?" I am so shook I slide off the stool and drop the sack. A wad of mazuma squirts out, but I clutch the bag and stuff it back in by the time Jonesy stretches over the bar to stare.

"Whassamatter with you, Dubois?" he growls. "You are jumpy as a congressman at the Pearly Gates."

"I—well, I was—I mean—" Then I bite my tongue because he is staring at me and the sack in a very peculiar way. I don't like it.

I put the bag behind me. "There's nothing in the bag!" I scream at him. "No moo or nothing!" Then I run out the front door—and run over Left Foot. He is dodging back and forth, but I hit him anyway. I land on his liver, because he is only a wisp. People take advantage of him; someone once palmed off a toothache on him.

In this melee I drop the sack again, but I grab it from under his startled puss. Him and Ben Franklin has been exchanging stares. Then I scoot like a sinner, clutching the sack to my stomach. I glance back and Left Foot's mouth is open so far I can see the eggs he had for breakfast.

I spend two hours in the park, but I have to keep moving. All the pigeons want to know what's in the sack. They think it's for them. If I stand still, they kick me on the ankle.

So I slink back to the boardinghouse and into my room.

Mrs. Sherpy sticks her head in the door. "What you done, Dubois? Faceless was here lookin' for you."

"Faceless!" I scream. I roll off the bed.

Mrs. Sherpy don't answer. She is gaping at the paper sack which has hit the floor beside me and is showing a green fringe of frogskins.

Her loose mouth starts to work but nothing comes out. She looks from me to the lettuce and back again and the claws on her hands begin to resemble talons.

I scramble up, scoop in the sack and sizzle through the door before she can snare me. She chases me down the hall, yelling that I have hijacked Faceless and that she will tell him unless I cut her in.

I lose her at the first corner and I head for Rooty's pad. He is not due for three days, but I have got to deposit the loot. I am wearing out from the green.

Only I never make it. There is a long, black boiler in the street, and I get a glimpse of Faceless Robert in the back seat. He looks like an armor-plated shark. When I run down the sidewalk the car spurts up beside me.

That's when I am forced into the First National Bank.

I slide into an office and a flint-eye opens an account for me; I deposit Rooty's loot. I can see that Faceless and his hoods are waiting outside, keeping their heaters warm.

I am so scared by the entire scene that I hardly notice when the fuzz arrive and pick me out of the chair.

"So you are the guy with the funny money, huh, sport?" he says.

"Wha—?" I say.

"Counterfeit, all of it," the flint-eye growls, pointing to Rooty's bagful.

The cop says, "Tell us where you got it and we'll see you get out in ten years."

They throw me in the slammer.

The next day Faceless comes to see me. He is chewing a match stick and looking very sharp in a new pinstripe. I cower at the back of the cell because I am sure he is going to stab me.

"Dubois, you saved my bacon."

"I d-d-did?"

"I was s'posed to find out about the dough you was keeping for that bum, Rooty."

"You w-w-were?"

"And then take it away from you so's the cops would find it on me." He makes a rumbling noise which I recognize as laughter. "So you save me, little pal, by putting the dough in the bank and taking the rap."

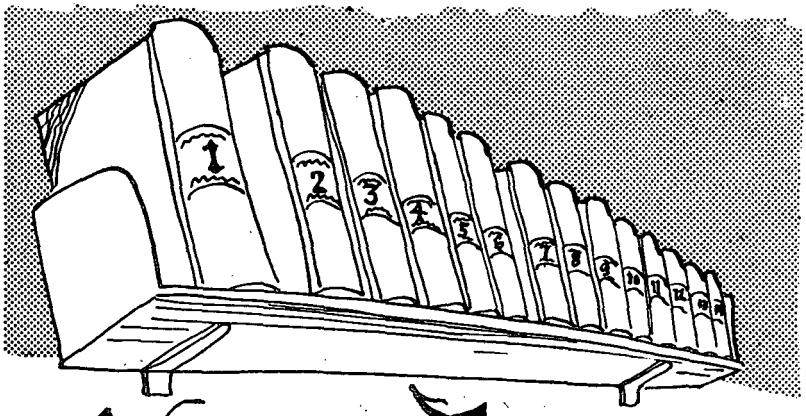
"I d-d-d-did?"

"So I am going to loan you bail money." He takes out a pinstripe wallet. "They won't make this rap stick."

"Gee, Faceless, that's great."

It only cost me twelve percent.

Perhaps life is a masquerade ball, though seldom with such a thorough unmasking.



Slay the Wicked

a Novelette

by Frank Sisk

JAMES MORTON OLIVER was seemingly a man above reproach. He was a deacon of the Queensport Congregational Church. He served for varying periods of time as local chairman of the Red Cross, the American Cancer Society, the United Fund, and the Waterfront Improvement Association. With a dozen other civic-minded citizens he founded the Benjamin Oliver (after his father) Memorial Li-

brary and was thereafter its principal financial support. Annually he subsidized a part of the summer camping expenses of the local Boy Scout troop. His pledge of $10,000 inaugurated the campaign that raised the money to add a children's wing on the Queensport Community Hospital. And he was always a dues-paying member of the Chamber of Commerce, although he had no local commercial interests.

James Morton Oliver had inherited a fair fortune from his father and then trebled it over a twenty-year period by judicious investment in the common stock of certain insurance companies. Each month he spent a few days in Hartford, another few days in New York, usually chauffeured to these cities by a small compact black man named Darby Tyler, who had been with him a long time and served also as butler. All the other days Mr. Oliver devoted to Queensport and environs—"the loveliest area in all of New England," as he often said with happy satisfaction whenever he was toastmaster at a testimonial dinner.

As had his father and grandfather before him, he lived in the Oliver mansion on Jericho Hill. The original part of the house was nearly two hundred years old and, thanks to assiduous maintenance from one generation to another, still remained in prime condition. Over the long years a number of additions had gradually converted the once four-square Colonial structure into a hub for a rambling series of wings and galleries that now could have housed quite comfortably a very large family. It sprawled in the approximate center of ninety scenic acres. The boundaries were marked by tall stands of Norway pine, green sentinels for all seasons. Behind them were mixed ranks of beeches, birches, maples, oaks. Close to the house were small well-kept orchards of apple, peach and cherry.

James Morton Oliver dwelt on this sizeable property completely alone except for his household staff. Besides Darby Tyler, there were Josephine Downes, the fat red-headed cook, and tall, slow-moving, laconic Si Green, general handyman and gardener.

James Morton Oliver never married. He had once been engaged to a young lady from Newburyport, Massachusetts, but she had died in an automobile accident. That was back when he was 28 or 29 years old. After that, any liaisons he may have enjoyed with the opposite sex were either nonexistent or conducted safely beyond the purview of the Queensport citizenry. Most people took the romantic line that

the Newburyport girl (who was remembered even by those who saw her only briefly and from a great distance as an exceptional raven-haired beauty) had been his one true love and that nobody else would ever fill the aching emptiness left by her tragic death.

James Morton Oliver, being the sole issue of his parents, had no close relatives. A few cousins, vaguely in evidence on occasion during his boyhood, had vanished under the folds of time. An aunt, the youngest sister of his father, was reputedly living the life of a society dowager in Phoenix, Arizona. An uncle on his mother's side had spent at least a decade succumbing to alcohol in and out of a VA hospital in West Haven, just forty-two miles away.

As for friends, James Morton Oliver appeared to have hundreds of them in all walks of life, but actually nobody was really close to him. Despite his natural warmth of manner, his fine sympathetic smile, his cheerful willingness to help where he was needed, he kept curiously at a distance from wholehearted involvement. He constantly gave a supporting hand but always withheld his heart. He accepted confidences but never dispensed them. The one man who might have known him better than anyone else was his lawyer, Herman Maxfield, and yet it was his lawyer who in the last analysis knew him least of all.

"For twenty-three years I have been this man's admiring legal adviser," Maxfield declared, his long loose-skinned face fuller than ever of melancholy furrows. "For twenty-three years I fancied myself among his few intimate friends. For twenty-three years I held him in a higher regard than almost anyone I've known. And now, in a trice as it were, the countenance I knew is stripped away like a mask and I tremble to see what is behind it. The quiet words of wisdom that were always so much a part of his character have overnight become a tissue of falsehood, a complex camouflage. It's a damned hard blow to take, I tell you. Worse still, I have just started to realize that henceforward I shall always remember the man—*if I can't somehow forget him*—with a great shudder of complete abhorrence."

The man listening to Maxfield was a pipe smoker. His name was Richard Seneca. He was state's attorney for the county. "Perhaps, Herman, your reaction is a little extreme," he said, emitting a slow cloud of smoke. "White to black, no in-between."

"Well, I admit I'm sort of under shock, Richard. Understandably. But wait till you've read what I've

read. You may see for yourself."

They were closeted in the library of the Oliver mansion. The French doors were slightly ajar. It was a glittering April afternoon. Motes whirled lazily into the room on shafts of sunlight, depositing an infinitesimal residue on all the shiny dark-wood surfaces.

James Morton Oliver had been dead nearly a month, dead and gone but hardly forgotten. His funeral had been a large affair. Among the many notables who attended was the lieutenant governor. Out-of-town papers gave it a column or more; *The Queensport Quota* filled a page. His ashes now reposed in a simple copper urn among other such urns in the family vault. But a corporeal remainder of the man, an essence of his earthly travail, lingered like a ghost and seemed bent on a disastrous course, namely to distort the august image that many were still politely mourning.

For James Morton Oliver had left in his wake a secret diary. It was a massive thing—fourteen thick volumes—and embarrassingly comprehensive on certain subjects. In his capacity as executor of the estate, Herman Maxfield had discovered the diary in the old-fashioned safe in a den off the library. During the past week he had been skimming through it, stopping at some passages with a growing sense of alarm, until finally he had come to the bitter end in utter dismay.

"Here's the first volume," Maxfield said, handing it to Seneca. "It begins at the latter part of nineteen forty-five while Oliver was still in Washington. He served the Navy in some civilian role during the War, but I think we may skip that part. Pure bureaucratic gossip. I've placed bookmarks in the sections that pertain to our immediate interest."

"So I see." Seneca placed his pipe bowlside down in a nearby ash tray and opened the volume at the first bookmark.

January 12th—Home at last for good. The town never looked finer. A white carpet of snow as far as the eye can see. Trees festooned with icicles. The very air seems to shimmer and sparkle. Winy is the word. Nothing will ever lure me back to Washington again. Not even that Congressional seat which has been dangled ever so tantalizingly in front of me by L. M. and A. R. . . .

Richard Seneca's eyes inquiringly left the diary. "These initials, Herman. They mean anything to you?"

"Leo McGovern and Al Roper,"

Maxfield replied. "They had a lot of the say in those days. Both long deceased."

Seneca's gaze returned to the diary.

. . . Father needs me here. He is failing fast. Just in the short time since my Thanksgiving visit he has aged a year. Also he is drinking more than is good for him, but I suppose he always has. And if Mother, may her soul rest in everlasting peace, was never able to persuade him to cut down on his intake, I certainly don't stand much of a chance. How is it stated in Proverbs? "Give strong drink to him who is ready to perish, and wine unto those who be heavy of heart." That perhaps is the best line to follow. He celebrated his 67th birthday last October. I doubt he will see his 68th. Which reminds me of my own approaching anniversary. On the 12th of next month I'll be 29. The date is one thing I have in common with Abraham Lincoln.

January 13th—The morning mail brought me a most welcome letter from my dear Claudia. Knowing I am now a bureaucrat emeritus, she writes to urge me toward an early reunion in Boston. A few days on the town, just the two of us. I shan't say nay. It's been a good six months since I last held her sweet passionate body in my arms, and then our moment of happiness was somewhat abruptly terminated by the intrusion of her brother phoning from the hotel lobby. Luckily we were registered in separate rooms. Six months, a lifetime, a millennium, an eon. I grow pathetically maudlin just thinking about her. Ah, Claudia, how I wish you were here with me now, here in the library, enjoying the great dancing warmth of the logs in the fireplace.

January 14th—The word is getting around town that I'm home. Phone calls are starting to fill the hours, some welcome, some not so welcome. One I would have preferred not to have taken was from Carol Roos, but Darby handed me the phone without first establishing the caller's identity. The dialogue went something like this:

"Hello, Jim Oliver speaking."

"Hiya, Jimmie. Bet you can't guess who this is."

"I'm not in a betting mood." Of course I knew immediately who it was.

"Give one guess, just one."

"Lana Turner."

"Oh, *youu!*"

"It's not Lana Turner then? Odd, I'm expecting a call from her this morning."

"It's Carol."

"Carole Lombard?"

"That's not a very nice thing to say. She's dead. Carol Roos."

"Why, of course. I was beginning to recognize your voice, Carol. How are you these days?"

"So-so. As if you care."

"But I *do* care, Carol. I care much. And how's that big blond boyfriend of yours—Henry Webber?"

"We've broken up."

"What in the world happened?"

"One of those things. You wouldn't understand. Or maybe you would."

"Try me, Carol."

"If you give me a chance. I want to see you anyhow."

"All right."

"Well, when?"

"Soon."

"Today?"

"I'm afraid today is out of the question. I've only just got home and—"

"I heard you've been home two whole days."

"That's true. But two days is not long. I haven't finished unpacking yet. Besides, my father is rather ill and he's been letting things slide. I'm trying to straighten out a few messes."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow's no good either, Carol. I have some legal matters to attend to. And the day after that I'm due in Boston."

"You don't really want to see me."

"Please don't take that childish attitude."

"Well, you're full of excuses, Jimmie."

"Please don't call me Jimmie."

"You men! Once you get what you want from a girl it's so long, dearie, good-bye."

"Listen, Carol. I promise you this. As soon as I return from Boston we'll get together. Understood?"

"I bet."

"You have my word. I must go now."

After hanging up I instructed Darby in no uncertain terms never—but never—to pass me the phone without determining who was on the other end of the line and giving me a chance to be unavailable.

January 15th—Herman Maxfield came to lunch with us today. Father's appearance handed him rather a shock. The old man was in a mild state of the shakes from last night's session with the bourbon bottle. His eyes were more bloodshot than usual. He had little appetite. Ignoring the lamb chops that Josephine had broiled to perfection, he concentrated on several dark-looking highballs, growing less lucid as time went on.

Later, when the old man tottered

off for his afternoon nap, Maxfield lowered his Harvard reserve sufficiently to comment: "Ben appears to be overdoing it, James. Is his doctor aware of it?"

"I wouldn't wager on it," I said. "Are you acquainted with Doctor Jeremy Bevins, Herman?"

"I don't think so."

"Next to Father I'd rate Jerry Bevins the second best drinker in town. Some might even say they're tied for first place."

"I see," Maxfield said in a tone that plainly expressed his dislike for what he saw.

Rabelais once wrote a line I should have quoted to him: "There are more old drunkards than old doctors around."

January 19th—With great reluctance I have just returned home from Boston after three delicious days and nights. My beloved Claudia has hooked me forever and a day and I must say I thoroughly like the idea. We took a suite at the Copley Plaza and rode the merry-go-round upstairs and down, getting nothing but gold rings.

One afternoon the skies opened up and let fall a slow thick snow. We watched it like happy children from breath-fogged windows, glasses of champagne in hand, dozens of bright red roses in every receptacle throughout the sitting room. At times we enjoyed the distinct illusion of rising upward in the downcoming snow, ethereal spirits.

But there was nothing ethereal about our appetities. We ate like beasts of burden. One evening we even took in a movie—*Life with Father*—starring William Powell and Irene Dunne. Paternal autocracy made amusing. In a daughterly part was a young actress whose dark hair and fair skin reminded me strikingly of Claudia. Her name is Elizabeth Taylor. She'll bloom into a headliner.

On the plus side of the Boston visit was the complete absence of Claudia's obnoxious brother Paul. Seems he's on the verge of flunking half his courses at B.U. and was parentally remanded to the Newburyport manse for a week of study.

Before we parted, Claudia and I agreed to announce our engagement on my birthday next month. She'll come to Queensport for the party in the company of her parents and her (ugh) brother.

January 20th—Carol Roos phoned today but Darby, who never has to be told twice, said I was out.

January 21st—Drove to Hartford today and bought a diamond ring. Lovely as it is, it won't achieve its

full splendor until it is on Claudia's finger.

Upon arriving home I intended to tell Father about my marriage plans but found him and Doc Bevins drunkenly reviewing the policies of Harry Truman. A note from Darby near the telephone said Carol Roos had called again and asked that I get in touch.

January 22nd—I nearly answered a Carol Roos call today but on an instant hunch I drew my hand back from the receiver and permitted Darby to take over. That little girl is shaping up as a bit of a pest.

January 23rd—O fateful day! O day of dreadful recriminations! If I had known this morning what lay in store I would have gone back to sleep.

Even now, many hours after the accident (for it was definitely an accident), I am still trembling at the recollection. I can hardly hold this pen. But I must record the details while they are clear in my mind. Otherwise, a week, a month, a year from now I might begin to blame myself instead of fate.

St. Augustine has written that "fate commonly means a necessary process which will have its way apart from the will of God and of men," and God knows my own will was never invoked over this terrible event.

It started this morning after a late breakfast. I decided to walk to the mailbox myself instead of waiting for Si Green to do it. The day was cold but brightly lanced through with sunlight. I enjoyed the quarter-mile stroll along the wooded path that led to our RFD box on Jericho Hill Road. As I was lowering the metal flag a car rolled slowly up behind me and came to a stop.

"Hello there, Jimmie," called a voice that was unpleasantly familiar.

I turned and saw Carol Roos sitting at the wheel of a green sedan, pre-War model. "Why, hello, Carol. What brings you up this way?"

"That's easy. You." Her smile was pert.

"I guess I've been a little remiss."

"Whatever *that* is, that's what you've been. So why don't you get in and tell me all about it." She leaned across the front seat and opened the car door.

Forgetting the mail, I climbed in. My conscience obliged me to do it. Carol drove in obvious accordance with a preconceived plan to the waterside section of town and eventually to Rocky View, a plateau overlooking the sea. We had been here together once before. It was as deserted now as it was then. It is a summer place, a place

for picnics. The stone fireplaces were rimed with ice. The trash cans were topped with graying snow.

Stopping the car near the chain-link fence that guarded the seaward side of the plateau but letting the motor idle, Carol turned her curly blonde head in my direction and gazed at me accusingly through sad brown eyes. "I had to see you, you know. Can you guess why?"

"You're quite a girl for guessing games, aren't you?"

"Maybe. But why don't you try to guess just this once. It shouldn't be too hard."

"You'd better give me a few clues, Carol. I feel rather dense this morning."

She smiled happily. "All right. Let's think back to Thanksgiving time. When you were up from Washington. Remember?"

"I remember, yes."

"Don't you remember one thing special, Jimmie?"

I didn't particularly wish to remember. "A twenty-pound turkey," I said, grinning.

"Stop kidding about it. What else?"

"Mashed turnips and pumpkin pie," I said.

"The Thanksgiving Eve dance at the Congregational Church."

"That too."

"And after the dance, Jimmie?"

"Let's see now." I wrinkled my brow in a semblance of deep thought. "I danced with you twice. Right?"

"More than twice. And that's why Henry Webber got mad."

"It's coming back to me. Henry brought you to the dance and then left you there."

"And you drove me home, only not right away."

"That's right, Carol. We came up here first, didn't we? It was rather a warm night for that time of the year. Rather warm indeed."

"I'd say hot," she said, giggling. I detest gigglers. "And that brings up why I just had to see you now. Do you understand, Jimmie?"

"Call me Jim."

"All right, Jim." Her hand reached out for mine. "You know what I mean, don't you?"

"I'm afraid we acted on strong impulses that evening, Carol. I take the full blame. After all, I'm older than you. I should have known better."

"You didn't force me. I was willing. I love you, Jim."

"Wait a minute, honey. Let's not be hasty."

"Hasty. Well, we've only got about seven months left."

The idea was incredible. "Do you mean you're going to have a baby, Carol?"

"Yes. That is exactly right."

"And you're saying I'm the father?"

"You *are* the father, Jim."

"How can you be so sure?"

"What a thing to say!"

"There's Henry Webber."

"Henry has never touched me like that. He has very high moral standards."

"Unlike me," I said. "Or you."

"Besides, I never loved Henry, Jim." She reached into the back seat and produced a skein of blue yarn and two aluminum knitting needles attached to about five square inches of knitted material. "Look at what I've been doing. Making a little blue pullover. I'm sure it's going to be a boy."

I opened the car door and got out. I walked to the chain-link fence and lit a cigarette. I looked out over the wintry sea. A cold chill ran up my spine.

Then I heard Carol opening the door on her side. I heard her saying, "Gee, honey, don't be mad at me. Please don't."

I turned as she came running in my direction, still carrying the knitting. I turned just in time to see her feet slip on a puddle of ice. They went out from under and she fell hard on her left side.

For several seconds a strange bubbly sound came from her open mouth, not unlike giggling. Then there was a sudden silence and a pervasive immobility about her. I took the few steps to her body and squatted beside it. One of the knitting needles was buried more than half its length in her left side. She was already dead.

I tossed my cigarette over the chain-link fence. With a handkerchief I removed any possible fingerprints from inside and outside the car. Then, with a last look at the poor girl who was now beyond any mortal help, I took the wooden stairs that ran from the west side of the plateau down to the beach. My shoes left no prints in the shifting sand. Within 35 minutes I was at the lower end of Dock Street, where I purchased two quarts of steamers from Fred Pollard who runs a fish market there, and then I walked two blocks to the depot and took a cab back to Jericho Hill. I asked Bingo Bates, the driver, if he'd ever had an ungovernable yearning for steamed clams and he said he sure had, hundreds of times, and I said, well that's exactly what had hit me this morning and so much so that I'd walked better than three miles to buy a few quarts, but I was damned if I was going to go the same route on foot again. Bingo said he understood and didn't blame me one damned bit.

I got out at the mailbox, gath-

ered up the mail at last, and then walked briskly back to the house.

January 24th—Today I woke with incipient sniffles. Josephine brought breakfast to my bed along with the morning newspaper. I could hardly bear the thought of what might be on the front page and in fact didn't so much as glance at it until I poured a second cup of coffee. Of course it was there—under a two-column headline in the lower right corner:

KNITTING NEEDLE KILLS GIRL

The body of a 19-year-old girl was discovered yesterday afternoon in the Rocky View section of Queensport as the apparent result of a freak accident involving a metal knitting needle and an icy strip of pavement.

Carol Roos, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Charles W. Roos of 22 Windsor Drive, was found shortly before 2 p.m. by Policeman Oscar Randall on a routine cruiser patrol. From the position of the body, Randall judged the girl must have been walking away from a car, also found at the scene, and slipped on the icy asphalt, thereby forcing a knitting needle into her left side. Dr. R. F. Keating, the medical examiner, said the needle obviously punctured the victim's heart, and called for an immediate autopsy.

The car which the Roos girl had driven to the deserted picnic area was traced by authorities to Henry Webber of 14 Windsor Drive. Webber informed police he often let Carol borrow his car to run errands, but he had no idea why she had gone to Rocky View at this time of the year.

"She said she needed the car to handle a personal matter," Webber was quoted by the police.

Mrs. Roos told this newspaper that "Carol had been acting kind of funny the last few days," but couldn't guess why.

Henry Webber's car. A personal matter. Et tu Brutus. The female of the species has at best an extremely tenuous moral fiber.

January 25th—A newspaper account today outlines the arrangements for Carol's funeral. Never noted for tact, *The Queensport Quota* appends to the end of the story a gratuitous malefaction: the deceased was in the early stages of pregnancy, according to the medical examiner. Furthermore, the police have begun to question Henry Webber more closely. If it develops that Henry sired the unborn, he is in a ticklish spot. One might quote Psalms at him: "Evil shall slay the wicked."

Looking up from the diary, Richard Seneca reached tentatively for his pipe. "I didn't know the pri-

vate man," he said to Herman Maxfield, "but to judge from what I've read so far he is quite different from the public man."

"The private man you're seeing, Richard, is not the private man I thought I knew so well. Turn to the next marker. It starts with his twenty-ninth birthday."

February 12th—Bad weather is a bad augury. Drizzle at dawn. Dreary sleet throughout the morning. Even the festive preparations for my birthday party fail to brighten the gray mood.

Claudia arrives two hours past noon, a long hour overdue. For a moment then there is light, but it is swiftly eclipsed by the looming presence of her brother and the notable absence of her parents. I ask where they are. They are at home with the flu. They send their regrets. They extend their best wishes. Paul says the drive down from Newburyport was the roughest 150 miles he's ever driven. Roads a glare of ice. He needs a drink to steady his nerves. Father remedies that situation promptly, all too happy to have a tippling partner to tide him over until Doc Bevins arrives.

Doc arrives semi-soused at 2:30 and the other guests, among whom are Herman Maxfield and the Reverend John Rutherford, begin to appear a bit later. By 3:30 everyone is present. The champagne is poured by Darby. Father proposes a toast to me and I propose a toast to my good luck and thereby announce that Claudia has consented to be my bride.

"And when will the wonderful wedding take place?" inquires John Rutherford.

"In June," I say.

"A month ordained by God and nature," he says. "And where, may I ask, will the event be celebrated?"

"In Newburyport, John."

"More's the pity, James."

"But you'll be invited."

"I feel better already."

The occasion went off fairly well as such occasions go. It was marred only by somewhat excessive drinking on the part of Father, Doc Bevins and Paul, but since they kept pretty much to themselves in the library their behavior was not generally noticed.

Claudia and I managed to disappear for nearly an hour down in the wine cellar to which only I have a key nowadays. There is a most comfortably furnished tasting room adjoining. Needless to say, it was not the grape that we savored.

The party began to break up at seven. Because of the weather (a few degrees below zero and the radio warning that driving was ex-

tremely hazardous), I tried to persuade Claudia to stay overnight, but it seems Paul was scheduled to appear next morning before the dean to answer for some serious infraction of school rules that might possibly lead to his expulsion. As it was, he was going to present a picture of the world's biggest hangover.

"I'll let you go on one condition," I told Claudia. "You do the driving—all of it."

"Don't worry, darling. Paul will probably sleep it off straight through to home."

"And be slow and careful, sweetheart."

"Forever and always, Jim."

February 13th—"Forever and always." For my beloved Claudia it meant almost no time at all, a meager few hours. On a sharp curve just south of Worcester, the automobile went into a skid and struck a guardrail, then flipped over several times, the state police reported. It was crushed to look like an accordion. Miraculously the driver escaped death, *but the driver was Paul.* Claudia, riding in the so-called suicide seat, was pronounced dead by the doctor who arrived with the ambulance.

I am numb from the shock of it. I can't think, I can't feel, I cannot write another word about it. I wonder whether I shall survive.

February 17th—The numbness lingers, but I'm afraid I shall live. To some good purpose, I pray.

These last few days have been the most harrowing of my life. I attended Claudia's funeral like a man drugged. The casket was closed, a black reminder of how completely her beauty had been destroyed. I remember seeing her parents as two gray shadows drifting limply across my vision. We exchanged whispered phrases that were meaningless. Paul was not present. He is still in the hospital with a broken arm and a slight concussion. My father did not attend the funeral either. He remained home "too ill," as we say, "to travel."

February 18th—Is Father trying in his own awkward way to take my mind off my sorrow? It seems so. Late this afternoon he emerged momentarily from his alcoholic cocoon with a very curious idea. He wants to endow a town library. I call the idea curious because it comes from a man who has shunned books all his life. The only book I've ever heard him mention (and that was years ago) was Kipling's *Stalky & Co.*, which his father must have given him as a boy. Actually, our own library was established by Grandfather, enlarged by my mother who was an avid reader of Dickens, Trollope,

Hardy and Meredith, and then more or less modernized by myself. Now in his dotage, Father perhaps feels he should get into the act as a sort of local Andrew Carnegie.

"We already have a town library," I told him.

"We do? News to me. Where in hell they hide it?"

"In the basement of the Congregational Church."

"Basement? Don't make me laugh."

"Among its twenty-five hundred or so volumes it numbers several works of Rudyard Kipling."

"Good. The old Stalky stories, I hope. But I got bigger ideas. Get the damned library out of the cellar. Into a big brick building. Statue out in front. The Thinker or something along those lines."

"When did this idea develop, Father?"

"Been worming round inside me for a year at least."

"You plan it as kind of a memorial for yourself?"

"I want you to plan it that way. You and Maxfield. I'll set up the money."

"What size endowment do you have in mind?"

"Hundred and fifty thousand. How's that strike you?"

It rather struck me dumb.

February 22nd—Herman Maxfield phoned this a.m. Father had mentioned the library memorial to him. Not too coherently, I gather. The good lawyer wished to verify a few facts. I told him I'd visit his Hartford office soon.

February 23rd—A slowly healing wound was cruelly reopened today. The morning mail brought a letter from Claudia's brother, writing from the hospital:

Dear James:

I can guess how you must feel about me. You probably want to kick my butt from here to eternity and to tell the truth I would not mind you doing it because being built the way we are I can hardly do it to myself and God knows I deserve it and a lot more. It's only today I realize that Claudia is dead and gone forever and it's all my fault getting drunk at your party and then insisting on driving after we stopped somewhere for a cup of coffee . . .

Et cetera. And then he came to the main reason for his letter. And I recognized behind it the disciplinary hand of his parents. Claudia's engagement ring was in his possession. He felt he should return it to me in person. He also felt he should personally ask my forgiveness (knowing it would be next to impossible for me to forgive him) for the good of his own tortured conscience. He was due to be discharged from the hospital on

the 27th of February. At 11 a.m. If I could find it in my heart to meet him there at that time and perhaps drive him to Boston, he would give me the ring and a few dozen letters of mine found among Claudia's things.

I know I'm asking a lot, James, but I've got to ask if I'm going to be able to live with myself. Remember I loved Claudia too. She was my only sister, my older sister, and always was kind to me . . .

February 27th—This morning at 11 o'clock I met Paul at the hospital in Worcester. His face was drawn and pale, giving his eyes a strangely luminous look. His left arm was in a sling. He held out his right. We shook hands.

"Let me get my bags from the desk," he said, "and I'll be ready to go."

"Better let me give you some assistance," I said.

Together we went to the desk and picked up a large leather suitcase and a small zippered canvas bag. I carried the suitcase.

As I put the car into gear, Paul said, "I feel like hell about everything. I can hardly look you in the eye, James. And as for my mother and father, they're sorry I was ever born, I guess."

"Deep-six that crying towel, Paul."

"On top of everything else, I've been booted out of school. I mean I'm on everybody's list, Number One Crumb."

"I know a fine inn not far from here. Grog that'll give the sky a brighter hue. And food that'll—"

"No booze, James. That's out. Strictly taboo from now on."

"Whatever you say. Still, this inn is where we're going. I feel like a relaxed hour after the drive up here."

"You're in the driver's seat."

So I drove to this well-known inn, whose name I won't mention here for obvious reasons soon to develop, and we found deep chairs in front of a blazing fire in the cocktail lounge. It it difficult under such cordial conditions to refuse a drink, but Paul manfully passed up the first round, diverting himself by unzippering the canvas bag and taking from it two bundles of letters tied with blue ribbon. Pushing them toward me across the table, he said, "Mother thought you ought to have these."

"Thank her for me."

"Oh, and this too." From the right pocket of his jacket he produced a pink satin ring case.

Without opening it, I dropped it in my own pocket. "Listen, kid," I said. "This is tough on both of us. Let's not make it any tougher than it has to be."

The waiter set a Rob Roy in

front of me and went away again.

"I just feel lousy, that's all," Paul said. "I don't think I'll ever get back to feeling the way I used to."

"That may be all to the good," I said, taking a sip of the drink. "Every crisis, whether the results are happy or sad, brings a change in a man's life."

"I suppose so."

"If it will help, Paul," I drained the glass and lied with a straight face, "I forgive you. I can't forget, maybe, but at least I can forgive."

Tears brimmed in his luminous eyes—eyes heartbreakingly like Claudia's. "Well, jeez, James, thanks, thanks. I, I, ah, I feel like the human race might let me join up again. Someday."

"How about now?"

"Like how?"

The waiter was approaching.

"As a starter, join me for a drink. I hate to drink alone."

"Maybe. Well, okay. Just one."

Three hours later the picture had undergone a radical change. Deep in grog but still without grub, we were the personification of wassailers just over the peak and beginning to head downhill. In my case the appearance was deceptive. After the third cocktail I had stopped at the bar on the way to the men's room and told the bartender, for my delicate stomach's sake, to omit the Scotch from all future Rob Roys sent to our table. Paul was drinking gin fizzes and continued to do so.

At 3:15 he gazed blearily at the grandfather clock ticking steadily away at the far side of the room. "Looks like after three already. Gotta shove off, James. Deadline's five. Home at five on dot. Ultimatum from old man. Otherwise."

"Otherwise what?"

"Disown me. Cut me off. Work me in his damned mill as bobbin boy."

"I'm afraid I'm feeling these drinks, Paul."

"Can't handle stuff. Thass what you saying?"

"I'm not much of a drinker."

"So Claudia always said. Be like James, she always said. Drinks like a gentleman. Dignity, he's got dignity. Never drunk."

"Glad she can't see me now."

"Look fine to me, James. Sober's a judge."

"Inside is where it is. Nausea. Tell you what, Paul. Take the keys to my car here and drive yourself home. I'll make some arrangements to get it back in the morning."

"Must be kidding, pal. I got no license. Cops grabbed license at scene of accident. Fact, come to think of it, I'm out on bond."

"So what. They can't take away what they've already taken. You go

on, Paul, and I'll get a room here and lie down awhile. You are able to drive, aren't you?"

"One thing I can do, James, is hold my liquor and drive."

So when the waiter was not in sight I gave Paul the car keys and we shook hands and I watched him weave his way, zipper bag in hand, to the side door that let out on the guest parking lot. In a few minutes I saw my car go past the tall curtained windows with a reckless amount of speed.

At the desk I asked the clerk if he had a room available. My friend, I said, required a few hours' rest before we continued our journey. The clerk said he had a very nice room.

I returned to the cocktail lounge and encountered the waiter. "Where is my young friend?" I asked.

"In the gents' perhaps."

"I suppose so. But no—unless he's taken his topcoat and bag along with him." I took my own topcoat from the back of a chair and felt through the pockets. "My car keys are gone." I walked to the nearest window and swept back the curtains. "And the car's gone too."

"I don't think the young man was fit to drive," the waiter said.

"I know he wasn't," I said. "We'd better have him picked up by the state police before he hurts himself. Is there a phone handy?"

"In the lobby. But don't say he got his drinks here. We could lose our license."

"Don't worry. All he had here was black coffee. Right?"

"Right, sir. Just right."

I majored in economics at college, not psychology, but my insight on Paul presently proved to be highly accurate. About 15 miles from the inn the state police spotted the car and signaled it with the dome light to pull over. Paul's response was to accelerate from 60 to 80 mph. The state trooper gave chase, playing it up with his siren now. Paul moved my old sedan up to 95, according to the accident report, and that was as fast as it could go, faster than it had ever gone for me, faster than it would ever go again. It suddenly went wild, zigzagging from one side of Route 9 to the other, until it finally bounced against a drainage curbing which put it on a swift straight line in the direction of an overpass abutment of reinforced concrete. The crash was followed almost immediately by an explosion. The flames were too hot for any rescue attempt by the state trooper. After the fire was extinguished by an emergency field truck, the state police came for me at the inn and drove me out there to make an

identification. If it wasn't for the charred cast on the corpse's left forearm I would not have known it was Paul. "Evil shall slay the wicked," as I've noted heretofore.

"Your Mister Oliver was quite a rationalizer," Richard Seneca said, placing the open journal face downward across his knees and beginning to fill his pipe. "It's a quality we all have to some extent, but he seems to have had it to an exaggerated degree. And you say you never noticed it, Herman?"

"Not as such, Richard." Maxfield lighted a cigarette, took a puff of it, then snubbed it out in an ash tray. "I'm trying to give these damn things up . . . Rationalization, yes, it was often there, but at the time it appeared to be compassion mixed with good sense, a sort of beneficent pragmatism, if I may say so."

Seneca pulled flame from a match into the bowl of his pipe. "Yes," he said.

"Go to the next marker, Richard, and you'll see what I mean."

August 6th—A balmy day. Too bad the adjective, in its less flattering sense, can also be applied lately to Father.

As he grows more incapable of handling any of his affairs, big or small, he grows more insistent on handling all of them. The result is both comic and chaotic. This morning, for instance, he put Si Green to work pruning the apple trees, though they'd all been pruned as usual in June. I told Si to cut a few laterals with weak fruit spurs and then to vanish as soon as the old man turned his back.

At noon Father engaged Josephine in a rambling discussion on the best way to make mincemeat, finally issuing orders that henceforth it should be made with applejack instead of rum. In a huff the good woman went to the kitchen and baked four pies, each containing either applejack, rum, brandy or bourbon. "I dare him to ever tell the difference," she told me.

In the afternoon he pulled Darby away from the polishing of silver and told him to lay down a good hard wax on the uncarpeted portions of the main staircase. Darby protested that he'd waxed them two days ago, but Father simply said to wax them again. Waxing wood, giving it a rich sheen, was becoming one of Father's many little obsessions.

And then late in his own elongated cocktail hour, around 4:15 or thereabouts, he cornered me about the memorial library.

"What in hell have you and Maxfield been doing about it?" he demanded.

"Frankly, not much. Since you haven't mentioned it in several months, I thought you might have changed your mind."

"Changed my mind. You know I never change my mind once it's set."

"All too well."

"No high-class sass, now, boy. I'm still head of this house."

"Everyone's quite aware of it, Father."

"Better be. To get back to my question, I want some papers drawn up on this memorial library and I want 'em drawn up before the week is out."

"You still like the figure of a hundred and fifty thousand?"

"It suits me, sure."

"Which demonstrates your ignorance in at least one walk of life, Father. A hundred and fifty thousand buys a lot of booze but it sure as the devil doesn't buy an impressive number of books, not to mention a good well-planned building to stack them in."

"I don't give a damn about the books. I just want the building. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth. You can move the books from the basement of the Congregational Church and start it off that way."

"So that's how it is."

"That's how it is. So set up a meeting with Maxfield for tomorrow morning sure, James. Early."

"All right."

"Now. There's the phone."

The dictator had spoken. I acted.

August 7th—Early this morning, an hour before dawn, I emerged from my bedroom on the way to the bathroom and discovered Father sleepwalking in the hallway. At least I think he was sleepwalking. His hands weren't extended in front of him as classically provided by the best movies. But when I called to him in a low voice he seemed not to hear me. He was wearing pajamas, a dressing gown and leather-soled felt slippers. His gait was somewhat shuffling. The leather whispered across the hooked rugs lying at intervals over the highly polished hardwood floor and made a rasping sound on the floor itself. He was heading toward the staircase.

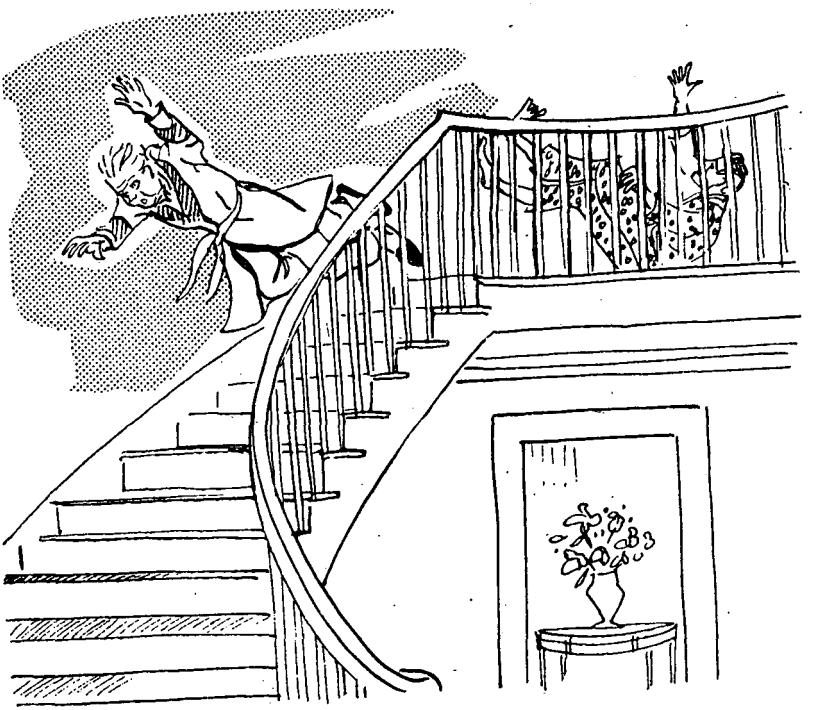
"Father," I called, a little louder this time.

Unheeding, he shuffled on.

"Father, be careful," I warned. He was getting close to the head of the stairs. If he were sleepwalking, I was afraid he might injure himself. "Father, wake up!"

He went on.

I started quickly forward with the intention of grabbing him, but went into a skid on a hooked rug, which carried me sledlike across the shining floor and threw me on



my back. I continued to slide, feet upraised at a 35-degree angle, until I came to a colliding halt against the back of Father's buttocks. He in turn flipped over and began to descend the stairs in a crashing series of clumsy cartwheels.

Dr. Bevins, nearly sober for once, arrived at 6:45 and, after a cursory examination, pronounced Father dead of a broken neck.

"How in hell did it happen, Jim?" he asked, getting to his feet.

"Let me buy you a drink and I'll tell you."

He looked at his wristwatch as if considering other urgent appointments. "Well, sure. I guess I've got time for about one."

Once we were seated in the library, drinks in hand, I told him this story: a natural urge had awakened me at 5:20, by the luminous dial of my watch, but I hadn't responded immediately. I was warm and comfortable and rather sleepy. I lay in bed uselessly postponing the trip. Then I heard the sound of movement in the hallway. That got me out of bed quickly. Hurrying across the room, I opened the door. From the faint

glow of the night lamp on the table outside the bathroom door I made out Father moving rapidly toward the stairs. Before I could call out to him, his feet appeared to slip on the polished hardwood exposed at the left side of the carpeting on the top step, and down he went like a bagful of kindling. It was awful, the noise of it, and seemed almost endless.

"Every square foot of hardwood in this house constitutes a hazard," I concluded. "It's all waxed regularly until it's about as slippery as a skating rink. Obversely enough, the hardwood with its fine sheen had become one of Father's pleasures. In fact, he had Darby wax the stairs *twice* this week, Doc."

Bevins shook his head slowly and sadly. "Hippocrates said it and he said it right—'Old people have fewer diseases than the young but their diseases never leave them.' I'll have another drink, Jim—this one to Ben, a fine old man."

A fine old man indeed! My mother would not have agreed and, looking back, neither can I.

August 8th—I devoted most of the morning to conferences with the Reverend Rutherford and Mr. William Bradley on the matter of funeral arrangements. Mr. Bradley is Bradley & Sons, Morticians . . .

Maxfield had risen from an easy chair and wandered behind Seneca to look over his shoulder. "You needn't go any further into that period, Richard. The next several hundred pages are irrelevant to our immediate interest. But what you've just read is a prime example of what I described as Oliver's beneficent pragmatism, or the illusion of it."

"I'm listening, Herman."

"A month or so after the funeral, Oliver and I met at my club in Hartford for a few drinks and lunch. Our purpose was to discuss plans for the Benjamin Oliver Memorial Library project. Almost immediately the sum of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars entered the conversation. Although this sum had never been fixed by a codicil in the will, it had been mentioned to me several times by Benjamin Oliver and I knew it was his intention to contribute that amount of money to the undertaking. James Oliver agreed as to the intent, but he took another tack—his beneficent pragmatic approach, if you will—and I found myself in wholehearted agreement with him."

"He must have been quite a spellbinder," Seneca said.

"Well, no, not in the usual sense of the word. Sincerity of purpose might better describe the impression he gave you, plus a very hon-

est intelligence. I remember his pointing out at this lunch of ours that, let's face it, as much as he'd always loved and respected his father he had to admit to himself that the old man was rather unstable during the last year of his life. Liquor had taken its toll. Did I not agree? Of course I agreed.

"The figure of a hundred and fifty thousand was a reflection of addled vanity, in his opinion, forgivably addled because the intent was fundamentally good. However, he had been giving his father's wishes careful thought these last doleful weeks and he had finally come to a conclusion he hoped was the right one. Right for Benjamin Oliver, right for himself and his conscience, right for the people of Queensport.

"We would draw up a trust agreement to be called the Benjamin Oliver Memorial Library Foundation into which he would place the sum of ten thousand dollars. The goal of the Foundation would be to raise not a hundred and fifty thousand but *two* hundred and fifty thousand over the next five years by means of public donations. The five-year period would allow time for bequests by will and testament, by charitable subscription and by special fund-raising events. In short, it would allow the town as a whole to participate in the creation of a library, a community library, an enduring monument to learning rather than just an edifice to commemorate the vanity of one man's senile vanity."

"He *was* a spellbinder, Herman," Seneca said, "but he knew what spells were acceptable. I'll say that for him."

"I daresay you're right, Richard. At any rate, the trust was drawn up in accordance with his outline. The amount of money was six thousand dollars short of the goal at the end of five years and therefore James Morton Oliver generously made up the difference.

"Curiously enough, Herman, that generous gift of six grand would be a thousand dollars less than a year's interest at five percent on a hundred and forty thousand—which is what he kept out of the Foundation by means of his father's death."

"How true, how terribly true! Yet the library now stands. As a matter of fact, it may well be said that it marked the beginning of Oliver's career as Queensport's most respected citizen and most beloved philanthropist."

"Did he still pursue his subterranean life?"

"Let me find you another volume. Yes, here it is. Nineteen forty-nine, three years after his father's death. Open it to the marker, Rich-

ard, and your question will be answered."

June 14th—Flag Day. Boy Scout Day. Ship Ahoy Day. Goat Island Day. Rev. John Rutherford Day. In fact, it has been a red-letter day for nearly everybody but me. If I had a beard I should weep into it. And gnash my teeth.

I might begin by blaming John Rutherford for what has happened, but I won't, lest I be accused of subscribing to the belief of St. John Chrysostom that, "Hell is paved with the skulls of priests."

But the unpleasant occurrence definitely started to ovulate (nice word) when Rutherford came to me for financial and social assistance in the annual Flag Day expedition of the Boy Scouts to Goat Island. I willingly contributed the usual $100 but rather reluctantly consented to act as one of the expedition's adult supervisors.

"Can't the scoutmaster handle the situation, John?" I asked.

"On land, James, yes. But at sea we require additional precautions."

Goat Island is a state preserve 14 miles offshore. Any responsible organization can obtain a permit to use it for an outing. The ferry that runs twice a day from Queensport to the larger inhabited island of Kingston can be chartered to make a slight change of course to discharge passengers on Goat Island and pick them up again, and it does so regularly during the summer.

Well, to get to the point, the trip over was uneventful except for one thing. The scoutmaster, a tall blond young man who looked vaguely familiar, seemed to take an inordinate interest in my appearance. Several times I caught him making quite an intense study of me from a distance, as though he wanted to ask me a great favor. At first I blamed my imagination, but no. Again on the island I caught him in the act. I was tempted to approach him and ask what was on his mind, but he was always surrounded by boys pleading for help with bowline hitches or semaphore messages or fire-lighting equipment. He impressed me as a nice young man, not too bright.

Late this afternoon, when we were midway of Goat Island and Queensport, the young man finally escaped from his charges, who were confined to the enclosed lower deck of the ferry, and came to the bow of the upper deck where I was alone watching the rough sea churning below. The sun, which had been kind all day, had recently withdrawn behind a thickening screen of grayish clouds. A chill was in the air. Rain threatened.

"Hello," the young man ventured.

I released my grip on the cold chain that stretched 15 or so feet from the portside gunwale to the starboard and was the only barrier between me and the sea beneath. "Hello," I said, turning to face him. "You made it after all."

"I know you, Mister Oliver," he said in a voice strung a bit taut, "but I guess you don't know me."

"I guess not. Who are you?"

"Henry Webber."

The name didn't really register. It was familiar, though, like his face.

"I used to go around with Carol Roos," he said.

"Yes, now I remember."

"You ought to, Mister Oliver. You sure ought to."

"I don't think I like your tone, Webber."

"And I don't like your high and mighty ways, either. I been doing a lot of thinking these last couple of years and I come to a certain conclusion."

"Your mental processes do not interest me at all."

"You're going to listen, though."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"Even if I have to hold on to you."

"Don't try it, Webber."

"It was you who got Carol in trouble. I'm sure of it. It couldn't be anyone else."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do, sir. The Reverend Rutherford told me you drove Carol home from the Thanksgiving dance that night. Left about an hour after I did, he said. Around ten, he said. But Carol's mother said she didn't get home until late. Close to three in the morning."

"Will you kindly step aside," I said firmly.

"So wherever you took her, that's where you got her in trouble. She never went out with anyone but me and I never did anything like that to her. Never."

"Step aside."

"And another thing, Mister Oliver. The morning she died up there on Rocky View, you were seen coming from that direction along the beach. Fred Pollard saw you. He mentioned it once without knowing what it meant. He happened to say you came into his market that morning from a long walk on the beach and bought some steamers."

"Why, you pinhead! I've got a good mind to sue you for defamation of character."

"I think you killed Carol," he said as if just arriving at that idea. "I really think you did."

Without further ado I tried to step around him. He lunged forward. I aimed a vicious kick at his

shins. His feet went out from under him. He fell forward. The chain caught him at belt level. It acted like a sling, catapulting him up and out. I didn't even see him hit the water. It all happened too quickly. When I looked down he was not to be seen. The ferry propellers had probably sucked him in and chopped him up.

I darted a glance at the wheelhouse. I could see only its roof and about five inches of glass from where I stood. If I couldn't see the captain he certainly couldn't see me.

Lighting a cigarette, I strolled to a companionway and down a flight of iron stairs. I entered the enclosed lower deck from the stern. It was filled with the noise of 40 boys engaged in 40 different forms of self-expression. I spotted Rutherford in a deck chair reading a book. I made my way toward him.

"John," I said, "do you happen to know where Henry Webber is? I want to subscribe to the summer camp fund."

"He's around somewhere, James."

"I suppose so," I said, sinking into a deck chair myself.

Richard Seneca slapped the volume closed. "I've heard of cool characters, Herman, but this guy wins hands down. Did they ever find anything of Webber's body?"

"Not a trace," Maxfield said.

"How did they close the case?"

"Accidental death by drowning. There was talk, of course, that he'd committed suicide. His parents inadvertently told a reporter that Henry was given to spells of moodiness ever since the Roos girl's death." Maxfield pursed his lips as holding back words, then he said resignedly, "There's a sequel to Webber's death that you won't find in the diary. But I'm terribly afraid it's connected."

"Go on."

"A week later Fred Pollard was found shot to death in the back room of his fish market. It's Queensport's only unsolved murder."

"And you think it can be solved now?"

"I'm afraid so."

"What makes you say that?"

"I think Oliver would have destroyed his diary otherwise. I think at the end the weight of his crimes was too much for him to carry. He wanted to atone somehow. But read the last several entries just before his death."

April 8th—I begin to catch a glimpse in the mirror that I like less and less. After all these years the events I thought I had forgotten are more alive than ever.

April 9th—Another night of insomnia. Even the sleeping pills don't work. An overdose might. Unless there's life out there in the dark after death.

April 10th—Funny, I can no longer recall what Claudia looked like and yet Carol Roos' face is graven indelibly on my mind. My mother's face is a sweet blue, but my father's is as clear as copperplate. Paul, whom I hardly knew, and Henry Webber, whom I saw only twice in my life, are my constant nocturnal companions.

April 11th—I once wrote somewhere in these vast volumes that "Evil shall slay the wicked," but at the time of the writing I did not realize the deep inner significance of that sentence. Now I know. As I scraped the shaving cream off my face a few minutes ago, I exposed an expression of wickedness I never dreamed to behold. I cannot ever face it again. The evil in my eyes is killing the wickedness in my heart. I am being slain slowly by myself, slowly and painfully and interminably . . .

"Well, that's the end of it," Richard Seneca said, closing the final volume of the diary.

"I only wish it were," Herman Maxfield said. "For memory's sake. But there's a little more to come. I believe if you compare the bullet that was removed from James Morton Oliver's head with the one taken twenty years ago from Fred Pollard's heart, you will probably find they were fired from the same gun."

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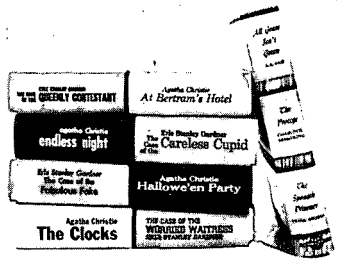

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