JUNE 60c K
ALFRED HITCHCOCK 47199

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

June 1971

Dear Reader:

I suppose, since it is that time of the year, that I could dedicate this issue to Love. After all, there are *all* sorts of that, and all ways of showing it, as herein you shall see.

Some love leads to a richer life for all concerned; witness *My Son, the Private Eye* by Charles McIntosh, which begins this month's new stories. Then look for other brands of devotion in *Sweet Tranquility* by Leo P. Kelley, *Mother Ramirez* by newcomer Nancy Schachterle, *The Locksmith* by Frank Sisk, *Loyalty* by Patrick O'Keeffe, *Yesterday's Evil* by Jonathan Craig, and *Hidden Tiger* by Michael Brett.

See it, too, in the bizarre tales spun by Marshall Schuon, Stephen Wasylyk, Sonora Morrow, John Lutz, Evelyn Payne, Gary Brandner, and Richard Hardwick. Then, for a unique journey into the world of telepathy, I present C. B. Gilford's gripping novelette, *Murder in Mind*.

The sum total is a tribute to those who simply love mystery and suspense, from those who love to write it.

Alfred Hitchcock

Richard E. Decker, Publisher
Gladys Foster Decker, Editorial Director
Ernest M. Hutter, Editor

Patricia Hitchcock — Associate Editor
Nick J. Sartorio — Circulation Director
Marguerite Blair Deacon — Art Director

VOLUME 16, NO. 6 JUNE 1971

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

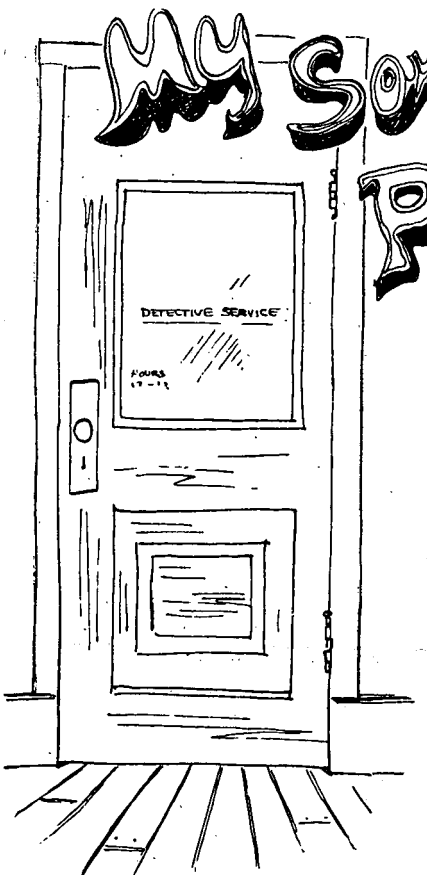
CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 16, No. 6, June 1971. Single copies 60 cents. *Subscriptions $7.00 for one year in the United States* and Possessions; elsewhere $8.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Entered as 2nd class matter at Riviera Beach, Fla. Additional entry at Concord, New Hampshire. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of addresses should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Printed in the U.S.A.

A little learning may not be such a dangerous thing after all.



My Son, The Private Eye

IT'S YOUR SON," Millie announced briskly.

"Okay, send him in," I said.

"Hi, Dad! 'Lo, Millie, old girl!"

She sniffed as she shut the door on us. With Millie's sinuses she sniffs a lot, but after thirty years I can tell one sniff from another. This was peeved sniff #2, mild grade.

"Well, this is a pleasant morning shock, Dickie. What's the war veteran doing in my humble office? Need another loan? I can maybe let you have fifty . . ."

by Charles McIntosh

My handsome, mod-dressed son laughed in that tolerant way parents grow to recognize. "It's not Dickie, Dad, or even Dick. Call me Rich, all my friends do. No, it's not money—I've got a surprise for you, one you'll like. I want to go to work!"

It did floor me. Well, nothing

but good news in that. I always knew Dickie—Rich—had good stuff in him, in spite of the fooling around in college earlier, and then his cynical remarks about the service after his Army tour. Well, in any case, here he was, wanting to settle down.

"Son, you make an old man happy. Let's see, I can call John Phelps at the bank, or perhaps you'd like to get an introduction to Ron Burns at IBM, or—"

"Hold it, Dad, you've got it all wrong, man. I don't want to be a square sitting inside a cube—I want to get in on the action. I want to be an 'eye' like you. Move over, hey?"

Floored again. Probably most fathers would be tremendously pleased to have their sons wanting to follow in their footsteps, but not if those footsteps lead to the business I'm in. Sordid, underpaid, dealing with the worst vices of the human race . . .

"Look, uh, Rich, I'm afraid you've been watching too many TV dramas since you got back. *Mod Squad*, *Hawaiian Eye*, and the rest to the contrary, this is really a dirty, grinding business. I don't think you'd really enjoy it."

"Ha-ha, you don't put me down so easy, Uncle Father. What about that trip to Acapulco last month, all expenses paid?"

"I was on my feet twenty hours a day, lost fifteen pounds, and got dysentery," I said drearily—and accurately.

"Maybe. And how about that shoot-out between Masterson and the Fed fuzz in the spring?"

"Son, I was employed by Mrs. Masterson to obtain evidence that her husband was having an adulterous affair on the side. It was strictly coincidence that he happened to be handling heroin, and that the FBI chose the particular night I was at the window with a camera to close in on him. Believe me, I was scared to death when the bullets started flying."

He grinned. Kids these days won't believe what their elders tell them, no matter how well-meant. They all think they know so damned much. Perhaps a day of doing what I do would teach him differently.

"Okay," I surrendered, "you want a job, I'll give you a job."

"Now you're showing sense," he exulted. "Where do we begin?"

I looked at his outfit. It was bright enough to blind a man. "We can start by getting you into something that doesn't look like the Cape Henry Lighthouse. Haven't you any quiet, conservative clothing?"

His jaw dropped. "What's *wrong* with these? I like 'em. It's

you that looks like something out of a nineteen-fifty movie, parent. Look, why don't you come down to a place I know, and we'll get you some real—"

"All right. All right." I put up my hand. It would only be for a day, anyhow. "You stay dressed the way you are, and allow me the same privilege. But you should know that the first rule for a private detective is to be inconspicuous, understand?"

That insouciant grin again. "Man, if I dressed like *you*, all the chicks on the street would laugh so loud, Charlie Lucky would hear them!"

Ignoring that remark, I pulled out a sheaf of forms and stuffed them into my old leather briefcase. "Come on, then."

"Great! What's on the old agenda? Murder? Hijacking?"

"Nothing so glamorous. As I told you, this business is pretty routine. I'll tell you about our assignments when we get into the car."

As we entered the creaky old elevator, Rich wrinkled his nose. "You know, Dad, this is a lousy place to have an office. Even the elevator smells like an old locker room. And Sniffing Millie! It's a wonder she doesn't chase the clients away before they get in to see you."

"When you've been in the business as long as I have, you'll understand that the clients don't want fancy, plush offices. They think it pushes up their bill—and they're right. As for Millie, she's been with me for thirty years. She knows the files inside out and she's the soul of discretion. That's important."

"Yeah, but gad! What kind of clients are you going to get with old Millie and that crummy backroom office of yours?"

"Very good clients, as a matter of fact," I defended stiffly. "Today, for example, you and I are going to handle assignments for a nationwide grocery chain, one of the big three auto manufacturers, and the wife of one of our most prominent citizens."

"Oh?"

That seemed to silence him. He looked out the window as I tooled the '64 Rambler station wagon toward the first supermarket on my list.

"Here we are," I said as we parked. I handed him a $20 bill. "Take this and buy approximately seventeen-fifty worth of groceries. Make sure you get plenty of canned goods, meats, and produce. Skip crackers, kitchen equipment, and boxed hard goods like detergents and cereals. Oh, make sure you get some frozen foods."

"Huh?"

"Pay attention, son. You're on

duty now, and time is money. Now, when you select canned goods, try to find dented cans, the worse the better. And make sure to grab any cans you see where the label is loose or has come off."

"I don't get it."

"You will. In the meat department, try to get discolored meat, meat that has a lot of extra fat or gristle in it, or packaged meat which has been torn open. If you happen on any meat that actually smells bad, grab it!"

"Dad, what in the—"

"Shut up, son, and listen. You're working now."

He shut up, glumly, and listened.

"Pick out the worst produce you can, especially overripe or spoiled fruit. Buy small amounts of fruit, and put each purchase in the heaviest bag you can find underneath the stands."

"That's all? This is nuts, if you ask me."

"Like they say on TV, 'I didn't ast yuh.' Now, Dick—*Rich*—one more thing. No matter how pretty or agreeable the checker is, don't be pleasant to her; be grumpy."

"Grumpy?"

"Even nasty, and listen to make sure whether she calls out the price of each item as she checks it. Pay with the twenty, and watch whether she puts the bill on top of the register ledge until she's given you the change and you've pocketed it. That's all. Go. I'll come in later and make my own purchases. I'll use a different check-out lane. On the frozen foods—"

"I can guess. I'm to get soft packages or items which look as if they've been defrosted and refrozen."

"Right. Hey! You're pretty good."

He didn't seem to appreciate the compliment.

Afterward, we met in the car. I drove several blocks away before stopping the wagon and spreading his purchases out on the rear cargo deck. I added up the amounts and then compared the total with his register receipt, nodding as I found a discrepancy.

"What's up—you don't like my choice of menus?"

"I'm looking at this total, Rich. You bought $17.21 worth of food, according to the marked prices. That is, you bought that much if the checker took the fruit out of these kraft paper bags before weighing them."

"She did. I watched her," he said, watching *me* with what I had never before noticed was a 'gimlet eye,' as they say. Perhaps the chip-off-the-old-block theory is correct.

"Anyway," I went on, "the total on the receipt is $19.28, an overcharge of $2.07. That's more than

ten percent, quite a nice profit."

"Let me see that receipt!" He lunged for the slip of paper.

I went on. "Since supermarkets work on a normal net profit of less than two percent on sales, that extra ten percent is pure profit—for the checker—and maybe for the manager, too."

"I found thirty-two cents' worth, Dad. Why, that little—! She charged me two times for soup that was three for thirty-two! But what was the other $1.75 for? I didn't buy anything for that amount."

"You probably bought a broom. We'll go back, and you go in and complain about the overcharge. I'll bet you a lunch there's a broom leaning against the register. She'll say she thought it was yours. She'll apologize all over herself and refund your money, then she'll call a boy to put it back in stock. But when you've gone, it'll show up again, leaning casually against the register. They'll sell that broom a hundred or more times today!"

When he came out, a sour look was on his face. He was learning.

"A broom?"

"A mop. Same thing." He grimaced and said a cuss word.

"How was the checker?"

"Sweet as Raquel Welch, and I was about ready to ask her for a date."

I frowned. "I *told* you to be grumpy, and you fall for her."

He laughed. "Well, I'm a beginner. Besides, she was a great-looking bird."

We parked again, and I drew out the long report forms. It took about ten minutes to check all the blanks and to fill in the comments. I stapled the receipt for my purchase to the form, and then did Rich's, showing him how to make the proper entries.

"You do a lot of these?"

I nodded. "Bread and butter. We get $7.50 a report plus the return of the expenditure."

"Only $7.50? Who gets the groceries?"

"The client. Delivered within eight hours of purchase. They want to see the evidence for themselves. But don't knock it; I can normally do about two an hour, if I plan my route right. That's fifteen bucks an hour. It pays the office bills, and for your crazy so-called clothes."

He made a face. "Don't rub it in. Man, this is a bad scene."

He was learning. I looked to my right and smiled as we drove to the next supermarket on my route.

By noon, we had crammed in four stores, which meant eight reports and $60 income. Normally, I would have done almost as well by myself, but Rich was a little slow, and explaining things to him after each stop took some time.

I bought him a steak sandwich at a joint. Rich wanted a drink, but I told him I had a rule about not drinking on the job, and his face fell. He was learning, all right.

"This car stinks like a fruit peddler's stand," he lamented after lunch. "The bugs are flying all over the fruit and the meat, and that's beginning to stink, too. And those milk cartons, the leaky ones, are slopping up the deck!"

"Okay, boy," I relented. "Let's do something else this afternoon."

I stopped by the headquarters of the grocery chain and dumped the offending groceries. Then I headed for a nearby auto dealer's.

"On this job, I'll let you go in. Don't go up to a salesman, but just sort of saunter around the new cars. Time how long it takes for a salesman to approach you and remember his opening greeting."

I gave him a lot of other instructions on what to watch and listen for. The manufacturer had a number of new features this year, and one of the things Rich was to note was how many of eleven special improvements had been brought out, and how well they were explained.

"Also," I instructed him, "act stupid—or should I say, act natural? In any case, don't be too cooperative, and above all, don't be enthusiastic. Oh yes, *don't* sign anything, no matter how good a salesman he is."

Rich came out an hour later with a mixture of disappointment and enthusiasm on his face, if there can be such an expression.

"Well?" I asked.

"Funny. The guy's a suede-shoe artist. It took over a quarter-hour for him to get around to me, and then he acted for a while as if I were a hippie or something."

"Your duds, man, your duds," I said with a modern accent.

"Huh. Well, I told him I was just out of the Army and had a bundle, and then he really brightened up. He tried to sell me up and down the wall!"

I pulled out the report form. "How many features?"

"Well . . . two. But, Dad, they got a real bomb this year! Four-forty cubes, and—"

"How was the salesman dressed?" I continued, going to item two.

"Damn! Oh, well. He had sort of a checkered coat, and . . ."

Unhappily, he ran through the rest of the items with me. He had inadvertently skipped a few, but I made an appropriate comment. He was learning, all right.

"You know, this old bus of yours is sure some antique. Why don't you trade it in?" he commented as we moved toward the next car

dealer's. "You deserve a new one."

"Maybe he was a better salesman than I gave him credit for . . . No, this *bus* gets twenty-one miles to the gallon, and it's inconspicuous. As I said, that's important."

"Inconspicuous. So's a mongrel dog."

"Clam up and write your report, son. The manufacturer's forms are those pink sheets inside my briefcase."

He wrote busily for a few minutes while I fought the traffic.

"Dad? I'm sorry I took so much time in there. I guess you lost money on me this time."

"Forget it, son. On these reports we get thirty dollars each. The client knows that a good salesman may take an hour or so to handle a prospect."

"Thirty bucks? Well, now, that's not so bad. You ought to deep-six that food chain and stick to autos."

"Uh-uh. The work is seasonal, and besides, we're not finished. A good car salesman will follow up for a couple of months by sending the customer cards and telephoning him. We have to hang onto these reports for sixty days and note any follow-up action before we can submit and collect."

We polished off two more auto agencies and it got close to five o'clock. I noticed that Rich was getting quieter and quieter. That's what this business does to a man—it grinds you down with routine. Well, he sure was learning quick, I'll say that much for my boy.

I found the apartment building automatically after going there every weekday for half a year, and parked across the street.

"What's up now?" Rich roused himself enough to ask.

"We wait."

"How long, and for who?"

"Whom, not who. Two hours, and for Sebastian Sergeyevitch."

He whistled. "The millionaire! What's dealing?"

I explained that Mrs. Sergeyevitch had retained me to watch the apartment where her husband visited his long-time girlfriend at least two or three days every week between five and seven. Girlfriend was a misnomer. Elsie Hollingsworth was every bit of fifty-five, only ten years younger than Sergeyevitch.

Rich came to life. "You gonna catch 'em in the act? Are we going in with a camera and a mike? Where's your equipment? Why has it taken six months to pin 'em down?"

I could only laugh at his torrent of excited questions. It felt good, after another of my typical days. I carefully explained that Mrs. Sergeyevitch, one of our society's leaders and a shrewd old

biddy, had no intention of divorcing her tycoon husband. She was quite content for him to have a true love on the side, where he could go to relax and talk as he couldn't do at home.

"She only wants to make sure he doesn't leave Elsie and take up with some young hussy," I concluded. "That way, she knows her reputation and position are still safe."

"Hussy?" kidded Rich. "You sound like an old movie."

"Sure. That's because I was your age when those movies were made. I know some other old-fashioned words, too, Rich, like *floozie*, *shamus*, and *gat*. However, your ideas about this business are just about as out-of-date as my vocabulary when you get all hepped up about being a 'private eye', and start thinking of bosomy blondes with thousands of dollars for retainers and mysterious strangers following them."

All the time I was talking, I kept watching for old Sergeyevitch. Some days he didn't show at all, and I had to wait the full two hours. It could get boring, as Rich was learning.

He looked at me then. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of his expression. It seemed strangely sad, or was it . . . pitying?

"I want to talk to you about that, Father."

Father? *Father?* Could this be my twenty-four-year-old product of the Seventies calling his old man 'father'? The seriousness in his tone surprised me so much I momentarily dropped my attention from the building's entrance, a lapse of the sort I haven't been guilty of in years.

Before I could speak, Rich grabbed my arm. "There! There he is! I recognize him from the newspaper pictures."

Sure enough, the dumpy figure furtively entering the doorway was Sebastian Sergeyevitch making his routine rendezvous. I sighed, made my own routine notation on the report sheet and cranked up the wagon. At least we wouldn't have to wait the full two hours today.

"About this business," Rich began again, while I wended through rush traffic back to the office. "I think you're going at it all wrong."

"Oh, you do, eh? What makes *you* an expert, your two years in the Army, eating taxpayers' chow?" I was getting short-tempered after my usual hard day, and this flashily dressed youngster had pushed me a little too far at the moment. I was immediately sorry for the words, but Rich didn't take offense.

"No," he said softly, "I may not

know much about being a private detective—yet. But I do know something about this world and the people in it. Dad, you're out-of-date."

"You've said as much several times today," I muttered grimly, as some idiot cut in front of me. I felt like driving right into the moron. The people they give drivers' licenses to!

"Look. What kind of accounts do you have? *Garbage.* Clerical type stuff any kid could do, and the pay is an insult. Dad, you got a master's degree in criminology, I know that, and you turned down a pro ball offer to go into this business. You're no lightweight. Yet you let yourself get pushed into this grubby little corner of the business and sit in your grubby little office with grubby Old Maid Millie, and—"

"Shut up!" I grated. "That's enough!" I was so mad I almost creamed a Lincoln. One more word from that brat and I'd kick him out at the next corner. My fingers trembled on the wheel.

"Please," he pleaded, and something in the way he spoke took all the fight out of me. Rich—Dickie—hadn't talked to me like that since he was a little boy, coming to me for something he wanted very badly.

"Okay, okay," I said. "What do you want me to do, grow my hair long and start a mustache? Should I get a wide tie, or maybe a neckscarf like yours?"

"It would be a start," he said quietly.

"Hell, boy, I'm fifty-two years old!"

There was silence for several blocks. Rich seemed deep in thought. I was sorry, desperately sorry, the day had turned out this way.

But after all, I reasoned, I had achieved my purpose. I had shown him what this business was really all about. He would go places, my fine young son, but in a better business.

"You know," he mused after a while, as we neared my office, "you could get a great layout in the new Kirby Building that's going up. A suite with an office for each of us, real luxury, and a nice reception area—probably for four, five hundred a month."

My Lord. "Rich, you're out of your head. First, you're *not* becoming a private detective, not if I can help it. Besides, how could I pay five hundred a month? That's insane! Do you know what my rent is now? Ninety-five, that's all."

"And we could get a sexy little receptionist, too," he plowed right on. "One that's got some smarts as well. Brains come in young, attrac-

tive packages as well as in Whistler's Mothers."

"One thing . . . one thing," I spat out, "where's the money going to come from to pay for this sultan's boudoir?"

"Easy. From a better class of clientele."

We were there. I parked and we took the clanking old lift up to the fifth floor. After Rich's needling, it seemed gloomier and slower than I had ever noticed. For the first time I wondered if the ancient cage was actually safe.

As we approached the front door, I heard two voices and saw shadows through the frosted glass. At the moment, I wasn't prepared to be charming to a prospective new client.

"In here," I motioned, going through the side entrance directly into my office.

I felt unutterably tired as I leaned back in my old oak swivel chair. I pulled open the bottom drawer and took out a bottle of bourbon and two shot glasses.

"Drink?" I asked.

Rich grinned widely. "At least *one* of my ideas was right. Yeah, sure, I'll have a drink with you."

We each had two ounces, neat, and I began to feel better.

"Take the wagon and go on home, son. Tell your mother I'll be along in about an hour. There's some paper work to clean up first."

"You'll grab a cab?"

"Yeah."

He left without a word, and I put the bottle and glasses back into the desk drawer. I shoved some of the forms on my desk into the drawers, too, and chewed a stick of gum. Finally, I pressed the intercom and called Millie.

"I'm back. Is there someone waiting, Millie?"

"Just a moment."

I heard the outer door open, and Millie's firm-heeled steps pounded out into the corridor. Apparently, she was retrieving an impatient client.

The footsteps returned, and Millie threw open the interconnecting door. A doll, a real doll, stood there hesitantly.

She was, maybe, twenty-two, with jet-black hair and a slim figure which showed every nuance and curve in a skintight black sheath. The neck of her dress—which must have been done up by some European couturier—was slit down to an inch above her navel. Her eyes were smoky, though a little perturbed, and so help me, she swayed as she stood there, just like one of Mickey Spillane's sex-goddess heroines.

I'd told Rich I was fifty-two and I meant I was old, but I sat there like a kid, staring at her chest and

thinking thoughts I hadn't thought I was capable of in a couple of decades, at least.

"Uh, what can I do for you?" I said automatically, though I almost stuttered.

"We-ell," she started, but stopped and looked around at the dingy old walls.

"You have a problem?" I nudged, gently. Sometimes clients, especially women, have a hard time revealing their troubles to a stranger.

"Oh, yes. Yes. But . . . perhaps . . . I don't know. Maybe I've come to the wrong place."

Her nervous eyes were darting back and forth, and my paternal manner didn't seem to be soothing her. I became more brisk, more professional.

"Miss, we are accustomed to all sorts of confidences. I can assure you that your situation will remain completely, discreetly private, if that's what's concerning you."

"N-no, it's not that. It's just—"

She took out a cigarette, and I fumbled for a match. As I don't smoke, I had to slam the drawers open and shut looking for one. Finally, I found a book of them in the drawer with the bourbon. Worse luck—the empty shot glass had tumbled and spilled a few drops on the striking surface. The miserable matches wouldn't light.

"I-I think I may have come to the wrong place," she said abruptly, starting to rise. She dropped the cigarette in the tray.

"No, wait!" I said. Just then, Millie came in with a cup of chocolate. I like hot chocolate, even in the most blistering weather, and Millie has always known when I've had a particularly hard day and need a little booster before I start for home. But now that thick china cup looked like a stage prop for a joke. I started to tell Millie to get it the hell out of the office, but she spoke first.

"Would you like some hot chocolate, young lady?" she asked, bending over the girl.

The young lady leaned back in her chair, hit with both Millie's odd appearance and the ridiculous question at the same time. I almost threw up my hands.

Was all this what Rich had been talking about?

"Er-no," she declined the offer.

Awkwardly, for such a graceful creature, she got to her feet and mumbled some confused something or other and started to leave.

I felt funny. Everything was wrong, and I didn't quite know why, or how to fix it.

She was heading toward the door, and I was trying to go after her to explain, when my side door opened and in came Rich.

"You didn't give me the keys, Dad. Hey! What have we here? Bay-*bee*! Don't fly so early—"

"Rich!" I exclaimed. "This is a cli—"

But he had gone to her side. "Sugar, what gives? Park it back, and spill it."

The two of them locked eyes, and she floated back and sat down.

"Rich," I began again, "what—"

"Sh-h," he gestured to me. "Now, what's dealin', big eyes?"

"Are you the private detective?" she asked in a small, lilting voice.

"The big bad eye, that's me. Who's on your lovely tail, huh? Tell daddy."

"But this gentleman . . .?" she motioned to me.

"My assistant. Come on, bluebird, let's have it."

She totally ignored me, and told Rich the wildest story I'd ever heard. She was an heiress, and a dark-haired Italian she'd met on the Riviera was following her all around the world, threatening to kill her if she didn't marry him. Sometimes he changed his story and merely said he'd blackmail her in the newspapers if she didn't pay him off to the tune of a quarter-million dollars.

"What I need," she finished, "is someone to travel with me and protect me from this terrible person. Also to take notes and get enough evidence on him to have him arrested or something. Honestly! I can't stand much more of it!"

Fantastic. This doesn't even happen on TV. I started to tell Rich what was happening, but he waved a hand at me and started talking.

"Okay, baby, we'll take care of this character. Where're you going now?"

"A-Acapulco," she said in a small voice, a tear swelling in her eye.

"Don't worry about a thing. *I'll* come along and take care of everything. Your plane?"

"Flight 203, TWA, at eight tomorrow night," she murmured.

"Daddy," he pointed at me imperiously, "get me a seat. Now," Rich continued, "I'll need some bread."

She started to open her purse.

"Uh—a check'll—" But she was ignoring me, the "assistant."

"I-I haven't done this before. Is five thousand enough?"

She counted out five pieces of paper. I stood up and leaned over the desk. I'd never seen thousand-dollar bills before.

My son swept them off the blotter carelessly and crumpled them into his pocket. "For a start," he said. Then he looked up at me. "Oh," he said, as if remembering the hired help. "Put this in the till for overhead and the plane ticket."

One thousand dollars fluttered

down onto the green blotting paper.

He started to shove the rest back into his bell bottoms, then pulled the wad out again and peeled off a second bill. "And this is for a couple months' rent over at the Kirby Building."

A second bill joined the first.

"I'll give you a call or something," he called to me over his shoulder as he ushered the heiress out the door.

I looked at the two bills. The damned, dirty-paneled office was quiet, except for Millie's sniffling outside. "Millie!" I yelled, after I had had a second bourbon.

She came in as if she had been on a rubber band pulled tight. "Yes, Mr. Curtis?"

"The year is 1971."

"Mr. Curtis, do you feel all right?"

"And I am fifty-two years old, do you know what that means?"

She sniffed. Damn it, does she always have to *sniff*!

"I suspect it means you've had a nip," she said in her old-maid, precise way.

"Millie," I began, "you're a—no, I take that back. Millie, have you ever thought of retiring?"

"Sir!" she said, shocked.

"Never mind," I procrastinated. Tomorrow would be another day. "Right now, I want you to get me the name and telephone number of the rental agency for the Kirby Building."

"The what?"

"Never mind again. I'll do it myself in the morning. It's after six, anyway. Good night, Millie."

"Good *night*," she sniffed, and this was peeved sniff #1. She left, and the slam of both doors was just right to express her indignation.

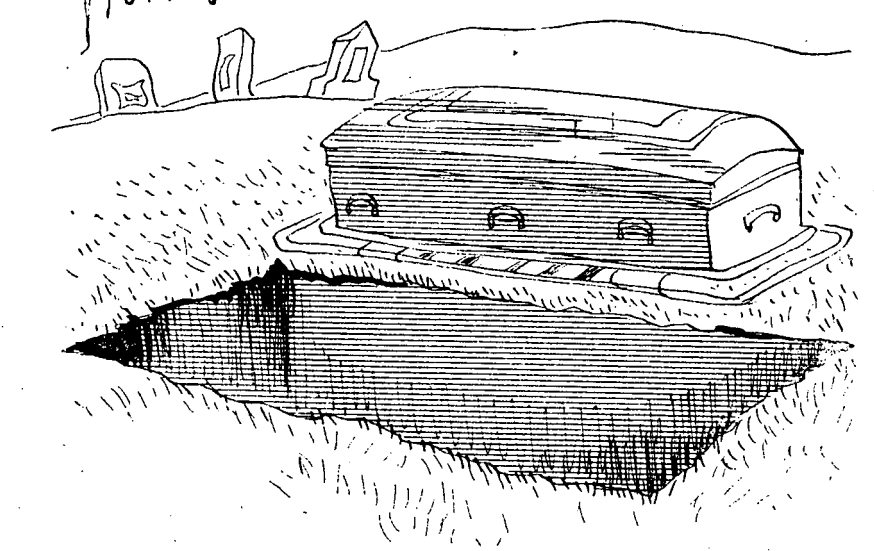
I decided to have bourbon number three. After all, at my age a little Dutch courage can be forgiven when a man starts thinking about shucking his sincere suits, thin, regimental stripe ties—and all he's lived by for three decades.

Three decades! I wonder how I'll look with long hair and a mustache. Like a regular private eye, eh?

I'm learning, all right.

The written word may salve the conscience, but will it solve the questions?

Sweet Tranquility



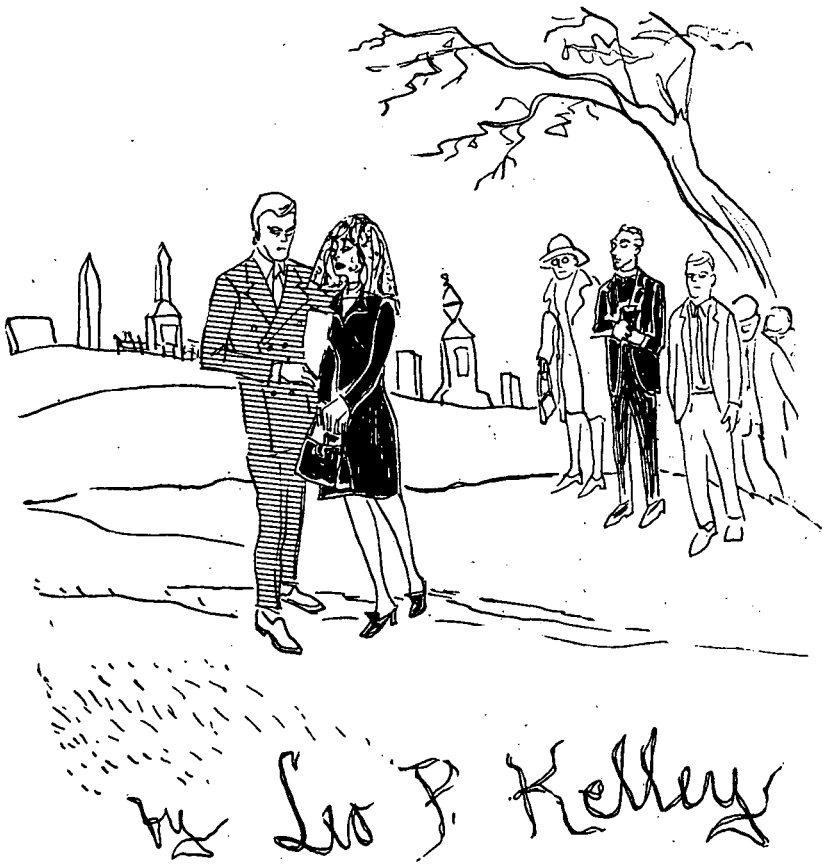
NOW, JUST AS the doctors and the reporters did in the beginning, the other two prisoners who wait with me on Death Row ask, "Why?"

I try to explain to Cairo and Frank, my fateful companions, just as I earlier tried to explain to the psychiatrists and the reporters, but Cairo and Frank just shake their heads. They simply can't understand why I did it; and, I confess, neither can I.

One of the doctors suggested to me at one point that I try writing it all down. "Don't concern yourself with matters of grammar or punctuation," he said. "Just put down whatever comes into your mind."

Well, now I am writing it down. I suppose when I am finished, I shall reread it and perhaps find at last an answer to the question that everyone has asked me over and over again: "Why, Dennis Colby, did you do it?"

To begin with—Nietzsche. I have always admired Nietzsche. He is both direct and precise; he minces no matters. Nietzsche said that the nature of man is evil. He went on to say that it is that very



nature—that *evil* nature—that allows man to survive. It is both his armor and his broadsword against the enemy that is the world he never made. Quite to the point, as always, with Nietzsche.

Still, I have never considered myself an evil man; but Nietzsche, on most matters, is not to be denied, I am convinced. Actually, I have always considered myself luckier than many other people. I enjoyed the advantages that came from having enough money, good looks, even better friends and a really quite pleasant penchant for success in nearly every endeavor to which I chose to set my hand. There was little that I lacked in life. Yet something, I suppose, was sadly lacking.

That thought reminds me of one of the statements made by the prosecutor during his summation at the trial: "Dennis Colby lacks an essential bond with the human community that is necessary, indeed vital, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, if a man is to be something other than a grunting beast of the field."

But I digress. I shall proceed to tell it simply and in as straightforward a manner as is possible under the circumstances, which for me were and are both painful and terrifying.

The beginning? Who can say? Beginnings are untraceable. Where, for example, does the shore begin?

Her name was Susan. She was two years older than I and married, of course. Women like her always seem to be married. She lived on East 63rd Street in New York City in a small but elegant apartment which she had done in antique gold and bone white. She wore little jewelry, less makeup. She was a woman without the need for props. Hers were the latest and best, but never the kickiest clothes. She had her hair done when it needed doing, which was remarkably seldom. Her hair, you see, had the happy facility, as did the wonderful rest of her, of needing neither a manufactured innocence nor a mass-produced touch of deviltry.

Susan was a woman very much the natural daughter of Eve and as engrossing as was that first female, that vulnerable innocent undone by so simple a thing as an apple. Susan's undoing was much more complex. I, I am sorry now to say, was Susan's undoing. Or was she perhaps her own enemy?

At any rate, our relationship progressed at an innocent enough pace at first. It began when we were both children. Susan always led the way in our childhood games. I followed. She teased and taunted me—I endured and adored her.

As she grew older, she changed from a lovely child into an even

lovelier woman. Neither beardless boys nor octogenarians were immune to her beauty. Then she married. Her husband, oddly enough, seemed to take her for granted. That dolt treated her as he would have treated any other of his prize possessions. That is to say, he treated Susan with a distant courtesy born of an easy familiarity. He showed on occasion, however, a kind of cool concern for her. The thought of them together was a fantasy I could not bear but one that returned to torment me with a relentlessness worthy of a Spanish Inquisitor. So I mentally eliminated Susan's husband from my landscape. From that miraculous moment on, he was never more than a minor annoyance to me, an ineffectual gadfly. From that moment on, my happiness soared when I was with Susan. In my mind, he remained forever chained to his rock that was the Earth, a poor Prometheus.

In the metropolitan garden where Susan and I grew up together like two blades of grass never quite touching, my infatuation for her matured into a yearning and then into a truly desperate drive to possess her completely and at any cost.

She ridiculed me when I spoke of love to her, secure in the knowledge of her overwhelming beauty. "Of course you love me, Dennis. Why wouldn't you? It would be quite abnormal if you didn't," she said.

Her words liberated me. They seemed to melt the bars on a cage in which I had not, until then, realized I had been imprisoned.

"Susan," I said, "a trip somewhere would do us both so much good."

"Sardinia," she said, smiling wickedly at me. "Iceland, perhaps."

"Sardinia might do. Olives—and hills in the morning heavy with dew. But Iceland, no. Too passionless and pale, Iceland."

We traveled that summer to Venice and stayed for the whole month of August. We minded neither the stench of the canals nor the flocks of pigeons that befouled us everywhere we went. We saw churches, fountains, statues, museums, the Bridge of Sighs—a totally different world from the America we had left behind, where money smeared a green slime upon the earth and the struggle for power was a palpable miasma polluting the air.

We rented an enormous apartment in an aged palace bordering one of the canals. Its bare floors and drafty rooms amused us. Its dim interiors shrouded secrets, and the dampness that was almost visible on the mahogany furniture

and stained glass of the windows only momentarily dismayed us.

Susan slept in the master bedroom, I in the smaller guest room. Perhaps Susan slept—I remember that I did not. In the heat and dampness of those endless, nerve-shattering nights, I would lie awake and imagine her in the other room doing womanly things and perhaps dreaming of *him*.

Her husband had been amenable concerning the journey, according to Susan. She had reminded him that I was an expert on art and a collector in my own small way, and that the trip would surely prove to be a financially sound investment if we could secure for him a good painting or two. It was true. I had studied art not in the way of courses which supposedly teach one to "appreciate" it, but in the way of a man who must know every freckle and faint flush that adorns the body of his beloved mistress. Such study, plus an innate sensitivity to the play of color, the manner of putting paint to canvas, had allowed me to purchase a painting here, a drawing there that had, in several instances, tripled in value within five years.

Susan and I spent our days gazing at Bellinis, Giorgiones and Tintorettos. The Titians were particularly impressive. But the clash of styles in the Venetian architecture wearied me. Here was a hint of Byzantine—over there, Italian Gothic—and everywhere the evidence of Renaissance architecture; quite extravagant, in the manner of a three-ring circus.

I bought a Veronese for him at what I considered a satisfactory price but one which Susan considered "outrageous." As we wandered idly along the Rialto, I patiently explained to her the relationship of lire to dollars. She agreed, when my lesson ended in laughter, that the price paid for the Veronese had indeed been "reasonable." One had to consider relationships carefully, I slyly told her. She merely smiled and said that she was certain her husband would be pleased with the purchase.

My worst and best days were spent on the Lido. Susan never wore a bikini, but the one-piece white suit that encased her languid body blinded me. As the fat Italian sun fondled her day after day and she surrendered willingly to its hot embrace, growing Mediterranean in the most ravishing way, I swam. The water was warm—I longed for Iceland after all. Susan would sit on the beach glistening like a bright savage in her oil, and eating an ice I had bought for her. I began to feel as if I existed for no other reason than to fetch and carry for her. I cursed her silently;

I cursed her for her cruelty in bawdy gutter language and in multi-voweled Italian. She sensed it, I'm certain, but instead of extending sympathy, she offered to share her ice with me.

Our idyll ended as idylls always do. We stood, arm in arm, in the train station on our last day, and finally the train rumbled and shook us and itself toward the mainland.

"It was lovely," Susan said, leaning her head on my shoulder. "Everything was so very lovely, Dennis."

"Even the canals?"

She laughed gaily. "Even those stinking canals."

When we returned to New York, I presented him with the Veronese and he put on his reading glasses and stared at it for a moment and then said, "It looks a bit murky, don't you think?"

When Susan phoned me the following week, she was excited but in control of herself. He was sick, she told me—very sick. The doctor had said it was his heart again. He had somberly commented to Susan that more and more men were dying younger and younger and it discouraged him.

"How bad is it?" I asked her.

She didn't know.

We both found out the next day when he died. Cardiac arrest; dull words to hide an unfortunate lack of immortality. A man ought to go out with more of an epitaph than that, I thought. Cardiac *eruption*! Now that would be far better, insofar as it implied protest—active protest—rather than the weak surrender of "arrest."

I went to the funeral and walked beside the composed widow and stood beside the gaping grave and marveled at how much the minister looked like Queen Nefertiti with his slanted forehead and sharp slice of a nose.

That evening I suggested to Susan that she give up her apartment and move in with me, if only temporarily.

She shook her head. "No, Dennis," she said, looking around my rather severe livingroom. "It wouldn't be right, would it, considering the fact that you have your own life to live?"

"Susan," I protested, "my life is with you! Otherwise, it isn't life. It's purgatory!"

She reached out and stroked my hand. "You are such a fool, Dennis."

I couldn't bring myself to say anything more. I couldn't shout it from the rooftops or on street corners. I could not—I *would* not—tell her that I loved her more than any other woman in the world. She would have called me charm-

ing but quite hopelessly mad. But she knew—I *knew* she knew! It was evident in her eyes at unguarded moments when I would surprise her studying me over a luncheon table or as we chatted idly in a theater lobby; and she *played* with that knowledge, a cat shaking a helpless mouse in its cruel teeth!

"You know I love you very much, Dennis," she said one night in that mocking way of hers. "I have since we were children together."

Suddenly, I felt faint—and frightened. Ridiculous! Yet my palms were moist, I realized.

"However," she continued, smiling faintly, "I won't let you sacrifice your life because of your concern for me."

"It's no sacrifice," I protested, "because I love you too, Susan."

She squeezed my hand. "I want you to be happy."

"You've made me very happy. Last August in Venice, just being alone with you was—"

"I really must go."

Several months passed during which Susan and I often lunched together and made pilgrimages to off-off-Broadway previews where everyone was somber and the plays were unintelligible. We spent Christmas Eve in the Oak Room at the Plaza Hotel.

"Santa Claus is coming to town," I sang tunelessly to Susan.

"Then you'd better watch out," she said. "The old boy's foxy. Coal and switches in your stocking if you don't behave yourself."

"Susan, we could go back to Venice."

She widened her eyes, looked away and then beckoned to a passing waiter. She ordered a drink for herself, sternly telling me I'd had quite enough.

"Acapulco," I suggested. "Or Tangier."

"Do you know T. Edward Carruthers?" she asked me.

"Everyone knows T. Edward Carruthers, the Third. Wine importing, isn't it?"

Susan nodded.

"Carruthers, the Third," I mumbled. "Ugly as an ogre. The first two Carruthers must have been mutants"

"Dennis, I'm going to marry him."

The English language—or any language for that matter—is an adequate instrument with which we convey news of births and deaths, our joys and heartbreak. Usually it is sufficient unto all; but it suddenly was not sufficient for me, not right then. "You're going to marry him," I repeated foolishly. She might have been speaking Swahili for all I could comprehend.

"Yes, next month," she replied.

"You're not! You can't!" My voice, to my surprise, sounded resonant and forceful, rich with a manly calm. "I won't let you."

"Edward has been very kind to me. I've been seeing him quite often since . . . since the funeral." She hesitated. ". . . And before it as well. I suppose I should tell you that, too."

"Susan, you are not going to—"

"Oh, Dennis, don't let's begin again. Just shut up!" She paused, looking at me over the rim of her cocktail glass. "It's really the very best thing—for everyone concerned."

I stood up and discovered with some shock that I was roaring like a wounded lion. People were staring at me.

The Oak Room is not noted for *grand guignol* but I introduced it that night. My words didn't matter—or even make much sense, I suppose. I accused Susan of betraying me again. I said that she was not to be trusted; that she should be put away somewhere, safely certified. I remember only one remark of hers at that point.

"I suppose it's true that it takes one to know one," she said, her lips twisted in an unmistakable sneer. Then she summoned a waiter who, with several of his colleagues, put me out.

You never notice how burly waiters are as they glide about on plush carpets carrying little silver trays and smirking, not until they pick you up under the arms—not quite off the floor—and put you out into the night that turns out to be empty of any star.

Susan disappeared. I sat on the edge of the Plaza fountain that was waterless for the winter and filled it with my tears.

"Bad trip, buddy?" someone whispered, and I punched him in his face which I couldn't see.

The day came—the day of the wedding that Susan and T. Edward Carruthers would celebrate in years to come, among fine china and complaints about servants. I couldn't control my impulse, although I tried desperately to do so. I went to the church on that bleak January afternoon and eased myself into an inconspicuous corner of the vestibule. Only a few well-wishers and members of the wedding party were inside waiting.

When Susan arrived alone in a limousine a few minutes later, I moved quickly toward the door.

"Susan," I said, "you're coming with me."

She saw the rifle. I held it openly now, cradled in my arm, the sheet in which I had wrapped it earlier discarded. I repeated my command,

a drowning man carrying on a hopeless dialogue with the last straw in his universe.

She glanced behind her. There were only a few people in sight some distance from the church. Obviously, she was both frightened and embarrassed.

"Dennis, is this the final madness? Let me pass!"

I barred her entrance to the church. "Susan, be reasonable!"

"Do you call that rifle reasonable?"

I seized her arm and hurried her down the steps. She said nothing; she knew me too well after all the years. Words were no longer of any use to either of us. I signaled to the chauffeur in the limousine but he saw my rifle, gaped and gasped, and then roared away down the street.

At the same instant, Susan jerked her arm free and ran toward the door of an antique shop several yards away. In that single action, which involved not only her body but her mind as well, was the measure of my total defeat.

I realized in a flash of agony that Susan would spend the rest of her life like this—fleeing from me. She would lead me on and then laugh and run from the anguish she had aroused in me. I raised the rifle and fired one doomed shot.

I was beside her almost before she touched the sidewalk. I remember thinking that there was not very much blood. I remember thinking that she was, possibly, a species of vampire that had dieted too long. My thoughts were a carrousel out of control. I threw her lifeless body over my shoulder and ran from the shouts and pointing fingers of those still living on the street and in the emptying shops.

Directionless and adrift now, I carried Susan into a tower of glass on Third Avenue. People moved rapidly out of our way like obsequious peasants before the approaching retinue of their ruler. I entered an empty automatic elevator and pressed the button for the top floor. An eternity later, I came out and found the door leading to the roof at the end of the long hall. It was locked. I blasted it open with a single shot.

On the roof was a water tower; underfoot—black, cracked gravel. Here and there air vents raised their shiny aluminum hoods. I put Susan down, turning her face upward, and sobbing, whispered her name.

Five minutes later, the police kicked open the door at the top of the stairs and yelled at me to surrender. I caught a glimpse of blue, a glint of steel and the sheen of polished holster leather.

I fired and heard the thud of

something falling in the door's interior that was suddenly so dim to my dazed and Susanless sight.

I moved quickly to one side so that the awkward angle of their sighting would prevent them from hitting me—but actually I wanted them to shoot me. They could not have known that at the time but it was true. I continued firing. I felt, after each shot, a lessening of the physical tension that had been torturing me for so long and the beginning of a sweet tranquility unlike any I had ever experienced before.

The police began using a bull horn, booming through it about surrender.

I had known the moment was coming. When my ammunition ran out at last and I had run down like a broken windup toy that had been forgotten by all the children everywhere, they stepped cautiously out of the doorway, their guns drawn. They approached me warily as if they were anthropologists and I some new and deadly species they had just discovered. I dropped my empty rifle as soon as they appeared and walked to where Susan lay. I knelt down beside her and touched her cold cheek.

They pulled me to my feet. On their command, I held out my arms and they snapped the handcuffs on my wrists.

"Okay, take him down!" shouted a red-faced detective with eyes of ice.

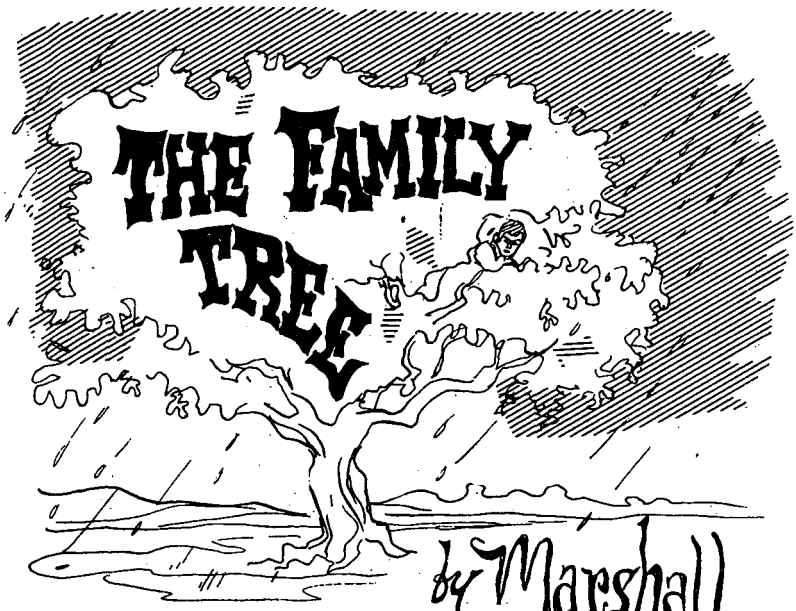
"Her name is Susan," I told the other detective who was leading me toward the door and the steps leading down from the roof. "She's—"

"We know," he interrupted. "Mr. Carruthers called us from the church and identified you. He told us he'd seen you take her with you."

"You won't let her lie there alone too long, will you?" I asked.

Now, as I sit here in my cell, I remember his voice sounding genuinely sympathetic when he answered, "No, Colby, we won't. We'll bring your sister's body down right after we get you out of here."

When a peeper reaper pays a call, little detectives from big oaks fall.



SEPTEMBER in the rain . . . Black branches, wet and dressed in sodden leaves . . . The roar of a freshet in the street below, runoff from the newly paved and subdivided cornfield up the road . . . Me, Jay Hunter, sitting outside in a Pennsylvania rainstorm and, like the tree, clothed in sopping black. A private eye, yeah. A wet, stiff peeper well on the way to pneumonia. As an ex-Marine, I'd stood some crazy watches in my time, but this topped it all.

Here I was, perching in the upper branches of an ancient oak, waiting to sweep like Tarzan on those baddies with the axes and saws. I even had a rope to swing down on, the Johnny Weissmuller yell reverberating in my sinuses.

Uh huh. Except that the baddies weren't going to come. I might be up a tree, but my client was definitely out of his. I mean, anybody who'd pay me a hundred bucks a night to roost out here on a branch in front of his house just had to be more than a little ready for the cackle factory. Voodoo lumberjacks indeed.

I looked to my right, peering through a hole in the dripping foliage at the huge old house where my benefactor was comfortably ensconced in a dry bed with his moist young wife, and I shook my head.

"Douglas Miles," I said somberly in his direction, "you are weird, really weird." Of course, it also struck me that he had no corner on craziness. After all, it was he who was in bed with the lovely Martha, and I who was out on a limb with the hypnotic drip of rain.

Hah! I thought. *The old Bucks County water torture, that's what it is! Miles, you crafty old fox, you've flipped out and now you want to convert the rest of us. Get us all into your tree, as it were. Lunacy loves company!*

Sure, you have money and influence and stuff, but anybody who figures his life depends on an oak tree . . .

I was snorting on like this, thinking derisive thoughts about my kooky client, shivering, cursing and taking an occasional nip from a pint of Scotch when the night up and exploded with a BRRRRRAAAAAMMMMM! so loud that I jumped a foot and lost my perch on that wet, slippery and horrendously hard branch.

I dropped my bottle of Scotch; that was the first thing. I also bumped my head and elbow. I was shook, and angry at myself because I hadn't seen the baddies arrive, hadn't even heard them below me when they pulled the cord to yank that power saw into life. And I was paying for my stupidity. Branches jabbed and cut, wet leaves whipped my face. I was falling out of that tree and there wasn't any time at all for a Tarzan yell . . .

Douglas Miles and his wife had seemed like rather normal people when they walked through the door that says *Jay Hunter, Investigations* earlier in the day. That could be a relative thing, though, since our artsy-craftsy town of Brighton is a kind of municipal madhouse, possessed of the strangest of Bucks County's strange.

Anyway, Miles had been wearing a suit and tie, a guy in his early forties with a red complexion that came from high blood pressure, too much booze, too much sun, or a

combination of the three. His wife, whom he introduced as Martha, was a perky brunette of about 24. The miniskirt distracted me, but I managed to notice the set mouth which destroyed just a bit of her prettiness and articulated the tension that had brought them to my office.

I got them seated across from my desk with some comments about the rotten, rainy weather we'd been having, told him I'd heard his name in connection with some of the civic and tourist stuff around town, then sat back to await his problem.

"Well," he said. He rubbed his eyes, looked at Martha, looked at me, rubbed his nose, and finally began. "Have you heard anything about the new housing development?"

When I said I knew from the papers that it had been a long time coming, that there had been financial difficulties on the part of the developers and that somebody had gone to court to try to stop it, he nodded wearily.

"I'm that somebody," he said. "The legal action has been expensive, but I've finally obtained an injunction to prevent them from building any more homes. Those tract houses are already sprawling all over the place up there above my property."

"It's a crime!" Martha said. "And it's not just us—all the nice homes where we live are going to be wiped out."

Miles nodded again. "You see," he said, "it's a problem of drainage. Actually, we're in the township, not in Brighton itself. There's never been anything much in the area except farms, and the township supervisors haven't had to cope with anything more technical than fixing potholes in the roads."

"So," said Martha, "when the original developer came in with his plans, they bought all his fast talk about progress and the bigger tax-base, everything. They approved it without knowing what they were doing."

Her husband gave me a tired smile. "Martha's even madder than I am. In fairness, those first plans weren't all that bad. The problem developed after the original developer ran into a snag on money and let a New York syndicate bail him out. And this syndicate . . . well, let's say they're not above using strong-arm tactics to get what they want."

"Mob money?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Possibly. The houses suddenly became much cheaper—they're practically shacks. And that certainly devalues our area, since it adjoins the development. But the real problem, as I

said, is drainage. The original plan for storm sewers has been abandoned, and the runoff is going to sweep us away."

I guess I blinked, because he said, "No, I mean literally. We're in a limestone area and the earth is just going out from under us. I've already got a huge sinkhole right in the middle of my lawn."

"Well," I said, "you have the injunction now, so you ought to be all right."

Martha tugged at the miniskirt. "We're not all right," she said quietly.

Miles sighed. "The injunction, yeah. I thought I had troubles before."

"They've been pressuring you?" I asked.

"Pressure!" said his wife. "Mr. Hunter, they are threatening his *life*!"

I studied Miles across the desk and his gaze came back level and gray. "Mr. Hunter," he said, "can you climb a tree?"

It took a while, but I finally sorted out that crazy question. Seemingly, it had to do with a great old oak tree on the corner of the family homestead.

In a nutshell—or an acorn, in this case—Miles had received two threats since being granted the injunction. One was a phone call, the other a scrawled note. He fished in his pocket, found the crumpled piece of paper and passed it over. A frustrated poet had done it in block printing with a red ball-point pen:

I think that I shall never see
A man as strong as a big old tree.
An oak whose trunk is split and bent;
Wonder where great-grandpa went?
Granddaddy, too, is a longtime gone;
Remember the limb that fell upon?
And father, dead now, like an ash,
Missed the driveway and went crash.
Your time, too, will come at last,
When that tree is dead and past.

I lit a cigarette and wished I'd gone to a movie. I handed back the note as Miles said: "Maybe this isn't such a good idea, but . . . well, dammit, something has to be done." His face seemed redder than before.

"Mr. Miles, would you like to spell it out and tell me what you expect me to do? Then we can decide whether it's a good idea or not."

He did and it wasn't, but I decided to take the case anyway; jobs that pay a hundred bucks a night don't usually grow on trees.

After leaving the office and stop-

ping at my apartment long enough for me to change clothes, we'd come out to the Miles' place, and I'd managed to soak up some of their warm hospitality—not enough, but some—before ducking out into the downpour. By that time, of course, Miles had explained everything, although with hesitation. I guess it sounded nutty even to him.

This tree had been standing on the property when his great-grandfather bought the land several eons back. The oak was undeniably majestic and had been great-grandpa's pride and joy. Unfortunately, he'd cozied up to it during an electrical storm and had been struck dead with a bolt from the skies.

That, naturally, did not make a legend by itself. But when his son—Miles' granddad—had been killed by a falling limb that was heavy with ice, the family began to wonder.

Miles' own father had sealed the tale by coming home late one night, missing the driveway and wrapping his 1948 Packard rather thoroughly around the trunk. The fact that he'd been imbibing heavily—a tradition in which his son also seemed steeped—did nothing to dispel the notion that when a male Miles kicked the bucket it would be of the old oaken variety.

"So you see," Miles had said, "while I'm not *really* superstitious, that note and the phone call about cutting down the tree have me kind of shaky."

With these things going through my mind, I'd climbed the tree steadily—well, unsteadily, perhaps—and had reached what seemed a comfortable roost. I settled myself in, hauled out the Scotch Miles had given me, and got ready for a long, long night. The first four or five hours weren't bad. I mulled the situation. I thought of all the other places I could be. I nursed the Scotch and vice versa. I watched the lights in the house go out one by one. And, of course, I got drenched. But it wasn't really too bad.

It was sometime after midnight that the branch got to be untenable, when I got to wondering whether the .45 automatic in my waistband would rust and stain my shorts, when I started having all those irrational thoughts about everybody's sanity. That, of course, is when the night exploded with sound and my numb fanny also lost its grip on reality. That was when I fell out of the tree.

Clunk! That was inside my head, compliments of a passing limb. And it was all rushing past. Man, that tree was traveling like mad. Going right on by me, it was.

Whoosh! My elbow hurt. There were scrapes and bruises, each punctuated with a yowl, an oof or something. I didn't know. It was all going too fast. I knew I was way up there. And I was coming way down. Gonna die, was what. Knew it. Didn't know much, but I knew—*SPLAT!*

So this is how the world ends. Not with a bang or a whimper. No, hell no. Somehow you never think of a *SPLAT!* I lay there for a while being dead, wondering dead wonders while the angels came. Their wings made a funny noise. It sounded as if they were powered by sputtering one-cylinder gas engines. My elbow hurt.

But the angels were just one guy dressed in—uh, oh—dressed in black. Well, okay, I was ready. I rated the guy in black, I guessed. But how come he was automated? *Aha, Grim Reaper—gave up the scythe for a McCulloch tree saw, eh? You sly devil, you. Well, I'll just come right along with you. Soon as I—whoops! Hey, watch that thing!*

Crazy guy was swinging the saw's whirling blade at me. Lopped the top right off that yew there. *Hey, yew there. Hey, now stop! And who in hell is doing all that yelling out the window? They'll wake the dead. Hah! They'll have a wake for me, that's what. Wonder if you could kill the Grim Reaper? Be a joke on him, all right. Still have my gun. How about that? Wonder I didn't shoot my leg off. Well. Okay, Grim Reaper, I'll just cock it back and take aim like this—Damn! Good thing I rolled over, there. You almost got me with your BRRRAAAAAMMMM Machine that time!*

Okay, take that and that. Bang, you're dead. Cripes, that really was a bang, wasn't it? Ah, I guess I killed your automatic scythe. Sure is quiet without it. Except for that woman screaming in the hou—hey, don't run away!

I jumped up. Death was receding, but I'd catch it. It was hard to run in the mud . . . mud? Life came flooding in and I realized I wasn't dead at all. I'd landed flat on my back in soft mud. All that rain had saved my skin—and said skin was now holding together all the pain of my acquaintance with practically every branch in that damned tree. But I had to move. The guy was getting away—and he was no more the Grim Reaper than I was.

He stayed in the yard, since the street was flowing like a river, but I could see that he was angling toward a car parked down the road. He was running like fury and I was squishing along right be-

hind him. I'd catch him, I thought, but it was going to be close.

I was gaining on him when he vanished in a puff of smoke.

That's what it looked like, and it really stopped me. I even thought for a moment that I'd been right the first time. He *was* the Grim Reaper, and he'd simply shoved off. But then I went up to where he'd disappeared and found him splashing in that big sinkhole Miles had told me about earlier.

He turned out to be a lousy swimmer, which was nice. Half-drowned and without his trusty tree saw, he wasn't much trouble at all. I got him up to the house and discovered, unhappily, what all the screaming had been about.

Miles, it turned out, had leaped from bed at the first sound of the power saw and—while I was busy plummeting and oohing and ouching—had lunged for the window, tripped over a pair of boots and gashed his side on the sharp corner of a table. He'd really ripped himself open, and Martha had telephoned police and ambulance in addition to spending some time screaming for me.

The sirens were already audible, in fact, and Martha had been so busy telling me about her husband—who was still bleeding on a bed upstairs—that she hadn't until this moment noticed the Grim Reaper. Now, though, she gasped, "Why, Mr. Smythe, what are *you* doing here?"

Smythe, scythe, I thought. I hadn't been far wrong. "This is the guy who was slicing down your oak tree. You know him?"

"I can't believe it," she answered. "Well, I mean, I *can* believe it, but . . . he's the local manager for the syndicate we were telling you about."

"What about it?" I said to Smythe-Scythe, who was quietly dripping on the carpet. But I didn't get an answer, because the state police arrived at that point, followed immediately by the township rescue squad's ambulance.

They brought Miles down, and he didn't look good. He was pale with red blotches. Martha went with him to the hospital, and the cops and I stayed at the house while I filled them in and we tried to question the syndicate man from New York. The former Grim Reaper also did not look good. He looked, in fact, like death warmed over.

I knew the detective and a couple of the troopers, so there was no problem with my statement, and they decided to take our boy back to their barracks for more questioning. That's what they said, although it was likely they just wanted to run a check on him

with New York authorities. He'd threatened Miles' life all right, but he'd done it so neatly that about all they could really hold him for was vandalism. They don't give you the chair simply for taking a whack at an old oak tree.

As I went with them to the door, the detective remarked that he'd never seen anything like the way the water was flowing in that street out front. "I tell you," he said, "that housing syndicate is through. Even if we don't nail this guy, he's gonna be pretty uncomfortable around here. And with all this water damage, the township is bound to force some kind of action. I think you can tell Mr. and Mrs. Miles that everything is going to be okay."

I said I'd see him around, then went back and stood in the livingroom to have a cigarette and dry off. The old house muted the pound of rain and roar of rushing water, but even those thick walls couldn't block out the tremendous *WHUMMP!* and sucking gargle that yanked my attention back to the front lawn. I stared in disbelief, rooted at the window, and it was two cigarettes later that the jangling telephone finally snapped me out of it.

"Mr. Hunter," said the voice in the receiver, "this is Martha Miles." There was nothing perky or pretty in the voice, and I was sorry because I knew what was coming. I even nodded as she said, "My husband has had . . . has had a stroke. He's . . . dead."

I made the proper responses—and there aren't any—and said I'd lock the house, that I'd be in touch to see if there was anything I could do. We hung up and I stood with my hand on the phone, wondering about it . . .

I thought about the gash in Douglas Miles' side and wondered how much of a gash Smythe-Scythe had managed to put into the trunk before he heard me landing in the mud . . .

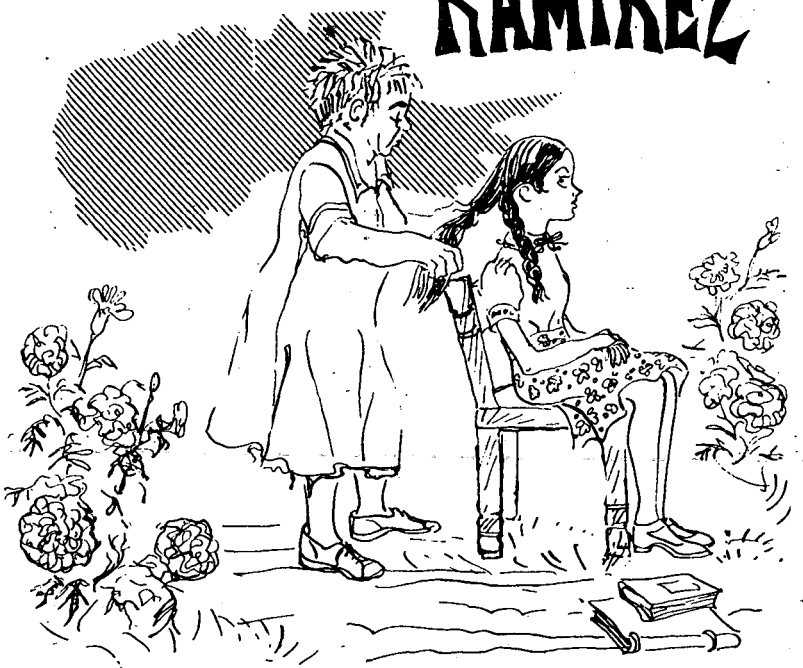
And I wondered if I should have told her about that tremendous noise outside—the noise the earth had made when the new sinkhole opened up and swallowed that giant oak tree.

No cord nor cable, the saying goes, can hold so fast as love can do with a twined thread.

MOTHER RAMIREZ

WE CALLED HER Mother Ramïrez. She must have had more of a name, but nobody knew her by anything else.

I guess I saw as much of her as anybody. She lived in an adobe hovel at the back of a vacant lot where the business section



straggled into a bunch of run-down old houses. My grocery store was across the street, and I got in the habit of glancing over there when I was sweeping the sidewalk or washing windows, or any of the jobs that kept me near the front of the place.

Call her what you want—nutty, retarded—she didn't have it upstairs. Lord knows how she managed as well as she did. Claire Jamieson from the welfare office stopped in three or four times a month to keep an eye on her, but they left her alone; I mean, they didn't try to put her away, and she got along somehow. I'd see her out in front of the shack, a dumpy, dark woman with pepper and salt hair that looked like it'd been hacked off with a dull knife. Her eyes—I didn't like to meet them. She reminded me of a scared horse, skittish, you know, and unpredictable. They had a sort of lost expression, along with the wild look.

From all I can learn, she was about forty, but she looked at least fifteen years older, with skin like leather, except I never saw leather with so many wrinkles. They tell me she'd had folks once, to look after her, but they'd both died, the mother first, and then the father, and she'd lived there all alone and looked after herself since she was in her teens.

by Nancy Schachterle

You'd think being weak in the head like that the fellows'd take advantage of her, but they never did. That is, it didn't seem like they had, until she was in her early twenties. Then she came up pregnant. When the baby was born, old Mrs. Martin, who had Claire Jamieson's job before her, said she wasn't fit to raise the kid, and they should take it away from her. But the way I heard it, when they tried, there was hell to pay and Mrs. Martin came out of it with a bloody nose. They thought it over and changed their minds, fast. It looked like Mother Ramirez was ready to kill anybody who tried to take that baby away from her. It was a major miracle that she had just the one. Even when she was young, though, she was never sociable, so I guess once she had the baby she had all she needed for company.

When I came to town, Rosie was about thirteen, a real pretty little thing. She was just a hair brighter than her mother. By the time I knew her, she could write her

name, and she looked almost normal. A couple of years before, they'd started a school here in town for that sort of kid. They didn't try to teach them much—you couldn't—but they came on strong with the cleanliness bit, and Rosie showed it. Funny thing, Mother Ramirez stayed just as scroungey and smelly as ever, but she was real proud that Rosie went to school, and any word that came from the teachers was like it came straight from God himself. It was a sight, how old Mother Ramirez kept that girl. Her own clothes came from the charity store, and she'd have big gaps under the armpits where the seams had split, and skirts hanging uneven and any old length. But Rosie! That was different. You might see her wearing the same couple of outfits days on end, but they came from regular stores, and they were clean and fresh every day, with the tears mended—maybe with big, awkward stitches, but they were mended.

But it was Rosie's hair that was really special. Like I said, Mother Ramirez' hair looked like it'd been whacked off with a butcher knife, and I don't think she owned a comb, but Rosie's was thick and black, and shone like a magpie's wing. Oh, the old gal was proud of that hair! Mrs. Harrison, from the school, came by a couple of times and taught Mother Ramirez how to do French braids. On nice days you'd see her and Rosie out there in the hard-dirt front yard, her brushing that long black hair till Rosie'd yip, and then braiding it so fancy. They'd spend half an hour like that before time for Rosie to go off to school, pert and chipper with little hair ribbons to match her outfit, green or blue, depending on which one she wore. When she got a little older, Rosie wanted to wear her hair loose, like the rest of the girls, but her mother wouldn't go for that. My wife said she figured the old lady felt she was different—I mean, she wasn't very bright, and she never got to go to school—but she'd learned one thing from the teachers, that was sort of a comforting tie, like, with the normal world, and she wasn't going to give that up easily.

Anyway, they went on that way until Rosie was sixteen. She was an attractive little thing, slim and medium tall, with pretty brown eyes and a shy smile. Her teeth were kind of bad, and she didn't always remember to clean her nails, but she was cute enough that it was bound to happen.

She got a boyfriend; not a nice, clean, simple boy like might have been good for her, but a hippie.

We have them around here. A couple of years ago they started up

a community, called it Peace Village, on some land south of town that weird Joe Simpson let them use. They like it here in the southwest, because they don't have much of any winter to get through. The wife and I drove by a couple of times to see what it looked like, and I'll tell you it wasn't much. Some of them were living in an old Santa Fe boxcar Joe'd kept cattle feed in for years, and the rest had thrown up the poorest kind of shacks, as long as they were shelter.

Now, some of these kids are reasonably harmless. I mean, they're after peace, and beauty, and if they're copping out on the world, that's not much skin off my nose, as long as they're doing what they call their own thing and not doing me and mine any harm.

This kid that took up with Rosie, he was something else. I'm getting sort of used to some of the long hair, but his was down to his shoulders, streaky shades of blond, and looked greasy. I never saw him except wearing dirty fringed buckskins, with faded blue jeans cut off ragged, and squaw boots, and those beads around his neck. He had a face like a ferret, with slitty mean eyes, and that long, straight hair flopping in them. I tell you, it made me sick to see him hanging around Rosie. They'd walk down the street toward town, him draping himself over her shoulder, and I'd look over to where old Mother Ramirez stood in the yard, just watching them, with that scared-horse look in her black eyes.

Rosie started skipping school. She used to come in the store once in a while, and I'd hear how they were teaching her to sew, and cook, and clean, and how to make change, and maybe one day she could get a job, like in the charity store, or someplace. But once this hippie started paying her attention, there was nothing in her head but him. She'd start out for school in the morning, all right, but sometimes she wouldn't get there.

Well, this went on for about three weeks, and then one day I didn't see Rosie. This was real unusual. I mean, like clockwork she and Mother Ramirez would do her hair, and then Rosie'd go off to school, just before eight-thirty. Mother Ramirez would putter around her skimpy little patch of marigolds, that she was almost as proud of as she was Rosie, and then go on inside for the rest of the day. This morning I saw her in her little yard, wandering sort of lost and hopeless, looking at the chair where Rosie always sat while she brushed her hair. She looked my way a couple of times, then finally she went inside. About ten o'clock I was putting some new sale post-

ers in the window, not paying much attention, and all of a sudden she was there, in the doorway, looking as if one word would send her running. I finished putting up the streamer telling about the fryers, keeping an eye on her all the time, waiting for her to say something. When I was done I stepped down to where she stood.

"You see my Rosie?" Her voice was rusty, like she hadn't used it in a long time.

"Not today, Moth . . . Mrs. . . . uh, not today." I didn't know what to call her to her face. In all these years I'd never once talked to her.

She stood there, her eyes sort of glazed, looking as if she was trying hard to think. Her chin was bobbing, and she shook a little all over. Then she turned, real slow, and waddled back across the road and into her little adobe hovel. I stood there for a long time, just watching that blank door, feeling kind of sad.

Rosie didn't come back that day, and she wasn't around the next morning. Mother Ramirez came out, right before eight o'clock, and stood looking at the hair-fixing chair. I could see her flap her hands, sort of helpless-like. She wandered around that bare yard for a minute or so. I watched her standing there, staring at her marigolds with a queer look on her face. Then all of a sudden, like a snake, she reached down and picked up a long stick. She went down that whole row, I mean she didn't miss a one, and with little vicious whacks of that stick she whapped the heads off every one of those marigolds. I tell you, it scared me.

The next couple of days the word was around that the hippie'd taken Rosie out to the place they called Peace Village, and had her off to himself in a shack away from the others. I was relieved that at least she wasn't common property.

On Thursday Claire Jamieson came, the lady from the welfare office. She stayed a bit longer than usual, and looked real upset when she left. It must have been easily two-three hours after that when Mother Ramirez came over to the store for the second time. I didn't even connect it. She wouldn't come inside, just stood there in the doorway watching me, till finally I left the counter and went over and asked if I could do something for her.

"Peace Village. You know Peace Village?"

I nodded, sure.

"You tell me how get this Peace Village."

Well, I thought for a minute. You know, I figured she'd never

been even this far from her shack for years, she'd never go out there. Jeez, nobody'd told me not to tell her. So I told her how to get out there, to Joe Simpson's place. Like I say, nobody'd told me not to tell her.

Along about that time I started getting busy, and I didn't see anything more of her. It was running through my mind, all the time, half-wondering whether she'd really go, as housebound as she was. That Rosie meant a lot to her.

She went, all right. Must have walked every step of the way and back. It's a good four miles out there, a hot and dusty four miles, and she got what she went after. I saw them come back, just at dusk, her with a grip on Rosie's arm, shoving her along. She had one of those little airplane bags in her other hand. Rosie was whimpering a little, and looked as if she'd been crying real hard. As they got close to the front door she gave Rosie a little shove. You could see she was real mad. I heard her chittering away in Spanish like a squirrel scolding you from a tree. She shoved her on into the house, and that's the last I saw of them that night.

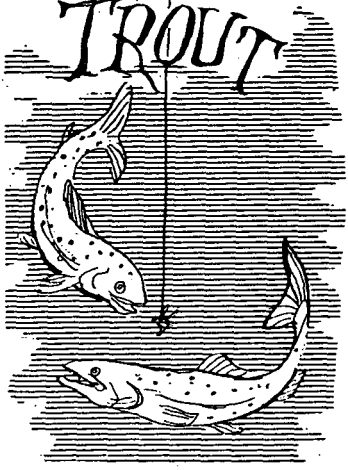
The next morning I got out early to sweep the walk. I'll admit I was watching their shack real close. The blinds were all drawn, even on the little window in the door, and you couldn't see a sign of life. Then I went inside the store for a minute, to get my window-washing stuff, and they'd come out in that time.

At least, I thought for a minute they had. Then I could see it wasn't Rosie. Old Mother Ramirez was brushing, all right. I walked across the street to get a better look. She'd set a little table up where Rosie usually sat, and was working on something there. Her back was to me, and half-hid what she was working on, so I sneaked a bit closer.

The little airplane bag was there on the table, and beside it was the thing she'd been brushing on. As I got where I could see, she'd just started on the French braids, carefully sorting strands of the long, greasy, streaky blond hair.

If you have tackled enough puzzles you can make the pieces fit—it takes just a little practical experience.

A COUPLE OF BROOK TROUT



MALONE LEFT THE CITY before dawn, wanting to get in a full day's fishing in the mountains on his day off. The sun was rising just as he left the turnpike to pick up the winding secondary road that would take him to his favorite spot outside of Morgantown, the upstate county seat.

He needed the time off. The Central Detective Division had been exceptionally busy for months now and Malone had moved from homicide to homicide, more than earning his sergeant's pay several times over. He was tired. The only things dead he wanted to see were a couple of brook trout browning nicely in a frying pan.

There were few cars on the road at that hour and Malone stretched the speed limit on the straights, slowing only in the spring-misted hollows when the road dipped.

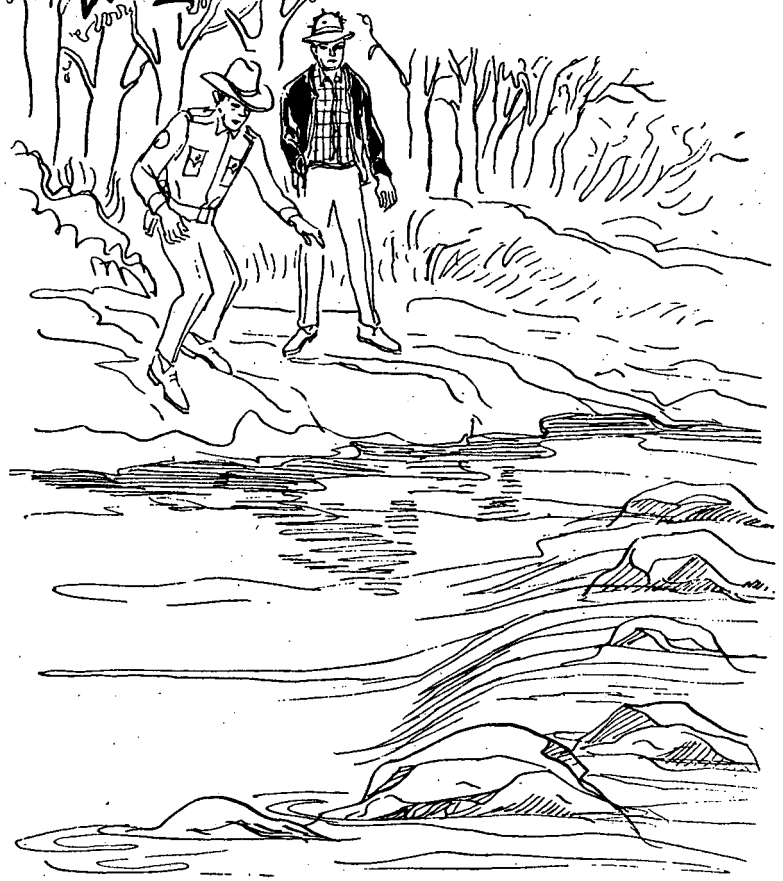
He grinned as he eased the needle down past sixty-five. He planned to check with the county sheriff, a lanky, even-tempered type named Tom Fulton, to see if he would take the day off to join him, but it wouldn't do to get a ticket. Fulton was known to be very hard on traffic violators.

A short block from Fulton's office in the county courthouse, Ma-

by Stephen Wasylyk

lone pulled up before a two-story apartment building, punched the bell for the lower apartment and smiled when Fulton, tall and thin with tousled hair, answered the door in his pajamas.

Malone grinned. "Your constituents should see you now. You wouldn't get a single vote."



"If they voted for my appearance I wouldn't get elected at all, Dave. They vote for my exemplary law-upholding abilities. What brings the big detective up from the city?"

"Fishing season just opened. I wondered if you wanted to come along."

Fulton held the door open. "The best I can do is offer you a cup of coffee. I have business today."

Malone's eyebrows went up. "Something important?"

Fulton poured the coffee. "A couple of kids found a body yesterday, out along one of the creeks. One of our more prominent citizens, a store-owner named Henry Towner."

"How did he die?"

"As far as we can tell, he had been fishing and slipped on some moss-covered rocks along the stream. Fractured his skull."

"Seems cut and dried. What's the problem?"

"None really. Just have to go out there and check it out more thoroughly. Didn't have much time yesterday. Want to come along?"

Malone sipped the thick hot coffee. "Why do you need me?"

"I could use another opinion. You see a lot more of these things than I do. I've told you before, I'm great at tracking down lost cows and giving traffic tickets, but not so good when a death is involved. We can go out there, look things over and still have plenty of time left to wet our lines."

"Done," said Malone, finishing his coffee. "Get your uniform on and let's get going."

They left the jeep at the edge of the road, picked up a path through a stand of trees and came out into a small clearing on the banks of a small stream. Shrubbery, sprouting green, surrounded the clearing and grew down to the slowly flowing water, except for an open spot studded with medium-sized boulders and small rocks that dropped abruptly a few feet to the shallows.

"He was found there," said Fulton, pointing.

"What time?"

"Late afternoon. Couple of kids just horsing around after school."

"Any idea of when he died?"

"Doc says early afternoon. Dead a few hours when they found him. You can see it would be awkward for an elderly man to negotiate the stream at this point."

"Funny he should try," said Malone. "Must be better places. Didn't he know this territory?"

"He should have. He's lived here all his life."

Malone looked around. "Be great for a cabin. Wonder who owns it?"

Fulton grinned. "You want to buy it? I've told you a million

times you ought to have a place of your own, maybe move up here permanently."

Malone studied the small glade. It was a pretty spot, not too far from the road but far enough. Easy to get in and out in winter, great in summer with that stream in your back yard. He felt a sudden longing to own this land, to make it his, to have somewhere to get away from the never-ending violence of the city. He thought of his slim bank account. There just might be enough in there to swing it.

"Yeah, I'd like to know who owns it." He knelt among the rocks. "Don't see much in the way of bloodstains. Did it rain up here last night?"

"Not a drop." Fulton joined him. "I didn't think of it, but you're right—his scalp was really torn, so there should have been a lot of blood. I'll check with Doc to be sure. What do you make of it?"

Malone considered. "Usually when you run into something like this, the first thing that comes to mind is, he had to be killed somewhere else and dropped here."

Fulton looked shaken. "You're handing me a murder case?"

"Nothing of the sort. You have an unnatural death and you have to look for answers. All we want to know is why there is no blood. Could be a few things we haven't considered. He could have fallen into the water and then crawled out, or maybe someone came along and pulled him out and took off so as not to get involved. Maybe he hurt himself somewhere else and crawled here. When you have no witnesses, you have to guess and sometimes the wildest ones turn out to be right. But suppose someone did bring him here. Who would want him dead?"

"Henry could be a rough man, but not enough so that someone would want to kill him."

"Look close to home," Malone advised. "What about his family?"

"One daughter, Evelyn, married to a Ray Lowery. He works with Henry in the store that Henry owned."

"What kind of store?"

"One of the bigger hardware and sporting goods places around here."

"What does Lowery do?"

"Runs the store for Henry. Doing a good job, the way I hear it."

"The girl and Lowery inherit?"

"They are the only ones left."

"Okay. You'll have to check them out."

Fulton groaned. "Now, how do I do that? I don't even know what kind of questions to ask."

"You just go talk to them. See if they know anything. Find out

what Towner did and where he went before he ended up out here. Did you see them yesterday?"

"Only to break the news. They were pretty upset."

Malone waved a hand. "There's another thing to consider. Suppose he was dropped here. Of all places, why this spot? Obviously, it was to look like an accident, but why here?"

"Damned if I know. Maybe the owner has the answer. We were going to look him up anyway; suppose we do that first? You can find out how much he wants for the place and he might know what makes this such an attractive spot to dump dead bodies."

Malone grinned. "We? I came up here to go fishing. This is supposed to be my day off."

"You can't walk out on me before this thing is settled. You wouldn't do that."

"Then it had better be settled before dinner. I'm due back tomorrow."

"I still say you ought to move up here."

Malone snapped his fingers. "And give up eight years on the force like that?"

"We'll find something for you. You know you hate the city."

Malone sighed. "Maybe, but I'm stuck there for the time being."

He took a deep breath as they walked toward the jeep, savoring the sweet smell of spring in the mountains, wishing he could see his way clear to do what Fulton suggested, knowing he was vacillating, that there was nothing really to hold him in the city. What he needed was a concrete reason to decide on one place or the other.

The county assessor's office was a dark, chilly room in the basement of the courthouse, lined with huge volumes, except for a faded map on one wall. The county assessor, a small, shrunken man named Shroeder, helped them locate what they were looking for.

Fulton didn't believe him, going around the big desk to see for himself. "He's right," he said. "Henry Towner owned the land."

"That explains why he was fishing there," said Malone, "and maybe someone knew that."

"It's valuable property," Shroeder volunteered. "I'd forgotten Henry bought it a long time ago."

Malone felt a sense of loss. The spot had intrigued him and he would have considered buying it, but if Shroeder said it was worth real money it would be out of his class. "Why so valuable?"

Shroeder led them to the map. "The government is building a big dam right here." His finger tapped the blue river. "Prevent flooding in

the spring and make a recreation area at the same time."

"I've heard of it," said Malone, "but it's too far down river to affect you."

"Not so," said Shroeder. "When that lake fills up behind the dam, Henry's property is going to be on the upper end. Take a few years but it will happen. All that land is going to be worth a lot of money. People just don't think that far ahead because all the action now is down river."

On impulse Malone went back to the book. "Who owns the adjacent land?"

"The Big Lake Land Development Company."

"Which side?"

"Both sides."

"So they'd be looking to buy Towner's land?"

"I would say so."

Malone looked at Fulton. "Someone else you have to talk to. Whether Towner was alive or dead would be important to them."

"What could they have to do with it?"

"Who knows? That's the way the game is played. You check out all of these things as they turn up until you get a clear picture."

"Suppose you don't get a clear picture?"

"Then you drop the file into a special drawer and chalk the whole unhappy thing up to experience."

Fulton groaned and motioned to Shroeder. "You have the name of somebody representing this Big Lake Company?"

"Should be on file somewhere," said Shroeder. He disappeared into a small room.

"You think there is something here?" Fulton asked.

"So far the only thing we've learned is that I can't afford the place," Malone said ruefully. "I'm beginning to wish I hadn't showed up today. Why don't you know anything about this Big Lake outfit? They must have been pretty active."

Fulton shrugged. "I don't pay any attention to real estate deals."

"Must have been some talk."

"People around here can be pretty closemouthed. After all, I didn't know Henry Towner owned that spot and that he probably went fishing there often."

Shroeder came back with a piece of paper. "They've bought quite a few parcels of land within the last several months. Man named Harvey Reese acted in behalf of the company. He's listed as secretary."

"You know him?" Malone asked Fulton.

"Never heard of him."

"I know him," Shroeder said. "Real estate man and lawyer. Has an office down river in Broadaxe."

"We'll pay him a visit," said Malone.

They thanked Shroeder and left the courthouse, and stood for a moment on the steps in the warm spring sun.

Malone stretched gratefully. "Feels good after that basement."

Fulton grinned. "I guess Shroeder has been down there so long he doesn't notice it." He waved a hand. "Great view from here, isn't there?"

Malone studied the valley stretched before them, young green foliage along the sparkling river, the far hills blue through the faint late morning mist.

There was a peace here and an easy way of living that Malone knew he would never find in the city. He felt the old longing come back. He had grown up in these mountains, leaving only because his family had moved, and he had never been content since.

He smiled at Fulton. "Let's get on with this investigation. I think it's time we talked to Towner's family. Brief me on our way over there."

"I told you about Evelyn. Pretty enough, delicate and easygoing—the kind who prefers to stay home rather than go somewhere. She didn't want to go to college, preferred to keep house for her father after her mother died. Then Ray Lowery walked into the picture."

"How do she and Lowery get along?"

"The sun rises and sets in her husband, you can tell that."

"What kind of man is Lowery?"

"Ambitious but a tireless worker. Some hardnoses around here say he became interested in Evelyn because he was looking for a good job in Henry's store. If that's what he had in mind, he earned it. He's done a nice job for Henry. Put some new life into the business, made some smart moves. Don't know that Henry appreciated it though. He was a hard man."

"He get along with Henry all right?"

"If he didn't, it's a Towner family secret."

Fulton pulled the jeep into the driveway of a mansard-roofed Colonial mansion and rang the bell.

The young man who opened the door was almost as tall as Malone and Fulton, slim but well built, with wide shoulders.

"You have a few minutes, Ray?" asked Fulton.

He nodded and opened the door wider, hard blue eyes holding Malone's for a moment, challenging him and making him feel uncomfortable.

He led them into a large room that had been furnished as a den. Books lined one wall, a desk stood

in one corner and a large leather sofa faced a big fireplace. It was a comfortable room designed for family living, a handsomely furnished room and well-kept. The furniture shone, and the floor was well-polished, dark with age and gleaming in the morning sun.

The sofa was occupied by a young woman with a soft, round face. She dabbed at tear-reddened eyes with a flimsy handkerchief. Lowery joined her, placing an arm around her waist.

Fulton introduced Malone. "We're here to investigate the death of your father."

Evelyn held the handkerchief to her eyes. "What kind of investigation? It was an accident."

Malone eyed a warning at Fulton. "All accidental deaths must be investigated and an inquest held to establish the cause of death. It's a routine matter. Sheriff Fulton would just like to know your father's schedule yesterday. How did he happen to be there? Did he go fishing at that spot often?"

"Often enough," said Lowery. "If things were a little slow at the store and it was a nice day, he'd take the afternoon off. When we came home for lunch yesterday, he decided to go. As a matter of fact, I was going with him. I wish now I had, but on the way over there, I remembered something I had to do, so I left him there and came back to the store. I was going to pick him up at the end of the day."

"Then you were the last to see him alive," said Fulton. "He was in good health?"

Evelyn stood up abruptly and left the room. Lowery made a movement as if to follow, changed his mind and sank back on the sofa.

"There was nothing wrong with him," said Lowery.

"Have you ever heard of the Big Lake Land Development Company?" Fulton asked.

Too harsh and too abrupt, Malone thought. *He should have led into it gently.*

Lowery shook his head angrily. "What does a question like that have to do with Henry's accident?"

Fulton reddened. "It's just something that turned up in our investigation," he mumbled.

"Never heard of them," Lowery said.

Malone found it hard to believe that if Big Lake had contacted Towner, his family wouldn't know about it.

"It doesn't matter," said Fulton. He glanced at Malone for help.

"Did your father-in-law ever discuss business with you?" Malone asked Lowery.

Lowery's jaw tightened. "All I did was work for a salary."

Which obviously wasn't to your liking, thought Malone. He lifted a hand. "I guess we have all the information we need. We regret disturbing you."

"I'll show you out," Lowery said.

At the door, Malone tried a tentative smile. "I couldn't help admiring your home. It's quite old, isn't it?"

The smile brought no response. "Quite old."

"Whoever did the decorating should be complimented," said Malone.

"Evelyn took care of it," Lowery said stiffly.

Malone closed the door behind them. Lowery wasn't interested in being pleasant at the moment and he didn't blame him for that.

"Let's go see this Harvey Reese in Broadaxe," he told Fulton. "You know where to find him?"

"We'll find him," Fulton said. "Broadaxe isn't that big."

Harvey Reese had a big sign extending out over the sidewalk on the one main street in the small town. Malone grinned when he saw it. "I wish it were as easy to find someone in the city," he said.

They climbed the wooden steps to the second-floor office. Harvey Reese was in, they were told by a middle-aged woman at a desk at the head of the stairs. She disappeared behind an office door, to reappear again in a moment, holding the door open for them.

Harvey Reese was small, baldheaded, with a big nose, thick lips, and thick, horn-rimmed glasses. He was sitting behind an old-fashioned desk in the center of a typical lawyer's office, the walls lined with thick books.

Fulton wasted no time. "The Big Lake Land Development Company. You're listed as secretary."

"It's no secret, Sheriff. I admit it freely. Arrest me."

Fulton chuckled. "Later. Right now all we want is all you know about Henry Towner."

Reese reached for a big cigar. "Stubborn old goat. Good businessman."

"You had dealings with him?"

"He owns some land we need. Finally talked him into selling."

If Harvey Reese had a reason for seeing Towner dead, it had disappeared with that agreement, Malone thought. *Reese needed Towner alive.*

"What was so important about the land?" Fulton asked.

Reese puffed on the cigar slowly. "You know what Big Lake is? About the biggest thing that ever hit around here." He blew a smoke ring and grinned proudly. "When they build that dam down river, Big Lake will own the entire north shore of the lake that dam will

create. You know what we're going to do with it? Build the biggest, finest lake-front resort you've ever seen. Year-round lodge and cabins, golf course, two pools, ski area. You name it, we'll have it."

"How did Henry Towner fit in?"

"Right in the middle. We needed his acreage to complete the package."

"You made a deal with him," said Malone. "When did he sign?"

"He didn't. Verbal agreement, but Henry's word is as good as his signature."

"Not anymore," Fulton said. "Henry Towner is dead."

Reese held the cigar up, rolling it in his fingers thoughtfully. "I hope you are joking but somehow I know you're not. What happened?"

"He was found by the bank of a stream with his head bashed in," said Fulton. "It looks like he slipped and fell."

"I should have known it was something like that or you wouldn't be here. Why all the questions?"

Fulton shrugged. "Routine. Just looking for information. Henry was found on his land and we wondered what he was doing there."

"If I knew Henry, he was fishing," said Reese. "That was part of the agreement he had with us."

"What was?"

"He retained the right to fish on the property any time he wished until the day he died."

"That's a peculiar agreement," said Malone.

"That wasn't all of it. He held me up for a nice piece of change, but even that was a bargain."

"How much?" Fulton asked.

"Ten thousand dollars."

Fulton whistled softly. "I figured that land to be worth two thousand. Henry probably paid a couple of hundred for it."

"As I said, it was a bargain. We would have paid more if we had to, but Henry wanted that fishing arrangement to be part of it." Reese sighed. "I guess I'll have to start all over again with the heirs. Who do I deal with now?"

"A daughter and son-in-law."

"Beautiful," said Reese. "I hope they are as agreeable as Henry."

At the foot of the stairs, Fulton turned to Malone. "Where to now?"

"Might as well go back and see what we have so far."

"What do we have?"

"Tell me something," said Malone. "What would you have done if I hadn't been here?"

Fulton shrugged. "Gone out there, looked around, and written it up as an accident."

"You might still have to report it that way, but at least your conscience will be clear. We'll talk about it at lunch. Know a good place?"

"There's a diner a few miles up the road."

"Good. Not having had any breakfast, I might collapse at any moment."

"Don't worry about it. If you can't make it, I'll carry you."

The food in the diner was surprisingly good, and Malone pushed his plate away with a satisfied sigh as the waitress turned from the coffee urn, gave a little gasp and dropped the cup she was holding.

"I'll never learn to be careful," she said disgustedly. "That's the second time I burned myself this week."

Malone leaned over the counter and surveyed the pool of coffee on the tiled floor. "Better get that mess cleaned up back there before you slip."

She reached for a mop. "Happens all the time. That's why we keep this handy. I always say it's a good thing this place doesn't have rugs."

"Add some class," Fulton suggested. "You ought to try it."

Malone put his half-empty coffee cup down slowly. "Finish your lunch," he told Fulton. "We're going to pay another visit to the Towners. It shouldn't take long."

"What for?" Fulton asked.

"Just a few more questions—then maybe we write your report before we go fishing for a couple of hours."

"You telling me you know something that I don't?"

"All I'm telling you is that the string has run out. We check one more thing—it pans out or it doesn't. Either way, we're through."

"I gather you don't want to tell me what you have in mind."

"If I'm wrong, I don't want to be embarrassed."

Fulton finished his coffee reluctantly. "I guess I won't have any dessert."

An obviously annoyed Lowery let them in again, leading them to the den. Evelyn was missing.

"I have the feeling we're being harassed," said Lowery.

"We apologize," said Malone. "Where's your wife?"

"In bed. All this is too much for her."

"I'm sorry to hear it. This won't take long." Malone reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. "You sure you have never heard of the Big Lake Land Development Company?"

Lowery shook his head.

"Henry Towner owned a piece of land that is very important to Big Lake," Malone said.

"Must be what he called his retirement land," said Lowery. "I guess it doesn't matter now."

"Big Lake made him an offer for it."

"He wouldn't have sold."

"But he did." Malone tapped the piece of paper. "For two thousand dollars." He ignored Fulton's stunned look.

"That's impossible!" Ray had straightened, his face white.

"How so?" Malone asked.

"That land is worth far more!"

Malone shrugged. "There's nothing special about it."

"The hell there isn't. Without it, Big Lake can't . . ."

They looked at him in the sudden silence.

"I thought you knew nothing about Big Lake," Malone said mildly. "How much do you know?"

"I know they offered him ten thousand! If they say it was sold for two, they're trying to pull a fast one!"

"How do you know all this?"

Lowery's lips tightened. "It doesn't matter."

"You want to tell us now?" Fulton asked.

"Tell them." Evelyn's voice came from the doorway. "I knew it was wrong from the beginning." Both hands were braced against the doorjamb, but she still swayed. Lowery stepped past Malone quickly to place an arm around her.

"Say nothing," he said.

"No," she said. "I killed him."

Fulton looked at Malone as if to say, *What do I do now?*

He turned back to Evelyn. "How could you have killed him?" There was disbelief in his voice.

"It was an accident," Lowery said hastily. "Just an accident. He told us at lunch he was going to sell. I tried to talk him out of it because I knew Big Lake would pay a great deal more, but he wouldn't listen. We were still arguing after lunch, standing in front of the fireplace."

"Father accused Ray of being after his money." Evelyn's voice trembled. "He said Ray was living off him, that he had given him a job in his store just because he married me and Ray wasn't carrying his own weight. He told him to get out and find a job and support me by himself."

"I couldn't take that," Ray pleaded. "Not after the job I had done in the store. I broke my back for that man. I hit him. He stumbled into Evelyn. Somehow she pushed him to save herself. He fell and smashed his head against the

fireplace. He tried to get up but all he could do was crawl across the room. His head was bleeding. He kept calling to Evelyn for help, then he collapsed. By the time I reached him he was dead."

"We didn't know what to do." Evelyn sobbed. "We were frightened."

"It was my idea to take him out to the stream," Lowery said defensively. "I thought no one would ever know."

Malone sighed. *People,* he thought. *You just can't follow the way some of them think.*

"I don't understand why," said Fulton.

"I don't know much about law," Ray said, "but I do know that one or both of us can be held for manslaughter, maybe for murder."

"In this town?" Fulton shook his head. "You don't have to worry. These people are your friends. You know they wouldn't be hard on you. Even if you were convicted, you'd probably get a suspended sentence and probation."

"Maybe," said Lowery, "but that wasn't the problem."

"I still don't understand."

"It wasn't for us," Lowery continued. "It was for someone else."

"Who?" Fulton was puzzled.

"Evelyn is pregnant," Ray said quietly. "I didn't want any son of mine growing up knowing his parents were responsible for his grandfather's death."

Malone grunted. He supposed that in some far-out way it all made sense, at least to Lowery.

It was late afternoon before Fulton had wrapped it up officially by taking their statements and placing them under arrest. "No use putting them in a cell before the inquest tomorrow," he told Malone. "They're going nowhere."

"You have an easy way with the law around here," said Malone.

Fulton shrugged. "They'll be released on nominal bail until the trial. Why should I make things difficult for them?"

"I guess you're right. They really did you a favor."

"How so?"

"Lowery should have known a little bit more of the law. A husband and wife can't be forced to testify against each other. If they hadn't confessed, you would have had a hard time proving anything. Even I couldn't have helped you there." He glanced at the sun regretfully. "Too late to go fishing. Now that you've ruined my day, I might as well get an early start back."

"Not yet. First you tell me how you figured it out, then I buy you the biggest steak the hotel dining room has to offer."

"The bare floor got to me," said

Malone. "It didn't fit. Not with such a beautifully furnished house and a meticulous housekeeper like Evelyn. She'd never allow a room to be without a rug unless she had to. So there was a rug, but it was missing. Why would it be missing? Because there was something Evelyn didn't want anyone to see. The waitress, saying it was a good thing the diner didn't have rugs when she spilled the coffee, got me thinking about it. Evelyn could have cleaned up something like coffee immediately. It had to be something she couldn't clean quickly."

"And we were looking for bloodstains," said Fulton grimly. "I'll have to remember to ask them what they did with the rug. Now, about that business with the folded paper . . ."

"Just a list of regulations that came with my fishing license. I wanted Lowery to think it was a signed agreement for two thousand dollars. I thought that would turn him on if anything would, if he knew the real value of the property. He did. I figured all along he was lying about Big Lake."

"I'm glad you did. *I* certainly didn't."

"I wouldn't expect you to. Yesterday we listed thirty-nine burglaries, fourteen robberies, three rapes and two homicides. You handle that sort of thing day in and day out and you develop an instinct for knowing when people lie."

"There you are," Fulton said smugly. "That's what I've always said. You work with these things so much, you know things I'll never know. Good thing for me you showed up today."

"Been great," said Malone. "Real busman's holiday. No fishing, no rest, and I saw a piece of land I'd like to have but can't, which makes me feel even worse."

"You went fishing," said Fulton, grinning. "Landed a couple of big ones, too, even if you never wet a line. Can't see that you wasted the day at all."

"Maybe so," said Malone. "But now I go back to the same routine tomorrow."

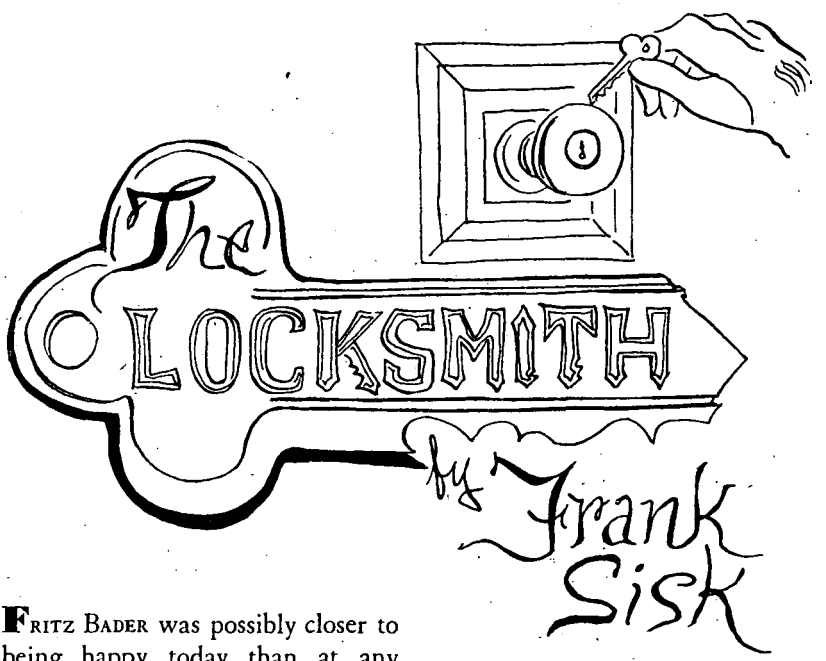
"Not before I buy you that steak."

Malone looked at him thoughtfully. "Not likely."

"Why not?"

"It just came to me. You'll make it a couple of broiled brook trout or it's no deal. After all, that's what I came up here for in the first place."

It doesn't always pay to be too adept at your trade.



FRITZ BADER was possibly closer to being happy today than at any other time of his life. Even so, this was not very close. He was not by nature designed to be a happy man, and he was himself inclined to be cautious, conscienceless and tenaciously acquisitive. By an exercise of the last characteristic, Bader had just recently acquired a mistress young enough to be his daughter and lovely enough to be desired by a dozen handsome men, young and old.

Bader was not handsome, far from it. His face was thin and parched, with myopic eyes perpetually watering behind thick lenses, and a bloodless mouth that rarely smiled and then only cunningly. It was the sort of face, as one of his more astute customers once re-

marked, that nobody would trust for long and that itself could trust nobody, ever.

Therefore, it was not Bader's looks which had won Cilla Krale to his exclusive use over the passionate courting of others. It was money. Bader smiled cunningly to himself this morning as he thought of what money could buy—and the smile grew grotesquely lipless as he considered how much money he had amassed in comparative secrecy over the gray years.

Bader was ostensibly a locksmith. He was other things, too—

some of them legal—such as landlord, stockholder, moneylender. But it was as a locksmith that he had started earning a self-sufficiency as a young man and now, a wealthy fifty-three, he was, by guarded preference, still at the trade.

He practiced this trade, with certain peculiar embellishments, in a tiny store on elevated ground known as High Street. To the right of him stood a run-down paint and wallpaper business, to the left a halfhearted delicatessen. This was a deteriorating section of the city but, as proclaimed by the weathered gold-leaf sign above the locksmith's curtained door, he had established himself there thirty-one years ago and he was used to it. He was one of only five locksmiths in the entire city whose addresses and phone numbers were listed in the Yellow Pages, and so he enjoyed a steady patronage despite the obscure location. People were always locking themselves out of all sorts of things—houses, cars, trunks, strongboxes—and wanting to get back in as fast as possible, and they kept Bader legitimately busy. It was, however, his illegitimate operations that made the real money.

On this particular morning, he arrived as usual at seven o'clock with the daily paper tucked under his arm. Letting himself in the front door, he locked it behind him and made his way to the dim cubicle of a back room and turned on a floor lamp whose light, seeping stingily through a globular shade of white glass, disclosed a round claw-footed table, two matching chairs with rickety straight backs, a leatherette hassock disgorging its straw through a curled wound—all bunched together on a humpy hooked rug whose coloration was mostly derived from spilled coffee and dropped food. Bader placed his hat and the newspaper on the table and went to a small sink from which he took an enamel saucepan and a plastic cup. He rinsed the cup under the faucet and filled the pan with water. After placing the pan of water on a hot plate and switching the actuator to *High*, he returned to the table and sat gingerly in one of the rickety chairs. In a few minutes his instant coffee would be ready. He was beginning to unfold the newspaper when somebody rattled the front door.

With a sigh Bader got to his feet and shuffled to the outer room. Outside stood a young man, only his head visible above the curtain that ran halfway up the door.

Bader didn't open the door. Opening time was eight o'clock sharp. He simply shrugged his narrow shoulders and pointed to the clock on the wall.

The young man's eyes grew wild. He shook the door savagely.

Bader shrugged again, wasting no words, and turned his back.

The young man began to pound on the glass.

Anyone else might now have decided to call the police, but Bader never called the police. He stood for another few seconds, listening to the glass vibrate, and then turned around and unlocked the door.

"So what can't wait till eight?" he asked in his flat voice.

"An emergency come up, Pop," the young man said.

"Of course. What else?" With youth everything was rush-rush, he thought, and then came an emergency and no money or brains to find a way out. This was the case with Cilla Krale. Fortunate for her, and for him also, that he was willing to help. "Well, okay, window-knocker, explain to me the emergency so I can have my coffee."

The young man took from the pocket of his leather jacket a handkerchief and unfolded it carefully on the glass counter top. It contained a hotel-size bar of pink soap. "There," he said. "Is that clear enough to go by?"

Bader blinked behind his thick lenses. "I already had a bath this morning."

"Why, you ain't even looking, Pop. Get closer like."

Bader bent over the soap until his nose was not more than two inches away from it.

"You see it, that impression?" the young man asked.

Bader nodded. Imprinted cleanly on the bar of soap was the outline of a key. The notches and grooves told him it was designed to lift five pin tumblers in the typical Yale-type cylinder, with the first and third pins longer than the others. It was the sort of key to be used on entrance doors of houses or apartments.

The young man tapped Bader's shoulder. "Is it good enough?"

Bader, straightening, said, "Good enough for what?"

"Good enough to make a key from?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On the man you come to. The craftsman, yes."

"Not to mention dough."

"Not to mention dough, yes. Because the cost of the key would not amount to much."

"How much?"

"Ten dollars only."

"A teniff, Pop. Are you screwy or something? With a cast like this I could get a single key made anywhere for two bucks at the most."

"Then go anywhere and get it

made," Bader said brusquely.

"Five. How about five?"

"Ten."

"You got me in a corner."

"Yourself got you in a corner, boy. Not Bader."

"It's a deal. How long will it take to make?"

"Come back at noon."

"No sooner?"

"No sooner, and don't leave yet." Bader walked behind the counter and produced an index card. "Write down your name and address. While you do so, I will make out a receipt for ten dollars received in advance."

"You don't trust nobody much, do you, Bader?"

"I trust, like the dollar says, in God."

Returning to the back room, Bader made a cup of instant coffee and sat again at the table with the newspaper. The story that most interested him carried a one-column headline under the fold on the front page. It reported the theft of gems valued at $50,000 from the residence of Jeffrey W. Beecher, industrialist, while Beecher and his wife were attending a concert. After the concert and upon their return home, Mrs. Beecher had gone to her jewel box to replace the necklace and bracelet she had been wearing, only to discover all her other valuables missing. The only occupant of the house during the evening was a maid asleep in her own room on the third floor. No signs of forced entry anywhere. All entrance doors were securely locked, police reported, and the Beechers themselves had used a key to let themselves in through a door connecting the garage with the basement. Investigation was proceeding along the lines of . . .

Of muddlekopf, thought Bader contemptuously.

At eight he opened for business by the simple act of unlocking the door. Twenty minutes later his first customer, an elderly woman, entered with car keys in hand and explained that she was unable to slide the door key into the lock. Bader sold her a tube of graphite, explained its use and sent her on her way. Just before nine the phone rang. He reached under the counter for it.

"Bader Locksmith."

"Bader himself?"

"Talking."

"Shanley. A real breeze, Bader."

"So I see by the papers."

"I should cut you in for a small percentage."

"Stolen goods I wouldn't touch with a long pole. Mail back the key, that's all."

"Already done. Now, how about another?"

"In a few months maybe. Rest.

You live longer. Don't rush it."

"A few months, then, mate."

"And call. Don't come."

At ten o'clock Bader went next door to the delicatessen and ordered a carton of tea with lemon and a cherry Danish to go. As he was finishing this customary mid-morning snack in the back room, a customer entered the store. Brushing crumbs from his vest, Bader went to the counter. A man dressed in blue denim work clothes tossed a key onto the scabbed wood.

"I need a couple more like this," he said. "How long?"

"A minute," said Bader. It actually took two minutes.

"How much?" asked the man.

"Seventy-five cents," said Bader.

That was his last customer until eleven and then it was a kid in a small black sports car that he parked right outside. The kid wore his hair too long for Bader's taste but he wore also an expensive tan cashmere sweater which, with the car, meant money in the background.

"Can you make me a duplicate of this key in a hurry, sir?" the kid said. He held it in the palm of his right hand. It was the disk tumbler type.

Bader managed one of his rare smiles. "What you call a hurry, son?"

"Five minutes or so. I'm late for a class."

"Five minutes, sure. No more than six." Bader took the key and then slid an index card across the counter. "While I make the key, please fill out what it says there. Okay?"

"What's this for, sir?" the kid asked, glancing at the card but at the same time reaching for the ball-point pen protruding from a stand on the counter.

"In case someday you lose all the keys, we got a record and can make one from nothing."

"Why, sure," the kid said.

As Bader worked he talked. But in talking, without ever asking a question, he developed a few points of basic information about the kid, his background and the lock to which the key belonged. When the kid left, uncomplainingly paying a dollar, Bader had a spare key in his file for a three-car garage at 22 Arrodel Terrace in the Mountain Grove section of the city.

He glanced now at the clock: 11:17. Next? Oh, yes, that soap mold from the hurry-up guy, the glass-pounder. The index card gave the name of George Deal (*I bet,* thought Bader) and the address as 1444 Capitol Avenue, no phone. Bader hauled the latest city directory from under the counter and checked the address. A monument

company was listed for 1444.

At the stroke of noon the so-called George Deal appeared, tense and wild-eyed as before. "Ready?"

Without a word Bader handed him one of the two keys that had been cut from a matrix taken of the soap mold.

"Where's the soap, Pop?"

"I washed my hands with it."

"You're a wise old buzzard."

"Like a block of stone on Capitol Avenue, I keep quiet."

Deal shook his head and left.

Bader retrieved the soap from the table near the small press and, with the spare key, two-stepped sideways to his master file on fundamental key characteristics of locks made by the principal manufacturers. There was something about this key made from Deal's soap that—

The phone rang.

Bader answered it.

"Vero," said a husky voice.

"Yes, Mister Vero."

"A man named Harold Bolloz—B as in Buck—has a summer place out at Lake Wallamansett. Know who I'm talking about?"

"Sure."

"I thought you would. Heard you'd done work for him."

"Yes, Mister Vero. So?"

"Do you happen to have a key to his boat house?"

"Possibly."

"Good. I'd like to rent it for twenty-four hours or so."

"A first-class or second-class rental, Mister Vero?"

"You kidding, Bader?"

"Not at all, Mister Vero. See if I could explain to you. In the past your rentals from me have been always second class—or one hundred dollars a day. Right?"

"I'm listening."

"You rent a key to open a lock, that is all. While the lock is open you may reach your hand in and find something you want. I don't care what. I couldn't care less. But a boat house makes me wonder, Mister Vero, what you would do with a boat. Go fishing, is it?"

The husky voice hacked out a mirthless laugh. "What if I just want to fix up our friend's boat so that when—"

"I don't hear details, Mister Vero, but what you have in mind is a first-class rental."

"How much?"

"Five hundred, all in fives."

"Fair enough. I'll have it in the mail in an hour."

"Upon receipt the key will go to your usual place."

After hanging up, he thought how already it was a good day's work and the day was only half over. Tonight he would buy a bottle of wine and take it for dinner at Cilla's apartment. A bottle

of wine and a few flowers even. It would show her on this second visit that he could be better than he had been on the first.

That first visit, he had to admit, was a failure. He'd acted too much like a moneylender securing collateral, but who could a man ever trust? Another man maybe, for a while, but never a woman, and never a pretty girl like Cilla whose own father and mother even wouldn't have anything to do with her or lift a hand to help the baby, father unknown. This is a girl you should trust yet?

Bader's own rent collector, that dumkopf Charlie Peterson, probably had a kiss or more from her. How else had she gotten three months in arrears without action being taken? When it came to Bader's attention, he personally took action. He went to that slum himself and saw the situation, heard the story and made a proposition. What else? He would himself never marry but he was a little lonely of late. He had a little money. He owned a very high-class apartment building on Congreve Boulevard. Would Cilla Krale like to live there alone, with an occasional visit from one lonely man?

Okay then. Here are the conditions: never mention to anyone the name of Fritz Bader; move tomorrow and leave no forwarding address; take nothing with you except the clothes on your back, for everything shall be provided, the best; see none of your old friends, especially the young scalawag who got you with child; be always loyal and obedient. Okay?

The baby? You want that baby? Okay, you can have the baby under these conditions: conduct yourself as aforesaid and a month from now we'll see. Seal with a kiss? Not yet, Cilla. I'm rusty. I haven't kissed anyone in twenty years.

His hand, he now noticed, was still on the phone. For a moment he had an impulse to give Cilla a ring, but he quickly suppressed it. Why waste words when you have nothing specific to say? Tonight would be soon enough—and with wine.

At one-thirty Bader closed his shop for twenty minutes and ate a corned beef sandwich in the delicatessen and washed it down with a glass of milk. The boy with the afternoon paper met him, as usual, just as he was letting himself back into the shop. The next few hours were so quiet that he was able to read the paper with minute thoroughness, but he saw nothing that interested him even slightly except the rewrite of the Beecher jewel robbery, now settled on page 3. Shanley, he thought, was getting a safe return on his second-class

rental. He shouldn't complain.

He got up and wandered aimlessly around the store until his eye fell upon the pink bar of soap, and at that moment some dark inspiration invaded his conscious mind from the hushed recesses of memory. He picked up the piece of soap and set it down again. He removed his glasses and wiped them much longer than necessary to make them clean. Returning them carefully in place, he again picked up the bar of pink soap with his left hand and reached into his trousers pocket with the right. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he drew forth a heavy ring of keys. He began to run through them one by one, without expression, until he came to the eighth, which he studied intently for all of a minute. Then he fastidiously set the eighth key within the impression on the soap where it rested in perfect congruence. Bader brought the matched pair closer to his eye and looked at them a long time without smelling the fragrance.

Finally he went to the phone and dialed the number of the apartment where he had established Cilla Krale just five days ago. There was no answer. On the chance that he had misdialed he tried again, with the same result. Next he dialed the apartment-building superintendent, who answered immediately, too much so for Bader.

"Loafer," said Bader, "tell me, how's afternoon TV?"

"What? Oh, hello, Mister Bader. I just this minute come in to get a socket wrench, I swear."

"Socket wrench, good. And what you got in the sockets of your skull to see by? Didn't I tell you to keep a lookout on Miss Krale for a few weeks? As a special favor?"

"Just what I been doing, I swear."

"Then swear this. How come a young man has visited her apartment already and it's hardly five days gone by? How come?"

"I know all about that, Mister Bader."

"A regular private eye."

"I was going to report to you later. This young fella rang her bell at a little after four yesterday afternoon and of course my bell rang here, too, as planned. So I went up to take a look at him. Dark hair, about six feet tall—"

"I know what he looks like," said Bader.

"Well, anyhow, Miss Krale didn't want to let him in, but he pushed in. Then she let him stay for about ten minutes. That's all."

"That's enough."

"Then when he came out, I heard Miss Krale say she never wanted to see him again. I got it

all written down here somewhere, Mister Bader."

"Okay, okay. So here's what I want you to do. Go up to Miss Krale's apartment immediately and knock loud. If no answer, use the master key. I'll be there in twenty or twenty-five minutes depending on the traffic."

Cutting the connection with his thumb, Bader called a cab company and ordered a taxi. Twenty-five minutes later, as the cab was approaching the apartment building, the driver remarked, "Some sort of trouble up there, Mac. Police cars and an ambulance."

"Stop here," Bader commanded.

He paid the driver and walked cautiously in the direction of the trouble. A dozen or so people were gathered on the sidewalk leading from the entrance of *his* building. Warily he approached and came to a halt behind two stout women and a thin old man.

"Here comes the stretcher," one of the women said.

"All covered up, face and all," the old man piped. "That means one thing. Nothing else."

"Awful," breathed a stout woman.

"But lookit there," the other woman said. "Oh, nooo."

Bader peered over the joined shoulders of the two women and saw another stretcher, borne by two uniformed policemen, emerge from the entrance.

"Same as the other," the thin old man said with satisfaction. "All covered up, head to foot."

"What happened to them?" one stout woman asked the other. "I mean, what—"

A freckle-faced girl with an armful of library books looked up at the two women. "Somebody said he killed her and then he killed himself. With a butcher knife," she added sedately.

"Why did they do it?" Bader heard himself asking of nobody in particular. "Such young people, such a waste." Then he turned and walked slowly away, thinking: *Rush-rush-rush, always in a hurry with no plans and no brains, the young people today, so it's always an emergency, a matter of life and death.*

The satisfaction one achieves from being a liberal neighbor may not be absolute.

Away From It All

MY RETIREMENT DINNER was a series of paradoxes. I was leaving because I had had it, and I was sick and tired of being called "pig," "fuzz" and "gestapo." I felt like telling the guys, "Forget it. Leave the department and do *your* own

thing. Let the stupid citizens get along without the police for a while, see how much they hate you then. Tell them, 'The next time you need help, call your local hippie.' "

Of course, I didn't say any of those things. There were just too many eager, help-and-love-your-neighbor rookies staring up at me. They were the new breed who still had faith in human nature and hope for the best.

They'd find out.

So, Captain R. D. Brown became just plain old Richard Brown. I drove my jeep out to the desert shack I'd bought—it was my second and final trip. The first time I had used a trailer to bring out all of Margaret's most beloved things.

I missed her so much. She was only forty-six when she died, the sweetest, dearest, most thoughtful wife a man ever had. She had been grateful for the sun and the birds, and the plants she cared for so tenderly rewarded her with beautiful blossoms and fruit. Even the stray dogs and cats for which she put out food would return and show their affection in sloppy kisses and purring nuzzles against her ankles.

by Sonora Morrow

The man I bought the shack from worried about selling it to me.

"I'm selling on account of that hippie community on the other side of the hill, Mr. Brown. They started coming about two years ago and I kept hoping they'd get tired of it. We're hot in the daytime and cold at night and they got no proper living quarters, just a couple of tents. No water, no toilets." He sighed. "But they keep coming and going. Sometimes there's only ten of 'em, sometimes there's as many as fifty, males *and* females, and I *know* none of 'em are married." His eyebrows raised and he gave me a knowing look. "Worse yet, I'm sure they're using drugs. They're a filthy, useless lot, Mr. Brown, and very, very dangerous."

I smiled and assured him that I knew all about those things. "If I don't bother them, they probably won't bother me," I said.

"Just so you know . . ." He paused and rubbed his chin. "I don't think it's really right to sell this place to a nice man like you, though."

"Mr. Shroeder," I replied, "a nice man like me has had twenty-five years in the police department, carried a gun, shot two criminals, and

had traffic with every kind of sick mind you can think of. I can take care of myself, believe me."

"But Mrs. Brown . . . ?"

"I'm a widower," I said shortly. "That's why I want your place—to be quiet and remember."

He nodded understandingly, and for a moment I thought he was going to pat my shoulder; but he didn't. I gave him my check, he signed over the deed and that was it.

In spite of the widely advertised pollution of our planet, the desert still gives clean air and clear skies. I'd always been a mountain, pine tree, fresh-water lake man, so the desert was a new experience for me. No birds singing, no rippling when the fish cut through the water, no whispers of wind through the trees. But the desert has its own sounds and I learned them as I made over the shack in Margaret's image.

It had a good big fireplace, and I put "our" armchairs on either side. She'd found them at the Salvation Army store, frayed and sad-looking, homeless. I'd begrudged the fifteen dollars she had spent for them, but when I saw them two weeks later, with new seat cushions and the slipcovers she'd made, I had to admit they were a bargain.

"Really, Richey," she'd smiled, "today's furniture is not too sturdy, and these will last us the rest of our lives. We'll toast each other with champagne on our fiftieth wedding anniversary from these very chairs." She'd hugged me and believed it, and so had I.

The small rug she'd taken two years to hook, green ivy on a beige background, I put in front of the fireplace. I spread the patchwork quilt she'd made over my bed. I was working out in front of the shack on a buffet to house her favorite dishes when one of my new neighbors sauntered up.

I'd seen thousands just like him, so the long dirty hair, the beard and the filthy clothes didn't bother me.

"Peace, brother." He held up his first and second fingers to form a V.

I just squinted at him through my sunglasses.

"You . . . live here alone?"

I shook my head.

"Got a wife and kids, huh?"

"Are you a census-taker?" I asked.

His face hardened. "Just trying to be friendly, neighbor."

"If I need a friend, I'll let you know," I said, and turned and went into the house, shutting the door firmly behind me. I watched him from behind Margaret's favorite ruffled dimity curtains.

He stood there, hands on his hips

for a full minute, then turned and shuffled off.

The next day I hiked up to the top of the hill that separated us, a distance of maybe three-quarters of a mile from my cabin. I lay flat on my stomach at the rim and looked down at my new neighbors. The commune was even more primitive than some of the others I'd seen. There were a couple of tents, scattered mattresses which had seen better and cleaner days, a campfire with a junk-yard grill over it topped by a chipped enamel coffeepot.

Two fifteen-year-old jalopies were parked nearby, and as I watched I counted five string-haired girls, all wearing blue jeans, men's shirts too large for them and sandals. Eight men, mostly shirtless and shoeless, squatted on the ground smoking. The wind was blowing toward me and I was certain I smelled that sickening sweet odor of marijuana. I couldn't hear any words, but there was talk and gestures. Breakfast couldn't have been much, and soon it would be time for lunch. I wondered how they ate and what. I also thought that with their lack of sanitation, hepatitis should be having a field day.

Mr. Shroeder had built a water tank near my house and I had a septic tank arrangement for the inside plumbing. The water truck came out from town every Friday, so I was in good shape. All the commune seemed to have was a couple of five-gallon jugs of commercial bottled water.

I slid back a few feet so that when I stood up I wouldn't be silhouetted against the cloudless blue sky. It was lunchtime and I was hungry.

I'd built a shelf over the wood-burning stove to hold Margaret's canisters, white with pink roses all around, in graduated sizes. Each proclaimed its contents in black, artistic, baked-in script: Flour, Coffee, Sugar, Tea.

Oh, the biscuits, pie crusts and dumplings I'd gotten from that Flour can. The Coffee canister I'd had to skip. A duodenal ulcer which developed in my seventeenth year on the force barred me from coffee, but Margaret had thrived on it. This didn't prevent her, however, from shopping for a white teapot festooned with pink roses so that I could have my tea fresh, hot and attractively served every day. I kept her canister full.

It was a Sunday when a car pulled up in a cloud of desert dust at my front door. I went outside and there was Ray Foyle, a big grin on his face and his hand outstretched. "Rich, you nut, when you get away from it all, you don't fool around! I had the devil's own

time finding this place," he said.

Ray and I had been in the Marines together during World War II, struggled through Police Academy training together, and were close friends, even though he'd made deputy chief and I'd only made captain.

I dragged him in out of the hot sun. He sat in one of the armchairs and looked around. "Margaret would have liked this," he said quietly.

"I can't offer you anything cold, buddy," I tried to smile, "but maybe you'd like some tea?"

He stood up. "You ever know a gyrene who couldn't find a cold beer *somewhere*?"

"No," I had to admit.

"Well, times haven't changed *that* much. These *now* guys could learn a lot from us *then* guys." He went out to his car, opened the trunk, and hefted an ice chest into the livingroom. Cans of frosty beer nestled in the chipped ice.

I sat in the other armchair and we talked and sipped.

"You know, Rich," he said finally, after the small talk ran out, "I always figured when we retired we'd go into the private detective business together. Remember how we used to talk about it at Guadalcanal? Must have been all those pocketbooks we read, modestly likening ourselves to Nick Charles, Philip Marlowe, and Continental Op." He sighed. "A blonde in the chair, a bottle in the desk and nuts to everybody . . . it still sounds good."

After four beers I thought so too—but just for a moment. "I . . . Right now, Ray, I'm still getting over Margaret. Afraid I don't have my heart in much of anything."

"I know," he nodded solemnly. "She was a kind, wonderful woman. She shouldn't have died; there aren't enough like her around that we can afford to lose even one. That's what made me think . . ." He stopped.

"Think what, Ray?" I asked.

"That you'd open your own agency. We're so hamstrung now, we can't do our job properly," he smiled grimly. "It seems that criminals and traitors have more civil rights than the good citizens."

There was a knock at the door. When I opened it one of the lank-haired girls from the commune stood there. Her vacant blue eyes looked into my face. "We're hungry, mister. We had a family conference and we thought . . . with you being a neighbor . . . well, you'd want to help out."

"Surprise," Ray said, "I didn't think you people thought at all."

She didn't even glance at him.

"And if I don't *want* to help out?" I smiled.

"Well . . ." She turned and looked behind her. There were four of the hippie men about fifty feet away. They stood, hairy, sunburned and bare-chested with their hands on their hips, sneering at me.

I snorted and Ray came to the door to look out at the visitors.

"I've got *my* gun and I assume you have yours." Ray was angry. "Tell them to blow."

The girl had turned back to look at me.

"What happened to the love and peace that's supposed to be your bag?" I asked. "Looks like if I don't give you something, you're prepared to take it—even if it's over my dead body."

"We forgive you because you're uneducated and unaware," she monotoned. "When everyone shares and is equal, then we will have love and peace."

Ray began to swear.

"Never mind," I said to him, "I'll give them something."

"Rich . . ."

"I know what I'm doing, Ray. Relax. Sit down and have another beer."

I went into the kitchen, filled a paper sack with the coffee from Margaret's canister, put it into a larger paper bag and added some canned soup, canned beans, a pound of bacon and a dozen apples. I returned and handed it to her. "It's all I've got. Just don't come back. I have several guns and know how to use them."

She took the sack and left without even a "thank you."

"Rich, in the name of heaven," Ray began.

"Use your head, buddy," I said. "So they advance and we shoot and we wing 'em or kill 'em. Where do you think *we'd* end up?"

"Satisfied!"

"No, we'd end up in court; you'd lose your job, and every bleeding heart in America would condemn us for killing innocent people who only wanted a little food."

"After what those parasites have done and are doing every day?"

"You know it, and I know it, and so does every decent citizen and law enforcement officer in the country, but we're outnumbered at the moment. Right is wrong and wrong is right and everything is upside down. We just have to learn the name of the game and how to play it. Ray, it'll work out, believe me." That had been a long speech for me and I opened the ice chest and took out two more beers.

Ray left that night unmollified and disappointed in me.

"I almost wish I were married," were his parting words, "so that I

could go home and scream at my wife."

"Come again soon," I hollered, and waved at his departing car.

The next week was uneventful except for my trip into town to stock up on supplies and buy the local paper.

Mr. Shroeder caught sight of me in the drugstore. "Mr. Brown, did you hear?" he seemed almost breathless.

"Hear what?"

"Them hippies—seven of 'em turned up in the local hospital sick as dogs couple of days ago. Three of 'em are dead and the others ain't got much hope."

I tried to act concerned. "What's the matter with them?"

He grinned. "Well, what with the advanced venereal disease, the hepatitis, the drugs, and the fact that they get most of their groceries from the market's trash bins, Doc's hard put to figure it out." He winked. "Just between you and me, I don't think he cares too much. One of them hippies raped his fifteen-year-old daughter last year and the court let the guy go for insufficient evidence. Not that Doc wouldn't save a life if he could, no matter who it was. He says he just don't know what's wrong, and the lab has done all kinds of tests."

"The hazards of a free life, I guess, Mr. Shroeder," I ventured.

"Think any more of 'em will come around there?" he asked. "Did they bother you, yet?"

"I expect there'll be more of them; and no, they haven't bothered me." I answered both questions.

He skittered away and I got into my jeep and drove home.

Ray Foyle and his beer showed up a week later. We settled in the twin armchairs, cold beers in hand.

"I've put in for my retirment, Rich, otherwise I couldn't have come out here," he began.

"Now what does one have to do with the other?" I asked.

"Last week, on page fifteen of our morning newspaper, was a small paragraph about seven hippies from this area—three dead, four critical, hospital mystified—and you gave those clowns groceries."

"So?" I queried. "You think I poisoned them?"

"I wouldn't blame you," he said. "Your neighbors had turned away four hippies who had knocked at their doors for food. The last they saw of them, they were headed for your place—and we all knew Margaret; stray dogs, stray cats, a heart full of love."

His words cut through me like a knife, but I remained silent.

"She would have let them in, she

would have fed them. She died with her own kitchen knife in her heart, in her own livingroom, and her diamond engagement ring was gone. So were most of your clothes; and her purse was empty of money."

I still didn't say anything, but memories and hate were crowding my mind.

"How did you do it, Rich?"

"I traced those slobs, Ray, from the descriptions, from citizens who'd picked up hitchhikers at that time in our vicinity. I talked to a hundred people, I dug and I delved, on my own time, using my badge. Finally, I knew who and where they were. The D.A. would have thrown my evidence right back in my face, and I couldn't have stood having them arraigned and dismissed when I had proof, when I *knew*."

"Easy, boy, easy," Ray whispered.

It was hard for me to talk with the lump in my throat, the pain in my chest.

"I have never believed in taking the law into your own hands. If everyone did it, there wouldn't be any civilization, we'd be back in the jungle. Believe me, Ray," I beseeched, "I shot Japanese because they were shooting at me. I never shot a suspect until he shot at me. But something about the way they killed Margaret, who only wanted to be helpful and kind . . ."

"I understand."

"I traced them here. I bought this place to be near them, but I really didn't have a definite plan to kill them. Maybe I wouldn't have, except—"

"They threatened you and they crowded you," Ray finished.

"But I *did* have the means," I countered. "I hadn't spent all those hours with the coroner in the Police Science Lab, reading up on toxicology, for nothing."

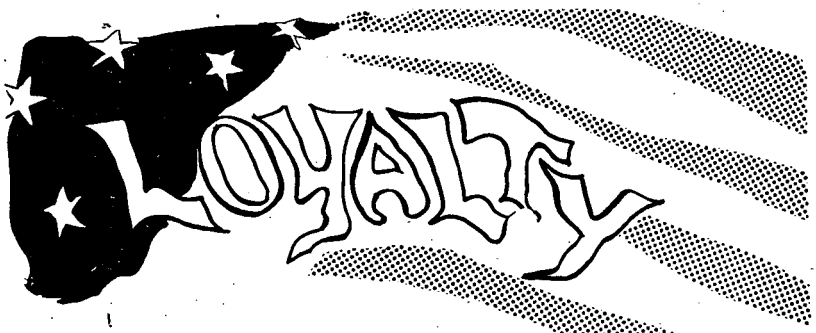
"It was in the coffee," he guessed.

"In the coffee, brown and ground, lethal and undetectable."

Ray shifted in his seat. "I'm starting the detective agency, Rich, and I want you to be my partner, but . . . is it finished? Are you through avenging Margaret's murder?"

I thought about it, and I really didn't know. Am I?

If one would believe Cervantes, "Every man is as Heaven made him, and sometimes a great deal worse."



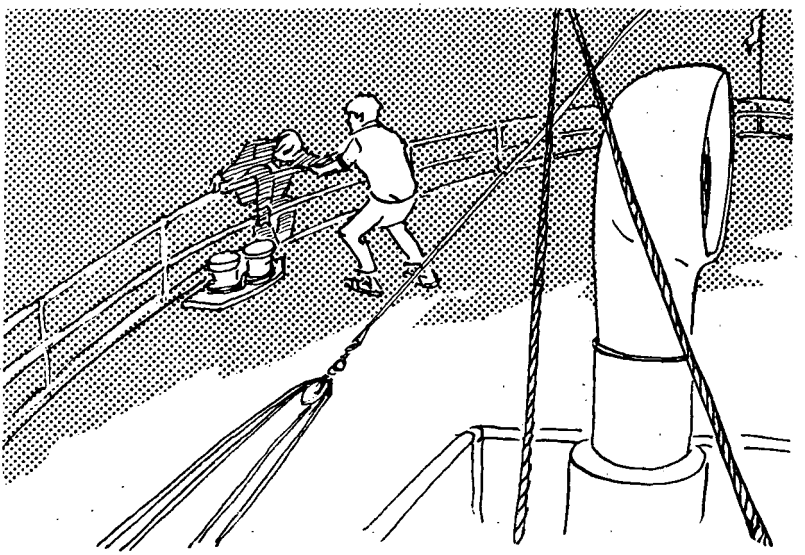
by Patrick O'Keeffe

TWO HOURS after turning in at midnight, Parke was still tossing, sleepless, in his bunk. The wooden bulkhead between his cabin and the next one resounded to snoring on the other side. The heat evidently wasn't keeping the chief mate awake, Parke realized enviously.

It wasn't really the oppressive heat of the tropical night that was denying him sleep, though. It was another fit of the blues, Parke told himself morosely. He simply couldn't shake them off. It wasn't easy to forget that only a few months ago he was chief mate of a modern supertanker, due for a command of his own within a year, all before he was thirty. Now he was down on the bottom rung again, third mate of an aging, chartered Honduran-flag freighter, barred from American ships as a loyalty risk.

Parke swung his long, lean legs over the edge of the bunk, groped with his toes in the darkness for his straw sandals, and lowered himself into them. A turn or two around the deck might get him out of his self-pitying mood and bring on sleep. He hooked back his cabin

door and started along the passageway in his shorts. The second mate's door was open, the cabin lights on, but the second mate, who had the deck watch, wasn't inside. Probably up on the bridge making log entries, mused Parke.



He stepped out over the high doorsill to the darkened boat deck and blinked around. There was no sign of the sailor on gangway watch either. Most likely he'd slipped down to the crew mess for coffee. The air was stagnant, and the fully laden *Mirmar* lay as if in a torpor, her forepart illuminated feebly by a distant lamp on the long wooden pier of the little Central American port of Truxillo.

Parke strolled aft, his sandals like cat paws on the deck planking. As he approached the rails overlooking the well deck, he froze to a halt. The offshore side of the ship was in deep shadow. There was no moon, but in the weak light from a few scattered stars he could see the form of a man clambering over the bulwark, near the stern. The intruder apparently had shinned up a rope from a small boat. He was helped inboard by another shadowy figure and led to a nearby hold ventilator mounted on a high base. The intruder scrambled up the handgrips and dropped down inside the cavernous cowl onto the bags of coffee below.

A second man was meanwhile squirming over the bulwark. He

was guided to the ventilator and vanished into the cowl. The man on deck then untied the rope from a bulwark cleat and let it drop into the unseen boat below. He started toward the midship accommodation, glancing cautiously around and upward at the boat deck, but failing to see Parke merged into the dark background of the superstructure. As the man stepped through the lighted doorway into the passageway below, Parke darted to the rails and caught a glimpse of his face. It was Budvic, the ginger-haired purser.

This, Parke decided grimly, was only the purser's first voyage in the *Mirmar* and already he was in business smuggling aliens. Parke wondered if the smuggling were connected in any way with Budvic's manner of joining the ship. Captain Mendoza had fired the previous purser at short notice, and Budvic had happened to be on hand to step into the job. Parke recalled the chilly brush-off Budvic had given him when he'd remarked that he'd met Budvic somewhere before, only to be told that he must be mistaken. It now looked as if Budvic hadn't wanted to be recognized.

Parke hesitated, undecided whether to find the second mate and report the stowaways to him as the officer of the watch, or waken the captain. He started as a form glided out from beside a lifeboat.

"Mr. Parke, please come along to my cabin."

Parke was dumbfounded. Captain Mendoza! The captain had actually been watching the stowaways smuggled aboard!

In silence, Parke returned along the deck behind the captain and into his cabin. Captain Mendoza closed the door.

"Sit down, Mr. Parke," he said bleakly, gesturing at the cushioned settee to one side of the door. The captain sank into the swivel armchair before his desk, swinging it around to face the third mate. Captain Mendoza, a slight, brown-skinned man in his fifties, with stern features and greying dark hair brushed back, wore soft slippers and thin pajama trousers, his bare upper torso damp with perspiration.

The captain stared unhappily at the carpet, and for several moments the only sound was the hum of the oscillating fan mounted between the two mosquito-screened portholes. This was only Parke's third voyage in the *Mirmar*, and he knew little of Captain Mendoza beyond that he was an exiled Cuban who had served his cadetship in American vessels.

"Last time we were here loading in Truxillo," Captain Mendoza

said in precise but accented English, "a compatriot of mine came aboard to see me. He said that I had displayed unfriendliness toward the Castro government by not returning to Cuba and serving in Cuban vessels. He said that my daughter, Carmela, had displayed similar unfriendliness and had been caught taking part in counter-revolutionary activities. She had been arrested. The evidence against her was irrefutable. There was little doubt that she would be found guilty and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. However, if the People's Prosecutor could cite any extenuating circumstance . . ."

Captain Mendoza looked up at Parke derisively. "From what you just saw, you can guess the extenuating circumstance he had in mind. I told him that the master of a ship is in no position to hide and feed stowaways. He replied that I would be given an assistant. I made every possible objection, pointed out every risk and weakness in the scheme. I was wasting my breath. The man said that when I reached New York and I heard from my daughter, I would find that I could overcome all obstacles.

"There was a letter awaiting me from Carmela. She wrote that she had been arrested with other counterrevolutionaries. She had confessed. She begged me to help her." The captain glanced mournfully at a photograph framed in silver on the glass-topped desk. "Carmela is all I have since her mother died several years ago. She waited too long after Castro came into power to leave Cuba. She is a doctor and, as such, is not allowed to leave."

The captain looked intensely at Parke as if for understanding. "The fear that Carmela might be imprisoned in a Havana dungeon, and surely die there, was agony. I finally yielded. It was Budvic who had brought the letter aboard. Previous letters from Carmela had come by airmail. Budvic said this one came through secret channels. He was ready to sign on as purser. I trumped up some excuse for discharging my regular purser.

"This afternoon Budvic deliberately fouled up the sailing papers after the coffee was loaded, to hold the ship in port so the stowaways could be got aboard during the night. I stayed awake. Budvic watched for the boat and let me know when it was alongside. I went out and told the second mate I could not sleep and sent him down to the galley to make me some cocoa. I told the sailor on gangway watch to go up to the fo'c'sle head and check the moor-

ing lines. That got the two of them out of the way. I was sure you were fast asleep, like the chief mate."

Parke shook his head. "I was wide awake—the heat, maybe. I finally turned out and took a walk along the deck. Captain Mendoza," went on Parke regretfully, "I'm most sorry about your daughter. I realize how worried you must be. But I can't go along with you in what you're doing. For one thing, those two stowaways can't be anything but Castro agents; that alone would be enough, but if they're caught, it would go pretty bad for me, with my reputation. You can understand that."

Captain Mendoza nodded. During his first voyage in the *Mirmar*, Parke had confided in the captain all about Clarice; how he, a lonesome merchant-marine officer, had been smitten by her on a plane between New York and Mobile, unaware that she was leftist inclined. He'd been pleased when she took up the study of political economy and sociology to fill in her time during his absences on long voyages; he'd naturally approved of her taking part in civil-rights demonstrations, and he'd joined her in a few of them, though he'd found them pretty radical. When his ship had gone on the Vietnam run, he'd regarded her curiosity about the ship's cargo and movements as mere wifely interest. He'd been stunned to hear over the radio at sea that she was one of the extremists blown up in an attempt to bomb a federal courthouse. By that time the FBI had marked him as a loyalty risk, and right after that Vietnam ammunition ship was hijacked, the Coast Guard canceled his validation, barring him from serving in American ships.

"But Mr. Parke," the captain said anxiously, "don't misjudge me. I did not tell you about my daughter to get your sympathy and ask for silence. Not at all. I wanted you to know what pressure I was under to have risked going so far. I only appeared to yield to the blackmail. The stowaways are to be smuggled ashore by boat, late, during the first night at the dock in New York. Immediately after the ship has tied up, I intend to contact the FBI secretly."

"But your daughter?" queried Parke.

"The agreement is that I see to getting the stowaways aboard unseen, do everything within my power to prevent them from being discovered at sea or when being smuggled ashore. What happens to them after that is beyond my control. I shall ask the FBI to cooperate by making it appear that the stowaways had been discovered by

chance after they had slipped ashore.

"What I fear, though, is that I may not be given an opportunity to contact the FBI secretly, even by telephone. Budvic is watching me, even censoring my radio messages. I could easily tip off the immigration inspectors at quarantine station, but they might not be as willing or able as the FBI to cooperate, and would seize the stowaways. Now, thanks to you, if you'll be willing to go along with me, I won't have to worry about that. You will be above suspicion. You could go to the FBI in my place."

Captain Mendoza eyed Parke beseechingly. Parke frowned.

"If the stowaways are discovered during the voyage," Parke replied, "I'd come under suspicion by the FBI if they're recognized as Castro agents."

"I pray they won't be discovered," said Captain Mendoza fervently. "Unless they were seized as Castro agents, they would be returned in this ship to Truxillo as ordinary stowaways, and I would have to make another attempt. If they were seized," added the captain reproachfully, "do you not think you could depend on me to swear that you could not possibly have aided them to stow away?"

As Parke hesitated, Captain Mendoza continued persuasively. "If you play safe and force me to put the stowaways back ashore, you will be giving them a chance to make another attempt by some other route or ship. If they remain on board, their capture is assured. By informing on what are possibly two important Castro agents, you will be proving your loyalty beyond all doubt, with all that it means—your old job, an early command. Most of all, to me at least, you will be doing a humane act in behalf of my daughter."

Parke's eyes went to the silver-framed photograph. Carmela Mendoza appeared to be around thirty, with the captain's dark hair, but gentle-looking and frail. He couldn't imagine her surviving long in a Havana dungeon. He'd hate to have that on his conscience.

There was a knock on the door. The captain glanced apprehensively at Parke, then called out cautiously. "Who's that?"

"Second mate, Cap'n. Your cocoa."

"Come in."

The bushy-mustached second mate entered with a mug of steaming cocoa. He stared at the lanky, half-naked third mate, obviously surprised at finding him in the captain's cabin at that hour. He set the mug on the desk and went out again, with a nod at Parke.

"For a moment," said Captain

Mendoza, "I thought it was Budvic coming up for something. I'd forgotten the cocoa. If Budvic saw you in here, he'd be suspicious."

Parke rose. "In case the second mate gossips, I'll let it be known I couldn't sleep for a splitting headache. I heard you moving around in your cabin, so I came in for a few aspirins from the medicine chest. You kept me chatting."

"Then you will go along with me?" cried the captain joyously.

Parke nodded. "I only hope the FBI will go along with you too."

"I am quite sure they will. Mr. Parke, I will never be able to thank you enough for—"

Parke, already opening the door, gestured with his other hand to show his embarrassment at being thanked.

The *Mirmar* sailed during the forenoon, after the vice-consul and the local port officials had accepted her papers and granted clearance. The weather was favorable, and the radio forecasts for the areas ahead were promising. Parke estimated that if they held, the ship would reach Ambrose Light around noon on the sixth day.

He awoke next morning with the anxious hope that Budvic hadn't been seen passing food and water down the ventilator during the night. According to Captain Mendoza, the purser was to provision the stowaways around two o'clock every morning, when the hands coming off deck and engine watches at midnight would have long since turned in; the day men, who usually gathered at the stern of an evening to smoke and chat, were generally asleep in their bunks by midnight. There were no crew quarters in the stern.

Parke was now doubly anxious that the stowaways go undiscovered, for it had belatedly occurred to him that if they were found during the voyage and not recognized as Castro agents by the immigration inspectors, he would be acting disloyally by remaining silent while they were returned to Truxillo, for a possible second attempt. If he spoke up, could he depend on Captain Mendoza not to turn against him in spite for having denied him a second chance to save his daughter? It was too late to think about that now, Parke decided ruefully.

Another thing that troubled Parke was a change in the purser's manner. Budvic now appeared to be less chilly toward him, even greeting him with a pleasant smile. It seemed suspicious that the purser should have adopted this new attitude right after the stowaways were brought aboard. Parke mentioned it to Captain Mendoza one forenoon on the bridge.

"I wonder if he spotted me on

the boat deck the other night and he's conditioning me for some kind of ploy."

"Nonsense!" snapped Captain Mendoza. "He would have told me if he had seen you. He is probably feeling friendlier toward everybody, now that the stowaways are aboard. It must be a relief to him. You can depend on it: he will be in trouble with his superiors if anything goes wrong. It has gone wrong, but he does not know it yet."

"He may not be telling you everything. Also, I'm sure I've seen that red head of his somewhere before, and he knows it too."

"You no doubt sailed with him on some other ship and it's slipped from his memory too. He told me he used to sail as a supercargo."

"I don't think it was on a ship I met him. I have a feeling it was somewhere ashore."

"Stop worrying about it," snapped the captain impatiently. "The FBI will find out for you."

Parke was silent. He resented the captain's manner. He was no longer the anxious father pleading for his daughter, but a stern captain curtly rejecting the misgivings of a subordinate. Parke now feared that any gratitude Captain Mendoza might feel toward him would be short-lived, might not be anything to depend on if the chips were down. Parke felt desolate.

The *Mirmar* arrived at New York quarantine station with the stowaways still in hiding. As the immigration inspectors returned ashore, Parke was uneasy over not having informed them about the stowaways, knowing that it would go hard against him if they were found before he got to the FBI.

Captain Mendoza had regulated the ship's speed northward to ensure that she would not dock at her East River pier until late in the afternoon, too late for the longshoremen to begin discharging the coffee cargo and perhaps discover the stowaways. By six o'clock the chief and second mates and most of the crew had gone ashore, leaving a shore night-mate to keep the deck watch.

Parke had washed and shaved and changed from uniform khakis into a light summer suit and was ready to go to FBI headquarters when Captain Mendoza burst into his cabin and shut the door. His swept-back hair was now in disarray, as if he had been tearing at it.

"Budvic tricked us," he moaned. "The stowaways are already ashore. He knew you intended to go to the FBI."

Parke stared at him in dismay. "How did he find out?"

"He saw you follow me into my

cabin the night the stowaways came aboard. He went around to my portholes and listened. He risked getting the stowaways out of the hold during the night, hiding them in his storeroom, and outfitting them from the crew slopchest. He gave them crew passes with my signature forged. They slipped ashore while the hands were down at supper."

"When did he tell you this?"

"A few minutes ago—just before he cleared out himself."

"There's perhaps time for the FBI to catch up with him and the stowaways before they get far. I'll phone from the pier right away." Parke stopped. "Captain Mendoza," he said gently, "I'm sorry about your daughter."

"You can still help me to save her. Budvic said he had been advised to tell me that though I had meant to break the agreement, my daughter would be released, even allowed to leave the island, if you agree not to inform the FBI."

Parke was almost speechless. "And you expect me not to?"

"What good will it do now?" asked the captain. "They'll never catch them now."

"Then why are the Castroites so anxious to keep me from going to the FBI?"

"They're afraid of what an investigation might uncover."

"Then that's what they're going to get. I'm sorry, Captain Mendoza, I can no longer stay silent."

The captain's eyes blazed. "If you cannot act human for my daughter's sake," he said in sudden vehemence, "then do it for your own. If Budvic is caught, he will swear that you were a partner with him and me in the smuggling."

Parke was stunned. "And you'd lie with him?"

"I will do anything to save my daughter."

"So that's the kind of thanks I really get!" raged Parke. "I was a fool to have listened to you. I see now why Budvic changed toward me. It was his way of laughing up his sleeve. But I'm going to have the last laugh. The FBI won't swallow the accusation. They'll think it strange I should inform on myself."

"Do you think Budvic and those behind him did not foresee that? You are dealing with clever men. Budvic told me to warn you that nothing has been overlooked. For your own good, do not telephone the FBI. Forget about proving your loyalty. It will land you in jail."

"Act like a traitor?" fumed Parke. "Keep my mouth shut while two spies slip into the country? You're talking to the wrong man. This isn't a time for proving

loyalty. It's a time for practicing it, and that's what I'm going to do. I'll take my chances against you and Budvic."

Parke snatched open a drawer, gathered up a few coins and started for the door. As he went out, Captain Mendoza called after him.

"You are making a big mistake. Stop and think it over."

Parke disdained to reply. He hurried down the gangway and started up the deserted pier. About halfway along it, he turned into a dust-covered telephone booth and swiveled up one of the directories on the stand.

He looked up with a start as two men suddenly appeared from behind some tall packing cases. One was heavyset and looked like a longshoreman; the other was Budvic, still in ship khakis.

So this was something that hadn't been overlooked, Parke decided grimly; a trap he would walk into blindly if threats failed. He was cornered. The pier watchman and the customs guard were out of sight and hearing up in the little office by the pier gates.

Budvic smiled. "If it's the FBI you're going to call—"

"And if I am?" challenged Parke defiantly.

He tensed as Budvic's companion thrust a hand inside his jacket. The man drew out not a knife or a gun, but something he held out to Parke to read in the dim pier light.

"I can save you a dime. If you have any doubts, I'll give you the number to call."

As Parke stared dumbly at the identification, Budvic chuckled.

"You really did see this red head of mine before—at those demonstrations you took part in with your late wife."

"So that's where it was!" exclaimed Parke. He scowled. "It was you who got me blacklisted."

"I felt better about you after Captain Mendoza told me you intended to inform on the stowaways and—"

Parke stared. "Captain Mendoza told you?"

Budvic smiled. "I didn't listen at his portholes. I got it from him. He led you to believe the stowaways were to be smuggled ashore by boat, instead of through the gates as crew members, as planned, to make you think you would have lots of time for tipping off the FBI. He hoped to scare you into silence by warning you I'd implicate you in the smuggling. He didn't succeed, so now we have to keep you from fouling things up."

"Me?" exclaimed Parke.

Budvic grinned. "You nearly fouled them up the night the stowaways came aboard. If you hadn't gone along with Captain

Mendoza, he'd have slugged you and called me in to help dump the corpse overboard. That really would have put me on the spot. I had to talk him out of making you, in effect, walk the plank at sea."

"Murder to save his daughter?" queried Parke incredulously.

"Daughter nothing! That photo is of his niece. She's secretary to a government official in Santiago. Captain Mendoza himself is secretly pro-Castro."

Parke looked bewildered. "If I ever manage to figure all this out—"

"Mr. Budvic," explained the purser's companion, "is one of the bureau's undercover informers. He infiltrated a red group which was inciting civil-rights demonstrators to violence. When the Castroites got the promise of assistance from Captain Mendoza, they inquired around for someone with sea experience to aid him. Comrade Budvic was tapped for the assignment. They wanted the two agents smuggled in by sea, for fear they might be detected if they tried to enter as refugees. When Mr. Budvic informed the bureau of the plan, it was decided to let them land and then keep them under surveillance in the hope they'd lead to other Castro agents. Unfortunately, we reckoned without you."

"Which," said Budvic, "is why you're being confided in. If Captain Mendoza had scared you into silence, it wouldn't have been necessary. He knows you went out to phone the FBI. He'll be waiting for agents to show up. He's all set to deny all knowledge of the stowaways, with me backing him up. He'll make it sound like a wild yarn you thought up to prove your loyalty. The bureau isn't ready to take action against him yet, but if there's no immediate inquiry tonight, he'll be suspicious.

"So," concluded Budvic, smiling, "the situation is reversed. You are being asked to cooperate with the FBI instead of the other way around. We want you to go back and tell Captain Mendoza you thought better of it on the way up to the telephone."

"Go back and eat all I said to him! Go back and let that lying Commie think I'm a-a—" spluttered Parke.

"It's tough, as I should know." Budvic smiled. "But to a loyal-minded citizen—"

Parke breathed loud and hard. "You *would* have to put it that way!"

Responsibility frequently places one in the middle of a tightrope, with both ends beyond one's sphere of vision.

Garden of Dreams

by John Lutz

MR. JOHN STAPLES closed the door behind him and walked with straight, brisk strides past his secretary, Mrs. Carvelle, who was watering an arrangement of peonies in a vase atop a filing cabinet. With a curt nod he entered his own office, sat behind his curved mahogany desk and waited for Mrs. Carvelle to enter. Enter she did, with an automatic smile and an unusually thick handful of mail.

"These are the pertinent ones," Mrs. Carvelle said. "There's another stack of letters in the outer office."

Mr. Staples drew a deep breath, held it as he spoke. "Appointments?"

"I canceled most of them, as you instructed. Mr. Brogan at eleven o'clock is still pending."

Mr. Staples lighted a cigarette, took two puffs, snuffed it out in the gold ash tray that had been a

gift from the company. As Mrs. Carvelle walked out, he stared at the neat stack of letters she had left on the gleaming desktop. Then he looked around at the sumptuous paneled office that had been his for two years. It had been a long climb here to this office in the huge Consolidated Natural Gas and Power Company Building, a long, hand-over-hand climb from Jack Staples, office manager, all the way to Mr. John Staples, Regional Director—and now this damned thing had to happen.

Yesterday his own personal project, the laying of the gas line across the river bend, had failed. The engineers to whom he had listened had turned out to be wrong—or at least they had turned out to look wrong—which from Mr. Staples' standpoint amounted to the same thing. A valve had not been turned, pressure had built up, metal had ruptured, and four square miles of the tenth biggest city in the country had gone without gas power on one of the coldest days of the dying winter. Thousands of people were without heat, thousands inconvenienced by unusable gas appliances, hospitals switched to auxiliary power; and for this monumental mess Consolidated Natural Gas and Power, Mr. John Staples, Regional Director, bore the brunt of the blame. The letters, the phone calls of complaint, would continue to pour in for weeks.

An aura of gloom hung about Mr. Staples' carefully cultivated executive's face—iron-gray hair combed straight back to accentuate the broad forehead; and firm countenance flushed by telling high blood pressure—a youthful, dynamic fifty-two.

At the buzz of the intercom, Mr. Staples' tapering, manicured hand reached out. "I instructed you not to disturb me, Mrs. Carvelle."

"I'm sorry, sir, but it's a man from the police department, a Detective Mungweather. He says it's official business."

A vein in Mr. Staples' forehead throbbed colorfully. He hadn't planned on seeing anyone while this mess was being investigated, but a policeman . . . Enough bad public relations, he decided, and he pressed the intercom button. "Send Detective Mungweather in, Mrs. Carvelle."

Mungweather, a small man in his late forties, with thinning hair and a quiet smile, didn't look like a cop, but he had on a cop's cheap suit and he had flat-blue cop's eyes. As he moved toward the desk across the soft carpet, Mr. Staples saw that there must be a tightly wound strength in the small body. He was carrying what appeared to

be a box of long-stemmed flowers.

"Detective Mungweather," he said, shaking hands with Mr. Staples and settling himself into the chair before the desk, with the long white box nestled in his lap.

"I suppose it's about some legal ramification of the power failure," Mr. Staples said, sliding a box of cigars toward Detective Mungweather.

Mungweather shook his head at both suggestions. "It's about these," he said, lifting the lid from the florist's box. He parted folds of white tissue to reveal a bouquet of different types of flowers—withered and dead flowers.

"I guess you'd better explain," Mr. Staples said.

Detective Mungweather flashed his gentle little smile. "Mr. Staples," he said, "inadvertently you are involved in one of the most bizarre cases of murder in the history of crime."

"Murder?"

"The facts haven't been made public yet," Mungweather said, "so I'll have to start at the beginning. Are you familiar with those old houses on Maden Street, the big ones that have become a little rundown?"

Mr. Staples nodded. He had seen those blocks of houses from an earlier, more prosperous era, brownstone and brick, with high gables atop three stories of hideous pseudo-Gothic architecture. Half of them were rooming houses now, with dirty windows and sloping terraces and gardens given back to nature.

"There was a man who lived alone in one of those houses," Detective Mungweather went on, "a man who inherited the house from his mother over a dozen years ago. This man—we're not at liberty yet to give you his name—had a small greenhouse built onto the back of his house, a hothouse about ten feet square and constructed entirely of glass. It was situated in such a way that it was hardly visible from the street, and most of the glass panes were soaped on the inside, partly to control the sun's rays, partly for privacy. Our man took great pains with his hothouse, even going to the expense of having a special gas heating unit installed in it to insure perfectly controllable warmth all year round."

"Nothing bizarre so far," Mr. Staples said, lighting up another filter-tipped cigarette. "Just a slightly eccentric horticulturist."

"More than slightly eccentric," Detective Mungweather said. "You see, besides being interested in the beauties of flowers, our man was also interested in the beauties of womanhood. He'd had two wives, both of whom supposedly ran off.

The last one disappeared four years ago. Now it turns out that there were many women in his life, a dozen in all. He murdered all twelve of them and buried them in his indoor year-round garden."

"Murdered a dozen women?" Mr. Staples half stood and sat back down again.

"Murdered," Detective Mungweather said clearly and calmly.

"But just a moment," Mr. Staples said, his cigarette poised before his lips. "You said they'd all been buried inside his hothouse, and you did mention that it was small, only ten by ten."

"That's true," Detective Mungweather said with his little smile. "He buried them all upright, with their heads a few inches below the ground. The tops of their skulls had been removed and a flower had been planted in each head. Marvelous fertilizer, I would think."

Mr. Staples almost doubled up in his chair. Images of those grotesque flowerpot heads beneath cool dark soil made his stomach wrench. "Good heavens, you can't be serious! You can't be!"

"I am, though," Detective Mungweather said. "They were women with pasts mostly their own, prostitutes, transients . . . women no one would really miss. Our man would strike up their acquaintance and go from there. Some of them lived with him for a while before their murders. I suppose he must have had a certain charm."

"But the flowers . . . why?"

Detective Mungweather leaned back in his chair. "Well, you must understand that this man identified the beauty of certain types of women with the beauty of certain types of flowers. We got this from his diary. One woman was named Laureen, and she was to him like an orchid, soft and delicate, with a perfect roundness and fragility about her. Then there was Rose Anne, his pink rose, blushing and pure, and looking younger than her years." Mungweather had reached into the florist's box and removed a withered rose on a long stem, a crushed and hriveled yellow tulip, a dried, once-delicate chrysanthemum. "Marlene, Doris, Barbara, Eunice . . . He had a flower for each of them."

"Insane!" Mr. Staples said.

Detective Mungweather nodded agreement. "But you must understand that this was how he possessed these women; to him, these soft petals whose stems and roots were nourished by the bodies of his loved ones *were* his women. These once-beautiful plants were the flesh of his beloved."

"Revolting," Mr. Staples said. "But I still don't see how all this

concerns my company anyway."

"This man was out of town yesterday," Detective Mungweather said, "when the gas failed. These," he nodded at the white box of withered flowers, "were all that was left in his hothouse when he returned. They are dead, and he holds Consolidated Natural Gas and Power, and you as Regional Director, directly responsible for the death of his loved ones."

"What!" Mr. Staples' voice was incredulous. "Responsible? How did you find out about this maniac and arrest him?"

"That's just our problem," Detective Mungweather said with his little wisp of a smile. "He hasn't been apprehended and, as I said, he holds you directly responsible for what happened."

Mr. Staples brought his open palm down on the desktop. He'd had a hard last couple of days, and now this ridiculous business was just too much. "That's preposterous!"

"A lot of things are preposterous," Mungweather said. "For instance, when I came in here, you didn't even ask to see my identification."

Mr. Staples' eyes fixed on the dark and withered flowers in the white box for a full ten seconds. His Adam's apple jerked and disappeared below his starched white collar. "Now see here . . ."

"See where?" Mr. Mungweather asked, drawing from beneath his suit coat a long-bladed pruning shears with red handles. He inserted his fingers within the handles expertly.

"I don't believe a word of this! I don't!" Mr. Staples said in a desperate, choking voice. He placed his hands on the edge of the desk and stood.

But Mr. Mungweather had stood also, his arm drawing back the glinting shears in what seemed, through Mr. Staples' horrified eyes, to be slow motion. Only Mr. Staples, still not believing, couldn't move—*he couldn't move!*

"Directly responsible!" Mr. Mungweather repeated through clenched teeth each time he lifted and plunged downward the red-handled glistening shears.

Meddling with another man's folly is said to be thankless work—but always?

I WAS THINKING that the best time for sleeping is between seven and nine a.m., but if you have trouble sleeping, then any time is the best time.

Myself, I have trouble sleeping and I guess it's due in large part to my wife, who snores and has been snoring for the last eighteen years; but for the fifteen years of our marriage before she started snoring I also had trouble sleeping, so I guess maybe her snoring isn't wholly responsible.

Thirty-three years married to one woman. You love her. You're used to her. Sometimes you think looking at her is like looking at your elbow and you wonder sometimes how a person can stay with another person for so long. Still, it happens all the time.

Nothing remains the same.

by Michael Brett

There was a time when I could play handball for three hours; now, if I run for a cab it takes me five minutes to get my breath back. When I married my wife, she was something. She used to say, "Bradley, you look like a Greek statue." Today she just laughs and pokes me in the belly and tells me that I look like Greek ruins. What are you going to do? It's the way of things.

There are days when a theatrical agent should stay home and forget about making a buck. This was one. There wasn't enough heat in the office. A chill wind swirled large snowflakes and banked them against the store fronts on the opposite side of the street. People walked huddled and crossed carefully at the corners.

Business was like the day, terrible. I had heard two groups audition. In the morning there'd been a folk-rock song-and-guitar outfit, three young men wearing beards and a young girl with long, brushed hair flowing to her waist. They did something about going over a cliff in a car doing one hundred and thirty-five m.p.h. and the world wasn't such a nice place. So what else was new? I told them I'd call them if anything turned up. They sounded ready to lie down in the street and die. They depressed me. Maybe it was too soon after breakfast for me to listen to them.

An hour later there was a psychedelic group, two boys and two girls with electric guitars and a prop man with a shaggy-dog look, a lean character with long sideburns. He flashed colored lights on the group. He gave me a demonstration and I said, "Spare me the lights."

One of the girls pleaded, "Please, Mr. Bradley, our act depends upon psychedelic lighting for effect."

I said, "Okay, but just remember this building is older than me. The wiring isn't so hot. So don't blow any fuses."

They made some noises with the guitars and the girls did some shaking and the gold, red and blue lights gave me a headache. I said, "Pretty good. Leave your names, addresses and a phone number."

The light-flasher said, "We could use work now, Mr. Bradley. We were held over in Manitoba."

So I thought, so why did you ever leave? I need a new psychedelic group like I need a hole in the head, but they weren't bad, so I said, "I'll call you the minute something comes in."

One of the girls said, "Mr. Bradley, we really need the work."

"Everybody needs the work," I said. "I'll see what I can do."

So the light-flasher said, "We'll work for anything, Mr. Bradley.

We just got into town. Things are kind of rough."

He was really saying that they were broke. Well, I'd seen and heard worse and I knew a guy who owned one of those coffee houses down in the Village who might be able to use them. I gave him a call and he told me that business was stinko. He needed some entertainers, but the only way he could hire them was on a straight food basis.

"What's that?" I said. "I've never heard that before."

So he said, "I feed them. I don't pay them. That's what that is."

I covered the mouthpiece and said to the psychedelic group, "I don't think so. All he wants to do is provide food."

"We'll take it," said the light-flasher. "Food's worth something."

When they left I tried to figure my commission on the deal. What percentage? Ten percent of four ham sandwiches? Like that, I'd go broke.

I spent the rest of the day on the telephone and booked a little business, a magician for Kent, Ohio, a gal singer for a saloon in Atlantic City, a comic for a lounge act in Las Vegas.

I told two guys who called for acts that I'd keep an eye out and dismissed their requests as soon as I hung up. The first guy had a little roadhouse-type nightclub and if I sent him a girl singer he wouldn't leave her alone. He'd chase and pinch her and she'd get black-and-blue marks on the arms where it showed, and then later I'd have to listen to her complaints. Who needed it?

Phil Kwenk, the second guy, was an altogether different story. He owned Kwenk's Blue Room. It's a dive in an old mill town along the Hudson River in upper New York State. The town has been designated as a depressed area by some state agency. The mills are all closed and the town is dead and there are some bitter people who live there. You can't blame them. You live in a place, you can get kind of attached to it. You might not want to move away. It's progress and automation, people say. I can remember when people were happier without it.

Anyway, Kwenk used to book a three-piece combo, or sometimes a crooner, but I stopped sending him people when I learned that his patrons gave my performers a hard time. They'd make bird calls while the singer was on, or throw a firecracker or two while the combo was performing—cute things like that. I liked to think they were the way they were because the town was finished and they had no hope. It could have been like that. Or it

could have been that Kwenk's patrons were simply crazies. They used to wreck his place about every third month. At any rate, I no longer sent my clients up to Kwenk's. After all, a theatrical agent has to protect his clients a little bit from the crazies of the world.

The day passed. I checked my watch. It was four o'clock and already dark. Usually I stay until five. Today there seemed to be something wrong with the heating. I felt as cold as the day outside. I cleared my desk. I wouldn't miss any business by going home an hour earlier. I'd have a drink, walk around in slippers, have something hot for supper. Maybe there was something to see on television for a change.

I got my hat and coat and the phone rang. It was my wife reminding me that tonight was her bridge night with the girls, and that she had left cold cuts and some hard-boiled eggs for me. "And make sure you clean up after yourself. Put the dishes away. Don't leave me a mess, and if you don't mind, Mister Bradley, don't fall asleep on the couch and don't leave your filthy cigar butts in my ash trays."

I said, "Okay," and hung up. Of course she was right about the cigar butts. Thirty-three years together, and we had two children and three grandchildren and she calls me Mister Bradley, and with a sharp tone, no less; and that was a girl who used to have to fight me off like a tiger before we were married.

I heard a sound and a slender girl stepped into the office. She was about twenty, a brunette with a thin face and big eyes and with fresh snow on her hair. There was something familiar about her.

"Are you Mr. Bradley?" she asked.

"One and the same," I said. "That's me."

She glanced at her watch, then looked at me worriedly. "I thought the office would be open until five o'clock."

"Usually it is," I said. "Today I have a business appointment. Is there something you want to tell me?"

"My name is Janet Rawls. I sing, Mr. Bradley," she blurted. "I was hoping that I could sing for you."

"It's late," I said. "Come back tomorrow morning when you're fresh, Miss. You're trying to get into a tough business. You need all the breaks you can get. You come around twenty minutes before closing time, when people are thinking of going home, and you're not going to do yourself any good." That was me, the voice of experience

talking. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Mr. Bradley, I'm sorry I came just before you were leaving," she said, and began walking out. From the doorway, she turned to me and explained, "Mr. Bradley, it would be very difficult for me to come back tomorrow morning."

I didn't ask her why. She probably had a reason. Maybe it wasn't convenient. To look at, she was just a skinny kid, all eyes. In the dim light shining from the hall, she was a figure out of the far-off past. She startled me. Then I realized she reminded me of my wife twenty-five years ago. Twenty-five years ago I would have rushed home to see my wife. Tonight I didn't feel like going home. Sometimes I think I work longer than I need to, so I don't have to go home.

She was very young and pretty, and tonight my wife and her cold cuts and her Mister Bradley, and the miserable gray snow and the cold people in the streets bent over against the sharp wind made me feel sad.

So I said, "Miss Rawls, would you make an old man who is very much in need of cheer happy, by having dinner with him?"

She made an appraisal, then gave me a warm grin. "I don't think you're old at all. I think you're distinguished-looking with your gray hair, handsome in fact, and I would love to have dinner with you."

"A big steak, tossed salad, and a baked potato. You like that?"

She just nodded and looked happy.

So I took her to a place with low leather-covered booths that had a moose head hanging on the wall and where the drinks were good and the portions plentiful and delicious.

She attacked her steak like a school of piranha. It was wonderful just to watch her. We drank coffee and she told me about herself. Born in a small New England town, father a chauffeur, she'd come to the big town to study dramatics and voice. Her father had died, she'd run out of funds. An instructor had told her she had a good voice and she'd come to me.

"In the morning I'll hear you," I said.

"I know it's an imposition. Can I do it now?"

There was nobody waiting for me at home. *Why not?* I thought. I said, "All right," and we went back to my office.

I played the piano. She had a voice suitable for one of those bad college-musical productions. It wasn't good enough to sell. Too bad; I felt sad, because I liked her. I wanted to help her. Then I thought of a saloon-keeper who owed me a favor. He sometimes had a girl playing lazy piano, background stuff to which nobody listened.

She couldn't play the piano.

I told her that I was sorry.

"Thank you for everything,"

she said. Then she gave me an uncertain look. "Mr. Bradley, would it be all right if I stayed here tonight?"

"Here? Here in the office?" I said.

"The reason I wanted you to hear me sing tonight is, if you had liked me I would have asked for an advance, and I'd have taken a room in a hotel."

I offered her twenty-five dollars and she said, "No, thank you, Mr. Bradley."

"It's a loan," I said.

"No, thank you," she said, and I watched in amazement as a tear welled in her eye. "I just want a place to spend the night."

Her pride was unsettling. "You'll freeze here. They turn the heat down. It gets very cold at night."

"I don't care about that," she said. "Please."

"Stay here," I said. I went out and purchased an electric heater and brought it back. "Don't open the door for anyone. You're a girl and you're alone."

"I'm grateful to you, Mr. Bradley. You don't have to worry. I won't take anything," she assured me.

"Take whatever you want, my desk, my file cabinet, a calendar from my insurance company. You'll be doing me a favor. Leave the ash trays. I stole them from a hotel and I'm very fond of them."

"I love you, Mr. Bradley," she said, and laughed.

She was something, this Miss Rawls.

Twenty-five years ago, ten years ago, I was a tiger. I said, "Go to sleep." I went home and went to bed.

When my wife came home she awakened me. "What's the matter with you?" she said. "You were smiling and laughing in your sleep."

"Don't begrudge me my happiness. I was dreaming of a young, beautiful girl who's sleeping on the couch in my office."

"Some chance of that. Don't talk like an old fool. There's no fool like an old fool," were my wife's deathless words.

I went back to sleep.

In the morning, Miss Rawls had done a very thorough job of tidying up. She'd swept the floor and cleaned the dingy windows. She beamed. "How do you like it?"

I used the phone and ordered breakfast sent up from a lunchroom downstairs. The coffee was strong and the Danish pastry fresh.

Miss Rawls told me I needed a secretary.

"I've always had a one-man office. I don't need a secretary."

"I type. I can answer the phone. I'll work hard. I'm efficient. You

need some efficiency around here."

"A pretty girl like you around—my wife would kill me."

"No, she won't," said Miss Rawls.

It was nice having Miss Rawls around. "All right," I said. "We'll try it on a temporary basis."

She laughed. "I love you, Mr. Bradley."

Her youthful exuberance was contagious. I said, "Control yourself, Miss Rawls." I realized I was having a good time.

At the end of the day I knew that she was an asset to me and to my business. She lifted some of the pressure from me. She replied to letters, she answered the phone and told various clients I didn't want to speak to that I wasn't in.

At the end of the week I wondered how I'd ever got along without her. She added comfort and joy and stature to my life. She made me feel twenty years younger. Just having her around was like a renewal of life.

It came with a crash, her falling in love with Dean Conrad. He was my most important client, a singer. He's also a bum.

There are a lot more people in the world like Janet Rawls than there are like Dean Conrad, but the ones like my singer feed on the unsuspecting ones like Janet Rawls. He wasn't any good. He took great pride in the vast numbers of gangsters he counted among his friends. He had a contempt for women and he used them with the ruthlessness of a slave trader. He had a terrible temper and it wasn't beneath him to punch some of his girlfriends around. I sometimes wondered if getting him out of the scrapes that came about as the result of his fine "character" was worth it. With it all, his popularity increased year after year.

A theatrical agent who has too much to say about the morals and behavior of his clients soon learns that he has no clients. Nevertheless, after he took her out the first time, I sat her down and told her about him. She thanked me and told me she thought my concern was charmingly old-fashioned, but she was a big girl now and she knew how to take care of herself. Furthermore, Dean had been a perfect gentleman. When she spoke of him her eyes were bright and her color high.

Three months later, when he was keeping her on the hook with promises of marriage, I confronted him and told him that she deserved better.

He laughed and said, "Bradley, they all deserve better. She's going to quit her job with you. I've got a cross-country tour coming up and I'm going to take her along as my

personal secretary." He winked. "I need a personal secretary."

"All you need is yourself," I said.

He gave me one of his famous smiles. "Maybe you got a yen for her yourself, Bradley." He laughed. "You're kind of old for her."

"I'm asking you to give her a break."

"The trouble with you, Bradley, is that you haven't kept up with the times. So what if I tell her good-bye after the tour? So what? She's got to learn the facts of life and I'm a first-class teacher. Come on, you make it sound as though I'm offering her a fate worse than death, Bradley. Wise up."

"You're a first-class bum," I said.

"Any time you want to tear up the contract . . . Now get this: what I do is my own business. You mind your own business and I'll mind mine."

When I got back to my office, it was past five and Janet had already left. I found a note on my desk. Kwenk had called.

I sat there and thought about Dean Conrad and Janet. He was playing games and she had to come out a loser. I picked up the slip of paper with Kwenk's name and I had an idea. It was crazy, but it might work. I put a call through to Kwenk and after I'd finished speaking I called Dean Conrad and apologized for being a meddling old man. Could he overlook it?

"Forget it," he said.

Then I asked him to do me a favor.

"Kwenk's?" he said. "You want me to work a place called Kwenk's Blue Room? I never heard of it, and you know I don't work for the kind of money a joint like that pays."

"Look, I owe the guy a favor. All you have to do is drive up there, show your face, sing one or two songs and walk out. That's all. I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't important to me. I promise I'll make it up to you."

He said, "All right."

That was on Thursday. He appeared at Kwenk's on Friday night. The police called me Saturday morning and I drove up and spoke to a police lieutenant named Sam Pechard, who explained what had happened. Kwenk's was S.R.O. for Conrad's appearance. When Conrad went into his second song it was met by a barrage of birdcalls from the patrons. Whereupon Conrad went after one of the birdcallers and crowned him with a beer bottle, knocking the miscreant senseless. The act had so incensed a bearded man in the crowd that he had thrown a firecracker, which triggered a barrage of firecrackers from other patrons. Then somebody had taken advan-

tage of all the noise and excitement to fire a bullet which killed Conrad. The place had erupted in a panic, patrons had charged out and driven off into the night. So far, no witnesses had come forward. The lieutenant doubted that any would. "It's a great loss, Mr. Bradley," he said. "My wife was crazy about him."

"Yes, many people were."

"I can imagine how you must feel," he said with concern.

"No, I don't think you can," I said, and he nodded understandingly.

He left when Kwenk came over.

"Sorry it happened here, Mr. Bradley," Kwenk said.

"Well, a thing like that, who could predict it? It certainly didn't do the name of your place any good," I said.

"That's for sure," said Kwenk. "Something like this really hangs a black eye on a place. I'll tell you something. I think that maybe one of my competitors rigged the whole thing to ruin me."

"No!"

"I'm sure of it," said Kwenk. "Of course the place is kind of dimly lighted so you really can't see too much, but I got a look at this guy with the beard who threw the first firecracker. I know just about every customer I've got. He's not one of the regulars. Well, this guy with the beard could have been put up to do it. My competitors know about the way my patrons act, so they could have hired him to do it. Nobody saw him firing a shot, but he could have done that, too. One thing I'm sure of, I'd never seen him before."

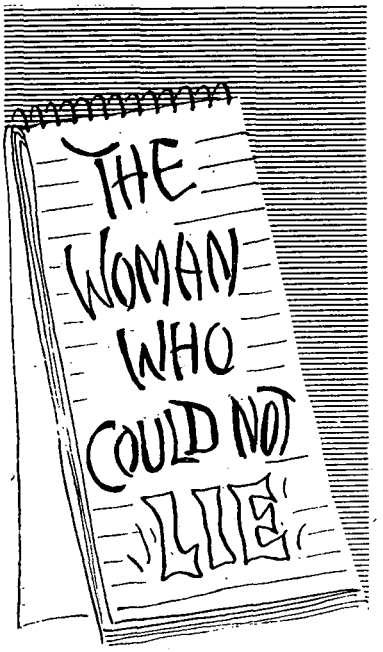
That wasn't quite accurate. He'd seen me on a number of occasions in my office, but never while wearing a black beard and wig and false eyebrows, the disguise that I had worn Friday night when I fired the shot that took Dean Conrad out of Janet's life.

"I'm sorry this happened," I said.

"I am, too," Kwenk said. "He was probably your biggest and most important client." He gave my back a sympathetic pat.

"Thanks." I smiled bravely. "I'll get over it," I said, and went out. In time, so would Janet.

There is room for improvement, it seems, even in a good reputation.

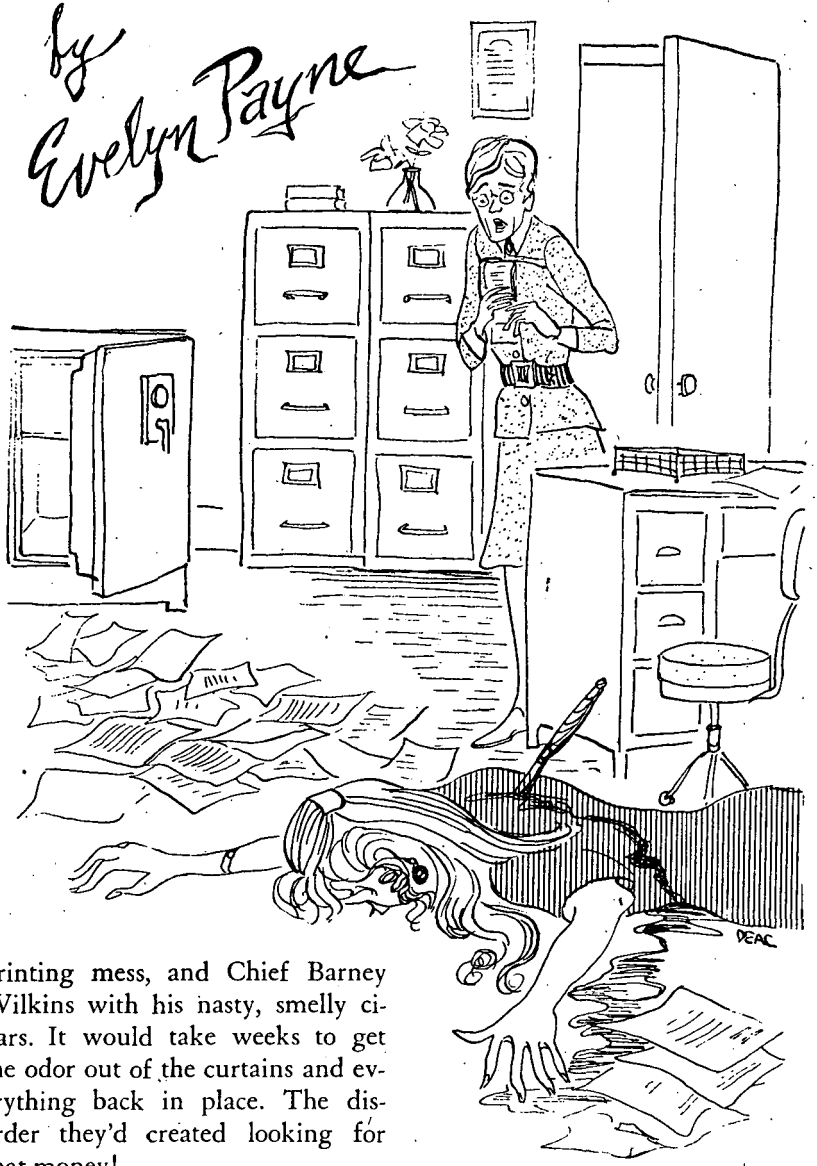


AURELIA HACKER'S bony fingers traveled swiftly over the typewriter keys. It wouldn't take long to finish the inventory and then she could return to her apartment, read a chapter of her book, drink a glass of milk, and go to bed. A lesser woman might have taken the evening off after the excitement of the afternoon, but with Aurelia business came first. Hillock-Mitchem Realty, Sales and Rentals, was her only child, her alpha and omega. She resented the time the police had wasted that afternoon and the fact that they had sealed up the offices, but purely physical considerations were unimportant where business was concerned. She had had the forethought to snatch the inventory from under the nose of the police, and now she was in the insurance office across the hall using one of their machines, which was in truly dreadful condition. But what could you expect of that silly little man and those flighty girls? Why, she'd even seen strikeovers on some of their letters!

Naturally, after twenty-five years of the real estate office, she didn't need her whole mind to type an inventory of the furniture in a rental house, and the list of chattels lengthened methodically while she thought over the events of the day.

Her main emotion was indignation. Her nice clean office! Blood all over the rug, papers scattered everywhere, the police with their big dirty boots and finger

by Evelyn Payne



printing mess, and Chief Barney Wilkins with his nasty, smelly cigars. It would take weeks to get the odor out of the curtains and everything back in place. The disorder they'd created looking for that money!

If only T. H. Hillock hadn't been too lazy to take the money to the bank, or if that idiot buyer hadn't insisted on giving the $2500 escrow money in cash, or if Claude Mitchem hadn't wanted to go over that advertising again, as if they could possibly prune it by another cent. Men! And women, women like Fran Keever. Not that Fran really deserved anything like that, but she had certainly been asking for something with all that black stuff around her eyes, and clothes more suitable to a beach than a respectable business office.

Only a few days before, Aurelia had taken her to task about those clothes, and Fran, her green eyes glinting with mischief, had replied meekly, "Yes, Miss Hacker." Then she'd turned up the next day in a high-necked, long-sleeved black dress that was twice as—well, go on, say it, Aurelia—twice as sexy as anything she had ever worn before. Don't think the men hadn't noticed it, either! Every man who'd come into the office had stared and straightened his tie and practically drooled. Claude, who had stopped hanging around the files the way he had when Fran first came to work, had spent nearly all day looking up totally unimportant papers. T.H., who usually arrived at nine and left at nine-thirty, had lingered half the day. Charley Quinn had whistled out loud. Up till then, Aurelia had rather approved of him because he was quiet and well-mannered and nice-looking in a sandy sort of way, but after that whistle . . . She hadn't been a bit surprised to hear that he was guilty.

She was still going strong when she heard the *whoosh* of the doorcloser on the front door and a man's heavy footsteps coming down the hall. She looked up, without missing a letter, when the steps reached the open door.

"Good evening, Tom. Did you want something?" she inquired coldly. Tom Faraday might be a good doctor, but he was certainly sloppy looking, and more than once when she'd met him on her way home at night she'd smelled liquor on his breath.

"You, Aurelia," he said sternly, his gaunt face more tired and grim than usual.

"I'm busy. What do you want me for?" she demanded, slipping the sheets out of the machine and removing the carbons.

"To tell a lie."

Her gasp was more horrified incredulity than indignation. The papers slipped out of her hands onto the floor.

"Oh, I know. You've never told a lie in your life. I've heard you brag about it," he said angrily,

holding up a hand as she threatened to interrupt. "But you've never done a decent human thing, either. It's high time you began. Charley Quinn's mother is dying. She's been sick a long time, and this thing this afternoon gave her the final push. Aurelia, she's going to die happy, because you're going over and tell her that her son did not murder Fran Keever."

"How dare you suggest such a thing? Why, I don't even know the woman," Aurelia objected indignantly, leaning down to pick up the papers.

"I'll introduce you," he offered drily.

"And I don't know whether Charley is guilty or not. He probably is, if the police arrested him. A jury—"

"Mrs. Quinn can't wait for a jury. She's dying. *Dying now.* You're involved in this affair and you have a reputation for telling the truth. If you tell her, she'll die happy. Happier, anyway!" he shouted.

"I've never told an untruth in my life and I do not intend to start now." Two red spots burned in her sallow cheeks and she sat straighter, if possible, than ever. "People know they can depend on what I say."

"Sure, to tell them unpleasant facts about their hats and their children's behavior. Surely, Aurelia," he pleaded, "since you've known Charley Quinn for several years, you can't possibly think he's guilty of killing that poor girl and stealing that money?"

"I haven't thought about it one way or another. It's not my business. I told the police what I saw and heard. I know nothing about him except the amount of real estate he's sold, and I've made it a practice not to form or express opinions about the office or the business. It cost the company a deal once," she said flatly, turning back to put the cover on the typewriter.

"The company! That's all you think about. This might cost a man his life. It's costing Mrs. Quinn her life right now, and you say it isn't any of your business. Think!" he thundered, pounding the desk. "Think of your immortal soul, Aurelia, if you have one!"

He sounded almost like the preacher in the country meetinghouse of her childhood, and a shiver ran down her back. For a long minute she and the doctor looked at each other, and in the end it was her eyes that fell. Slowly, still rebellious, she put on her hat and coat and followed him out to his car.

She was in turmoil. To someone else it might have seemed a minor thing, but to her it was treason, be-

trayal, an abrogation of the principle by which she lived. In all her 56 years she had always told the truth as she saw it, no white lie, no polite fib, no mendacious silence. No hint of powder softened the long sharp outline of her nose, not even the palest of lipsticks concealed the prim line of her lips, no frill hid the stepladder lines on which she was fashioned. Yet now she was going to tell a lie, a deliberate, premeditated falsehood, because insofar as she had considered the matter she really did think Charley Quinn was guilty. So did the police and so, undoubtedly, would a jury.

For a moment she felt she could not possibly do it, and she put out a hand to the doorhandle. As if he sensed what she was thinking, the doctor turned and said quietly, "I only hope we're not too late." She withdrew the hand, and they rode in silence to the modest little house.

Inside it was very dim and silent. The nurse glanced curiously at Aurelia, but all she said was, "No change, Dr. Faraday. She's conscious."

He nodded and turned to Aurelia. "Make it good."

Hesitantly she advanced into the bedroom, looking about a little desperately, trying to gather strength from the inexpensive, tidy furnishings. Only the barely discernible rise and fall of the covers indicated that Mrs. Quinn was still breathing. There were bluish shadows around her nose and temples, and the curiously tender lips were faintly violet. She lay with her face turned to the bedside table, on which were several photographs of Charley and a small bunch of withering flowers.

Aurelia remembered that Charley took his mother some flowers every evening on his way home from the office. She had seen him in the florist's shop the night before buying—why, they must have been these very blossoms!

Her heart, which had done nothing but pump blood for years, contracted suddenly, and her eyes stung. Swiftly she knelt beside the bed and took one of the thin hands in hers.

"Mrs. Quinn," she said softly, even gently, "I am Aurelia Hacker. I've come to tell you about Charley."

The woman's eyes opened and her lips moved. Aurelia could barely make out the words. "Kind . . . of you. My son?"

"He's all right. It's all a mistake. He isn't guilty. I know," Aurelia stated in the same flat tone she used for announcing interest rates. It carried conviction, just as it always had.

This time Mrs. Quinn's voice

was strong and joyful. "Thank you . . . knew it couldn't be . . . he's a good . . ."

That was her last breath, but there was a shadow of a smile on the dead face.

"That was the best thing you ever did," the doctor said huskily as he bent over the bed. "That was a good lie, better than a lot of truths."

Abruptly Aurelia was herself again. She said firmly, "That was not a lie. He is not guilty."

She had never believed in intuition. Facts were more important, easier to deal with, solid. But now something obscure and powerful (perhaps merely an overwhelming desire to recapture her reputation for truthfulness) compelled her to repeat, "Charley Quinn is innocent."

Tom Faraday straightened up and stared at her, and the nurse, moving about softly, paused also.

"Are you sure? How do you know?" he asked.

"I'm not sure exactly. Now that I think of it, I don't believe he could do a thing like that. There was something that bothered me this afternoon, some discrepancy, something I forgot. But I'll think of it."

"Well, don't go broadcasting it, for heaven's sake," he said, putting on his coat. "This guy, whoever he is, won't hang any higher for killing *two* women so keep it quiet."

It was only a vague feeling, the uncomfortable sensation that sends you back to check ash trays and pilot lights, but as Aurelia walked from the office toward her apartment, it grew stronger, more definite. *Something forgotten.* She hurried on, forgetting to pick up her usual quart of milk at the Health Cafeteria where she ate most of her meals, omitting also an evening paper from the newsstand. Home, she tossed her hat and coat on a chair instead of hanging them up, fixed herself a hurried meal out of the refrigerator, and sat down to think.

The beginning was, of course, the Hillock-Mitchem Realty Company. Aurelia had been there for twenty-five years, had handled the details of every deal, had come to take her fellow workers for granted. Now she had to reverse the process, for after T.H. had come in with the $2500 in the envelope, no one else had entered the office. (Testimony of the legless veteran who sold pencils out in front.) She had suggested taking the money right over to the bank.

"Aurelia, you worry too much," he had said, thrusting the envelope into the safe and shutting, but not locking, the door. "You can make out a deposit slip and drop it into the night depository on your way

home. In the meantime you and Fran are here, aren't you?"

"I don't like it. The whole thing is most irregular," she had fretted.

T.H. had appealed to Claude, who went over and shoved the envelope deeper into the safe and said, "Sure, it'll be all right for that length of time. You make the deposit slip, Aurelia, and I'll drop it by myself. And as soon as you've got things under control here, come to my office. I want to go over that Monte Vista advertising again. I still think—"

"Every penny comes right out of your tightfisted little soul, doesn't it, Claude?" T.H. had commented unpleasantly. Then he'd put on his hat and coat and gone out the north door into the hall that led to the outside door. Aurelia heard him walk the few steps to the door, but it had been subconscious, for she was busy typing a letter, clearing up the papers on her desk, giving some to Fran to file, and generally getting ready for the next day. There would be no other time if Claude insisted on going over those ads again. Fran was already busy filing, going from one to another of the cabinets, and she received Aurelia's instructions with an impatient wiggle of her shoulders. Aurelia frowned, picked up her notebook and pencil and went out the west door and up the main hall to Claude's cluttered office.

She had sat there, tapping a mental toe, thinking of the things she could or should be doing, for nine minutes. By turning in her chair she could see the hall all the way down to where, at the corner of her own office, it turned right and became the entry hall. She caught a glimpse of Charley Quinn crossing from his office to somewhere—probably the rest room, although it could as easily have been her own office.

Then the phone had rung and before she could switch the call she had heard Claude answer in T.H.'s room next door, saying at exasperated intervals, "Yes, ma'am . . . no, ma'am . . . sorry, ma'am . . . I couldn't possibly."

Then he had come in, his round pettish face redder than ever. "That pest, Mrs. Middlebottom."

For ten minutes they went over the same old ground on the subdivision advertising. Out of the corner of her eye, Aurelia had seen Charley go back to his own office. Finally Claude, with a dissatisfied grunt, had given up, and she had hurried down the hall to her office.

She screamed. There were papers scattered wildly all over the floor, and in the midst of them lay Fran Keever. Even at a glance it was obvious that she was dead—the blood and the paperknife sticking out of

her back only confirmed it. The door of the safe was open and the envelope was gone.

They were all in there the next minute, milling around excitedly. Aurelia, although she was shaken, found herself taking charge, sending Claude to phone the police, restraining Charley's efforts to move the body, and thrusting, bodily, the hysterical insurance trio into their own offices. The police came, followed in a minute or two by T.H., his handsome face drawn and anxious.

The medical examiner came and went, taking poor Fran with him. The offices were searched wildly for the money, and the fingerprint expert dusted every possible surface with powder. Barney Wilkins sat himself down in Aurelia's own chair and asked questions, wiggling his heavy eyebrows and pursing his fat lips importantly. Half the town's population was standing outside, voluble with horrified curiosity, and Barney had stationed a young patrolman at the door to keep them out.

The insurance people had been in their offices with the doors shut for two solid hours, so they were allowed, even encouraged to leave.

T.H., lighting one cigarette after another and tapping his long fingers on the table, said weakly that he didn't know exactly what time he'd left the office. He'd walked down the street, greeting several people on the way to the Haddonville *Courier*, where he'd been talking to the editor when he saw the police car draw up.

"I'll never forgive myself. If I hadn't insisted on leaving the money here, if I'd taken it to the bank, as you wanted me to, Aurelia, this awful thing wouldn't have happened," he said brokenly, and sat with his head in his hands.

Claude sheepishly admitted that after he'd left her office he'd gone to the supply room and taken a drink of whiskey. "Hair of the dog, you know, Chief. That banquet last night—"

Aurelia sniffed, but Barney looked sympathetic—he'd been there himself.

"I'd been taking aspirin and black coffee all day and finally couldn't take it any longer—don't like drinking in the office—never have—but it was either that or go home," Claude explained, running a hand through his stubble of graying hair. "I sat on a box there for a minute or two. Then I went into T.H.'s office through the side door and hunted for the stuff I wanted to talk to Aurelia about. Couldn't find it right away—he keeps things in such a mess. Then the phone rang—Mrs. Asa Middlebottom. I talked to her a minute or two and

went into my office. Don't know how long Aurelia and I talked, but if she says it was ten minutes, then it was. She's always right."

Charley was the last. "I came in about quarter to four to write a contract, a damn complicated thing that probably won't go. But I messed it up, so I started over, and that lousy typewriter jammed. I poked around and found a staple down inside. Since I was already filthy, I decided to oil it. Then I went to wash my hands." He looked pale but not unduly upset. "Then I rewrote the contract. I had just finished when Aurelia yelled."

"Don't look to me like you got your hands very clean," Barney commented.

"There was only a sliver of soap in the washroom and no brush," Charley said, looking at his black fingers.

"Did you know about the money in the safe?"

"I could say no, but it wouldn't be true. I heard T.H. and Aurelia discussing it—my door was open. I could hear Claude mumbling."

The typewriter, an old noiseless, had been freshly oiled; there was a torn contract in the wastebasket and a complete one lying on the desk. There was no sign of the money. Charley might not have been arrested if one of the other policemen hadn't come in just then and whispered something in Barney's ear. The chief's bushy eyebrows met and he said, looking like a very elephantine cat about to pounce, "You and Fran had been runnin' around together some, Charley?"

"Why—why, yes. We did have occasional dates," he admitted. "I liked her. She was a lot of fun."

"Had an argument with her last night, out to the Blue Moon, didn't you?"

"Well, I suppose you might call it that. I wanted to leave because it was almost midnight," Charley explained slowly, "and the woman who looks after my mother doesn't like to stay later than that. Fran knew it, and usually she was nice about it, but last night she'd had a number of drinks and wanted to stay longer. We—we discussed it a few minutes and then she found another guy who was stagging, and he said he'd take her home. So I left. I—well, naturally I wasn't too happy about it." He lifted his head defiantly. "But I wasn't mad or anything like that."

"Just irritated enough to kill her."

"I didn't kill her! No!"

Barney kept asking questions, especially about what he'd done with the money and hadn't his mother's illness cost him a lot? Charley denied it indignantly.

"I make enough money. Ask Aurelia—she'll tell you. And my mother has a small pension."

It really wasn't much of a case, but Barney arrested him anyway.

Aurelia hadn't thought much about it then, but now, sipping at an unprecedented nighttime cup of coffee, she wondered why. Claude could have done it even more easily. He could have planned it, getting her, Aurelia, into his office, waiting in the supply room till the coast was clear. He could have slipped into the office, killed Fran—it would have not taken long for apparently she had died instantly—grabbed the money and gotten back to T.H.'s office in time to answer the phone. Claude had, she recalled, liked Fran a lot at first. Suppose she had not reciprocated. He was a vindictive man. The money would certainly appeal, and if there were any secret hiding places in the office, he would be the one to know, since he had personally supervised every stroke of the paintbrushes and the driving in of every nail during the alterations two years ago. But as far as Barney was concerned, it was inexpedient to arrest a Mitchem unless you had an airtight eyewitness case. A Mitchem had built the first house in Haddonville, and there had been two of them in the mayor's office and heaven knew what else.

T.H.? But he had left, had been out on the street or at the newspaper office—presumably. And he was married. Nevertheless, it would bear looking into, but Barney would never do it, for T.H.'s father-in-law owned half the town.

So Charley Quinn, a totally unimportant resident of a few years' standing, was a welcome scapegoat.

Somebody would have to do something, Aurelia decided grimly, remembering that she had never cared for Barney Wilkins. But what? The answer, she was sure, lay somewhere in her own mind, that bothersome forgotten item.

She made another cup of coffee and sat up long past her bedtime, thinking. She slept badly, dreaming confusedly about money and blood, and awoke tired and depressed, glad for once that she could not go to work. The office was still sealed up, presumably to let Barney and his minions tear it still further apart. She was too restless to stay home, so she put on her sensible hat and her shapeless gray coat and went out. She needed information and gossip, and Mattie Sloane was known as the biggest gossip in town.

Mattie welcomed her cordially, served coffee and homemade cookies, and listened sympa-

thetically while Aurelia outlined the situation with regard to Charley Quinn.

"I always liked that boy, and I certainly never thought this town deserved to have anyone like Barney for chief of police. I'll tell you what little I know," she said. "Fran wasn't a bit choosy—married or single, it was all the same to her. Mostly she went in for the ones with plenty of money, but I reckon sometimes she just wanted to have fun, like with Charley. Claude was supposed to be really stuck on her for a while. If he ever got around to proposing, which I doubt, she probably turned him down, knowing he'd want to live on wieners and she partial to steak. He probably didn't give her any expensive presents, but T.H. might've."

"He's married," Aurelia reminded her, "and he certainly didn't seem to pay much attention to her at the office."

Mattie laughed, her three chins quivering. "I don't think he's done much playing around here in town. It'd be too much trouble dodging all those relatives of his wife."

Aurelia nodded. "Did you ever hear any gossip about him and Fran?"

Mattie leaned forward confidentially. "Far's I know, nobody ever saw them together around here. But someone—I won't say who—saw them going into a motel in Dallas. Last August."

Aurelia brightened. "Why, yes, I remember. T.H. went over to Fort Worth about a deal, and Fran took her vacation in Dallas at the same time. I remember because Claude was furious—we'd done business with that Fort Worth firm before by mail, and it was always quite satisfactory. But T.H. insisted."

Back home, she considered what she had learned. Of course, the money wouldn't have meant much to T.H., who made—and spent—plenty. But he had been the one who had brought the money into the office, had insisted on leaving it in the safe, unlocked. He might have taken it as a blind, though. Claude, of course, enjoyed every little driblet that came in and wept over every expenditure, but he was very cautious. Yet it had to be Claude, because she had seen T.H. leave, heard him walk to the outer door, even heard the door click shut, and Fran had still been alive.

At the office she found Barney strutting around excitedly. He said accusingly, "I hear, Aurelia, that you're sayin' Charley Quinn couldn'ta done it. Well, we got proof. We found the money stuck in the bottom part of that jar of sand you put out there for folks to stub out their cigarettes in. Reckon he figgered on pickin' it up later."

The urn was about two and a half feet high, made of some kind of cheap metal painted to look like pottery. Unlike the real pottery urns, it came in two pieces, so that the top with the sand and the butts could be lifted off for emptying and washing. It stood just inside the outer door.

"Were his fingerprints on the envelope?" she asked.

Barney shook his head regretfully. "Likely he handled it with gloves."

"It's no proof at all, Barney. Any one of us could have put that envelope there," she said crushingly, and left.

It was clear that Barney had made up his mind, and any faint possibility that she might have persuaded him to do a little more looking around was gone. There was no time to investigate Claude's relations with Fran or go into the Dallas angle, just in case whatever it was that she had forgotten concerned T.H. But there was one thing. Tom Faraday could probably get her an answer there. She returned to Mattie's and phoned the doctor.

"I need some information, Tom, that you can probably get for me," she said crisply. "Barney's found the money and seems to think that settles things."

"Anything you like, Aurelia, as long as you don't want me to go traipsing off somewhere. I've got an office full of patients."

"Did they do an autopsy on Fran?"

"Probably not. The wound in the back was obviously the cause of death. Why?" he asked interestedly.

She blushed a fiery red to the roots of her hair. "Was she—I mean, was she . . . ?"

"Pregnant? I don't know, but I can find out," he said thoughtfully. "That would put a different complexion on it."

She and Mattie gossiped aimlessly until the phone rang.

"You were right, Aurelia. Three months," the doctor informed her succinctly.

"I'm not surprised," Mattie told her. "The question now is who. T.H. couldn't marry her, if he's still in the picture, and I doubt that Claude would want to take a chance on playing father to somebody else's baby—or even his own. Too expensive. My land, is that wind? Guess we're going to have a storm."

The back screen door started banging and suddenly swung wide with a long screech of hinges. Abruptly the detail Aurelia had been so feverishly pursuing presented itself to her. "Mattie!" she cried, putting her hand on the

other's plump arm. "I know now. I've remembered."

"My land, Aury, who?"

"But I can't prove it," Aurelia went on, frowning. "And Barney won't pay any attention to anything except indisputable proof."

"What are you going to do?"

"There's only one way. A trap. Look, Mattie, do you suppose you could get it noised around to the right people, Barney included, that I'm going to the office tonight to look for a clue, something pointing directly to the murderer?"

"Oh, Aury, you can't," Mattie whispered, her face gray with fear. "He'll kill you too."

"There's no other way," Aurelia repeated, deliberately not thinking of the possible danger. "There's no clue really, but he knows I know that office like the palm of my hand. He'll think perhaps he left something incriminating that only I would recognize. Now that they've found the money the office is open again. About eight o'clock. It'll be good and dark by then."

Mattie agreed after much argument, stipulating only that Aurelia have dinner with her. Once started, however, she did her work well. Barney Wilkins, sitting down to supper, said loudly that it was all a piece of nonsense and that he, for one, wasn't going to be bothered with some old maid's nutty ideas about detective work. Tom Faraday, briskly slapping a newborn baby, swore under his breath. And in still another house someone else began to make plans.

The dinner would have rocked the Health Cafeteria to the bottom of its aseptic pots and pans, and Aurelia, the abstemious, found it hard to rise from the table. She grew more and more reluctant to start out on her risky journey. Life, hitherto merely a succession of days to be worked through, was suddenly very sweet.

Mattie clung to her, weeping, and it took quite a lot of talking to dissuade her from coming along. She did insist on going as far as the bus stop, and Aurelia found her presence comforting. Up till now nighttime had been merely the absence of daytime, a necessary but inconvenient period when work regrettably ceased. She had always walked fearlessly around the town at night, but tonight seemed darker and colder than other nights. Shadows were no longer merely shadows, but skittery patches of menace. The shrill wind sang an ominous tune and the gathering storm seemed infinitely more than just a spell of November weather.

She was hesitant to leave the warmth and light of the bus, and she gazed wistfully at the lighted windows of the drugstore. The de-

sire for a cup of coffee, a moment of shelter there, was almost overwhelming. But she pushed her feet, in their sensible shoes and old-fashioned black rubbers, ahead. Finally, with a last regretful look around, she unlocked the door of the office and went in.

It was very still. The howling of the wind and the sudden lash of rain seemed muted and distant. The jar of sand was gone and nothing remained in the entry hall except the old hatrack in the corner, tilting tipsily.

Not till she was about to put the key into the lock of her own office door did she hear the sound, a long indrawn breath close by. Very close. She turned her flashlight back again on the hall. It was still empty. That meant he was either just around the corner or, more likely, just inside the door of her office.

Abruptly she was afraid as she had never been before. All the fears she had ever suffered were only childish qualms compared to the soul-wracking, body-shaking terror that seized her. Involuntarily she took a step backward. Then she heard the sound again.

He's afraid too, she thought, and it steadied her. He was undoubtedly inside her office and the question was how to get in. (What she intended to do after she got in, she deliberately ignored.) Of course, she could creep around to the other door, but the interior distance between doors was only about ten feet. He could reach there while she was still turning the key. She could try waiting him out in a war of nerves, but hers might give out first. She had to do something and do it fast. Nervously, she flashed the light around again. Ah!

Aurelia crept noiselessly down the hall and picked up the hatrack. She took off her hat, put it on top, spread her coat around the hooks and buttoned it up. Perhaps it would work. It was all she had—it *had* to work.

She carried the hatrack back to her door, put the key in the lock, turned it carefully, recalling that the door always stuck a trifle. Then, holding the hatrack out in front of her, she kicked the bottom panel hard. The door flew open, and a dark shape, cursing, leapt on the hatrack, jerked it out of her hands, pulling her off her feet. For a second she and the hatrack and the man were all mixed up together, and then the lights went on, and Tom Faraday growled, "You're covered. Get up and put your hands behind your head. Aurelia, are you all right?"

She scrambled to her feet, careful to keep to one side, and turned to look. Still cursing, the man was

disentangling himself. When he rose, red and furious, with a long knife still clutched in one hand, she knew she had been right. It was T. H. Hillock.

The rest was confused and hurried. Tom barking orders, Aurelia dazedly obeying. The police—Barney still in his bedroom slippers with his coat buttoned up wrong—arrived, and crowds of people sprang up out of the wet, deserted street.

Barney was shocked and incredulous. It took T.H.'s confession to convince him.

"I did it. I killed Fran. I—she was going to have a child. She wanted me to get a divorce. She threatened to tell my wife. I took the money as a blind. I—Aurelia, I really didn't want to hurt you. It was just . . . Oh, hell, Barney, let's get it over with."

Finally, it was over, and Tom drove her to Mattie's. Mattie wept and kept patting Aurelia's arm, as if she couldn't quite believe it. Aurelia, drinking coffee and eating lemon tarts and watching the flames shoot up in the fireplace, could scarcely believe it herself.

Mattie said firmly, "Aury, I've got to know what you remembered."

"Oh, it was just that while I was sitting in Claude's office waiting, I heard the *whoosh* of that doorclosing contraption on the outside door. No one came in, so it must have been someone going out. And I realized that when T.H. left I had heard the door click shut, but not the sound of the doorcloser. You can open it about an inch before it starts working, you know. He simply stayed in the hall until I left the room. Then he went in, killed Fran, hid the money and left." She turned to the doctor. "I haven't thanked you, Tom, for saving my life. Or for making me go see Mrs. Quinn."

Tom shook his head admiringly, "You're quite a woman, Aurelia. You should have been a Christian martyr. The lions would have had tough going."

"Don't be absurd," she said sharply. "All I was doing was trying to show Barney that I had told the truth."

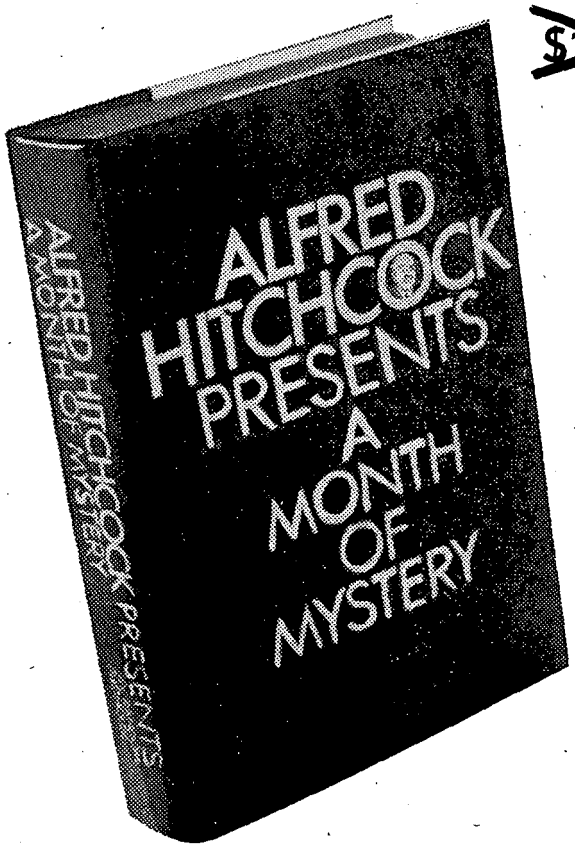
NEW NEW NEW

BIG

MONEY SAVING OFFER

~~$13.95~~

$7.98



For details please see other side

Only a hair may divide the false and the true.

NOBODY'S PERFECT

by Gary Brandner

BANDIT SLAIN IN PRISON BREAK, cried the headline. A breeze off the darkening California desert stirred the frayed curtains of the hotel room where the young man had propped the newspaper against the mirror. Two mug-shot photos stared from the page. The young man ignored the first and studied the youthful, scowling face in the other picture with the caption, "At Large." He scowled at his own features in the mirror. Then he tried a smile, making his face open and friendly, and compared the results with the news photo.

Nodding at his reflection, he opened the paper and read through the story quickly. It told of Harry Bretano, one of a pair of bandits who had robbed a San Andros savings and loan office of $100,000 two years before. A clerk and a cus-

tomer were killed during the robbery. Bretano, who was serving a life term, died this morning in an escape attempt, the story continued, without revealing the location of the stolen money or the name of his accomplice. Farther down, it mentioned Daniel Voda, a second convict, who got away. A prison guard thought he had wounded Voda, but he wasn't sure.

The young man rolled the newspaper and stuffed it into the dented wastebasket. He walked to the window and edged the pull-down window shade aside. A dark blue Plymouth was parked across the street. There was still enough light to see a figure slouched behind the steering wheel with a road map in front of his face. The young man watched until the map was lowered, revealing a droopy-lidded face with heavy black eyebrows and moustache. Cold, narrow eyes flicked across the front of the hotel, then the map was raised again.

The young man let the window shade fall back into place. From his waistband he pulled out a heavy blue-black automatic pistol. He checked the chamber and magazine, then put the gun back and pulled the bottom of his windbreaker down over the handle. He swept the room with his eyes, then eased out, closing the door softly behind him.

Bypassing the rackety elevator, he walked down the single flight of narrow stairs. The sound of voices stopped him before he turned into the lobby. He listened to the nasal whine of the room clerk.

"There's nobody here who looks like that. Who wants to know, anyway?"

"This badge wants to know." The second voice was a rumbling growl. "You take another look at that picture and think harder."

The young man leaned around the partition between the stairs and the tiny lobby. A blocky man with a bulldog jaw leaned forward with both hands planted on the counter.

The clerk stared at the newspaper spread before him, then said, "A guy checked in about six o'clock—two hours ago—might be your man. I couldn't swear to it."

"Let's see the register," the blocky man said.

The clerk swiveled the book on the counter and pointed to an entry near the top of the page.

"Donald Vinson, eh?" the other man growled. "I don't know what it is about lamsters that makes them so crazy about their own initials. What's the room number?"

The young man didn't wait to hear the clerk's answer. He walked swiftly back past the elevator and out through the rear fire door. Out-

side it was nearly dark. He crossed the alley behind the hotel and slipped into a parking lot. There he found a dusty five-year-old sedan with the keys in it. He started the engine and headed north toward the newer section of town. As he drove he glanced frequently at the rear-view mirror.

Fifteen minutes later he parked beside an empty lot and walked around the corner to a two-story white stucco apartment building. He ran a finger along the row of mailboxes, then went in through the iron gate and turned to his right. He stopped at the second door he came to. There was no bell, so he rapped on the aluminum screen door.

The inner door opened, and a pale girl with long blonde hair looked at him through the screen.

"Lynne Ruskin?" he said.

"Uh-huh."

"I'm a friend of Harry Bretano."

"Then you're no friend of mine," the girl said. "Go away."

"Wait a minute. Have you seen the papers today? Does the name Dan Voda mean anything to you?"

The girl looked closely at his face. "You're the guy who broke out with Harry this morning."

"Now will you hurry up and let me in?"

The girl unhooked the door and the young man stepped into a tiny, neat apartment. On the screen of a portable television set, three teenagers were coolly solving a murder.

"How did you find me?" the girl asked. "Harry didn't know this address."

"I asked down at the Wildcat Club, where you used to work. The manager played dumb until I told him I knew Harry."

"Oh, wow, you must be out of your gourd. Don't you know what kind of people hang out down there? You couldn't have done better if you'd *tried* to get a message to that trigger-happy partner of Harry's. They say he's been hanging around ever since the robbery, waiting for a lead to the money. Harry was carrying it, you know, when they split up after the shooting."

"Do you know who this partner of Harry's is?"

"I don't even know what he looks like. Don't you think I went all through that with the cops when it happened? All I know is, it had to be him who shot those two people. Harry was no good, but he wasn't a killer—and before you ask, I don't know where the hundred grand is, either."

"*I* do."

The girl studied the young man for a long moment. "Are you kidding me?"

"No. I know where the money is. Part of it's yours if you help me. I need a place to hole up for a couple of days. I spotted two guys following me—one of them's the law, and the other looked like even more trouble."

"Why me? Don't you have any friends of your own?"

"No. Harry told me he trusted you."

"Not enough to tell *me* where he stashed the loot."

"Maybe you didn't have anything to sell—like a plan to break out of the joint."

"If that's what he bought, it doesn't look like much of a bargain. Harry's dead."

"There were no guarantees."

"No, I guess not." The girl took hold of the edges of the window draperies and made a small peephole. With her eye to the gap she said, "There's a guy with a moustache cruising by awful slow in a blue car. Looks like he's reading the house numbers. Anybody you know?"

"Maybe. Let me have a look."

The girl clutched the draperies together. "Like the devil you will. If that goon sees you looking out of my window, you and me can both be deader than Harry. Did anybody follow you here?"

"I didn't see anybody. Look, just put me up for a day or so. If there's any trouble, you can say I held a gun on you."

"How much of the money do I get?"

"How does half sound?"

The girl's eyes looked up at the corner of the ceiling while she mentally divided $100,000 by two. "Okay, but it'll be a nervous couple of days. I wish there was something to drink in the place."

"Is there a liquor store nearby?"

"Block and a half."

The young man fished through his wallet and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. "Here. Go get a bottle of something."

For a moment the girl didn't move. Then she took the money and headed for the door. "Stay out of sight," she said.

"Don't worry."

When the girl left the apartment, the young man snapped off the television and sat in a chair smoking. He had finished two cigarettes when the girl returned.

"Where's the bottle?" he said.

"I didn't get it. Listen, you can't stay here. I saw the guy with the moustache again a block over. He must know you're around here somewhere."

"What do you want me to do, walk out in the street and get shot?"

"No. I know a place—an old shack out toward the desert that

Harry used to use sometimes. Nobody ever goes near there. We can go in my car."

The young man looked doubtful.

"Either that or you walk out now and take your chances," the girl said. "I'm not keeping you here."

"Okay. When do you want to go?"

"The sooner the better. I'll get my car and signal you when the street's empty. You run out and get down low in the back seat."

The young man switched off the apartment lights and watched from the side of the window. When a white compact pulled up in front, its lights blinked and he dashed out to the street and jumped in the back, where he wedged himself down out of sight on the floor.

The car moved out and the girl drove in silence for several minutes.

"How far is it?" the young man asked. "It's cramped down here."

"Not far. Just stay down."

The car left the smooth highway and jounced along for another five minutes over a curving, unpaved road, then braked to a stop.

"This is it," the girl said. "You can get out."

The young man unfolded his legs from the cramped back seat and limped after the girl toward a square wooden building the size of a garage. Light from a three-quarter moon showed the shack to be leaning wearily to one side. The girl pulled the door open and stood aside.

As the young man stepped through, a beam of light hit him in the eyes like a punch. He lurched backward to find the door closed behind him. After several blinding seconds the light turned toward the ceiling. As his vision returned the young man saw that the beam came from a powerful hand-spot that rested on a wooden table. The other furniture in the room consisted of a canvas cot with broken legs and a pair of old kitchen chairs. In one of the chairs sat the droopy-lidded man with the moustache.

"What is this?" the young man said.

"You've been sold out," said the other.

With puzzlement and anger on his face, the young man turned toward the girl. "What's the idea?"

She said, "I don't know who you are, mister, but when you pulled out that wad of money to buy the booze, I knew you didn't crash out of any prison this morning. So when I went out, there's Mr. Moustache parked right around the corner. I ask him if he's interested in a Dan Voda. He is, so I tell him how to get to this place and I'll de-

liver you. I'm not looking to get myself shot up in your private game, whatever it is."

"That business with the money was not very smart," the man in the chair said.

The young man shrugged. "Nobody's perfect. At least I don't wear a moustache you can recognize a city block away."

The girl was staring wide-mouthed when the door of the shack crashed open against the wall and the blocky man with the bulldog face stepped in. A .38 revolver moved back and forth in his hand, covering the three people inside.

"Raise your hands!" he growled. They did as they were told. "Now turn around and face the wall. I got some things to talk over with young Danny Voda here. Hell, kid, didn't you think I seen you go out the back of the hotel, then later run out and hide in the broad's car? I must've got careless somewhere along the line not to spot Carlucci."

"You're making a mistake, O'Rourke," the man with the moustache said. He started to turn from the wall.

"The hell with you, Carlucci," the blocky man said. The .38 exploded and the man at the wall went down clutching his back. The gunman took a step toward his victim, but before he could fire again the young man had his automatic out. The big gun crashed three times. The first two slugs caught the man called O'Rourke in the chest, knocking him backward. The third caught the top of his head. He fell heavily and moved no more.

Across the room the first man to fall rolled over and felt gingerly under the back of his coat. The young man crossed quickly and knelt beside him.

"Where are you hit, Steve?"

The other groaned and pulled out a pair of bent steel loops. "I think he got me right in the handcuffs." He explored further and looked at his fingers. "No blood. I'll be black and blue in the morning, though. Is O'Rourke dead?"

"Yeah."

"I saw him go into the hotel. Did you make him there?"

"Uh-huh. He was flashing a phony badge to the room clerk. I knew him from the mug shots of Bretano's friends we went over this afternoon. If I'd been sure then that the girl wasn't involved, I could have let O'Rourke make his move right there."

The girl stood with both hands to her face. Her eyes jumped from one man to the other. "Will somebody please tell me who is who and what's going on?"

The man with the moustache got

slowly to his feet, rubbing his lower back. "Sorry, Miss Ruskin. I'm Sergeant Carlucci of the San Andros police. Your young friend is Deputy Fred Kohler of the Sheriff's Department. Over there on the floor is Tough Tom O'Rourke, a local hood and apparently your ex-boyfriend's partner in the savings and loan holdup."

"Then who is Dan Voda?" the girl asked. "Was there really a prison break?"

"There was a prison break, all right, just as the papers reported it. Harry Bretano was killed and, when the story was given out, we thought Voda had escaped. A couple of hours later we found Voda's body where he had crawled into the brush. The guard who thought he'd hit him was right.

"When we brought the body in, somebody spotted how much Voda looked like Deputy Kohler. We spent the afternoon working on a one-shot plan to flush out Bretano's partner by making him think Voda was going after the stolen money. We had to be obvious enough to lure the guy out fast because we couldn't plan on keeping Voda's death out of the papers more than twenty-four hours."

"Very clever," the girl said. "Can I go now?"

The two men looked at each other, then back at the girl. Carlucci said: "I guess you can. We'll want you as a witness at the hearing on O'Rourke's death, but it seems you haven't committed any crime."

"Thanks a lot." The girl turned to the young deputy. "By the way, I suppose that was part of your snow job about knowing where the hundred grand is."

"Oh, no, I can tell you where that is. It's back at the savings and loan office where it came from. The police found it six months after Bretano was locked up. It wasn't publicized since the other bandit was still at large, and the money would make good bait."

The girl shook her head. "You guys are too much. Not only do you look like crooks, you go around lying to people. That is no way for cops to act." She walked out the door and was gone.

Reputedly, healing is a matter of time, but opportune circumstance has been known to hasten the process.

YESTERDAY'S HILL

EARL BRENNAN came back to Hegner on an afternoon in late September when the shadows had already stretched their purpled length halfway across the valley floor and the sun, weak and remote, had begun its descent behind

the hazy peaks of the ridge beyond.

That was where it had happened, up there on the ridge, more than fifty years ago.

Hegner was not on any map. It was only a place name for four decaying frame buildings on the four corners of a mountain crossroad.

Brennan parked his dusty sedan in front of the general store and sat drumming his fingers on the wheel, staring up at the ridge that loomed so bleakly against the slate-gray of the sky. A man of seventy who looked nearer fifty, with carefully barbered hair as white as the collar of his expensive shirt, he shivered a little, remembering . . .

I shouldn't have come, he thought. *I must be getting senile.*

Yet he'd had to come. The sudden compulsion that had made him turn off the main highway and drive forty tortuous miles to this forgotten pocket in the mountains had been stronger than his will to resist. It was something that came to every man, he knew. If the man lived long enough, the time came when he felt compelled to pay a last visit to the place where he had spent his youth, even if it was a place like Hegner; even if half a century had passed; even if something unspeakable had happened there.

He tried to take his eyes from the ridge, but he could not. Across the years he could hear Flossie Tyner's cries and the drunken, animal-like sounds of the other four boys and himself. He could feel the terror he'd felt after it was done and they had run away from the battered corpse of the young girl there by the narrow trail.

He hadn't meant it to end in murder. He hadn't wanted the other part of it to happen, either; but the other boys had, and there had been too much moonshine, and a kind of madness that he had never known existed. It had sickened and shamed him, and he had never again raised his hand in violence of any kind.

Where were they today, he wondered, those four young men who had shared that midnight madness so many years ago? Jody Simms and Lute Munson and Billy Stritt and Buck Danley. They'd all been a few years older than he when it happened; they'd all be in their seventies now.

They had gotten away with it;

by Jonathan Craig

no one had even suspected them. Flossie Tyner's older sister, Sue Ellen, had discovered the body the next morning, and all five boys had stood in the crowd that had gathered around Flossie's father in front of this same general store and heard him swear on the graves of his long-dead wife and newly-dead daughter that Flossie's name and death would be avenged.

Earl shivered again, remembering the chilled flesh that old Caleb Tyner's words had brought to him that long-ago morning. It had been no idle vow that Caleb had made. Here in the mountains, where blood feuds and violence were a way of life, and where a man's redemption of the honor and death of a kinsman was taken for granted, the fury of an outraged father was terrible to see, and his sworn vengeance was certain, even if it took a lifetime to exact.

Caleb Tyner had been in his fifties at the time, Earl reflected. Caleb would be long gone now, buried back there on the hill with his wife and Flossie.

Stop thinking about it, Earl told himself as he got out of his car and walked up the dirt path to the store. He'd buy a cigar, and if there were any old-timers there he might ask about Jody and Billy and Lute and Buck, and maybe a few of the others he had known. Afterward, he might drive around a bit, perhaps look at the old home place, and go to Blind Fish Cave and some of the other places where he'd played as a boy; then back to the main highway to resume the pleasure trip he had interrupted because of an old man's yearning to visit the past.

It would be a short visit, he assured himself. He had only just arrived, but he was already anxious to be gone. He was becoming depressed, and at the dark edge of the depression there was something else—some nameless anxiety, an uneasiness of mind that would not go away.

He stepped into the store, closed the door behind him, and paused, stunned by how little the big room had changed.

There was a middle-aged man behind the rough-plank counter, and another middle-aged man and a very old man sitting on wooden boxes by the big potbellied stove. All three men wore frayed work clothes and stained, shapeless hats.

"Come right on in, mister," the man behind the counter said. "What can I do for you?"

Earl crossed to the counter. "You carry cigars?" he asked.

"I got some factory seconds is all. Three for a dime," the proprietor said. "Better than nothing, I guess."

"They'll do fine," Earl said. He put a dime on the counter, took three cigars from the box the proprietor held out to him and put them in his breast pocket.

"Bit snappish out," the proprietor said. "Wouldn't surprise me none if we got a little snow."

"Yes," Earl said. "Excuse me, but you bear a resemblance to a man I used to know. Tom Bradley."

The proprietor laughed. "I reckon I better look like him," he said. "He was my daddy." He paused. "You from around here, are you?"

"Yes. A long time ago, though. Before you were born."

"Well now, is that a fact? And you knew my daddy?"

"We were good friends. I used to spend a lot of time in this store."

"Ain't no place else to spend it, I guess. Isn't now, and wasn't then. You mind me asking your name?"

"Earl Brennan."

The proprietor frowned thoughtfully. "Well now, I got me a pretty fair memory, folks say. But I just don't recollect—"

"I recollect him," the very old man by the stove said. "But I'd've sure never known his voice. He talks like a city man now. No offense."

Earl turned to look at the old man, and now he saw the clouded pupils of the rheumy eyes and realized suddenly that he was blind.

"You might've knowed old man Walker would recollect," the proprietor said. "Things stick to his mind like flies to flypaper. Always did."

"Are you Jed Walker?" Earl asked.

"Sure am," the old man said. "Been that for ninety-four years. Aim to be it for a fair spell longer, too."

"I remember you," Earl said.

"You been gone a long time, son," Jed Walker said. "Last time I seen you, you was about twenty, as I recollect. Left these parts real sudden, it seems like."

"And did mighty well for yourself, too," the proprietor said. "Judging from your clothes and car and all. Yes, sir."

"Real estate," Earl said. "I was lucky."

"You was a real fire-eater in them days," the old man said. "Be you still?"

"No," Earl said. "I'm seventy years old now, Mr. Walker."

"And them boys you run with," the old man said. "Good boys, but hell-raisers, every one." He paused. "Let's see, there was Buck Danley and Jody Simms and Lute Munson and—let's see, now—and Billy Stritt." He laughed. "You five was sure wild ones, and that's the truth."

"Are any of them still around?" Earl said.

"No, they ain't," the old man said. "And they ain't been for nigh as long as you been gone."

"What happened to them?" Earl asked.

The old man shifted his cud of tobacco to the other cheek and spat at the stove. "They just disappeared," he said. "All four of them at once. Ain't nobody knows where they went or why they went there. They was just here one day, and the next day they wasn't."

"Disappeared?" Earl said. "All four of them?"

"All four," the old man said. "Happened two, three months after you left. Disappeared complete."

The middle-aged man sitting by the stove spoke for the first time. "I heard my pa talking once when I was just a youngun," he said. "Him and some other men. They was saying the devil must've took those boys, they was so mean."

The old man snorted. "Shoot! It wasn't no devil. And it wasn't no fiend, neither. They was some put stock in that talk about a fiend, I reckon. But I didn't."

"Fiend?" Earl said.

"Well, they disappeared about the time that little Tyner girl got killed up on the ridge. Flossie, her name was. You recollect her?"

Earl wet his lips. "Yes," he said.

"Well, there was them that figured there must be a fiend on the loose around here. He killed Flossie, they figured, and then later on killed them four boys and hid their bodies somewheres. But it was just talk. Like I said, I never put no stock in it."

"It's just a pure mystery, is all," the proprietor said. "Ain't nobody ever going to know what happened to them."

Earl started to speak, then changed his mind. *Let it go,* he decided. *Why pursue it? We were all together that night, those four and I, in that drunken horror on the ridge, but . . . Something unexplained happened to them after I left, yes, but whatever it was it couldn't have had anything to do with what happened on the ridge.*

Couldn't have? But what if it had?

"I think I'll have a look around," Earl said, turning toward the door. "It's been a pleasure talking with you, gentlemen."

"Well, you take your look around, and then you come back and talk some more," the proprietor said.

"Thank you," Earl said. "Maybe I will."

Back in the car again, he followed the twisting mountain road for two miles to the cabin where

he had been born. He didn't even bother to get out of the car. There was nothing left of the cabin but a jumble of fire-blackened planks overgrown with foliage, and a pile of stones that had once been a chimney.

It'll be getting dark before long, he thought. *I might as well go back.*

Still, he wanted to see Blind Fish Cave.

No, he thought as he started the engine again. *It's not the cave you want to see. It's the cabin just beneath the cave. The old Tyner cabin. Where Flossie Tyner lived until the night you . . . And why should you want to see it? Why, Earl? To torture yourself? A little salt in the wound of your guilt?*

He drove another mile and a half and parked at the foot of the steep path that led up the hill to the old Tyner place and the cave above it.

A long way up there, he reflected as he got out of the car. *Too far, and too steep a path for a man my age.* But he started up.

When he came to the path that branched off to the Tyner cabin, he paused to rest. The cabin, fifty yards away, was shrouded by brush and scrub oak. There was no smoke from the chimney. Probably it had been deserted long ago, he reflected. He was a little surprised to find it was still there. It had been an old cabin, even fifty years ago.

Flossie . . .

He shook his head as if to clear it, and started up the path again. No point in thinking about that night on the ridge, he reminded himself. No point at all.

"Stop right there, mister!" a woman's voice said behind him. "And turn around. But slow. Real slow."

The woman who stood with an ancient rifle aimed at his chest was small and old and bent, with a toothless mouth and the most grotesquely wrinkled face Earl Brennan had ever seen.

"What're you sneaking around on my property for?" she said in a grating whine. "Speak up, damn you!"

"My name's Brennan," Earl said. "I'm from around here. I was just—"

"In them city clothes? You're lying, mister. You're a county inspector or something. I'll ask you one more time. You lie to me again, and I'll—"

"Point that thing the other way, ma'am," Earl said. "I was born and raised here. I left a long time ago. I was just visiting. I mean, I was just looking at some of the places I used to—"

"Like what places?"

"Well, like Blind Fish Cave up there. And my old home place, over by Indian Knob. And Bradley's store, down at the crossroads."

"Name some of them you know around here. Besides Bradley."

"There aren't too many left. Old Jed Walker, for one. The boys I grew up with are all gone."

"Name 'em, anyhow."

"Well, there was Jody Simms and Lute Munson, and Billy Stritt and Buck Danley."

"Must have been a little before my time," the old woman said. "Don't remember you, either. What'd you say your name is?"

"Earl Brennan."

The old woman stood completely still, studying his face carefully. "You talk pretty fancy for somebody brought up around here. But your voice has got a mountain tone beneath it, that's sure."

"I've been away a long time," Earl said. "Fifty years."

The faded eyes in their pockets of wrinkles appraised him for another long moment. Then the woman slowly lowered the old rifle. "You're too old to be a county man, anyhow," she said. "In fact, I s'pect you're too old for anything but what you say you are." She paused. "But you was sure doing some awful hard looking at my cabin."

"I used to know the family there. The Tyners. I wondered if—"

"They was before my time, too. Two, three families have lived there between them and me." She motioned toward the path Earl had climbed. "A man your age ain't got no business on a path like that. If you want, you can come in and rest a spell."

Earl hesitated; but the urge to see the inside of the old Tyner place again was strong.

"Well . . ." he said.

"Suit yourself," she said. "It makes me no never mind."

"All right," Earl said, and followed her down the side path to the cabin.

"Set down on that cane chair, if you want," she said as she closed the door. "It ain't comfortable, but there ain't any others."

"Thank you," Earl said, and sat down.

"I hope you got some pipe tobacco on you. I ain't had a smoke for a week."

"I'm sorry," Earl said. "I smoke cigars."

"That'll do fine. I'll just mash it up good and tuck it in my pipe."

He handed her a cigar and began to remove the wrapper from another for himself.

"Left my pipe over there on the sink," the old woman said, moving past him toward the rear of the room.

Earl spun the wheel of his lighter and brushed the flame across the end of his cigar.

He did not feel the impact of the heavy iron skillet that thudded dully against the back of his head and sent him sprawling senseless to the floor.

When he came to, he thought for a moment that he was having a bad dream. He was lying on cold, damp stone in what seemed to be a small cave, while above him, grinning horribly in the wavering light of the kerosene lantern in her hand, stood the old woman.

But this was no bad dream, he realized. The cave and the old woman and the rending pain in his head were real. He groaned, and tried to move, and found that his hands and feet were tied.

"You give me a scare," the old woman said. "I was about ready to think I killed you—and that would have been a pure shame." She laughed soundlessly, her gums black in the lantern light. "Oh, I mean for you to do some dying, never fear. But not fast. I aim to stretch it out for you."

Earl's mouth was so dry he could hardly form the word. "Why?" he asked.

"Why? Why are you going to do your dying so slow? Well, Mr. Earl Brennan, it'll be for the same reason your friends did their dying that way—that Jody and Lute and Billy and Buck. They did theirs fifty years ago, and now you're going to do yours."

Earl swallowed hard. "Flossie," he said. "Flossie Tyner."

"Yes," the old woman said. "Poor little Flossie Tyner. Dead fifty years. Savaged and murdered by you and them others."

She moved a few feet to her left and held the lantern high above her head. "Look at them," she said. "See what your fine friends look like now, Mr. Earl Brennan."

Slowly, painfully, Earl turned his head to look.

Propped against the cave wall in a sitting position were four skeletons, the skulls grinning at him in the yellow wash of the lantern light.

"There's an empty space there at the end, you can see," the old woman said. "That's for you. I been saving it for you all these years."

Earl jerked his gaze away.

"This here's a cave the cabin was built against," the old woman said. "I can step out here and look at you any time I want." She laughed that soundless laugh again. "I aim to please myself that way many a time, Mr. Earl Brennan."

"Who are you?" Earl asked.

"I'm the one that lured your fine friends to their justice fifty years

ago," the old woman said. "And I'm the one that's waited so long for you, Mr. Earl Brennan. I knowed you'd come back someday. I knowed you'd have to."

"You knew," Earl said. "You knew about me and Jody and the other boys." He paused for breath. "But how? How could you know?"

"Because Flossie told me," the old woman said. "You boys left her for dead. But she wasn't. She didn't live long after I found her that morning, but it was long enough."

"But it was Flossie's sister that found her that morning," Earl said. "Not you. It was her sister—Sue Ellen."

"I ain't surprised you didn't know me," the old woman said. "I sure don't look like the nineteen-year-old lass I was fifty years ago, do I?"

Earl lay staring up at her, unable to speak.

"My daddy wasn't the only one to swear that whoever killed Flossie would have to pay," the old woman said. "I swore it, too. But I never told Daddy what Flossie said before she died. I knowed Daddy would only have took a gun and killed you boys one by one."

She put the lantern down and bent over him to make sure the bonds on his wrists and ankles were tight by giving each a tug.

"And that weren't the way I wanted it," she said. "Dying quick and easy like that would've been too good for you. I wanted you to die slow and die hard."

"Listen," Earl said. "Sue Ellen, please listen to me. I—"

"Of course, doing it my way weren't easy," the old woman said. "If Daddy hadn't died sudden, right after you killed Flossie, I couldn't never done it. But then I was the only one living in the cabin, and I saw how I could."

"Sue Ellen—"

"Stop your whining. What I did was, I waited till I come across all four of them boys together. It took a long time. I'd come across two of them, and sometimes three, but never all four together. And then one night I did. And I was ready. I lured them over here. I made them think we were all going to have us a party. I was as shameless about it as any hussy you ever see."

"Sue Ellen," Earl said, "if you'll only let me—"

"I even had some whiskey waiting for them. I told them we'd have to have our party back here in the cave, so no lights would show. I told them the kind of party we was going to have, we didn't want nobody seeing us through the window." She paused. "That's a double-thick oak door there, and

it's got a big iron bar and hasps on the other side to keep it tight shut with. I put them there myself, Mr. Earl Brennan. It was part of my plan."

"But I never meant it to happen to Flossie," Earl said. "I swear it, Sue Ellen. I never—"

"And just when the party was going good," the old woman said, "I made my move. I was out of here and had that door barred before them boys knew what was happening. She paused. "They died hard, Mr. Earl Brennan. They had plenty of whiskey in here, but they didn't have no food and they didn't have no water. It took them a long time. You should've seen how they'd wore their fingers all bloody, clawing at the door."

"In the name of mercy, Sue Ellen," Earl said, "don't—"

"Mercy?" she said. "What mercy? You're going to do a heap of hurting, Mr. Earl Brennan." She nodded slowly. "And don't think I'm worried about somebody seeing that big car down there at the foot of the hill, either. In a little while I'm going to tear a piece or two off your clothes and take them up to Blind Fish Cave.

"I'll hook them on some of the sharp rocks right on the edge of that underground river. Where folks always said there was blind fish, but where they ain't no such thing. And when somebody gets to wondering about that fine big car and asks about you, I'll say yes, I saw you, you was going up to the cave where you used to come when you was only a youngun.

"They'll go up there, and they'll see pieces of your clothes where they got tore off on the rocks when you slipped and fell and slid off in the river. I'll put your hat on the edge too, and gouge up the bank a little so it'll look like you clawed it when you was trying to keep yourself from sliding in."

"Please," Earl said. "Please, Sue Ellen. You can't do this."

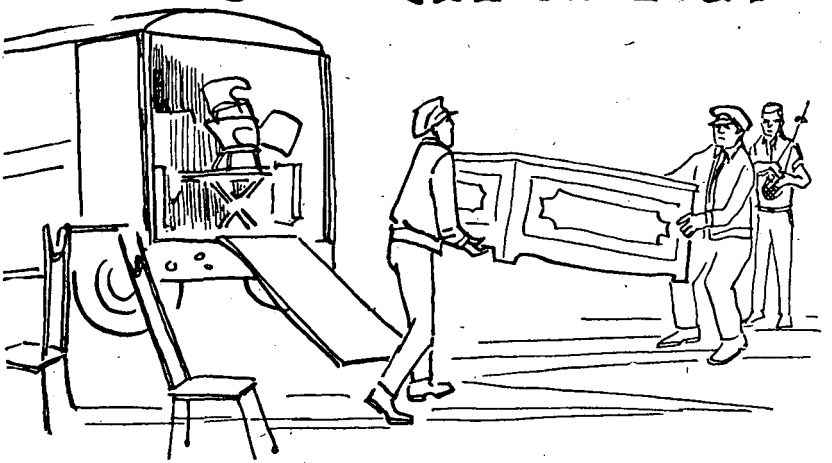
"And you ain't going to just starve and thirst to death, either," the old woman said. "You're going to do a powerful lot of hurting along with it. You're going to have more things done to you than you ever even had nightmares about."

She laughed her soundless laugh and turned to leave.

"After all, I've had fifty years to think of things to do to you, Mr. Earl Brennan," she said. "Thinking of them kind of helped me to keep from thinking about what you done to Flossie."

A woman's intuition may turn out to be the spark that lights the way.

A NEIGHBORLY OBSERVATION



JEANETTE EASED the drape back with a red-nailed finger and peered across the street. She had done the same thing half a dozen times since lunch, and now she had apparently come to some decision, for she turned and marched to the sofa.

"Lou, there is definitely something funny going on over there."

Lou Meakin gestured impatiently. "In a minute, Jeanette, huh?" It was the bottom of the ninth, the bases were loaded, two out, and a full count on the batter.

Jeanette reached out and clicked the set off. "I want you to take a

look. I haven't seen Betty all morning and he's over there with two men loading all their things into that truck."

Lou frantically flicked the television back on. The picture showed the crowd moving out of the sta-

dium, and he sighed and picked up his beer.

He went to the front window. "Why do you have the drapes drawn in the middle of the day?"

"So he can't see us watching him." She eased the drape back. "Take a look."

He looked, then shrugged and went back to his seat on the sofa. "We knew they were moving. What's so strange about Tom and two guys loading their things in a truck? Personally, I'd be a little surprised if they left everything there when they moved."

"All right," she said, miffed. "But did you see *her*? Did you see Betty? You did not. She hasn't been there since the day before yesterday. At least . . . well, I won't say it. Not yet."

"Won't say what?"

"What I'm thinking. He was a brute to her, you know that, don't you? Big, hulking thing like that, and Betty as tiny and fragile as a rose."

Lou frowned. "What's this past-tense business?"

"We'll see," she said cryptically. "Lou . . ." She was peering out again. "Lou, walk over there and tell him we'd like both of them to drop over for a cup of coffee before they leave. That way he'll *have* to say something."

He pressed his palms against his temples. "Good Lord, Jeanette—"

"All right, *I'll* do it!"

"Never mind." He knew well enough how she would make it

sound, like a challenge rather than an invitation. She never had liked Tom Regan. She had always harbored some vague distrust of him ever since they became neighbors a year ago.

Lou put on a light jacket and went out. The day had an edge to it. For late April it was cool, and the heavy clouds scudding along only a few hundred feet above the budding trees held the promise of rain before the afternoon was done.

Across the street, Tom Regan came out of the house carrying a cardboard carton. He put it on the tail gate of the rented truck, saw Lou, and with a grin came out into the street to meet him.

"Hi, pal! I was going to call you. Wanted you to help me polish off a few beers I've got left in the box."

Lou glanced over his shoulder uncertainly, knowing full well Jeanette was taking it all in from behind the drapes. "Sure . . . but first, Jeanette says for you and Betty to come over to our place for a cup of coffee. I've got something a little stronger for you and me."

Regan seemed surprised. "Betty left day before yesterday. I thought she called Jeanette. She took the car and drove ahead, you know, to sort of get things ready on the other end before I got there with the truck. Look at me telling you about moving. You've done it as much as I have. Now, come on, let's finish up that beer so I can get rolling."

They walked on into the Regans' house, past the two men who were helping load the truck. They were, Lou thought, a lot alike, he and Tom. Lou was an industrial engineer, Tom a draftsman. They were both always looking for that greener pasture, switching jobs every year or so, moving all around the country. There was a whole breed of people like them, skilled gypsies, really. They never stopped long enough to put down real roots.

Half an hour later the two laborers came into the kitchen. "That's it, Mr. Regan, except for this table and two chairs."

"Take 'em away, boys," Tom said. He stood up and held his hand out to Lou. "So long, pal, and good luck to you."

"I feel it in my bones, Lou," Jeanette said after hearing Lou's report. "Look! He's pulling away now in the truck! Lou . . . I've got the funniest feeling that Betty's right there in that truck . . ."

"In the *truck*? You're crazy, Jeanette! Why, I was over there talking to him and he said she went ahead in the car day before yesterday. What the devil would she be

doing in the truck? Tell me that!"

"That's precisely my point," she replied without turning away from the window. "She's not *doing* anything. Did you notice that shiny new cedar chest those men loaded? I happen to know for a fact they didn't even own a cedar chest, at least not until the past few days. He must have bought it when he—when he planned what he did."

"When he planned what?"

She did not answer him directly. "I know Betty wouldn't have gone without at least phoning me." The departing truck turned the corner at the end of the street and disappeared. Jeanette drew the drapes, letting the gray afternoon light into the room. "They were fighting like cats and dogs for the last month, Lou, did you know that? He threatened her, she told me. A big brute like Tom Regan, he could take a little thing like Betty in his two hands and . . . well, you know."

"No, Jeanette, I don't know, and neither do you. As for Betty not phoning you before she left, Tom explained that. He said she tried, but nobody was here."

She pursed her lips and looked around at him. "That's what *he* said."

Lou found himself wondering now. Regan had looked very pleased about something, and it was certainly true the Regans did not get along at all well. "You think that Betty was . . . was *in* the cedar chest?" he said.

"All I'm going to say is that if I don't hear something from her within a week, I'm going to do something."

"What do you mean, *do* something?"

"Betty was a friend," was all she would say. "I've got a responsibility and a duty."

Three days later Jeanette called Lou at his office at ten o'clock. It was the first time, as far as he could recall, that she had ever phoned him in the morning. There was an occasional afternoon call to remind him to come straight home, or to pick up something at the store.

"I'm downstairs, Lou," she said in a taut whisper. "Come down right away!"

"What for, Jeanette? I've got work to—"

"It's about *them*!" she rasped. "I was right! I've got *proof*!"

He put his work aside and hurried down. Jeanette was waiting beside the elevator bank. She had the conspicuous look of someone trying to appear inconspicuous.

"You wouldn't believe me, would you?" she said victoriously.

"What on earth are you talking

about, Jeanette? Please explain."

"You'll see. Come on."

Their car was at the curb and with Jeanette at the wheel they roared off. Moments later, less than three blocks away, she spun the wheel and darted into a used car lot.

"Follow me," she said. They threaded their way between rows of shiny automobiles, then Jeanette stopped suddenly. "Take a look!"

She had a finger aimed at a two-tone blue sedan. Lou walked slowly around the car, his frown deepening with every step. "You . . . you think this is the Regans' car?"

"I don't think anything of the sort. I *know* it's their car. Now what do you think of Mr. Tom Regan saying Betty drove ahead with it?"

"It does look like their car." He laughed uneasily, not taking his eyes off the blue sedan. "But there must be a million just like it—"

"With this exact dent here?" she broke in, indicating a place on the left rear fender.

At that moment a smiling salesman appeared. "Can I help you folks?" He gave the blue sedan an affectionate pat on the hood. "This is a good, clean, one-owner job. Low mileage, good rubber, make you a real deal on it."

"Who was the owner?" Lou said, still staring at the car.

"What was that?"

"You said the car was a one-owner job. Who was the owner?"

The salesman seemed irritated. "I won't kid around about it being a little old lady who didn't drive anywhere but down to the mailbox. What—"

"Look, buddy, how about checking in the office. I want to know who brought it in. If that's too much bother for you, we'll look someplace else."

"Sure, mister, sure. Hold your horses, I'll be right back." He walked across the lot and into the small prefab office. When he returned he held a file card in his hand. "Here it is. It wasn't a trade, but an outright sale. Fellow was moving to the West Coast, taking a new job. I talked to him myself. He said his new company was supplying him with a car and he didn't need—"

Lou reached out and took the card. With Jeanette peering over his shoulder, he read the name aloud. "Thomas Regan . . ."

"That doesn't prove a thing," Lou insisted as they drove away from the used car lot, "except that Tom sold his car."

"He said she drove ahead, didn't he?"

"Yes. But—"

"And I didn't see her before she was *supposed* to have gone, did I?"

"No. But—"

"You told me yourself, Lou, that he had a smug look the day he left."

"Damn it, Jeanette, I didn't say smug. I said . . . well, pleased."

"With him it's the same thing. You'll never convince me he didn't kill poor Betty, put her body in that cedar chest, and just drive away from here as boldly as you please! Somewhere between here and the West Coast he stopped, buried her where nobody will ever find her, and now he's out there on a new job, among people who never even knew he was married. He's having a great big laugh, but he's not going to get away with it!"

He had to admit that a lot of what Jeanette said added up. Still, he was skeptical. Whether his skepticism stemmed from a genuine doubt or from fear of putting his nose into something that was none of his business—and might easily backfire—he did not know.

"You're jumping to a pretty gory conclusion, Jeanette," he said. "I mean, just because he said one thing and did another, that doesn't mean—"

She broke in angrily. "All right, Mr. Einstein! *You* explain it!"

He opened his mouth, but no explanation was forthcoming, so he shut it.

"You know something, Lou," Jeanette said after a moment. "If it hadn't been for me, that horrible man might very easily have gotten away with it."

"What are you going to do? Just remember, Jeanette, if you start throwing accusations around, you could get us involved in a lawsuit."

"I'm not going to make any accusations—yet. In fact, I'm going straight to the horse's mouth."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She pulled the car to a stop outside Lou's office building. "You'll see." She smiled grimly.

The following afternoon when he got home, Lou Meakin was met at the door by an inspired Jeanette. "He was clever," she said, "but not clever enough!"

He sailed his hat toward the hall table. "Oh?"

"I don't think you even *care* whether Tom Regan killed poor Betty or not! If I hadn't thought something was funny when he moved out, and if I hadn't just happened to see their car sitting on that lot, well . . ."

He went into the kitchen and got a beer from the refrigerator. "Okay, what's the latest?"

"He didn't move where he said he was moving, that's what's the

latest!" she answered smugly.

He paused with the opener in his hand. "What?"

Jeanette nodded. "He said he was going to Los Angeles, didn't he? Said he'd found a better job there, didn't he?"

"That's right."

She crossed her arms. "Well, *I* remembered the name of the rental company on the side of that truck he drove away from here. I called them and I found out that he didn't go to Los Angeles at all, but to *Chicago*!"

Lou opened the beer slowly. It all seemed to sink in at once, and he found himself wondering if she didn't really have something, after all.

"I'm going to the police, Lou," Jeanette said. "That—that monster is going to pay for what he's done!"

"Now wait a minute, Jeanette. Wait just one minute. I realize I can't explain all this, but there could be an explanation. Let's not stick our necks out too far."

"And while we keep our necks safely drawn in, that murderer escapes!"

"Look, if Tom is a—a murderer, he probably thinks he's in the clear. So wherever he is, he's probably going to stay. Why don't we sort of sit on all this for a few more days, huh?"

Jeanette sighed impatiently. "All right, Lou. But if I don't hear anything from Betty by Monday, I'm going straight to the police!"

It happened Sunday afternoon. Lou sat before the television watching a tight game between the Braves and the Dodgers. Jeanette was at the dining room table pecking away on a portable typewriter, carefully documenting the progress of her case. The doorbell rang, and still deep in thought Jeanette got up and answered it.

Standing on the stoop was the petite figure of Betty Regan, very much alive. "Hi, Jeanette," she said.

"It . . . It's . . ."

"You busy? Can I come in a minute?"

"How . . . What . . .?"

Betty smiled guiltily and stepped inside. "Hi, Lou. I guess you two wondered what was going on between Tom and me."

Lou nodded. "Jeanette did mention it, I believe."

"I didn't think Tom would say anything about it. He's terribly proud, you know. I guess it was his pride that really came between us."

"It happens that way sometimes," Lou nodded.

"Well, we had this fight and I left him. He had a job all set in Los Angeles, you know, but he

didn't take it. I guess he was all smiles when you last saw him, huh?"

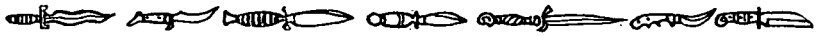
"Well . . . I guess you could say that."

"That's the way he is, smiling on the outside, crying on the inside. I found out later that he sold the car and the furniture and moved in with his brother in Chicago. I felt so sorry for him. Well, I phoned him and he just broke up completely, begging me to come back and all that . . ."

The two girls went on talking and after a while Lou sat down again to watch the ball game. The Braves were up. The big first baseman stood there at the plate, waggling his bat. Out on the mound the pitcher went into his windup.

Lou picked up his beer and took a swallow. The figures on the screen faded from his consciousness. Lou was thinking about what had happened, and about something Jeanette had said. It could have happened just as she had it figured, and Tom Regan could very possibly have gotten away with it if it hadn't been for one nosy neighbor. It had been sort of like a dress rehearsal, pointing up the good and the bad, *stressing the things to be avoided.*

He put the beer down and picked up the morning paper. Turning to the classifieds he reread the ad that had caught his attention earlier. It occupied an entire page, and it was headed with the hook: *Engineers! Want a Whole New Lease on Life? Come to Southern California! Ace Aircraft Needs You . . .*



Dear Fans:

It is always a pleasure to welcome new members into the ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, and it is very rewarding to hear from our enthusiastic and loyal present members.

Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news, issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:

ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, P.O. Box 5425, Sherman Oaks, California 91401

I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

One (distorted) picture may be worth one thousand policemen.

MURDER IN MIND

IT BEGAN, Cheryl Royce remembered, as a kind of parlor game—a slightly dangerous game, dealing with the dark unknown, but it was the danger, and the venture into the unknown, which made it interesting.

Hypnosis.

"Sure, I can hypnotize people," Arnold Forbes said.

Nobody at the party except the hosts, the Cunninghams, knew Forbes very well. Naturally, someone challenged him, someone else begged him for a demonstration, then Liz Cunningham very sweetly chimed in, "Arnold used to do a nightclub act. Would you like to show them, Arnold, dear?"

So Arnold Forbes performed. He was a short, chubby fellow, very jolly; very deceiving. His blue eyes could suddenly transfix one with a very penetrating, very commanding stare. Somehow, maybe because he thought she was pretty, or

maybe because she looked like a scoffer, an unbeliever, he chose Cheryl Royce.

With Forbes' blue eyes probing into her own, she "went to sleep" in about thirty seconds. Only she didn't exactly go to sleep. Her eyelids closed, but she was far from unconscious. She could hear Forbes' voice quite clearly. "Your eyelids are very heavy . . . your arms are heavy . . . your entire body is very heavy . . . very relaxed

. . . you are drifting down . . . down . . . down . . . into a very deep sleep . . ."

No, I'm not, she answered silently. *I'm not going to sleep, because I can hear you. Besides, I know I'm not asleep. I'm sitting in this easy chair, and everybody is gathered around, and . . .*

Nevertheless, she had to admit that the state she was in was strange indeed. Her body did feel heavy, and yet almost weightless. She hadn't wanted to close her eyes, and yet she had closed them. Now she wanted to open her eyes, and she couldn't.

She was entirely at the hypnotist's mercy. He gave her commands—to read a book, type a letter, drink a glass of water—and she obeyed him, pantomiming the actions, even though she knew perfectly well that the objects weren't there, and even though she resented going through the silly motions. Forbes passed his finger around her wrists, "tying" her to the chair arms, and she couldn't move, even though she knew there was no rope binding her. The game went on and on, and all the while she felt foolish, for being tricked, for being helpless.

Yet when Arnold Forbes wak-

ened her finally, with a snap of his fingers, she laughed and joked about it, playing at being a good sport. Forbes found another victim, and Cheryl drifted off to the sidelines, gratefully out of the limelight.

Wint Marron followed her. Wint was darkly handsome, in his middle thirties, with a pretty blonde wife. Cheryl had attended perhaps three or four parties where the Marrons had been present.

"How did it feel being hypnotized?" Wint asked her.

"It was fun," she said.

"No, it wasn't," he contradicted her. "You hated it. You fought that guy every minute."

She stared at Wint Marron for a moment. "How do you know that?" she demanded.

He smiled, showing his perfect white teeth. "I know a little about hypnosis. One of the things that happens sometimes is that under hypnosis, telepathic powers are sharpened. Maybe you and I are on the same wavelength. Anyway, I saw into your mind all the time you were asleep there. You kept telling Forbes, 'No, I won't do it . . . I don't have a glass of water in my hand . . . you don't have a rope to tie me with.' And you were angry."

"You saw that from the expression on my face," she argued.

He shook his head, still smiling at her. "Your expression was completely serene. Ask anybody." He waited for an answer, but she had none. "It's interesting, don't you think?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Don't worry that I'll be able to read your thoughts all the time. I won't. It doesn't work that way." He had leaned closer. They were all alone. Everybody else was watching Arnold Forbes and his act. "Telepathic powers are sharper while under hypnosis, like I said. But I might catch a random thought of yours some other time. For that matter, you might catch a thought of mine. It usually works in both directions. Like I said, we seem to be on the same wavelength."

"What am I thinking now?" she demanded.

He hesitated, looking straight into her eyes. With an effort, she met his gaze. "You don't like what I've been telling you," he said finally. "You think your privacy has been invaded. The whole thing disturbs you. Now tit for tat. What do you think I'm thinking?"

She didn't want to, but she kept staring back at him. Was she trying to read the expression in his dark brown eyes? Or was she going beyond his eyes . . . to his thoughts? Then she found herself saying, involuntarily, "I think you want to kiss me."

He laughed softly and winked at her. "I don't know what you're using now, honey," he said. "I don't know whether it's telepathy or not. But you're close. Mighty close . . ."

She didn't see Wint Marron again for months. Perhaps she was even, subconsciously, trying to avoid him. During that interval she perhaps thought *about* him a time

or two, but she certainly didn't receive any telepathic messages from him, for which she was grateful. And she didn't send him any messages. At least she didn't think she did.

Once, however, she saw Paula Marron, Wint's pretty blonde wife, in a dim corner of a dim cocktail lounge. She was shoulder to shoulder with another man, acting in a way no married woman should act with a man not her husband.

The incident shocked Cheryl, for several reasons. Paula's obvious infidelity, for one, and that she should be unfaithful to a man as attractive as Wint Marron, for another. Wint was handsome, charming, and doing very well in advertising. Why should Paula be dissatisfied?

It was a while after that incident, a month perhaps, that Cheryl first began to get the strange sensations. Sensations . . . she looked for a better word to describe the experiences; forebodings . . . feelings of uneasiness . . . that came to her at odd times and for no apparent reason.

They came for no apparent reason because everything seemed to be going so well in her life. She'd met Alan Richmond, and had almost decided that Alan was her long-awaited dream man. He was tall, lean, pleasant-looking, ambitious, very fond of her, very devoted to her. They'd been going out together frequently; she'd been with Alan when she'd seen Paula Marron in the cocktail lounge. Her life was happy, and there was the promise of even greater happiness.

But there were those queer sensations, the feeling now and then that a threat lurked somewhere. More than that. An emotional response to that threat . . . a vague kind of anger . . . or hatred . . . or jealousy . . .

Jealousy. She could almost laugh at the notion. She had no cause for jealousy. Alan had proposed marriage—she could have him any time she wanted him—and she knew that he didn't go out with other girls. Why on earth should she be jealous where Alan was concerned?

Well, she couldn't be, and she wasn't. She wasn't jealous . . . *she* wasn't jealous . . . why then did she feel . . . ?

The answer came suddenly.

She'd had a difficult day at her job, had begged off going to the movie with Alan. She was tired. She was in bed, in her dark bedroom, falling asleep, perhaps already asleep. When it happened, she came awake with a jolt.

For a sudden, searing, painful moment she wasn't in her bedroom. She was in that dim cocktail

lounge. There was Paula Marron sitting in that corner with that stranger, leaning her shoulder against the stranger's shoulder, stroking his chin with her fingertips, whispering into his ear, her lips very close to the ear. Then Paula turned, distracted by something. Paula was full-face, her expression blank for a second, then her eyes widening, her lips parting.

Paula said one word, loud, in a tone of complete surprise. "Wint!"

The vision faded. Cheryl Royce was in the darkness of her bedroom again. The cocktail lounge, the strange man, Paula Marron, had all departed.

What was left, and it was inside Cheryl Royce, was a bursting flame of anger . . . hatred . . . jealousy! Her hands clutched the blanket in a death-grip, her mouth contorted, she stared at the empty air. It was a minute or two before the feeling subsided, and she lay there afterward, limp, drained, her skin clammy with perspiration.

She knew then exactly what the experience had been. Wint Marron had discovered his wife in the company of that other man. Wint Marron was insanely angry and jealous. She, Cheryl Royce, knew all that, because she had been there in that cocktail lounge with him. She had read his mind, been inside his mind.

She and Wint Marron were on the same wavelength.

She didn't confide in Alan, or in anyone. She considered trying to find Arnold Forbes, the hypnotist, asking him to help her. She wanted to get off Wint Marron's wavelength. She didn't want to share his thoughts. But she didn't seek out Forbes. The whole business was too ridiculous, too embarrassing—too incredible, in fact.

She didn't want to believe it. It was quite possible, wasn't it, that she'd been dreaming there in her bed? She had once seen Paula Marron in that cocktail lounge, and so she was able to dream about it. The dream had put her, as it were, in Wint Marron's place, but there was an explanation for that too: the power of suggestion. Wint Marron had suggested that they were "on the same wavelength."

So she spoke of the matter to no one, and she was sorry for that.

Just three weeks later, on a Thursday, at dusk, her consciousness sat inside Wint Marron's skull again, looked out through his eyes, felt his emotions, and decided upon an action.

She was alone again, sitting at her dressing table, combing her hair in front of the mirror. Alan was due to pick her up in half an hour. Her thoughts were on Alan,

not on Wint Marron, but then they were wrenched violently away from Alan. Her own face disappeared from the mirror. She was looking not into the mirror, but through the windshield of an automobile.

Ahead was a road, dim and shadowy in the dusk; not a road that she recognized. Then, however, she lost awareness of herself completely.

The car was going slowly at first. The road curved. The headlights swept a border of trees that lined the road. The lights were very bright. The trees showed up very distinctly, but not the road. The road was blacktop, dark.

Something appeared in the road . . . or at the edge of it . . . or just at the side of it . . . the right side. Something white, very brilliant in the lights, in great contrast to the blacktop. White, fluttering . . . a woman's dress.

A woman was standing there by the side of the road, as if waiting to be picked up. Yes, to be picked up, because in her right hand she carried a small suitcase. Definitely a suitcase, blue, very bright blue against the whiteness of the dress.

But she was not waiting for the driver of this car. No, because when she saw which car it was, she made a funny little gesture of surprise, throwing up her left hand, the fingers spread wide. The face registered surprise also. The car was close enough now for the driver to see her face.

Paula Marron's face, almost as white as the dress. Framed in yellow-blonde hair. Blue eyes very wide, very blue, as blue as the little suitcase. Emotion in the eyes. Fear.

Emotion in the driver too. Relentless hatred, and soaring triumph. Here was Paula, the hated object, caught in the act. Where were you going, Paula? I thought if I took your car keys away from you, you'd have to stay home. But you're waiting for your chauffeur, aren't you? *Him*. Where are you going with him? For how long? You're taking the small suitcase, I see. So maybe it's just overnight. Or maybe not. Maybe you're going for good, and you decided not to bother to take all those "rags" hanging in your closet. Well, you're not going anywhere, baby. Not with *him* you aren't!

The car was going faster now. The engine responded to the accelerator with a rasping roar. Paula seemed to comprehend suddenly. She tried to back away, off the road, into the trees. She'd be safe among the trees. The car couldn't follow her there.

But she wasn't quick enough. She hadn't comprehended soon enough. She dropped the suitcase,

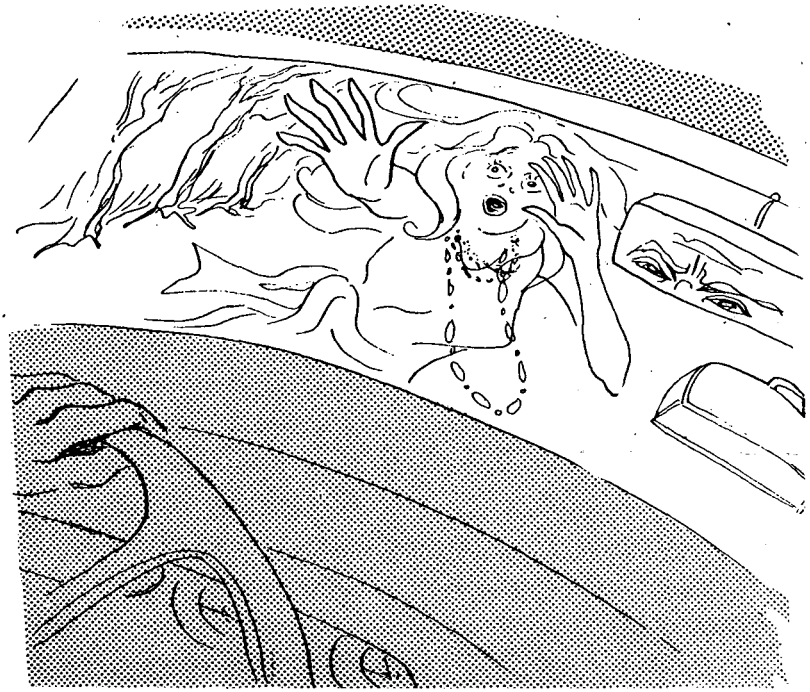
tried to turn and run, but in her high spike heels she stumbled on the rough gravel along the road. She wasn't in costume for racing a car, and she seemed to know that she couldn't win. She turned again toward the car. Her arms stretched out in a gesture of pleading.

Don't kill me, Wint!

The gesture of the arms changed. They rose, trying to shield that soft white face from the onrushing metal. The face grew larger, almost filled the windshield. The red mouth opened wide, and a scream competed with the roar of the engine, overcoming it for a moment.

In the same instant there was the impact, so hard that the glass in the windshield shook. The trees, the whole scene pictured through the windshield, shuddered as if in an earthquake. The white face and the white dress sank down out of the picture. The last visible parts of Paula were her white hands with their long tapered fingers . . . reaching upward . . . begging . . .

The car didn't stop. It went relentlessly forward, the tires protesting as they dug into the gravel at the side of the road. Why was



the ride so bumpy? Why was the woodsy scene in the windshield jarring up and down? Were the wheels of the car passing over something? Was there an obstacle in the road? Ah . . .

The road smoothed, the jarring ceased. The car swerved back onto the blacktop, negotiated the curve adroitly . . .

And as it did, the windshield scene faded. Cross-faded rather, into a face in the mirror. The face of Cheryl Royce, contorted into an ugly mask of hatred.

Hands went to the face, Cheryl Royce's hands, covering the staring eyes, desperately trying to shut out the vision. *What did I just see?*

After a long time, the hands lowered, and Cheryl looked at her own face again. The ugly lines had softened, but there were beads of perspiration on her forehead, and her hands were shaking.

She staggered from the dressing table to the phone, managed to dial Alan's number. "I can't go out tonight," she told him in a trembling voice. "I have this terrible headache."

Which was true.

There was nothing in the morning newspaper, but the afternoon edition told the story completely.

Paula Marron, aged 28, apparently had been the victim of a hit-and-run driver. The accident had occurred sometime early last evening, on Morton's Mill Road, almost in front of the Marron home. Mrs. Marron was struck, run over, and then dragged along the road for about thirty feet. She had died, the examining physician said, immediately. There had been no witnesses.

The Marrons lived in a wooded, exurban area of rather expensive houses, each set on five or six acres. The Marron home was several hundred feet from the road, and the road was invisible from it. Mr. Marron, who was at home at the time of the accident, stated that he had not heard any unusual sounds, nor could he explain why his wife was walking along the road at that time of the evening. Police were questioning neighbors, hoping to find someone who had seen the hit-and-run car.

Cheryl Royce read the newspaper account with growing horror. She had really seen Paula Marron die. In a fit of jealousy, her husband had run her down with his own car. He had committed murder. Cheryl had seen him do it. She had practically ridden in the driver's seat with him.

So of course she should go to the police.

Then she stopped, right there on that crowded downtown street

where she'd bought the newspaper. What was she going to tell the police? All that stuff about telepathy, thought-transference, mental wavelengths? Could she, Cheryl Royce, who had been in her own apartment at the time of the murder, qualify as a witness? She felt she had to try.

At police headquarters she was eventually allowed to see a detective sergeant named Evatt, who listened frozen-faced to her story.

"You realize, Miss Royce," he said at the end, "we'd have to have more evidence than what you just told me." Evatt was lean, tired-looking, but polite.

"Yes, I know," she told him, "but I thought this might alert you to look for evidence in Wint Marron's direction. Doesn't a car usually get a bent fender or broken headlight or something if it hits a pedestrian? You could tell them to look at Wint Marron's car."

Evatt nodded. "I can pass on the tip," he agreed, but not too convincingly. "Now, you mentioned, in one of these scenes you imagined—excuse me, one of these times you saw into Mr. Marron's mind—you said you saw another man with Mrs. Marron. Who was he?"

"It wasn't anybody I recognized—well, I really didn't look at him. I was looking at Mrs. Marron most of the time, you see."

"It would help," the detective pointed out, "if we knew something about this guy. It would establish a possible motive."

"Yes, I realize that," she said, "but I don't think the man was anybody I know."

"Well, I'll pass the word on to the officers investigating the accident," Evatt promised, and he jotted down her name, address, and telephone number. But he had called the case an "accident," she noticed, not a murder or a homicide.

As she left the detective's tiny office, she thanked him, and then she paused in the doorway. "I could be wrong, of course," she said. She felt forced to make the admission. "It could have been my imagination."

Evatt nodded again. "It could have."

"I'm not accusing Wint Marron of . . ."

Evatt seemed to understand. "If the boys ask Marron any questions or look around," he promised, "your name won't be mentioned."

She left feeling better. She had done what she could. It was up to the police now. If Wint Marron had committed murder, it was their job to bring him to justice, not hers.

She had dinner with Alan that evening. The restaurant was a

quiet place, the music soft and unobtrusive, the lights dim. She didn't confide in Alan. He apparently hadn't even read the newspaper, didn't know that Paula Marron was dead.

She was uneasy the entire evening, as if she were trying to think of something, to remember something, and the elusive little fact kept dodging away. Finally, however, after a long time, the message came through.

Cheryl told them. The three words beat in her brain over and over again. *Cheryl told them.*

Then she knew that Wint Marron knew. Either his suspicions had been aroused by a visit from the police and fresh questions asked, or else he was seeing directly into her mind, as she'd seen into his.

She sent Alan home early, spent the rest of the night tossing in bed, unable to sleep. In the morning she called Detective Sergeant Evatt.

"Your story interested the officer in charge," Evatt told her. "He went back to the Marron home. He made an excuse to get into the Marron garage. There were two cars there, neither with any signs of front-end damage. But the car Mr. Marron usually drives is a Jeep. It has an oversize, reinforced front bumper. The officer concedes you could possibly hit someone with that bumper and not get a dent in it. But possibility isn't proof."

"What about the little blue suitcase?" she asked.

"No sign of that."

"Wint Marron could have retrieved it from the scene of the accident," she argued. "There might be blood on it. Though he could have washed it off—or burned the thing . . ."

"Miss Royce," Sergeant Evatt interrupted, "I've also mentioned this matter to the lieutenant. He doesn't seem to think that the kind of evidence you've offered us is really enough to ask for a search warrant. We don't have any real grounds for suspicion. You weren't exactly an eyewitness."

"So you're not going to do anything."

"There isn't anything we can do right now."

"You think that I'm a crackpot?"

"Nobody said that, Miss Royce. But we've followed it through as far as we can go—for now, anyway."

She confided at last in Alan, and Alan scoffed. No, he would not try to sneak into Wint Marron's garage to inspect his Jeep, or into Marron's house to look for a bloody blue suitcase. Perhaps she

had received telepathic signals or vibrations from Marron, but if Marron had murdered his wife, that was the business of the police—not his or hers. She was furious.

That was one of the reasons why she left the city. Another reason was that she was frightened of Wint Marron.

She had no logical explanation for her fear. She had already communicated with the police, and Wint knew she had. Therefore, he wouldn't dare do anything violent to her. What could he do, then? Well, he could annoy her, threaten her. She was almost certain that he would. So she wanted to escape, get away, let time pass. Then perhaps she'd stop seeing into Wint Marron's mind. Perhaps then she could forget.

She begged leave of absence from the agency and drove away that afternoon. Nowhere in particular, not in any special direction. Just out of town. To somewhere different.

She ended up, toward sunset, at the Northway Motel in a small town, not more than a village, called Northway. The motel was a typical long building, with the rooms side by side, and space in front of each unit for the guest's car. A restaurant adjoined. She had a sandwich, and when she strolled back to her door, night had fallen and the stars were out. She checked her car again to make sure it was locked, then went inside.

Guessing that she would need them, she took two sleeping tablets, indulged in a long hot shower, propped herself up in bed on the motel's excellent pillows, and tried to read. It was a futile exercise.

Hours passed. She squirmed restlessly in the bed. The book did not interest her. She turned the light out finally, then stared into the darkness.

She couldn't get Wint Marron out of her mind. He knew that she knew—but did he know how much she knew? Surely her mind couldn't be a completely open book to him. Might he even be afraid that she knew more than she actually did? How he had disposed of the blue suitcase, for instance. Or the identity of Paula's companion in that cocktail lounge.

Since she didn't want to share any more of Wint Marron's guilty secrets, could she send him the message that he had nothing further to fear from her, that she was finished playing public-spirited citizen and informing on a murderer? But would he believe her, would he trust her . . . ?

In the darkness of that strange room she suddenly sat upright. He didn't trust her! Wint Marron was

saying that to her, right at this moment.

She came near to panic. For she knew something else too. Whether it was telepathy this time, or a kind of animal instinct for the proximity of danger, or whether she had actually heard a small noise, she wasn't sure. But she knew! Wint Marron was there.

She eased out of the bed. In the front wall of her room near the door was a large window, heavily draped. She inched the drape aside to make a small peephole, found a venetian blind, bent down one of the slats.

At first she saw nothing outside. The driveway was fairly well lighted. Her car was there, a hulking lump of shadow.

Then she did hear a noise, this time unmistakable, the scrape of the sole of a shoe on the sidewalk close to her door. A dark shape passed the window, paused beside her car.

A man. Wint Marron. It could be no other. If she clung to any desperate doubt, however, that doubt was erased when the man walked around to the rear of the car and the light fell on his head and shoulders. Cheryl Royce saw Wint Marron's lean, dark, handsome face.

He had followed her. Quite easily, of course, because she had sent him the message. Northway, the Northway Motel.

Now he was interested in her car—making sure it was the right car, and since it was parked there, checking which was the right door, the right room. He was going to do something to the car, or try to enter her room . . . or perhaps simply wait for her to come out.

Panic overwhelmed judgment. She could phone the motel clerk, ask him to call the Northway police. But the police would never believe her. They hadn't before. They wouldn't now. Not until Wint Marron did something, and then it would be too late. Besides, the police were her enemies. Going to the police had caused Wint Marron to fear her, then to pursue her. Her only safety was in convincing Wint that she'd never go to the police again.

But right now, while he was still angry with her, she must escape. How? *Don't plan . . . don't plan,* some part of her brain warned her. *Wint can read your mind, don't you know that? If you plan where you're going, he'll be there waiting for you. So leave your mind blank . . . use instinct . . . act blindly . . . don't panic . . .*

She dressed quickly, feeling in the dark for her clothes. She refused to think. *I'm getting dressed . . . no, I must not even think that,*

she reminded herself. *I must think neither about the future nor the present.*

She stood fully dressed now in the middle of the dark room. It was difficult, almost impossible, to keep her mind blank. The apparatus just isn't constructed that way. But she tried.

The room had a rear window also. She had to pull aside the drape and raise the blind. The window itself resisted for a moment, but finally moved upward. There was a small squeak and a groan as it did so, perhaps not audible on the front side of the building. Without hesitation, without considering the problem that she might be seen, avoiding concentration on the matter, Cheryl eased one leg through the opening, then her torso, then the other leg.

She was standing on a grassy lawn. *Where now?* No, she mustn't think. Just act, move.

She heard traffic noises from the highway, out front. Although she had been in bed for some time, the hour still wasn't late. There were people around, no need to be afraid.

She walked past the rear of the motel restaurant. Inside were a waitress and a customer or two, but the place appeared ready to close. No refuge there. Wint could follow her there anyway.

She walked on, trying not even to note her surroundings, trying not to reflect upon the sense images her eyes gathered. Something large loomed in her path: the rear of a truck. She walked around the more shadowed side of it. Not too long a truck. Not a trailer rig.

A man stood near the front end, smoking a cigarette. Maybe the driver. He heard her footsteps, turned to watch her approach. There was no light on his face, only the glowing tip of the cigarette. She stopped close to him.

"Is this your truck?"

Apparently startled, he didn't answer for a moment. "Yes," he said finally.

"Are you going somewhere or staying here?"

"I'm leaving," he said after another hesitation, "just as soon as I finish this cigarette."

"Will you give me a ride?"

The tip of the cigarette glowed more brightly as the truck driver took a long drag. "Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter."

"Look, I'm going to . . . ."

He stared at her, puzzled, but her face was as much in shadow as his. He dropped his cigarette butt on the gravel and didn't bother to grind it out. What he was thinking was as obvious as if he too were on her mental wavelength. He

couldn't guess what kind of risk he might be taking, but the proposition was intriguing . . .

"Hop in," he said after a long moment, and opened the door for her.

I've never ridden in this large a truck before, she thought as she climbed into the cab. But then she told her mind to be still. *Don't think words . . . be quiet . . . go to sleep . . . yes, sleep . . . hypnotize yourself.*

The driver climbed in on his own side, started the engine, and the truck rolled out. Cheryl kept her eyes closed, but in trying so hard not to, she sensed that they had turned left onto the highway. Did Wint notice the truck's departure? Maybe not. Surely he couldn't read her every thought. He needn't know that she was in the truck.

"I don't know whether I should be doing this," the driver was saying. "You on drugs or something?"

"No, I'm not on drugs."

"You're not the other type. So you must be running away. Who from? Your husband?"

"No. I'm sorry. I can't explain."

"I may be doing something illegal."

"No, you're not. I guarantee you that."

They drove in silence for a while. Cheryl tried to keep her eyes closed, not to notice road signs. The driver glanced at her sideways now and then, she realized. But whatever he might be thinking, she had less to fear from him than from Wint Marron.

"Is there a car following us?" she asked suddenly.

She regretted the question instantly, because the driver became alarmed. He glanced at his mirror. "Nobody back there now. Look, who are you expecting to follow us?"

"Nobody."

"You might be running away from the police."

"I'm not."

"I don't want to get mixed up in anything."

"All you have to do is take me somewhere. Anywhere."

"I'm just going to Jackson Harbor."

She gave a little shriek, and put her fingers in her ears, but it was too late. The name of their destination pounded in her brain . . . *Jackson Harbor* . . . she couldn't stop it. And she knew, she knew absolutely, that the name was vibrating through the ether, straight back to Northway, back to Wint.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Let me out!" she screamed. "Just let me out!"

"Look, I said I'd take you—"

"Let me out, or I'll jump!" She

poised with the door half open.

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Let me find a place where I can get off the pavement."

He'd put the brakes on, and the truck was slowing down, so she waited. He picked a place finally, and edged off onto the shoulder. But long before the truck had come to a dead stop, Cheryl had the door open, had climbed down to the running board. "Thanks," she called back to the man, and jumped.

She landed on her feet, stumbled, but didn't fall. Only then, when she was safe, did she look to see where she was. A road marker loomed in the bright headlights of the truck. Junction . . . K.

Wint will know exactly where I am, she thought. She shouted to the truck driver. She wanted to get back in, but already the engine was roaring and the big rear tires were spitting gravel at her. Before she could catch up with it, the big vehicle had turned back onto the highway. In a moment it had diminished to a pair of taillights, then it was gone completely.

She was left alone, afoot and in darkness, her exact location pinpointed to Wint Marron as the junction of Road "K" with the main highway.

Her first instinct was to try to hitch another ride, till she realized the possibility that the first car to stop for her might be Wint's. Or maybe he wouldn't stop. Wint had another method of dealing with female hitchhikers who had displeased him.

A pair of headlights came hurtling down the highway toward her. She dropped into the weeds at the side of the road. She lay there until the lights and the car flashed by.

This main road was dangerous; too many cars. She picked herself up out of the weeds and ran in the only direction left open, down Road K.

Wint knew where she was going, of course, for the moment. *Road K* pounded in her mind in the same rhythm as her feet pounded on the gravel. But she would get lost—lost, that was the answer to her problem. If she didn't know where she was, neither would Wint. She would find an even smaller road than this, a dirt road, and follow that. Or simply run across fields or through the woods.

But she hesitated to plunge off into the darkness. She had only a vague idea of the geography of this area. She knew approximately where Northway was. How far toward Jackson Harbor had they gotten? Jackson Harbor was on the lake, of course. But there were

other bodies of water in between, as she recalled the map, a couple of small rivers . . . and weren't there marshes or swamps? Quicksand, maybe?

Was she doing the right thing, running away from civilization, running into a sparsely populated semi-wilderness? Maybe she should have stayed in the truck, stayed with people. But it was too late now.

It was a clear night, with moon and stars. She could see her way along the road. The woods would be dark, though. She couldn't bring herself to leave the road. She'd find that unmarked side road.

But she didn't. Panting, she had to slow to a walk. And then she stopped.

Where did you go, Cheryl?

It was as if the question had been spoken aloud, it was so clear, precise. But she was alone there on the road. She knew, however, exactly where the question had come from.

Wint Marron was standing by the open rear window of her room at the Northway Motel. That had been a mistake, hadn't it, to leave that window open? Wint stood there, and she was with him, looking at the window through Wint's eyes.

Then he climbed inside, and she accompanied him. A flashlight beam searched the room, glided over the walls, lingered for a moment on the empty, mussed bed.

We're communicating, aren't we, Cheryl? Like a voice, speaking to her from within her own brain. *You know I'm here.* There was a long pause. *And I know where you are.*

Was he lying? She closed her eyes and ground her teeth together in a desperate mental effort not to think about the lonely gravel road and the dark woods on either side.

Don't try to hide from me, Cheryl.

She pressed her lips together to smother a gasp.

You hitchhiked, didn't you?

He was groping, guessing. He didn't know as much as he pretended to. She went on trying to keep her mind blank.

You went to the police. I knew that, didn't I, Cheryl? And I found the Northway Motel, didn't I?

He was goading her, trying to panic her. If he succeeded, she would lose control and perhaps betray her whereabouts.

It's your own fault, you know, Cheryl. You butted into a private affair. It was a while before I realized you were butting in. I guess I should have been more careful, because I was the one who discovered that we could share our thoughts. I

even mentioned to you that this telepathy thing could run in both directions. It's too bad, though, it turned out the way it did. You're a cute girl, Cheryl. I did want to kiss you that night we met. After I got rid of Paula, and things had settled down a little, I might have looked you up. Yes, it's your fault, Cheryl. Even after Paula, you didn't have to go to the police. You didn't have to turn against me. Not when you and I were so intimate. Couldn't you understand? Couldn't you sympathize? Haven't you ever been jealous? When I saw Paula with that Don Bruno . . .

She screamed, a short, choked, stifled scream. Don Bruno, not a very ordinary name. That detective had said that if she could identify the other man in the case the police would have something to go on. Now she knew who the other man was—but she didn't want to know!

Cheryl!

He must not have been aware that she hadn't known before. But now he surely realized the slip he had made. He had given her a weapon against him, and now he must disarm her, silence her.

She started running again, on the gravel road, Road K. Turn off into the woods? No, not now. Wint could run through the woods faster than she could. No, she had to stay on the road, find somebody, find help, find a telephone. It had to be on this road. Going back to the highway would mean rushing to meet Wint. This was her only road. This road led somewhere. And when she found that telephone, she would call Sergeant Evatt, and she would shout to him, "The man's name is Don Bruno! Locate him! Make him admit that he was going to pick up Paula Marron who would be carrying a suitcase! Don Bruno can tell you enough so you can arrest Wint Marron for murder!"

She ran on. If the rough gravel hurt her feet through the thin soles of her shoes, she wasn't aware of it. She'd gotten her second wind now. She could make it. Wint was still miles behind her, getting into his car, consulting his map, searching for Road K.

She concentrated on not thinking, on not letting her surroundings impinge upon her senses. *Don't give Wint any clues. Don't give him any landmarks. Don't let him know if this road is going through woods or swamps, or by a stream or near a lake. Don't see any of those things. Just look for one thing. A light. A light that will mean human habitation.*

How much time passed? In her state of suspended awareness she didn't know. Minutes . . . miles

. . . neither had meant anything.

Until two sensations came to her at exactly the same moment. One that she welcomed and one that she feared. One from the front and one from the rear. A sight and a sound.

Up ahead, still distant, she saw it, a mere pinhead of illumination amid the woodland foliage. And simultaneously, behind her, she heard the far-off growl of an automobile engine.

She raced that approaching sound. It was coming down Road K, she knew that, and as it drew nearer she even thought she recognized it. She'd heard it once before, the evening that Paula Marron was struck down by a hit-and-run driver. Wint was pursuing her in his Jeep, that Jeep with its reinforced front bumper which wouldn't dent when it smashed into a human body.

But the light grew closer too. The road curved and the light swung to a new position, almost straight ahead. A yellow light, growing larger and larger. A porch light? It didn't matter. Any kind of light meant people, safety.

The Jeep engine was loud in her ears now. She thought she could hear too the rasp of its tires on the gravel. But the light loomed brighter and closer too.

She saw other things now. A reflection of the light, a vertical gleaming bar of yellow. On water, a stream or a narrow inlet, and the light was on the far side.

For a dreadful moment she supposed that she was lost, isolated from that help on the other bank. But then the light illuminated—ever so slightly, and off a bit to the left where the road was curving again—*a bridge!*

Not much of a bridge. Wooden. Old. Rickety. But a bridge nevertheless, leading to the other side of the water and to the light.

Behind her—only yards—the roar of the engine and the scream of tires clawing gravel rose together into one deafening crescendo.

Her flying feet touched the first board of the bridge. Then the Jeep's headlights, swinging around that last little curve of the road, suddenly illuminated the whole world . . . herself . . . the floor of the bridge . . . the dark shining water just ahead of her outstretched foot . . .

She couldn't stop. It was too late for that. Her foot leaped ahead of her out into space. There was nothing else beneath it, until the black surface of the water rose up to meet her.

Just as she sank into it, rubber tires hit the boards of the bridge and the hurtling Jeep found the

same emptiness in front of it. It sailed over Cheryl's head, darkening the sky, just as her head went under water.

In the water then she felt the exploding pressure waves as the metal monster plunged in just beyond her. She bobbed to the surface.

There was nothing there. The sky was empty. The roar was silenced. Nothing but huge ripples, almost waves, spreading out from the spot where the Jeep had disappeared.

Wint!

She blurted his name, silently, inside her brain. But there was no answer, no communication. The connection was cut. The line was dead at the other end.

Yes, dead . . . . or dying. She sensed that somehow. Wint Marron's head had hit something hard, like the windshield. Unconscious, helpless, wedged into his seat, he was drowning now.

She swam a stroke or two toward the source of those ripples. "Wint!" she called aloud.

A numbness seized her. A coldness. She became certain of an unalterable fact. Wint was dead.

So she swam back, toward the bridge . . .

Bridge? She looked at the wooden structure in the moonlight. Not a bridge at all. Only a pier.

She shivered then, not at the coldness of the water. She had killed him. She had killed Wint. Had he known differently, he might have been able to stop the Jeep. But her brain had sent him the wrong message. Not pier. Bridge . . .

Gardner. A.A. Fair. Christie. Armstrong. Gruber. 11 mysteries, $1.

Including the newest Hercule Poirot and Perry Mason bafflers.

1. The Case of the Fabulous Fake by Erle Stanley Gardner. 36-24-36 is her only I.D. Can Perry find her before she's accused of murder? (Publ. Ed. $4.95)

2. Hallowe'en Party by Agatha Christie. After she boasts of seeing a murder, a child drowns. And a town explodes under Hercule Poirot's probing. (Publ. Ed. $5.95)

3. The Case of the Careless Cupid by Erle Stanley Gardner. A widow is doomed unless Perry finds who really poisoned her husband. (Publ. Ed. $3.95)

4. Endless Night by Agatha Christie. Everyone's after Ellie Roger's millions. Now someone's trying murder. (Publ. Ed. $4.50)

5. The Case of the Queenly Contestant by Erle Stanley Gardner. An aging beauty gets Perry involved with a $2,000,000 estate and murder. (Publ. Ed. $3.95)

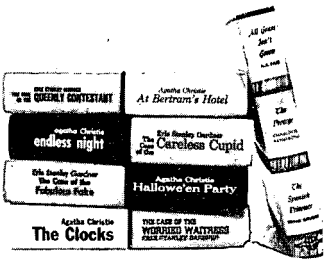
6. At Bertram's Hotel by Agatha Christie. Even Jane Marple never expected the vicar to lead a daring train robbery. (Publ. Ed. $4.50)

7. The Case of the Worried Waitress by Erle Stanley Gardner. The only one who can save Perry's pretty client is blind. (Publ. Ed. $3.50)

8. The Clocks by Agatha Christie. The dead man's room now holds 6 clocks instead of 2 and a girl turns up dead nearby. It's time to call Poirot. (Publ. Ed. $4.50)

Plus a Club selection—including the latest by A. A. Fair, Armstrong and Gruber.

9. All Grass Isn't Green by A. A. Fair. This missing persons case leads Donald Lam and Bertha Cool to a love triangle, marijuana and murder. (Publ. Ed. $4.95)



10. The Protégé by Charlotte Armstrong. Old Mrs. Moffat's life is upended by a bearded young redhead, who's not what he seems. (Publ. Ed. $4.95)

11. The Spanish Prisoner by Frank Gruber. The ex-FBI man's search for an old con game or old gold leads him to a Spanish castle and torture-rack murder. (Publ. Ed. $4.95)

The Detective Book Club
Roslyn, New York 11576

Please enroll me as a new member and send me at once the four hard-bound double volumes of full-length Gardner/Christie thrillers, PLUS the regular 3-in-1 Club selection, containing the brand new Donald Lam-Bertha Cool case and 2 other great new mysteries. I enclose no money. Within a week after receiving my books, I will either return them and owe nothing or keep all five volumes, containing eleven first-rate mystery stories, for the special new-member introductory price of only $1.00 (plus a few cents mailing charges).

As a member, I am to receive advance descriptions of all future selections, but am not obligated to buy any. For each future triple volume I keep, I will send you only $3.39 (plus a few cents mailing charges). I may reject any volume before or after I receive it and I may cancel my membership at any time. (Books shipped in U.S.A. only.)

1-RF

Mr.
Mrs.
Miss } _____
(please print plainly)

(see

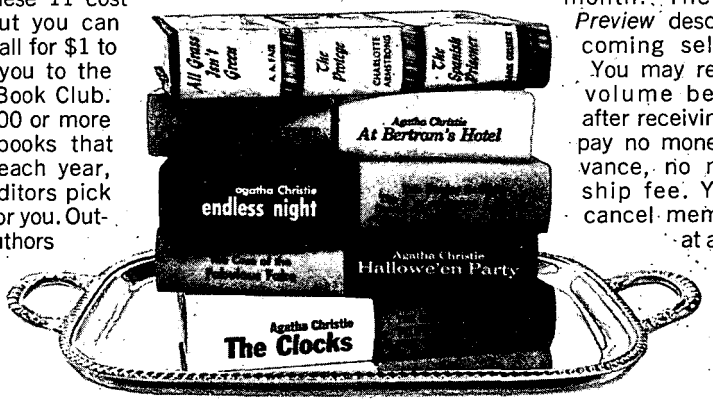
For one small dollar, you can get the brand new Lam-Cool whodunit, which Erle Stanley Gardner wrote under the pen name A. A. Fair—plus 4 of the newest and best Perry Mason mysteries. We'll add 4 spell-binders from Agatha Christie's pen. And top it all off with the newest books by Charlotte Armstrong and Frank Gruber.

11 full-length mysteries, bound into 5 hard-cover books. In the publishers' original editions, these 11 cost $50.65. But you can have them all for $1 to introduce you to the Detective Book Club.

Of the 300 or more detective books that come out each year, the Club editors pick the plums for you. Outstanding authors like Mignon G. Eberhart, John Creasey, Agatha Christie, Van Wyck Mason and many others have had their books selected. Many are Club members themselves.

Club selections are all newly published. You can get three of them each month complete in one handsomely-bound triple volume (a $12.40 to $15.40 value in publishers' editions) for only $3.39.

You don't have to take a volume each month. The Club's *Preview* describes all coming selections. You may reject any volume before or after receiving it. You pay no money in advance, no membership fee. You may cancel membership at any time.



11 mysteries that will make your mouth water. All for $1.

First Class
Permit No. 7
Roslyn, N.Y.

Business Reply Mail
No postage stamp necessary if mailed
in the United States
Postage Will Be Paid By

The Detective Book Club
Roslyn, New York 11576

(see