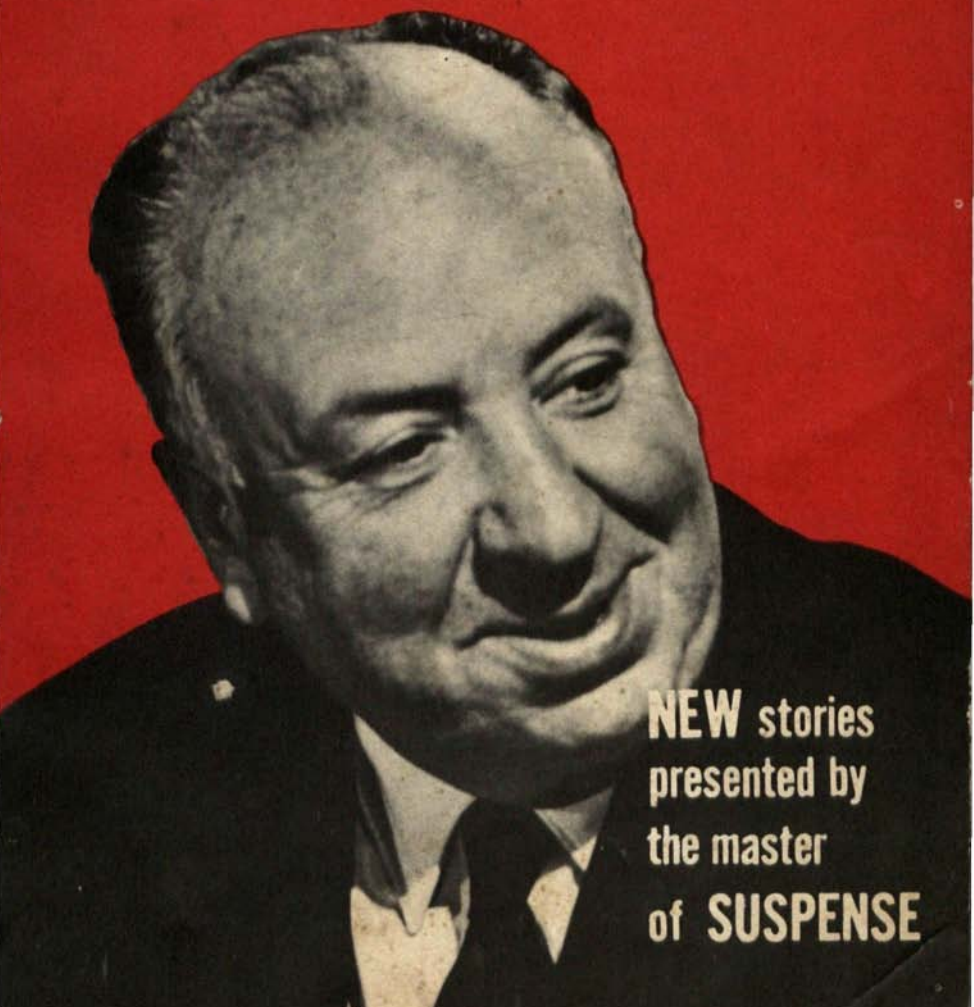


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# HITCHCOCK'S

## MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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



July 1971

Dear Reader:

While authorities cause a mere ripple of brows with terrifying but dry statistics on the high cost of crime, I am here to tell you it is all so. However, it is my habit to pursue the fine art of disclosing the whys and wherefores of such outlay with a fresh lineup of new stories monthly.

Since we are agreed, then, that crime is not free in any regard, look for the singular toll it takes in *Incident at Malibu Beach* by Robert Colby; *Who Needs an Enemy?* by Nancy Schachterle; *The Protectors* by Clark Howard; *A Convention of Wooden Indians* by Frank Sisk; and *Lock It Up or Nail It Down* by James Michael Ullman.

See it, too, in the other approaches taken by authors Edward D. Hoch, John Lutz, George Antonich, W. S. Doxey, Talmage Powell, Theodore Mathieson, C. B. Gilford, and Bill Pronzini.

Then, the lengths to which some go to combat crime are ably illustrated by James Holding with his fast-moving novelette, *Conflict of Interest*.

May each and every story relieve your diet of vapid reports, and shed new light as they entertain.

*Alfred Hitchcock*

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# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

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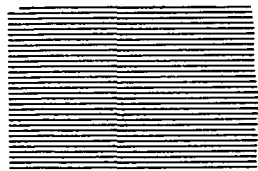
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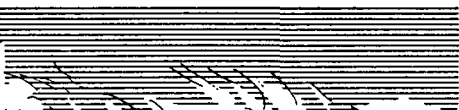
*A cure for boredom very often puts a new slant on life.*



# INCIDENT AT MALIBU BEACH

**B**RAD NORTON lived alone above his boating supply store on the beach at Malibu. In the first week of June, for some obscure reason which probably lay hidden in the complex maze of his unconscious, he had been awakening at three o'clock every morning. He would then toss fitfully, unable to sleep again.

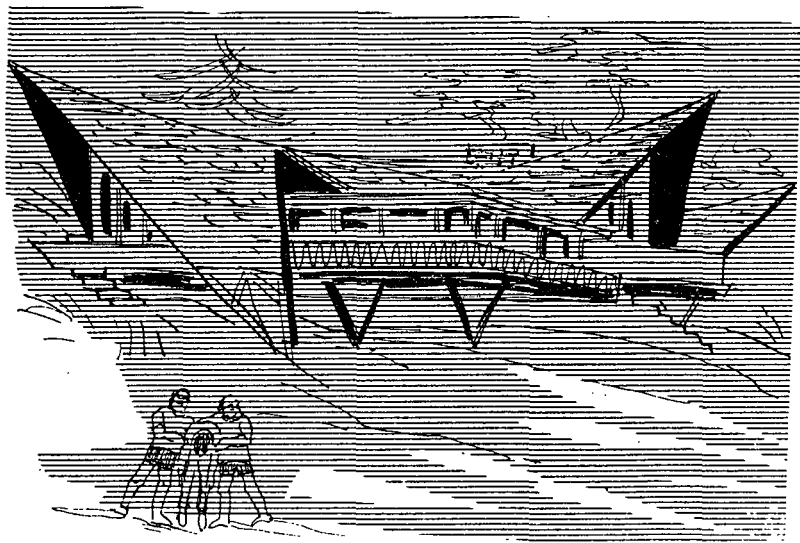
In defense, he went to bed earlier, rising at three in the morning



by Robert Colby

to hike a mile or two along the hard-sand rim of the ocean. He came to enjoy the exercise, the moist breath of the Pacific blown by a chill breeze, and the deep isolation in which to search himself while most of humanity slept.

shortly after three, Brad went down to the beach, descending by stairs from the terrace of his apartment above the store. The sky was overcast, and pockets of fog hugged the coast, diminishing the clarity of sea and shore. It was nearly



The endless coastline, often strewn with great rocks squatting somberly in the boiling surf, was edged with large houses, some the costly sanctums of the very rich. There was seldom a light to be seen in any of them at the hour; and so rarely did he meet another person, there was the curious deception of total abandonment, of wildness unspoiled by human traffic.

On a Wednesday morning,

high tide, the ocean calm with long, easy swells folding inland.

Brad walked briskly near the edge of the surf, threatened by surging fingers of water. He had turned 32 in April but looked younger with his sun-bleached flaxen hair, his bronzed open features and wiry build. A few months earlier he had become a widower. Since then he'd been less gregarious, more withdrawn, though he had a passing acquaintance with

many people, mostly customers who stayed at the beach or came for the summer.

When he had hiked a good mile, he paused below one of the newer, larger houses in the area, a split-level of sprawling, pseudo-Polynesian design. He approached the house, passed a few feet beyond to a vacant lot adjoining it. There he sat in deep shadow on the soft sands fronting the lot. He chose the spot with purpose, for though it was unlikely that he would be challenged, he did not feel comfortable while lingering on the privileged beach before a private house.

He smoked a cigarette and, squinting at the fog-draped shoreline, hunched down in contemplation. He had scooped a shallow grave for the cigarette butt and was covering it with sand when he heard the closing of a door, then voices. They were male voices, muted in the manner of secret urgency but growing more distinct as they came toward the beach, apparently from the other side of the split-level.

Presently, two men appeared in silhouette, moving laboriously in the sand as they carried a third man between them, his arms dangling limply, head lolling in unconsciousness, if not death.

"Dump 'im here while we get the boat," said one of the men in a

hushed growl, releasing his hold.

As Brad watched incredulously, the two men vanished around the far side of the house. They returned in seconds, toting a small outboard motorboat. Lifting the shaft of the motor, they set the boat on the sand beside the body. After a time in which they seemed to be rearranging gear with a mutter of wood-on-wood and a small clatter of chains, one of the men murmured, "Keep this rifle handy in the stern, case we run into trouble."

The body was hoisted into the boat, which was pulled swiftly down the sloping beach to the brink of the water. Then both men retraced their steps, carefully erasing the boat trail with their feet.

The boat was launched skillfully. In the interval between breakers, one man climbed in, produced oars and rowed vigorously while the other shoved it into deeper water and hauled himself aboard. No doubt the motor had been warmed in recent use, for when the prop was lowered and the motor cranked, it came to life at once and the boat, lifting at the bow, sped off into the darkness and was lost behind a gray cover of fog.

There was then nothing but the thin, fading whine of the motor.

A telephone? Brad glanced about. The closed, forbidding face

of every house was wrapped in darkness. Ankles torn by barbed little demons in the tangle of weeds, he raced across the lot to the entrance of the sinister split-level, at the coast highway. A solid wood fence screened the lower regions of the place, but on the mailbox there was a name—*Gilbert Wyndon*—and the house number.

Fixing these in his mind, he loped away toward home along the shoulder of the highway. Soon he came to a gas station, blacked out, but there was a phone booth on the parking apron. He fumbled for a coin, clutched metal and brought up three pennies. With a snort of disgust, he hurled them to the road and bolted on again.

Back in his apartment above the store, he lifted the receiver of the phone, gulped for air, dialed. "Police emergency," he told the operator, and she connected him with the sheriff's substation.

A bland voice, absurdly calm, asked his problem. He explained without dramatics. Seemingly unimpressed, the voice told him officers would be sent in a patrol car to investigate the *Gilbert Wyndon* house, after which they would call at Brad's apartment.

Sure enough, in less than half an hour a couple of uniformed deputies knocked at his door.

"You Mr. Norton?"

"That's right. Brad Norton."

"I'm Davison, my partner is Trumble. You reported prowlers at the Wyndon place?"

"Well, that's an understatement, but—"

"We found nothing at all suspicious. Doors and windows locked, no signs of breaking and entering, no boat tracks on the beach. We shined a light through a livingroom window. The house is closed up, with dust covers on the furniture."

"You didn't go inside?" Brad asked.

"Can't do that without permission or a search warrant," said Trumble. "Not unless we catch someone in the commission of a crime." He spoke as if from rote.

"Is it a crime to take a dead man off in a boat, probably with the intention of planting him at the bottom of the ocean?" Brad questioned.

"Sure is, if we can catch 'em in the act or find evidence to back you up," Davison answered. "These characters just came out of the house with a dead man, heaved him into a boat and hustled him out to sea, huh?"

"Yes. But first they covered their tracks."

"You sure the man was dead?"

"No, but if he wasn't, he is now, I would think."

Officer Davison pursed his lips and shook his head gravely, but somehow conveyed the impression of doubt, if not amusement. He was a young man of good looks, spoiled by the smug set of his jaw. "Could you tell me, sir," he said, "how you happened to be sitting in that particular spot just then, past three in the morning?"

"I couldn't sleep. I went for a walk along the beach, then took a break in front of a vacant lot just by the house."

"Are you acquainted with the Wyndons?"

"Never heard of them until now."

Davison toyed with a long-handled flashlight, tapping it against his palm. "They tell me at the station, Gilbert Wyndon is a multimillionaire. Runs a big die-casting company, something like that. Has a mansion in Bel Air, a yacht at Marina Del Mar. The Malibu spread is just his little summer place." Davison chuckled. "Sure you got the right house?"

"Positive!" Brad told him. "Listen, it's nothing to me, I usually mind my own business. But in this case I thought the police should investigate. These days, of course, murder is getting pretty routine."

"Tell you what," said Davison, ignoring the needle, "we'll turn it over to Homicide. They'll contact

Mr. Wyndon to see if he wants the matter investigated further. Fair enough?"

Brad shrugged in annoyance. "Seems to me that'll take time, and time is running out here—fast. But I've done my part and you know where to find me."

"You'll hear from us, Mr. Norton," Davison replied in parting. "Someone'll be in touch."

Brad didn't believe him. There would be a negative report labeling Brad Norton a probable crank. Nothing would ever come of it. There were too many crimes with real evidence and a visible corpse to expect the cops to battle shadows.

Still, the incident had not left him indifferent. He had been made to appear foolish while doing his best to combat an obvious crime, and his pride demanded vindication.

Near mid-afternoon of the same day there was a surprising turn of events. Mr. Gilbert Wyndon himself phoned Brad at the store. Mr. Wyndon had been informed of the situation by the police. Consequently, in company with his daughter, he had gone to inspect the beach house. He had found not the least indication that intruders had entered his summer place. Nevertheless, he did not take the report so lightly as to dismiss it entirely.

Mr. Wyndon therefore wondered if Brad would be willing to drop around to the beach house at six p.m. to give his firsthand account of the incident? Brad replied that he was not only willing but also anxious to relate his story in order to convince Mr. Wyndon that the police should be goaded to action.

Wyndon then offered to send his chauffeur at six, but Brad declined with thanks, saying he preferred the short walk up the beach. Actually, he wanted to take another quick look in daylight at the sands around the house.

He closed the store at five, and at five-thirty, not bothering to dress for the occasion but wearing his sneakers, denim pants and a safari jacket over a sport shirt, he left to keep the appointment. The skies had cleared and when he arrived in the harsh light of reality at the beach before the Wyndon house, he found the atmosphere anything but ominous. Further, as if the whole dreadful business could have been the product of an evil dream, the sands about the house were innocent, undisturbed.

He began to hunt then for that door from which the body must have been carried. He discovered it on the side facing the neighboring house. Beyond it was a smooth space in the sand which could have

been flattened by the weight of a light boat, but it was hardly significant.

Not caring if he were observed, he backtracked to the heavy door, the one he doubtless heard closing before the intruders appeared with the burden of their crime. Bending, he examined the sand before it minutely, stirring it gently with his foot. He was not at all sure that dried blood, even in quantity, could be detected in sand after many hours.

He was turning to leave when a curved piece of leather caught his attention. He plucked it from the sand and found that it was fastened to a gold wristwatch. It was a man's watch, handsomely designed and certainly expensive. More, the back of the case was engraved with the initials *D. W.* The strap was badly worn and the clasp had parted from the leather, likely under stress.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Brad muttered. He tucked the watch into a pocket and went around to push the bell button.

A girl in her early twenties admitted him. Her hair was long and dark, her eyes darker, accented by pale, cleanly sculptured features in a narrow face. She smiled a greeting, but her eyes were troubled.

"Nice of you to come on short notice, Mr. Norton," she said as

they passed from a garden patio of small trees and flowers into the house. "I'm Carol Wyndon, my father will be down in a moment. He's expecting you, of course."

In the outsized livingroom, the dust covers noted by Deputy Sheriff Davison had been removed from massive pieces designed more for comfort than a display of the Wyndon affluence. Beachside, drapes had been drawn back from a wall of glass, through which the late sun slanted brilliantly.

"I just made martinis," said Carol Wyndon. "Like one?"

"Fine," he answered, and sat with his back to the glare. She brought the drink and faced him from the corner of a sofa.

"We don't usually open the beach house until after the first of July," she commented. "But under the circumstances, we might even keep someone here all year 'round."

"You're taking me seriously, then?"

"Oh, yes." She plucked her glass from a table and sipped. "Perhaps more seriously than the police."

"Well, I don't know why you should have any more faith in me than the cops do."

"My faith in people is not at its best right now," she said with a wisp of smile. "But we do have our reasons to believe that . . ." She

trailed off mysteriously. "Perhaps you'd better talk to my father."

"How large a family are you?" he asked.

"There's just my father, my brother and myself. My mother died a year and a half ago." She turned her head as a tall, lean man with a wavy fluff of graying hair stepped down into the livingroom from a curve of carpeted stairs. "Daddy," she announced, "this is Mr. Norton."

They shook hands. Gilbert Wyndon had a face which was craggy-strong, though pleasant, almost boyish for a man somewhere in his late fifties. His eyes were darkly ringed, he looked haggard. He sat beside his daughter and, giving her hand an affectionate squeeze, peered steadily at Brad.

"You have a boating store here at the beach, Mr. Norton," he said in a tone of preoccupation.

"Call me Brad, if you like, and actually mine is a supply store, gear and fishing tackle. I don't have room to stock boats, though I keep a few outboard motors on hand. In the slow seasons I overhaul marine engines."

Wyndon nodded absently. "Brad," he said solemnly, "I wish we had time for all the niceties, but at the moment I'm on the run. So if you'll forgive me and get right to what you believe went on here

early this morning, I'd be grateful."

Brad told it all again, tersely but thoroughly. Though she tried to contain her reactions, Carol seemed horrified, as if the episode had implications she understood too well. Wyndon's expressions revealed nothing but rapt concentration.

"Now tell me," he said after a pause to reflect, "the man these hoods carried off in the boat, could you describe him? And could you judge his true condition?"

Brad shook his head. "It was pitch dark, you understand. Heavy clouds, no moon. Foggy. But if that man wasn't dead, he was unconscious. I don't see that it makes much difference if they were going to sink him to the bottom."

Carol drew a sharp breath.

"Because they took the man out to sea," said Wyndon, "it does not necessarily follow that they were going to drown him."

"These creeps wore bathing suits?" Carol asked.

"They had bare legs and I assume they wore trunks. And dark shirts of some sort. Probably had dry clothing in the boat."

"Okay," said Wyndon, "that's logical. But did they come from inside this house? There isn't a clue to prove they did. They could have carried the boat to the beach from an auto trailer. In which case my house does not become involved in

any personal sense. Understand?"

"Good try, Mr. Wyndon. Even though I distinctly heard a door closing before these weirdos appeared with the body, I'd be inclined to buy it. Except for this." Brad produced the watch and handed it to Wyndon, who studied it front and back with a deepening frown, turning away from Carol so that she could not see, despite her frantic efforts.

"Where did you find this?" he asked.

"In the sand by the door leading to the beach." Brad glanced at Carol, caught her eye. "The initials on the case are D.W., you'll notice."

"It belongs to Doug—my brother!" Carol blurted.

Wyndon nodded. "Yes, I gave it to him last year, when he graduated from U.C.L.A. I imagine he came down for a swim and lost it then."

Brad said, "The strap is twisted and the clasp has been torn away. I'd say it was loosened in a tussle, then fell apart by the beach door. Maybe your son came down with friends and got into a playful scrap," he added smoothly. "Why don't we ask him? Is he around?"

"Ahh, no," replied Wyndon. "He—he's in San Francisco—visiting."

"Sorry, Mr. Wyndon, but I don't think so. Whatever happened to

him, it wasn't in San Francisco. It was right here."

Carol made a small sound and was then overcome by tears. Wyndon stared at his shoes.

"Obviously you don't want help from the police, though you ought to have it in a hurry," said Brad. "If I've guessed the reason correctly, you have my sympathy."

Wyndon looked up. "Doug was kidnapped," he announced quietly.

"I thought so," said Brad.

"Naturally," Wyndon continued, "we want him to have every chance. So I hope you'll cooperate, Brad. Your silence could save his life."

"It might if he were still alive. What makes you think he is?"

"I talked to him an hour ago; they put him on the phone for the second time. It was a condition I demanded."

"Sounds to me like a trick. You sure it was your son?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"I listened on the extension," said Carol. "He was groggy, vague. They told us he was being kept under—quote—sedation. Meaning, knockout drugs, so he wouldn't know where he was being taken. We were shaken by your story, but for that reason we never believed he was dead."

"Why would he be held here at your own house?" Brad ques-

tioned. "That seems too risky."

"It's only an educated guess," said Wyndon, "but I think that at first he was here of his own free will, hiding out. He's been smoking pot and dropping acid, as they say. Heroin, too, for all I know. He fell in with the hippie crowd and their pushers, the very dregs of that bunch, all perfectly capable of kidnapping him. He was wild, defiant, and I couldn't reach him. He was sometimes gone for weeks. And, sadly, we became strangers."

"He had a key to this place?"

"Certainly. Used it for little pot and pill parties, I suppose. We found evidence of it, but of course we put everything back in order and lied to the police."

"And you think a couple of acid heads or pushers decided to clean up with a kidnapping?"

"Exactly. Came here with a pretense of bringing him dope, then held him for ransom. The phone wasn't turned off and I wouldn't be surprised if they used it to contact me."

"When was the first call?"

"Early yesterday."

"How much?"

"Two hundred thousand. I have it ready to deliver tonight."

Brad shook his head. "That kind of money is unreal to me. Did they give you the instructions yet?"

Wyndon nodded. "Yes, and

they're incredible. I'm to sail my yacht to Catalina Island within a mile of the harbor at Avalon. Then I'm to turn and follow a compass course which will skirt around the island and take me nowhere—just out into miles of empty sea. I'm instructed to follow that course indefinitely. All night, if necessary."

"That's it? That's all of it?"

"No," said Wyndon. "At some unspecified time during the night, providing my yacht is not observed to be in the vicinity of any other vessel or hovering aircraft, I'll receive a signal. The flash of a white light three times, and a red twice, repeated until I acknowledge with the identical signal and shut off power so that I am merely drifting.

"At this point, an outboard motorboat containing one of the men will be sent to pick up the money case, lowered over the side. When the money is delivered to what we'll call the mother ship, my boy will be sent back alone in the outboard. If the boat does not return with the money, if there is a double cross, the kidnappers will speed off, Doug will be shot dead and heaved overboard."

"Clever," said Brad. "Anything else?"

"Yes, we are to run with full lights while they'll be blacked out. We are to maintain absolute radio silence, and they'll be monitoring."

"Seems almost foolproof," said Brad. "Their boat must be fast enough to outrun most anything the police or Coast Guard could muster, or they wouldn't chance it. Still, there should be a way they could be tricked and caught if you were willing to risk the police."

"Yes, but I'm not!" Wyndon said firmly. He glanced at his watch. "I've been ordered to set sail precisely at eight p.m. and my chauffeur should be waiting out front by now. Since you're already involved, Brad, and you might be helpful, will you come along with us?"

"Yes, please do!" Carol implored.

In distress or not, she had a lot going for her, thought Brad. He smiled. "I suppose you people want me in sight so I won't inform to the police," he said.

"In all honesty," Wyndon replied, "that thought did occur to me."

"Well, I might not agree with you, Mr. Wyndon, but I think the decision about the police should be yours. In any case, I'm ready. Let's go."

Outside, a chauffeur was standing beside a hearse-like limousine. He opened the door and they entered, Wyndon clutching a gray attaché case containing, he said, the two hundred thousand dollar ransom. During the short drive to the

yacht basin, an anxious silence settled over the group, broken only by Wyndon's declaration, sotto voce, that the chauffeur, like all others of the Wyndon entourage, had not been trusted with the secret. The boss was merely taking "a little pleasure cruise to Catalina."

Wyndon's yacht, the *Carol Wyndon*, was a rakish white ship of burnished splendor with a blue-monogrammed, ornamental stack. Though certainly imposing and seaworthy, it was not one of the giants among pleasure craft. With a practiced eye, Brad judged it to be not more than seventy feet in length.

The yacht was manned by two men in crisp whites, introduced to Brad as Captain Mike Kendrick and his mate, Hank Sadler. Wyndon maneuvered them to the wheelhouse to break the news of the kidnapping and instructions to follow, while Carol waited nervously with Brad at the rail aft.

At eight on the button, Wyndon reappeared. Engines sputtered and throbbed to life. Hank Sadler undid the lines fore and aft, Kendrick eased the cruiser from the dock and fed power.

Darkness closed in as they rode the first gentle swells of the ocean. The sea was mild, the sky clear and domed with stars. In deck chairs aft, the three sipped high-

balls served by the mate; and but for the heavy mood and the grim purpose of the cruise, Brad might have enjoyed himself thoroughly.

To relieve the stubborn silence imposed by Gilbert Wyndon and his daughter, he said conversationally, "She seems marvelously steady, at least. What's her speed?"

"Cruising speed about sixteen knots," Wyndon answered, as if returning from a distance within himself.

"We should make Catalina in about two hours," Brad suggested.

For a time, Wyndon did not reply. Then, "We should pick up some company, well behind, after we change course at Avalon," he said.

"Yeah," Brad agreed. "Apparently that's the base of operations." He scanned the open water ahead, looked back at the glimmering lights of the receding shoreline. "Good visibility tonight. With a high-powered scope or binoculars they should be able to spot our lights for a long distance."

"True," said Wyndon. "And run circles around us without being seen." He scooped binoculars from beside the money case he had placed in readiness on the deck. Lifting them to his eyes, he adjusted the focus.

"You both make it sound as if it were a game of hide and seek,"

Carol said disgustedly, "when the only thing that matters is whether Doug is alive and well."

Wyndon lowered the binoculars, reached for her hand. "I know, baby, I know. It's only a distraction, you see. In the worst hours of my life, when some disaster threatened me, I've always managed to control my emotions by keeping my mind on details. That's the key to survival."

He handed her the glasses. She took them reluctantly, but after a minute she became involved, tensely searching the dark, rumpled face of the water.

It was going on eleven p.m. They had changed course outside the harbor at Avalon and had traveled to a point some ten miles southwest of Catalina Island. Brad, Wyndon and Carol had moved to the bow and were standing at the starboard rail. There had been other boats cruising the waters around Catalina, but for several miles now they had not seen a single vessel, lighted or otherwise.

"Just because you don't see them, doesn't mean they're not out there," said Wyndon, who had again taken possession of the binoculars.

"A fast boat at full throttle churns up a lot of water," Brad answered. "Still, for a distance of even a mile—"

Abruptly, the twin engines of the *Carol Wyndon* lost power, died altogether.

Wyndon swung his head sharply. "What's going on?" he shouted at Kendrick, who had given the wheel to Sadler and was coming forward with long strides, his own binoculars strapped about his neck.

"Lights off the port bow!" Kendrick cried, and lifted his glasses.

Wyndon, who had been searching the starboard side just then, crossed to port and raised his binoculars. Brad and Carol rushed to join him.

"I don't see any lights!" said Wyndon stridently. "Nothing at all out there, Mike."

"Maybe not," said Kendrick in another voice, softly menacing. "But you can see *this*, can't you?"

A few feet removed, legs spread against the easy roll of the drifting ship, Kendrick squinted at them from behind a .45 automatic. Though not especially tall, he was a burly chunk of man who looked as if he would be trouble even without the gun.

Wyndon, recovering from the shock, was staring above the captain's shoulder at the wheelhouse.

"Don't expect help from Hank," said Kendrick. "He's up there starin' down your throats with a

rifle. Take a look for yourself."

Brad looked and saw the rifle barrel, Hank Sadler in shadow behind it.

"Hank doesn't surprise me as much as you do," said Wyndon coolly. "He's a new man and you hired him. But I thought I knew you better, Mike."

"What you know about me, Mr. Wyndon, is no more than varnish on the deck, glossy paint on the hull. But underneath is *me*, hungry for a big fat slice of your pie. Now go get it for me, Mr. Wyndon."

"Where's Doug? What've you done with him, Mike?"

"Well, he's doped up a bit, not much more than usual. Otherwise he's shipshape and ready to travel. We're gonna let him go—if you don't make waves. He might even get home before you do."

"Can you give me one reason to believe you, Mike?"

"You bet. This gun. It says I can't lose, so I don't have to lie. Get the case, Mr. Wyndon."

Wyndon crossed to a deck chair and returned with the case. As Hank approached to cover the group with his rifle, Kendrick opened the case and there was the green wink of currency before he shut the lid.

"I thought you and Doug were such good buddies, Mike," Wyndon said disdainfully, as if baiting

Kendrick. "You really surprise me."

"Yeah? Well, we were such good buddies he told me all his secrets, then kept borrowing dough from me to buy grass and acid when you cut him off at the pockets. Promised to pay it back with a sweet bonus, but I never saw a penny."

"I got to brooding about him and the whole rotten scheme of things. So we bought a little fiber glass boat and we snatched that hopped-up, no-good kid over to a shack in Catalina after we held him in the beach house long enough for Hank to give you the pitch on the phone. It was that simple."

"Well, there's one born every minute, Mr. Wyndon. Now you three walk ahead of us, down the companionway to the cabins."

Hank waved the rifle. "Let's go," he growled. "Move it!"

Down below, they were herded into Wyndon's stateroom. "We're gonna lock you up and then we're gonna shove off in the dinghy," said Kendrick. "After we're long gone, you can break out and head for home. Time you get there, we'll be on our way outta the country. So long, suckers."

He backed off behind the .45, locking the door behind him. There was a long silence, spaced by isolated sounds without clear meaning or identity. Then the two

men could be heard on deck, lowering the powerboat from its davit. These sounds were climaxed by the whine of a starter, the snarl of a motor coming to life.

From Wyndon's porthole, the boat could be seen racing into the darkness, hurling plumes of water from the bow.

"Heading back to Catalina if they don't change course," said Wyndon. "Won't take long—that so-called dinghy was designed to double as a speedboat. They'll probably hop a plane to the mainland, then catch another to Mexico."

"I don't like it," said Brad. "When you add it all up, it doesn't total. If they haven't disabled us, you can have the police after them in no time. Suppose they do escape? What kidnappers would reveal themselves and risk being hunted anywhere in the world? There's gotta be a catch, a gimmick."

Wyndon nodded. "Whatever else Kendrick is, he's not dumb."

"Are we gonna just stand here talking!" cried Carol. "Let's crash out of here. If Doug isn't already dead, they might kill him if we don't hurry!"

"I need another minute to think," said Brad. "Your brother isn't dead, I'm sure. That much of what Kendrick said, that he didn't

have to lie behind a gun, I believed. I watched his face when he made his point. But I don't buy the Catalina bit. A man like Kendrick would know better than to risk such a distance in a tiny cork of a boat in waters where sudden storms can blow up without warning. . . .

"No, I just smelled something else in the wind. C'mon, let's get this door open!"

He took turns with Wyndon, battering with shoulders, booting with feet. The lock held, but the wood splintered and finally gave.

"So far, so good," said Brad. "Too good to be true. Let's see if they've left us a clue. Are there crew's quarters?"

"Up forward," said Wyndon. "I'll show you."

The door was open to a small cabin starboard with double bunks. It was empty of all but a couple of hastily discarded uniforms. They returned to the passageway which terminated forward at a small, solid door. Brad found it locked.

"What's in here?" he asked Wyndon.

"Forward compartment, storage space for rope and gear."

"The key?"

"Kendrick has it. I'm seldom on board except in summer. But—wait here."

He went off and returned in sec-

onds with a fire ax. Brad took it and at that moment their eyes met.

"I know what you're thinking," said Wyndon.

"You know *part* of what I'm thinking," Brad said grimly, and swung the ax.

They found Doug Wyndon inside, roped hand and foot, gagged and chained to a stanchion. He was unconscious, or semiconscious, for when he was freed and the gag was removed, he moaned, stirred, slept on.

They placed him on the big bed in Wyndon's stateroom and left Carol to nurse him. "He was here all the time," Wyndon said with astonishment.

"Sure," Brad replied. "They used your yacht, your house, even your phone. They'd have used that speedboat for the kidnapping, too, but it was too heavy to beach and carry."

"They must've made the last call from the yacht," said Wyndon. "When she's tied up, you can plug in and dial, same as with any other phone. Out to sea, it's ship-to-shore through the marine operator."

"If they left that radio in work-

ing order," Brad said, "we've got them boxed!"

"I'll check it," said Wyndon, and raced off, while Brad, as if on a hunch, went to the engine room.

He could find no parts removed or damaged, but after a couple of minutes of careful inspection, he did discover an ignition wire which apparently had no practical purpose. He traced it to a square wooden box of considerable size. Brad lifted the cover and stared at enough dynamite to blow the ship to the bottom in charred fragments.

He had detached the wire and was lugging the heavy box out to the open deck aft when he heard the deep rumble of the engine being fired up.

In the wheelhouse, having found the radio dead, Gilbert Wyndon had given the ignition switch an experimental twist.

Brad looked down at his burden and knew that when the wealthy Gilbert Wyndon heard his story, he was going to be a very grateful man. But Brad realized at the same time that even if he weren't, it didn't really matter at all.



*Some old-fashioned modesty may reveal more than it hides.*



# WHO NEEDS AN ENEMY?

**T**HE MAIN THING to be learned from my father's murder is: Don't trust anybody.

I've tried to think what would be the best way of telling you about it. If I bring you in at the point where the police captain started interrogating us, that should do it.

But first, a bit of background.

Daddy was Philip Rendell. I know you've heard of him, or at least you've seen his work. He was

the head of the Rendell Agency, and responsible for some of the most imaginative commercials ever seen on TV. He was a vital man. At forty-five, when he was murdered, he just seemed to be getting up steam. Certainly he wasn't slowing down at all. He kept himself in marvelous physical condition, terribly fit. In fact, you might say the poor dear was just the least bit vain about it.

Mother died in a car accident about two years ago. Since then I'd looked after Daddy and her brother, the Reverend Mister James Earl, who still lives with us. That's how he likes to be introduced: the Reverend Mister James Earl. Uncle James, I must admit, is a bit stuffy. Nice, but stuffy. He's about fifty, I suppose; fairly tall, a little on the heavy side, rather skimpy blond hair combed

by Nancy  
Schachterle

straight back, colorless features except for his flashing blue eyes, but they're hidden behind the most awful steel-rimmed glasses.

Miles Ericson was staying with us that weekend. As well as being our family doctor, Miles is a bachelor friend of Daddy's of long standing. He's a couple of years younger than Daddy, tall, well-built, not terribly good-looking, being rather prematurely bald and having a nose that's just a bit too large for male beauty, but Miles is a real swinger.

And last, but I hope not least, there's me. I'm Jennifer Rendell, twenty-three years old, a Bryn Mawr graduate, working in a very minor capacity in Daddy's agency. I may modestly say that I'm quite pretty, with violet eyes and long blonde hair, and am considered to have a very nice figure, though I think a little on the petite side.

So there we were, the four of us, rattling about in the big Rendell ancestral mansion that Friday night. I'm being facetious, really. It was a big house, but by no means a mansion. We had a housekeeper, but Daddy had given her the weekend off, and none of the rest of the help lived in.

Now, not to cover the ground twice, needlessly, I'll skip to the time after Daddy was killed, when Captain Woodrow was trying to

find out just what had happened.

Even at such an awful time, and though I did feel rather guilty about it, I was proud that Daddy was important enough that they felt the head of the police department should come to the house in person. Captain Woodrow was close to retirement, a tired-looking old man whose square face was seamed with parallel slashes—between his dark, bushy eyebrows, alongside his bumpy nose, and long, sad crevices on either side of a sensitive mouth that looked out of place on a policeman. It was a face you don't forget easily.

He interviewed us individually, and then gathered us all together in the livingroom. Ordinarily, it is a charming room—warm and inviting—but then I felt chilled, alone in an alien space with our doctor, our minister, and a stranger who'd come to see who had murdered my father.

Miles was standing before the unlighted fireplace in what would seem to be a theatrical pose, but I could tell he was extremely tense and the pose was simply his way of trying to look relaxed. Uncle James didn't try. He sat bolt upright on the edge of the straight-backed chair that went with Mother's antique secretary by the window. I had chosen the sofa, but was already sorry. If I sat back comfort-

ably, my legs stuck out and my skirt rode too high, and I wasn't about to sit perched on the edge and have them think I was nervous. Daddy would have expected that much of his daughter.

"Let me recap," Captain Woodrow said. "You all had dinner together, about seven o'clock." He looked from one to another of us, and I could see Miles and Uncle James nodding in an idiotic way. They reminded me of the heads on those children's toys, balanced on a broad metal strip, that just won't stop bobbing back and forth.

"And you were finished just before eight o'clock?" They nodded again, and I realized to my horror that I was doing it too.

"You say that in spite of having a weekend guest, Mr. Rendell had brought work home with him, and retired to the study to go over it?"

Miles spoke up. "It wasn't unusual. I'm here almost as often as I'm at my own home, and I don't expect—didn't expect Philip to put himself out any more for me than he would for the family."

Captain Woodrow nodded as if he understood. "And you, Reverend Earl—"

"Mister Earl, if you please," Uncle James interrupted. "I like to make that clear. Reverend is an adjective, not a title. *Mister* Earl."

Actually, though I've never tried

to pin him down on the point, I believe Uncle James is wrong. He may have been right in some pontifical past, but Reverend is now a completely acceptable noun. But it would be useless to try to convince him. He's like that.

Captain Woodrow cleared his throat and made what might pass for apologetic noises. "And you," he continued, "went to your bedroom to study your sermon?"

"That is quite correct."

"That left you, Mr. Ericson, and you, Miss Jennifer," and he bowed to me in courtly fashion, "in here together."

"That's right," Miles said.

Captain Woodrow consulted a page in the notebook he'd been scribbling in ever since he arrived. "At nine o'clock, or thereabouts, you, Mr. Ericson, interrupted your host in the study."

Miles bridled. "You don't have to make it sound like that. It wasn't work that couldn't be disturbed. I'd been sitting here thinking about a problem that needed discussing, and decided to tack . . . to go and talk it over with him."

I've been crazy about Miles since babyhood, but my father had been murdered, and I couldn't help it. "You were screaming at him!" I cried.

Miles started toward me with a pacifying look on his pleasant,

homely face, but stopped. I suppose I cringed away from him.

"You were quarreling," Captain Woodrow stated.

"I can't deny that. Jennifer heard us shouting. But I didn't kill him! Phil and I were closer than most brothers. He was my very dear friend, and I'd gladly have died for him, if that doesn't sound melodramatic. I want it on the record, here and now; I did not kill Philip Rendell."

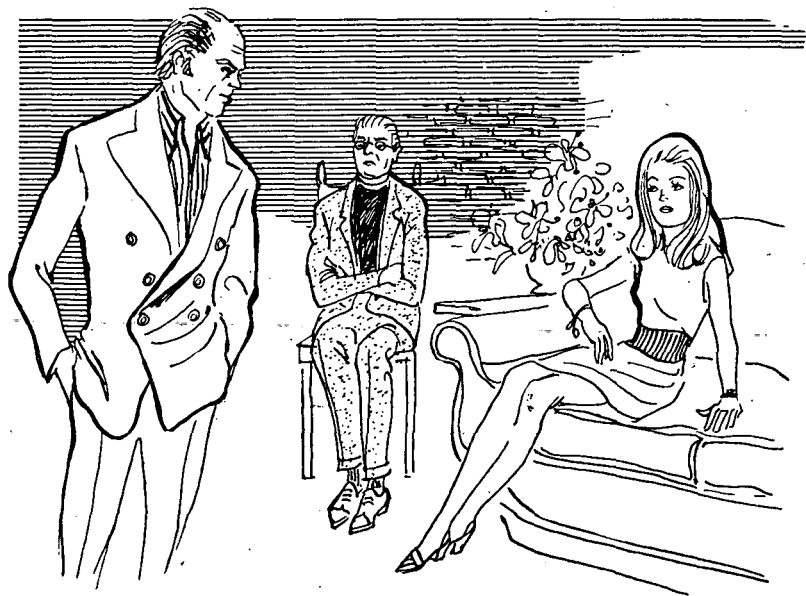
"Would you mind telling us what you were quarreling about?"

"It has nothing to do with Phil's murder."

"I'm afraid we'll have to decide

that, Mr. Ericson. Let's hear it."

The muscles around Miles' jaw tightened, and he flushed darkly, but apparently he decided it would be pointless to hold out. "Phil had told me earlier that he planned to ask a certain young woman to marry him. I have been seeing this young lady for some time now. If it was right for them, I'd have backed out gracefully, but I happened to believe they would have been miserably unhappy together. For one thing, even though in business he's completely up-to-date, in family affairs he's terribly rigid and old-fashioned. Besides not wanting to lose her myself, I was



entirely against her marrying him. He, naturally, didn't agree."

Miles turned to me. "I'm sorry, Jennifer. You'd have found out eventually."

I couldn't think of the right thing to say, so I didn't say anything. I just smiled what was probably a sickly smile in his direction, without looking directly at him.

"How long were you in there?"

"It couldn't have been over ten or fifteen minutes. We weren't getting anywhere. I found I was beginning to lose my temper. Much as I liked him, Phil could get my goat. He'd gone upstairs to change into his dressing gown before he settled down to work. He was a vain man. He sat there, his silk dressing gown open to the waist, probably thinking himself the picture of virility with that hairy chest showing, all curly, without a touch of gray. Well, he was insinuating that he was the better man, and I thought it best to get out before we started getting ugly. We were much too good friends to let that happen. I figured if I left he might calm down and think over the things I'd said, and we could discuss it a little more rationally another time. I said so, and left."

"And you say you were with him fifteen minutes at the most."

"About that."

Captain Woodrow turned to

Uncle James. "And you were the next to see him. What time was that?"

"Nine-twenty. Even on the second floor it was possible to hear the two of them arguing. I heard Miles come upstairs, and allowed five minutes for Philip to get back to work before I went to the study. I didn't disturb him. I'm used to slipping in and out quietly when he's working. I knew right where the book was that I wanted. I went directly to it, took it from the shelf, and studied it for something like five minutes; but I found the study terribly warm, and decided I should take the book upstairs, where it was cooler. So I slipped out quietly again."

"You told me earlier," Captain Woodrow said, "that you didn't actually see Mr. Rendell when you went into the study."

"That is correct. I suppose it's the ostrich principle. If one doesn't look at him, he won't look at oneself and be disturbed. I was trying to be as unobtrusive as possible."

"But he was at the desk?"

"Oh, yes. I could tell he was seated there—I'd guess now, trying to call the scene to mind, that he was leaning forward, both arms on the desk, but that would be just an impression."

"So he could have been dead then?"

"Great Heavens! I hope not!"

Captain Woodrow turned to me. "And you, Miss Jennifer, went to the study around a quarter to ten to say good night to your father before going upstairs, and found him dead, his dressing gown pinned to him by a letter opener through his heart?"

"Yes. It was a Toledo steel opener I brought him from Spain." I started to sob.

Miles and Uncle James moved to my side to comfort me.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I don't like to seem the emotional type. I couldn't help it. Really, Captain Woodrow, you must start looking in the neighborhood for the person who did it. It's impossible to think that either Mr. Ericson or my uncle could have murdered Daddy. The study is right inside the front door. Somebody must have slipped in and stabbed him, although I don't know why. He doesn't keep any money there."

"That door wasn't locked?"

"No," Uncle James volunteered. "This has always been a peaceful area. The house is never locked, except when there's nobody here."

"The proverbial vagrant is a most unlikely suspect in a murder case," Captain Woodrow ventured.

"No more unlikely than Uncle James," I snapped.

The captain shook his head.

"No," he said, "I believe your uncle might be considered to have a very powerful motive for your father's death. Isn't it true," and he whirled on Uncle James, "that in the two years since your sister's death you have brooded over it constantly, blaming Philip Rendell for the accident which caused her death?"

For an instant Uncle James went white around the mouth, and then he flushed horribly. His mouth opened and closed like a goldfish against the side of a fish tank. I ducked my head so I wouldn't have to watch him any longer, my nerves taut with suspense. When he got his voice, what was he going to say?

He finally spoke, his voice low and quiet, and very dignified. "It is true, perhaps, that I have in times past harbored the thought that my brother-in-law was responsible for my sister's death. But I can assure you unequivocally that I did not kill him, for that or any other reason."

Captain Woodrow breathed out heavily, like someone who has just come in from a hard run. "No, I don't believe you did," he said. "Listening to all your evidence, I have seen one point that makes it quite clear to me who murdered Philip Rendell."

The three of us were like some kind of a three-headed automatic

creature, gasping in unison and turning sharply to look at him, wide-eyed and tense.

He passed a look among us, the eyes anxious in his tired old face.

"I know *who* murdered your father," he told me. "I just don't know yet *why*." He paused for a moment to lubricate his voice. "Two points have come out about your father, Miss Rendell. He was vain, and he was old-fashioned. Mr. Ericson says he was irritated by the sight of the curly hair on your father's chest. We found him stabbed with his own letter opener, through a closed dressing gown. Mr. Earl found the study uncomfortably warm, so your father wouldn't have closed his dressing gown after Mr. Ericson left because he was chilly. Nor would he have closed it when Mr. Earl arrived. He was proud of his virile chest. Besides, Mr. Earl was not really supposed to be visible to him, according to an unspoken working arrangement between them. Nor would he have closed it for your imaginary vagrant. For whom, then, would he have closed his

dressing gown?" Woodrow asked.

I heard the gasps as understanding struck.

"When his young daughter enters the room, a modest, old-fashioned man is going to automatically close his dressing gown, no matter how virile, or how proud of his ungrayed, hairy chest. Your father was not dead when you entered the room, Miss Rendell. You were the one who picked up that Toledo steel opener you brought him from Spain and struck him through the heart. Why, Miss Rendell? Why?"

I was on my feet, not really knowing what I was saying or doing. I think I clawed at that policeman. I told them about Daddy, my Daddy, whom I finally had to myself after his wife died. Then I heard the quarrel, heard that he was going to marry that silly girl Miles was always bringing to the house. After Miles went upstairs I sat there, thinking. And finally I knew what I had to do, so nobody would ever take him away from me, so he'd be mine, always.

Yes, I did it. I told you in the beginning: Don't trust anybody.



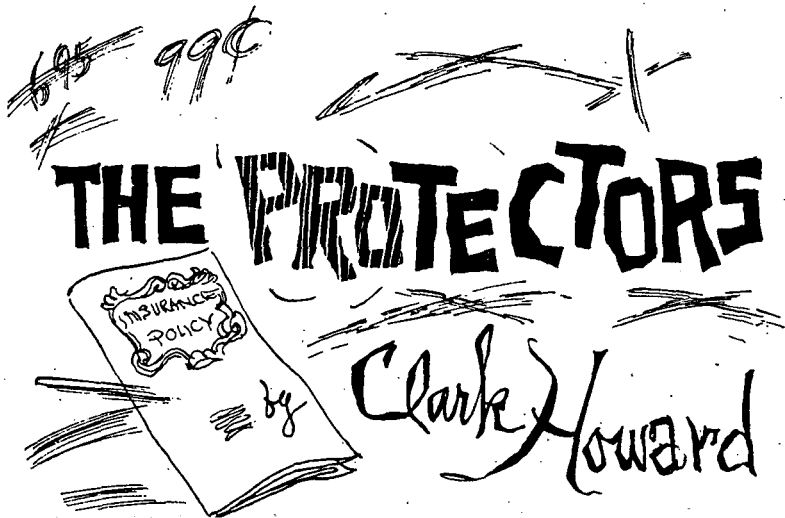
*A little added precaution may be required to keep the records straight.*



**M**ARTIN WILK was straightening a tray of female vocalist albums in the popular music section when he heard someone tapping with a coin on the front window. He stopped what he was doing and went to the front of the store where he

for a couple of days yet," he told the caller.

"Good, I'm glad I caught you in time," the man smiled. He stepped forward and Martin automatically opened the door wider. "My name is Edward Slack," the man said



pulled aside the paper he had taped to the glass and looked out. A man in a conservative business suit with a briefcase in one hand was standing at the door. Wilk let go of the paper and opened the door a foot.

"We won't be open for business

when he got inside. He handed Martin a business card. "Slack Insurance. My firm is Bay City's exclusive vandalism insurance agency."

Martin frowned slightly and closed the door. Slack was already

walking farther into the store; Martin followed him, holding the business card.

"I didn't know there was such a thing as vandalism insurance by itself," he said. "Isn't that a part of the ordinary business policy?"

"Usually," Slack said. "You probably already have it if you've got a business liability policy. But with a nice new record store like you've got here, it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a little extra coverage." Slack opened his briefcase on one of the counters and took out an application form. Smiling, he clicked the point down on a ball-point pen and began writing. "I've got a policy here that will keep your mind vandalism-free for only fifty dollars a week—"

*"Fifty dollars a week!"* Martin said.

"It's a bargain, believe me," said Slack, still smiling. "Look at it this way: we're a growing young town, you'll be the only record store in the community, you're bound to net two, two-fifty a week minimum. If you don't have any business interruptions, that is; serious vandalism damage or anything of that sort—"

"What is this," Martin said indignantly, "some kind of a protection racket?"

"Certainly not," Edward Slack answered stiffly. The smile faded

from his face. "You have my card. I am a legitimate businessman—"

"Legitimate!" Martin snorted. "You come in here asking me to pay twenty-five percent of my net income for an insurance policy and you call it legitimate?" He stretched his arm out straight and pointed a stiff finger at the door. "Get out!"

"There's certainly no need to be rude—"

"Out," Martin's voice rose, "before I throw you out!"

"Threats of violence aren't called for either," Slack said. He clicked up the point of his pen and closed his briefcase. At the door he paused to look back. "Don't expect to make many friends in Bay City unless you improve your attitude," he advised. Martin took a step toward him and Slack hurried from the store.

*The nerve of that joker,* Martin thought. *Fifty bucks a week!*

He resumed his work on the female vocalist albums, muttering irritably to himself.

Shortly before two that afternoon, following a leisurely lunch at the Bay City Coffee Shop down the street, Martin returned to the store to put in a few more hours on his displays. He had just unlocked the front door when two men stepped quickly beside him.

One of them took him firmly by the elbow.

"Right on inside," he ordered Martin.

They were big men, both of them; brawny like wrestlers, wearing turtlenecks, Levi's and sneakers. They forced Martin into the store and locked the paper-covered door behind them.

"There's no money in the place," Martin told them.

"We don't want money," one of them said.

"That's right," his partner agreed. "We're not thieves; we're vandals." He pushed Martin against the nearest wall and held up a right fist wrapped in a set of dull brass knuckles. "You take one step away from that wall and I'll plant these an inch deep in your face," he warned. He bobbed his head at his partner. "Get to work."

The partner walked over to the nearest tray of records, stretched his big hands to lift out a thick stack, held them up in front of him for a split instant, then dropped them haphazardly to the floor.

Against the wall, Martin turned pale and swallowed dryly.

The partner stepped to the next tray and did the same thing. He emptied two more after that, dumping the records onto a growing pile.

Martin wiped suddenly wet

palms against his trouser legs. Once he almost stepped forward, but the sight of the brass knuckles stopped him.

"Relax," said the man guarding him. "The records aren't being damaged; just messed up a little."

He turned to look as his partner used the side of one foot to shove the pile of record albums and send them toppling over to slide the length of the newly tiled floor.

"Since this place is having a grand opening," said the man with the knuckles, "why don't you fix up a few sale items for the new customers?"

"Yeah, good idea."

The partner fished a red grease pencil from his pocket and went over to a section of double-record classical albums. Methodically he went through them one by one, drawing a heavy line through the label price of six ninety-five, and repricing each of them at ninety-nine cents.

When he finished changing the prices, the partner went back to dumping trays of records onto the floor; he made several piles and then systematically kicked them all over the floor until they were thoroughly mixed up. Afterward he used another grease pencil to draw random slashes of black along the glass counters and on the walls. When he tired of that, he took



Martin's small fire extinguisher and sprayed its foamy chemical into the record trays he had emptied. His last act was to open the glass showcase at the front of the store and indiscriminately strew the selection of needles and other stereo accessories all over the floor.

"I guess I've had enough fun for one day," he said then, and came over to join Martin and the other man at the wall.

"I want you to notice," said the man with the knuckles, "that we didn't really damage anything. The records can all be picked up and sorted out again; the trays can be cleaned out; and those grease marks may take a lot of scrubbing, but they come off okay too." He grinned pleasantly. "The point I'm making is that we're not really bad guys; we're just a couple of harmless vandals. You'll find a lot of us in Bay City." He slipped the hand with the brass knuckles into his pocket. "Now me and my partner are going to leave. Don't try following us or running out onto the street yelling or anything like that; it wouldn't be smart—or healthy."

The two of them went casually out the door, leaving Martin standing at the wall with wide eyes and open mouth. He looked around him at the shambles that had been his shiny, orderly, almost-ready-to-open record store. He looked at the

scattered records, the marks on the walls and counters, the album trays filled with blue fire extinguisher foam—

*Slack*, he thought. *Edward Slack, that insurance salesman.*

Martin's eyes narrowed and his mouth closed into a tight line. Sure, it had to be him; it was all too obvious *not* to be. Slack tried to sell him a phony protection policy, and when it didn't work he sent in a couple of goons to wreck the place.

*Well, I don't have to take it!* Martin resolved, slamming one fist into an open palm. *There are laws against this sort of thing. I'll go to the police!*

He gingerly threaded his way through the path of littered records and left the store. Grim-faced, he hurried toward the town square where the courthouse was located.

The Bay City police chief's name was Dyer. He was a broad man with the leathery look of someone who had come up through the ranks. He listened patiently to Martin Wilk's story and then rubbed his square jaw and shook his head slowly. "I can put out a description bulletin on the two men who wrecked your store, Mr. Wilk, but I'm afraid there's nothing I can do as far as this man Slack is concerned—"

"But *he's* the one I want arrested," Martin protested. "He's the angleader, he's behind the whole thing!"

"Mr. Wilk, you could come in here and tell me he was head of the Cosa Nostra, but I'd still need proof to arrest him."

"Proof! What more proof do you want? Come down to my store, look at the shambles his hoodlums left it in!"

"I intend to have someone look over your store," Chief Dyer said. "In fact, I'm going to have a police photographer take pictures of it. But please try to understand that the factual evidence of your store having been vandalized is not sufficient reason to arrest Slack. I've got to have *cause* to arrest a man. So far, all you've given me regarding Slack is assumption."

Martin spread his hands incredulously. "But—but he tried to make me buy protection from him—"

"He tried to sell you an insurance policy, Mr. Wilk; an expensive one, to be sure, but still an insurance policy. And from the looks of this business card he gave you, the man is a legitimate broker, licensed and bonded. I'll check out his business license, of course—"

"I don't want his license checked," Martin snapped. "I want him arrested, and don't tell me you

don't have cause or whatever. Not three hours after I refused to buy his fifty-dollar-a-week protection, two thugs came into my store and did *exactly* what his so-call policy would have prevented! I suppose you would call that a mere coincidence?"

"Mr. Wilk," Dyer said patiently, "suppose he had offered to sell you an automobile collision policy. Suppose you had declined, and then three hours later your car was side-swiped by a hit-and-run driver. Would you want me to arrest Mr. Slack for that?"

"That's beside the point—"

"I think it's *exactly* to the point," Dyer said. "You could no more prove that Slack was connected with the hit-and-run driver than you can prove that he's connected with the two thugs who hit your store. Now be reasonable, Mr. Wilk."

"Am I to understand that you intend to do nothing about this man?" Martin asked stiffly.

"Mr. Wilk," the police chief said, "I *can't* do anything about him, not without factual evidence." He rubbed his square jaw again. "Look, why don't you try the Bay City Businessmen's Bureau? Maybe there's some way they can help you."

Martin glowered at Dyer for a moment, then rose and stalked

angrily out of the chief's office.

The manager of the Bay City Businessmen's Bureau was a well-dressed, personable man named Oxford. He tugged gently at one ear as he studied the business card Martin had given him.

"Slack," he said thoughtfully, "Edward Slack." He shook his head. "The name isn't familiar so we couldn't have received too many complaints on him. I always recognize the bad ones. Of course, he could be new in town, too. Let me check my insurance file—"

He rose from his desk and went to a bank of file cabinets along one wall. He fingered through a drawer of files.

"Let's see—Skinner, Skipworth, Skirnak, Slade, Sloan—no, no Slack." He closed the drawer. "I'll take a look in my card file; he may have been active in another line."

Oxford moved down to a set of smaller drawers and pulled one open. He withdrew a stack of index cards and fanned them out in his hand. Studiously he checked the name typed in capital letters at the top of each card. After a moment he said, "No, the closest thing I have is a fellow named Slake, first name Henry, who was running a TV repair swindle about a year ago. Couldn't be the same man though; Sam Dyer, our police

chief, ran this fellow out of town.

"Really?" Martin said bitterly. "That surprises me. Anyway couldn't he have come back to town?"

Oxford smiled a knowing smile. "Not likely. When Chief Dye runs a man out of Bay City, he stays out." The Businessmen's Bureau manager returned to his desk and picked up the phone. "Let me try one more thing," he said, dialing. "There's a state insurance agent's association that might be able to give us a line on Slack—Hello, Mr. Nickhoff, please—" He covered the receiver with his hand and continued talking. "Dave Nickhoff over in Clayville is the president of the association; if anyone can help us, it'll be Dave." Momentarily he removed his hand and said, "Dave? Bob Oxford here. Dave, we've had a routine inquiry on an agent here in Bay City, fellow named Edward Slack. I was wondering if you knew anything about him?"

He paused, pursing his lips thoughtfully as he listened. Martin, sitting in front of the desk, drummed his fingers soundlessly on the arm of the chair. He swallowed dryly, thinking of the cleaning job waiting for him in his store. Picturing the shambles the vandals had left it in caused his anger to begin bubbling again.

"Okay, Dave, I appreciate your help," Oxford was saying into the phone. "Let me know if I can return the favor. Fine. Good-bye, Dave." He hung up and sighed heavily. "Dave says he met Slack once or twice, says as far as he knows the man is a legitimate licensed agent. Their organization has had no complaints of any kind regarding his ethics or practices—"

"What you're saying," Martin interrupted, "is that you aren't going to do anything about him, right?"

"Just what would you *have* me do, Mr. Wilk?" Oxford asked with a slight frown.

"I don't know," Martin snapped, "but there must be *something* that can be done! Can't you get his license taken away?"

"To revoke a business license requires a hearing before the city council, Mr. Wilk," Oxford said sternly. "I happen to be a member of that body, and I can tell you from personal experience that my associates and I would not consider taking away a businessman's license on the basis of what you've told me here today. Why, if we did a thing like that, the newspaper in this town would—"

"That's it!" Martin interjected almost gleefully. "The newspaper! I'll go to the newspaper; they'll listen to me!" He was up and heading for the door almost before Ox-

ford knew what was happening.

"Mr. Wilk," he warned, "it won't do to go making rash accusations to the press—"

But Martin did not hear him; he was already out of the office and hurrying down the stairs.

The *Bay City Herald's* editor wore a crew cut, a bow tie, and a perpetual scowl. His name was Criller and he had the capacity to stare holes in people.

"You say you took your story to the police," he said tonelessly. "What did they tell you?"

"That there was nothing they could do without more evidence."

"And then you say you went to the Businessmen's Bureau. How far did you get with them?"

"About as far as I got with the police. The man there said they couldn't do anything about Slack's license."

"So now you've come to me," Criller said. "What do you expect me to do for you?"

Martin shrugged. "I—I'm not sure. I thought newspapers liked to find out about things like this. I thought they liked to write stories that exposed people like this person Slack—"

"Mr. Wilk," Criller said flatly, "have you ever heard of the word libel? Or the word slander?"

Martin wet his lips. "Why, I—

yes, certainly I've heard of them."

"Do you know what they mean?"

"Well, yes, I think so. Roughly, I mean."

"Roughly, eh? Then let me tell you what they mean *specifically*, Mr. Wilk." He leaned forward and folded his hands on the desk. "Libel, Mr. Wilk, is the act of publishing a defamatory statement about someone—something like calling him a thief or other unsavory name. And slander, Mr. Wilk, is the act of speaking that same kind of statement. To put it more simply, slander is what you've been committing against this fellow Slack since you came into my office; and libel is apparently what you're trying to get *me* to commit, against that same person. Now I ask you, Mr. Wilk, why are you trying to make me get my newspaper sued?"

"I'm not," Martin protested, "really. I'm not trying to cause trouble—"

"Then I'd hate to meet you if you *were* trying, Mr. Wilk," the editor said caustically. "Now, I'm a very busy man—I have a newspaper to get on the street—but I'm going to take another minute or two of my extremely valuable time to give you a piece of advice. First let me say that I find it difficult to believe that this fellow Slack is

working a protection racket in Bay City, and doing it in such a manner that neither the police department nor the Businessmen's Bureau can stop him. I think it is far more likely that Slack is a legitimate insurance agent who offered you a high-priced policy which you turned down; and then when your store was coincidentally vandalized the same day, you were upset and blamed Slack for it. Now, my advice to you, Mr. Wilk, is to stop making accusations all over town before Slack hears about it and you find yourself in trouble. And believe me, that's just what will happen."

Martin shook his head as if in a daze. "I've never seen a town like this before," he said incredulously. "Something like this happens and nobody—*nobody*—wants to do anything about it. Not the police, not the Businessmen's Bureau, not the newspaper. I thought you were all protectors of a person's rights."

"We can't protect you against your own imagination, Mr. Wilk," the editor said dryly, "and that seems to be your main problem. Now, if you don't like Bay City, why don't you open your business someplace else?"

"I can't," Martin said quietly. He shook his head slowly. "I put every dollar I had into buying the store and getting it stocked to open for

business. If I pulled out now I'd bankrupt myself."

The door to Criller's office opened and a copyboy brought in a stack of dummy pages for him to approve.

"I'm sorry I can't be of more help to you, Mr. Wilk," the editor said by way of ending the conversation, "but as you can see, I have a deadline to meet. If you'll excuse me—"

"Yes, of course," Martin replied in a barely audible voice. He rose and left the office.

He walked back to his store like a man transfixed, staring into space.

It took him all night to put his store back in order. Most of the time was spent picking up the albums and sorting them back into their proper classifications. When that was done, Martin cleaned the drying fire extinguisher foam from the record trays and put the albums back in place. A few of them were damaged, but for the most part his entire stock was still in good condition. He would have to take a loss on the albums that had new prices grease-penciled on their jackets, of course, but there was nothing that could be done about that.

After taking care of the records, Martin collected the needles and other accessories that had also been

strewn around the store, and put them back in the showcase. Then, with a bucket of water and a sponge, he went up one side of the store and down the other, carefully scrubbing the black slashes from the walls and the counters. Afterward, he swept and mopped the new tile floor, and finally his store again looked as it had before the previous day's nightmare had begun.

It was nearly eight o'clock in the morning when Martin finally put away his cleaning equipment and started to leave. He decided to go down the street for breakfast and then go home to bed. He could come back in the afternoon and see if there was anything else that needed doing.

As he locked the door and walked out onto the sidewalk, he stopped abruptly and stared at two men sitting in a car in front of his store. They were the same two men who had wrecked his store. Only now they were wearing Bay City police uniforms, and the car in which they were sitting was a Bay City police cruiser.

As Martin stood staring dumbly at the men, a second police car pulled to the curb and parked. Chief of Police Dyer got out of the car and walked over to Martin.

"Good morning, Mr. Wilk. I thought I'd stop by on my way to

headquarters to see if everything was all right." He waved briefly to the officers in the other cruiser. "I've had a couple of my men keeping an eye on your place from time to time, just in case. I'll make sure they check you regularly for a few days."

Martin nodded. "A few days," he said almost listlessly. "What happens then?"

"They'll have to resume their usual patrol, naturally. We can't give individual security service to one citizen, Mr. Wilk; the force just isn't that large. These are my two very best men, incidentally."

"I'm sure they are," said Martin. For a moment he was tempted to blurt out to Dyer that they were good at something besides being policemen, but he quickly decided that it would do no good. To accuse the two officers would be to imply that they were working as part-time hoodlums for Slack—and that, Martin knew, would merely make his story seem that much more preposterous. If he didn't watch his step they were liable to lock him up as a lunatic.

"Well," Chief Dyer said, "I'll be going. My men will be around if you need them."

"Thank you. That's very reassuring."

Martin watched the chief get back into his car and drive away.

As he was looking down the street, a man in a conservative suit and a briefcase in one hand walked up from the opposite direction and stood next to Martin.

"Good morning, Mr. Wilk."

Martin turned and saw that it was Edward Slack.

"I decided to drop around in case you'd changed your mind about that vandalism coverage," Slack said. "It really is good protection, you know."

"In a town like this, it seems to be the *only* protection," Martin said.

"I really don't know what you mean," Slack replied innocently.

Martin smirked. He thought of all the money he had paid for the store, all the money tied up in stock; all the work, the planning. It had taken him a long time to get a business of his own. A long, long time . . .

Martin sighed and his shoulders sagged a little. "As a matter of fact, I have reconsidered that policy," he said quietly. "I suppose fifty dollars a week is little enough to pay for peace of mind. Come inside and I'll sign your application."

"You've made a wise decision, Mr. Wilk," said Slack. He followed Martin back into the store.

At noon that day, in the courthouse conference room, the three-

man city council met for its weekly luncheon.

"I thought that fellow Wilk was really going to go off the deep end yesterday," said Chief Dyer, the council chairman.

"He certainly was determined, all right," said Oxford, the manager of the Businessmen's Bureau.

"They're *all* determined in the beginning," said Criller, the newspaper editor. "Then they think it over and take the easy way out. People." He shook his head. "You can always count on them to take the easy way out." He grinned at Oxford. "Incidentally, when you make your phony Dave Nickhoff call, how about bothering Dyer once in a while instead of me all the time. You interrupted me while I was writing an editorial on community growth."

"Sorry about that," Oxford said. "However, you'll be happy to learn that it was a profitable interruption." He unzipped his briefcase and placed a single sheet of paper on the table before him. "Slack called me this morning to report that our Mr. Wilk has signed up

for fifty dollars per week coverage. That means, gentlemen, that we now have a hundred and eighteen businesses paying a total of forty-one hundred and thirty dollars per week for, ah—insurance. Deducting five hundred per week for Slack, and two-fifty each for the chief's two very best men, that now leaves the three of us with slightly more than a thousand dollars a week each."

"Very nice," said Chief Dyer. "Did Slack think Wilk was going to be troublesome at all?"

Oxford shook his head. "No. He said Wilk seemed to have resigned himself to the situation just like all the others."

"Stop worrying about him," Criller told the chief. "It's like I said: he'll take the easy way out."

Dyer looked at Oxford. "What about you? What do you think?"

"I think," Oxford smiled, "that Mr. Wilk is going to be an asset to Bay City."

The three councilmen thought about the remark for a moment and then laughed quietly about it together.



*That lion that beat the unicorn all around the town was riding a unicycle, maybe?*

# A CONVENTION OF WOODEN INDIANS

A FILM OF TEARS dimmed Herbert's eyes. "Ma," he said aloud, as was his recent habit, "why in all hell did you do it?"

Ma, being absent, said nothing.

Herbert raised a supplicant face to the morning sky and then looked back again at the outsize rubbish grate. From the cold ashes poked several charred heads, an indeterminate huddle of legs, fragments of frayed feet, a testate of crumbling fingers.

"Oh, man," Herbert muttered, frankly weeping. "If only Pa had lived to see this."

Nobody was left now except John Wan, hidden under a few forkfuls of hay in the rearmost stall of Paw's disused stable; nobody but John Wan and nothing but the unicycle, in the next stall, carefully concealed under a moth-eaten horse blanket.

Frank Sick

Wiping his eyes on a polka-dot bandanna, Herbert pondered on how set Ma was against that unicycle and nearly everything else he kind of cottoned to. Hated it, he guessed; hated it as much as she must have hated Pa and his trotters; and probably hated it because it was Pa's gift to his only begotten son.

"Only a complete fool would ride a one-wheel contraption," he could hear Ma saying, cranky. "And only a half-fool would perch on two wheels behind a horse's rump," referring, of course, to Pa

that way, even after he was long dead and gone.

A unicycle wasn't the easiest thing in the world to ride. Herbert couldn't count the number of bumps, bruises and breaks he'd sustained before he could really sit atop it and make it move. (*Like a proper boob*, Ma was always say-

ing.) Yet once you learned a few tricks, like starting near a high fence or hedge and stopping near a street light or an awning, the wheel gave you as good a ride as any other vehicle hereabouts, and maybe a better one. (*I'd as soon see you bounce your guts out on a pogo stick*, Ma often said.) And



lately the old gal hated to see him ride it even on their own gravel road on their own private premises where nobody watched except a bushy-tailed jack or a long-tailed weasel.

Today was going to be different, Herbert resolved, dry of eye at last. Today he was going to ride the unicycle plumb into the center of town, come hell or high water, and do business at the Trappers Bank & Trust Company.

When Clyde Waverly, president, vice-president and acting treasurer of the Trappers, heard a thud against the weather-stained plate glass, he removed the dead cheroot from between dry, brown lips, swiveled his desiccated frame slowly around and away from the papered confusion of his desk and sought with faded eyes the source of the sound. What he saw was Herbie Littleton swinging from the bank's awning support like a fat baboon.

"Simpleton's at it again," Clyde Waverly said. "Miss Cain," he called, "come here a second."

Miss Cain, trig and spinsterish in white blouse and blue skirt, came forward from the desk nearest the tellers' cages. "I see him," she said crisply.

"Then cope with the nitwit," Clyde Waverly said, creakily leav-

ing his chair. "I'm going to the men's room. Knock twice when he's gone."

"He won't deal with anyone but you, Mister Waverly. You know that."

"Well, he ain't dealing with me today. Ten minutes with that cuckoo just about saps the little wit I got left."

"If you aren't here, sir, he'll simply hang around and wait and disrupt everything."

Clyde Waverly sighed sadly and sat down. "All right, Miss Cain. All right. But pull up a chair and don't leave us alone."

A minute later he was offering Herbert a cheroot.

"You know I ain't smoked since Ma spoke against it," said Herbert. "Come to look, you appear about smoked out yourself, sir."

"All of that and then some." Clyde Waverly rasped out a dry cough. "Well, Herbie, what can I do for you this morning?"

"I'd like to get into the safe-deposit box, Mister Waverly."

"So that's it."

"And get at a few of them bonds Pa left me, Mister Waverly."

"So that's today's ticket, is it?"

"My legal age, as you rightly know, Mister Waverly, and can easily verify by the town clerk, is just about fifty-one next month."

"I know all that, Herbie. Would

you like a cup of coffee? Miss Cain and I usually have a coffee break about now."

"Be obliged to, sir. After I get into the safe-deposit box."

"Don't leave," Clyde Waverly said to Miss Cain, who had half-risen in response to the coffee-break suggestion. "Well, Herbie, I'd gladly let you into a safe-deposit box if you had one here in your name, which you don't, and if you had a key, which you don't. So let's call it quits. I'm a busy man."

Herbert grinned. "I got me a key, Mister Waverly," and he produced one from the pocket of his corduroy jacket.

"Is that one of our keys, Miss Cain?"

Miss Cain looked and nodded. "Number thirteen B."

"Sounds like a danged shoe size, don't it?" Herbert said with a wet grin of delight.

"I'm pretty sure that's his mother's box number," Miss Cain said.

"Check to make sure," Clyde Waverly said. "I been had before."

As Miss Cain left, Clyde Waverly asked, to kill time, and then regretted asking, "What makes you so all-fired anxious to get your hands on more money than your mother allows?"

"It's this convention over in Gilt-head."

"Gilthead . . . ? Gilthead *where*?"

"Gilthead where the convention is being held, Mister Waverly."

"I mean what state is it in? What state of the Union, is what I mean, man." Already Clyde Waverly was feeling dizzy.

"This state, I reckon."

"Then you reckon wrong, Herbie. We don't have a Gilthead anywhere within the boundaries of this state that I know of."

"You must be backward on your boundaries, no offense, sir, but that's where this here convention is being held, right enough. Gilt-head."

"Good heavens! What kind of a convention?"

"A convention of wooden Indians and their owners."

"Lawdawmitee! A convention of wooden Indians?"

"That's right, sir. And their owners."

"I heard you the first time, Herbie."

"I'm glad you did."

"And you've been invited?"

"I sure have."

"And your mother won't give you the money to go?"

"You're a purebred mind reader, Mister Waverly."

"And then some, Herbie. Now who in the devil invited you to this convention?"

"Why, I got the letter right

here." He produced from the inside pocket of his jacket an envelope showing the wear of much reference. "Written out on a typewriter and all."

With hands that trembled more than usual, Clyde Waverly took the envelope and checked the postmark, which was local, and then unfolded the single sheet inside and read:

*Dear Herbert:*

*Our association is planning a Convention of Wooden Indians and their Owners next month at the Standing Bear or Bare Hotel in Gilthead which is just down the road a piece from East Pessary. A map will be enclosed if you decide to join in the festivities. Venison is to be served out of season, so make your reservation early by writing to P.O. Box U. G. H., Gilthead, Ake., if you plan to eat. Rooms are being held for you personally at \$1 per night and for as many wooden Indians as you care to bring at \$10 each.*

*Greetings from,*

*The Great White Father*

"Be damned!" Clyde Waverly said, handing the letter and envelope back to Herbert.

Miss Cain was back. "Yes, sir, that's Agnes Littleton's key all right."

Clyde Waverly gummed the chevron. "How'd you come by that

key all of a sudden, Herbie?"

"Ma give it to me."

"Give it to you, did she? Just outright like that?"

Herbert nodded.

"Not in keeping with her, wouldn't you say, Miss Cain?"

"Quite out of character, sir."

"Well, since I got the right key, sir, can't we put it together with the bank's and get into that box? Two, three bonds is all I want. And they're rightly mine. Ain't that so?"

"Manner of speaking, yes. They're yours in trust."

"Well, I'm as close to fifty-one as I'll ever get, Mister Waverly, and I got to go to this convention in Gilthead. So I'd be much obliged if you'd take me to our box."

"I can't do that, Herbie. Not without your mother's say-so."

"I got the key."

"The key isn't enough. It's your mother's key. Nobody can use it but your mother unless she gives power of attorney."

That seemed to puzzle Herbert. He squeezed his eyelids together as if holding back tears.

"I tell you what," Clyde Waverly said. "I'll give your mother a jingle on the phone right now and ask her to authorize—"

"She won't be answering," Herbert said.

"Why not?"

"She's traipsed off on a visit is why not."

"Where to, Herbie?"

"Over to Lumberton with friends from the Sunshine Club." He squeezed his eyelids together again. "Now what-all was that thing she has to give?"

"Power of attorney?"

"Kind of a paper?"

"A paper that says she authorizes somebody to act in her behalf and signed by her and duly witnessed."

Herbert rose abruptly. "Well, I'll be back, Mister Waverly. Obligated to you and Miz Cain."

"Don't take any wooden—" Clyde Waverly amended the sentence midway: "Don't fall off that wheel, Herbie. Mind, now."

Herbert unicycled south on Franklin Avenue, creating merriement and dismay among automobilists and pedestrians. In front of Barron's Hardware, he embraced a street-light standard, dismounted and slid to the sidewalk.

Inside the hardware store he purchased a quart of brown-colored shellac and a tube of glue.

"You givin' them wooden Indians another touch-up?" asked Jay Barron, bagging the purchase.

Herbert grinned and nodded. "Got to pretty 'em up for a big convention down Gilthead way."

Miss Cain came neatly from her

desk to Mr. Waverly's. "I let the phone ring a dozen times, sir. No answer."

"And she's not deaf by a long shot," Clyde Waverly said. "Well, I guess I better call the police, to be on the safe side."

Herbert leaned himself and unicycle against the clapboard front of the last store on River Street, whose battered sign proclaimed it to be *I. Wise & Son, Fresh Killed Kosher Pou. ry.* I. Wise, emerging from the store at the sound of the clatter, assisted Herbert to the ground.

"You couldn't be more on time if you tried," I. Wise said, ushering Herbert into the shadowy confines of his offal-laden shop. "I got prime turkey feathers galore. Some, will you believe it, two feet long. And fresh plucked within the last few days, give or take a day. How many you require, Mister Littleton? A hundred, two hundred? Almost three hundred I could let you have."

"Twenty, thirty will about do it, Mister Wise."

"Twenty, thirty. How many Indians you got out to your place anyway?"

"To tell the plain truth, Mister Wise, I ain't got as many as I used to have," Herbert said, and he squeezed his eyes shut and his wet

mouth trembled in remembrance.

At the Trappers Bank & Trust Company, Clyde Waverly was trying to explain the nearly inexplicable to the chief of police. "I'm kind of sorry I ever mentioned this wooden Indian thing to you at all, Harvey. It's old Agnes Littleton I'm a mite worried about, so let's get back to her."

"Not so fast now, Clyde," Harvey Simkin said. "You got my curiosity piqued to a right-sharp point. I know the boy. I seen him on that big wheel of his. I knew he was an odd one, first time I set eyes on him. Harmless but head a whit out of whack. But I never seen him consorting with no Indians, wooden or otherwise. You been nipping the corn already this morning, Clyde?"

"Enjoy yourself, Harvey. Enjoy yourself. I got a good mind to withdraw that note extension I just gave you."

"Bankers and bloodsuckers are close kin," Harvey Simkin said. "Sass 'em and they suck you dry. Well, okay, Clyde, but I was plain curious why you brought up these here wooden Indians in the first place."

"I brought 'em up because the boy—hell, he's fifty-one, Harvey, let's face it—he sets great store in those wooden Indians of his. Al-

ways has, long as I've known him."

"Why's that, Clyde?"

"His father gave them to him. Like you'd give a kid toy soldiers, you know."

"This must go back before my time, Clyde."

"I guess it was. Let's see. Harry Littleton's been dead about twenty-five years. All of that. Killed in a trotting race up in New York somewhere. Goshen."

"A jockey?"

"I don't think they call them jockeys, the ones that handle trotters."

"Well, that's neither here nor there, Clyde, the man being dead all this time."

"Flung from the sulky during a big race," Clyde Waverly said reminiscently, "and fractured his skull against a rail, as I remember. Anyhow, he had money and he made money with his horses. Left a tidy sum for those days. Two-thirds of it in trust for Herbert, who was well into his twenties at the time."

"And these damned Indians, Clyde—when do we get back to them?"

"Oh, well, yes, Harry kind of collected them in his travels. As a gag, at first, but then more seriously, to judge from what I've heard, until finally he had a dozen or more, all shapes and sizes, stand-

ing around the house out there on Magnolia Road. Finally his wife put her foot down and made him move the things out. Stabled them with his horses, as I understand it, and when his will was read the Indians became the sole property of Herbert, with the proviso that he keep them in A1 condition. Something like that. And Herbert's taken care of them ever since, like they were family."

"Beats all, Clyde, what went on here before I became chief."

"It's what might be going on right now, while you sit on your fat hams, that I'm fretting about."

"You sure make a point the mean way, Clyde. But just to please you, I'll mosey out to Magnolia Road in person this afternoon."

"Pick me up and I'll go with you, Harvey."

Herbert parked the unicycle in the alley that ran alongside Sweetney's Soirée and then entered the place by the door marked *Ladies Entrance*. The first lady he was able to make out in the stale gloom of the place was Hilda Metcalf, whose hair looked a different color from the last time he'd seen her, all of six months ago.

"Look who's here," cried Hilda to her companion in the booth. "Big Herb Littleton, mama's silly

creep. What's happening, creep?"

"You oughtn't to say that, Hilda," Herbert said. "You know how fond I've always been of you."

"Kiss kiss. Mummy spank." Hilda winked at her companion whom Herbert couldn't quite make out in the corner.

"I'm looking for Chan Tooker," Herbert said. "You happen to see him in here today, Hilda?"

"He's looking for Chan Tooker," Hilda said. "Now that's a laugh. Ol' Herbie maybe wants to fight a duel."

"I don't want to fight no duel, Hilda. I got a little business to talk over with Chan if I ever catch up with him."

"Well, you just caught up with him this second, Herbert," said the shadow in the booth. "How much you want to loan me?"

"That you in there, Chan?" Herbert asked, squinting.

"That's me all right, Herbert. Pardon me for sitting with your girl, but I understood the affair was broken up by your Ma."

"I'm fixing to change a few things, Chan. I mean that, Hilda. Ma ain't going to butt in no more. Never."

"Let's give the poor slob three Bronx cheers," Hilda said.

"Let's not be rude to Herbert," Chan said. "I think I sense something changed about him. Like he's

received an important communication and has done some positive thinking. Am I close, man, or am I not?"

Herbert's full face expressed candid surprise. "A purebred mind reader, that's what you are, Chan. Like Mister Waverly over at the Trappers."

"Can you top that!" said Hilda.

"I see a number of tall wooden dark men in your life, Herbert," Chan said in a low voice. "Indian file, they are, you leading 'em, and all heading in the direction of West Pessary."

"East," Herbert corrected. "Bedawged, Chan, you're a man I plumb got to admire. And that's the reason I come here in the first place. You ever heard tell of a paper called power of attorney?"

"I sure have, Herbert."

"You think you could typewrite one up for me, real legal-like?"

"For a fee, Herbert."

"Suits me, Chan. When?"

"Let's say the day after tomorrow."

"Suits me, Chan. Whereabouts?"

"High noon on the bench in front of the First Baptist Church. I'll be wearing a tangerine shirt and a Dutch Boy hat."

"I'll be there prompt," Herbert said happily. "Pleased to see you again, Hilda."

It was nearly noon when he

came out into the alley. His unicycle was gone, but he still had with him the combined bags of shellac, glue and turkey feathers. It took him a half hour to walk home in the hot sun. Some day soon now, he thought, he might up and buy an automobile and learn how to drive it.

It was nearly three-thirty that afternoon when Chief Simkin, with Clyde Waverly slumped beside him, cut off the blacktop of Magnolia Road and onto the gravel driveway that meandered through a patch of scrub pine and on up to the big rundown house known as the Littleton Place. The chief, at Waverly's behest, drove the unmarked car around back to the stable yard.

Herbert watched from the back stoop as the two men got somewhat laboriously from the car and approached. Beside him stood a freshly shellacked wooden Indian offering all comers a fistful of cigars with the left hand and shading his eyes against the sun with the other.

"Howdy again, son," Clyde Waverly said. "Let me introduce Chief Simkin here."

"Right pleased to make your acquaintance, Chief," Herbert said, shaking hands. "And I'd like for both of you to meet John Wan."

Chief Simkin barely avoided shaking hands with the wooden Indian.

Clyde Waverly said conversationally, "You seem to be giving John a new coat of war paint."

"That's right, Mister Waverly. Want him to look his best for that convention I told you about this morning."

"How many Indians you plan on taking with you, Herbie?"

"Two is all."

"Two? I thought you had practically a tribe out here."

"I used to have seven all told."

"What happened?" Chief Simkin said with a chuckle. "They wander off the reservation?"

"No, they was run through a buzz saw and then burned up in that big ol' rubbish grate over there." The thought of it brought a smart of tears to Herbert's eyes.

"Who in hell'd do a thing like that?" Chief Simkin asked.

"Ma. She did it."

"What for?"

"She was dead set against us going to that convention, that's what for."

"Is she home now?" Clyde Waverly asked.

"She sure is, Mister Waverly."

"I'd like to see her, Herbie."

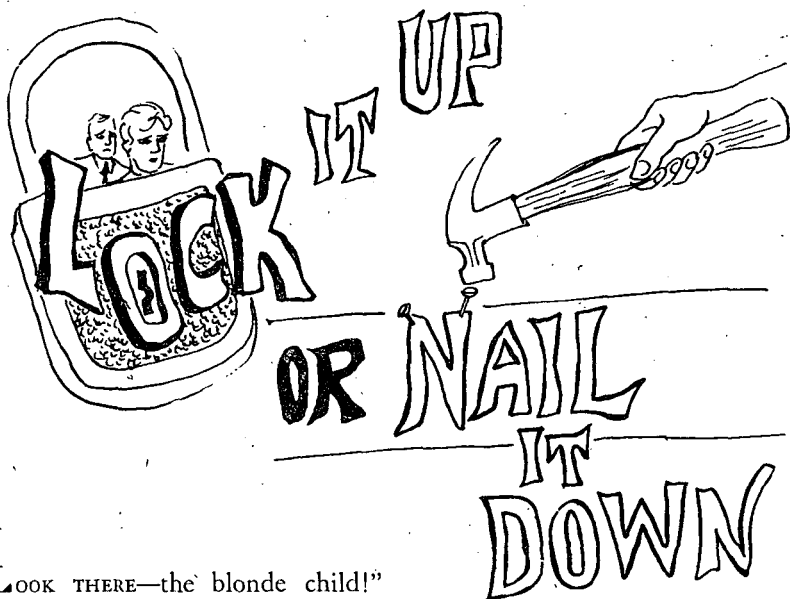
"I was just fixing to ask you in," Herbert said. "Come right along inside here."

They followed him into a large high-ceilinged kitchen that was immaculate, then through an old-fashioned pantry walled with jars of preserves, and out into a windowless storeroom that smelled pleasantly of potatoes, turnips, apples and onions. Against the far wall, visible only because of the thin shaft of light from the pantry, stood an upright freezer of giant economy-size. Herbert opened the door, thereby illuminating the interior.

Standing at rigid attention and staring out at them from eyes as cold as blue ice under frost-rimed brows was an ancient Indian squaw wearing a haphazard head-dress of turkey feathers. Chief Simkin, who thought the figure a sloppy piece of woodcarving, stared expressionlessly back. Clyde Waverly, who knew better, fainted.



*For want of a nail the shoe was lost—but not, perhaps, irreparably.*



**LOOK THERE**—the blonde child!" Louise said. "She just stole a traveling alarm clock! Took it off the shelf and slipped it into her purse!"

Ben Elwood rose and peered down over Louise's shoulder at the sales floor of the little variety store. Her back to them, a mini-skirted blonde girl was moving toward the checkout counter. Tall, several inches over Ben's five-six, she walked with the arrogant confidence so characteristic of teen-

agers in this affluent suburban community.

"You're sure?"

"Positive." Nervously, Louise drummed her fingers on the sill of the window in the little office, built on a platform in the store's rear. A tiny, thin, dark-haired woman with worried features and bright black eyes, she was Ben's wife.

"She's been strolling around for

at least ten minutes," Louise went on. "Heaven knows what else she stole. I've seen her in the store before, too, sometimes with her girlfriends. Maybe they *all* do it. And she seemed such a nice child."

"They all seem nice." Grimly,

Ben pulled a suit-coat over his narrow shoulders. He was a slight man of middle years, with wan features that reflected a lifetime of hard work in enterprises that had not quite panned out. "Okay, I'll handle it."

"Be careful. You know what the doctor said."

Ben hurried down to the sales floor. Yes, he knew very well what the doctor had said: Avoid conflict, anything that could bring on stress.

Already, a knot of anxiety had formed in his stomach and his heart was pounding. When apprehending a shoplifter, it was always this way. There'd be an embarrassing confrontation, perhaps uglier scenes later. Last month, the mother of a boy caught pocketing a wristwatch had followed him screaming down the aisle, accusing him of manhandling her child; and the month before a young matron with a stolen bracelet in her purse had gone into hysterics when he told her he intended to phone the police.

By the time Ben reached the checkout counter, the blonde girl had left the store. Of course the



by James Michael  
Ullman

cashier would have seen nothing. She was a housewife, a part-time employee unschooled in the ways of shoplifters. If it weren't for Louise, constantly scanning the floor from her concealed perch in the office, larcenous-minded children and matrons would have stolen them blind.

"The girl who just went out," Ben said to the cashier. "What'd she buy?"

"A box of paper clips." The cashier's eyes widened. "Why, Mr. Elwood! You don't mean that she—"

"Yes. Another one." Through the window, he watched as the girl strolled into the parking lot. "But she won't get away with it."

When he caught up to her, she was inserting a key into the door of a bright red sports car. Stickers promoting the township high school were plastered on the rear window. Her own car, probably; parents here could afford to give expensive automobiles to teen-aged children. To Ben, born and reared in a drab city neighborhood where people stole because they couldn't afford the merchandise, it made the high incidence of shoplifting in this store all the more inexplicable.

"Excuse me, Miss."

Gazing at him coolly, she straightened. Her features were clean-cut, her eyes a haughty blue. Her cheeks and pug nose were

splashed with freckles. Altogether, she was the picture of the all-American girl.

"Yes?"

"I'm the manager of the variety store." His gaze strayed to her purse, a bulging, oversize cloth bag. "Sorry, but I'll have to ask you to come back with me."

Her expression was one of perplexed innocence. "Good golly, why?"

"I want you to open that purse in front of a witness."

"My purse?" Innocence was replaced by growing anger. Louise had better be right. If not, they'd be socked with a big false-arrest suit and would certainly lose their jobs with the store chain.

"You think I stole something?" the girl went on. "You've got your nerve! I don't have to open my purse for you or any other shopkeeper. Just because you're an adult, you think you can push kids around."

"No," Ben agreed, "you don't *have* to open it." There was a tremor in his voice. He felt uncomfortably on the defensive, obviously more ill at ease than the girl. "But if you refuse, I'll call the police."

She thought that over. Then she shrugged. "Okay. So maybe I did pick up a few things. Let's not panic, hey? It's just junk. There's no problem, I'll pay for it."

The stolen merchandise—the clock, five lipsticks, two compacts, a scarf, some lingerie and a few pieces of costume jewelry—were deposited on Ben's desk. Its retail value was twenty dollars and thirty-four cents.

Arms folded over her chest, the girl slumped in a hard-backed chair, her attitude one of bored resignation. Across from her, Louise studied her with curiosity and pity.

"I *told* you," the girl said, "I'll *pay*. I have my own bank account, I can get the money in five minutes. Why such a big deal?"

"It's not that simple," Ben replied. "Shoplifting's a criminal offense."

"It's not shoplifting. Not like I committed a *crime*. Honest, I really don't know what came over me. I've never done anything like that before. I just—"

"What's your name and address?"

"I—oh, well. It's Patricia Ramsey, 869 Pine Drive."

That would be in one of this suburb's most exclusive sections.

"Still in high school?"

"Yes. I'm a senior."

"Your mother home now?"

"I guess so. But I don't see why you have to—"

"Patricia, this is no joke. Shoplifting losses in this store alone run to thousands of dollars a year, most

of it taken by amateurs. We can't afford to let people go with just a reprimand anymore. When the circumstances warrant, we have to prosecute."

"You're kidding. You *must* be."

From the stern expression on his face, she began to realize that he wasn't kidding.

He reached for the telephone. "What's your number? Before we go further, I think your mother should be here."

Mother arrived in a late-model hardtop, which she left in the no-parking zone in front of the store. A tall, slim, well-groomed woman in her late thirties, she paused to ask a question of the cashier and then strode grimly down the aisle and up the stairs to the office.

"I'm Mrs. Ramsey," she announced. "Mrs. William J. Ramsey. Of the Ramsey Construction Company." Her eyes settled on her daughter. "You all right, honey? He didn't lay a hand on you, or anything like that?"

"No," the girl said glumly. "Mom, I didn't *mean* anything. Really, I—"

"We won't discuss it now, not in front of these people. We'll talk about it when we get home." She looked at Ben. "The little things she took—how much were they worth?"

"Twenty dollars and thirty-four

cents," Ben answered her promptly.

"All right. Here." Mrs. Ramsey opened her purse and pulled out two tens and some change. "There's your money. We won't even take the merchandise. You can set it back out on the shelves and sell it again. *That* should satisfy you. Come on, Patti."

"He says," the girl went on, "they're going to prosecute."

"He did that just to scare you, dear. To teach you a lesson." Her gaze swung to Ben. "But really, Mr. . . ."

"Elwood."

"I don't think *that* was necessary, frightening the child that way. It seems to me you've already humiliated her enough, forcing her to remain here all this time, putting her through the embarrassment of having me come down to bail her out, not to mention the inconvenience *I'm* going through."

Ben cleared his throat. "I meant it," he told her forcefully. "It's company policy. Pilferage losses in our chain have mounted to such an alarming extent that we have to notify the police whenever a shoplifter is apprehended."

"*Every* case?"

"No. I wouldn't report a ten-year-old who stole a candy bar, for instance. But every case where I think it's justified."

"But only twenty dollars! How

ridiculous can you actually get?"

"On some days," Ben pointed out, "the net profit from this store is less than that."

"Mr. Elwood, let's be reasonable. After all, it isn't as though Patti's ever done anything like this before."

"How," Louise asked, "can you be so sure?"

For the first time, Mrs. Ramsey looked at Ben's wife.

"She's my daughter, that's why. We're responsible people. I've told you, my husband is William J. Ramsey. He's the president of the Ramsey Construction Company, and—"

"Your daughter," Louise persisted, "was very cool when she stole those things. She didn't act at all guilty. Usually, the first time, they're nervous. And usually, when it's the first time, they steal only one or two inexpensive things. But your daughter went through our store like a vacuum-cleaner."

"This is outrageous! No ribbon clerk can talk to *me* that way! I won't stand here and—"

"Ask your daughter," Louise continued, ignoring the emotional outburst, "if she stole anything before, and tell her she'd better tell the truth. One of the first things the police juvenile officer will do will be to ask your permission for a policewoman to accompany you on

a search of her room." Louise paused. "How long has it been, Mrs. Ramsey, since you took a good look at your daughter's possessions to see if she could afford to buy what she owns on the allowance you give her?"

Mrs. Ramsey turned to the girl. "Go on, Patti. Tell her how wrong she is. You buy everything on your charge cards. We'll have a record for almost every item of consequence."

But Patti looked at Louise and asked, "Is that true? The police may go through my things?"

"I'm afraid it is."

The girl's gaze swung to her mother. She swallowed hard and said, "Look, Mom, maybe there *are* a couple things in my room that—well, it wasn't really *stealing*. It was—for kicks, sort of, and the stuff's not all *mine*. I'm just keeping some of it for some of my friends. It's been sort of a game with us, and I guess it got out of hand. We didn't mean anything *bad*. I mean, if this man wants to make such a *fuss*, my friends and I'll take the stuff back to the stores where we got it, or pay for it out of our allowances. Golly, I couldn't stand the *police* knowing about all that . . ."

Her expression blank, Patricia's mother studied the girl. Then she turned back to Ben, gazing at him

with undisguised hatred. "I'd like to call my husband, Mr. Elwood. I hope you'll have the decency not to notify the police until after he gets home, and we've gone through Patti's room together. You heard what she said. They're not *all* Patti's things, and I doubt that whatever those girls took will be worth very much."

Dresses, skirts, lingerie, coats, sweaters, bathing suits, transistor radios, tape cassettes, jewelry—all were in a heap on Patti's bed. Price tags were still affixed to some of the loot, which had been stolen from more than a dozen stores.

Shaking his head, William J. Ramsey said, "Nearly a thousand dollars worth!"

A hulking, red-faced man in his mid-forties, at first he had shared his wife's indignation at Ben for bringing their daughter's thievery to their attention, but as the pile of stolen goods had mounted, he'd grown silent and thoughtful.

"She didn't take it all herself," Patti's mother said defensively. "Her friends took most of it. Didn't they, Patti?"

Ramsey shot a piercing look at the girl. "These friends of yours. Who are they?"

Sullenly, Patricia chewed her lower lip. "Do I *have* to tell?" She glanced at Ben. "In front of *him*?"

"You bet your boots you do. Unless you want all the blame yourself."

"All right." Her gaze shifted to the floor. "There was Sally Adams, and Midge Peterson, and Babe Norwood, and Jo Ann Miller."

"That Miller girl," Mrs. Ramsey said. "I'll bet she put you up to it. She's been in trouble before. If *anyone* gets turned over to the police, it should be—"

"Dear, that's enough." Ramsey's tone with his wife was acid. He glanced at Ben. "Let's go downstairs and talk this over."

Ramsey led Ben to a first-floor study, walked behind a bar and hauled a tray of ice cubes from a small refrigerator.

"Drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Well, excuse me. *I'll* have one. It ain't every day a guy learns his house is a warehouse for hot merchandise."

Ramsey poured himself a stiff jolt of bourbon and settled in a chair behind a large desk. Uncomfortably, Ben eased into a chair across from him.

"You know," Ramsey drawled, pausing to sip and then putting the tumbler down, "if you tell the cops about Patti and the other girls, you could be makin' a big mistake."

"I don't follow you."

"Got any kids of your own?"

"No, we haven't, unfortunately."

"Well, I'll spell it out. When you got kids, sometimes they're more important than anything. And an arrest record—Hell, it'd mean those girls couldn't go to college, or even get a decent job if they wanted to work. It'd haunt 'em for life. Me and the other parents wouldn't like that, not one bit, and in this town we're very influential people."

"Is that a threat?"

"I just said we're influential. We have friends in city hall—people who control the building inspectors, the fire inspectors, the garbage collectors, the tax assessors and so on. We have other friends who spend a lot of money in your place, and others who have connections with some of your bosses in that chain you and your wife manage the store for. Draw your own conclusions."

Ramsey paused for another sip. "Anyway," he went on, "it hardly seems fair. The way you leave merchandise lying around loose in your store would tempt anyone. If it was my store, I'd hire some clerks, and I'd lock everything up or nail it down."

"Self-service," Ben replied with mounting anger, "is what the public wants. Don't think I'm not concerned with what an arrest record will do to those girls, but what's making me angry about all this is,

there's no remorse here—no apology, no guilt, no nothing. Your daughter had no economic reason to steal, but when I caught her, she shrugged it off as a joke. Your wife is angry only at *me*, for catching Patti, and you, with those threats—”

His heart beating wildly, Ben had to close his eyes and lean back. *Take it easy*, the doctor had said. *Don't allow your emotions to take control.*

Suddenly solicitous, Ramsey leaned over him. “You okay? Can I bring you anything?”

“Sorry.” Ben’s eyes opened. “I should have known better. I’m not supposed to lose my temper and get worked up. The doctor . . .”

“That’s too bad. And I imagine those doctor bills are pretty hard to meet, on your salary. Look, I don’t blame you for getting up-tight. I think I can get the other parents to go along with anything you suggest, so if there’s *any* way we can keep the cops from learning about this . . .”

Wearily, Ben walked down the

aisle and up to the office, where Louise waited. He sank into a chair and mopped his brow with a handkerchief.

“I couldn’t help telling Ramsey off,” he said. “Louise, I can’t stand much more of it—the tension, the stress. I’m risking my life every time something like this happens.”

“Well, it won’t have to be much longer.” She walked behind him. Gently, she rubbed his neck and shoulders. “Relax, dear. Then we’ll have a nice, long drink before dinner. How much did you take him for?”

“A neat ten thousand dollars.” Reminiscently, Ben smiled. “Two thousand for each set of parents. That makes nearly fifty thousand so far this year, payoffs from families of the rich women and children we’ve caught stealing for kicks. One more big score and we’ll have enough to buy our own store; and when we do, we won’t leave everything out in the open and apparently unwatched, as we do here. No, we’ll take Ramsey’s advice. We’ll hire clerks, and lock everything up or nail it down.”



*Last straws generally cause some breakage somewhere.*

**I**T WAS NIGHT and it was raining—a hard, driving rain that seemed to promise relief from the month-long drought. Kreiger turned up his coat collar and dashed to the next doorway, cursing the rain and yet somehow enjoying the feel of its wetness against his face.

The *Lazy Hour*, when he reached it, was empty except for an indifferent bartender polishing some shot glasses. "Rain keeping the crowd away?" Kreiger said, and the man grunted. "Give me a beer, will you? Local."

It was a bit after nine, barely dark on a summer's evening, though the gloom of rain clouds had blotted out the sun hours be-



**DEAD  
ON THE  
PAVEMENT**

fore. Kreiger sipped the beer slowly, making it last because he didn't want a second one.

Finally, just before nine-thirty, Jimmy Lean came in, shaking the water from his cheap plastic coat. He nodded vaguely to Kreiger, or-

by  
Edward D.  
Hoch

dered a shot of Scotch, and took it with him to one of the rear booths. After a moment Kreiger followed.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming," he told the man.

Jimmy Lean squinted at him through blood-shot eyes. "I almost didn't. I'm sick and tired of crawling to you cops every time I got a piece of information."

Kreiger took a sip of his beer. He'd heard it all before. "You like the money, don't you, Jimmy? The money's good."

"I like my self-respect too. Sometimes I go home at night with the money in my pocket and I can't look my wife and kids in the eye."

"Come on, Jimmy! I'm not asking you to rob a bank or cheat at cards. I'm asking you to be a good citizen and help the police, and get paid for it besides."

"I know." Jimmy Lean looked down at his gnarled hands. "And I been doing it most of my life."

He spoke the last softly, and Kreiger knew the fight had gone out of him. He slipped his hand into an inner pocket and withdrew a flat envelope which he slid across the table to Lean. "You just wanted to be convinced, Jimmy. There's two twenties in this envelope, if you'll tell me about the bank job. Tell me who pulled it."

Jimmy Lean stared down at the envelope. "For forty lousy bucks."

"It'll buy food for the wife and kids, Jimmy. It'll buy a few bottles of good Scotch."

"Yeah." The wrinkled hand came out, hesitated, and then accepted the envelope. Lean squinted toward the bar, but the place was still empty except for the broad back of the bartender at his chrome cash register.

"The names, Jimmy. I haven't got all night."

Jimmy Lean told him the names.

Kreiger nodded and got to his feet. He tossed some coins on the table. "Buy yourself another Scotch, Jimmy. On me."

"Damn you, copper!"

"It's yourself you hate, Jimmy. Not me."

Outside it was still raining. Kreiger sprinted to the corner, where a glass-walled phone booth stood si-

lent and waiting. He slipped in the door and phoned headquarters.

"Captain Leopold? This is Detective Kreiger. I just made contact with our pigeon, Jimmy Lean."

"Well?" The voice at the other end was impatient.

Kreiger smiled to himself, watching the sparkling droplets of rain as they collected on the glass and started their slow slide to the pavement. "He gave me the names of the two guys who held up the Midvale Branch and killed the teller."

"Who?" Leopold asked.

"I'll be there in ten minutes with a full report, Captain." He hung up before Leopold could ask him again. It was a simple thing, but he wanted Leopold to wait for the names. One of life's minor pleasures.

He stepped out of the phone booth into the driving rain, and if he heard the car at all he paid it no attention. Kreiger was still on the sidewalk when it hit him, throwing him against the glass booth, over into the gutter where the wheels crunched against bone.

Kreiger had time only for one last regret before he died.

Captain Leopold disliked rain in the summertime, and there weren't many things that could have gotten him out on the street that night. It had been a week to forget, a

week that had started with the holdup-slaying of a bank teller, and now had brought the killing of a detective.

He hadn't known Kreiger well, but he'd called him in on the bank case because the FBI wanted a lead and Kreiger was known in the department as a man with a number of good underworld contacts. Now, seeing him dead on the pavement, Leopold felt a twinge of responsibility. A detective had been killed while on an assignment for him, and this was the thing that mattered. It mattered to Leopold, and it mattered to the others who stood around in that ragged circle.

Sergeant Fletcher left the police photographer and came over to stand by him. "The car went up on the curb to get him, Captain. It wasn't any accident."

"I didn't think it was. Any clues? Anything at all?"

"A few bits of glass from the headlights, Captain. We'll check them."

"Get some help from those FBI guys. Tell them there may be a tie-in with the bank job."

"Right, Captain."

Leopold turned away, seeing a familiar newspaperman hurrying through the crowd of spectators. The papers would make a big thing of a cop killing. They always did: indignation, calls to action.



There were good cops and bad cops, and he wondered which Kreiger had been.

"Fletcher."

"Yes, Captain?"

"What sort of a detective was Kreiger, anyway? I hardly knew him until this bank thing."

Fletcher scratched his head as they moved away from the crowd,

back to stand beside the rain-speckled squad car. "I don't know. He was a good man, I suppose. Never heard anything bad about him, and he sure had the contacts."

"Was he married?"

"Divorced. But there was a girl. Some said he was sleeping with her, but discreetly."

"You didn't approve?"

Fletcher shrugged. "None of my business."

"Find out her name. I might want to talk with her. Meanwhile, run the usual check on auto dealers and service garages. Get out a hit-and-run alarm, and a pick-up on Jimmy Lean."

"Lean?"

"He was the last person to see Kreiger alive," Leopold said. "Except the killer, of course."

Jimmy Lean was small and wrinkled, with eyes that squinted against the glare of daylight. Leopold guessed his age at 45, then flipped through the arrest record on his desk and found that he was high by three years. "You were a friend of Detective Kreiger," he said quietly, opening the conversation.

"I knew him."

"I understand you sometimes supplied him with information."

Lean's face twisted into an expression of anguish. "Look, Cap-

tain, give me a break, huh? There are guys that would kill me in a minute if they knew I was stooling to the police."

"Don't you think they know already?"

"Huh?"

"Somebody followed Kreiger after he left you and ran him down. Somebody didn't want him to talk, and they won't want you to talk. Your life isn't worth much right now, Lean."

"I . . ."

"You told Kreiger the names of the men who pulled the Midvale bank job. Two men, who killed a teller. I want those names, Lean."

"I didn't tell him a thing." The squinting eyes were fearful, trapped. He was a man who lived on secrets, revealed at the proper time for the proper compensation.

"He phoned me just before he was killed, Lean. He told me you'd given him the information. Look, we've got the FBI in on this, too. Would you rather talk to them?"

He ran his tongue over dry lips. "Geez, give me a break, huh?"

"The names, Lean."

"I don't know any names."

Leopold sighed and changed course. "All right. Do you admit meeting Kreiger?"

"Yeah." Reluctantly.

"Where?"

"That little bar, the *Lazy Hour*."

"Any other customers see you—people you knew?"

"It was raining. There was just the bartender."

"All right. What did you talk about?"

"The rain."

"Sure." Leopold got up from behind his desk. "All right, get out of here! When you decide you'd like to talk to us, maybe we'll listen. Maybe we'll give you some protection then, too. If it's not too late."

He watched the small man go down the stone steps to the street and hail a cab. Then he went over to Fletcher's desk. "Put somebody on Jimmy Lean, but don't let him know it."

"Right, Captain. You going out?"

Leopold nodded. "Down to the *Lazy Hour* bar. Anything yet on the murder car?"

Fletcher shook his head. "If it's a gang, they may fix it in their own garage. It hasn't turned up at any of the regular garages or service stations."

"What about that glass from the headlights?"

"Could be from any one of a lot of makes. Nothing there."

"Any clues to the bank job?"

"Kreiger had the only clues, and they died with him. The killers look like local guys, though. They knew the bank routine too well to

be outsiders just passing through. That's why Kreiger figured the underworld would know who pulled it."

Leopold nodded. "I'll phone in later. Give me the name of Kreiger's girl, in case I'm over that way."

Outside, the morning was beginning to warm up. He avoided a puddle left over from the previous night's rain and put on his sunglasses. The weather was improving, but nothing else.

The *Lazy Hour* did a surprisingly good noonday business, drawing thirsty workers from a trucking company's garage in the next block. Captain Leopold threaded his way through the noisy bar business and waited at one end till he had a chance to catch the bartender's eye.

"You on duty last night?"

"Other guy."

"What?"

"Other guy. Down there." He motioned toward a second bartender busily engaged in filling the beer cooler. "Charlie."

Leopold waited patiently until he could speak to Charlie.

"Last night? During the rain? Yeah, I remember the guys. They left just before the accident up the block."

"One of them was killed in it,

and it wasn't an accident," Leopold told him.

"Yeah? I don't know anything about it. Just a couple of guys."

"Ever see them before?"

"No."

"You don't know Jimmy Lean?"

The bartender looked away. "Yeah, I guess so. Was that him? I didn't even recognize him in the raincoat and all."

"Sure. Look, you want to come down to headquarters and talk about it? That was a detective who was killed."

"Yeah?"

"Don't you read the morning papers?"

"Not if I can help it."

"All right, Charlie. Who'd you call last night? Who'd you tip off?"

"Nobody! I swear it!"

Leopold was getting nowhere. He noted the man's name and address and left it at that for the time. "I may talk to you again," he said over his shoulder.

"How about a beer? On the house."

Leopold shook his head and kept going.

The girl Detective Kreiger had been sleeping with—discreetly—lived in a walk-up apartment in a section of the city that was old but still vaguely fashionable. Leopold

hadn't expected to find her home on a Friday afternoon, but she answered his ring and invited him in without question.

"I was expecting somebody," she explained simply. "From his office."

"You're Shirley McDaniels?"

"That's right." She was tall, and older than he'd expected, though there was a hint of a smile lurking by her lips that held promise of being infectious. He guessed that she was well into her thirties, with blue eyes that made her younger and a firm body that showed evidence of self-discipline.

"I'm Captain Leopold. He . . . Detective Kreiger was on assignment for me when he was killed."

She motioned him to a chair. "I've heard of you, Captain. You're a hard man."

"Not really."

"He thought you were."

Leopold let it pass. "Do you know anybody who might have wanted to kill him?"

"No."

"I understand he was divorced."

"His ex-wife, is that who you suspect?" Shirley McDaniels asked with a snort. "She lives in California. He hadn't seen her in years, and she couldn't care less about him."

"All right. How about you—any jealous boyfriends?"

Her eyes flashed, just for a moment. "It wasn't like that. We were planning to be married. There's no one else."

"Did he ever talk about his work?"

"About other detectives. About you, a little. Not much about the cases he worked on."

"The Midvale bank robbery?"

"No."

"Did he ever mention a stool pigeon he used—fellow named Jimmy Lean?"

"No."

"The *Lazy Hour* bar?"

She shook her head. "He came here to relax, mostly. We didn't go out much. He didn't want people to see us and start talking. He said it would be bad for his job."

"But I thought you were going to be married."

She looked away, smoking her cigarette, perhaps seeing a good deal farther than he could. "Guys make a lot of promises. You probably did yourself, when you were younger."

"I'm not that old."

"Do they always send captains to question suspects? Or just when it's a cop that's been killed?"

"You're hardly a suspect in anything, Miss McDaniels. But Kreiger was working for me when it happened, and I've never believed in working a case from behind a

desk. I want to be at the scene."

"Are you married, Captain?"

"Divorced. Like Kreiger." He got to his feet. "Maybe it's part of the game. There aren't many women who'll go along with the hours, the uncertainties."

"Uncertainties?"

"Like Kreiger dead on the pavement, in the rain."

She shook her head. "It wasn't an uncertainty for me, Captain. I always knew he'd end up like that someday, ever since the first day I met him."

"Why was that?"

"Sometimes you know, just by looking into a person's eyes. Sometimes when we were . . . in bed, I'd look at him, and I'd know. He was a good cop, I think. Maybe too good."

Leopold shook his head. "If he was too good, he'd still be alive."

He left her and drove over to his own apartment, feeling more tired than usual. The night before had been a long one, and he'd only dozed for an hour or two. He'd meant to phone Fletcher, but he drifted into sleep before he realized it, sitting in the room's only comfortable chair, staring out at a cloudy sun low in the western sky.

It was dark when the phone awakened him. "Hello?"

"This is Fletcher, Captain. I was hoping you'd be there."

"What's up?" The tension in Fletcher's voice had fully awakened him.

"It's Jimmy Lean. Somebody just tried to kill him with a bomb."

"Is he alive?"

"He's alive. And talking."

Jimmy Lean's car had been blasted with a single stick of dynamite whose fuse had been ignited by a spark plug when he started the motor. He'd left the motor running and gone back into his house for a pack of cigarettes, and that was what had saved his life—for the moment. Leopold stared at the twisted metal of the car and turned to him.

"I hear you want to talk to me, Jimmy." It was first names now.

"I want to talk and I don't ever want to stop talking, Captain. I never thought it was them that killed Kreiger."

Leopold motioned to the police stenographer who stood nearby. "Let's go inside, Jimmy. Is your wife in there?"

"I sent her over to her mother's. I'm scared stiff, Captain."

"Then give me the names."

"Two guys. Small-timers. I didn't want to tell Kreiger, but he gave me forty bucks."

"The names, Jimmy."

"Frank Bellow and Sandy something. I don't know his last name."

"Where can we find them?"

"Sometimes at the *Lazy Hour*, when the heat's off. I should have known better than to meet Kreiger there."

"All right." Leopold motioned to a detective. "We're taking you into protective custody, Jimmy. Just till we get them."

"I don't want to go to jail!"

"Would you rather stay here?"

The squinty eyes were frightened. "I'll go," he said quietly.

Leopold sought out Fletcher and found him questioning the neighbors. "What about the man who was watching the house?"

"He didn't see a thing, Captain. But the bomber could have sneaked in through a rear garage window. That's why I'm checking the neighbors."

"Leave that for someone else," Leopold said impatiently. "We've got to find a couple of guys named Frank Bellow and Sandy."

"The bank job?"

Leopold nodded. "It's nearly eleven now. I've got an excuse for not calling the FBI till morning, but after that it'll be out of our hands. If they're the ones who killed Kreiger, I'd like it to be in our hands."

"Where do we start?"

"The *Lazy Hour* bar."

The bartender on duty was just

losing up as they entered. It wasn't Charlie. "Police," Leopold said quietly, flashing his badge. "Where's the other guy? Charlie?"

"Night off."

"Closing early for a Friday, ren't you?"

"Slow night," the bartender numbled.

"Where could I find a guy named Frank Bellow?"

"Beats me."

"Cut the clowning," Fletcher interrupted from behind Leopold. "You know him?"

"He used to come in. Haven't seen him in months."

"How about Sandy?"

"Friend of Frank's. Haven't seen him, either."

"Does Charlie know them?"

"Charlie?"

"The other bartender."

"I guess so. Charlie Bellow is Frank's brother."

They looked up Charlie's address in the phone book after they left the bar, trying to act casual so no warning would be phoned in advance. Then they drove across town to the darkened apartment.

"You think they're up there now?" Fletcher asked, a bit uncertainly.

"Have your gun out, just in case."

Leopold led the way into the darkened apartment house, then

motioned Fletcher to cover the back stairs. He knew he should be calling for assistance, reporting to the FBI, but it was far from a sure thing. Besides, if they were up there—if they'd killed Kreiger—he wanted to take them himself.

He knocked once on Charlie Bellow's door and then flattened himself against the wall. Nothing happened. He waited a moment and knocked again, harder. Of course Charlie might be out, making the midnight rounds of other bars. Or he might be in there, dead. Leopold considered all the possibilities.

He tried the knob, but the door was locked. He was debating whether to try forcing it when a voice on the other side asked, "Who's there?"

"I've got a message for your brother," Leopold answered. "Open up."

The door came open a crack, and Leopold's shoulder did the rest. Charlie went sprawling in his pajamas, startled and afraid. He started to rise, saw Leopold's gun, and stayed where he was. "What the hell is this?"

"I want your brother Frank. And a fellow named Sandy."

"I haven't seen them in weeks. Get out of here!"

"This is murder, Charlie. The murder of a bank teller and maybe

the murder of a detective, as well."

"You got any evidence?"

"The word's around that they pulled the bank job. Kreiger heard that word and he was killed. We want to question them. Tonight."

Charlie Bellow was backed against an ugly overstuffed chair, his thin hair rumpled and his eyes suddenly afraid. "I know how you question cop-killers. I read the papers. You want to gun them down in their beds."

Leopold put his own pistol in its holster. "Maybe I want to find them to prevent just that. Maybe I want to get them safely behind bars before some of Kreiger's friends find them first. It happens—I don't deny it."

"Can I believe you?" the bartender asked doubtfully.

"Try me. I could have killed you just now. There's a pretty strong assumption that you tipped off your brother about Lean's squeal to Kreiger."

"I didn't! I didn't even know Kreiger. I couldn't hear what they were talking about!"

"Then tell me where I can find your brother. It's the only chance you've got of seeing him alive."

Somewhere off in the night a siren sounded briefly and died. A cuckoo clock on the wall came briefly to life and sounded the hour of midnight. Charlie Bellow's face

relaxed into a slow grin. "It's too late now. They've left town."

Leopold glanced around, saw Fletcher entering behind him. "Just like that, huh? They left town at midnight. Fletcher, what leaves town at midnight?"

"No planes this late, Captain. And the trains are mighty few at any time these days. I think there's a midnight bus to Philadelphia and Washington, though."

"Sure there is!" Leopold glanced at the clock again. "And we just might catch it before it crosses the city line."

"No!" Charlie started to get up, but Fletcher shoved him back down and followed Leopold out the door.

The intercity bus was a great gleaming giant of chrome and glass, cruising down the highway with its twin-beam headlights splitting the mists of night like waves. Fletcher kept the siren going all the way, and pulled the bus to the curb just one hundred yards from the city line. There was no need to search it. Two men burst free from the emergency exit and hit the pavement running.

"Shoot for their legs," Leopold shouted to Fletcher. "I want them alive!"

The younger man turned to draw a gun and Fletcher brought

him down with a quick, well-aimed bullet. He collapsed in the fingers by the roadside, clutching his bleeding thigh. The other one topped short and raised his hands high above his head.

Leopold moved carefully closer, his own gun ready. The man was tall and tanned, his features reflecting the glow from the bus' headlights. "You would be Frank Bellow," Leopold said quietly. "You look a bit like your brother."

"So he ratted on me, huh?"

Leopold ignored him and spoke over his shoulder. "Call an ambulance for the other one, Fletcher. We're taking them both in."

The night—what remained of it—was long and drudging. They took turns questioning Frank Bellow at headquarters and the man named Sandy Morrell at the hospital. During those first hours they denied everything and spoke of suing the police for assault and false arrest. Finally, just as dawn was peeking over the city roofs, Bellow broke down and admitted the bank robbery and the killing of the teller. The money had been sent to general delivery in Philadelphia to await their arrival.

Captain Leopold sighed and lifted his tired body from the sticky leather seat. "All right. Now what about Kreiger, the detective you ran down?"

"You're nuts! Never heard of him!"

"What difference does it make, Bellow? You've already confessed to one murder!"

But the man would say nothing more. Sergeant Fletcher came in with hot coffee and a theory that hadn't occurred to a sleepless Leopold. "You won't get any more out of him, Captain. The most he can get for killing the bank teller is life in prison, but New York State still has the death penalty for killing a cop."

Leopold nodded. "You're right. Let him rest a while. I'm going home for some sleep."

Fletcher glanced at the clock. "Aren't you going to the funeral, Captain?"

"What?"

"Kreiger's being buried at nine o'clock. The family didn't want to keep his body over Sunday."

Leopold sighed and rubbed his eyes. "What's today—Saturday? I've lost track of time. Sure, I'm going to the funeral, Fletcher. Got enough coffee there for two?"

Leopold decided that even on a summer Saturday, the cemetery was a gloomy place. He stood with hat in hand, listening to the coldly final words of the minister while he watched a gull circle lazily overhead. A few bits of earth for the coffin, a sob from a mother who

hadn't seen Kreiger in years. Then a turning away, sadly back among the tombstones to the waiting line of cars.

Leopold caught up with Shirley McDaniels and took her arm. "Good morning, Miss McDaniels. I thought you'd want to know we arrested two suspects during the night."

"That won't bring him back, will it?"

He looked into her eyes, blurred with useless tears. "No. No, it won't," he admitted. "But if only he'd told me their names on the phone Thursday night . . ."

"What?"

Leopold had stopped dead still, some distance from the waiting cars. Something had clicked in his tired brain. "Pardon me, Miss McDaniels. I have to get back."

He hurried down to the last car in line, where Fletcher waited somberly. "Back to headquarters, Captain?"

"Back to headquarters. We're closing the Kreiger case."

"You know who did it? Below?"

"I know who did it, but for the first time in my life, Fletcher, I haven't the damndest idea of the motive."

"Do we need a pickup order?" Fletcher asked, reaching for the radio.

"No. He's already in jail, waiting for us."

They brought Jimmy Lean over from the cell where he'd been held in protective custody, and Leopold faced him once more across the cluttered desk, feeling as if he hadn't slept in a week. "We got them, Jimmy. Frank and Sand both."

"Good. Good. You'll be letting me go, then?"

"No, Jimmy. Not quite yet. First I want you to tell me why you killed Detective Kreiger."

"What? You're crazy! I was in the bar when he left!"

"The bartender said you both left before the accident, Jimmy. While he was phoning me, you got your car. And you ran him down."

"Try to prove that."

Leopold was very tired. "I will, Jimmy. I think I can. We were assuming all along that Kreiger was the killer and the bomber of your car. That acted to silence you both, to protect the identity of the bank robber. But that was fantastic. (The killer *saw Kreiger leaving a telephone booth*. The fact that Kreiger didn't tell me what he'd just learned from you is immaterial. The killer must have assumed that the word had been passed on, and therefore there was no longer any motive for killing Kreiger. Once I establishe

this, I knew Bellow and Morrell were innocent, and also Bellow's brother, the bartender."

"So that left me, of all the people in this town?"

"That left you, Jimmy. Someone like Kreiger's girl might have had a motive for killing him, but she'd hardly have a motive for bombing your car. If the Bellows and Morrell didn't kill Kreiger, then the attack on you was a fake. We had confirmation of this—no one was seen entering your garage, and only one stick of dynamite was used. You bombed your own car, Jimmy, for the simplest of reasons—to hide the damage done to it when you ran down Kreiger Thursday night."

Jimmy Lean was breathing hard. He squinted his eyes once more and asked, "How do you know that?"

"It's a pretty good guess. I noticed you took a cab when you left here yesterday morning. Of course you couldn't risk driving the murder car to police headquarters. The lab men are going over it now, though—very carefully. The glass

from the headlights, bits of paint, things like that. They know what they're looking for, and they'll tell me just exactly what damage was caused by the dynamite and what was there before."

"All right," Jimmy Lean said finally. Just that.

"Do you want a lawyer?"

"Yes. But I'll make a statement."

Leopold motioned to Fletcher. "Why did you kill him, Jimmy? Why?"

"Sometimes you get to hate what you're doing. Sometimes you get to hate yourself. He made me tell on them, and I hated his guts for it. He was a sneaking, deceptive cop, and when I saw him outside on the curb, I just ran him down."

"Because you hated being a stoolie, Jimmy?"

"Yeah. And besides . . ." He looked down at his hands, as he had so many times before. ". . . besides, Kreiger said he was giving me forty bucks for the information."

"So?"

"There was only twenty in the envelope."



*Notwithstanding a stockpile of pertinent facts, the power of suggestion can yet be formidable.*

# PROSPECTUS

ON

DEATH

by  
John Lutz

**R**OGER TABBER sat quietly behind the wide desk in his private office, listening to the muted sounds of the traffic streaming by below him on Seventh Avenue. He was visible really from three angles, for the plush office was furnished with several huge mirrors stretching from floor to ceiling, to give the impression of space. It was the nature of Tabber's business that he spend much time confined to his office, and he wanted to spend that time in an unstified atmosphere conducive to decision-making. The three Roger Tabbers were men of about fifty, beginning to gray, with handsome, aggressive faces becoming slightly padded with the excess flesh of middle age. They lifted their right arms simultaneously and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Louis?" Tabber said into the telephone. "Give me a quote on Laytun Oil."

"I see," Tabber said after a pause. He drummed his fingers on the smooth desk top, letting the man on the other end of the line wait. "Buy me five hundred shares," he said then. "I'll talk to you later, Louis."

Tabber hung up the phone and gazed around him at the many handsomely framed charts hanging on the walls, at the wide table in the office corner covered with more charts and graphs, financial reports, figure sheets on great corporations and small alike. With his pencil,

with his ascending and descending lines and sheet after sheet of figures, Roger Tabber was able to keep his finger on the pulse of the stock market. As an independent speculator and investor he had to in order to stay in business.

Tabber was intimately familiar with the countless graphs around him, and he believed in them. If all the pertinent facts were known, almost anything could be reduced to a graph, could be analyzed, plotted and, more importantly, predicted, at least to the degree that Roger Tabber had made a profitable business out of it.

When he'd returned from Haiti last year he had started the business, working out of his apartment, but soon the reams of graphs and assorted information, the tools of his trade, became too numerous. He was making plenty of money, so he rented this office on Seventh Avenue, had it lavishly decorated and had two telephones installed. Here, alone in his office with his charts and telephones, he was building his fortune.

Tabber gave a little start behind his desk at the knock on his door. It was most unusual for anyone to be calling on him at the office. He straightened his tie and called for the visitor to enter.

A tall, dark-complected man stepped into the office and closed

the door behind him. He was broad-shouldered and muscular, though the trim cut of his dark-blue business suit made him appear almost slender. With a wide smile on his pleasant face, he glanced about him at the imposing graphs hanging upon the walls before advancing on the desk.

"Mr. Tabber," he said, extending his right hand, "I am Siano . . . of the Leasia family."

Tabber's heart leaped as he shook hands. Well, there was nothing this man could do about it now, even if he were fully aware of what had really happened.

"Yes," Tabber said, "I know of the family from my stay in Haiti. And I have heard of you."

"I'm honored, sir," Siano said in his velvet, high-pitched voice. It was a cultured voice, grammatically precise, and Tabber could almost see the verbal punctuation in the air. "I have been a long time away from the island. It surprises me that you have heard of me."

"I heard you mentioned in a conversation about your father," Tabber said. "Your father, you know, is rumored to be a . . . What is it?"

"A hungan," Siano said pleasantly, "and it is good, sir, that you know I am of his family."

Again Tabber felt an irregularity in his heartbeat. He remembered

now—native superstition. A hun-gan, or shaman as he'd heard them called, was a voodoo witch doctor. There was always talk of such non-sense when he was on the island; it had developed into quite a gim-mick for the tourist trade. And this was Siano, one of the sons of the Leasia clan, well-traveled and edu-cated in Europe—on some kind of foundation grant, no doubt.

"Well," Tabber said, "what is it that brings you to New York?"

"I will be here for some time," Siano said, "staying at the Hilshire, and I thought I would talk with you about the Sweet Kane Sugar Company."

"But . . ." Tabber shrugged, ". . . it no longer exists."

"I am aware," Siano said in a sad voice behind his smile. "Bank-ruptcy, liquidation—it was cruel."

"Cruel?" Tabber shook his head. "It was unavoidable."

Siano's smiling dark eyes met Tabber's directly. "You, sir, as the manager, should know better. Af-ter an entire tribe of people had migrated from their homes, after they had been promised wages to live on, you got them to help you strip the land and then liquidated the company, paying them no wages, leaving them to poverty and hunger."

Tabber pressed the flat of his hand on the desk. "But there sim-

ply *was* no money! Don't you un-derstand?"

"I understand, sir, the mechanics of business," Siano said. "I know that the profits of Sweet Kane Sugar went to the parent company that owned most of the stock, that all assets went in various ways to the parent company so that when liquidation occurred there was nothing for the people. I am not inexperienced in the world of fi-nance, sir."

Tabber drew a gold fountain pen from his pocket and began toy-ing with it. "Well," he said, staring at the pen, "it does no good to talk about it now."

"That's true," Siano said, "but I must tell you that my people will not tolerate what has happened. I, too, have called the Loa, I am also a hun-gan, and I have been sent to New York to see that death visits you."

Tabber's body stiffened in sud-den shock. "And how do you pro-pose to do that?" he asked in a tight voice.

"You needn't fear death by the hand of man," Siano said in his pleasant, smooth voice, "but death will come to you; death is on the way to you."

Tabber felt himself getting angry. "What the hell do you in-tend to do, stick pins in a doll or something? I don't believe in your

malarkey any more than I believe in prechauns, and I'm surprised an educated man like yourself does. You must know that voodoo works by the power of suggestion; he intended victim must believe in it or it's worthless. And I assure you I don't believe in it!"

"I am aware," Siano said calmly.

"I am aware, too," Tabber said ingrily. "Now get the hell out."

He watched Siano smile and get up slowly. Tabber felt the hardness of his walnut desk top for reassurance. Around him were the wall charts, the square-cornered filing cabinets, the accouterments of commerce, of civilization, while below him he could hear the Seventh Avenue traffic passing below his window in an endless stream of reassuring noise and gleaming metal. This was New York, not Haiti. Was this savage in an expensive business suit out of his mind?

Siano turned and walked gracefully to the door. Tabber expected him to turn back and say something before leaving but he didn't.

Tabber sat motionless for a while, looking at the blank panel of the closed door. Then the heavy quiet of the office was broken by the jangle of one of the telephones on the desk. It was Louis, calling to tell Tabber that he had been able to buy Laytun Oil at 24 1/4.

Within a week Tabber had for-

gotten about Siano's visit, and there was no reason for him to remember it when he received the piece of mail from Snowden Investment Research advising him to consider buying Belfor Electronics. The letter, an ordinary form letter, was like hundreds of others that Tabber received each year. He was always deluged by mail from private research firms, hoping to get him to subscribe to their weekly or monthly newsletter at bargain rates; and like Snowden Investment Research, they often supplied sample tips to lure customers. Tabber tossed the letter onto a pile with the rest of his correspondence and promptly put it out of his mind.

Three days later he noticed that Belfor Electronics had risen almost three points, from 30 5/8 to 33 1/2. He began to watch it more carefully.

That same day another letter arrived from Snowden Investment Research, advising him again to buy Belfor Electronics. Tabber folded the letter and placed it in one of his desk drawers.

Belfor remained around 33 for the next week, then Tabber received another letter from Snowden Research telling him that, due to certain information they couldn't divulge, Belfor's stock was due for a sudden upsurge.

Tabber stared at the letter for a long time. Then he picked up the telephone and called his broker to inquire about Belfor Electronics and to ask for a prospectus.

Louis knew nothing about the stock that might suggest it would rise. Belfor was a fairly large company that made radio parts and showed a steady increase in earnings each year, though last quarter they had taken something of a beating due to the expense of opening a new plant.

The next day the prospectus on Belfor Electronics came in the mail, along with another letter from Snowden urging again the purchase of shares in the company. This time the letter was accompanied by a set of graphs showing the expected curve of Belfor's sales and profits into 1972. Tabber compared the graphs with the information on the prospectus and found that up to the last quarter they tallied exactly. Apparently Snowden Investment Research had done some accurate homework. But would their upward sweeping curve into the future be correct?

Belfor seemed to be a solid company at least, so after studying the prospectus Tabber picked up the phone and bought a hundred shares, just for a feeler.

Within a few days, Belfor Electronics stock was up to 38 1/4. An-

other letter and set of graphs arrived from Snowden Research telling Tabber that Belfor was still a smart buy despite the sudden rise, that the stock was destined to move higher very shortly. Tabber talked to Louis, who told him that there were rumors about Belfor now, about possible take-overs, mergers, government contracts, but only rumors. Tabber studied his charts from Snowden carefully, called Louis back and bought 500 shares.

Profit-taking drove Belfor stock down to 34, then it began to climb steadily on heavy volume. The news broke in the papers that Belfor Electronics had been awarded a fat government contract to make components for the space project, and by the end of the month the stock had soared to 47 3/8.

A letter came from Snowden Research, advising Tabber to hold all his Belfor stock, and this time, along with the letter and graphs, came a curious thing.

It was a carefully composed actuary chart from one of the biggest insurance companies in the country, showing the decreased life expectancy of people with a history of heart trouble at various ages. There was no explanation, only the chart. Perhaps it had been placed in the envelope by mistake—but Tabber had a history of heart trouble.

When the next letter from Snowden arrived, Tabber got a momentary jolt. Along with the usual information was a chart listing the unfavorable life-expectancy statistics for people who had suffered exactly the same type of heart attack that Tabber had suffered three years before. Smoking decreased the number of years these people had to live; being overweight cut more years from their lives; working in professions that tried the nerves was unfavorable; married ex-heart patients tended to live longer than those unmarried; rural patients outlived urban dwellers. As Tabber's eyes studied the deadly statistics he realized that all of these things, *all* of them applied to him.

It was then that he remembered Siano's visit and a flash of indignation and anger shot through him. Of course Tabber's heart attack hadn't been a secret, and Siano would have the money and resources to research him quite thoroughly. Imagine trying something like this! He lifted the telephone to call Siano at the Hilshire and vent his anger, then he thought better of it and replaced the receiver in its cradle. Why give the man the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten his intended victim angry? Tabber cursed himself for becoming upset over such super-

stitious harassment and crumpled the information from Snowden and tossed it into the wastebasket. He noted as he did so, however, that Snowden still advised holding Belfor Electronics.

The next week, out of curiosity, Tabber inquired into Snowden Investment Research's address in Brooklyn and found it to be the address of a mortuary. That, he thought, was a nice touch.

That same afternoon another letter arrived from the fictitious Snowden Research, telling Tabber to sell Belfor Electronics. The letter stated that despite the government contract another unfavorable earnings report would drive the price of the stock down. There was another graph enclosed with the letter, a graph that made Tabber's breathing quicken and his right hand move unconsciously to his chest. At the top of the lined paper was the heading: Life And Projected Life Expectancy Of Roger Tabber. A thick black line started at the left side of the graph in a column marked Oct. 3rd, 1920, the date of Tabber's birth, rose through adolescence into adulthood, remained steady, curved downward into middle age, then dipped sharply at the date of his heart attack. Then the line went into a gradual decline, turned gray at today's date, extended to the end of the month

and finally stopped completely.

Tabber reached for the telephone again to call Siano, but he paused, the receiver pressed to his ear, and instead called Louis and sold half his shares of Belfor Electronics stock.

A week later Belfor did issue a very unfavorable earnings report, and their stock plummeted. Tabber sold the rest of his shares at 43 and still made a nice profit. Letters from Snowden were arriving almost daily now, accompanied by graphs and information sheets that predicted Tabber's demise. Tabber was becoming nervous, irritated at the slightest things, but the last thing he would do, the most unwise thing he could do, would be to call Siano and ask him to quit. He could call the police, of course, but what would they be able to prove? They would think that he, Tabber, was the superstitious fool.

It was the day the elevator was out of commission that it happened. Tabber had to climb the six flights of stairs to his office, but he took the steps slowly and carefully. His heart had been beating quickly and irregularly of late anyway, and after the operation his doctor had told him not to exert himself. Nevertheless, when he closed his office door behind him he was breathing quickly, too quickly. From the corner of his eye he saw the top of an

envelope from Snowden Research sticking out of the wastebasket. *Did his heart skip a beat?* A wave of fear went through Tabber as he leaned on the door. Of course his heart *might* have skipped a beat! That was normal, he was out of breath, it had skipped a beat before.

Tabber drew a deep, steadying breath and began to cross the office toward his desk, and his heart did skip a beat, it *did*! His hand moved to his chest, wrinkling his white shirt front beneath his tie. Now his heart seemed to be beating irregularly, spasmodically!

Siano! Could it be possible? Was he actually able with his statistics and graphs to suggest to Tabber the moment of his death? Of course not! . . . But he had been right about Belfor Electronics stock, and Belfor Electronics stock had gone down!

Then Tabber felt the pain. It was a quick, subtle pain that might have been all in his mind, or might not have been. He felt his heart leap beneath his clutching fingers and fear shot up in him like a flame. Clumsily, he stretched out his left hand and supported himself on the desk, waiting for the next pain. It came, searing through his chest like fire, moving up and out, cutting off his breath, turning his arm to molten lead! Gasping,

his face mottled and distorted, Tabber struggled around the desk to the telephones and dialed the first person he could think of. "Louis. . . !"

It was a massive heart attack, but not a fatal one. Afterward, though the doctors claimed Tabber was in critical condition and too ill to have visitors, they finally acquiesced to his demands to see his "old friend" Siano.

Tabber watched him come through the door to the tiny hospital room, somehow walking silently over the tile floor. Siano was immaculately groomed, as before, wearing a tailored dark suit and with the suggestion of a smile on his dark face. "They told me you wished to see me," he said pleasantly.

Tabber waited for the nurse to leave before answering, then he looked up at Siano. Siano had lost, Tabber told himself. Tabber had had his heart attack, but he was still living.

"You've caused this," he said to Siano in a hoarse voice. "You have caused me to be an invalid for the rest of my life if I'm wheeled out of here alive."

Siano smiled down at him. "You

are the one who caused it, sir."

Tabber felt the anger stir in him, but he had promised himself that he'd stay calm. After all, it was just possible he'd have had his heart attack if Siano had never entered his life. That was the thing he really wanted to believe. He was not a superstitious man, but there was something he still didn't understand.

"I called you here to ask you one question," Tabber said, "and I want you to promise to tell me the truth."

Siano considered for a moment before answering. "I will give you that promise."

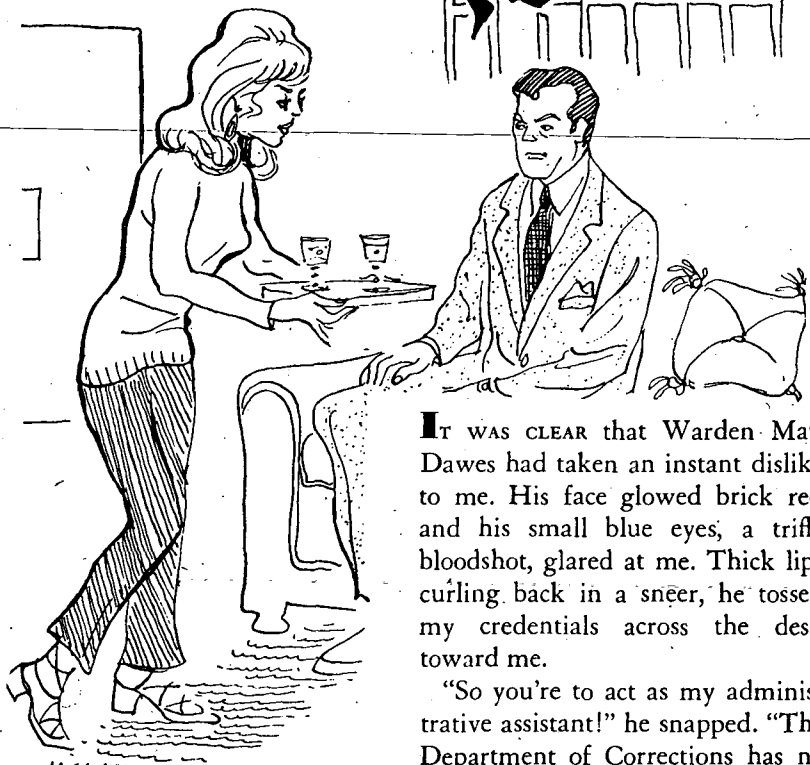
Tabber raised his head slightly from his pillow. "How did you know that Belfor Electronics stock would go up?"

Again Siano smiled down at Tabber, and his dark eyes seemed to grow deeper and darker. "I am on the board of directors, sir." He turned then, still smiling, and strode silently from the room.

From that day on Tabber struggled desperately to recover, but his heart had been severely damaged, irreparably damaged, and the chart at the foot of his bed showed a steady decline until death.

*Where incentive is sufficient, startling changes may result.*

## THE RELUCTANT Runaway



**I**T WAS CLEAR that Warden Matt Dawes had taken an instant dislike to me. His face glowed brick red and his small blue eyes, a trifle bloodshot, glared at me. Thick lips curling back in a sneer, he tossed my credentials across the desk toward me.

"So you're to act as my administrative assistant!" he snapped. "The Department of Corrections has no business sending a special investigator into my prison."

"In Capitol City," I reminded him, "we're under the impression that Corona is a state penal institution—not your private domain."

"I'm sorry, Winters." He forced a tight grin. "This breakout has me all wound up. I've never lost a prisoner before."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "you haven't really lost Bruce Hyle—just misplaced him."

The warden muttered an obscenity. "Don't tell me you believe all that newspaper hogwash?"

I shrugged. "Corona is supposed to be escape-proof, and those crime reporters are sharp lads. Perhaps their theory that Hyle is hiding out somewhere inside the prison is a valid one."

"A lot of nonsense," he exploded, "to sell more newspapers."

"Still, their so-called nonsense has the governor very upset."

"Look," Dawes said, "it's been ten days now since Hyle disappeared. I know this institution like the back of my hand. We've been over every inch of it—including my own house. If Hyle were anywhere inside the compound we'd have flushed him out by now." He stood up then, a tall, powerful man of forty, well over

six feet. "What you, an outsider, can hope to accomplish in here is beyond me."

"Warden," I said, trying to mollify him, "I don't like this assignment any more than you do. I was scheduled for a two-week vacation when it came up. The quicker I get out of here, the better I'll like it."

"All right, then," he said. "The governor called, said to give you a free hand in this. What's your first move?"

I stood and lifted my suitcase. "I'll need a place to bunk."

"I'll have one of the men take your things to my house. Can you cook?"

"Cook?"

"After tonight, we'll have to bach it. My wife's been ill lately. Tomorrow she's going to the city to consult a specialist."

"I'm sure we'll make out," I said. "Hopefully, my stay will be a short one. I'll do my best not to interfere with your routine."

"Do you want to go to the house now, to freshen up?"

I shook my head. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather get started at once."

Warden Dawes grunted his approval. It was apparent that the

by George Antonich

sooner I finished my business and left Corona, the happier he would be. That made two of us.

"The guards have all been instructed to cooperate fully, but until they get accustomed to you, I've assigned Captain Mike Dorsey to show you around."

I nodded. Dawes stabbed at the intercom and sent for the guard captain. When he finished I said, "I understand Bruce Hyle had been working as your house orderly for the past six months."

"That's right. Since my wife took sick he's been a tremendous help. Neat as a pin. A much better cook and housekeeper than she ever was, and a genius with plants and flowers."

"Weren't you a bit leery of having him in your house?"

"Me, leery?" His fuzzy eyebrows shot up. "Why should I be?"

"After all, Hyle's been locked up for five years. I should think you'd be worried, leaving him alone with your wife."

Dawes laughed. It was a mocking splash of sound. "Evidently you didn't bother to read his case history."

I admitted there hadn't been time. "I had planned to study your records."

He shook his big head and brushed a shock of red hair from his eyes. "No, Winters, I was defi-

nately not worried. My wife—any woman—was safe with Bruce Hyle. He was a little, ah—odd. If you know what I mean."

I knew what he meant. Before I could say more, Mike Dorsey arrived. A tall, pleasant-looking man in his thirties, he carried his muscular body with an erect military bearing. As we left the warden's office he said, "Well, Mr. Winters, where do you want to start?"

"Wherever Bruce Hyle was last seen. And please, call me Hank."

Dorsey grinned and lost some of his West Point stiffness. "As near as we can determine, Mrs. Dawes was the last to see him. She told the warden he'd been working all morning in the garden. He left the house at noon to catch the short line."

"The short line—?"

"We have a very small mess hall, and 1800 inmates. They're fed in two shifts. The short line consists of inmates who work in the various offices, and those in dormitories, the trustees, and so forth. When they've finished, the main line, the tough cases from the cell house, are fed."

"Didn't anyone in the mess hall see Hyle?"

"If they did, they're not saying."

"I noticed the warden's house is separated from the main prison complex by a wire fence. Did the

guard on gate duty see Hyle leave?"

Dorsey shrugged. "Fletcher doesn't remember. Says he was so used to seeing Hyle come and go at all hours, he hardly noticed him anymore."

"When was he officially missed?"

"Shortly before the evening meal. A count was taken at four-thirty. Hyle was gone."

I took a deep breath. "Well, I'll have to begin somewhere. Let's assume he went to the mess hall at noon. How could he vanish from there?"

"It's the logical place to try a sneak break," Dorsey said as we crossed the prison yard. "Just beyond the kitchen area are the loading docks where supplies are brought in. The day he disappeared, six trucks were admitted."

"They were searched, of course?"

Dorsey nodded. "By me personally. I was Officer of the Day. I lifted the hoods, examined the undersides, checked for hidden compartments. I'd take an oath that an undernourished midget couldn't have slipped by me."

I believed him. A further check showed that in order to pass from the mess hall to the loading docks, Hyle—dressed in prison blues—would have had to go by three guards in the kitchen and slip un-

noticed past a dozen workers all clad in white. He would have stood out like a sore thumb.

"What if he did not enter the main prison grounds, but stayed in the area of the warden's house? How much closer would he have been to freedom?"

"Not an inch." Dorsey led the way to the inner fence. We were let through the gate by Fletcher, a ruggedly handsome young guard in his twenties. Standing some fifty yards from the warden's house, I could see a double row of barbed-wire fence surrounding the ten-acre compound.

Following my glance, Dorsey said, "The inner fence is twelve feet tall, and the outer is fourteen feet. As you can see, the tops are heavily barbed and are constantly watched over by armed guards in eight towers."

"He could hardly have slipped over unnoticed."

"Impossible. Even if one of the guards should goof, we have an electronic device that registers an alarm if anything larger than a sparrow touches the fence."

"Could he have tunneled out?"

Dorsey shook his head. "A thorough search revealed no signs of digging inside. Bloodhounds and their handlers examined every gopher hole for a half-mile area outside. No sign of a tunnel exit."

I paused for a long moment before asking, "Is there any possibility that Hyle, after six months in the warden's house, could have fashioned himself a hiding place there?"

"No chance. I led a squad in a painstaking search. There is no basement in the house, no attic. The warden insisted that we check even his and Mrs. Dawes' bedroom. There is simply no place to hide in that house."

The sudden sharp blast of a steam whistle startled me. "It's four o'clock," Dorsey explained. "The workday is over. The inmates will clean up now, be counted, then go to the evening meal. Would you care to join me in the guard's mess?"

"I don't know," I said. "I think the warden expects me to dine with him."

Dorsey grimaced. "You'd be better off eating with the convicts than risking one of Ptomaine Tammy's meals!"

"Ptomaine Tammy—?"

"A nickname the warden gave his wife. She is not the world's greatest cook."

"Do you visit his house often?"

Dorsey shook his head. "Not if I can get out of it! Tammy—Mrs. Dawes—is something of a flirt, and the warden is insanely jealous. It's the kind of situation I want no

part of, if it's at all possible."

I was wondering if I should go to the house or back to the warden's office when Dawes came through the gate. "Ready to knock off for the day?" he asked.

When I nodded, he said, "Come on up to the house, then. There's plenty of time for a shower and some drinks before dinner. I brought along Bruce Hyle's case history for you."

He led the way along a gravel path bordered by a profusion of brightly colored ageratum and verbena in neat, carefully tended rows. At the steps to the wide-front porch he stopped and pointed to a large shrub whose whorled foliage was turning bright orange. "Thank God that little jerk planted my smoke tree before he took off."

When I had showered and shaved I went into the livingroom. It was spotlessly clean and more tastefully furnished than I would have expected the warden's lair to be. The walls were of knotty pine relieved by frilly, full-length curtains. Scattered about on end tables were some fine porcelain figurines. A long, low sofa held a mixed collection of colorful pillows. It was easy to see the woman's touch. *If left to his own tastes, I thought, Dawes would most likely have a pool table in the room.*

He came in then, dressed in

slacks and a loose-fitting Hawaiian shirt. "My wife is fixing the drinks." He plopped down on the sofa, grunted peevishly, then threw one of the pillows to the floor. "Damned feminine gewgaws!" he muttered.

"I was just admiring your livingroom."

Ignoring my small talk, he said, "Well, what did you learn today—if anything?"

"I'm convinced that Bruce Hyle is still somewhere inside the prison grounds, waiting until things die down before he makes his break for freedom."

"That's impossible!"

"Perhaps. But we know for certain that every avenue of escape beyond the fence was immediately cut off. Bus and train stations were covered; freight trains stopped and searched; roadblocks set up and airlines watched. He couldn't have slipped through."

"You can't be certain of that."

I shifted under his angry gaze. "I'm sure he's hiding inside the prison, Warden. But to have lasted this long, someone must be providing him with food. The only way we're going to smoke him out is to cut off his food supply."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"I want you to confine the men to their quarters for a few days.

Feed them in their cells and dormitories. Allow only those inmates indispensable to running the prison to be out. Put extra guards in the kitchen and search everyone leaving the mess hall area. Without food, Hyle will have to give himself up."

"You," Dawes blurted, "are out of your mind! These men have got to get out and work off their pressures. Keep them locked up and I'll have a full-scale riot on my hands."

I was about to elaborate on my plan when Mrs. Dawes came in carrying a tray of drinks. My attention was caught at once by her graceful, statuesque femininity. A trifle too much makeup, I thought, but more than compensated for by bright honey-blonde hair that fell to her wide shoulders. She appeared much younger than her husband, and wore slacks with a loose-fitting turtleneck sweater.

Dawes introduced us and she threw me a shy, polite little smile. His speech was curt, and I noticed that when she was near him her face tightened, her wide green eyes darting about, as though she did not want to look at him.

"Don't mind Tammy's silence," Dawes said. "On top of all her other ailments she's developed a throat problem." He glanced up at her. "I see you're a blonde today, my dear . . ." He sighed deeply.

"Winters, she keeps me broke with the collection of vari-colored wigs she's bought."

"Sounds like an interesting idea," I said. "Like having a different wife with each change."

Dawes grunted. "Put down the drinks, my dear, and—watch what you're doing, you clumsy fool!" he shouted as she caught her foot on the thrown pillow and almost fell.

"No harm done," I said quickly, mainly to divert his anger from her. I took a drink from the tray and gulped at it. "This," I told her, "is delicious."

Her smile broadened and became more friendly. She put the tray on a coffee table and went to stand for a moment behind Dawes. From the corner of my eye I could see the frantic wriggling of her fingers as she tried for my full attention. When I looked, her full mouth formed the words: "*Help me.*" Then she whirled and left the room.

Stunned, I lifted my drink and watched Dawes over the rim of my glass. He had seen nothing. Mike Dorsey's words came back to me then. Tammy Dawes was a known flirt, and Matt Dawes was insanely jealous. My assignment here was to investigate a prison break, not the domestic difficulties of the warden. Unless he openly assaulted her, I decided, I would not—could not—

interfere. I'd just have to ignore it.

We had an excellent dinner, Dawes and I alone. "Tammy," he told me, "is on a special diet. I only hope the specialist can make her completely well again."

"She's leaving in the morning?"

Dawes nodded. "I'll drive her to the station early. When I get back we'll put your plan into operation. I want it on record that I'm opposed to it, but I intend to cooperate in every way."

After dinner we stretched out on chaise longues on the front porch. Dawes broke out some cigars and brought along a bottle of brandy from which he drank heavily and steadily. Between Hyle's disappearance, his wife's peculiarities, and the brandy, I began to understand the reason behind his blood-shot eyes.

The drinks were making him talkative. Not wanting to get involved in his personal affairs, I stood up abruptly. "I think I'll turn in," I told him. "I want to study Hyle's case history."

"I'll probably be gone before you get up," he said, his speech beginning to thicken. "I'll send someone over to fix your breakfast. I should be back before you finish."

Bruce Hyle's case history was woefully slim. With no previous criminal record, the thirty-year-old Hyle had, in a fit of temper,

clubbed to death his roommate, one Tyrone Rydell. Beyond calling the police and admitting his guilt from the start, he had offered no defense, no reason for the slaying. At his trial, a court-appointed public defender had moved for second-degree murder. Since the DA's office could not prove premeditation, he was found guilty of the lesser charge. His prison behavior had been exemplary. His record in the free world showed steady employment as an entertainer. A long list of various nightclubs he'd worked was included in the file. One of them, the Chi-Chi Club, which was in Capitol City, sounded vaguely familiar. As I read on, the combination of a good meal and the brandy took its toll—I could hardly keep my eyes open. I put aside the folder and fell asleep at once.

Next morning the smell and sound of coffee perking woke me. In the dining room, a large, fat young man in kitchen whites was setting the table. Grinning, he said, "I'm Martin. How do you like your eggs?"

"Over easy. Has the warden left yet?"

"Just a few minutes ago. French toast or plain?"

"Plain," I said, then sat down to drink my coffee. The cutlery gleamed and the white tablecloth

was immaculate—except for a smudge of lipstick near a centerpiece filled with bright orange foliage from the warden's smoke tree. On an impulse I moved the decorative arrangement. On the white tablecloth, scrawled in lipstick, was the single word: *Hyle*.

I called Martin in from the kitchen. "Did you put that centerpiece on the table?"

He shook his head. "Mrs. Dawes did it just before she left." He paused, then made a wry face. "It seemed to make the old man—the warden—sore as hell."

"What do you mean? Why should it anger him?"

"I don't know. He came in, saw her arranging those orange things, then pulled her out of the room. She sure didn't want to go with him."

Puzzled, I sipped my coffee. Had Mrs. Dawes been trying to tell me something? Foliage from the smoke tree, with the name *Hyle* under it. The smoke tree—*Hyle*. *Hyle* under the smoke tree.

*Hyle buried* under the smoke tree?

I whistled sharply. The idea was fantastic—but it would explain why the missing convict had not been found. I went to the phone and called Mike Dorsey. "Get over here on the double," I told him, "and bring along some shovels."

"I don't buy your theory," Dorsey said as we stood beside the shrub, "and I'm not sure I want any part of this."

I filled him in on the previous night—the fear in Tammy Dawes' eyes, her husband's brusque behavior, her silent plea for help, the warden's haste to ship her out immediately after my arrival.

"You can't really believe the warden killed Hyle because of some hanky-panky between him and Tammy?" Dorsey shifted uncomfortably. "Everyone knows Hyle was—"

"I know all about that," I cut in. "I also know that a jealous man doesn't need much fuel to ignite his anger. He might mistake the simplest act of kindness for something more. If there's nothing under that shrub we can have it replanted before Dawes comes back."

Mike Dorsey shrugged in resignation, spit on his hands, and began to dig. As he did, I had long second thoughts about my actions. If I had guessed wrong there would be hell to pay.

"Good Lord!"

The guard's hoarse cry brought me back to reality. He motioned me aside and scraped the dirt from a piece of dark blue material in the hole. Inside the material, face down, was a body. "Four six four three," Dorsey said. "That's Bruce

Hyle's number, all right, Hank."

"Don't dig anymore," I told him. "We'd best finish this up with witnesses. Get the prison doctor down here, and a photographer to make a record of each step. I'll call the state police to grab Dawes before he kills again."

"Before he what?"

"He has to kill again, Mike. He has to get rid of the witness to this murder."

When Dorsey hurried away, I went into the house to call the state police. I identified myself and told them what I wanted. "Bring them both back here," I ordered, "if you have to shackle them. I'll take full responsibility."

I cradled the phone, then slumped to the livingroom sofa with my eyes shut, trying to sort out the jumbled thoughts racing through my mind. Something about the rapidly breaking events just didn't ring true. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I felt a nagging certainty that I had overlooked some glaring truth; had at some point made a wrong turn. As I mulled it over, Dorsey came back.

"It'll be a little while," he told me. "Doc Millman lives off the grounds and hasn't come in yet. The photographer will be along in a few minutes." He stood in the center of the room, his eyes sweeping over it in admiration. "Wow,"

he exclaimed, "what a change Bruce Hyle made in this place."

"It is a very charming room," I agreed.

"Hyle would call it very chic. You should have seen it before. Mrs. Dawes should have been arrested for impersonating a housewife."

I stared at the guard captain for a long moment. The strangest sort of feeling overtook me. I felt like a cartoon character over whose head a light bulb suddenly flashes.

"When was the last time you were in this house?"

"The day Hyle disappeared."

"Did you talk to Mrs. Dawes then?"

He shook his head. "She was very upset. She stayed outside while my men and I searched the house."

I paused momentarily, then said, "You may want to punch my nose at this next question, but I must ask it. Were you having an affair with Mrs. Dawes?"

"Lord, no!" he blurted. "I'm a very happily married man."

"Have there been any rumors concerning other guards or personnel?"

"None. The warden's jealousy and his hot temper put this place strictly out of bounds to everyone but Hyle."

"Was there anyone else who had

the opportunity to visit her when the warden was away?"

Dorsey thought for a moment. "I can't imagine who it could be. There's a guard tower less than fifty yards from the house, and Fletcher at the inner gate, but neither of them would dare leave his post."

Before I could pursue it further, the phone rang. It was the main gate. "There's a state police car here with Mrs. Dawes," the guard said. "Shall I admit them?"

"Isn't the warden with them?"

"No, sir—just Mrs. Dawes." There was a pause and the muted babble of voices in the background before the guard continued. "The trooper says the warden was injured in a car accident. They took him to the hospital in town."

"Send them to the house," I said, then hung up. I filled Dorsey in and together we moved out to the porch. In another minute the state police car came to a stop at the end of the graveled walk. One trooper stayed at the car, looking in at the feminine figure huddled in the back seat. The other came to where we stood.

"How bad off is the warden?" I asked.

"He'll be all right. Just a slight concussion." He pointed toward the car. "It's her I'm worried about. She seems to be in a state of shock.

I can't get one word out of her."

"Do you have any idea what happened?"

"A couple following the warden's car reported the accident. Said there appeared to be a struggle for the steering wheel. Then the car ran off into the ditch."

Mike Dorsey said, "You were right, Hank. She must have guessed he meant to kill her and she tried to get away."

"What do you mean?" The trooper tensed. "Who was going to kill who?"

"The warden," Dorsey said, "was going to kill his wife."

I turned to the guard captain. "You're wrong, Mike. The warden had already killed his wife—ten days ago." I cupped my hands and shouted toward the police car. "Hyle! Come on up here. Everything is going to be all right."

The rear door of the car opened slowly. The trooper stood aside, his mouth gaping, as Bruce Hyle got out of the back seat with the honey-blond wig in his hand. He took several halting steps toward the porch, then broke into a run until he reached my side.

His voice a garbled whisper, Hyle said, "Dawes . . . tried . . . to kill me . . . in the car." He pulled down the neck of the sweater to reveal ugly purplish bruises on his

throat. He'd had a taste of death.

"It's all right," I said. "Don't try to talk until we've had the doctor look you over."

"Well, I'll be damned," Mike Dorsey exclaimed. "How did you know it wasn't Hyle in the grave?"

"I didn't," I admitted. "Until a few minutes ago, I actually believed it was Hyle."

"Then what tipped you off?"

"You did," I told him. "Oh, I should have seen it long before. I should have guessed it from the spotless condition of the house, the carefully-tended-plants-and-flowers. I should have known for certain at dinner last night. After all, I had been warned about Ptomaine Tammy's horrible cooking—yet the meal was excellent."

Dorsey was plainly puzzled. "But how did I—?"

"Word association," I told him. "You mentioned that Hyle would have called the room very chic, that Mrs. Dawes should have been arrested for impersonating a housewife. Hyle had worked in the Chi-Chi Club in Capitol City—a night spot that features female impersonators exclusively."

Bruce Hyle tugged at my sleeve. Hoarsely, he whispered, "I . . . never tried . . . to escape."

"I know that now," I said, "and don't try to talk. I'll tell it as I see

t. If I'm wrong, you can stop me."

"Will someone," the state trooper exploded, "tell me what's going on around here?"

"Mrs. Dawes," I began, "was having a visitor to the house while the warden was away. My guess is, that it was Fletcher, since his post is nearest the house and little used. At any rate, on the day of the supposed escape, Dawes saw someone leaving the house. He confronted his wife and in a fit of jealous rage he killed her."

I paused to look at Bruce Hyle. He nodded vigorously. "I saw . . . him do it."

"I can only guess at what went on next," I said. "But I would say that Dawes buried Tammy in Hyle's clothing so that nothing of the supposed escapee would be found in the subsequent search. He may even have toyed with the idea of killing Hyle then and there. But it would have been pretty tricky to explain the disappearance of both his wife and a convict on the same day. Instead, knowing of Hyle's past success as a female impersonator, he decided to put those talents

to good use. A man as large as the warden probably had no trouble intimidating Hyle into agreeing to the deception." I turned to face the little man. "What did he do, promise to let you go once the heat had died down?"

Hyle nodded. "I knew he . . . was lying. But I had to . . . go along."

Mike Dorsey was standing with his mouth open. "Listen," I told him. "I want you to see that Hyle gets immediate medical attention, and that no charges are brought against him."

Dorsey frowned. "What have I got to say about that?"

"Everything. I'm going to call the governor and recommend that you be made acting warden. It might even be permanent."

Grinning, Dorsey started to lead Bruce Hyle away. The little man planted his feet firmly and refused to budge. He turned to face me. "Please . . . get me some . . . prison blues. I-I'd like to change."

I nodded. I had an idea he meant to change more than just his clothing.



*The first virtue is said to be the art of restraining one's tongue.*

# A WARNING

by W.S.  
Doxey

THE DOORBELL RANG as Tom and Ada left the dinner table and came into the livingroom still cluttered with crates scattered about by the movers.

"The neighbors don't waste time," Tom said.

Ada glanced out the front window. "I don't think it's them. Who do we know that drives a black sedan?"

Tom shook his head. "I don't know anyone in this town except Ed Forbes and he has a sports car."

The bell rang again as Tom opened the door. A young man faced him across the threshold. He wore a conservative dark suit and his blond hair was cut on the short side. In one hand he held a gray snap-brim hat, in the other a small gift-wrapped package.

"Good evening, Mr. Walters," he said. "I have something for you."

"No, my name is Smith," said Tom.

"This is 550 Cedar Street."

"Yes, but my name is Smith."

"Who is it, Tom?" Ada asked.

"Wrong address," he said over his shoulder.

"It's the right address," said a second man who had been standing against the wall out of Tom's line of sight. Now he stepped into view. A giant of a man, he wore a neatly tailored dark suit which, except for size, was the mate of his partner's.

Tom glanced at his square, solid

face, then said, "It may be the right address, but we're new here. Just moved in this morning. Our name isn't Walters. It's Smith, plain Smith. Sorry."

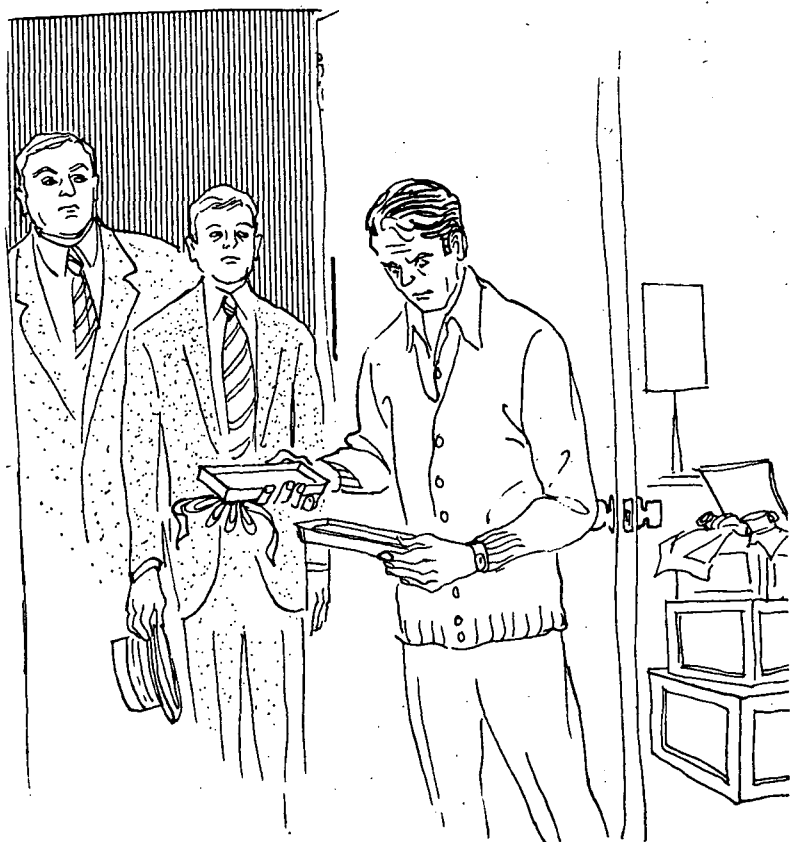
He tried to close the door but the big man put his foot in the opening. "Now, see here—" Tom protested.

"No, *you* see here," the big man said.

"The address is right," said the young man, "so this belongs to you." He placed the package in Tom's hand. "Our employer wants you to know he has his eyes on you, no matter where you go. Open it."

"But I'm not—"

"Do what he says."



"You have your nerve!" cried Ada. "I've got a good notion to call—"

"No, Ada, wait," said Tom. The two men seemed to mean business. Besides, what if it were some kind of practical joke cooked up by the fellows at the new job? He turned to his wife. "Shouldn't you put the dishes in the washer?"

"I'm not afraid of them! This is America!"

Tom balanced the package in the palm of his hand. "Yes, of course. But see about the dishes, okay?"

As Ada retreated to the dining room Tom loosened the gay ribbons binding the package. There was a lacy silver bow, and the red and green paper was of a slick metallic finish. He peeled away the covering as carefully and steadily as he could. He did not want to drop it. For a reason he could not quite understand, it seemed important that, like Ada, he not let them know how frightened he was.

Beneath the paper he found an ordinary small white box, the type jewelers use for bracelets and necklaces. Tom examined it and hesitated. It had to be a joke. Sure, when he opened it, an elastic snake would zoom out and the two ominous callers would yell, "Surprise!"

"Open it," the young man said, a smile twisting his lips.

Tom sliced the tape on each side with his thumbnail and, bracing himself for a shock, slowly lifted the lid. A layer of cotton greeted his eyes.

"Go on," the big man said.

"All right." Tom drew a deep breath, lifted the cotton and blinked at the two shell-like pink objects resting on a second layer of cotton. Ears! A pair of human ears, crusted with dried blood along the edge!

The shock of such a terrible sight drained the blood from his head. This was no joke. Whose ears were they? Each lobe bore a small dark dot. Pierced. They had to be a woman's ears, or a girl's.

The young man laughed. "Now do you know who you are, Walters?"

"I—I'm—what does this mean?"

"Mean?" said the big man. "Tell him what it means."

"It means our employer wants you to be a very, very good boy. It means you should keep your big mouth shut. It means if you play ball with us you'll see your kid again. That's what it means."

"My kid?" said Tom. He strained to look past the two men on his porch. Yes, there were his son and daughter playing across the street with the neighborhood children—and his Sue's ears weren't pierced.

"Now you know what we mean," the young man said. His cool blue eyes narrowed. "Stop playing dumb, Walters. You're wasting our time." He pointed to the ears. "Keep quiet till the investigation dies and you'll get the girl back."

"Ears can be fixed," said the big man. "Death can't. Understand?"

Tom nodded slowly. Who wouldn't understand that? The small box cupped in his fingers weighed a ton. He had to put it down, to get rid of these monsters, but he couldn't forget he wasn't the man they were after. Replacing the lid on the box he said, as calmly as he could, "Suppose you're wrong, suppose I'm not Walters?"

The young man frowned. "In that case we've made a mistake, which is very bad for us. But we never make mistakes. You are Walters."

"Yes," Tom lied, his mouth as dry as Death Valley. "Yes, yes."

"Sure you are," said the big man.

"Yeah, okay, we'll see you around," the young man said. "No hard feelings, Walters. We're just doing our job." He extended his hand and, as in a trance, Tom shook it, feeling the cool dampness of his flesh.

Tom stood in the open door, the box in his hand, and watched them go to their car. The children across

the way ran in crazy patterns over the green lawn, squealing incoherently, as a third man came around the garage and slid into the back seat. The big man started the engine and backed down the drive. Good grief, they weren't going to—but yes, they were. At the street the car stopped momentarily and all three gave him a cheery wave.

Not until the car passed out of sight around the corner did he move. Then it was at the hurried insistence of Ada, who brushed past him to shut and lock the door and exclaim, "Quick, call the police! I got their license number!"

"But the children—" he said.

Ada dropped the envelope on which she had jotted the identifying numbers and slapped her hands to her mouth. "I forgot them!" she bawled. She shoved Tom aside and ran down the walk, frantically calling, "Sue! Tommy!" so that all the children stopped playing and stood dumbfounded as she swooped down upon her two and convoyed them home.

By then, Tom regained his presence of mind enough to turn his son and daughter back from the door and take his wife into the kitchen. He searched through the cabinets, found half a bottle of bourbon and two glasses, and poured a pair of neat drinks. He

placed the small box on the table between them.

Ada said, "This is a hell of a time to drink! They're getting away!"

"I don't think we want them caught," Tom replied. He nudged the box toward her. "Do you know what's inside?"

She had forgotten the box. Now she took it in both hands and wrenched off the lid. The contents spilled across the table. For a moment she was speechless. Then, choking, she sobbed, "Ears! Human ears!"

"Yes, ears," Tom said, and then he told her the young man's message.

As he spoke, Ada stared at the ears with a horrible fascination. When he finished she said, without looking up, "They've made a terrible mistake. What can we do?"

"I don't know. Calling the police would be insane."

"We'll move away! Right now, this minute!"

"No, that would be worse than calling the police. Don't you see, if we leave town this employer, whoever he is, will believe we really are the Walters. We've got to stand fast as though nothing happened."

"Nothing? But something *has* happened. What about those?"

Tom picked up an ear in each hand, gingerly with thumbs and

forefingers, as he'd grasp a pair of kittens.

"You touched them!" Ada cried.

"Do you want me to leave them on the table? They do belong to someone, you know—they said to a little girl."

"I don't care. Drop them into the garbage disposal."

Tom studied each ear, then packed them in the box between the two layers of cotton. "We can't throw them away."

"What do you mean, we can't?" Ada said. "I can't live in this house with them! You've got to do something."

Tom took a generous sip of bourbon. "What if I do and those men realize they've made a mistake and come back? They'd be overjoyed to hear I threw them away."

"There must be some other way," said Ada. "Maybe we'd better do the right thing and get it out in the open. I'll call the police if you won't."

"I told you we can't. Listen, honey, did you see the third one? He was watching the back yard."

"While I was in the kitchen?"

"Yes, he was out there keeping an eye on you and the back door."

Ada looked over her shoulder at the unlocked door. "I don't believe you. You're trying to scare me into keeping those—those *things* and doing nothing."

Tom opened the back door and went down the steps into the yard. A set of deep footprints marred the flowerbed beneath the kitchen window. "Those are fresh tracks, see?" he said.

Ada saw. "There *was* another one." She glanced along the wall and into the hedges. "Are there more?" she whispered.

"I don't know," said Tom. "But I wouldn't be surprised."

As they went back into the kitchen Ada tried to speak. There was desperation in her eyes as well as her voice. "What—what are we going to do?"

Tom picked up the box and went to the counter. "We'll do the only thing we can. Absolutely nothing."

"But the ears, what about the ears?"

"We'll keep them," he said, rummaging through the counter drawers.

"But how, where? Not in the house! Tom, I couldn't stand it. Go to the bank in the morning and get a safe-deposit box."

"Won't work. After a while the

smell—ah, here's what I want."

He withdrew a package of plastic bags, shook one open, dropped in the box, and twisted the plastic closed.

Ada collapsed in a chair at the table. "You're not going to put those ears in the—"

"Yes, the freezer," Tom said. He opened the refrigerator, and as a cloud of icy air settled about his head he reached deep into the snowy box at the top and deposited the package between containers marked "turnip greens" and "liver". Then he closed the door and turned to face his wife.

"Let that be a warning," he said.

"A warning?" she moaned. "A warning of what?"

He leaned his dead-tired weight against the refrigerator and thought about it. After some moments he replied simply but honestly, "I don't know, of everything, I guess."

While his wife cried softly, he took her hand and they went out and sat on the porch of their new home and watched their children joyfully at play.



*The first prerequisite in improving one's circumstances lies in maintaining good relations.*

# The Delicate Victim

**T**ERRY BIXBY stopped the white convertible in the driveway of the imposing redwood rancher in Tanglewood Heights. Looking at the lovely home, he slumped behind the wheel. Thoughts of the future wrung a groan from him.

He wondered which would go first—the home, the car, the furniture. Everything was third-mortgaged and refinanced to the hilt. He wasn't a magician, and without a monetary miracle, strangers were going to be enjoying their car and throwing those wonderful poolside parties.

Terry sensed movement beside the car and lifted his face from his hands. In her chic, polished cotton dress and sandals, glistening black

hair casual about her tanned, lovely face, Miriam was the perfect image of the smart suburban homemaker.

The deep violet of her eyes went a shade darker as she watched the haggard way Terry got out of the car. "You didn't get the loan," she stated thinly.

"When I left the finance com-

by TALMAGE  
POWELL

pany," Terry snapped back, "I couldn't even get a drink in Chez Pierre. Seems our liquor bill is more than slightly overdue."

"Too bad, darling," Miriam's words crackled brittle ice shards,

"you had to pass up your afternoon cocktail!"

"Don't ride me, Miriam! Not this evening."

"Of course not, you poor dear," his wife said nastily. She folded her



arms and tapped a toe. "But just what do you propose we do now?"

Terry took a heavy breath. "I don't know," he admitted. He looked longingly at the house, the landscaped lawn, the poolside furniture just visible beyond the rear corner. His handsome young face flickered with the look of a small boy who's just learned there's no Santa Claus. "All we wanted was to live decently."

"On easy credit and too little income," Miriam said, her practical, female side asserting itself. "You'll have to get up the nerve to ask old man Hergeshimer for a raise, that's all!"

Terry's knees wobbled at the mere thought. "Not a chance. I'm hanging onto my job by the skin of my teeth as it is. I don't want to remind my boss I even exist." He threw a desperate glance around him. "We'll not give it up! We'll find a way, if I have to . . . to rob a bank or something."

Miriam's laugh was remotely amused. "Really, Terry. You, in the role of nerveless bank robber? What a quaint notion! Anyway, we have another little problem that just popped in."

"Spare me." Terry's eyes explored heavenward. "I thought we had already cornered the market on problems. What is it now?"

"We have a house guest. A little

lady who says she is your great-aunt Griselda."

"Griselda? I haven't any . . . Wait a minute, would her last name be Carruthers?"

"So she says," Miriam said.

"I haven't seen her since. I was a kid." Terry glanced at the house. "I vaguely remember her as a slick young woman who supplied the rest of the family with its secret gossip. I think she eventually took off for New York and the lure of footlights."

"She finally landed in our house," Miriam said. "She arrived by taxicab about two hours ago. Said she'd flown all the way from Caracas and was delighted to have the phone book turn up the name of her only surviving relative here in the city."

"Caracas?"

"A city in Venezuela, darling."

"I know where Caracas is!" Terry glared at the house. "Okay, we'll give her a dinner, a roof for the night, and let her fly right out again."

Great-aunt Griselda was a dainty and wonderfully preserved woman. Her hair was feathery frost about an oval-shaped face that still retained an echo of its once captivating, porcelain prettiness.

The reunion took place in the livingroom, Griselda hugging Terry and stepping back to look at

him with a gentle hint of warm and happy tears in her flashing blue eyes. "You turned out to be a truly handsome man, Terry! And with such a lovely wife. I'm so happy to know that life has been kind to you, with this charming little home and all."

"It's nice to see you, Aunt Griselda," Terry lied beautifully, remembering that she was only going to be here for the night.

"Perhaps you'd like to freshen up," Miriam suggested, "while I finish getting dinner together."

"Don't put yourself out, dear. Any morsel will do for me."

She ate more than a morsel of everything Miriam produced on the table.

"Delicious, delightful!" Aunt Griselda remarked throughout the meal.

Terry lifted a dubious brow. The dinner of roast, potatoes, and asparagus had been the usual scorched and lumpy results of Miriam's efforts in the kitchen ever since their one servant, a cook-maid, had given up trying to collect the arrears of her salary and walked out three weeks ago.

"The General," Griselda said, giving her lips a last dainty touch with her napkin, "would have enjoyed the dinner. He did so like his spot of roast beef. Perhaps because he was English, you know."

"The General?" Terry looked up from the plate where he'd scooted food back and forth with the tip of his fork.

"But of course you didn't know," Aunt Griselda said. "My late husband, dear." For an instant, despite her years, her eyes were those of a coquette. "The most interesting, lovable, and charming of all my husbands."

Terry suspected the General wasn't long gone. "I'm sorry about your bereavement, Aunt Griselda."

"Thank you, dear, but I'm feeling better already, being here with you and Miriam. The General and I always felt at ease with younger people. Those gouty folks in the diplomatic and banking circles weren't our speed. Indeed not. The General and I could swim, ride, golf, fly our plane, and party with the jet set—right up to the day when the bomb killed him."

Miriam sat straighter. "Bomb? Did you say bomb?"

"Planted in the General's limousine by those horrid terrorists." Aunt Griselda's eyes fired with vengeful wrath, "The cowardly, despicable . . ." She drew a breath to control the direction of her feelings. "But I really didn't intend to dampen—"

"Not at all, Aunt Griselda," Terry said. "What happened?"

"The bomb," Griselda mused on

a past moment of horror, "killed them both. The General and Ferdie."

"Ferdie?" Terry ventured. "Not . . . your son?"

Griselda returned to the present with a tender look at Terry. "No, dear. The General and I never were blessed with children. Perhaps that's why I looked you up. My arrival wasn't at all accidental. I have no one now but you, Terry, and lovely Miriam." She looked fondly from one to the other. Then she gave a little sigh. "But we were talking about Ferdie. He was the most excellent of chauffeurs; the product of a fine training school in England."

Quite naturally, Terry and Miriam slipped a look at each other.

Miriam said casually, "I imagine a chauffeur like that would be expensive."

"Expensive?" Griselda said, a bit blankly. Then she shrugged. "I suppose so. With the General's millions we never bothered to count trifling costs. Of course I set up a trust to take care of Ferdie's poor parents. It was the least I could do."

Terry was becoming itchy with interest. "It reveals but another facet of a remarkable woman. By the way, did you meet the General in Venezuela?"

"No, dear. I was on the Riviera

several years ago, the ideal place, really, for one to readjust after divorcing a second husband. I met the General there." Her eyes grew dreamy. "The man for whom I'd waited all my life; dashing, handsome, debonair. A perfect gentleman, and, the lover of lovers . . ."

Terry held off from intruding in Aunt Griselda's memories for a moment. "Was he in the military at the time?"

"Military?" Aunt Griselda smiled with a hint of condescension. "His title was purely honorary, dear, bestowed on him by the King of Trans-Kublait. My husband's interest was oil. He brought in wells from the Middle East to South America. It was his last business coup that took us to Venezuela—and the dreadful bomb."

A fluttery eagerness to please their guest had crept to life in Miriam. "Wouldn't you like more dessert, Aunt Griselda? Coffee? An after-dinner brandy?"

Aunt Griselda smiled her pleasure. "A spot of vintage Cognac—" She caught herself. "But of course anything you have on hand will do beautifully."

During the following week changes took place in the Bixby household. Aunt Griselda was cozily ensconced in the east corner bedroom, the largest and sunniest

Terry hocked his golf clubs for the price of good brandy. Mornings, he and Miriam tiptoed about the house, Griselda having quietly mentioned that she did enjoy her morning naps.

After dinner one evening, Terry directed a remark concerning money at Miriam, for Aunt Griselda's benefit.

"I'm glad you brought up the subject," Aunt Griselda said.

Terry's heart warmed from the way she'd risen to the bait.

"I've had a talk with a local attorney and broker," she informed them. "You'll be interested to know that I've transferred considerable sums from Swiss banks—and written a will most favorable to my charming family." She reached across the table and clasped their hands.

"Why . . . uh . . . Aunt Griselda . . . I didn't mean . . ." Terry's soaring spirits choked off his words.

The old lady missed his real feelings. She patted his hand. "There, there, dear, I understand; and please forgive me for referring to that lurking moment in the future when we shall be parted."

She pushed back her chair. "Miriam, I'll have a brandy in the den, please. This American television fascinates me, especially the quaint commercials." Griselda glided

toward the den with regal imperiousness.

Miriam gave Terry her I-could-wring-your-neck look. With the old lady out of earshot, Miriam added a hiss, "You lunkhead! You let the chance to put the bite on her slip right through your fingers!"

Terry groaned. "I'm sorry."

"You should be. I spent the afternoon answering phone calls—from creditors."

Terry shifted uneasily. "I wonder how much the old fool is worth?"

"From bits and pieces I've picked out of her," Miriam said, "I'd say about five million."

"Five . . ." Terry grabbed the edge of the table and hung on. "Get moving with that brandy. We can't keep five million dollars waiting!"

Terry dreamed that night of monstrous stacks of currency mil-dewing in underground vaults. He woke with a drained feeling, and was thirty minutes late when he arrived at Hergeshimer & Co., Real Estate, Mortgages, Appraisals, Investments.

Terry tried to slip unobtrusively to his desk in the far corner, but Miss Buttons, the receptionist, must have been watching for him. She called his name and motioned him toward her desk.

"You'd better get into the old

bear's office right way," she said. "He was out here asking for you."

The corner of Terry's mouth twitched. "Did he say what it's about?"

"You kidding? But from the quiet, overly-polite manner he was wearing, I'd say he's drooling with sadistic schemes inside."

Terry forced one foot to precede the other in the direction of Hergeshimer's office.

The old bear's private secretary admitted Terry immediately. Hergeshimer rocked behind his desk, regarding Terry's cowed figure with the gentlest of eyes. "Good morning, Bixby."

"Good morning, Mr. Hergeshimer."

Mr. Hergeshimer smiled. "You're fired, you lazy bum."

Terry sank weakly toward a chair.

"Don't use the furniture," Mr. Hergeshimer said, most courteously. "You're no longer connected with this company. You're trespassing."

"But, Mr. Hergeshimer—"

"No need for further talk, Bixby. Your severance pay is waiting at the cashier's desk."

Terry's shaking hands waddled into limp fists. "At least you owe me an explanation."

The old bear stopped his quiet rocking. "Owe you? If I owe you

anything it's a lawsuit to recover salary taken under false pretenses. As to my reasons for firing you, there are many. You are a prime, double-dyed example of the modern trend toward a half-day's work for a double-day's pay. Your sole concern is the salary and fringe benefits. The job involved is a bothersome annoyance to be shirked as easily as possible."

The creases in Mr. Hergeshimer's big face wreathed a pattern of raw pleasure. "In short, Bixby, you are a creep. The sword has been hanging over you for some time. Your failure with Conway yesterday cut the thread."

"I tried to call Mr. Conway—"

"One time, Bixby. Just once. Then you were off to the country club. But Conway reached his office at three o'clock. If I hadn't thought of giving him a ring myself, we might have lost the account."

The old bear turned his attention to a tray of papers on his desk, blotting Terry from existence.

Terry dragged his feet into the comfortless luxury of his house and fell into a livingroom chair.

Miriam came in, drawn by the sounds of his arrival. With robot-like motion, he turned his head and looked at her. "I've lost my job," he said.

Her lips tightened to the van-

ishing point. "Oh, great! You're a real success, Terry!"

He clutched the arms of the chair as if he would rip them off. "Don't start on me now, Miriam," he warned. Carefully, he relaxed his hands and drew a breath. "I've thought about it all the way home. Where is Aunt Griselda?"

"In the breakfast nook, nibbling a Texas pink grapefruit laced with sherry."

Aunt Griselda made a rather exotic image against the bay of windows that enclosed the breakfast nook. She was wearing a wrapper of brilliant colors that she'd said the General had picked up for her in Algiers. Touching her coffee with a spot of cream, she glanced up. "Why, good morning, Terry. Taking the day off?"

"Well, not exactly . . . As a matter of fact, I've lost my job."

The shadow of concern slipped from Aunt Griselda's eyes. "For a moment, when you walked in with that look on your face, I thought something serious had happened."

"This is pretty serious to Miriam and me!"

"But you must keep it in perspective, dear. Jobs are lost and found every day. As the General always said, any willing hands can find a constructive task. When one door closes, another opens. If the General were here, he'd advise you

to regard this as a great opportunity to go out and find yourself a better job."

She wavered in Terry's vision as his control began to slip. He was so sick of the General's stuffy, second-hand platitudes he could have crammed them back in Aunt Griselda's small, pearly teeth. "A few empty words are all you're going to offer us?"

In the act of rising, Aunt Griselda paused. Looking at him, her eyes cooled. "You know," she said quietly, "I've the suspicion that I'm being tolerated in this house."

Miriam dug an elbow in Terry's rib. With a sweet smile, Miriam said, "Why would we do a thing like that, Auntie?"

"For my money," Aunt Griselda said bluntly. "Perhaps I made the wrong entry. Would I have been welcome if I had arrived in rags?"

"Ever so welcome," Miriam entertained. "Please believe me. We do love you—for yourself."

"Sure," Terry said. "I was upset for a minute, is all. Taking my feelings for my ex-boss out on you, Aunt Griselda."

Griselda looked from one to the other. "In sickness or accident I should put unlimited funds at your disposal. Terry is my only living relative. One day, when I'm gone, you'll have all that I possess. But you must solve this little present

difficulty on your own, Terry. You'll be a better man for having done so—and that is my sole consideration."

Terry and Miriam stood perfectly still, watching Aunt Griselda cross the dining room and move out of view.

"We'll never get it," Miriam hissed, "until the day she dies."

"She knows she's got a grip on us," Terry said.

"She's made slaves of us," Miriam added.

"Even slaves rebel and take what's rightfully theirs . . ."

It was out in the open, the tantalizing, overpowering prospect.

Terry stole a glance at Miriam. The cold determination in her face gave him a slight shock. He realized that Miriam was way ahead of him. Miriam had been thinking about Aunt Griselda's demise from the moment the old lady had revealed her financial status.

"She's had her years," Miriam said. "It wouldn't be any great loss."

Terry struggled with a single word: "How?"

"She's going to take her morning shower right now. We are witnesses for each other. No one can dispute our words. Aunt Griselda is going to slip and fall in the bathroom. Start mustering your grief for your dear, departed aunt,

Terry," Miriam stated abruptly.

While her decision retained its initial iron hardness, Miriam hurried across the dining room, shoulders square. She didn't look back.

Terry stood with everything inside of him drawing tighter and tighter. He heard a door open, voices speak. A muffled scream. The thuds of a struggle in a remote part of the house. Another scream, longer, higher in its wailing pitch.

Terry clamped his eyes shut and clapped his hands over his ears. The silence seemed endless. Then a form materialized in the hallway arch. It was Aunt Griselda. She was wriggling and jerking smooth the wrinkles in a blue silk dress which she had just slipped into.

She looked across at Terry with the degree of frosty contempt that only the very worldly-wise person can muster.

"My dear boy, through a sense of graciousness I've endured the boredom of this house, with nothing but stupid TV programs and the oblivion of catnaps to sustain me. I've eaten your wife's atrocious cooking to pay her an unwarranted compliment. I have taken more brandy than is proper in order to lull the gastric destruction resulting from the selfsame cooking and boredom. I have forced an interest in your stupid little ideas and talk. I accepted it all . . ." her eyes

clouded briefly, "because the weight and loneliness of my year suddenly crushed me, when the General passed on. I, who have traveled every continent and consorted with princes, came here resolved to get down to your provincial level, to appreciate the things you do, to be at last the little old auntie someone might take to their heart."

She was moving briskly to the front door.

Terry broke his paralysis. "Aunt Griselda, we didn't mean—"

"I know quite well what you meant. But you'll never inherit five million dollars." She opened the front door. "By the way, Miriam was quite awkward in her attack. It took, you know, a superb woman to attract a man like the General. One had to know how to sit a spirited horse, fire a big-game gun, strike a golf ball, and appreciate the fine points of a bullfight. One was never far from danger in the exotic, far corners of the earth—and the General taught me karate a long time ago. I never had

to use it until today, when the twisted streets and swarthy villains are so far behind me . . ."

Terry stumbled after Aunt Griselda to the doorway. He watched the delicate victim walk coolly to the sidewalk and start watching for a taxicab. He knew he would never see the trim figure again.

With a sort of rudderless manner in his actions, Terry somehow got turned around and headed for the bathroom.

Miriam was on the floor, looking stringy-haired and half-drowned. Her face was white with pain and the shock of returning consciousness.

Terry's stomach turned over as he stared at her right arm. It had been broken just below the elbow. He saw the ragged ends of bone that almost burst the skin.

Miriam stirred; moaned; gibbered a scream, and then another.

"Oh, shut up," Terry said in a nastier tone than he'd really intended. "Now we'll have to throw my severance pay away on a lousy hospital bill. . ."



*We are healed of a suffering only by experiencing it to the full.*

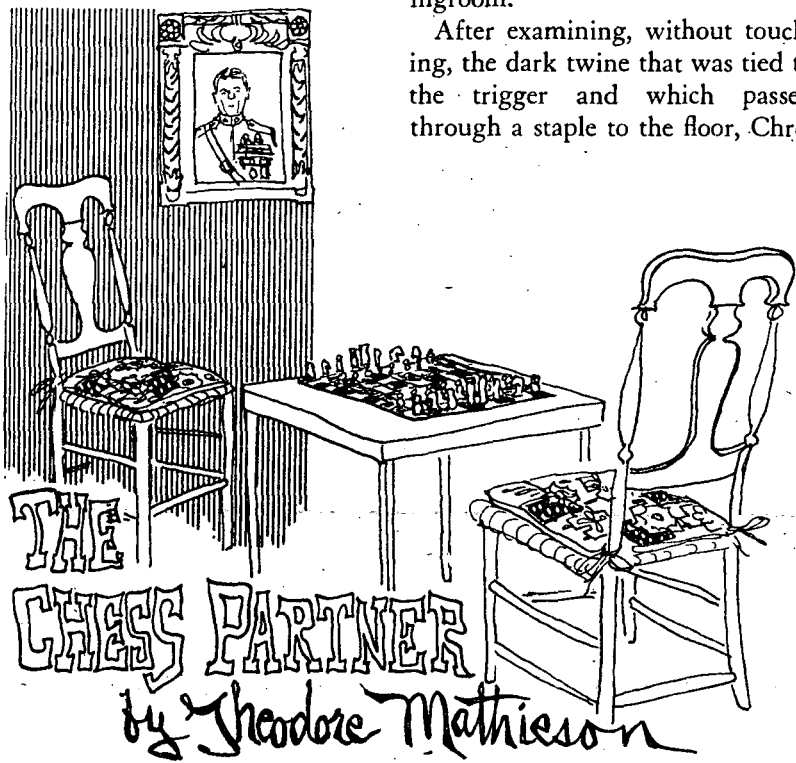
*—Marcel Proust*

**S**WEATING WITH apprehension, for he was gun-shy, Martin Chronister cocked the trigger of the Colt .38 and sighted down the barrel for the last time.

The gun, held between the jaws

of a vise clamped to the top of a bookcase in his bedroom, was aimed—through a small hole he had cut through the plywood wall—at a chair drawn up to a chess table in the adjacent livingroom.

After examining, without touching, the dark twine that was tied to the trigger and which passed through a staple to the floor, Chro-



# THE CHESS PARTNER

*by Theodore Mathieson*

nister followed the line through the door and into the livingroom, making sure it lay free along the wainscoting, to where it ended at his own chair at the chess table, opposite the first chair.

For a moment he thought he heard Banning's car, but decided that it was the evening wind beginning to sigh among the pines. He added a log to the fire, then turned to look at the painting of his deceased father in the heavy, gilt frame, beneath which the lethal hole in the wall was concealed in shadow.

"I'm using your old Army gun, too." Chronister smiled up at the portrait which he'd lugged down from the attic that afternoon. In the gloomy oils, the medals on the uniform of the disabled old soldier shone dully, like golden poppies through the smoke of battle, and the grim lips seemed to be forming a question.

*Why pull a string to do it?*

Sure, the Old Man knew what it was to kill an enemy, and might even understand doing it across a chessboard instead of on a battlefield, but he'd always had contempt for his son's fear of guns.

"It isn't just gun-shyness, Martin," he'd said once. "You shrink from every bit of reality and involvement in life!"

No matter, Chronister knew that

if he faced Banning with a live gun, he'd botch the job. Doing it his way made the act less personal and more—mechanical.

A crunch of footsteps on the path outside the cabin alerted Chronister to the fact that, having missed the sound of Banning's motor, the zero hour was almost upon him. Flinging open the front door, he greeted his enemy with a false smile of friendship . . .

If Banning were actually to die that night, it was because he'd made three mistakes, one of which he couldn't help.

First, he'd barged into Chronister's relationship with Mary Robbins. Not that the relationship was much to speak of at the beginning. For two years Chronister had met Mary at the store in town every week when he went to buy his groceries, but the contact had become a cherished event. Always a loner—he had worked for years as a bookkeeper in small-town businesses before he'd retired, unmarried, at forty-nine—Chronister had always been afraid of women. But Mary was different.

She, too, lived in the woods, tending an invalid father, in a house at the foot of Chronister's hill, but he'd always been too shy to pay them a visit. Although she might be, as the storekeeper said,

rather long in the tooth, she had a gentle voice and nice hands and eyes, and above all she seemed maternal, which perhaps was her greatest attraction for him.

Then came the Saturday when he'd met Mary in the canned goods section, and they'd struck up a conversation that seemed even livelier than usual, over the quality of different brands of tuna fish. Suddenly Banning happened along, looking remarkably distinguished in his tan raincoat, with his prematurely graying hair.

"I couldn't help overhearing," he'd said in his knowing way. "Fresh *anything* is better than canned, unless you're afraid that building up your red corpuscles will make you wayward."

Mary had looked uncomfortable, and murmuring something about finding it difficult to buy fresh fish in a mountain community, moved away. Chronister was outraged, but he waited until they were outside the store and he had put his groceries in his pickup before he spoke.

"When I'm talking with my friends, I'd appreciate your waiting until you're introduced before you volunteer your opinions."

"I hate to hear phony talk, that's all," Banning said. "She isn't really interested in tuna fish, Martin. What she really wants is a man in bed with her. You'll never make

the grade with that kind of talk!"

Chronister felt a sudden rush of blood to his head. "What gives you the right to interfere in my business?" he shouted. "Just because you come out once a week and play chess with me doesn't make you my adviser. And your winning lately doesn't make you my mental superior!"

"You must feel it does, or you wouldn't mention it," Banning said.

Chronister nearly struck out at him then. Until a few months ago, Banning and he had been pretty evenly matched upon the board. Then his chess partner had started winning relentlessly, which seemed to Chronister to give his partner a psychological ascendancy over him. No matter how hard Chronister worked to improve his game, he had continued to lose, and Banning seemed to grow more sure of his domination.

After what had happened in the store, Chronister was beside himself. "Well, Miss Robbins and I are not chessmen," he said, "so keep your damned fingers off us!"

"Sure," Banning said.

He walked away abruptly, crossing the highway to the hotel where he lived alone on a modest disability pension.

"I always wanted to be an intellectual bum," he'd told Chronis-

ter once, "and the Army helped me do it."

Banning had lost his left arm in Korea . . .

For the next two weeks Chronister lived without having a single visitor at his cabin. Twice he saw Mary at the store and the last time she asked him to come to visit her and her father.

Chronister kept putting off the visit, largely out of a lifetime habit of avoiding entanglements, but Mary was often in his thoughts.

Meanwhile he worked hard at his chess books, playing games against the masters. He had a hunch that Banning would be back, and sure enough, one Friday around the end of April his chess partner appeared, full of conciliatory smiles.

"No use holding a grudge, I figure," Banning said. "Besides, I miss our games."

"So do I," Chronister agreed. "I've been boning up on the books, and I think I can take you now."

"Let's find out."

The struggle this time was more even, and up to the end game Chronister felt he had a fair chance of winning. But in the final moves, Banning brought his hopes down crashing, and then checkmated him.

Once again came Banning's smile of superiority, his almost

physical levitation—which was Banning's second mistake.

"By the way," he said from his height, "I paid a couple of visits to Mary and the old man. You're quite right in giving her the eye. In a housecoat she's not bad at all. Although her pa is a dreary lump. Every time he looks at my arm, he fights the Battle of the Marne all over again!"

If Chronister had had his gun handy, he might have used it personally then. Instead, he played another game and lost, and invited Banning back the following week.

The very next day he dressed up and went down to visit Mary and her father.

"I wondered why you hadn't been down before," Mary said, standing beside the wheelchair in which sat a withered old man with sly eyes. For some reason, she seemed more amiable here than at the store, and Chronister remembered what Banning had said about the housecoat. Now she was wearing a kind of muu-muu which concealed all but her head and hands.

Aware of his scrutiny, she colored and excused herself, and the old man began talking about the First World War.

"If I hadn't got shrapnel in my spine," he whined, "I'd have taken up the Army as a profession. You

been in the service yet, sonny?"

Chronister winced. "No, sir. My father was a colonel in the First World War, and he wanted me to go into the Army, too, but I guess I wasn't cut out for it."

"Good life for a red-blooded man!"

"My father thought so, too."

Mary returned shortly wearing jeans and a tight-fitting sweater, and Chronister saw what Banning had meant.

"My chess partner said he enjoyed a visit with you," Chronister said, following the line of least resistance.

"Oh, Mr. Banning, yes. He's quite delightful."

Chronister felt a stab of jealousy. "I guess he talks a little more easily than I do," he admitted. "Social situations have always been pretty hard going for me."

"It mustn't be that you're antisocial; you just don't like crowds. Well, neither do we. That's why Papa and I live in the woods. I see your light up there sometimes."

"And I see yours."

It went like that for perhaps an hour. Mary served tea and some cookies she'd made, and he departed, not sure what kind of impression he'd created. But he knew that Mary attracted him, and that he felt the need of her, because when he returned to his cabin that

night he was aware for the first time of its emptiness.

Through the rest of the week he continued playing over the master games, but no matter how hard he tried to concentrate, thoughts of Mary interfered. Finally, on a Thursday, in the middle of a game, he threw the chess book aside in disgust, put on his hiking boots, and went walking in the sunny woods.

As he sat resting under a yellow pine, he heard voices, a man's and a woman's, which presently he recognized as Banning's—and Mary's.

He wanted to run, but he felt paralyzed, and as he sat they came close enough for him to hear what they were saying.

"... spring is the time for a walk," Banning was saying. "I don't get out half enough."

"Nor do I," Mary replied. "It's so lovely."

The two had stopped a few yards off, and Chronister prayed that the chaparral concealed him sufficiently.

"Look," Mary said, "you can see a roof from here. It must be Mr. Chronister's."

"Does he ever take you for a walk?"

"Mr. Chronister? Oh, never. He's been to see me only once in two years! Besides, I don't get out much."

"You should. Your father can do a little for himself, can't he?"

"Not much, and he's getting worse every day, so I like to be around when he calls."

"If you ever need help, Mary—I mean, with your father . . ."

"Thank you."

A silence followed, and Chronister, straining his ears, thought he heard them kiss. Then there was a sudden movement and quick footsteps sounded down the leafy trail.

"Mary!" Banning called, and then he, too, was gone.

Chronister continued to sit, his fear giving way to anger, then to rage. Finally he rose and pounded through the brush, not caring whether he was seen or heard, and by the time he reached his cabin his mind was made up. Mary was going to be his. He was going to kill Banning—tomorrow night . . .

The zero hour had come.

Banning, sure of himself tonight as ever, sat down in his usual chair, took out his tobacco pouch and loaded his pipe.

"Been doing some changing around, eh?" he asked, looking up to where Chronister had hung his father's portrait to hide the hole in the wall.

"I like a change every once in a while," Chronister said. He sat down opposite Banning, casually

leaned over and picked up the twine, laying the loose end across his lap. Banning was staring at the picture.

"Would that be your father? He was an Army man, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"You know, he looked familiar. I see he lost his left arm, too."

"In the Argonne. He led his own battalion."

"Must have been quite a man." Banning's eyes seemed to hold a taunt. "Well, it's your turn, Martin, I think with the white."

Chronister played pawn to King's fourth, and as the opening game developed in a conventional pattern, his hands upon the twine began to sweat.

In fifteen minutes, however, the game took an unexpected turn, and Chronister concentrated on the problems so avidly that he forgot the string, the gun, even his intent to murder. At the back of his mind he knew he was playing superbly well, with a freedom and dash that he had never before achieved. His moves seemed to flow, to dovetail, shaping themselves into a pattern that was a sheer work of art. Time and again he heard exasperated sighs from his chess companion that ignited his ingenuity further until finally, in the end game, he played simple cat and mouse, certain of victory.

"I concede the game," Banning said at last, leaning back in his chair. Chronister, looking up like one coming out of a dream, was surprised to see a new Banning, one divested of pride, humble and human.

In the objectivity of the moment he saw, too, that Banning had never deliberately meant to make him feel inferior. The guy had just been elated by winning a game.

"You played better tonight than I ever could," Banning said, smiling warmly. "But I guess it's just your lucky night." He put his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I met Mary in town this morning, and she gave me this to give to you. I won't say I didn't read it, so I happen to know she prefers you to me."

Chronister took the note in a daze, letting the twine fall lightly to the floor.

*Dear Mr. Chronister:*

*Papa had a bad spell last evening, and since we are without a telephone, and you are the closest person to me, I wonder if you'd*

*mind my coming up to see you if I have need of your help?*

*I'd rather call on you than anyone.*

Mary

When Chronister looked up, Banning was staring at the portrait again.

"Now I know who your father looks like," he said. "He looks like *me*—even if his arm weren't missing!"

Chronister's mouth felt dry as he rose. "Let's go into the kitchen and have a beer," he said through stiff lips. He took a step forward then, and felt the tug upon his hiking boot where the twine had caught in a lace hook. Before he knew what happened, the explosion filled the room, making the lamps wink in their sockets.

The echoes seemed a long time dying away, and the blood upon the floor grew into a pool beside the dead man.

There came a timid tapping at the cabin door.

Knowing at last the meaning of utter involvement, Martin Chronister went to answer it.



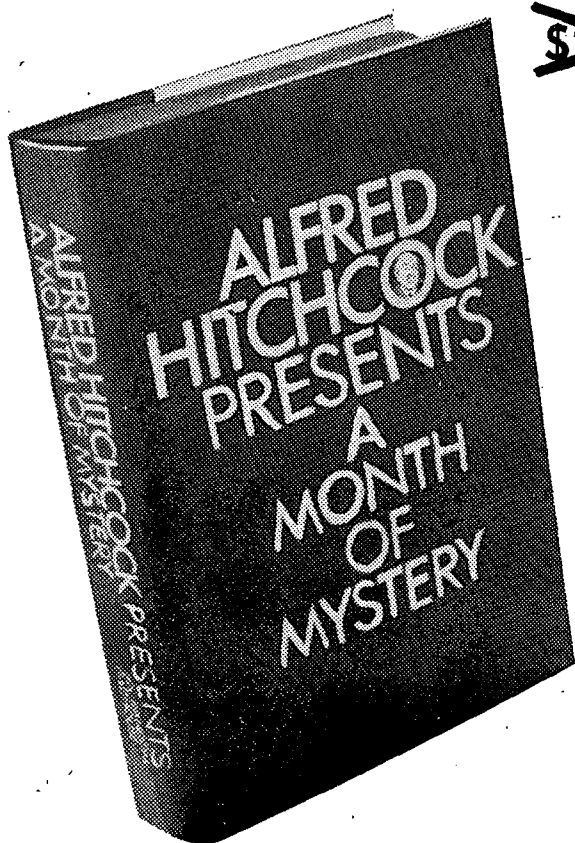
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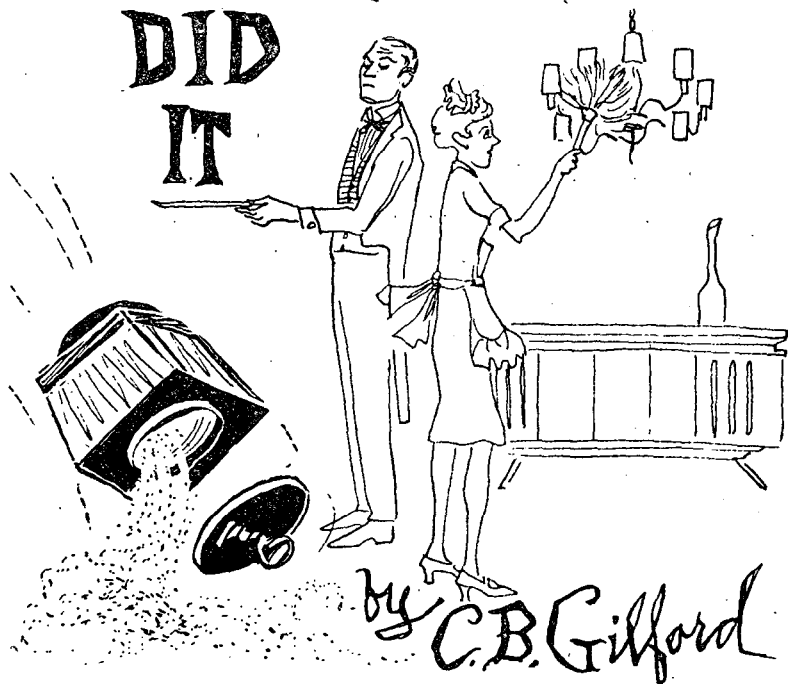
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*It is commonly believed that no man ever became extremely wicked all at once but, proverbially, the potter envies the potter.*

# THE BUTLER DID IT

**B**LAST YOU, OAKES!" Mr. Ryder said. "See what you've gone and done,—you clumsy fool. Now that you've spilled it, get down on the floor and pick it up. Every last crumb!"

Oakes looked down at the overturned humidior and the expensive imported pipe tobacco scattered



over the rug. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Ryder, but I didn't spill it."

Indeed, he hadn't. Mr. Ryder himself, pirouetting with that ridiculous riding crop tucked under his arm, had knocked the humidior off the corner of the desk. Mr. Ryder had been strutting back and forth, complaining as usual about the way the establishment was being run, trying to act the part of a country squire in his boots, his jodhpurs, his tweed jacket, and of course, the riding crop. Ridiculous, because Mr. Ryder didn't ride, and was very likely, in fact, terrified of horses, and the crop had knocked the tobacco onto the floor—tobacco which Mr. Ryder very, very seldom smoked.

Mr. Ryder's pink little face was reddening. "What did you say to me, Oakes?"

"I said I didn't spill it, sir."

"How dare you!"

"I'll pick it up, sir, because I'm the servant here, but I didn't spill it."

Why was he arguing? He'd been unjustly accused ten thousand times before. Perhaps it was because this time the charge was more outlandish than ever before. He had been nowhere near the desk when the humidior fell.

"Oakes, are you contradicting me? Are you calling me a liar?" The red face was growing slightly

purplish. Mr. Ryder was not a handsome man, and now, in anger, he was uglier than ever.

"I said I would pick it up, sir."

"Of course you will. Because you spilled it."

"I didn't."

They faced each other, perhaps six feet apart. Oakes felt his own pulse racing, felt his hands twitching and trembling. His face must be crimson too.

"Oakes, I've put up with you for twenty years; your clumsiness, your laziness, your lack of respect for your betters. But I won't put up with this . . . this . . ."

Finding no adequate words, Mr. Ryder resorted to action. He lunged forward and swung the riding crop over his head, then brought it down vertically. The blow would have landed on Oakes' head, but he ducked aside, and the crop came down on his shoulder. Whether Mr. Ryder would have tried again, he didn't know, but Oakes didn't wait to see. Instinctively he grabbed for a weapon of his own, and his hand found the poker standing against the fireplace.

The very act of his butler's defending himself goaded Mr. Ryder to greater fury. He charged again with the crop, but this time Oakes swung more swiftly and more accurately. The heavy iron thudded



down upon Mr. Ryder's skull. His charge was halted in mid-stride, his nerveless hand dropped the riding crop, and he fell on top of it, in a little heap of boots and tweed.

Oakes gazed down upon what he had done. The violence was over, and he felt calm again. He realized the situation quite clearly. He had committed murder.

In their little room on the third floor, up under the eaves, Claude Oakes recited the facts of the case to his wife Matilda. She sat on the bed, staring at him as he paced, her dark eyes wide, her gaunt face pale. A thin woman now in middle age, she had worked just as hard as her husband for the past twenty years, and as she listened to him describing the murder of their employer, she appeared thinner than ever, a suit of skin stretched over skull and bones with no flesh in between.

"And I really can't claim to be sorry," Claude Oakes finished. "He would have liked to kill me with that riding crop of his."

"But of course he couldn't have," Matilda pointed out in a dry, choked voice.

"What are you saying?" he asked her. "That I can't call it self-defense?"

"I don't think so. If it were the other way around perhaps, with you the employer and him the butler . . ."

"All right, murder it is, then." He went back to pacing. "The minute the missus gets home, she'll go into the library looking for him. And when she sees what's there, she'll scream her head off."

Matilda nodded. "It would probably be better if you called the police first yourself."

"You mean to give myself up?"

"Yes."

"I'll go to prison. What will happen to you then, Matty?"

"Oh, I'll get a place somewhere. I don't imagine Missus Ryder will have me after this."

"And it's not likely anybody else will have you either . . . the wife of a murderer."

"Oh, there'll be no trouble. Servants are hard to get these days, they tell me."

He sat down beside her on the bed. "Yes, that's what they say," he agreed. "Then why did we stay here for twenty years?"

"The work was easy, and the pay was good."

"But the abuse!"

"And both of them swore that if we left they wouldn't give us a recommendation."

They sat there together for a while. Claude Oakes' mind explored twisted labyrinths of possibilities. He certainly didn't want to go to prison.

"I could run, I suppose," he said after a while. "Or we could run together. When is the missus due home?"

"She went to do some shopping for their trip. She probably won't be home till six."

"We'd have a three-hour start then . . ."

"Where would we go?"

That was indeed a question, where would they go?

"Maybe," he said, "I could arrange it to look like an accident . . . or the work of a burglar . . ." But he had very little idea of how to go about making such arrangements.

Then a new notion hit him. He turned, seized both of Matilda's hands, and looked at her searchingly. "There's another way," he said.

She waited, rather fearfully, he thought.

"The Ryders were going to leave Thursday, day after tomorrow," he began. "They were going to be on the ship for a while, and then they were going to stay at Costa Verde for about a month. Then back on the ship. Maybe six weeks in all. Now, if we had six weeks to get organized, cover our tracks . . . Well, actually, the Ryders have no particular friends who would be inquiring for them, so it might be a lot longer than six weeks before they were considered missing . . ."

Now it was Matilda who gripped Claude's hands. Her eyes widened. "Why do you say *they* would be missing?" The question came out in a whisper.

"Leona Ryder," he answered, "is the only person in the world who's interested in Alex Ryder. If she were out of the way, there

wouldn't be anybody," he added.

"You mean . . . kill her?"

"Two murders won't send me to prison faster than one."

That part of it, at least, was logical to her; and as he went on talking, she seemed to begin to understand. He'd be no worse off with two murders against him, two corpses on his hands, and they would have time to make some kind of plans. On the other hand, let Leona walk into that library and find Alex; and the jig would be up right then. What choice was there?

"You know," he said, "we've lived in slavery for twenty years. Alex was no better than Leona. Didn't they both treat us like dirt? If he deserved what he got, then she deserves the same thing. You know, the trouble with us, Matty, was that we got used to it. We got used to being browbeaten, and scolded. We were timid souls, you and I, Matty, or we wouldn't have been servants in the first place. That's why we didn't look for other jobs. We were scared. We've spent our whole lives being scared. But now that I've stood up for my rights against Alex Ryder, I feel good. I feel more like a man than I ever have before."

She gazed at him with shining eyes. Perhaps she was beginning to understand.

"The Ryders have taken twenty

years of our lives," he said. "I don't feel like giving them any more. You'll stand by me, won't you, Matty? I'll need your help, you know. Moral support, that's all."

He continued on in that vein, and by five o'clock she was convinced. That left him with perhaps an hour before Mrs. Ryder's return. He worked swiftly.

There was the body to be temporarily disposed of. He lugged it down to the basement. The corpse was heavier than he would have thought, but Matilda didn't want to touch it, so he managed by himself. There was a small bloodstain on the hearth tiles, fortunately none on the rug. The stain washed away easily.

He was ready when Leona Ryder returned home. She was a short, dumpy woman with a doughy face and several chins, always overdressed and laden with noisy jewelry. A cab came up the drive and deposited her at the door. The cabbie accompanied her with her packages. Oakes let them both in, paid the man and saw him off. Leona headed immediately for the library.

"Alex! Alex! Where are you, dear?"

"He left just a moment ago," Oakes said from the doorway. "The tobacco got spilled, and he said he'd walk down and get some

more, so he could be sure to have enough for the trip. Said he needed the exercise."

"Oh dear, I so wanted a martini," she said crossly.

"I'll mix them, madam."

"We'd better wait. I'm sure Alex would like one too."

"It's more than a mile to the tobacconist," Oakes said. "Mister Ryder also said he might stop to pick out a new pipe or two."

"Doesn't the tobacconist close at five?"

"Six, madam. It's a quarter till now. I think he'll make it. Shall I mix a martini, madam? I can mix fresh ones when Mister Ryder returns." He was playing upon her weakness. Leona Ryder had a little too great fondness for alcohol.

"Yes, do mix me a martini, Oakes," she said finally.

At the sideboard he had his ingredients ready—gin, vermouth, and a heavy dose of Mrs. Ryder's own sleeping powders. He had sampled the medicine himself and discovered it to be almost tasteless. When he brought Mrs. Ryder a brimming martini glass, it was as full of the stuff as he dared to make it.

She sipped greedily, and then, just for a second, she wrinkled her pudgy little nose as if she detected a foreign taste. "Oakes," she said wearily, "I've tried for years to

each you how to make a decent martini."

"I'm sorry, madam. Shall I throw it out and try again?"

"And waste all this good gin? I ought to deduct it from your wages is what I ought to do. No, you can try again when Mr. Ryder comes home."

Abusing and threatening her servants was a way of life with Mrs. Ryder. She and Alex tormented each other on occasion, but mostly she saved her small darts of venom for her butler and housekeeper. Oakes felt no remorse as he watched her drink the martini to its last drop.

She went to sleep shortly afterward. Oakes called his wife. They stood over the sleeping woman together.

"If the medicine doesn't do her in, I'll have to use other methods," Oakes said matter-of-factly.

The original method worked quite well enough. Leona Ryder never woke up. When Oakes decided to check finally, there was no pulse in the woman, no heartbeat, no breath to fog a mirror.

Claude Oakes turned to his wife. "I didn't realize how much of a worm I was before. But now I'm a man; not Mister Ryder's man, but my own." He bent and kissed his startled wife. "What's more, I am the man of this house."

He strutted about the room, tasting the strange savor of ownership and control. "Now, Matty, you go out into the kitchen and fix dinner. For two. And we shall eat it in the dining room. Undisturbed. There'll be no ringing of bells, no shouting. We shall enjoy peace and tranquility. How about it, Matty? Does that sound good to you?"

The poor amazed woman nodded.

When she was gone, Claude Oakes picked up some of the spilled tobacco, filled a new pipe that Alex Ryder had never used, and began to smoke.

The next day, however, was a workday. The problem of disposing of the bodies had gestated in Claude's subconscious, and he had come to a decision.

Several months ago a new furnace had been installed in the Ryder house. The process had involved some repairs to the concrete floor of the basement. That concrete could probably be disturbed again, Claude reasoned, without appearing terribly strange to some future tenant of the house. He attacked the floor behind the furnace. It wasn't easy, but he managed to remove an area about three by three, most of it new concrete. No sense in making it in the shape of a grave, he reasoned. Digging through the dirt was even more

difficult, and the job took him almost the whole day. By dinner time, he had a hole deep enough for his satisfaction, and he had wedged the two bodies into it together.

The next day he finished. The pieces of broken concrete he buried with the Ryders, and he drove out in Mr. Ryder's car to purchase some new mix. He had some extra dirt left, of course, but he could dispose of that after dark in the yard. The grave he cemented over neatly, so that it didn't look too much different from the work done by the furnace repairmen.

Matilda didn't seem to understand. "Why must you go to all that trouble?"

"Matty dear," he explained, "it would be best to hide the fact that a crime has been committed for just as long as possible."

"Well, are we ready to leave now?" she asked. She didn't like living under the same roof with those corpses.

"Leave?" He stared at her. His mind had been taking one thing at a time. "I haven't thought yet where we ought to go."

"You said you wanted to kill Missus Ryder so we could have a six weeks' head start," she reminded him.

"So I did . . ."

Then the obvious thing occurred

to him. "Matilda," he said, "in Mister Ryder's desk are several thick pads of traveler's checks, plane tickets, ship tickets, and confirmed reservations for two at the Costa Verde Hotel."

"No!" she said, aghast.

"My dear," he answered, "what else?"

It was difficult getting used to people waiting on them, instead of their waiting on someone else; in the plane, on the ship, and then at the hotel, stewardesses, taxi drivers, waiters, bellhops, doormen, everybody. "Mister and Missus Alex Ryder," they said, flinching at first. Then, when people seemed to believe them, they began to carry it off with more aplomb, even at the hotel. They knew the Ryders had never been there before, so nobody either recognized or failed to recognize them. Claude had perfected a very passable forgery of Alex Ryder's signature that served to cash the traveler's checks, and that was all that the people at the hotel cared about.

Claude had also made free with Alex Ryder's wardrobe, including his collection of tweed jackets. They'd been of the same height and weight, though Ryder was older, and the clothes fit rather well. Poor Matilda, of course, couldn't wear dumpy little Leona's things but a few discreet purchases

in the local shops remedied that, and without making much of a dent in the traveler's checks.

They lived in luxury, and luxury corrupted them—even Matilda. As their scheduled stay at Costa Verde drew near its end, they liked less and less the prospect of returning. To what? To face charges for the murder of the Ryders? Or even if they avoided that, to pack up and look somewhere else for positions as butler and housekeeper? After the experiences of Costa Verde, becoming menials again seemed most unpalatable.

They basked in the sunshine, took side trips in rented automobiles, ate rich food, drank rare wines, and contemplated their future. Until one day, Claude announced to Matilda, "My dear, one might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb."

They managed to arrive home again during the hours of darkness so as not to attract undue notice in the neighborhood. They found the place undisturbed, even the new cement work in the basement. For the moment, therefore, in case the wrong person should turn up, they resumed their roles of Claude and Matilda Oakes.

While Matilda removed the accumulated layers of dust from the house, Claude sat in Alex Ryder's study and familiarized himself

with the dead man's financial status. The locked desk, opened with a key found in a dresser drawer, revealed many secrets. So, also, did the little wall safe. Claude had observed the combination over Mr. Ryder's shoulder several times, although he had never used it before. All in all, the total information was most encouraging.

Central to the whole situation was the Ryder family lawyer, the venerable Mr. Jerome Stiles. Mr. Stiles had been an old man when Claude first came to work for the Ryders. Now he was ancient, but he still hung on. He did everything, managing the Ryders' investments so that Alex Ryder had had nothing to do except enjoy the income. Alex Ryder had inherited his money, hadn't liked the business world, probably hadn't understood it too well. Jerome Stiles had been his financial guardian.

So it was, then, that late of an afternoon on the fourth day after his return from Costa Verde, Claude Oakes dialed a telephone number. "I wish to speak to Mister Stiles," he said briskly, doing a rather good imitation of Alex Ryder's voice.

Thirty seconds later the quavering old voice came on the line. "This is Jerome Stiles."

"This is Alex Ryder."

No hesitation. No suspicion. "Well, Mister Ryder, you're back.

"Was it a nice trip? Welcome home."

"I'll tell you all about it when I see you, Mister Stiles. Leona and I have made an important decision."

"Indeed? And what is this decision, Mister Ryder?"

"It's what I want to discuss with you. Could you drop by this evening?"

Mr. Stiles undoubtedly preferred his own hearthside after a day at the office, but the Ryders were very important, lucrative clients. "Why, I suppose I could, Mister Ryder," he answered.

"Good. About eight o'clock or thereabouts?"

"Of course."

"Good. I'll see you about eight."

He rang off quickly, and smiled at Matilda. She smiled bravely back. He put his arm around her. "My dear," he said, "we're merely trying to convert danger into opportunity. I really don't see that we have any choice. It's all or nothing."

At dinner in the dining room Matilda, despite her uneasiness, ate heartily. She was filling out a bit, Claude noted. The life of a lady was agreeing with her.

After dinner, he went up to Alex Ryder's bedroom which he occupied now, just as Matilda was ensconced in Leona Ryder's queenly quarters. He surveyed himself for a moment in the mirror, then began

working on his disguise: a liberal application over most of his face of some whitish face cream, letting it dry and cake, making a sort of mask, through two holes of which his eyes stared like the empty sockets of a skull. He touched off his new look with bandages across his forehead, where he looked least like Alex Ryder, a pair of dark glasses, and a scarf tucked into his collar, muffling his neck and chin.

At eight o'clock he was ready.

Mr. Stiles was punctual. The doorbell rang at four minutes past the hour. From the library, Claude heard Matilda opening the door.

"Good evening, Missus Oakes."

"Good evening, Mister Stiles. Mister Ryder is waiting for you in the library." A trembling in her voice? Perhaps, but Stiles' hearing surely wasn't that good. "Come this way, Mister Stiles."

"Oh, I know the way."

Right then Claude Oakes experienced a qualm of uncertainty. He could have tried to do this by mail—he was quite good at forging Alex Ryder's signature—but that might have seemed suspicious, if not to old Stiles, then to some of the other lawyers in his office. If old Stiles could say that he had *seen* and *talked to* Alex Ryder, the whole situation might appear more credible.

Well, anyway, it was too late

now. Stiles was in the doorway, peering into the shadowy library. "Mister Ryder?" he called out in his thin, reedy voice.

"Come in, Mister Stiles."

The old fellow stalked in like an arthritic stork, thin as ever, wearing his usual black suit, carrying his ever-present briefcase. His spectacles were halfway down his nose, but they aided his failing vision very little anyway.

Claude had lighted but one lamp in the room, and Mr. Stiles had to grope his way through semi-darkness. It wasn't till he was five or six feet from Claude that he discerned the pale mask that was his host's face.

"Mister Ryder! What happened to you?"

"A blasted skin infection," Claude said. "Caught it swimming at Costa Verde. Nothing serious. Just looks awful."

Mr. Stiles' peering was from curiosity and concern, not from doubt. His whole manner was respectful, almost obsequious. Of course it never entered his mind that someone standing in Mr. Ryder's library, who answered to the name of Mr. Ryder, and who sounded somewhat like Mr. Ryder, should be anyone except Mr. Ryder.

"Not painful, I hope," the old fellow said solicitously.

"Oh, no. Just annoying. Sit down, Mister Stiles."

Claude knew a bit about the relationship between Ryder and Stiles. The latter had often come by the house with a paper to sign. Ryder had usually been brusque, sometimes nearly insulting, never friendly with his lawyer. Ryder had always felt he had a right to mistreat his hirelings, so Claude endeavored to emulate his master.

"Let's get right down to business, shall we, Mister Stiles? I have to get back to my sun lamp for this infection. It's why I asked you to come here, of course . . ."

"I'm glad to be of any service, Mister Ryder."

"Glad to hear that. I'm going to put everything in your hands absolutely from now on. Missus Ryder and I have decided to spend the rest of our lives traveling. All I expect to do is to keep you informed of our newest address, the name of the foreign bank you're to send deposits to, and how much. We may spend a bit more money than we've been spending here, so from time to time you may have to sell off some of our holdings. Also, I want you to sell this house and everything in it. We'll be leaving in a few days. I'll let you know exactly when."

Old Stiles was amazed, but equal to the occasion. He was grateful, he

said, for the trust reposed in him. He already had the power of attorney, he explained, so there would be no legal difficulty. Then he prattled on for a while about how all the Ryders' investments were prospering under his tutelage, and there would be no lack of funds. He'd make financial reports regularly, he promised, and forward whatever sums were requested. By the time he finished, Claude had a fair notion of just how rich a man he'd become.

"What about the Oakes?" Stiles asked finally. "Are you taking them with you?"

"Oh, no. We can find servants wherever we happen to be."

"Will you be giving them any severance pay?"

"Should I?"

"They've been with you a long time."

"All right, instruct my bank to honor a check for five thousand when Claude Oakes comes to cash it." Claude smiled invisibly behind his face-cream mask when he thought of the two roles he would be playing. He would cash that check, of course; as Claude Oakes.

Their business concluded, Claude hustled Mr. Stiles toward the door. Prolonging the scene meant added risks.

"How is Missus Ryder?" Stiles asked at the last moment.

"She has a headache this evening. But she told me to say hello to you."

Matilda ushered Mr. Stiles out through the front door. She and Claude waited till the lawyer was in the taxi for sure, and off down the driveway, before they hugged each other.

"If I only had known," Claude told his helpmate, "if I only had known how easy and profitable it was to dispose of the Ryders, I wouldn't have waited for twenty years."

The new Alex and Leona Ryder—Claude had told Matilda they had to think of themselves and of each other under these new names so as never to make a fatal slip—the new Alex and Leona Ryder traveled compulsively at first, almost as if they were running from somebody, but when it turned out that nobody was chasing them, they went about it in more leisurely fashion.

Europe was nice. They didn't miss any of it. Then South America, the Pacific Islands, parts of the Orient. The second time around, they hit only their favorite spots, and lingered for a while at each one: London, Paris, Rome, Madrid, the French Riviera, the Italian Riviera, the Spanish Riviera, Capri, the isles of Greece, Cairo, fabled Istanbul, serene Bali, bustling Hong

Kong, quaint Japan, the languorous South Seas, colorful Hawaii, throbbing Rio, Buenos Aires. Then around again, like a spinning top, but gradually slowing down.

They developed, as they went, only one real passion, and that was for servants. Having been servants themselves, both Claude and Matilda—or rather, Alex and Leona—had accumulated pent-up desires to be waited upon.

They admitted this failing to each other. "Actually I was born too late," Claude said once, perhaps only half-joking. "What I really would like would be to have slaves. Hundreds of 'em. To wait upon my every whim. I'd rather have slaves fanning me than have air-conditioning any old time."

In nearly all of the places they visited they were able to hire servants easily. The first thing they would do upon their arrival somewhere was to rent outlandishly large quarters, a villa if possible, and the second thing was to staff it with servants. Thereafter they kept busy, amused, even fascinated by the problem of finding things for their employees to do. No lazing about for the Ryders' retinue. When their name had been Oakes, they hadn't been allowed to loaf on the job. They knew all the tricks. The cook, maid, housekeeper, butler, chauffeur or gardener who

didn't earn his wages while working for the Ryders was a clever idler indeed.

As this hobby occupied the Oakes—the Ryders, that is—more and more, they traveled less, merely moving about now according to the season. Eventually they narrowed it down to just a few favorite spots, Paris in the spring, a bit of London in the summer, Capri in the fall, and warm Hawaii in the winter. They maintained a semi-permanent domicile and left a skeleton crew of servants at each location, this crew to be augmented by temporary help at each annual visit.

They settled down to this routine, the years passed, and they were very happy.

Upon the death of his grandfather, Mr. Jerome Stiles, young Mr. Gerald Stiles fell heir to managing the investments and properties of Alex and Leona Ryder. Mr. Gerald Stiles was a thorough and conscientious young man, and he reviewed the portfolio and the complete files with great care. In the process, he found a gaping omission.

He tried all the ordinary means of communication, telephone, cable, airmail, without satisfactorily contacting the Ryders. Either their frequent movements about

the globe made communication difficult, or the Ryders weren't particularly anxious to discuss business matters.

Young Mr. Gerald Stiles; not to be thwarted, boarded a jet and chased them, finally caught up with them at their castle in Kilarney. He telephoned Mr. Ryder from Shannon Airport, in the morning, said he was coming right away, hired a car, and managed to arrive by that evening. At long last, he cornered Mr. Ryder in his great baronial hall where, surrounded by a bevy of retainers, he was having a solitary feast.

To Mr. Stiles' dismay, Mr. Ryder's face was swathed in bandages.

"I say, are you injured, sir?" Mr. Stiles burst out.

"Oh, not really. Just some bad scratches. Doing a bit of hunting, and the blasted horse plunged right through a bramble thicket."

Young Gerald Stiles was amazed. "Do you mean to say that you ride at your age?"

Mr. Ryder's eyes, almost invisible among the bandages, seemed to blink several times. "Why not?" he asked after a moment.

Mr. Stiles laughed uncomfortably. "Yes," he agreed, "why not?"

Mr. Ryder ordered a plate for his guest. Mr. Stiles ate, and after-

wards they had several rounds of Irish coffee. Mr. Stiles began reciting some of the things he had learned about the Ryder investments, and had several suggestions to make. Mr. Ryder assented to the changes in every instance.

"There's one final thing, sir," Stiles said after a bit. "Pardon my saying so, but you and Missus Ryder are getting on in years. You really should have a new will. The old one was made almost forty years ago. It leaves your estate to some very distant cousins, some of whom are dead now. Might end up in a legal tangle. I really think you ought to make out a new will."

Mr. Ryder appeared to be giving the matter some thought. Meanwhile, servants came and went constantly through the big hall. Mr. Stiles had never seen so many servants, and wondered what purpose they could all have.

"I'll have to discuss it with Missus Ryder," Mr. Ryder said finally. "She's not feeling well at the moment. I imagine we shall decide to leave our money to various charities. We'll send you a list, Mister Stiles. You can write it up in the proper form and send it back to us. Then we can sign it and mail it to you for safekeeping."

Mr. Stiles understood quite clearly that he was being dismissed,

that there had been quite enough discussion of business matters, that he was not being invited to stay the night in this roomy castle, that he might as well drive straight back to Shannon. Accordingly, Mr. Stiles stood up.

"I'll attend to it as soon as you send me the information, Mister Ryder," he said.

Impulsively, he thrust out his hand. Automatically, Mr. Ryder accepted the handshake. It was then that Mr. Stiles noticed a very strange circumstance. Mr. Ryder's hand seemed fleshy and smooth, remarkably so for so old a man. Why, Mr. Ryder must be past seventy . . . and this hand felt like the hand of a man half that age.

Mr. Stiles started to comment, but Mr. Ryder seemed to guess as much. He jerked his hand back

and said curtly, "Well, good-bye, Mister Stiles."

Mr. Stiles departed obediently. Perhaps a man's hands stay young, he thought, if he's never done a day's work in his entire life.

The butler—or the head butler, it must have been, since there were so many of them—let him out through the huge double front door. He was a friendly, curious young fellow, this butler was.

"Are you Mister Gerald Stiles, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, I am."

"The lawyer chap that sends all the money?"

"Well . . . yes. What of it?"

"Just wanted to make sure. Good night, sir."

Mr. Stiles went out to his waiting car, and started the long journey home.

Dear Fans:

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*I want to thank all of you for your interest.*

*Most sincerely,*

*Pat Hitchcock*

*Though the picture may fade, the sounds of memory are difficult to squelch.*



**I**T WAS A BALMY early-summer night, with the pungency of wood-smoke and the near-ambrosial sweetness of Burmese honeysuckle in the warm, still air. In the willow garden and in the grasses to the rear of the small frame house, crickets sang sonorously and tree frogs were in full-throated, hungry voice.

On the porch, in the deep shadows at the far end, Ellen and George Granger sat silently with-

out touching, without looking at one another. They had been sitting there for some time, listening to the night sounds.

George said finally, almost whispering in the deep magic of the evening, "What are you thinking about, Ellen?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"I asked, didn't I?"

"I was thinking about our perfect crime," she said softly. "I was thinking about Tom."

He was silent for a long moment. Then, "What for?"

"It was an evening just exactly like this one when we murdered him," she said.

"Don't use that word!"

"There's no one around to hear."

"Just don't use it, Ellen. We agreed never to use that word."

"It was an evening just like this one," she said again. "Do you remember, George?"

"Am I likely to have forgotten?"

"We shouldn't have seen each other so often," she said. "If we had been more careful, he wouldn't have caught us together. But it was such a lovely night . . ."

"Listen," George said, "if it hadn't been that night, it would have been some other soon after. We couldn't have hidden our affair from him much longer."

"No, I suppose not."

"It worked out fine as it was," George said. "There was no one else around that night. It worked out fine."

"George, why didn't we run off together? Before that night? Why didn't we just go off somewhere?"

"Don't be silly," he said. "You know I had no money. None at all. Where would we have gone?"

"I don't know."

"No, of course you don't."

"If only Tom hadn't been so jealous," Ellen said. "I could have

asked him for a divorce, and things would have been so simple. We wouldn't have done what we did, then."

"But he *was* jealous," George said. "He was jealous and he was a fool, and I'm not sorry for what happened."

"I wasn't either, at the time," she said. "But now . . ."

"What's the matter with you tonight, Ellen? You're acting damned peculiar."

"It was a night exactly like this one," she said for the third time. "The honeysuckle, the wood-smoke, the crickets and tree frogs. It could have been this night, George."

"Don't talk silly."

Ellen sighed softly, tremulously, in the darkness. "Why did we kill him, George? Why did we do it?"

"We did it because he caught us, why do you think?"

"At the time, we said it was because we were in love."

"Yes, there was that, too."

"That, too," Ellen repeated, and she smiled fleetingly. "At the time, *that was all*. It was what made it all right."

"Why are you talking this way?" George said exasperatedly. "We committed the perfect crime, Ellen. You said so yourself—then and just now. Nobody ever suspected. They all thought it was an accident."

"Yes, I know. I know they did."

"Then what's the *matter* with you?"

Ellen said very softly, "Was it worth it, George?"

"What?"

"What we did. Was it worth it?"

"Of course it was worth it. We got together, didn't we? We got married, didn't we?"

"Yes."

"We've been happy."

"I suppose we have."

"You always said you were."

"Were *you*, George?"

"Certainly I was!"

Ellen was silent. From somewhere far down the block, a dog bayed mournfully at the pale yellow sphere of the moon. The crickets were creating a symphony all around them. She said at last, "I wish we hadn't done it. Before God, I wish we had not done it."

"Ellen, it was the perfect crime!"

"Was it, George? Was it really?"

"You know it was."

"I used to think so once. But not anymore."

"Stop talking that way."

She sighed her tremulous sigh. "I can't help it," she said. "I'm afraid. I've been afraid for a long time."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," George said. "We weren't

ever caught, either one, were we?"

"No, we weren't caught."

"And we weren't punished either, were we?"

"*Weren't* we?" she said softly.

"Ellen . . ."

"There's no such thing as the perfect crime, George," she said. "I know that and you know it now too, don't you?"

"I don't know any such thing!"

"Yes, you do. You know it, just as I know it. Deep down, we've both known it almost from the beginning. We haven't gone unpunished, George—and yet we haven't paid the full price for what we did either. But it won't be much longer . . . not much longer at all."

They sat in silence then, with nothing left to say, with the gently cloying odor of the honeysuckle wrapped around them like a cloak, with the song of the crickets almost deafening in their ears; sat without touching, without looking at one another, on the deeply shadowed porch . . . remembering . . . waiting.

So sat Ellen and George Gran-ger—seventy-nine and eighty-one years of age—who had committed "the perfect crime" five decades past, in the year 1921.

*Conflicts are ever present, but the most interesting for those concerned is not without its recompense.*



# CONFLICT OF INTEREST

*A Novelette*

*by James Holding*

I HAD NO TROUBLE keeping Matheny in sight, even among the sidewalk crowds along Queen's Boulevard. He stood five inches over six feet and he threw his left foot like a horse with bone spavin in a hock joint. I was half a block behind him, though, and when he came to 108th Street and turned off the

Boulevard, I had to hurry. I got to the corner in time to see him duck into a bar-and-grill down toward the Inn.

I followed him inside after a peek through the front window of the place showed me that he was sitting by himself at a side table for four with his back to the door. I could see his hatless streaked-blond head sticking up over the booth partition.

I climbed up on a stool at the bar

where I could see him in the bar mirror but he couldn't see me. I thought he was waiting for somebody to join him and I wanted to know who. I ordered a plain tonic water from the bartender and nursed it. I like tonic water better with gin in it, who doesn't, but it gives me indigestion. Anyway, when you're trying to cut in on people like Matheny, you've got to go easy on the sauce.

After fifteen minutes, I figured I was wrong about him meeting somebody. Nobody showed up at his table, and when a waitress went to him to see if he wanted another beer, he told her, "Yeah, with my dinner. I want a sirloin steak, rare, and french fries and catsup on the side. No salad."

That was enough for me. I beckoned to the bartender, paid for the tonic water and left. If he was going to eat dinner and have another beer, I ought to have a good half hour to myself. I went back to Queen's Boulevard. Up by the florist's shop near the 8th Avenue subway stairs, a guy was passing out leaflets of some kind to the pedestrians. Not many were taking them. I turned west and walked fast.

Matheny lived in a rented room over a bakery shop. I went up the narrow staircase from the street. One look at the lock on the door at

the top of the steps made me feel a lot better right away. A baby could have picked it with his rattle handle. I used a plastic calendar card and some pressure. When the door swung open under this simple routine, I began to feel bad again, because nobody with any sense, much less a hard case like Matheny, would leave very much loot in a pad as easy to bust into as that—and loot was what I was after. I knew he had it, but I didn't know where he kept it. That was my trouble.

As long as I was there, though, I gave the place my best treatment. It didn't take me very long.

There was nothing in Matheny's one-room mansion except a broken-down studio couch pulled out into a bed and left that way, with dirty sheets partly hidden by the couch cover; a scarred chest of drawers with the drawers not closed tight; an easy chair whose fake leather upholstery was burned in one place and stained in another; a reading lamp on a rickety table beside the chair, with sections of the daily newspaper scattered around it on the carpet; and the carpet itself which missed being wall-to-wall by three feet on every side and missed being new by about thirty years. A telephone was on the floor in a corner.

There wasn't any likely place in

the room where Matheny could have hidden the money. It would be kind of bulky, being in cash, and would take up a good bit of room. I went over the furniture, walls, ceiling, the floor under the carpet, even the base of the telephone. I didn't find a thing.

The telephone made me feel better again, though, because it looked pretty clean compared to everything else in the room, and maybe that meant Matheny had put it in after he rented the room. If he had, that meant he was expecting somebody to call him or he was to call somebody, and that somebody could be whoever was holding the cash for him, or was going to tip him when the heat was off, or meet him for a split-up somewhere, or something connected with the cash. Matheny had stashed the loot somewhere, and I wanted it.

After I finished with the room, I gave his bathroom a going-over, too, but no luck there, either. Matheny wasn't the kind of dope to hide his loot in the water tank.

I looked at my watch and saw I'd been away from the bar-and-grill where Matheny was having his sirloin rare for twenty minutes. I was still on the safe side of any chance he might come home and catch me. All the same, I thought I'd better get out. I straightened everything up, then went over to the

telephone in the corner to see if I'd remembered the number right. I figured maybe I could use it later on, someday.

Just as I bent over the telephone, it rang.

I stared at the phone for a second and it rang again. A lot of things went through my head in a hurry. The one that came out winner was that maybe this call had something to do with the money. So I picked up the receiver, held the mouthpiece away from my face and said, "Hello." Nobody said anything for a count of three, and I couldn't hear anybody breathing at the other end. Wrong number, I thought.

Then a man's voice, indistinct against a faint roar of background noise, said, "Boulevard 3-2459?"

That was Matheny's number. I held the receiver away from my mouth again and said, "Yeah." I waited. A little more of nothing happened next.

Finally, the voice said, "Three-oh-six, four-two." I heard a click at the other end of the wire.

Great. I hung up. I said *that* number to myself a couple of times, fixing it in my mind. Don't ask me why. I told myself I was a jerk for not asking the guy who was calling. I'd never latch onto Matheny's dough that way. Come to that, maybe the guy on the

phone was a jerk, too. He hadn't even asked me if I was Matheny.

I wiped off the telephone receiver, just to be safe, and got out of there.

Back on 108th, the guy passing out leaflets was working the other side of the street. He stepped in front of me and said, "Take a leaflet, sir, for the good of your soul." I took it and shoved it into my pocket and kept on walking. It was something about a religious sect called Theosophists United, whoever they were.

I crossed over to the other sidewalk and looked through the window of the bar-and-grill where I'd left Matheny. He was still there. I went on by, walked through the Long Island Railroad underpass and went into the Inn.

I needed a drink and dinner myself. The Inn isn't cheap, but I've always liked to live it up when I've got the price. Sitting at the bar, though, I got to thinking about my indigestion again, and ended up ordering another plain tonic water with a squeeze of lime instead of gin. I washed down a peptic tablet with the first swallow, and worked my shoulders to make my gun ride a little easier under my coat.

While I downed the tonic and had dinner, I thought about the number I'd heard over Matheny's telephone: 30642. It might have

meant something to Matheny, but it sure didn't mean anything to me. I went through some possibilities. It wasn't a telephone number, not enough digits. Too high a number for a check locker in an airport or railroad station. And certainly too high for a safe-deposit box in a bank.

You can see how my mind was running. I wanted the number to have something to do with Matheny's loot; a clue to where he'd stashed it, or who was holding it, or where he was going to meet the others who had been in on the job with him.

I came up with nothing except a full feeling from the veal parmigiana I had for dinner, so I paid my check and went out into the lobby of the Inn.

A couple of stewardesses and pilots from La Guardia Airport were signing in at the desk. They were still in uniform, kidding around, not a care in the world. I gave the two good-looking birds the eye and that did it.

I could be going at my number all wrong. I was saying to myself three-oh, and then a pause, and then the last three numbers, six-four-two. Then I recalled the guy on the phone had said the first three numbers together, then a pause, then the last two numbers.

Seeing the airline people trig-

gered it. The number could be an airplane flight number, followed by a seat number. Flight 306, seat 42, and the background noise behind the guy's voice on Matheny's phone could have been the roar of an airport terminal.

I shut myself into a telephone booth, looked up Flight Information at Kennedy and dialed it.

A girl's voice answered. "Flight Information."

I said, "Have you got a flight number 306 listed on your schedule anywhere?"

"What airline?" she asked.

"I don't know. That's why I'm calling."

"Do you know when it's scheduled, sir?"

"I don't know that, either."

She laughed. "Do you happen to know where it's going?"

"No."

"Or where it's coming from?"

"Just the flight number," I said.

"Well, if you'll hold on a minute, I'll try to find it for you." She put a lot of patience into her voice.

I held on. She was gone less than a minute. "Here we are," she told me. "TGA Jetstar Flight 306, Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, Kansas City, out of Kennedy at 10:30 tomorrow morning. That sound like it?"

"Thanks a million," I said.

I looked up TGA Reservations in the book and put another dime

in the slot. My hand shook a bit.

"Your flight 306 tomorrow morning," I said to the girl who answered. "Any seats left?"

"Yes, sir. To Kansas City?"

I took a chance. "To Pittsburgh," I said. Pittsburgh was where Matheny had knocked over the bank.

"First class or coach?"

"Coach." I like to live it up, but not that much. Besides, seat 42 ought to be in the coach section.

"Right, sir," the girl said. "Your name, please?"

"Arthur Matheny." I spelled it for her.

"Your ticket will be waiting for you at the TGA counter, Mr. Matheny. And thank you for calling TGA."

"Not at all," I said, and hung up. My heartburn kicked up suddenly, like hot steam in my throat. I got out a tablet and chewed it before I left the telephone booth. Heartburn or no heartburn, I was feeling fine. Things were beginning to move. I was pretty sure I was on my way to Matheny's dough—or some of it, anyway.

Seat 42 was a window seat on the left side about halfway up. I had a seat two rows behind it and on the aisle.

The stewardess who checked me in was a dish. Her hair under the uniform cap was dark brown and

so were her eyes. Suntanned, she had a nice nose and a figure that didn't go straight up and down any place, as far as I could see, and I was looking. She gave me a perfunctory smile when she checked me off on her clipboard.

The plane wasn't a quarter full when we took off, and that was all right with me.

Seat 42 was empty. I figured it might be, with such a small load. Would Matheny have asked for that particular seat? I didn't think so. It would have drawn attention to the seat. He wouldn't want that. He'd probably have played it by ear once he was on the plane, the way I meant to.

We weren't airborne more than half an hour before the stewardesses started passing out snacks and offering drinks. I didn't take any because of my heartburn, but I said a few words to the stewardess with the Raquel Welch shape when she bent over me with her tray. "How long to Pittsburgh?" I asked her. She smelled like carnations.

She laughed. "You're almost there. It's less than half an hour more. You sure you won't have anything?"

I told her no, I'd just finished breakfast. She seemed in no hurry to move on, so I said, "Not many passengers today."

"It's always light on Mondays."

She leaned a little closer to me. Carnations again. "To tell you the truth, I'm just as glad. Gives us a chance to rest up a little bit after the weekend." She flashed the smile at me, not so perfunctory this time.

"I haven't flown this route before," I said. "Is it all right if I move over to a window seat and take a look out?"

"Of course," she said. "Take any vacant seat you want."

"Thanks." I stood up, took my flight bag from the overhead rack, squeezed past the stewardess in the aisle, which was pleasant, went forward two rows and slid by a gray-haired man's knees into seat 42. The gray-haired man was asleep.

Holding my flight bag in my lap, I leaned over and looked out the window beside me at what we were passing below. I guess it was the Allegheny Mountains. It looked like a green skin dented with wrinkles.

I wasn't really interested in the view, anyway. After three minutes of staring at it, I had a crick in my neck and I turned away from the window. The stewardess was up ahead, not noticing me. The gray-haired guy next door was still asleep. I fumbled a copy of the airline's in-flight magazine, *Jetstar*, from the pocket on the seat ahead of me, opened it and pretended to

read. I hoped I looked convincing.

With the magazine and my flight bag hiding my movements in case my neighbor woke up, I used my left hand, the one next to the window, to explore seat 42.

I didn't know what I was looking for. Some kind of a hiding place, probably, but a simple one, where Matheny could find whatever it was he was going to pick up without too much trouble . . . a message or a map or cash. It could be anything, but I was betting on cash. Cash was what turned Matheny on.

If I hadn't known there was something to look for in seat 42, I'd never have found it. Only the overlap, where the long thin patch of seat material had been applied over the upholstery, gave it away. My fingers, sliding along the curve of the seat where it went under my knees, found a slight unevenness in the smooth, tight-stretched nylon seat covering, and I knew right away I had it.

I picked at one of the ends of the patch with a fingernail. It came loose for about half an inch, peeling back like an adhesive bandage off a cut finger.

I checked the man next to me. His eyes were still closed, so I risked a quick look down past my magazine and flight bag at the little flap of material I'd pulled loose. The

light wasn't too good, but it looked like an exact match for the seat-covering material; same color, same texture, same amount of fade. It was a neat job down under the front curve of the foam rubber seat where nobody would notice it in a million years. I pulled at the flap of material and it peeled back another inch. The adhesive it was stuck on with was the kind that stays sticky. The flap I'd raised stuck to my fingers like chewing gum.

I peeled back another inch, still pretending to read my *Jetstar* magazine. When I could work my forefinger and thumb loose from the stickum on the patch, I shoved them through the slit in the upholstery under the patch, and felt a cut-out hollow in the three inch seat pad inside. In the hollow, my fingers came up against the straight edge of a small flat package. Bingo!

I took my fingers away from the hole in the seat and brought them up in my lap where I told them to turn a page in *Jetstar* while I ran a check of the plane passengers and crew. Nobody seemed to be caring whether I lived or died or stole Matheny's money. At least nobody was looking my way. The old gent next to me was sleeping so hard now, he'd slipped sideways away from me and was practically falling into the aisle.

I dropped my left hand out of sight again, grabbed the front edge of the flat package in two fingers and worked it out of the seat. I brought it up slow and easy into my lap under my flight bag and slid it into one of the bag's outside pockets, covering the move with the magazine in my other hand. Then I stuck the patch back down over the slit in the upholstery.

Just in time, too. The flight deck gave us the word we were letting down for Pittsburgh and the passengers all went through the belt-fastening bit except for the sleeper beside me. The carnation-smelling stewardess straightened him up and fastened his belt for him, waking him up in the process. When I fastened mine, I transferred the flat package from the pocket of my flight bag to the inside of it, under my clean shirt and electric shaver.

I was excited. I figured the flat package had about the right dimensions to hold a couple of stacks of bills maybe three quarters of an inch high. And that could come to a bundle of dough if the bills were all hundreds, say. Twenty or twenty-five grand.

We floated across some power lines and a superhighway and made a smooth landing at Pittsburgh. I unfastened my seat belt, grabbed my flight bag in one hot hand, stumbled over my neighbor's

knees again, and was all ready to leave the minute the door was opened. Only six other passengers were getting off in Pittsburgh, I noticed, unless some millionaires were descending from first class. I said good-bye and thanks to the pretty stewardess and ducked down the steps. There was a handful of people at the exit gate waiting for friends or relatives from the plane, but I didn't give them a second look.

I should have.

I had no luggage except my flight bag. I saw the word "Men" on a door in the waiting room inside the gate. I headed for it without looking back. The package was burning a hole in my flight bag.

In the men's room I stepped into a compartment, locked the door, brought out the package. It was done up in brown wrapping paper. I gently loosened one end of the paper, expecting to see edges of currency stacked solid. I didn't. What I saw was the end of a shallow blue box. I slid the box out of the wrapping, fiddled with the catch and lifted the lid. All that got me was a look at a piece of chamois skin—the kind you wash windows with, but softer. Impatiently I flipped back the flap of chamois and finally saw what I had.

Not cash. Diamonds.

The blue box was full of them. Square cuts, marquises, pear shapes and rounds, packed between layers of chamois skin and throwing sparks like a rhinestone G-string under a baby spot.

Nice surprise from Matheny. I don't know much about diamonds, but that tray of ice could be worth ten times as much as the two little stacks of currency I'd been hoping for. There wasn't a stone in the collection smaller than two carats, and some were jumbos.

I closed the box, slid it back into the wrapping paper, folded the loose flap in. Then I shoved the box into my flight bag and left the men's room.

The escalator that led from the field waiting room up to the main floor of the terminal was just outside the men's room. I stepped on it and started up to get a ticket on the next plane to New York. A voice behind me said, "Matheny."

I turned my head. A short, fat, broken-nosed type was riding the escalator step below mine. He wasn't giving me the big smile of an old friend, but he wasn't looking hostile, either. He was occupying the whole width of the escalator belt, with a hand on both rails. I couldn't reverse my field, that was for sure.

I said, "Oh, there you are. I wondered when somebody would show

up. I was waiting around for you."

Another voice, light and feathery, pulled my head around the other way. "In the men's?" it said.

This one was slight and blond and dressed in a sky-blue sport jacket over red-checked slacks. Unlike his clothes, his eyes didn't have any color in them and they didn't focus quite straight.

I said to him, "I didn't think you'd leave."

The fat one moved up beside me. His buddy stood facing us, riding up the escalator backwards. He said, "You're not Matheny."

"Am I supposed to be?"

"Your stewardess said so." The fat one crowded me against the escalator rail. "We checked with her when Matheny didn't show. The first man off the plane, she said. That's you. And you ain't Matheny."

"I knew that all along," I said, grinning at him. "Matheny couldn't come."

"Why not?"

"Sick."

"What do you mean, sick? Matheny don't get sick. He's healthy as a horse."

"Not now he isn't." I said. "He went to the hospital yesterday."

Two pairs of eyes stared at me as though they thought it might be my fault. The pretty boy stumbled when the escalator reached the top

level and bumped him backwards off his step. He almost fell, but I reached out and caught him as Fatso and I stepped off. He didn't thank me, but closed in on my right side and we walked three abreast down the long corridor of the air terminal.

The gaily dressed one made sketchy introductions. "I'm Brad," he said, "and that's Leo." We walked a few more steps. "So who are you?"

"Matheny, for this job," I said.

Brad said, "You got the package?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you damn well better have it, or it'll be too bad for you. And Matheny." This was Leo.

"Then let's say I've got it, okay?" I flipped my flight bag. "Where are we going?"

The slender one hitched a shoulder. "To Mitch," he said. "Where else?"

"Matheny didn't tell me about Mitch."

"What did he tell you?"

"Told me somebody would pay me five G's for making a pickup and delivery in his place. That somebody would meet me at the Pittsburgh airport. And if it didn't work out, I could keep the package."

Leo laughed. "That Matheny," he chortled, "he's a million laughs."

He sobered suddenly and said, "You a friend of Matheny's?"

"You might say so, yes."

"Where'd you know him?" The colorless eyes on my right gave me a crooked scrutiny.

"I'll tell Mitch," I said.

We came out of the main entrance to the airport terminal building and headed for a big parking lot off to the right.

"I'll carry your bag," Brad offered.

I shook my head. "I'll carry it. As far as Mitch, anyway. It isn't heavy."

"Mercy," said Brad in his high tenor, "he's touchy, isn't he?"

"Nervous is what he is," Leo laughed. "Over this way."

They shepherd me into the parking lot and down a long row of cars to a black sedan at the end. Leo got under the wheel. Brad, behind me, said, "Sit in the middle." I climbed in and sat above the hump in the floor with my flight bag in my lap. The front seat wasn't meant for three. I didn't complain. Brad climbed in after me and slammed his door.

Leo tooled the car out of the parking lot and turned into a four-lane highway heading east. Once we got rolling, Brad said in his feathery voice, "I'll carry your bag now."

I looked down, and he had a

gun in his lap, aimed in the general direction of my appendix. I looked up again, into his colorless eyes. "If you insist," I said.

Brad took my flight bag and tossed it into the back seat. He just wanted to make a point.

Leo said, "That's sensible. Brad gets kind of touchy himself sometimes."

Brad's lips lifted and he exposed very white teeth that could have been false in a sweet smile. "Good gracious," he said, "do you know something, Leo? I believe this friend of Matheny's is armed. Mitch wouldn't like that."

"Left armpit," Leo said. "I felt it on the escalator."

Brad reached over and relieved me of my gun. Then he put his own away, looking straight into my eyes the whole time. I was glad to have his gun out of sight, to tell the truth. Brad dressed and talked like a flit, but his funny eyes told me he liked to use that gun.

We took a left off the highway after a while and followed that road for a few miles at an easy sixty till we came to a river. As we went over it on a high suspension bridge, I said, "Is this the beautiful Ohio?" and got nothing but a grunt from Leo in reply.

Pretty soon we went east again on a road bordering the river, rolled through a little hick-town

business section and turned north up a winding road that climbed the steep bluff behind the town. I saw a roadside sign that said "Co-raopolis Heights." As Leo worked up higher and higher on the bluff, I could look down and see the river shining below us.

Brad wanted to make another point. "You still didn't tell us your name," he said in his delicate well-bred way.

"Let it wait," Leo told him.

We turned into a concrete driveway toward the top of the hill. Leo touched a gadget on his sun visor and the wide door of a two-car garage rolled up and let him snuggle the sedan in beside a red convertible.

I got only a quick look at the house as we drove in. It was built into the cliff above the garage, and two or three stories high, I couldn't tell which, not counting the garage level. There was no lawn and no fence. The ground was too steep for anything but trees to hang onto. There were plenty of those, though, all around the house, growing close in.

I said, "Is this where Mitch lives?" and crawled out of the car after Brad.

"Yeah," Leo answered. "Some cottage, huh?"

Brad opened the back door of the sedan and took out my flight

bag, giving me a creepy look as he did it. We went up a couple of steps from the garage to a square hall by the front door of the house, and stepped into an elevator that took us up one flight into a big livingroom.

The livingroom was nicely furnished, with a bar finished in leather and nail heads at one end, an open fireplace at the other. One whole wall was made of sliding glass panels. Outside the glass wall was a terrace with wrought iron furniture scattered around and a fine view of the river. The terrace was really the roof of the garage.

A big guy wearing hornrims and a neat goatee was sitting in one of the terrace chairs by a round umbrella table, watching us as we came through the livingroom and out onto the terrace. Mitch, no doubt. His ears were small and set low on his head and tight against it. He had reddish-brown hair, and bare feet stuck into sandals. He was wearing jeans and an open-necked shirt and he had a French paperback open on his lap. If I had to make a guess, I'd have said he was a professor cutting his own classes.

Leo started to say something, but Mitch interrupted him. "Who's this?" He looked at me when he said it.

"Matheny's sick," Brad ex-

plained. "This guy came instead. At least, that's the way he tells it." He gestured with my flight bag which he held in his left hand, leaving his right hand free to draw his gun, maybe.

Mitch took the flight bag, zipped it open, rummaged around in it and brought up the package wrapped in brown paper. His scholarly pan got a relieved look on it.

Leo said softly, "If that ain't it, Mitch, he hid it in the men's room at the airport. That's where we picked him up. Every place else, since he left the plane, we been on him good."

Mitch didn't answer right away. He was busy tearing the wrapping off the box. When he got the lid up and turned back the chamois skin, he looked at the diamonds for a minute. Brad and Leo gawked at them, too. I did myself. Under the open sunlight, they looked even better than they did under the men's room fluorescents.

Mitch got some heart into his voice. "This is it, Leo," he said. "This is definitely it." Leo sat down. Mitch closed the box and looked at me directly for the first time, as though I could be a person after all. "I owe you for this," he said with disarming candor. "Mr. . . ." He paused for an answer. "Smith," I said. "I was glad to do

Matheny the favor. He told me I'd have five G's coming."

Mitch frowned but nodded. "Fair enough, Mr. Smith. You'll get it."

I needled him a little. "From the looks of that box, you could afford to pay me more than five."

Mitch didn't react one way or the other. He said, "What happened to Matheny?"

"Busted appendix, I think. We were playing gin yesterday afternoon when it hit him. He doubled up like a hunch bettor—"

Mitch cut in. "Where?"

"Where?"

"Yes. Where were you playing gin?"

"At his place," I said easily, "in Forest Hills."

He frowned again. "Go on."

"His pains got worse. The phone rang once and he could hardly answer it. But he did, and after that, he asked me to stick around for a while just in case. So I did. By seven o'clock he was hurting bad enough to know it was something serious. I told him what it was. Just like me when my appendix busted once. You get a high fever and pains you wouldn't believe. I told him he ought to get to a doctor or the hospital before something let go on him. He says okay, if I'll do him a favor and make this pickup and delivery. Told me the

setup and said I'd get five grand. Then I called him a cab and sent him off to the hospital."

"What hospital?"

"Search me. I told the cabbie to take him to the nearest one." That seemed safe enough. I was pretty sure Matheny wouldn't have registered under his own name anyway, even if he *had* gone to a hospital.

"Why didn't you go with him?"

"He wanted me to get started on a reservation for the plane this morning. He said he'd be okay." I shrugged my shoulders. It felt funny with my gun's weight gone. "Maybe he's okay and maybe he isn't. All I know is, it's six-two-and-even he had a busted appendix. And he promised me five grand. Let's not forget that."

Mitch nodded to a chair. "Sit down, Mr. Smith. Brad, get Mr. Smith a drink, will you? What'll you have, Mr. Smith?"

"Plain tonic water if you've got it," I said. "Alcohol gives me heartburn."

Brad went off toward the livingroom bar. Mitch swiveled his eyes at Leo without saying anything. Leo got up and went into the house.

I called after him, "Boulevard 3-2459, area code 412. But he won't be there, Leo. I guarantee it."

Mitch laughed. "We'll check anyway. Okay? You been a friend of

Matheny's very long. Smith?" No 'Mister' now, I noticed. It should have sounded patronizing from this egghead type, but it didn't. Just friendly. Mitch had a way with him. I figured maybe he was beginning to believe me. With the diamonds in his lap and my knowing Matheny's hideout and telephone number, there was no reason why he shouldn't. I hoped.

Brad came back with a glass of tonic water in his hand and a sneer on his face. Probably thought I was a queer if I drank that slop. He didn't sit down after he handed me my drink, but went and stood by the terrace rail, a little behind me on my left, where a clump of young ash trees hugged the terrace. I figured from that that they still didn't exactly trust me.

I figured right. Mitch repeated his question about how long I'd known Matheny. I said, "Quite a while."

"Since when?"

I took a chance. "Since Raiford?"

"You were in prison with him?" Mitch was surprised.

"Yeah. The stretch he did for armed robbery in Jacksonville." That was safe, too.

Mitch fiddled with the box of diamonds. "Funny Matheny never mentioned you to me."

"Or me," Brad fluted behind me.

"Nothing funny about it," I said.

"I never worked with him on a job. Never even saw him after Raiford until I was casing a thing in Forest Hills yesterday and ran into him on the street." I grinned. "You can't miss Art Matheny. The way he sticks above everybody else and throws his left foot when he walks. I was glad to see him."

"Why?" Mitch didn't take his eyes off me. "After all those years?"

I tried to look embarrassed. "I figured maybe I could touch him for a century. My luck has been lousy lately. And Matheny looked prosperous."

Leo came back to the terrace. He looked at Mitch and shook his head. I hadn't expected that Matheny would answer the phone. The chances were against it. But I felt relieved, all the same.

Mitch said to Leo, "Matheny ever mention a friend named Smith to you?"

"What's your first name?" Leo asked me. "Smith ain't enough. Everybody has a friend named Smith, don't they?" A clown.

"Firedoor," I said. "Firedoor Smith."

Leo laughed. "Matheny never mentioned no Firedoor Smith to me," he told Mitch. Then he asked me, "How come Firedoor?"

I said, "I work apartments and hotels. So I use firedoors to make

my scores, that's all there is to it."

Even Mitch smiled at that. "Then a pickup in an airplane is right down your alley."

"Right," I said.

Mitch put a finger under his red beard and scratched his neck. I thought I knew what was bothering him. Matheny had probably been under orders to stay strictly doggo in New York until he got that telephone call I'd taken for him. No social contacts like gin rummy with an old lag allowed. So how come I'd been with Matheny when he took sick?

Mitch's next words hinted I was right. "Lucky for us you happened to be there when Matheny got the cramps."

"Well, I ran into him by a bakery, just as he was going up some stairs alongside. It turned out he lived there." I made a face. "What a dump. But I figured it was just temporary. While the heat died down from his last job, probably."

"What *was* his last job?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask him. If you know Matheny, you ought to know he's a tight-mouth." Mitch said nothing, so I went on. "Speaking of luck, it was lucky for *me* I happened to be Johnny-on-the-spot when Matheny's appendix busted. Five G's are more sugar than I've seen all at once for more than three years, would you believe

that? I *need* it, man! That's why I kind of forced myself to be invited into Matheny's pad and tried to swing a loan over the gin rummy game. And I guess that's why Matheny knew I wouldn't cross him on this pickup thing. Not with five G's in sight when I was flat."

"He give you the dough for your airplane ticket?" Brad said.

"I used the dough I won from him at gin. He's a lousy player."

Mitch said to Brad, "Knock it off, Brad." And to me, "What did you think you had in this box?" He tapped the diamonds.

I looked him straight in the eye. "Horse."

He blinked. "You didn't open the box while you were in the men's room, did you?"

I said no.

Mitch said, "One end of the wrapping was loose."

"It tore when I pulled it out of the airplane seat."

He leaned back in his chair. "Don't hand me that, Firedoor. There isn't a man alive who could resist looking into a package he'd been paid five grand to collect—if he had the chance. And you had the chance. You took a peek, didn't you?"

"Well . . ."

"And when you saw it was diamonds, you thought you'd go into

business for yourself, didn't you?"

I looked guilty, I guess, because he laughed out loud.

"I know how these things go, Firedoor, believe me. I'm not a psychology professor for nothing."

I said, "What!"

"Currently between jobs," he said, and laughed again. "Ask Brad and Leo why they work for me. It's because I know how people's minds work, and make money from it. And because I know how people's minds work, all my people are not only safer but more successful working for me than for themselves."

This guy had to be a little nuts, I thought. I looked at Leo and his battered mug was solemnly nodding agreement to Mitch's brag. I said, "All your people? You got more than Matheny and these two here?" I put respect into the question.

"Who do you think bought these diamonds for me from a jewel thief in Amsterdam?" Mitch said quietly. "And who do you think secreted them in the airplane seat for Matheny to pick up? And who do you think tipped off Matheny what flight to catch today, and what seat the stones were in?"

Amsterdam, that explained some of it. One of Mitch's people in Europe bought a ticket for New York on a TGA plane, hid the diamonds

in his seat cushion during the flight over and covered up the slit in the upholstery with a pre-prepared patch. When he arrived at Kennedy in New York, he left the diamonds on the plane and went through customs inspection like any other innocent tourist. Then Matheny was tipped off to the flight and seat number and was to go aboard that plane's first domestic flight, collect the diamonds and take them off the plane at Pittsburgh, because there's no U.S. Customs inspection in Pittsburgh for passengers on domestic flights. A very cozy setup.

In answer to Mitch's questions, I asked, "Who?" He seemed to expect it.

"My people," he said. "And that's merely a sampling. I have excellent connections all over Europe and America, and excellent people to help me exploit them. We all make a very nice living, don't we, boys?" he appealed to Brad and Leo.

I was impressed. I said wistfully, "I could use my five G's, in that case. A boss smuggler like you wouldn't even miss it."

Mitch laughed. "Smuggling's only part of it. I'm running sort of a conglomerate here, you might say. And all my subsidiaries are showing a nice profit at the moment."

"Mitch!" Brad protested in his high voice.

Mitch waved a hand at him. "Don't worry so much, Brad. I know what I'm doing." He turned back to me. "A little smuggling, a little bank robbery, a little car theft for those poor deprived people in South America . . . We try our hands at anything that pays well, Firedoor."

"Wow!" I said in simple admiration.

Mitch patted the diamonds. "I like the way you handled this pickup for Matheny on very short notice. It took brains and a lot of cool to bring it off so smoothly your first time out of the gate. I can use brains and cool like that. Would you consider working for me?"

Brad started to say something. Mitch gave him a sharp look and he shut up. Leo's broken-nosed face was as deadpan as ever. I said, "Hell, Mr. Mitchell, you've got to be kidding!" I made it plain I hoped he wasn't.

Brad muttered something under his breath.

"I'm not kidding. I might activate another subsidiary with you as chief executive officer, Firedoor." He laughed. "Our hotel and apartment division. I have some ideas along those lines that could be turned into important money if ap-

plied to just the right objectives."

The telephone rang in the livingroom and Leo went to answer it.

I said, "This doesn't affect the five G's I've already got coming?"

"Of course not."

"Then I'll take the job, Mr. Mitchell. And glad to get it."

Leo walked out on the terrace.

"Who was it?" Mitch asked him.

"Ruby."

"Yes?"

Leo broke his deadpan rule. He threw me a real disgusted look. "She says no hospital in Queens admitted an acute appendicitis patient last night after seven o'clock. Or even treated one with a bad gut pain. Or even any patient six foot, five inches tall. And there ain't no Matheny registered in any of them, either. Even the private ones."

All of a sudden I felt chilly. Leo wasn't as dumb as he looked.

Mitch clicked his tongue politely. Brad stirred at my back. I thought I heard the safety on his gun click off, but it could have been my imagination. I didn't turn to look.

Mitch said sadly, "Why, Mr. Smith, I'm afraid you haven't been leveling with us. At least it looks that way. But we can't be sure, can we, until we hear from Matheny?"

"If we ever hear from Matheny," Brad said. "We're sure enough to suit me right now, Mitch. Give me

this monkey. I'll take care of him."

"Presently, Brad." Mitch spoke to him like a mother soothing a bad-tempered baby. "We can't be precipitate. That's one of my cardinal rules. You know that. Meanwhile, I suggest we put him in our little hideaway on the top floor. Use the elevator." He laughed with enjoyment. "And lock the fire-door."

Brad said, "That's a waste of time, Mitch. Let me have him now."

"Shut up," Leo said, and to me, "Let's go, stupid." He came over and grabbed one of my arms in a big paw, making me spill some of my tonic water. Brad closed in on my other arm, very military. Now I could see that he *did* have his gun out and the safety *was* off.

They were helping me out of my chair when the phone rang again. Only it wasn't the phone. It was a signal from an intercom. Leo, at a nod from Mitch, let go of my arm, went to a grid beside the elevator in the livingroom, and spoke into it.

"What-is-it?" Mitch called to him.

"Somebody at the front door asking for Matheny," Leo reported.

"For Matheny?" Mitch was startled. "Cops?"

"John says no," Leo answered. John must be another of Mitch's

'people' I hadn't seen. "It's a chick," Leo said. "By herself."

"Well, well," Mitch murmured to me softly. "So there's a girl in on this with you?" He called to Leo, "Tell John to send her up."

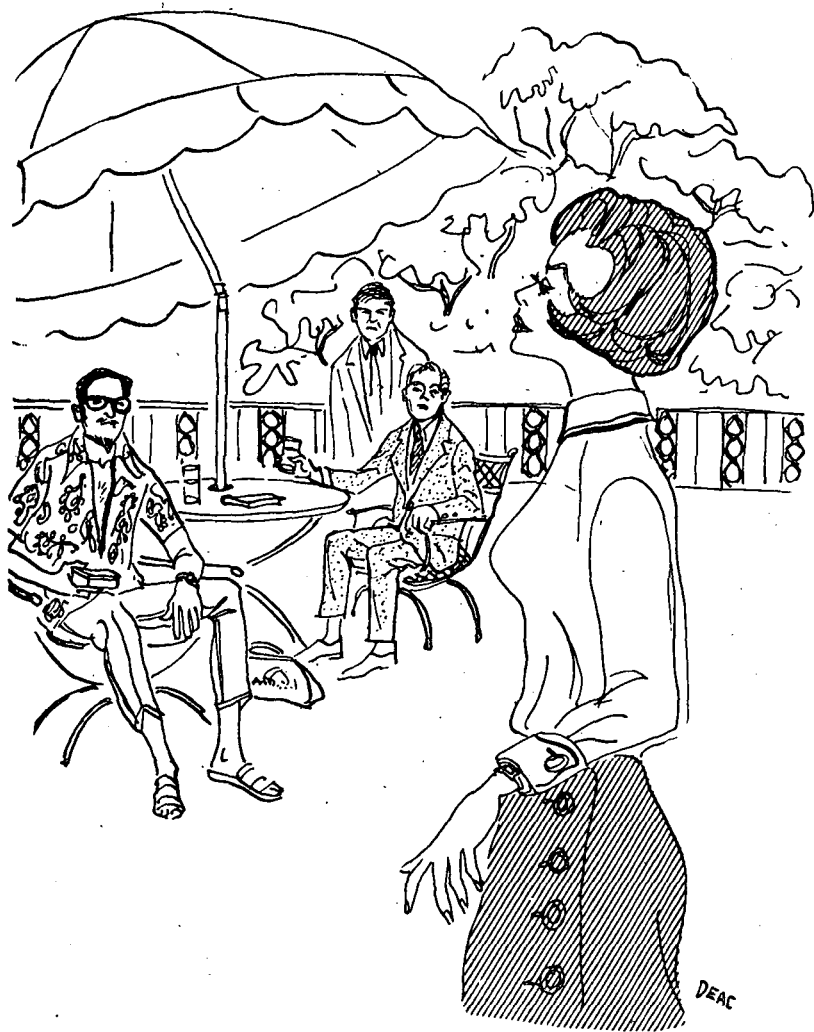
I put down my tonic glass. I didn't want the rest of the stuff anyway. I planted my feet to make a good try for Brad's gun, but something round and cold came against the back of my neck, so I thought the hell with it, and relaxed again—as much as my heartburn would let me.

I went back to feeling lousy again when I saw the chick who came tail-switching out onto the terrace with Leo, pushing a faint smell of carnations ahead of her: the stacked stewardess from flight 306. She'd ditched her TGA cap and wings somewhere, but she still wore her uniform blouse and skirt, and she was still a dish.

I hoped she wasn't mixed up with this crummy crew, a nice girl like her. But if she wasn't, she stood a fine chance of getting hit in the head along with me. I said, "I thought you'd be in Kansas City by now, baby."

She nodded to me without smiling. "Hello, Mr. Matheny. Who are your friends?"

Mitch stood up. So did I. "Tell her who we are," he said to me. So he didn't know her. That put her



in deep trouble here for sure.

"That's Mr. Mitchell with the beard," I told her. "The beauty who ushered you in is Leo. And this character behind me who has

just put away his gun so as not to alarm the ladies, is Brad."

She turned her head to each one as I named them off. "I'm Sheila Glasgow," she said steadily. "May I

sit down with you gentlemen?"

She had us all off-balance, and no wonder. Mitch gestured to Leo to pull up another of the terrace chairs for her. "Join the party, by all means, Miss Glasgow," he said courteously. Then, with more iron in his voice, "And tell us what your business is with Mr. Matheny."

We all sat down around the umbrella table.

Leo said, sotto voce, "It's the stewardess off his plane, Mitch."

"Indeed?" said Mitch. "Then I repeat my question."

Sheila Glasgow's eyes went to the blue box in Mitch's hand. "My business isn't only with Mr. Matheny," she said. "It's also with those diamonds."

That shook all of us. This babe not only knew I'd lifted a package off her plane, she knew what was in it. Mitch came close to gaping at her. Brad pulled in a quick breath. Leo froze.

"Diamonds?" Mitch asked in a neutral voice. "What about them?"

"They're counterfeits," said Miss Glasgow.

That shook us even more. Brad squeaked, "This girl is high on something, Mitch. She needs help. Shall I get her to a doctor?"

Mitch paid no attention to his problem child. He was too interested in the girl. He played it care-

fully: "I'm afraid you've lost me. How did you arrive at the remarkable conclusion that this box contains diamonds? And even if it did, which I don't for a moment admit, what in the world makes you think they'd be fakes?"

"I didn't say they were fakes. I said they were counterfeits."

"What's the difference?" I asked, getting a black look from Mitch.

She gave me the side of her eyes. "Counterfeits are real diamonds, only they're synthetic. They're man-made."

"So what's the sweat?" Leo said. Practical Leo.

For some reason, I got the impression Miss Glasgow was enjoying herself, maybe because Mitch was listening as closely as any of us. "Synthetics, even perfect ones like those," a finger again indicated Mitch's blue box, "aren't worth as much as real ones, the kind nature makes. Their refractive index is about eight-thousandths less, for one thing."

Mitch pretended sarcasm. "And purely out of curiosity, may I ask what difference the refractive index makes?"

Miss Glasgow permitted herself a small smile. "About twelve hundred dollars a carat."

Mitch didn't bat an eye. Bad news, I thought. It looked like one of Mitch's subsidiaries might have

to report a loss. Miss Glasgow wasn't fooling.

She went on, "I know there are diamonds in that box, Mr. Mitchell. And I know they are counterfeits. So why can't we discuss this like reasonable people?"

"Because I simply do not believe you, Miss Glasgow. And I have trouble being reasonable with liars." It was pleasantly done, but there was a bit of temper in his voice now. He didn't like to be lectured in front of his people, that was sure, and not by a pretty girl who tells him that his diamonds might be worth six figures less than he'd thought.

"I am *not* a liar," she said. "I know there are diamonds in that box because I put them there. And I put the box in the plane seat. And when I put the diamonds in the box, they were counterfeits. So they're *still* counterfeits."

Mitch didn't bluff anymore. Nobody said anything for a minute. Then Mitch made an effort. "They were genuine when they left Europe," he said. "Are you claiming that you switched them in New York for counterfeits?"

"Good thinking, Mr. Mitchell," she said sweetly. I hoped she wouldn't push Mitch too far. He might just give Brad one nod and the next minute it would be *pow!* with the gun and good-bye Miss

Glasgow. So ease up, lady . . .

Almost to himself, Mitch muttered, "Then you got to José or Matheny."

"That's right. I got to both of them."

"Not to me," I said. "You didn't get to me."

"Yes, Mr. Matheny, I certainly got to you. By proxy, over the telephone. And on flight 306 this morning."

"Shut up," Mitch said to me. He was really upset now. "You might have conned Matheny, but you couldn't have got to José. He's seventy years old and hates women."

"He's not seventy years old any longer," Miss Glasgow said. "He's dead."

All this jazz about José and Matheny left me out in the cold. I didn't have the faintest idea what she was talking about. But Mitch and his boys did. They exchanged looks, and Mitch said, with zero sorrow in his voice, "So José's dead. Too bad." He fixed a speculative eye on Glasgow. "Is *that* your angle, Miss Glasgow? Are you bucking for José's job? And holding out the real diamonds to give you leverage for a deal?" There was a hint of admiration in the words, like when he'd complimented me on recovering the package so smoothly the first time.

Another small smile from Miss

Glasgow caused a minor miracle in her face. It came alive like poor old José never would again. She said, "No, that's not exactly my angle, Mr. Mitchell. Try another guess." She was going to get herself shot, couldn't she see that?

"Blackmail, then?" Mitch asked, holding out a hand to keep Brad quiet.

"That's closer. Let me put it this way. My angle is simply to make you pay through the nose for smuggling those diamonds. All of you."

A stray breeze moved briefly in the leaves of the trees that grew on the steep hillsides flanking the terrace. Mitch must have been working hard at his rule about not being precipitate. He kept snapping the catch on the blue box of diamonds with a clicking noise like the safety on Brad's gun. It made me want to duck.

Instead, I said, "This kid's a phony, Mr. Mitchell. A rank amateur. What she's trying to do, she happened to see me lift the package off her plane this morning, and she's trying to build it into something big for herself. There's nothing counterfeit about those diamonds, I guarantee it. They're the originals. Or why would I have tried for them? Throw this chick out. She's nothing."

Mitch gave me a cold stare. "She

came here asking for you," he said. "So she's working with you. That two mouthy strangers in one day should try to muscle in on this same small enterprise, and not be connected in some way, is just too coincidental to believe, Mr. Matheny. I suggest that *you* switched the diamonds yourself—if switching took place—in the airport men's room. You planned to disappear with the genuine stones, leaving the counterfeits still concealed in the airplane seat, perhaps. We were meant to believe that Matheny had missed the flight for some reason. Only things went wrong for you and Miss Glasgow. Brad and Leo caught up with you before you got away with the diamonds." He gave a smirk that said, "I know how people's minds work."

What he said was close enough to the truth to make me squirm a little, except for the part about the chick. Still, I didn't blame him for thinking she was in on the caper with me. She *had* arrived like the Marines, and thrown them another curve about the diamonds, just when I was in deep trouble with my own little scheme to get Matheny's money. If she was a Marine, she was the prettiest one I ever saw.

She pushed her chair back from the table. "I'm not working with

Mr. Matheny," she assured us firmly. "As a matter of fact, I've come to arrest him." She said it so seriously that Mitch and the boys almost busted out laughing. "Along with the rest of you," she finished.

That brought more grins. Since they were convinced she was working with me, *they* were enjoying themselves. Two could live in that little upstairs hideaway as cheaply as one.

Miss Glasgow stood up, turning a little pink. "Don't laugh. I can do it. I'm not really a stewardess, you know."

"What, then?" Mitch was amused.

With an air of triumph, she announced, "Right now, I happen to be a girl who has two sharpshooters with rifles planted in the trees on each side of this terrace, ready to break your heads or your kneecaps if you move a muscle." While we were digesting that one, she gave it a final flourish. "I'm a U. S. Customs inspector on special duty, if you really want to know."

So it hadn't been a breeze on the edges of the terrace. I gave her credit. She'd held us there, gossiping like a sewing circle over brownies and tea, while her men took care of John, whoever he was, downstairs, and positioned themselves on the hillsides to sweep the

terrace with their fire. Neat. She ought to feel pretty proud of herself.

But her patriotic announcement fell flat on its face. I believed her, knowing what I knew, but the rest of the boys didn't. Mitch's face split in a grin that wiggled his goatee. "What are we supposed to do? Stand up and salute?"

That irked her a little. "I'd advise you not to stand up unless you want a bullet through your leg."

"Give her to me, Mitch," Brad said. One-track mind.

Miss Glasgow pulled a whistle from her blouse pocket and blew on it. "That'll show you," she said.

I was trying to keep them all under my eye at once, a tough assignment. I thought I'd figured out why she'd pushed her chair back a minute ago: to be out of the line of fire. I felt naked myself, sitting between Mitch and Brad, because that figured to be right *in* the line of fire.

A man's voice sounded from high on the hillside to the left of the terrace. "Freeze," it said. "This bullet can travel faster than you can move."

The words fell onto the terrace like rocks into a quarry pool, sending ripples of shock clear out to the railing. All in one split second, Mitch and Brad and Leo changed their attitude to Miss Glasgow. I

could see it happening by watching their faces. The wise grins went away and flash fear suddenly bit in.

Mitch and Leo and I sat as still as a rasher of corpses, taking no chances with the hidden guns. Brad had a better idea. Like an eel, he slid under the table, clawing at his gun, and flopped over on his belly. It was fast thinking and fast acting. Lying there, the metal tabletop would partially protect him from any cross fire coming from the hillsides above.

He didn't waste his time on unseen targets or any of that shoot-you-in-the-leg stuff, either. He raised the gun in his right hand six inches from the floor, resting on his right elbow, and brought it to bear on Miss Sheila Glasgow's face. There was plenty of room between my legs and Mitch's under the table for him to get her in his sights. In his tenor voice he shouted, "Call them off or you get it first!" She wasn't in any doubt about who he meant.

There was saliva in the corners of his mouth. I wasn't sure he could control himself much longer, since he'd been wanting to shoot somebody all day. So I kicked the gun out of his hand.

It went off as it was jerked from his fingers and skidded along the terrace floor toward Miss Glasgow. I don't know where the bullet

went. Brad snarled like a sick cat and I brought my heel down hard on his wrist under the table. Bones grated and cracked under my shoe. Brad screamed.

Nobody else on the terrace said anything except Miss Glasgow. She yelled, "Hold it, Joe!" in a shaky voice. She was looking just a little scared for such a near miss. She stooped down and came up with Brad's gun. She wasn't familiar with the make, you could tell, but she didn't need to be handy with it now. It was a tableau there on the terrace. Everyone was playing statues as hard as he could. Rifle barrels looking at you when you can't see them are pretty uncomfortable.

I said to Glasgow, "Is it all right for me to move now?"

"No," she said. "I appreciate what you did, Mr. Matheny, but no. Don't move yet." She turned toward the hillside on the left and yelled, "Three of you come in, Joe. Leave Stan to cover the terrace." A regular general for strategy.

I looked down at Brad. He was holding his right wrist in his left hand and groaning. His face was the color of library paste. I said to Miss Glasgow, "He's got another gun."

She flushed and came over and stooped again, lifting my gun out of Brad's hip pocket. He didn't try to stop her. All the starch was out

f him. He was ready for a rest. "That's mine," I said, and casually held out my hand for the gun, but she wasn't having any. She stepped back against the glass wall of the livingroom and waited for Joe.

I thought it was likely Joe was up there on the hillside all alone, and she was bluffing about having our men with her. She held Brad's gun on us nervously until a heavy-set lad walked out on the terrace with a rifle in his hand—and I was wrong. Two other men came climbing over the rail of the terrace from the trees on the right side, also with rifles, and with "police" written all over their faces and feet.

Two of them dragged Brad out from under the table and cuffed his bad wrist to his good one, not trying to be gentle. Their buddy cuffed Leo's right wrist to Mitch's left one. All this took place without a word from anyone except for Brad's groans and a string of salty language that came out of Mitch's mouth like a ribbon unrolling and wasn't meant for mixed company. I was surprised at Mitch. I'd figured him for a gentleman.

Miss Glasgow took the blue box of diamonds from him like candy from a stunned baby. When she could make herself heard over his background cursing, she said, to Joe, "That's fine. One more to go.

Matheny, here, is also going."

Joe's two followers shoved Leo, Brad and Mitch into the livingroom toward the elevator. Joe started toward me. "Wait a minute," I said. "You don't want me."

"I certainly do," Miss Glasgow said, "whether you helped me with that—that Brad or not."

Helped her! I'd saved her carnation-scented life, if she only knew it.

Joe grabbed my right hand to snap on a cuff. I dipped my left into a camouflaged pocket I have and showed her what I took out of it.

Her eyes got round. She said, "I don't believe it."

"Now who's calling who a liar? It's true." I waved the badge and the ID card at her. "Read it."

She read it. "FBI?" she murmured. Then, stubborn, "No, you're a smuggler."

I said, "Can we talk?"

She finally told Joe to turn me loose and go and get the boys into the cars and tell Stan he could come out of the trees now. Joe went, with a funny look in my direction.

We sat down at the terrace table. I said, "You first, Miss Glasgow. Are you really a Customs girl?"

"Yes, I am. And Sheila to you. Any friend of the FBI is a friend of mine. We eat from the same

trough." She smiled at me now. "Should I call you Al?"

"That's my name. So, you first."

She hesitated. "Well, this Mitchell you led us to, he's got to be the head of a big smuggling operation." She gave me a puzzled glance. "I can't understand . . ."

"What put you onto Mitch?"

"You did. That's what I can't believe . . ."

"Forget about me for a minute. How about the diamonds?"

"Maybe I'd better start from the beginning," she said. "We've known a lot of contraband was getting by us at Kennedy International in New York, but we couldn't figure out how it was done exactly, or who was running the stuff in. Then, day before yesterday, we got one of those once-in-a-lifetime breaks. The courier who was bringing those diamonds in from Europe had a heart attack just as he was going through customs inspection at Kennedy. Our inspector helped him until an ambulance arrived."

"The courier was this José you mentioned?"

"Yes, an old man, head of a small export-import firm, we found out." She laughed. "Mostly import, it seems. Anyway, he thought he was dying, which he was, and he kept worrying about a message he had to get to somebody named

Matheny in New York." She dimpled a little when she smiled.

"That's me," I said.

Our inspector promised the courier he'd see to it that Matheny got the message. So, what was the message? The old man said he wouldn't know until he heard from somebody named Ruby in TGA's maintenance department, and a lot of other ramblings that didn't make much sense. Our man did get Matheny's telephone number out of José before they took him away."

I nodded. "Boulevard 3-2459."

"Show-off," Sheila said. "On an off chance, our man gave orders for a specially thorough check of the TGA plane José had come in on, and they found the diamonds in José's seat. So then we knew we were on the track of something pretty big, maybe the biggest. And we thought we might use the diamonds to lead us to the top people in the smuggling ring. We confiscated the real diamonds, of course, as contraband, and substituted counterfeits in seat 42."

"Who was this Ruby in TGA maintenance?"

"Ruby Cassavetta, her name is. We found her within an hour after finding the diamonds. We scared her with a smuggling charge and she told us about the system. Somebody, obviously José, cabled her a

flight number from Europe every so often. Being in maintenance, she kept track of that particular plane when it landed at Kennedy until it was serviced and ready to return to domestic flights. As soon as she found out what its first domestic flight would be, she let José know, by telephone. She swears that's all she had to do with it. Didn't even know who José was. Just called a certain telephone number and gave the flight information to the man who answered. Never saw anybody connected with the scheme in the flesh."

"How'd they recruit her, then?"

"By telephone," Sheila said. "Somebody, probably José, propositioned her by telephone, she says, and mailed her money to her."

"When did you come into it?"

"We wanted somebody to keep an eye on seat 42, and for me to fake the stewardess thing seemed the best way to do that. The airline cooperated, of course, and some local law was tipped off to meet the plane and render any assistance I might need."

"You make a pretty fair stewardess," I said. "At least, you smell nice."

"And you, Mr. Matheny, led us right to Mitchell and those two creeps of his. How come? It's your turn now. What were *you* after Mitchell for?"

"We weren't after him for anything. He's just a bonus. We were after Matheny for bank robbery. He and a couple of buddies robbed a bank here in Pittsburgh last month, and a guard got killed in the process, or fatally shot, at least. That was probably our friend Brad, I think. He and Leo fill the bill for Matheny's companions in the knock-over, from the guard's description. He didn't die until after he'd described the robbers to us. Matheny was easy, once we knew the guy who robbed the bank was a man well over six feet tall who threw his left foot. We've had Matheny on our books for fifteen years, more or less. Well, we found Matheny a few days ago, living in a dump in Forest Hills with nothing to do, and before we pulled him in, I thought we ought to take a shot at recovering the ninety thousand he stole from the bank—or some of it—if possible. The dough had to be somewhere, and we thought Matheny would lead us to it."

Then I told her about my side of the thing, about taking the call intended for Matheny. "I suppose that was one of your men, standing in for José?"

"Yes. We hoped he did it near enough like José's calls to make Matheny follow through."

"I couldn't say about that. But

the message was plenty tough enough for *me* to figure out. I almost missed it." I couldn't keep my eyes off her face. "Have you got the New York end cleaned up?"

"Almost, with José dead and Ruby allowed just enough rope to operate normally if anybody should happen to get in touch with her over this diamond smuggling."

"They got in touch with her today," I said. "And she made a liar out of me." I told her about it.

"How about Matheny?" she asked.

"In the slammer," I said. "I gave the word to pull him in after I drew a blank in his room last night. One of our boys who just happened to be passing out religious leaflets nearby made the arrest." I paused. "Where the hell did you get hold of those counterfeit diamonds?" I still thought they were real.

"We confiscated them from a tourist trying to sneak them through customs last year," she said. "Now I have a question."

"Shoot."

"Don't use that word. In this crazy mix-up, have you found any leads to your bank money?"

"I think so," I said. "Mitch has been running a kind of conglomerate here. His word. Smuggling, bank robbery, car theft, maybe gambling. I think Matheny

knocked over the bank for Mitch. Mitch planned the job and hid the boys out here in this house till the heat died. And probably kept the money for them, too. It wouldn't surprise me if we find a lot of loot in the elevator." I waved toward the livingroom.

"The elevator?"

"Sure. It has a false back panel with concealed hinges down one side. I noticed it when they brought me up here. And the cage is too shallow for the size of the shaft. I think Mitch has a big hidey-hole in the back of the elevator. Nifty idea, too. Kind of a free-floating safe, always going up and down from one floor to another. Nobody would ever think of looking for a safe in an elevator."

"Nobody but you," Sheila said tartly.

"Don't be jealous," I said, grinning. "You were too busy to notice elevators."

She turned thoughtful. "They must have smuggled more than diamonds with such an elaborate setup. If there's a safe in the elevator, I bet it'll have more than stolen money and smuggled diamonds in it."

"Sure," I said. "I hinted at that to Mitch. And I thought he reacted."

"If so," Sheila said, "we've *really* done a day's work, haven't we?"

I nodded. I took out a peptic tablet, chewed it and swallowed it.

"What's that?" Sheila asked.

"Never mind. I guess Mitch and his 'people' are in the soup so many ways, they'll never get out."

"It looks that way, doesn't it? My Customs Bureau wants him for smuggling. The FBI wants him for bank robbery. And Narcotics will probably want him even worse than we do."

"To say nothing of the Pittsburgh police. They'll want him for everything from conspiracy to accessory to murder."

"So who's going to get first crack at him?"

I gave it some thought. Then I said, "Look, Sheila, it seems to me we've got a king-size conflict of interest on our hands, among a lot of important government agencies. I,

for one, don't want any bad feeling developing between us over a lousy smuggler like Mitch. So I've got a suggestion."

She gave me the smile. "What?"

"I think the only thing to do is for you and me to sit down to dinner together tonight, someplace quiet, and talk the whole thing out. What do you say?"

"Your expense account or mine?"

"I'll toss you for it. Is it a deal?"

"I'd love to, Al," she said, and reached out and touched the back of my hand.

That was good enough for me. As we went to have a look at Mitch's elevator, I made up my mind to one thing. When I took Sheila to dinner, I was sure as hell going to have some gin in my tonic water, heartburn or no heartburn.



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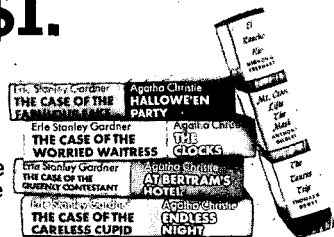
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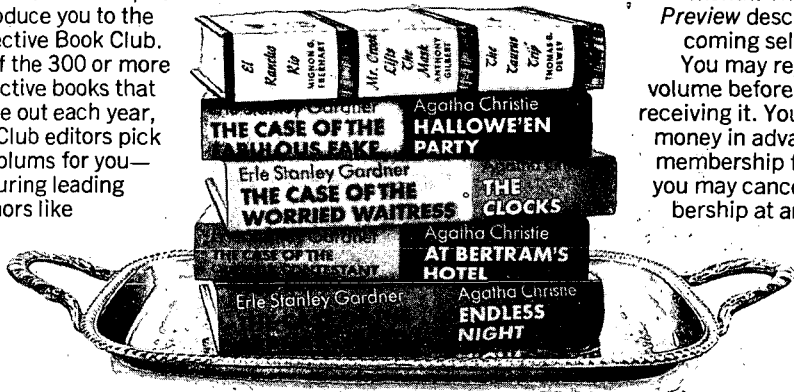
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