

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

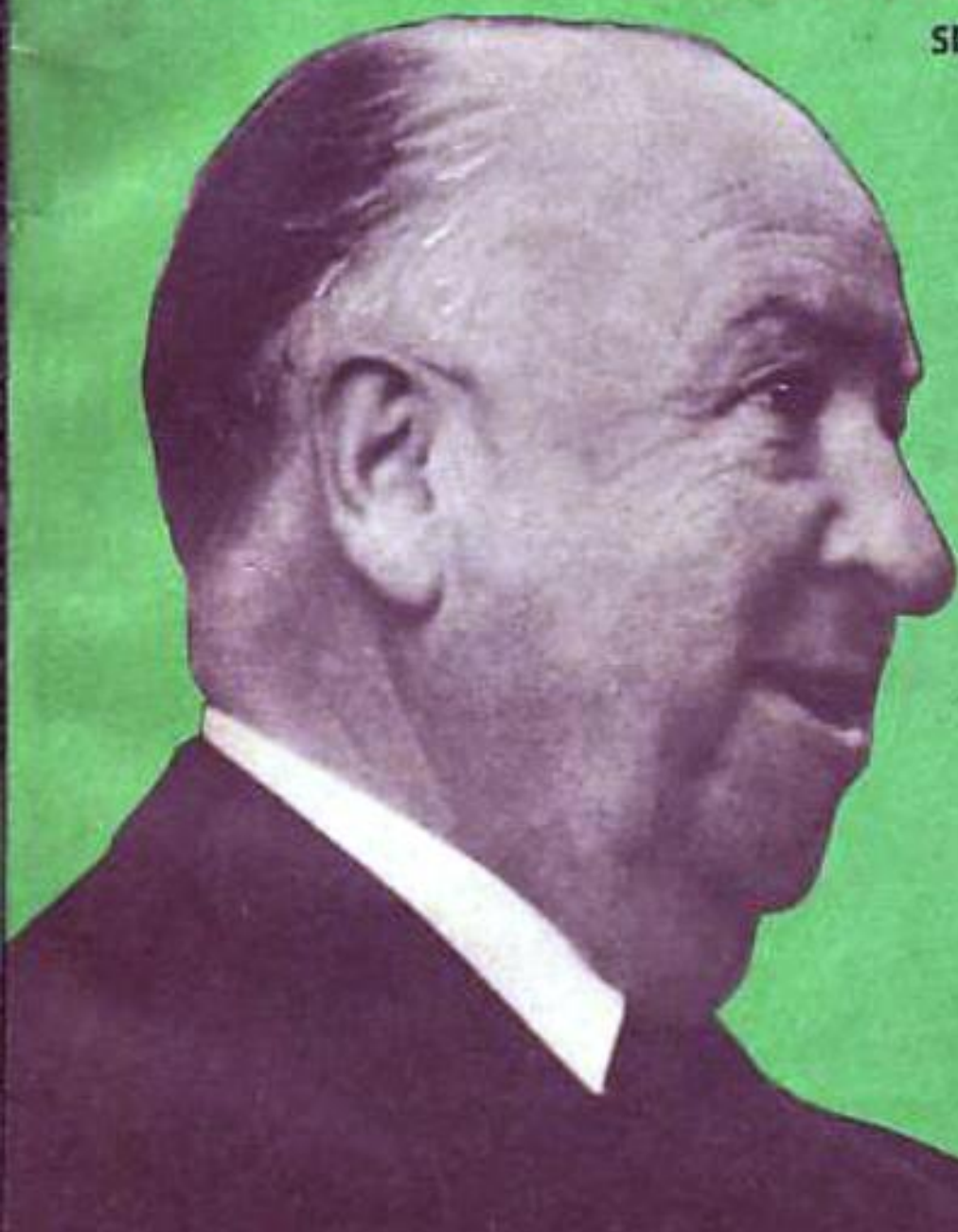
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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



September 1971

Dear Reader:

Since you delight in machinations macabre, the new tales within should fill you with joy. The fun begins with Allen Lang's gentleman computer-programmer and the mobsters in *The Case of the KO'd Computer* and extends through Jaime Sandaval's hanging—and then some—*Judge and Jury*, this month's chilling novelette.

Many more schemes, earthly and otherwise, are there for the reading in *Unknown Woman* by Charlotte Edwards, *Fair Grounds for Murder* by Donald Olson, *Upgraded* by Joanne Saliby, *Theft Is My Profession* by John Lutz, *Day of the Dog* by C. B. Gilford, and *T'ang of the Suffering Dragon* by James Holding.

I further recommend the extraordinary malice imparted by Bill Pronzini, Jack Ritchie, Miel Tanburn, Pauline C. Smith, Fred Levon, Ron Goulart and Arthur Moore. These authors know of myriad weaknesses of man—including yours, for good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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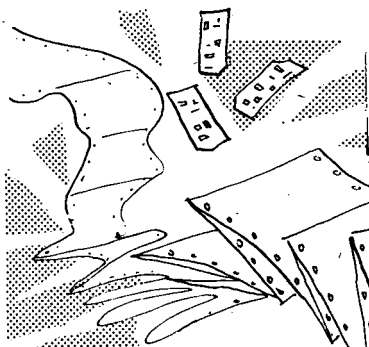
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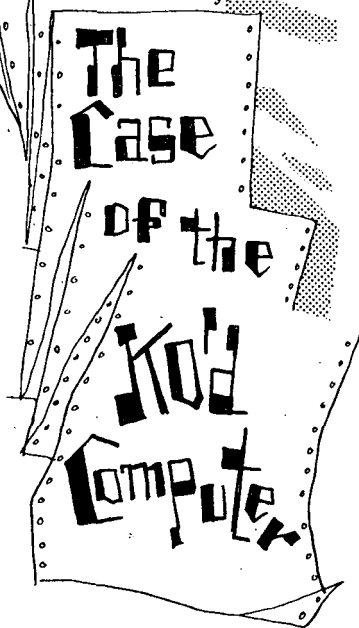
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 16 No. 9. Sept. 1971. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions \$9.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Copyright H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 1971. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Title registered U.S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of address should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

If the porifax is too high on your verbelschnitzer, perhaps you'll forgive a pause for keypunching new cards.



heels. There were two men in the front seat. Wise guys? Agents of the international antipedestrian conspiracy? Thieves? Hefflin leaped over the curb and onto wet grass, the ground sinking half an inch un-

HEFFLIN had jogged along for a mile and a half when he discovered that he was being followed by a truck with flowers painted on it. As the truck turned down the aisle of the museum parking lot to head toward him, he could read the name framed in painted roses on its side panel: Auntie Phlox's Indoor Gardens, Inc. He stepped up his pace, eager to be off the asphalt and into the trees. Puffing, he regretted every ounce of extra weight under the bellyband of his sweat pants. He glanced over his shoulder. The florist's truck was thirty yards back, a clear stretch of pavement between its bumper and his



der the rippled soles of his jogging shoes.

Even on Sunday morning, there should be a cop car out there on Lake Shore Drive. None. No busloads of Brownies come to inspect the pieces of the moon inside the museum, to visit the coal mine, to see the teen-aged girl sliced up and displayed in glass like a confectionery ham; no skinny sailors from Great Lakes, patrolling the big staircase for whole girls from Jones High and Roosevelt U. This early, Hefflin was quite alone with the flowered truck.

Ahead of him, caged like iron hippopotami, were the locomotives Old 999 and The Pioneer Zephyr; to their side the Nazi U-505 pointed its twin antiaircraft cannon toward the Jackson Park radar station. Behind him the panel truck swept around the curve of the access drive, closing in on him like a puppy on a squirrel. *No tree for me*, Hefflin thought. Then he saw the fireplug mushrooming up beside the hurricane fence that protected the German submarine.

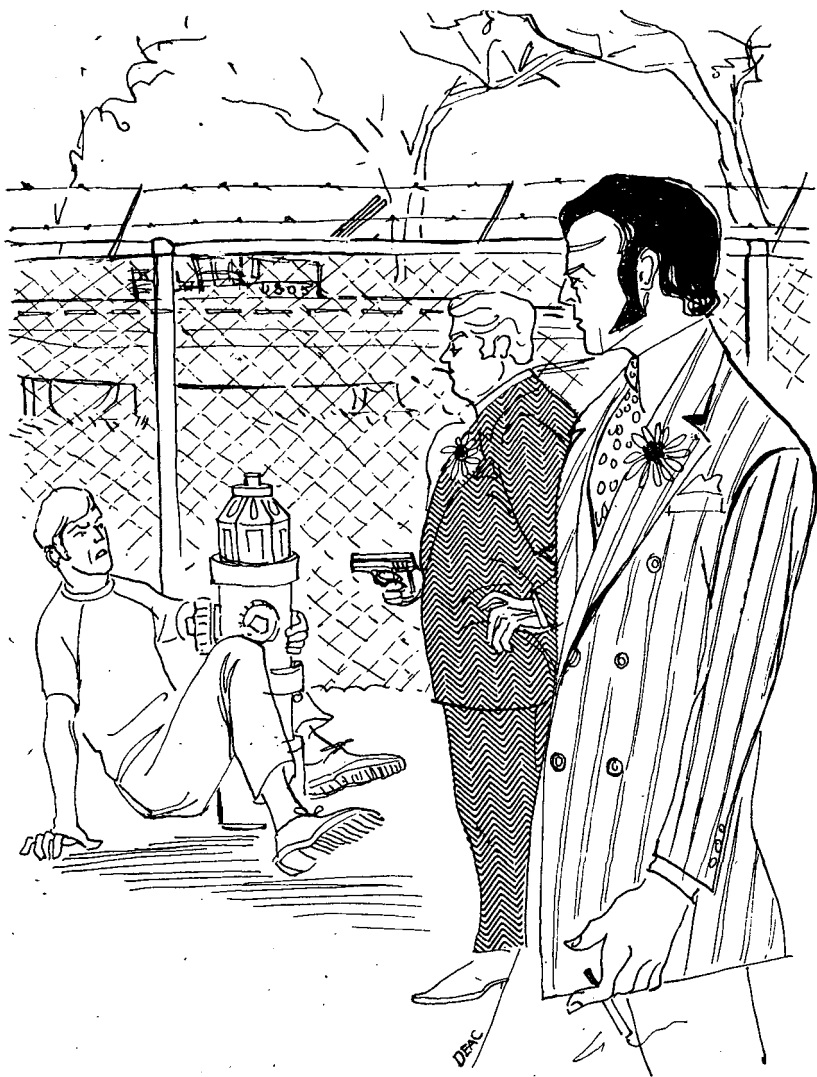
Hefflin jumped up, monkey-gripping the hexagonal head of the yellow fireplug between his running shoes, and wrapped his hands

around the top strand of barbed wire so that the little spikes stuck out between his fingers. He jabbed his right toe into the diamond-link network and threw up his left leg, trusting that the heavy cotton sweat pants would pad his skin from the barbs. The corrugated soles of his running shoes skidded off the round wire. One of the little metal hooks caught itself in his left palm and sliced a red trail down the base of his thumb. Hefflin sat down hard on the pavement, the fireplug between his knees.

The chubby driver of the florist's truck stood beside him. A toothpick dangled from the right side of his mouth, and a .25 caliber automatic from his gray-gloved right hand. In the lapel of his gray suit was a daisy, dyed blue to match the silk handkerchief that peeped from his breast pocket. His hair was tangerine, his face pink, and his smile dazzling. "Sport," he said, "for a guy who runs for his health's sake, you've been behaving pretty carelessly."

"Hide the heater, Eskay," the other man said. This one was older, with black sideburns down to his jaw angle. His suit had been cut from green pool-table felt, a chipper

by Allen Lang



yellow daisy in its lapel trying to compensate for its owner's tired-looking eyes. "Good morning, Mr. Hefflin," he said.

Using the fireplug for support, Hefflin propped himself up with one hand while feeling for damage with the other. "No bone frag-

ments," he murmured. He stood. "Who are you? How do you know who I am?"

"My name is Grimm," the dark-haired man said. "My partner is Eskay."

"For 'Speed Kills,'" Eskay explained. "In our social circle, a little joke. About the way we know you, it was all in the papers. The *Daily News* had that whole page how you balance the blood-bank books with your computer and do all sorts of scientific work for the hospital. So we looked you up in the phone book, sport. We talked with that gabby little lady down on the first floor of your apartment building, and we watched you bounce along through the park for the last quarter hour. Now we're ready to talk business, sport."

"If you stopped me to rob me, you cased me wrong," Hefflin said. "For one thing, sweat pants have no pockets."

"We are not in the petty-thief line of work," Eskay said. He made a little tent of his jacket pocket, his automatic serving as the tent pole. With his free hand, he unlocked the rear doors of the flower truck and opened them. "We are after bigger deer than jogging computer-programmers, sport. You may think of yourself as a mere pawn in a game that uses counties like checkerboard squares, and lays bets with million-

dollar chips. So get aboard, sport."

"Eskay, you are perhaps a little loose in the mouth department," Grimm suggested. "Get in, Heff."

Hefflin shrugged and swung himself into the back of the truck. Eskay slammed the doors and locked them.

Eskay slid behind the wheel. "In case you should feel the need to do a little more running, sport, let me point out that I am the only person in this truck who has a gun."

"I'll bet you've used it plenty, pushing dope," Hefflin said.

"An astute guess," Eskay said. "True, we're involved in free-market pharmaceuticals. We'll head for the hospital now."

"Drive a little more carefully this time," Grimm said, taking a cigar from an aluminum tube. Hefflin noticed that he, too, was wearing gloves. "You gave all our roses to the cop that stopped us on the way over; next time you'll have to take the ticket."

Hefflin squatted on the floor, surrounded by a confetti of gold and pink petals, gravel, fragments of redwood bark and styrofoam dandruff. Behind Eskay's seat, on a square of floor that had been brushed clear, he saw what might have been mistaken for a six-layer German-chocolate cake in a round plastic box with a handle. A more scientific examination would have

revealed the device as six eighteen-inch rust-brown plates stacked together on a white plastic hub, boxed for safety. "What's the diskpack for?" Hefflin asked.

"We borrowed it from The Man from River Forest," Grimm said. He slung his left arm across the back of his seat and turned to face Hefflin, his cigar curling up question marks of smoke. "We want to know what the *capo* has on that disk. You and your hospital's computer are going to find that out for us, Mr. Hefflin."

"My fee for free-lance programming is thirty dollars an hour," Hefflin said. "For hoods in the dope business I'll set a special rate: let's say, fifty bucks for sixty minutes."

Eskay grinned big teeth at Hefflin in the rear-view mirror. "Sport, if you do us a good job, we'll let you stay alive. How's that price grab you?"

"Beats the option," Hefflin admitted. "But the security guard won't let you into the hospital."

"I know better, sport," Eskay said. "We watched you last week. We know you work all kinds of hours; you got a rep as some kind of nut, like for this jogging bit. So when we come past the guard, he'll say good morning, Mr. Hefflin, and you will tell him that Mr. Grimm and I are mechanics from IBM come to service your giant jukebox.

Then we'll all three run up to the second floor and play out what's on that record on the floor beside you." He glanced at Hefflin in the rear-view mirror.

"Keep your eyes on the street, Eskay," Grimm snapped.

"Trust me, partner," Eskay said. "I'm wheeling us like I was delivery man for a nitroglycerine works." He stopped to let a cluster of church-hatted ladies across 47th Street, gravely saluted two cops in a squad car at 42nd, and skillfully schussed the truck through a line of potholes on Lake Park, never hitting a one of them. "The thing is, sport," he said, "if anything untoward should occur, we can guarantee you a rich floral tribute. We can get wreaths the same place we borrowed the truck and the diskpack." He glanced into the mirror. "This jogging you do, is it good for fat?"

"I weigh forty pounds less than I did on New Year's Day," Hefflin said, "and my blood pressure is down to normal, or was, till I met you two clowns and got hypertensive all over again." Eskay was lighting a cigarette with exquisite care, eyes on the road, both hands on the wheel while Grimm brought up the match for him. "First thing before I started jogging, I stopped smoking," Hefflin said.

Eskay rolled down the window and spat the freshly-lighted ciga-

rette onto the street. "I should shape up some," he admitted.

"You should shut up some," his partner said. The flower truck was headed into the hospital parking lot now, rolling into a slot between a Chicago Fire Department ambulance and an equally grand beige sedan with a caduceus screwed into its back license plate. "Remember you're a married man, Hefflin," Grimm went on. "We don't carry accident insurance on you, either."

"Yeah, sport," Eskay said. "What's on that wheel back there is my future: flights to Rome and friends in high places; Scotch in my rumpus room and bunnies in my bedroom. So don't try to cross us. Please don't. This is my big play."

"Not a wet eye in the house," Hefflin remarked. He picked up the diskpack by the handle in its cover, climbed out as Eskay unlocked the doors, and led the way up to the Emergency Room entrance.

Wearing full Chicago-cop hardware and police blues, the security officer sat just inside the door. "Hi, Heff," he said, and held out a clipboard marked after hours. "These gents with you?"

"Yeah, Ralph," Hefflin said. He scribbled his name and the time on the guard's pad, with Grimm reading over his shoulder. "They're with IBM."

"Machine broke down?" Ralph

wanted to know. "Is it serious?"

"We have to turn down the porifax on the verbelschnitzer, is all," Eskay explained. "Then we give her a lube job and a fresh set of points, and she'll perk along as good as new again."

"Just get the computer in shape by Wednesday," the guard said. "That's payday, and Heff prints our pay checks on his machine."

Grimm took the clipboard, without removing his gloves, and signed, "Henry Jones, IBM." He handed the board to Eskay. "Sign the paper, Jim Phillips," he said.

"I got my own alias," Eskay snapped, and scribbled something.

The guard didn't notice anything wrong. "You hear what IBM really stands for?" he demanded. "It's for 'It's Better Manually.' All this electrical machinery Hefflin has upstairs—heck, we used to do better with a crank-handle adding machine and learning multiplication tables by heart back in grade school; and all this new math, what I got to say about that is the same as sex education, which is—"

"See you later, Ralph," Hefflin said.

Eskay sniffed as they walked down the corridor toward the elevator. "Hospitals stink," he said. "I don't like the way hospitals smell one bit."

"It's just the smell of floor wax

and soap and fresh paint," Hefflin protested.

"That's what jails smell like," Eskay explained. "Soap and wax and paint."

If he had any luck, Hefflin was thinking, there'd be another programmer on hand upstairs, taking advantage of the machine's Sunday-morning holiday to debug a sour program or to assemble a new one. Eskay stepped aside at the elevator door to let two junior student nurses step aboard, crisp and sweet in their starched uniforms. The red-head kept the gun in his pocket on a line with Hefflin's belly, though, till they got to the second floor and stepped out.

Accounting, Credit Office, Pharmacy, Data Processing—all the windows on this office wing were dark. Down at the end, a woman came out of the chapel with a handkerchief pressed to her eyes. No one else was on the wing. The sign on the computer-room door warned: Restricted Area—Authorized Personnel Only.

"This authorizes me," Eskay said, playfully nudging the nose of his little automatic against Hefflin's back ribs.

Hefflin swung on his heels, slamming the diskpack into Eskay's belly. The gunman folded, clutching his arms reflexively around the pack. His .25 clattered to the floor,

where Grimm dived for it and scooped it up.

"Keep your hardware out of my kidneys," Hefflin growled at Eskay. "Next time I'll fit that diskpack between your uppers and your lowers."

Eskay rubbed his middle. "I've seen some ticklish guys before," he said. He set the disk down on the desk inside the door. "You could have been shot."

"Worse yet, Mr. Hefflin, you might have damaged our borrowed property," Grimm said. He handed the little gun back to his colleague. "Next time, hold on tighter," he advised him.

Hefflin zipped his jacket halfway down, then decided to leave it on. "What's my job?" he asked.

"We want you to play out what's on this wheel," Grimm said, nodding toward the diskpack. "We think it may be the top money-record of the year."

Hefflin examined the disk through the clear plastic cover. The white trimshield was blank, unlabeled. "What sort of file is it?" he asked.

"It's the accounts receivable for a major Midwest organization," Grimm said. "You'd know the name if we named it. Everything's there: customers, with their names and addresses, even zip codes; how much they bought last year month-by-

month; discount percentages, and an inventory of our competitor's stock, with prices. If we can get that information to set up our own operation, we can squeeze them out of the market before they know we're in it."

"You kidnapped this diskpack?" Hefflin asked.

"Just for long enough to have you peel off what's on it for us," Eskay said. "Then we'll sneak it home again, and nobody hip but us. What The Man from River Forest doesn't know won't hurt us."

Hefflin punched POWER ON, set the mode-switch on the central processing unit to RUN, and the console lighted up. Fans started humming air through the main frame. The printer buzzed with eagerness to get its magnetic print hammers going. "It will take me a while to work out a format for you, even after I've gotten a disk dump," Hefflin said. "I'd better call my wife. She might worry, call the guard, have him check on me."

"No sweat, sport," Eskay said. "I called before we picked you up, said we had problems at the hospital. She knows where you are."

"Work fast and we'll have you home for a late breakfast," Grimm promised, shrugging off his suit jacket and draping it across a keypunch machine.

Hefflin unscrewed the bottom

shield of the purloined pack and spun the wheel into place on its shaft. Lifting out the protective cover, he closed the drive and switched it on.

"Remember, sport, if you erase that pack, we'll erase you," Eskay said.

"That's right, Mr. Hefflin," Grimm said. "Perhaps you'd like to describe to us what you're doing, as you do it?"

"The disk spins at fifteen hundred revolutions a minute," Hefflin said, "like a phonograph record." A six-fingered electronic hand pushed out between the plates of the spinning disk. "That read-arm picks up or writes information coded as magnetic patterns on the twelve surfaces of the disk, just as a tape recorder reads magnetic spots and translates them to speech or music. One of these packs holds as much information as a good-sized filing cabinet. I'm going to use a utility program to print out what's on this one."

"Take care, Mr. Hefflin," Grimm said.

"If you don't like the way I run things, take your job to another shop," Hefflin said. He grinned. "I've got people I'd love to recommend to you."

"No offense," Eskay pointed out. "Johnny Grimm wasn't belittling your skill." He rummaged through

the decks of object programs rubber-banded together in a sort of shoe box. "Lots of fascinating stuff here," he said. "Like, Core Dump. Reproduce 80/80. Anchors Aweigh. And what's this one?" He held up a half-inch deck of punched cards. "It's marked, All Problems Solved."

"It's what it says," Hefflin said. "It's the Universal Answer of the Electronic Brain. But you want to get on to business. . . ."

"Business can wait," Eskay said. "I got to know how this pop-up toaster of yours can push out the answer to any question I ask."

Hefflin glanced at Grimm. "So show the boy your tricks," Grimm said. "What's five minutes to a pair of potential millionaires?"

"So be it," Hefflin said. He engaged the clutch of the printer, closed the hood to keep down noise, then fit the little program deck into the hopper of the card reader and pressed LOAD. The cards were licked into the machine, lights danced on the face of the central processing unit, and Eskay stood staring through the plastic shield of the printer with his hands fisted in his pockets. Hefflin pressed START to feed in the last card of the program.

The printer exploded into action, startling Eskay into a two-foot, backward jump.

WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM? the machine asked. INDICATE BY SETTING SENSE-SWITCHES SINGLY OR IN COMBINATION AND PRESSING START.

MONEY PROBLEMS

- SENSE-SWITCH "B"

HEALTH PROBLEMS

- SENSE-SWITCH "C"

DEEP PHILOSOPHICAL
QUIDDITIES

- SENSE-SWITCH "D"

FAMILY PROBLEMS

- SENSE-SWITCH "E"

CAREER INQUIRIES

- SENSE-SWITCH "F"

SEX HANGUPS

- SENSE-SWITCH "G"

"These must be the sense-switches," Eskay said, indicating an array of eight toggle switches lined up across the panel of the main-frame console. Hefflin nodded. Without hesitation, Eskay took his fists from his pockets, walked over to the console, flicked sense-switch "G" to ON, and mashed his thumb down on START.

The printer burped out a single line of type: JACK, IF YOU NEED A COMPUTER'S ADVICE ON YOUR LOVE LIFE, YOU'VE GOT NO PROBLEM. YOU'RE OVER THE HILL. NEXT PROBLEM?

"I should pull the plug on this dumb machine," Eskay said.

Grimm was smiling in the manner of a man who just missed being

the one to sit down on the whoopee cushion.

Hefflin selected the PRINT DISK program, added a punched control card, and fed it into the reader. "Some people complain that they can't get the answer from a computer, Eskay," he said. "They believe that the machine is magic; they go by the GIGO principle, which they interpret as 'Garbage In, Gospel Out.' What GIGO really stands for is, 'Garbage In, Garbage Out.' You don't get out better stuff than you put in."

"I don't care for smart remarks from this heap of transistors," Eskay said, "and I don't want to listen to you chatting on like little orphan whoosis."

The printer complained that Hefflin had lied to it about the reference numbers on the spinning disk. Hefflin replaced his control card and tried again. The printer approved. The print chain started slamming black lines across the green-striped paper: M-020000 DATA-01005KEYAMERICAN BEAUTY 0400 0000000000000000 and so on, sheet after sheet of paper skipping through the printer and accordion-folding neatly in the rack behind it.

Hefflin watched the cryptic stuff thunder out. "If I'm going to be able to edit this hash into readable form," he shouted, "you'd better

give me some idea of what it means."

Grimm was reading across his left shoulder; Eskay peered over his right. "They named their stuff after flowers," Eskay said. "That's cute. They got the greenhouse as a front, so why not go along with the gag?"

"SWEETPEA must be STP. ZAP VIOLETS has to be Zapotecan Seedless Purple; selling for two hundred bucks a key," Grimm said.

"How much is a key?" Hefflin asked.

"A key is a kilo, like a kind of European pound," Eskay explained. "You take two-and-a-quarter pounds of clean leaves, American Beauty, Evansville Green or, if you're lucky, Acapulco Gold, wet 'em down good with cold or sugared tea, and squeeze 'em into a brick to dry."

Grimm was checking out the prices. "GREEN ACACIA 015000HUND," he quoted. "That's an arm and a leg for a hundred green Acid. Look, Eskay, here come the customers. Look who's there. Remember that guy? And look there, way down to Florida, outside The Man's territory, he's sticking his neck out for the Council to chop. Hey, this is great stuff. We've got ourselves a money-machine, Eskay!"

Names and addresses lined up on the paper, with zip codes and fields

filled with less intelligible numbers. Hefflin punched STOP. "Probably monthly totals, outstanding accounts, and the like," he murmured. "Gives me something to start with. Eskay, why don't you run down to the canteen in the basement and get us a set of rolls and some coffee? Mine's black."

"You don't need anything to eat, sport," Eskay said, reaching out as though to pat him on the belly, then thinking better of it and withdrawing his hand. "Me neither," he admitted, patting his own belt line. "Let's just get to work, OK? We want to leave here by noon with two copies of The Man from River Forest's private files."

"Must be five hundred customers on that disk," Grimm mused. "We know they spend twenty million dollars wholesale for their vitamins and vegetables. Squeeze those names and numbers out of that plastic Yo-Yo by noon, Heff, and we'll drive you home. But we do want our listings by noon."

Hefflin glanced up at the clock. It was ten-oh-five. He broke the paper on the printer along a perforation, picked up the stack from the back, and went to his desk to work. Nothing fancy, he decided; nothing that programmers employ to persuade bookkeepers grudgingly to accept computer printouts of their dismal sums. He mea-

sured fields of the disk-printout with his print gauge, marked X's and N's across a chart, then was ready to begin coding the program proper.

On one line of his coding pad, writing in Autocoder, Hefflin lettered: MLC @ HELP—I AM BEING HELD PRISONER IN AN IBM MACHINE ROOM—CALL POLICE @ 250. Then he crossed it out. This was nonsense; no one would read his printout but these syndicate dropouts.

Grimm took another aluminum cylinder from his shirt pocket, unscrewed one end, and shook out a cigar wrapped in redwood veneer. "I'm sure that your sign over there . . ." he pointed the cigar at the No Smoking notice posted up over the rack of tapes behind the disk-drives "doesn't apply to us."

"Nope," Hefflin said. "I only enforce that rule on folks I like. Light up, Johnny Grimm."

Eskay grinned. "Sport, you are most likely the least polite public servant I've had business with since I was sassed by a traffic cop on North Rush Street last April, a fellow currently walking a beat on Sixty-Third Street." He took a tin box from inside his jacket and removed with surgical care a rascally-looking cigarette, brown and a bit lumpy, as though it would need only a bit of sprinkling to sprout.

"Now, if you want to work up to the top of your form, sport, this is the kindling to burn." He coaxed over the match Grimm was bathing the tip of his cigar in, puffed gently, then leaned back on his heels to yawn in the smoke. After a moment he held the cigarette toward Hefflin. "Have a sip, sport."

"No, thanks," Hefflin said, doggedly lettering words and numbers into the little squares on the sheet before him. "I wouldn't trust a program I wrote under grass. It might print out paisley."

Eskay seated himself on the corner of the desk and sighed aromatically. "You civilians are still in the dark ages about wonder-weed," he said. "Tell me, sport, you ever hear of a bag of Mary Jane with 'Caution: May Be Hazardous to Your Health' stamped on the side?"

"Nope," Hefflin said. "But I knew a gentle grass-head who drew five years when the fuzz glommed his stash on a squeal from the schoolteacher down the hall, who didn't like the smell of the incense my friend burned to hide the smell of his smokes. And how about this other garbage you guys are flushing into our city? Uppers and downers, purple acid, grey mescaline—rotten stuff."

"Sport, you're mouthing off like some kind of Commie stooge," Eskay said. "You don't believe in the

law of supply and demand? In capitalism? Look, if some folks want French vanilla ice cream, it gets put in stores. If other folks want to trip out on speckled octopus tabs, that's their sacred right as money-spending American citizens. You want to know something else?" Eskay lazily waved one arm around his head, indicating their surroundings. "Sport, you've got this whole hospital building full of doctors and nurses and laboratories and sick people, and there are thousands of hospitals just like this one all over the country, and they've got medical schools and research foundations and about a million monkeys in cages to experiment on, and you know what? They still don't know why an aspirin works, and they can't cure a cold, but I can. I can prevent the common cold. Sport, I can fix anybody so he won't ever have a cold again."

"With that little automatic of yours?" Hefflin asked, nodding toward the bulge in Eskay's jacket.

"No, my friend, with a miracle drug called smack, which is to say, scag. Horse."

"Heroin," Grimm supplied.

"Right," Eskay said. "It is a medical fact of life that heroin addicts don't catch colds. Now I ask you, why don't doctors tell people that? I can tell you why they keep it secret: they don't want to lose their

incomes, that's why. Now if the Legislature and this Constitutional Convention would just make heroin legal. . . ."

Grimm took his cigar from his mouth and examined the tip as though the ash were a blossom he was growing especially for the flower show. "More talk and less work I haven't seen since I was a high-school lad gone on a bus trip to Washington to see Congress in action," he said. "I will remind you, Eskay, that in two or three hours our florist's truck will turn into an embarrassment, and we'll have The Man from River Forest breathing down our necks. While you are burning marihuana, my friend, time passes."

"Don't push at me." Eskay glared at his partner. "I'll turn on on Judgment Day if I want to, just to make sure I'm already high when the big sift-out starts. Besides, who was it put you wise to where they keep their computer? Who jumped the wires on the truck? Picked the lock on the back door of The Man's greenhouse? Found out where to grab Hefflin, here? Not Johnny Grimm. Me. Eskay, that's who."

Hefflin watched the smoke billow toward the ceiling as Grimm unplugged his cigar to reply. He glanced up to the three little aluminum snouts that poked through the ceiling. Smoke-sniffers, they were,

hooked up to that bright red box behind the main frame, connected to red lights, a buzzer in the hospital Security Office, and a repeater that would bring over a truck from the Chicago Fire Department engine house three blocks away. "You wouldn't happen to have another cigar, Johnny Grimm, would you?" he inquired.

"No, sport," Eskay said. "Don't break training. You don't want to be kicked off the track team, do you? Blow a possible gold medal at the next Olympic Games?"

"Smoke," Grimm said. He looked up to see the smoke-smellers in the ceiling. "We're idiots." He plucked the cigar from his mouth and ground it out on the floor. "Kill the marihoon, Eskay," he said. He cupped his hand and slammed it into the back of Hefflin's head. "Trying to set off the fire alarm, weren't you? Jerk! We play ball with you, and you try to hammer our brains out with the bat."

Hefflin shook his head. "I may sue you for whiplash," he said.

"How soon will you have our job done?" Grimm demanded.

"I have to keypunch my source program, assemble it, and then print out your dope sheet, if my head doesn't fall off first."

"We're low on time," Eskay said. "We've got to have that disk back in The Man's computer room by

one o'clock at the latest, when Frosty comes on duty there. So get with it, sport. Computers are supposed to be the fast way to get things done, but I could have done this job quicker with a three-inch pencil and a yard of brown wrapping paper."

"Sure, if you could read magnetic fluxes in iron oxide, then print out the answers at six hundred lines a minute," Hefflin agreed. He sat down at the keypunch machine, shoved Grimm's jacket aside, and started punching his program into the 80-column cards. His program was austere, a mere thirty instructions to pick data off the stolen disk and print it out in readable format. After checking through the three dozen cards he'd punched, Hefflin took a diskpack from the rack of forty behind his desk and placed it on the right-hand diskdrive.

"What's that for?" Eskay asked.

"This is the Autocoder assembler," Hefflin said. "It's a translator that rewrites the code I punched into absolute language, the code the machine uses. The translation will be punched into new cards, and that's the program we'll run. When the computer reads this object deck, it will interpret them one level farther down, from binary-coded decimal to binary, all zeroes and ones, which is how a computer thinks. It'll switch data around in

this baby-talk, then eventually spit the answers out on the printer; if, that is, I remembered to set a word mark or two."

"Like I said, the porifax is too high on the verbelschnitzer," Eskay said.

The card punch growled. Hefflin ran through the last punch card, then held up the thin sheaf of cards the machine had produced. "OK, hoods. Here's what you hired me for."

"So print us a list," Grimm said. He looked at the clock: eleven-fifteen. "Print us a list quick."

Hefflin stopped the Autocoder pack, removed it from the drive, and replaced it with the rackets pack. He started it spinning.

Eskay touched him on the shoulder, very gently. "Print up two copies, sport," he said.

"Two copies?" Grimm demanded. "Don't you trust me, Eskay?"

"Just as you trust me, Johnny Grimm," Eskay replied.

"Print *two* copies," Grimm ordered.

Hefflin fit two-part wide paper into the printer, lined it up, then fed in his program. The printer seized the paper and threw it past the print chain. The columns of data grew: INVENTORY PRICE UNIT, then CUSTOMER ADDRESS, CITY, STATE, ZIP, OUT-

STANDING BALANCE. "I had to guess at some categories," Hefflin yelled.

"Sport, you did good," Eskay shouted back. "Johnny Grimm, we're from today big men in the wholesale produce business. Give us our paper, Hefflin, and we'll drop you off home on our way out to The Man's greenhouse."

END OF JOB printed out, and the printer purred, ready for the next job. Hefflin tore off the fifty sheets of paper stacked behind the machine and took them to the deleaver. The printout was on a double form, two sheets of paper sandwiching a sheet of carbon paper. Fitting the end of the forms through a pair of rollers on the deleaving machine, Hefflin arranged the original and carbon copy to flow down on opposite sides, while the carbon paper was twirled up on a rapidly rotating fork. In a minute the carbon paper was a black spool on the spindle, and two neatly folded copies were ready for Eskay and Grimm.

"You've got what you came for," Hefflin said, pointing down to the printouts. "Now I'd like to get home. No need to drive me. I can call a cab."

"And a cop, eh, sport?" Eskay asked. He displayed the little .25 automatic. "I think we'll take you out in the suburbs, someplace

where there's more cows than phone booths, and let you walk back into town. By the time you get back, we'll be long gone."

Grimm frowned. "Eskay, have you ever seen the build-a-crook kits the police have? They take a cellophane sheet with a pair of eyebrows painted on it, fit it over another sheet that shows the nose the witness says he saw, stick on a pair of ears, and they've got your picture, just as though they'd caught you with a camera. Do you want Mr. Hefflin talking your portrait to a cop with that kit, partner, when all they've got to do afterwards is go to the file for the folder marked Johnny Grimm and to Indiana State Prison for the file on a fellow nicknamed Eskay?"

"You got a place to hide him?" Eskay asked.

"You're the guy who knows all about planting methods," Grimm said. "How about you swiping a car, shoving him in the truck, and driving out to the airport to park it?"

"No," Eskay said. "That expressway traffic to O'Hare is a killer."

"Hey," Hefflin said, "you jokers figure to pay me off with a bullet?"

"You prefer an ice pick?" Eskay asked him. "Sport, you just handed us a franchise in the biggest business in town. We can't let you blow

the whistle before we even get the door open."

"Too bad, Chubby," Grimm said.

"Chubby?" Hefflin stepped back from the deleaver to the shelf where backup magnetic tapes were filed. He grabbed up one of the tape cans—plastic, three and a half pounds, almost a foot in diameter—and sailed it into Grimm's chin. The man's mouth dropped open and he slid to his knees.

"I wanted to walk out of here quiet and polite," Eskay sighed. "Well, at least you'll die in familiar surroundings, sport, and maybe they'll pay your widow overtime for you being here all day Sunday." He rested his elbows on the edge of the printer to steady his gun and took aim, deliberate as a machinist about to drill a hole in a casting.

Hefflin backed along the shelves. "How about law and order?" he said. "You can't just murder me in cold blood."

Eskay's finger was gently closing on the trigger. "Done it dozens of times," he said, patiently following Hefflin with the little pistol. "The difficulty of killing people is vastly overrated. Easier than squirrels."

Hefflin turned and dashed for the door.

Pow! The noise spun him around; or perhaps it was the brick that had caught him squarely under the right back ribs. As he toppled, Hefflin

caught at the edge of the rolling table where jobs-to-be-run were stacked. A day's patient-billing, a box of perhaps a thousand tab cards, lay on the bottom shelf. He snatched the box up in both hands and tossed it, like a very short basketball player taking his penalty shot. Everybody's hospital bill struck Eskay beautifully; had his shirt collar been a basket, Hefflin would have won a point for his team.

Eskay waved the .25 down toward Hefflin, then shuddered. His shot slammed through the I-Star Register of the computer's console. Eskay sat down in his shower of IBM cards.

PROCESS, the upper left-hand light said. PUNCH said another. The card reader began to flick its aluminum hand to pat nonexistent cards down its throat. A thin feather of smoke eased out from the grillwork atop the central processing unit and ticked its way into the snout of the smoke detector in the ceiling. FIRE, the red box flashed. An angry buzzing filled the hall. The phone began to ring.

"Get up!" Eskay shouted at Grimm, himself rubbing his head and staggering. "We gotta get the hell outta this place." Grimm, his lower jaw curiously lumpy, stood warily, and turned bitter eyes at Hefflin. "Get the printout," Eskay

ordered him. "I'll carry the diskpack and turn off sport."

Hefflin had the door open. A bullet struck the steel elbow of the door-closer above his head and went whining around the room. Eskay tripped somehow, was on his face, scrambling to get up. "Help!" Hefflin yelled down the corridor, and headed for the stairs, feeling warm particles trickling through the hand he pressed to his right side. *Bits of his liver?* he wondered. *Bone meal?*

Here came Grimm, his precious paper printout pressed to his chest, and after him Eskay, kicking his way along the hall as though knocking aside obnoxious insects. He carried his diskpack in his left hand, his little pistol in his right. Pow! A bullet parted the air where Hefflin's head had been before he turned the corner to the stairs. Then he was down them, jogging faster than he had since high school.

Grimm was faster yet. "Watch ouuuuuuuut!" he yelled through his hurt mouth. Streaming the printout like newlyweds' festooned automobile, he came flying past Hefflin, his feet scrambling in mid-air, trying to find that step they'd somehow missed.

"BB's," Eskay roared. "The place is alive with BB's!"

A fireman appeared at the foot of the stairs, dragging a cobra of hose

from its nest in the wall. "Stand back, folks," he said, then stepped aside as Grimm landed, balled up like a sleeping puppy, at his feet.

A student nurse pushed a cart along one wall. "No need to worry," she was saying to the white-haired lady who lay under the blanket. "It's only a drill."

"Drill, hell!" the old lady snapped. "If my plants burn up, I'll see you pay for it with your cap."

"Get up, Grimm!" Eskay cried. He shoved the .25 into his pocket and wadded the two printouts into a bundle the size of a Sunday newspaper. He grabbed at his tie and pulled the knot free. Looping the green silk through the handle of the stolen diskpack, he took both ends in his teeth, then loosened his belt, stuffed the wad of paper under, and cinched it tight. There were tears in his eyes. He bent to grab Grimm's wrists and ankles, grunted him up and staggered down the hall with his partner in a fireman's carry.

Hefflin was busy. He had his jacket off, then the ten-pound weight-reducing belt. BB's spilled out of it and skittered across the hall. A larger chunk of metal clunked to the floor from the perforated belt. It was a .25 caliber, bent. Hefflin smiled. He glanced up to see Eskay, bowed under Grimm on his shoulders, dangling the disk from his teeth, papers bulging his

middle, stagger through the door marked Emergency Room like an outrageously overburdened camel. Ralph, the guard, was holding the door for him.

Hefflin got to the parking lot in time to see Auntie Phlox's flower truck drive off. A tag end of paper waved from the driver's window.

"Funny kind of IBM men," Ralph remarked. "Kind of surly, that one with the tie in his mouth."

A police detective joined them. "Sir, there were shots fired upstairs," he said. "Care to tell me what happened?"

"Let's get upstairs," Hefflin said. "I've got to tend to a wounded 1401."

Things were quieter now in the computer room. A disappointed fireman was readjusting the smoke alarm. All the lights were out on the computer, and the printer was silent. "That guy who walked out was the one who shot me," Hefflin explained to the man with the notebook. He eased up his sweat shirt to show him the bruises that the cushioned bullet had hammered into his side. "Then he shot my computer.

He's plain mean, I guess, that Es-kay."

"But what's it all about?" the detective demanded.

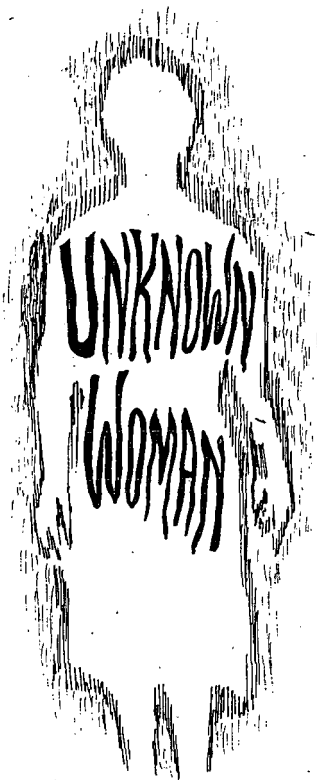
"Dope," Hefflin said. "Those two men had borrowed the records of The Man from River Forest, whoever he is; everything on his marihuana and dope sales, names of customers."

The detective named The Man from River Forest. "I'd trade my pension for a copy of that printout of yours," he said. "It's not your fault, Mr. Hefflin, but it's a setback for us that they got away with both copies."

"If they hadn't gotten away," Hefflin said, "that fellow—The Man from River Forest—would close up shop, warn his customers, hide his stock. Now everything's wide open. No reason he should suspect a thing." He stood up. "You can keep your pension, mister, but here's your copy of the syndicate's catalog and mailing list." He took the spindle off the deleaver and unrolled three feet of carbon paper. "It's all there, in black and grey. Read it in good health."



Let the reader be forewarned that the juxtaposition of strong emotions is such that a transition is frequently indecipherable.



WHEN I WOKE UP this morning there was a typewriter on the table in my room, and beside it was a pile of fresh, clean white paper.

When you've written as long as I have, that is an exciting sight, and

I had the feeling that I had been too long away from my vocation and my joy. Even before I had coffee I sat down before the machine, stroked the keys as I would stroke my son Ken's hair, and the words began to pour out.

Mama and Craig will like this, I thought. Mama liked everything I wrote whether it was published or not, and Craig, the husband of my world and the light of my life, was my best friend and severest critic. Both of them would like the idea, the theme, of the story which was riding out from my fingers. The idea that love, my love, could conquer hate—*her* hate; and that I won.

The way it was, we moved down the long winding road, past ocean views, shades, colors, moods. Craig held my hand and drove slowly. He kept peeking at the golf course, hoping, I knew, that he would be able to defeat it. I knew, too, that he would offer it supplication, challenge, his best drives and ripest vocabulary.

From the back seat Mama sighed happily: "Isn't it pretty? And cooler already."



by Charlotte Edwards

Ken, dear dreaming child, made a sort of poem. "The deer will come down. There'll be a hummingbird outside my bedroom window. I'll

chop wood with an ax. I'll stay up as long as I want!"

"Only three days," Craig said at last. "But it'll seem like a real

relaxing holiday for us, won't it?" — bass hum of the sea. The house

A long weekend and sunshine lit the world the afternoon we arrived.

The real-estate woman's note had read, "It's short notice. Hard to find a place. This is the only one available. The lady who owns this house is away for a while."

Light shafted through the trees, clear, pure. Air shafted like the light, down into our self-protecting lungs and opened them. We reached the corner marked X on the real-estate map. There was the house—*her* house.

A gnarled tree groped out and up before the wide front window. Pale cream stones were set in random pattern, all grace and subtlety, across the width of the building.

Everybody talked at once. I felt the lump in my throat start from zero and grow, mushroom-like, until it pushed pulp against the walls. We were a tired family, wearied by heat, slam-bang, school, selling, freeways, windless nights, the dry, the brown, the arid, the pressure, small frets; the whole total of daily living, daily survival, the world always a little too much.

I stared at the stone house in the quiet sun-spattered forest. I felt the wind in the tops of the long-trunked trees, heard the initial yelp of the seals out on the rock, the sharp machine-gun precision of a woodpecker against a branch, the

seemed anchored to the beautiful, quiet, cool land, permanent and still.

They all went ahead of me, even Mama. I moved carefully, carefully, as if I might break a spell. I knew this house. It had been mine since I was young, in some dim dream.

A fat robin in the damp grass watched our single-file invasion. The key stuck in the door. Craig worked with it, impatient, forcing. I moved up behind him, shifted my bundles, and took the key from him. With one hand, as if I knew the trick, I pushed down on the latch and the door swung smoothly open.

I walked in first, the original impact all mine, untouched. It slapped against my nostrils, pungent, damp; against my eyes, brown and tans. I braced myself on that first breath, first odor and vision—and something else.

Then they crowded me. I did not like the push of them, the cracked silence of Ken's whoop, Mama's deep breath, Craig's chortle of pleasure. They stifled. They spoiled. They kept me from finding out that something else.

I snapped, "What's the rush?"

Craig gave me a level, surprised look. He and Ken began to open windows. Mama sat down in the nearest chair. I stood still. I swung my head around. I lifted the cover

on the old grand piano. I put down my hand. Middle C and D were dead—as I knew they would be.

Ken called me. Craig called me. I walked through the house. The livingroom was square, with a fireplace. There was a small dining room, neat kitchen; two wings.

In the left wing Mama stood, her call still echoing. "Oh, could I have this room?" she asked, knowing she could, as always, for any asking. It was a bright room with a French door to the patio.

That left the front room, beyond the bath, for Ken. We stood in the doorway, hesitant. The musty odor came out to us. I opened the windows. "It will go away," I promised.

Ken moved slowly to the bed, sat on it, humped up and down, then left to explore outdoors.

The right wing had a double door, its own bath, its own twin beds, its own fireplace, a just-married setup, and double locks.

Craig whispered, "Double doors?" He pulled me to him and held me close, reveling in the privacy. When he kissed me, we lost ten years. We believed in love. I had occasion to remember that.

The phone rang. I answered it. The real-estate lady asked, "Do you like it?"

"I could cry."

"Oh." There was a pause. The

line seemed suddenly dead and gone and she with it. "What—" She came back loud and strong. "Is anything the matter?"

"No. No. It's just so . . . wonderful."

I could hear a sharp-drawn breath. "I'm glad. Get rested. We'll pick you up for cocktails about five tomorrow. Bring your boy. There's another lad."

"We will, thank you." We were both rattling and rattled, and covering something. I hung up.

Elation began to climb in me. "Tomorrow," I cried to all of them, "we can still say almost three days."

It was a special thing, Labor Day weekend.

Craig said, "Yeah, if that dizzy dame doesn't decide to come home."

I stood frozen, fierce. "She won't dare. I won't let her."

They laughed. I didn't laugh back. I had flung a glove, flaunted a challenge, offered a duel. Some part of my mind, my hearing, waited for the answer.

After dinner, on the patio, the outside fire lifted smoke tree-high. The big log was a cylinder of flame. We sat in the dark and stared up at the stars, jillions of tiny shy ones, which save themselves for rare atmosphere. The seals spoke sleepily and constantly. The breeze talked in steady conversation with the sea.

When the log exploded into small sparks and warm ash, we went to bed.

"My room's too cold," Ken stormed. "It feels funny. It smells. I want to sleep on the couch."

Craig turned stern. "March. Act your age. Don't spoil our vacation."

Ken marched. I let him go, but there was a valid fear in his eyes which shook me.

The two doors locked smoothly. The dying bedroom fire glowed and set the room to glimmer. The privacy moved in upon us, no alarm to jangle the morning, being together, together in a honeymoon aura. It was very sweet.

Then we were in our twin beds, silent, awake, happy. The log burned itself to fragments, crackling and reluctant. Crisp, watered air pushed through the open windows. Again, muffled now and secret, there was the quiet dialogue of wind, trees and sea. A sleepless dog spoke sharply.

"A different world," Craig muttered in a drowse-thickened, satisfied voice. He fell asleep, snoring almost at once.

My trained ears forced the snore far away, brought forward the rustle, the ocean rhythm. "A different world," my mind said over and over. Then it eased its way into blackness.

I came awake with a jump. No

sound awakened me. I sat up, my heart in my throat. The even snore across the room offered no reassurance. I could not swallow my heart nor grab my breath.

I rushed from the bed, frantically unlocked both doors and ran down the hall. I paced into the kitchen, switching on all lights. The electric clock above the sink snarled midnight. I poured a glass of water and drank it slowly. I set the glass down with a tiny resounding clink.

I was not afraid. I was unaware of anything outside of the house, the sink, the glass, the kitchen. I moved into the livingroom. The gray, distorted tree was painted by a moon beyond my sight. I paced in the darkness; back and forth, back and forth.

With no source, no beginning, no reasoning, it grew in me until I was wild with it, frantic, insane with it. There was no name, either. Not terror; not fear or panic; some far-unlost corner of my crazy mind tried all the words. None of them fitted. *I had to find the word.*

The sound of my bare feet on the rug was a whisper of desperation. The smell of the house was thick in my brain until my thinking was odor, decayed, ancient, animal.

With sudden determination I swung back to the kitchen again and hurried, as if I knew each tiny corner of the room, to the drawer

beside the sink. The long knives were neatly slotted and freshly sharpened. I picked one up. I ran my finger, slowly, carefully, along its edge. It felt cool, pleasant, somehow definite and sure of itself and its purpose.

I slammed the knife back, the drawer shut. I shuddered. I could not stop. I cried. I could not stop. I walked, fast, to the private bedroom. The blankets felt good. Only when I was between them did I realize how deeply and bone-tightly I was shivering. Only when I stretched out did I know how bruised with battle I was, inside, outside.

The sound of Craig's snore blasted at me.

"Shut up, you," I snarled under my breath. It was not my voice. "You, shut up. Stop breathing. Drop dead. Shut up. I hate you, hate you, hate you!"

Hate. That was it. That was the word.

Suddenly, as if a string had been cut by a razor blade, the tension snapped and freed me. The illuminated dial of the bedside clock read one-thirty. I nodded gratefully, with my own head filled with my own brain. That was it. For an hour and a half I had walked with pure hate, undiluted, full, raging.

I fell asleep at once.

The real-estate lady's home was

set on a jutting chin of a bluff, with the sea not a murmur but a constant roar below it.

I sat in a big chair, the women surrounding me. I was at once queenly and shy. The real-estate lady had passed around one of my obscure books. For the moment I was all celebrity and admired. I liked it.

Somebody asked, "Well, how do you like the house?"

I twirled the stem of my cocktail glass and stared down at the olive, drowning itself in colorless alcohol. I did so in an absolute silence, as abrupt as the switching off of a radio. I lifted my eyes. Each face was pointed and eager.

I said, precisely, "There is evil in that house!"

They came alive, sophistication stripped like a too-tight girdle on a hot day.

"You see—" the real-estate lady began, in the midst of a quick buzzing and babbling.

I lifted the glass, regal, an empress raising a cup for a toast.

"Don't tell me. Not about her. I have to find out—"

She said, "I shouldn't have let you—"

I laughed. "Silly. I don't believe in ghosts."

"She's no ghost."

That surprised me. Or did it?

In the middle of the second

drink, suddenly terrified, I set my glass down. "Where is the phone? I have to call my mother. She's there alone."

The real-estate lady was as urgent as my voice, hurrying me to the hall. Waiting, listening to the rings, I noted that my arms were flecked with goose-pimples as thick as freckles.

Mama cried tinnily, "Hello; hello." She sounded frightened.

I was blotted out with fear. *She'd better leave that helpless old lady alone.* "Mama, are you all right?"

"Of course. I'm watching TV in your bedroom. You scared me. Who'd be calling, I wondered."

"We're going to dinner, dear." I swam in a sick pool of relief. "We're taking Ken."

"Have a good time." It was wish and wistful.

Dinner was forever, too many drinks, too many courses, but eventually we brought everybody back to the house. Craig opened the door and they spilled in, full of noise—then were so quickly quiet it was again the snapped-off radio.

Ken was already past me, sleepy and ready for bed.

If they stay long enough, I felt myself think, maybe it won't happen again. Not tonight.

Mama was sitting up, her eyes blazed with sleep. "What's all that

racket?" she sprayed at me then.

"Just the party."

She sniffed. "Sound drunk."

"Just happy. Try to get back to sleep."

"Humph." She lay back, closed her eyes. Her breath went steady at once through her half-open mouth.

I stood over her, hunched, staring down: *Ugly old woman, always finding fault; smug, superior, everything done for her. Never a thank-you. Ugly, ugly old woman.*

I went into Ken's room. He was already asleep, bunched up, hanging onto the blankets, a frown between his brows. I stared down at him, as at my mother. *Better-off dead, I thought. Rotten, dirty, worried world, any child is better off dead and out of it.*

The room was thick with the rank, musty odor. Ken stirred and his nose twitched.

I stood in the livingroom entrance. I saw them all: *Faces out of focus like their eyes; slovenly, painted, wrinkled, distorted. Fools. Too much money and time. Too little sense and appreciation. Wasters. Despicable. Useless. No good.*

The real-estate woman had her arm around Craig. He didn't shrug her away.

How does it feel, my mind

sked silently, and how does she
mell? Richly scented, unfamiliar?
You're a fool, too, and how many
others have there been that I
didn't notice? You poor slob with
your picayune job so that three
days is a big deal for a vacation.
What I could do, with money like
heirs, and without you, you two-
iming slob.

I began to shake. I made my way
into the kitchen. I did not look up
at the clock. I knew, I really knew,
that it was long after twelve and
not yet one-thirty. Not yet. I let the
cold water run—and I opened the
sink drawer again.

They shimmered up at me, pol-
ished and silvery—and long and
beautiful. The longest knife was in
my hand without my knowing it.
The wooden handle, tight against
my palm and my clenched fingers,
was silken smooth. I lifted it high
and it angled down as if seeking a
target. I turned and took two quick
steps toward the livingroom and
the noise.

*Not now, I thought sharply. You
imbecile, not with all those people.*

The looseness came so suddenly
the knife dropped from my hand
and clattered to the floor. I stooped
to pick it up and knew that the
clock, when I looked at it, would be
twenty-nine, or twenty-eight or
twenty-seven minutes to two. I set
the knife neatly back and went

back to join the party.

The next morning was Sunday. I
woke very early. I was totally my-
self and the initial content of our
trip was within me. The fullness of
the day, just beginning out there,
poking a tentative path through the
open drapes, soothed me. Craig was
on his side, curled like a young
child. What we had been to each
other for years, what we still were,
bubbled my heart like an inflated
balloon.

I put on my robe and slippers and
tiptoed into the right wing. Mother
lay flat on her back, white hair
shining, rosy and childlike, too;
mine to care for and love and
repay.

I went into Ken's room. The
early morning moved the curtains
and the sunshine had heated the
rancid odor to sweetness. I bent to
kiss him; ours, product of a good
union, privileged to live a good life,
our miracle gift.

As noiselessly as possible I went
into the kitchen, made a pot of cof-
fee, and took it, with a cup, out
onto the patio. I could stare up for
miles to the top of the trees, the
new day, life, all questions.

They slept around me. I knew
them by heart. By heart, I had
grown up with Mama. By heart, I
had gone to Craig with instincts
alive. By heart, I had touched the
new fuzz on Ken's head the day he

was born. By heart, I had learned patience and the uses of love. *Rich. I am rich.* I sipped my coffee and listened and watched and felt. It was better than a mile-long bank balance.

Suddenly I dropped the coffee cup. No—I threw it as hard as I could against the bricks. *Bull. Fancy thinking. Sentimental hog-wash. You don't love them. You hate them. Mama, dear, sweet Mama, eats on you, demands, robs. Craig, sweet as honey, as slow-moving, not caring, what about the bills, leaving you to worry the months out, ask for nothing. Ken, the living doll, selfish, conniving, never saving you a step or moment, give me this, buy me that, whine, ask, demand, demand—*

I was on my feet, shaking, shivering and cold in the early morning's sudden chill; cold with loathing, hatred for them, the three, all of the world, every stinking person who had stepped in my way, eaten up my time, kept me from being myself, exploring myself, whatever I might have been without them.

I could kill them. For a long-stopped moment it seemed as if the thought took wings, like a bat, and flapped and swooped above my head.

I spoke aloud, clear, sharp, in my

own voice: "Oh no, you don't! No you don't! Just because you almost had your way last night, you don't start again in daylight. You don't get me. Take me. You don't ruin. You—get—the—hell—out—of—here!"

My fists were tight at my sides, my breath strong and fierce. I felt the glint in my eyes, the power slowly crawling through me, the coil and pressure of my own brain, struggling, moving, inside my head. I felt the great tremendous swelling battle of love against hate.

"Get out," I repeated more quietly. I stooped down and picked up the shattered pieces of the coffee cup. "I'll buy you a new one," I told her conversationally.

The patio was whole and stable once again. I set trays around the fire. I went into the kitchen and put together a big breakfast. When it was ready I walked from room to room.

I called all three of them. I kissed them, all three. I rubbed Ken's back and told him what a fine boy he was and he purred like a beloved kitten. I patted Mama's head and felt tenderness rise like yeast when she turned half-blind eyes, unglassed, and empty mouth, un-toothed, to smile back at me. I wound my arms around Craig, as once I had when no restraints, no

eariness, were in me. He came wake under my kiss, slow understanding rising to joy in his eyes as he remembered where he was, and why.

It was a lovely day. Craig left, dining with pleasure, to play golf with the real-estate lady's husband. Mama and Ken and I stopped for steaks and gin and coffee cake and a model which Ken set to work on at once at the kitchen table. We all slept watch through the front window for our friends from San Francisco who were coming to spend Sunday night, to play golf at the great challenging course on Monday.

The house seemed full of air and light. I walked from room to room, trying to figure it out. There are two kinds of waves, I told myself. I've been receiving. Now I am sending—happiness, yes, and love. I pushed my mind, eerie and strange, but definitive, until I thought I could see the rightness spread, until the evil was slinking out of all the doors and windows, splintered, frayed, dissipated, as the afternoon sun had melted the morning fog.

When Craig came back, and our friends arrived, were greeted, given the twin bedroom and had admired the house, I puffed with pride. *I built this house. In two nights and one morning, I have*

torn down old crumbling bricks rotten with hate and set strong new ones in place, mortared with love.

The steaks were perfect, the martinis especially dry. The night was again clear and star-splashed. We sat till late, till Ken went to bed of his own accord and Mama was long asleep. We set our guests up in the double-doored wing. We put pillows on the floor between the dining room and livingroom for Craig, and blankets on the couch for me. Everything began to hush.

The fire in the livingroom, kept alight by a too-big log, was to be tolerated. Craig heaved a big sigh as he settled on the joined pillows. I lay with my head to the front window. From the eating and the drinking, we went almost instantly to sleep.

Freezing panic wakened me. Despite the fire and smoke which pushed into the room, although not a leaf seemed to stir on the gnarled tree in front, the room was iced with chill.

I jumped up madly and walked with purpose, in the half-dark of the fire and the moon, in the sting of the smoke, to a panel in the wall beyond where my head had lain. I touched it, as if I knew its secret. It slid into itself, revealing a dark closet. From that closet walked, as

definite as a solid human body, the overpowering essence of pure demonic evil.

My hand trembled as I reached for the light switch and set the room to clarity. The closet was totally empty.

Craig's voice came to me. "What is it? What are you doing?"

I pushed the panel door back into place and snapped off the light. "Nothing," I whispered. "I can't sleep." *You see, I thought to myself, you couldn't do anything about the closet, couldn't try to clean it out, because you didn't know it was there.* I set my pillow at the other end of the couch, like a dog who faces a door, the point of danger.

Craig said in a voice which seemed thinned with the dark, "It's the smoke. Damned fireplace is smoking." He coughed.

The couch shook with the cold that ate into me and walked through the closed windows, the locked doors; not hate, not a simple clash of wills, but panic, terror unadulterated and strong. I had no words for Craig. I knew that nothing he could do or say would relieve this horror or warm my body.

"Sleep." He sounded fuller, more normal, as if my ears had opened. "Going to play golf to-

morrow with friends, remember?"

I held the thought: *Golf. out on the great greenness, the beautiful homes, the sparkling ocean, the normalcy, golf.*

It did not help.

I lay through the minutes of terror until I fell, at last, asleep; fell into a crazy horror of unconsciousness, in which the knife was unfelt but sure in my hand, and there was blood everywhere and found, at last, a weird sanctuary in the paneled hidden closet.

See, Mama? See, Craig? I wrote the whole story out, and it was good to have my fingers on the typing keys again. And isn't it wonderful, really, when you think of it how strong the power of love can be?

See, I changed it all. I filled the house with the love of the three of us for each other, the feeling for our visiting friends, the happy crowd of *her* own neighbors who came back and felt free in *her* house, because we were there; because I was strong, and *she* couldn't get to me.

The only thing, and I might just as well put that down too, is that every morning I wake up with a pounding in my head. I stand in the bathroom and brush my teeth. After a little I look up at myself, into my eyes, and they are not mine. They are still brown, with

cles and the usual number of
shes, but peeking out from the
ck of them, way in back but
ming closer to the front, to the
en, are *her* eyes—livid, evil, full
hate.

It is a bad moment, in the
orning. I stare *her* down as best I
n. I have lived with *her* hate,
id I gave her *my* love to replace

Replace? Was there, then, an
change?

Mama, Craig, even Ken dear, I
annot bear the thought that hate
is more power than love, nor that
e unknown woman in me can
ove outward from my eyes. I have
keep *her* back in there, way back
nd unseen. I have to!

If I don't, in the dark of some
eep, windy, restless night, I will
ll you all—the three of you, who
at on me like sharks; kill you all,
ith the long, slender, shimmering
lade of the new carving knife I re-
ently bought; the knife which is
eatly slotted in the kitchen drawer
nd which feels cool, pleasant,
omehow definite and sure of itself
hen I run my finger slowly along
s edge.

The only thing, the trouble is,
once in a great while, in a rare
strange moment in the morning,
her eyes laugh at me in the mirror,
and *her* mouth moves, matching
my grimaces, and *she* tells me
something.

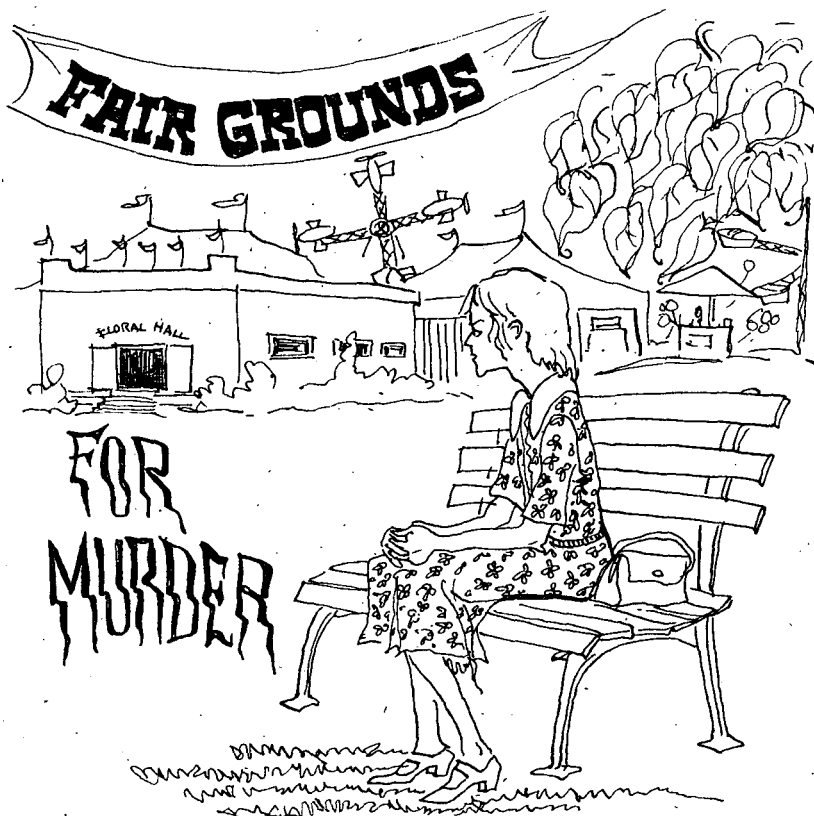
She tells me that there is no new
carving knife in my kitchen, and
that I couldn't walk into that
kitchen, or even into my own home,
if I wanted to. *She* tells me that the
old carving knife and her kitchen
and her clock, which didn't move
fast enough, and her hidden closet
were enough. *She* declares there
were no wild, restless dreams.
There was reality; and this—this—is
the dream!

She says, oh, how clearly she
enunciates, that the reason nobody
comes to see me in this white and
barren room where everything is
whispers, shushing uniforms and
heavy locks, is because there is no-
body left of my world. I killed them
all!

Then *she* laughs and laughs and
laughs, in my voice, and the locks
open and the uniforms come run-
ning.



To pave the road to victory, every steppingstone must, before implementation, be cautiously weighed.



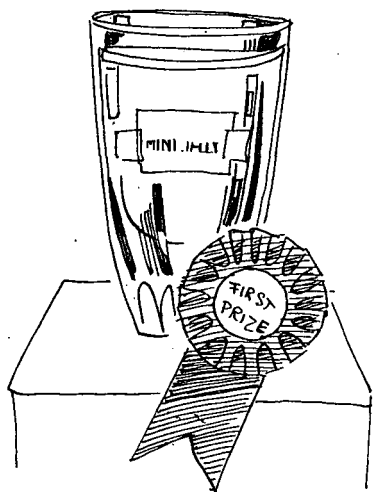
HAZEL THOUGHT she was doing the right thing when she made up that story about why Rachel Crosscutt always won the blue ribbon at the Waranoga County Fair for her In-

dian Orange Preserve. At the time it seemed like a good idea. After all, what harm could it do?

It was not surprising that Arvida had believed it, since she, the

youngest of the six sisters, had always been the most imaginative: the dreamer, the schemer, the yearner for impossible triumphs, the one who scorned the chances that did come her way because they never measured up to the grandiose notions of what she wanted. No job was glamorous enough (and it was a key to the impracticality of her nature that she could expect Millville to offer anything in the way of

BY
**DONALD
OLSON**



glamor), so she stayed on the farm with Mama and Papa, except for that one disastrous attempt to open Milady's Beauty Salon in Millville, for which Papa advanced the money despite the family's outspoken misgivings. They predicted that most of the women in that farm community would remain loyal to simple, warmhearted Affie Winslow even if she did use her kitchen as a beauty parlor and doubled as postmistress. They were right. Milady's Beauty Salon was a fiasco, and after that unhappy venture Arvida stayed at home to dream of more successful enterprises, none of which ever materialized. As might be expected, she was disdainful of the county boys and remained a spinster.

The years went by, bearing into the pool of eternity Arvida's grand and not so grand dreams, along with three of her sisters and Mama and Papa, and the farm itself, of which nothing remained but the crumbling foundation, the stone-filled well, the mulberry tree, and the orchard that went on bearing golden apples that withered on the branch. Arvida now had a little house in town where she lived alone with an arthritic cat named Uncle Peter, and with the last of her dreams, a constant, abiding desire which over the years had become a driving obsession: to win

the blue ribbon at the Waranoga County Fair for Mama's Mint Jelly. Yes, the glorious dreams had been reduced to this one modest, parochial, not unattainable ambition, the one dream of them all that her two surviving sisters, Hazel and Ruby, did not dismiss as "nonsense."

The jelly was made to Mama's own secret recipe from a specially succulent mint that grew along the creek bed below the orchard on The Old Place. Making the annual supply of jelly for the whole family was a ritual entrusted to Arvida alone, who believed, mistakenly, that she was the only one who had the recipe, and Ruby and Hazel indulged her in this belief. There were times when they were nearly driven by exasperation to blurt out the truth, but they were truly fond of their sister and bore her foibles with patient understanding. It wasn't always easy. Lately her behavior had been verging on the eccentric, to say the least. She had become utterly indifferent to her own appearance and went all around town wearing that soiled blue housedress with the red piping all unstitched and dragging behind her like a rat's tail. Her muddy gray hair was a disgrace to womanhood, but wild horses, she declared, wouldn't drag her to Affie Winslow's kitchen for a permanent, nor

to Affie's daughter's place next to the feed store. Why, if it weren't for those two, she was always saying, she'd be as famous as that Elizabeth Arden or that Helena Rubinstein.

Her vindictiveness was not limited to the Winslows. It took in almost every man, woman and child in Waranoga County, but the special victims of her malice were, in this order, Mary Agnes Jones and Rachel Crosscutt; Rachel Crosscutt, because she invariably won the blue ribbon for her Indian Orange Preserve, and Mary Agnes Jones because she judged the preserves and jellies every year and consistently awarded the blue ribbon to Mrs. Crosscutt.

"It's got nothing to do with her Indian Orange Preserve," Arvida was fond of declaring. "It's just because Rachel Crosscutt's given so much money to the school. And if she hadn't pushed that stupid kid out of the way of that milk truck and had to spend the last ten years in a wheelchair it would be another story."

No one believed this invidious tale. Everyone who knew Mary Agnes Jones, and most people did since she was head of the Home Economics Department at Apple Valley Central School, vouched for her scrupulous fairness and knew that if she perennially awarded the

blue ribbon to Rachel Crosscutt's Indian Orange Preserve it was because she honestly considered it superior to the other entries. As for Rachel Crosscutt, the only reason she continued to suffer the embarrassment of walking off with that blue ribbon year after year was that everyone insisted a champion had no right to quit, that she had an obligation to keep entering the competition until a challenger succeeded in breaking her record.

"High time they had another judge!" was another of Arvida's yearly declarations that won no support. The other regular entrants would not have felt they had truly won the blue ribbon if anyone but Mary Agnes Jones awarded it. Arvida had always grumbled but in the end acceded to this view of the matter. That is, until the last couple of years. By then her wistful ambition to win that blue ribbon had become the one fixed idea in a growing psychic turbulence. It was as if she were looking back and seeing for the first time all that she had missed, all that she had let slip through her fingers until there was nothing left but a crippled cat and a recipe for mint jelly. She was haunted by a galling sense of failure and began to imagine that everyone shared this opinion and that they were all laughing at her. Worst of all, Mama herself had begun to

blame her for her failure to win.

Mama had begun to pay Arvida disturbing visits, usually at dusk, or in the first blue hour of evening when Arvida would look through the open bedroom door and see Mama's gently blurred figure rocking back and forth in the chair beside the bed, turning her head now and then to look back at Arvida with a compelling frown that conveyed better than words the old lady's displeasure. Mama would never be able to rest peacefully in her grave until Arvida had won the blue ribbon at the county fair.

The first time Arvida conveyed this extraordinary piece of news to Hazel, her sister had merely blinked and asked her what she had said.

"Are you deaf, Hae? I said Mama won't be able to sleep in peace until I've won that blue ribbon."

"Oh, Arvida, stop talking rubbish."

"It's true. She's mightily vexed because I haven't won the first prize for her mint jelly. And I don't blame her."

Hazel dropped her knitting, rubbed her eyes, groaned with discomfort. She was so fat she had to sit sideways in the chair, and her legs and ankles were so badly swollen she could wear nothing but bedroom slippers on her feet. "Arvida, honey, if you go around talk-

ing that way folks will think you're daft."

"Who cares what *they* think? It's what Mama thinks."

"Mama's in heaven. She's not thinking about mint jelly and blue ribbons."

"A lot you know about what she's thinking. For your information, she sat right in that rocker in there and *told* me what she thought."

Arvida said this so matter-of-factly Hazel felt a shiver run through her. She regarded her sister with a sympathetic but pained frown on her grandmotherly face. There had been signs before this: a certain vacancy in the eyes; a queer secretive gesture, as if she were scolding someone who wasn't there; ambiguous remarks. Hazel remembered all too well what had happened last year and the year before, the mortifying scenes Arvida had made right in the middle of the fairgrounds after the judging. The committee was seriously distressed; so was Hazel, but she didn't know quite what to do. Two of the members had already been to see Hazel, urging her to make every effort to persuade Arvida not to submit an entry this year. The unpleasantness simply had to be avoided.

Arvida hadn't even listened. Not to enter Mama's Mint Jelly was unthinkable. Arvida didn't even get mad. The idea was so preposterous

she only laughed. Of course she must submit an entry.

Now, it has already been demonstrated that Hazel was not the most imaginative person in the world. Otherwise, she would have invented a more plausible story than she did to convince Arvida how useless it would be for her to enter the competition at the fairgrounds. Had she been more imaginative herself, she might have anticipated the effect her clumsy lie would have on Arvida's already dangerously overwrought imagination. What she told Arvida was this: there was no use entering her mint jelly in the competition because, no matter how good it was, it stood no chance of winning.

"Oh, there's always a chance," retorted Arvida. "Even if it is mighty slim."

"Not even a slim chance, honey. Not even a sliver of a chance. Because the whole thing is fixed."

Arvida shied away as if Hazel had stuck her with a pin. "Fixed?"

"Fixed. Mary Agnes Jones has agreed to let Rachel Crosscutt win the blue ribbon as many times as she wants, because Rachel promised to donate a whole new electric kitchen to the Home Ec Department of Apple Valley Central School."

"Who said so?"

"Someone as close to the horse's

mouth as you can get without being bit. Nobody could prove it, of course, and most folks wouldn't even believe it if it could be proved, so don't you dare go shooting off your mouth about it. Just don't make a fool of yourself by carting anything out to those fairgrounds again. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Arv, but you are my little sister and I can't stand your constantly being hurt like that."

What Hazel, with her usual obtuseness, interpreted as grudging acquiescence on Arvida's part was not that at all, and as soon as Hazel went away, happily convinced that the perennial crisis in Floral Hall would never have to be faced again, Arvida began pacing back and forth from the front door of her little house to the rocking chair in the bedroom. She was in a serious quandary. If she didn't enter Mama's Mint Jelly in the county fair, Mama's spirit would never find rest, but she herself would die before she would be defrauded ever again by that mealymouthed cheat, Mary Agnes Jones. That's what she kept intoning to Uncle Peter as she paced back and forth: "I'd die first! I'd die first!"

As long as Arvida's wrath could be diffused over most of the population of Millville it was relatively harmless, but now it became focused on one individual: Mary

Agnes Jones. Arvida's blood boiled when she thought of how her heart had nearly stopped beating every time she had watched Mary Agnes Jones dip her little silver spoon into Mama's Mint Jelly, pretending to judge its taste and color and consistency . . . *pretending*—when all the time she knew the blue ribbon was going to an entry she hadn't even looked at yet!

"Oh, I could *kill* her! I could *kill* her!"

She spoke with such caustic vehemence poor old Uncle Peter's tail began swinging like a pendulum gone crazy, although it was as purely rhetorical an outburst as when she had cried, "I'd die first!" Yet no one could have been more surprised than she when a moment later the words echoed in her mind with a somewhat different emphasis: *I could kill her . . . I could kill her.*

If Mary Agnes Jones were dead she wouldn't be able to judge next year's competition; and if it weren't for Mary Agnes Jones, Mama's Mint Jelly would win the blue ribbon. Oh, why hadn't she thought of this idea last year?

Perhaps if the rocking chair had not been there to remind her of Mama's visits in the blue hour of evening, and perhaps if the arsenic had not been down there in the cellar where it had been ever since

that invasion of rats after The Big Flood, perhaps she would never have done it. But the rocking chair was there and so was the arsenic, and there wasn't a chance in a million it could be laid to her. The idea was foolproof since the entries were all lined up on that long table in Floral Hall, sealed till the time of judging, when Mary Agnes Jones would travel down the line with her little silver spoons, tasting a generous sample or two of each entry and then announcing her decision shortly thereafter. The blue ribbon was awarded and the honorable mentions declared. The blue ribbon winner was put on display and the others, including the honorable mentions, could be removed whenever the entrants wished. Most of the rejected entries were whisked away at once, as if in shame.

Oh, it was an ingenious scheme! Arvida knew enough about arsenic to know how much to put in the jelly to be sure it was a lethal dose. By the time Mary Agnes Jones was dead and they got around to analyzing the contents of her stomach, if they did, they'd have no way of telling which of the two dozen or so jellies and jams had contained the poison. By that time Arvida would have hurried home, washed the rest of the mint jelly down the drain and scoured the jar clean.

Making the jelly was twice as much fun that year. When Arvida went alone at dusk to gather the mint along the creek bed she sat dreaming on the foundation of The Old Place, while the wind whispored over the empty fields and sighed among the gnarled branches of the apple trees.

When she told her sister, on the day before the submission of entries, Hazel's fat face expanded, her eyes bugging out so they seemed in danger of rolling off her lids and down into the yawning cavern of her mouth.

"Arvida! You promised me you wouldn't."

"Never did no such thing."

"Oh, yes, you did, right here in this very room!"

"You've been hearing things, Hae. Must be hardening of the arteries. They'll be sticking you away in Holly Hill if you aren't careful."

"But you can't! I've told them. I've told them you wouldn't."

Arvida shrugged. "The more fool you. Mama would never rest if I didn't enter."

Hazel's face was blotched with crimson. "You can't possibly win. I told you that."

Arvida tossed her mane of muddy gray hair and gave her sister an impish, superior grin. "It matters not if you win or lose, it's how you play the game. If I don't win this

year there's always next year."

There was something funny about all this and Hazel didn't like it. She had forebodings of disaster, of public disgrace. Something would have to be done quickly. She went away sorely troubled.

The day of the judging was also the last day of the county fair. The most popular events were over and many of the exhibits had already been removed from the fairgrounds, which were hot and dusty and pungent with the mingled odors of barnyard and carnival. The midway was still thronged and there were crowds three and four deep around the cold drink stands. Every kid who went by was licking a cone or popsicle.

It was no cooler in Floral Hall, where only a furtive rank breeze came through the open double doors. Arvida sat with Hazel and Hazel's husband Kenneth on folding chairs just inside the door. Poor Hazel looked wretchedly uncomfortable with her vast bulk spread over two of the chairs, dangerously taxing their strength. Ruby and her whole family were here, too, and Arvida was displeased. It made her edgy having them here, darting those slyly expectant looks at her every now and then as if waiting for her to do something outrageous, maybe start foaming at the mouth when she didn't win, but she was as

meek as could be. She smiled sweetly at everyone who came through the door, even at Rachel Crosscutt, who was wheeled in by her grandson Timothy, preceded by a chorus of ohs and ahs and comments like, "Here she is," and "Rachel Crosscutt just came in." As if she were a queen or something! Arvida forced herself to keep smiling and tried not to look too often at the jar of Mama's Mint Jelly glowing like bottled emeralds on the snowy tablecloth.

She had made her feelings crystal clear. She had no intention, she had said, of sitting there like a bump on a log, once the judging had begun. She wouldn't trust herself not to make a fuss. Instead, she would go down by the grandstand and sit on that bench under the catalpa tree where it was cooler and she wouldn't be so fidgety. The instant the so-called "judging" was over, Hazel was to retrieve Arvida's exhibit from the table and bring it down to her. *Immediately*. She hoped she had got that through Hazel's thick head.

Hazel seemed a bit testy herself today. The heat was too much for her. "If you think I'm going to pick up my feet and *run* all the way across the fairgrounds on a day like this—or any other day—you've got another think coming."

"You don't have to *run*. Nobody

said anything about your running. I just said to come at *once*, not to loiter."

"If you're in such a dither to get home you should have let me hold the bench for you and Hitch could do your chasing around."

The minute Mary Agnes Jones put in an appearance Arvida got up to leave. She turned to give Hazel a last-minute reminder.

"I'll scream if I don't get out of here. Now mind, you fetch my jar of jelly to me the second it's over. If you don't make tracks to the grandstand with my exhibit, I'm going to come back up here and raise such a fuss you won't be able to hold your head up in public for a year! I'll tell everybody within shouting distance all about the electric kitchen and the whole shabby story. I mean that, Hae."

With that, she stalked out of Floral Hall and made her way across the fairgrounds to the bench where Ruby's grandson Hitch was stretched out with his eyes shut, licking a popsicle that was dripping all over him—the bribe Arvida had given him to keep the bench for her till she got there. Now she shooed him away and sat down. It was really a pleasant spot, so cool and shady under the catalpa tree. She wished she had stopped for a glass of lemonade. Oh well, it wouldn't be long now. There was much to

watch. The loop-the-loop was just a few yards away and it was fun to watch those nitwit girls in short skirts making silly fools of themselves. The fair was reaching its peak this afternoon, a sort of mad, frantic gaiety throbbing itself out under the raging sun. Soon the dust and the noise would begin to settle, the crowds would dwindle away, shadows would lengthen across the deserted fairgrounds and it would all be over for another year. But next year! Next year would be different!

More and more frequently now, Arvida glanced up toward Floral Hall, a corner of which she could see from the bench. It should be over by now. It *must* be over by now. Where in Sam Hill was that woman? Hazel, Hazel, Hazel, why don't you come?

Finally she did, at a maddeningly slow pace on her swollen legs. Arvida squinted at the sunlight reflected off glass and metal. Liquid waves of heat undulated visibly in the dusty air. She leaned forward, vexed at the fools who kept getting between her and the tiresomely slow mass of her sister. At last, she got a clear view of her—but where was the jelly? Oh, if that silly cow had forgotten to fetch it . . .

She got up as Hazel huffed and puffed toward her, making weary, listless fanning motions with a

hanky the size of a butternut leaf.
"Hazel! Where is it? *Where is my exhibit?*"

Hazel seemed not to hear.

"My jelly! My jelly!" shrieked Arvida, giving the blubbery arm a rude shake.

Hazel was grinning the most foolish, idiotic grin Arvida had ever seen on the face of man or beast. Oh, she was infuriating!

"Go back! Go back and fetch my jelly, you fool! Go—"

"No use," gasped Hazel, sinking blissfully onto the bench under the catalpa tree, the perspiration running off her triple chins.

"Will you get up off that bench this minute and—"

"Arvida! Will you kindly let me get my breath? Stop jumping around and poking at me. I can't take your exhibit away."

"Hasn't the judging been announced? You should have stayed till it was—"

"Yes, yes, it's over. But you've got to leave yours there. Arvida, it *won*! You won the blue ribbon!"

Arvida looked more horrified than happy, as if it were the last

thing on earth she wanted to hear.

Well, *that's gratitude*, thought Hazel, thinking how she had practically got down on her knees and *begged* the committee to award Arvida the blue ribbon just this once. They had finally agreed, bless them. It wasn't fair to the others but they had finally agreed it was the only way to solve the vexing problem so it wouldn't happen another year. Let Arvida have her precious blue ribbon. Heaven knows what the bedeviled thing would do if she didn't once take home the prize.

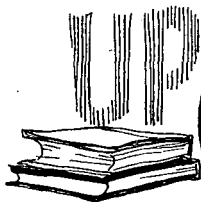
"You're lying!" cried Arvida. "Lies! Lies!"

"No, dear, it's the truth. You won the blue ribbon for Mama's Mint Jelly. There! Ask Kenneth. He'll tell you. Here he comes now."

Kenneth had news all right. He was running! Fat as he was, and with that sun boiling down as fiercely as it was, he was running. Hazel shook her head. Why on earth should he *run*? He was almost up to them now, but he didn't look at all like the bearer of glad tidings. Quite the contrary; he looked as if something terrible had happened.



Exceptional, indeed, is the child whose mother is endowed with inherent understanding.



GRADED

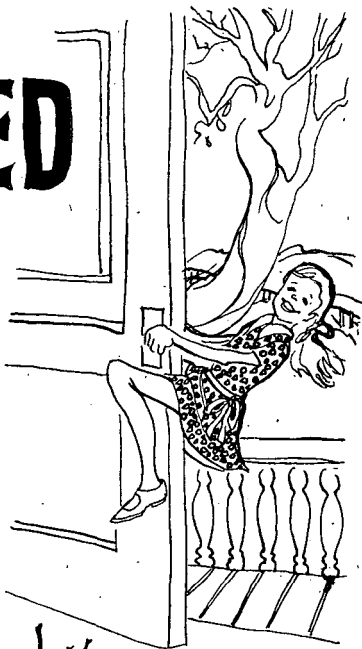
THE BACK DOOR swung open, letting in a swarm of flies. The man set down a bucket of milk, and a cat began to lick the foam from the top. A young girl hooked thin legs around the door and swung back and forth.

Inside the house a thin, tired voice scolded, "Martha, get off that door. The flies smell this cabbage."

Martha rode back and forth several more times, then jumped off inside the small back porch. She slipped into the kitchen behind the man.

"Cow didn't give much tonight," said the man. "She's drying up already. Hope that damn calf is a heifer."

"Won't be much good anyhow, Fred," count of that old red bull of Henley's," the woman at the stove complained. "You should have kept



by
Joanne Saliby

the cow out of that back pasture." She stirred the large kettle on the back of the coal range.

"Ma, is supper ready yet?" The boy in the doorway hunched his

shoulders and sniffed. He walked over and stood by the stove. Quickly, the woman hugged him and smoothed his pale, ruffled hair.

"Come and sit down, all of you," she replied. "It'll be ready in a minute. Martha, put some butter on."

Martha darted out the door to the small wooden icebox on the back porch and hurried back with the bowl of butter. The woman reached up and pulled on the light which dangled over the table, and they all sat down.

"Bless, oh Lord, what thou hast given, and of which we now do eat. Amen."

Fred shoveled a spoonful of beans into his mouth and looked questioningly at his wife. "How come Bub went to school today? You know he's better off here where he can be of some good."

"He wanted to go, and besides, this was wash day. I can't have him underfoot every minute."

Bub interrupted. "I like school, Pa," he protested, "and I'm learning to read, and the teacher says I do good." He smiled proudly, and looked to his mother for approval. She reached out and patted his hand.

"Well, ain't that nice. Twelve years old and already learning to read." The man's voice was harsh. "Martha, here, ain't even ten and she can read the Bible through."

Martha darted a quick glance at her brother, and then at her mother. "Bub's not smart like me, is he, Ma?"

"Hush now, and eat your supper." The woman pushed a piece of cabbage around on her plate. "There's jam in the pantry, Bub," she said.

The man pushed his plate away and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "You'd better forget about school for a while. The sow is going to farrow soon, maybe tonight. She's got her nest all ready. I need some help around this place."

Bub looked down at his plate and guided a piece of fat around in greasy circles.

"Ma . . ." Martha grabbed the last slice of bread with her brown hand. "Bub caught a mouse today, and he squashed it."

"Don't talk about it, child. You'll be sick," Fred replied soothingly. "Besides, it was most likely an accident."

"No it wasn't. I saw him. He squashed it with his bare foot."

"Well, never you mind," the man frowned. "How do you like school this year?" he asked, changing the subject abruptly. He lit his pipe and leaned back in his chair.

"Oh, it's all right, I guess. But that dumb Miss Westover spends so much time with Bub and the other dumb kids that we don't have time

to do anything fun." Martha looked over at her mother. "But she says I might get put up a grade because I'm smart. Bub's dumb, but I'm not."

Fred regarded her with interest. "And I suppose you'll be going off to be a teacher, too, like your Aunt Jane. Now there's a smart woman for you."

Martha frowned. "I want to be a scientist, and experiment on animals and things."

"Martha!" her mother exclaimed, twisting a strand of lank, pale hair. "What's got into you? You know you have a delicate stomach."

Bub pushed his chair back. "Ma, I didn't kill no mouse. I like mice."

"He did too. I watched him, and I got sick and threw up at recess."

"The boy's a damned good liar, for all of being so dumb, but he's never gonna come to no good. Soon as Martha gets old enough to have company we'll have to send him away. Can't have him scaring off the boys."

"Pa! We'll talk about that later." The woman got up and began to clear the table. "Now you two kids get outside before it gets any darker. Bub, you separate the milk first, and don't forget to feed the cats outside the smokehouse. You always slop it so inside."

Martha jumped up and ran for the door. "Come on, Bub, let's

catch lightning bugs. I'll get the jar and you come when you get done."

Bub, still perplexed by the conversation at supper, stumbled hesitantly out the door. He reached down and picked up a kitten which mewed anxiously at his feet and, taking the bucket which waited on the porch, stepped down and walked along the narrow plank walk to the smokehouse. Martha jumped out from behind the smokehouse door.

"Bool!"

Milk sloshed on the floor.

"Yah, I scared you!" Martha cried as she ran out the door. "I'm going out to the barn. Hurry."

"You made me spill the milk again, and now Ma will be mad," Bub whimpered. Carefully, he put the separator together and began turning the heavy handle. The bell rang with each turn, and he put his hand over it to muffle the sound. The milk whirled steadily through the separator. Bub finished, and filled the cats' pan outside the door. Outside, Martha was washing her hands at the water tank.

"Bub, you'd better stop off and see about the old sow. She might be having her pigs."

Bub climbed over the stile and walked slowly toward the barn. In the distance a locust began a lonely *zwEEEEEEEE uh*, and a swallow disappeared into the barn. Martha

picked up a jar and began chasing the lightning bugs.

The back door slammed and the man came down the path. "I'd better go see about the sow again. Where's Bub?"

Martha looked up from her jar of bugs. "He's out in the barn with the sow. I think she's having her pigs. I heard something squealing." She turned her back and dumped the wingless fireflies on the grass.

Bub walked slowly up from the barn lot; he held two limp, bloody pigs.

"Where in hell did those come from?" shouted the man.

Martha stood behind her father. "Bub killed them. He took a stick and beat them and I heard them squeal. He killed them, and I'm going to be sick!"

Bub looked up and wrinkled his forehead, puzzled. "But they was dead when I got there. The others are alive, but these was dead, and I found them."

"You smashed them with the stick, and you killed them. Pa will send you away now. You big dummy!"

Bub dropped the dead pigs and began to cry. Fred called up to the house. "Ma, come here." He turned to the children. "Martha, you go inside and get ready for bed now. It's getting late."

Martha slipped around the house and back behind the water tank, and listened. The windmill stood silent in the waiting evening.

"Ma, look here what Bub done. He killed two of the new litter. They was just born. I came out of the house, and here he is with these dead pigs. He just went out and beat them bloody with a stick. I tell you, he's not safe to have around. No telling what he might take a notion to do to Martha sometime."

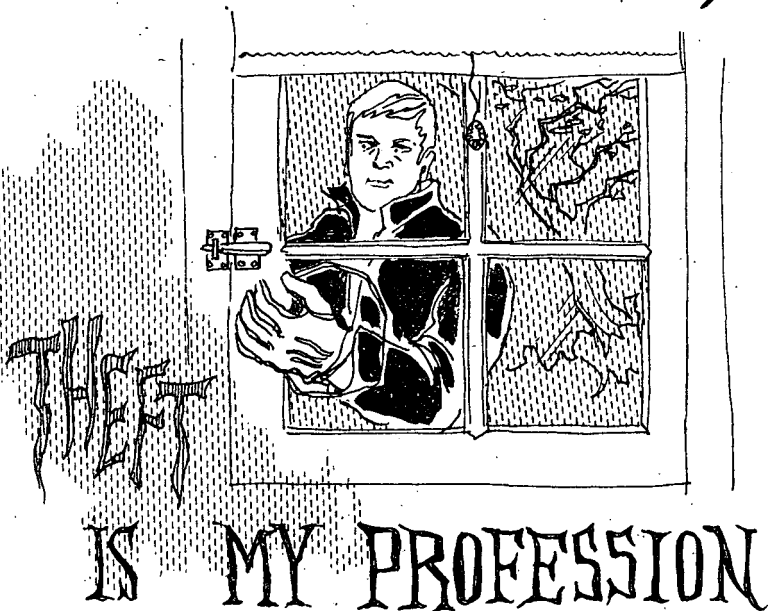
The woman looked down at the pigs, and then at the boy. "Wash up and get to bed, Bub. It'll be all right."

Bub went into the dark house, and the kitten slipped in behind him. Behind the tank, Martha waited.

"Yes, you're right, Pa," the woman sighed. "We can't keep him here any longer. We do have Martha to think of."



A real professional always plans carefully for the future—it makes the present more palatable.



FIRST I MUST IDENTIFY myself, though don't suppose it will be my correct name. Still, I feel the need to give you some name, to assure you that I at least exist—for like everything that lives in this world, I must be called by some name, and everything called by some name exists. So let's make the name Randolph Cole—that fits me.

Let's get something else straight.

I'm writing this account of my professional life for two reasons: first, I need the money; second, I think you'll find reading my account in this magazine fascinating. That would give me pleasure, to give you a glimpse of me in action, to tell you how it really is.

I was in my early thirties when I began. Up to that time I'd led a fairly straight kind of life. I'd been

in the Army as an enlisted man, then married and went to work, believe it or not, as a watch repairman.

There isn't much demand for watch repairmen, and the death of my wife and the loss of my job came almost simultaneously. I was alone, I needed money.

Now, morality never interested me a great deal. My code was and is: Look out for Randolph Cole. All my life I'd been aimless in my own way, concentrated but aimless. The church was never for me either. When I was growing up I used to spend my Sunday mornings building model ships in bottles with a special set of tools I'd designed. Some of those ships took months to finish perfectly. For me, there's more religion in building sailing

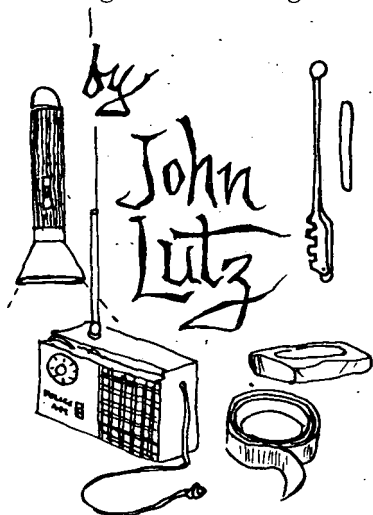
ships in bottles than there is in going to church.

Times weren't good when I lost the two things that meant the most to me, and the money situation became worse. I wish I could tell you about some single interesting incident that made me decide what to do, but I can't. I just fell into it as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and perhaps it was. I decided to become a professional burglar.

Now, I said *professional*. There aren't many of us, for unless you have an exceptional aptitude for the job, your career is curtailed rather early. I possessed that aptitude.

I had no police record, and no associates who were on the shady side of the law. I well knew what tripped up most professional burglars. It was the fact that they had an identifiable method of operation, underworld connections to dispose of the loot, prison records and histories of crime from an early age to aid the police in identification. In short, all the tentacles that connected them to the world of crime also entwined them.

No such tentacles for me. I hadn't had a traffic ticket for five years. As for a fence, I much preferred to work completely alone, stealing only what was negotiable and trusting no one but myself,



whom I trusted implicitly. That is the key to the whole craft, being as solitary as possible.

Already I had some small skill at picking locks, and I practiced until I became quite proficient. Usually, though, I planned to use other means of entry, quicker means. I practiced with a glass cutter and tape, dulling the noise with soap, until I could swiftly and silently cut a six-inch hole in plate glass and with a gentle tap remove the glass section held fast with strips of tape to prevent it falling noisily.

I then set out to purchase from various large stores the tools I would need for my new trade. I bought a small crowbar, screwdriver, celluloid strips, and a more expensive diamond-bladed glass cutter. For clothing, I bought (on credit, of course) some rubber-soled shoes of a very popular and untraceable brand and a navy blue jacket to wear with dark trousers. I didn't want to attract undue attention to myself by wearing all black clothing, but a dark ensemble was always to be desired. A small portable radio that would pick up police calls was my last purchase.

Then I set out to serve my lonely and dangerous apprenticeship.

My first target was the home of a wealthy plastics firm president in the well-to-do west end of town. It was a large house, and reasonably

secluded. My careful reconnoitering led me to be certain that they owned no dog and had no domestic help that slept in. The only two people who lived permanently in the house were Mr. and Mrs. President and their two sons, who were presently away at college. The sons came home and left one weekend while I was noting the absence of dog, doghouse and domestic help.

Every three nights, at irregular intervals between ten and twelve o'clock, I telephoned the house, the first time hanging up when there was an answer, the next time faking a wrong number. If I had called four times and they were always home, I would have given up and moved on to another victim. But the third call found Mr. and Mrs. President out.

I immediately dressed in my inconspicuous dark clothing, put my tools in a brown canvas bag and got into my car. The car already suited my purpose, being of popular make and color. I drove to a small shopping center only a few minutes from the house and phoned again. Still no answer.

When I got near the house I parked the car down the street, about two blocks away, then reached into the bag for the glass cutter, tape and screwdriver. I already knew the window where I would gain access, a small window

on the side of the house partially obscured by some bushes.

There was a light on in the house, and there was no car in sight, though the garage door was closed. I expected a light to be on, wanted one on, in fact, so I would have light to work by.

Walking casually, unhesitatingly, I made my way to the side of the house. From my vantage point in the bushes I looked around before entering. I was in shadow, as I had calculated earlier by the position of the street light. The nearest house was about two hundred feet away, partly shielded by a tall fence. When I was sure I hadn't been noticed, I applied some soap to the glass cutter blade, tore off a strip of tape, and within a minute I was reaching my gloved hand inside to unlock the window. In another half minute I was inside.

The first thing I did was draw my radio from my pocket and tune in on the local police calls. Then I placed the radio back in my pocket and plugged the earphone into my left ear. I slipped on a mask I'd made from one of my wife's old stockings so that if surprised I couldn't be recognized, and began looking around.

I allowed myself fifteen minutes of systematic searching inside the house. Keeping low so as not to be spotted through a window, I then

searched desk drawers, bureau drawers, closets and any miscellaneous places that looked promising, in that order of priority.

My nerves were virtually screaming inside that still house, and it took all my willpower to meet the challenge of controlling myself. Once a passing car slowed outside and I froze in blind fear, then I swallowed that fear and continued with my task.

When I left that house I had two hundred and ninety dollars cash that I'd found in a desk drawer and three ten-dollar bills that had been in a woman's jewelry box. A purse in a closet had also netted five dollars. Reasonable pay for a short night's work.

I got into my car with its carefully mud-spattered license plate and drove away.

When I arrived home I allowed myself a drink and sat staring at the money before me on the kitchen table. It wasn't all that much money, really, but that night had filled me with a secret excitement I hadn't felt since childhood. A challenge—intricate, dangerous—had been met successfully. I knew then I had found my true calling.

In the months that followed I did quite well, averaging two burglaries a week, though at very irregular intervals so as not to set a pattern. As I worked I perfected my technique.

Since I had no police record I decided to stick to one safe, efficient method of entry. What difference if the police had my M.O. if they could do nothing with the information? The crowbar and heavier tools of the trade were discarded, along with the rather melodramatic stocking mask, and I carried only the tape, glass cutter and sometimes a strip of celluloid—easy enough to dispose of if the police ever did get me in a tight spot, and much less incriminating than a crowbar. As for a portable radio, they could hardly find that incriminating even if it were the type that could pick up police calls.

My secret business flourished while for six months I actually drew my weekly unemployment check. I can't tell you the satisfaction it gave me to collect that stipend from the state while I was growing rich from my nocturnal adventures.

Then it occurred to me that I would need some visible means of support. After just a little bit of thought it came to me—I would solve two problems with one ingenious stroke.

I went into business by purchasing a small secondhand and antique shop. Now I could boost my profits still higher by stealing untraceable, salable items as well as money. I would be my own fence!

For several years I prospered.

Even the tiny shop showed a fair profit aside from the proceeds of stolen merchandise that never entered the books. By this time I had perfected my technique, elevated it to an art, if I might set modesty aside to make that claim. Each job was carefully analyzed and planned to the tiniest detail until the odds against me were reduced well to my favor. When I was confident that danger was at an acceptable minimum I struck skillfully, swiftly and silently, a phantom come and gone.

Sometimes at night, lying alone in bed after a job, I'd wonder what Jean, my dead wife, would think of this if she were alive. She'd forgive me, I'm sure. She might even discover what I was doing and pretend she didn't know; but she would never understand. I was sure she'd never understand.

Then chance, as chance eventually must, worked against me.

I was working in a house in the west end one night when I heard the dispatcher's calm, emotionless voice on the police radio inform a patrol car that a robbery was in progress at 333 High Lane. I stopped what I was doing immediately. I was in one of the bedrooms of 333 High Lane.

It wasn't the first time I'd set off one of those silent burglar alarms, and I knew what to do. Unless the

car summoned happened to be only a block or two away, I had ample time to make a quick exit, cut through to the next block and walk casually down the street to where my car was parked. I might even drive past 333 High Lane to see what was happening; just another curious motorist.

Only tonight as I approached my car I saw that it was leaning slightly. The left rear tire was flat!

Congratulating myself for taking nothing from the house and having the good sense to toss my glass cutter and wadded up gloves into some bushes, I opened the trunk and in an efficient but unhurried manner began to change the tire.

I was just tightening the last nut when the police cruiser glided to a halt behind me.

"You're too late," I said jokingly, smiling at the two officers who got out of the car. "The work's finished."

They stood over me and watched silently as I banged the hub cap into place. As I straightened I noticed that the younger of the two was staring into the open trunk.

"Thought you might need some assistance," the other policeman said in a friendly voice.

I lowered the car on the jack and hoisted the flat tire into the trunk. "Luckily I had a spare, but I appreciate the thought." Without looking

at them I stooped, tossed the jack and wrench into the trunk and slammed the lid. My heart was racing. Then with a smile and a nod I began wiping my greasy hands on my handkerchief as I walked toward the door on the driver's side.

"Hold on a minute, sir," the older officer said as my fingers touched the door handle.

I turned toward them, a puzzled expression on my face.

"Mind if I ask you what you have in your shirt pocket?" he asked as he walked toward me.

Innocently I pulled out my portable radio. "I don't have a car radio," I said truthfully. "I always carry it when I drive."

"This picks up shortwave," the officer said, examining the radio carefully, "police calls."

"Yes," I said in a friendly voice, "lots of the ones they sell now do that." But I noticed that his young partner had returned to the cruiser and was talking into the radio microphone while he watched me.

In a politely apologetic voice the officer instructed me to lean on the car while he searched me. Of course he found nothing incriminating.

"Stay there a while, please," he said to me, and I held my uncomfortable position.

A half minute or so passed be-



fore the young officer called from the police car. "The lieutenant says we're to bring him in," he said.

I was led to a small office in the police station and made to sit in a

chair near a wide wooden table that smelled of varnish. Lieutenant Harrow sat across the table from me and stared at me for a moment. He was a short, flabby-looking man who had those squinty, rather rec-

tangular eyes that you sometimes see on exceptionally shrewd people, as if they were constantly peering into something. I have such eyes myself. He had thinning hair and a slightly bulbous nose and would have appeared almost comical except for the eyes.

"Have you been advised of your rights?" he asked me.

"Certainly," I said, "but I don't need a lawyer. I've done nothing illegal and there's no reason I shouldn't cooperate with you."

"There was a burglary near where you had your flat tire," he said in an unimpressed voice. "How is it you were carrying a radio that would pick up police calls?"

I smiled. "Many of the better portables will pick up shortwave."

"A neighbor said he thought he saw a man dressed in dark clothing leaving the house. You're dressed in dark clothing, Mr. Cole."

"So are your officers," I said. "Perhaps the neighbor saw one of them."

Lieutenant Harrow stuck out his lips something like a fish and nodded. "Possible." He reached into his pocket and laid my glass cutter and gloves on the table. "What about these? Found in some bushes near the house."

I picked up the glass cutter by the wrong end and examined it curiously. "Some sort of tool?"

"A glass cutter," he said patiently, "and those are gloves. Try the gloves on please, Mr. Cole."

I slipped on the gloves and flexed my fingers as if I were unaccustomed to them.

"They seem to fit pretty well," Lieutenant Harrow said.

"Not surprising," I said. "These are cheap cotton work gloves. They come in small, medium and large, and I'm medium."

Harrow watched as I removed the gloves. "What were you doing driving in that neighborhood?" he asked. "I notice by your address you live in the other end of town."

"Yes," I said easily, "I'm in the antique business, and several of those large old houses contain heirloom furniture. I often drive through that neighborhood looking for real estate signs so I can ask the family that's moving if they plan to sell any of their furniture. That way I get to it before it's advertised."

"Clever," Lieutenant Harrow said without blinking at me.

"I think so," I said, not blinking either.

The lieutenant leaned back and pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He drew out a bent cigarette, lit it, and offered one to me. Graciously I declined.

"You know," he said, settling himself comfortably in his chair,

"there've been a lot of burglaries worked the same way as this one on High Lane. Family's never home, nothing's ever taken but cash and small valuable items—quick, clever entry at the home's most vulnerable spot. A real professional, one of the best we've run up against."

"Surely you'll catch him eventually, Lieutenant."

Harrow pursed his thick lips and looked perplexed. "But this man is smart; will we be able to hold him—to prove anything?"

"I don't know," I said, shrugging. "That's your department."

"It's not like dealing with an ordinary crook," Lieutenant Harrow said thoughtfully. "Sometimes that one in a thousand comes along, the true expert."

"You almost make me admire the man, Lieutenant."

"The man himself . . . I don't know," Lieutenant Harrow said, "but you have to admire the way he does his job."

"The man or his job," I said smiling. "It seems to me in a case like this they're almost one and the same."

Lieutenant Harrow blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling and watched it dissipate. "We're not going to hold you, Mr. Cole. There's not nearly enough evidence to get anyone into real trouble."

I stood, with the smile still on my

face. "I hope I've at least been of some help to you," I said in a sincere voice.

The pale and fleshy face before me didn't change expression. "I hope so too," Lieutenant Harrow said, blowing another cloud of smoke at the ceiling.

When I got home I saw unmistakable signs that my apartment had been searched, but that didn't matter. I'd prepared for such an eventuality. All the money I'd retained from my burglaries was in several safe-deposit boxes around town.

I sat up late that night, thinking. Almost getting caught had changed things, had brought me to the attention of the police. They would watch me now, and carefully. I would have to wait a while until my next job, and I would have to cut down on the number of burglaries I committed. Since my meeting with Lieutenant Harrow the risk factor for each of my late night adventures would be doubled.

By the time I went to bed I had decided the safest and most profitable thing would be for me to move on to some other large city. Of course I couldn't attract more suspicion by leaving right away. I'd stay here for six months at least and pull four or five more burglaries to keep my hand in and to establish that the robberies hadn't stopped

abruptly after the date of my questioning.

Almost two months passed before I burglarized my next home. I chose the home more for its seclusion and ease of entry than for its potential profit. Yet I was pleased to net almost two hundred dollars in cash, some small diamonds I could easily remove and place in different settings, and a rare coin collection that I could dispose of piecemeal at a nice profit.

Just a few days later Lieutenant Harrow visited me in my shop and asked me about the burglary, the work of the same elusive expert. I informed him that I knew nothing of the robbery and explained that I had been home in bed when it had occurred. Before he left I offered to sell him an increasingly rare 1928 nickel.

A week after my next burglary, which for caution's sake I decided to make my last before leaving the city, I was again visited by the lieutenant.

"You'll be interested to know," he said to me as he leaned casually on a showcase of curios, "that the man we talked about has committed another burglary."

"No," I said in a shocked tone. "And the police aren't any closer to catching this master criminal?"

Harrow put his hands in the pockets of his unbuttoned topcoat

and shook his head. "A man like that is very hard to apprehend, hard to convict." He raised his eyebrows. "I suppose you were home sleeping last Thursday night."

"Why, yes, from ten o'clock on. What time did the robbery occur?"

"In the early morning hours," Lieutenant Harrow said. "By the way, after I left here last time I checked the list of stolen items and you'll be interested to know that some of the merchandise right here in your shop matches items on that list."

"That's not surprising, Lieutenant. Much of the merchandise in this store is mass-produced by the thousands, and I don't ask questions of the people who sell it second-hand to me. You'd be welcome to check anything in the store, but I suppose it's all untraceable."

"Yes," Lieutenant Harrow said with a saggy little smile, "untraceable." He handed me a card with some handwriting on it. "If you decide you know anything about these robberies, or if somebody shows up here with something suspicious in the next few weeks, call this man at headquarters."

I took the card and slipped it into my shirt pocket. "Certainly, Lieutenant. If something should happen to come up."

He didn't look back at me as he left.

Scarcely a week passed before I had another visitor from the police department, a young detective who managed to break a twenty-dollar cut glass vase before leaving. I began to wonder if this was going to be a campaign of harassment. Lieutenant Harrow didn't strike me as that crude or unrealistic, but then he was a frustrated man.

I decided to telephone police headquarters and have a word with the lieutenant.

Instead of Harrow I was connected with a lieutenant detective named Voss. I remembered the name from the card Harrow had given me when he was at the shop.

This Lieutenant Voss was very uncooperative on the phone. He refused to connect me with Harrow or tell me where I could reach him. When I demanded that the police department pay for the broken vase, he told me he'd send some men around to question me about the incident and then, if necessary, I could submit a written request for payment. I knew what would come of that. I told him to forget about the vase and hung up.

The next morning I called police headquarters again, and Lieutenant Harrow still wasn't available. Then I opened the phone directory and looked up Harrow's home number. If he thought he wouldn't be harassed back he was very wrong; but

when I telephoned there was no answer. I checked his address in the phone book. It was only a half hour's drive from my apartment, so I decided that later that afternoon I would drive over and talk to Lieutenant Harrow personally. Then I busied myself working on the shop's books.

Lieutenant Harrow's home was the kind of house a police lieutenant would live in, a small white frame on a deep but narrow lot. Neatly trimmed shrubbery surrounded the house, and as I stepped up on the cement porch I noticed a well-kept flower garden off to the side. I gave the doorbell a long ring. No answer.

Again I rang the doorbell, then knocked loudly on the door. As I did so I looked down and saw two rolled up newspapers lying near my feet. After one final ring I left, disgusted.

As I stepped through the gate back onto the sidewalk a postman came by on one of those little red, white and blue mail scooters. "Ain't nobody home there," he told me in an amiable voice. "Harrow stopped delivery for two weeks. Went down to Florida."

I nodded to him and he drove on, stopping farther down the street, then turning the corner.

So the unreachable Lieutenant Harrow has taken his policeman's

vacation and gone south, I thought, as I got into my car and twisted the ignition key. But he had left things in capable hands.

I was several blocks away when the idea struck me.

What a clever stroke! What a perfect coup! What a splendid tweak of the nose and grand finale!

Quickly I turned the car around and drove back to look at Lieutenant Harrow's little frame house more carefully. The next time I would see it would be after night-fall, and there would be no moon tonight.

It was 10:30 that evening when I parked my car around the corner from Lieutenant Harrow's house. I had to smile. I had no way of knowing Lieutenant Harrow was away in Florida. The police department had been too rude to give me any information at all. Still, I wanted them to suspect me, so I would leave a little something behind.

Getting out of the car without any hesitation, as if I were as careless as the next man, I nonchalantly walked around the corner, fingering the 1928 nickel in my pocket.

The street was empty as I slipped through the gate and made my way to Harrow's porch. I would be almost impossible to see in the darkness, but even so I wanted to appear casual, as if I belonged there. When I got to the porch I glanced

about, then slipped off to the side of the house behind some bushes near a low window. I pulled my tape and glass cutter from my jacket pocket, and in less than a minute I was inside.

The darkness was total. Switching on the flashlight I'd brought from the car's glove compartment, I cautiously shone the beam around. I was in a small bedroom with a single bed and a chest of drawers.

Hurriedly, silently, I rummaged through the drawers. There were some men's clothing, linen, an empty briefcase, and a gold wristwatch without engraving that I took a fancy to and slipped into my pocket. Two of the drawers were empty. Apparently this was a spare bedroom.

I moved out into the hall and spotted a small desk in the corner of the dining room. As I pulled out the drawers I found that the desk contained more unpaid bills than anything else. Burglarizing a police lieutenant's home wasn't like searching one of the stately west end homes. I did come across a good portable tape recorder in a bottom desk drawer and slipped that into my pocket with the watch. Keeping the flashlight beam low so it wouldn't be spotted from outside the house, I began making my way toward the master bedroom.

Then the lights came on! All of

them, throughout the whole house.

My heart began to pound rapidly and every sense was alive. Instinctively I ran for the back door, opened it, and as I rushed out, the entire back yard was bathed in brilliant light. I stopped so fast I almost slipped and fell, shielding my eyes from the bright lights with my forearm. There were footsteps now, and voices.

"It's him," a voice said, and through the glare I saw a familiar face. It was the postman who had stopped and talked to me this afternoon. Only now he was wearing a different kind of uniform.

Strong hands gripped me by both arms, forcing my wrists behind me painfully and snapping handcuffs over them.

Then Lieutenant Harrow's flabby face appeared before me, white in the exaggerated light. There was a bent cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. I stared back at him unflinchingly.

"You were bound to get caught," he told me in an almost kind voice, "because I understand what makes a man like you steal. I mean, what

it is that *really* makes you steal."

He was still watching me, standing with his hands in his pockets, as I was shoved into the back of the waiting patrol wagon.

So now I'm writing this from my cell in East State Prison. It's always cold in this place, and the food is tasteless and everything's as gray as an old movie. Not my sort of place at all.

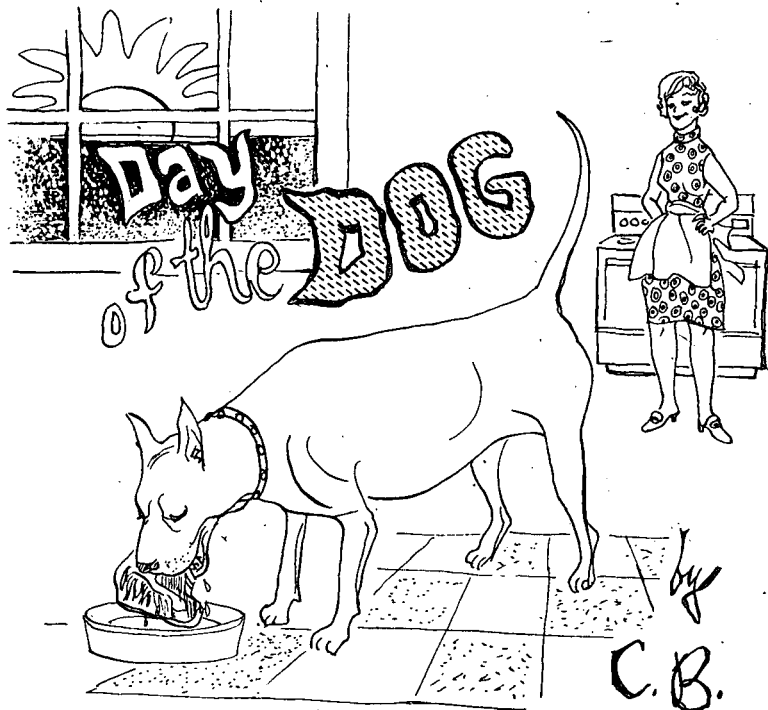
Nevertheless, that's where I'm writing this from. I really should sign it '33586', but that is such an ignominious title. Besides, I might not be 33586 much longer, for I've been studying this prison very carefully.

At first I calculated the odds of escaping at ninety-five percent against me, but then I began evolving plans. At worst I could be killed, and if only caught I'd be sure to get a much longer sentence. It's not a smart gamble, really, and at best I figure the odds now to be seventy-five percent against me. Not a smart gamble at all.

Still, there's always that other twenty-five percent . . . Oh man, what a challenge that would be!



The shortcut is said to be the rational one, often circumventing the inhibitions of civilization.



by
C.B.
Gilford

IT BEGAN, as murders usually do, with a small thing. The small thing in this case was a glob of brown flesh, flopping, wobbly, ungainly, but bearing a certain resemblance to a dog. By virtue of its parentage and registration by the American Kennel Club, the pup was, how-

ever, guaranteed to be, or at least to become, a Great Dane. Arnold Spenther, his purchaser, had once taken a night course in Shake-

spare, and appropriately named the beast Hamlet.

Hamlet, rapidly growing, filled a void in the lives of the Spenthers. They were a childless couple, for reasons more emotional than medical. Arnold was a clerk in the ladies' shoe department of the city's largest store. Over the years he came to despise women, his wife Verna included. That explained a lot of things, among them why he began to prefer dogs.

Verna Spenther was the kind of female who married not really for love, nor for security. A secretary of sorts who was making her own living when Arnold found her, she had decided that marriage, even to a fellow like Arnold, was simply easier than working.

In the early years of wedlock, Verna was satisfied with magazines, television serials, and rich desserts. From long sitting, both on the chaise longue before the TV set and on the kitchen chair, she waxed fat and content. Arnold, who loathed fat ladies because it was so hard to insert chubby feet into narrow shoes, came to cherish his wife less and less as there grew more of her to cherish. He found his only solace in daydreams, Mitty-esque dramatizations of himself as an outdoor man, hunter, fisherman, provider of venison and bear steaks. He had his own magazines, the male kind,

about adventure, the outdoors, and animals.

Hamlet was a mutual decision. To Arnold the animal—any animal—symbolized the great world of space and wilderness outside the narrow confines of the shoe department, their untidy little bungalow, and the bus line in between. Verna's attraction to the pup was slightly more complex. She craved company. She disliked her husband. The Spenthers had no friends. The imaginary people in the magazines and on the television screen had their limitations. She wanted a companion who was alive, breathing and present, but who didn't make demands. Hamlet was all things to both of them.

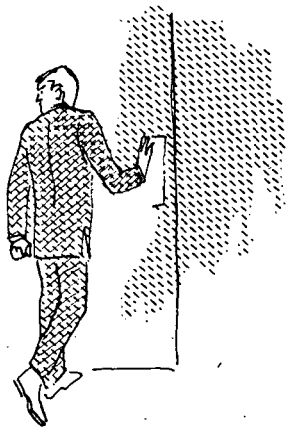
They should have bought two dogs, one for each of them. Then there wouldn't have been the bitter rivalry for Hamlet's affection; but a lot of people would be alive today if they hadn't made certain mistakes.

The Spenthers' first argument exploded less than a week after the purchase of the canine. Arnold arrived home from his shoe-selling chores, and was not greeted at the door by the fragrance of cooking food. True, such a happy event occurred only seldom, but he could always hope. This particular evening, however, he felt unusually hungry, and made his way immediately to

ie kitchen at the back of the house.

He was just in time to observe Hamlet's being served a royal reast, the *pièce de resistance* of which had a definite resemblance to U. S. Grade Choice. "Hey, that's weak," he shouted in alarm.

"I know what it is," Verna answered placidly. "Hamlet hasn't been eating well at all lately. I figured he needed something to perk up his jaded appetite."



"So you chose steak? Beefsteak?"

"Why not?"

"Why doesn't he eat dog food like other dogs?"

"He isn't like other dogs."

"All right, he's our dog. But the stuff in cans is what he needs. It's scientifically formulated. It's nutritious—"

"It's horse meat. I looked at the label."

"There's nothing wrong with horse meat."

"Hamlet is not going to eat it."

Arnold felt anger rising in him like dirty backwater in a clogged drain. He was every bit as fond of Hamlet as Verna was. It wasn't toward the dog that he felt angry. His mounting fury was directed toward Verna.

"How much did you pay for that steak, a dollar a pound?" His voice had gone to falsetto, robbing him of dignity and authority.

"Almost two dollars," Verna answered with perfect calm.

"Do you know how much I make a week?"

"Only too well. It isn't very much."

"Right. It isn't very much. Not enough to keep a Great Dane in steak at two dollars a pound."

"Ask for a raise."

"You know very well I work on commission. And I can sell just so many shoes a day."

"You wanted a dog."

"I still want a dog."

"Then you'll have to find a way to support him."

Savagely he turned his back on the scene of Hamlet gently masticating the thick, red, juicy slab of meat and Verna's enraptured contemplation of the spectacle. He went to the bedroom, where he vented his rage by throwing himself

on the bed, not caring whether his suit got wrinkled or not.

It was eight, almost eight-thirty, before Verna called him to dinner. He went, though still sulking, because his appetite had returned with a vengeance and he was hungry enough to outdo Hamlet in the matter of steak.

Then Verna thrust a plate in front of him. On it, making three separate little mounds and leaving plenty of room in between, were a small, bald, boiled potato, a bit of soggy spinach, and a flabby, quivering red gelatin in the shape and size of an inverted demitasse, innocent and naked of any fruit or other adornment.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"The Spenther vegetarian special."

"What are you talking about?" The volume of his shout was such that Verna was slightly alarmed.

"I have a confession to make," she began.

"Go on."

"I tried the dog food on Hamlet, but he didn't like it. Those were our steaks I gave him."

From that day forward the doom of the Spenthers' marriage was sealed. It had never amounted to much anyway, but now it was finished. They did not part, however. Ironically, it was Hamlet who held them together. They didn't exactly

share him. Rather they vied for his attentions, and as they themselves termed it, his love.

Verna had a great tactical advantage in this epic struggle. Five days a week, nine hours a day, while Arnold sold shoes, she had possession of the dog, and she lavished luxury and affection upon him. From the beginning, she had assigned him the spare bedroom. The basement, she said, was too damp and the outdoors too perilous. She disposed of the bed frame, but kept the mattress. On the floor, it made an imperial-sized couch for the new monarch of the household.

"But a Great Dane isn't a lap dog," Arnold objected bitterly.

"And he isn't a wild beast either," Verna said.

"Hamlet can take care of himself with that Pekingese next door."

"There's a Scottie up the block," Verna pointed out.

"But a Dane is a big dog." Hamlet was, indeed, growing rapidly on his beefsteak diet, and though still a pup, was managing to occupy a considerable portion of his mattress. "We could put a fence around the back yard."

"With winter coming on?" Verna asked in horror. "He'd catch the sniffles first thing."

Hamlet, though seemingly in perfect health, had already run up a bill at the vet's. Arnold gave up. He

had it all figured out now, but it was too late. He should have bought some little toy-sized dog for Verna, something she could more conveniently baby and cuddle. In Verna's mind, Hamlet was a tiny Mexican Hairless or something, and no matter how much he grew, he was going to stay that way to her.

In the evenings and on weekends Arnold strove mightily to impress Hamlet, to retrain him, to make a man's dog out of him. In the evenings he would take the dog for a walk. It was fine fall weather, but to Verna the brisk air was full of chill and laden with germs. Hamlet seemed glad to escape the house, but Verna always made a scene.

On weekends Arnold scheduled day-long hikes in the country. Verna retaliated by toggging her pet in specially knitted sweater and boots. Arnold would wait till they were out of sight and then help the dog disrobe. Verna tried going along several times, but she was too fat for hiking, and after several experiences of being left panting by the roadside, took to staying at home in tears.

Red-eyed, she spent the Mondays after those Sundays removing country burrs from Hamlet's short coat, and examining his paws and every inch of his enlarging body for cuts and bruises. At the least suspicious mark she summoned the vet.

A dog psychiatrist would have been more appropriate. Hamlet was reacting to his environment in these, his early and personality-formative months. He was becoming a schizophrenic.

Of course it couldn't last. The tensions were too great. Someone would crack.

Preoccupied with his domestic problems, the quality of Arnold's work deteriorated. He sold fewer shoes. His boss hinted darkly that perhaps Arnold would be happier in some other employment.

He was aghast at the prospect of losing his job. His expenses had risen astronomically, and he was saddled with a mounting debt. The vet's bills were constant: Arnold kept telling the man to ignore Verna when she called, but the vet evidently needed the business and continuing as Hamlet's personal physician was a lucrative thing. Arnold resorted to loan sharks. Anything was better than letting his boss know that he was living beyond his means.

Then there were the grocery bills. Arnold had fought Verna's beefsteak extravagance as best he could. He had refused to give her cash money. Next, he had removed her name from his checking account, but there was always a grocery store which would extend her credit and then dun him at the end

of the month. He gave up this particular struggle finally.

The worst of it all was that he was losing Hamlet. Verna stuffed him with steak all week, and also initiated him into the toils of her own particular vice—chocolate. As Hamlet's bones extended and he should have stretched out, he did, indeed, stretch out, but he also filled as he stretched, maintaining somewhat the comparative dimensions of his puppy days. Arnold got some pictures of champion Great Danes and showed them to Verna, but to no avail. Her mind was closed on the subject. The pictures, however, displayed the ideal of the species as a tall dog, long-legged, and with a certain massiveness, especially in the head and jowls but, essentially, a *lean* dog.

Hamlet wasn't turning out that way at all. He was now over three feet high at the shoulder, but viewed from the front, he presented a round silhouette, rather like a cow's, with a great sagging belly that looked preposterous when supported by his thin legs.

All of which, however, was more than an aesthetic concern to Arnold. An overweight dog is not an enthusiastic hiker. Now, when Arnold tried to get the beast out of the house for a weekend jaunt, he began to have not only the weight of Verna to pull against, but likewise

the vast bulk of Hamlet, like a balloon filled with lead. There came the inevitable day when Hamlet, whatever might have been his mind, refused to walk out of the house. He lay inert on his mattress, considering Arnold with his huge sad brown eyes, implying, *I'd like to go along with you, dear master, but I'm just not up to it.*

Verna, whether she'd deliberately planned it this way or not, recognized her final victory. She shouldered past Arnold through the doorway of the spare bedroom, got down on all fours, and with a great posterior sway, waddled across the floor to the mattress and curled up there beside Hamlet, with one chubby arm around the dog's neck. Hamlet returned the affection by unrolling his enormous tongue and licking her face, in much the same manner and on the same scale as a paperhanger distributing his paste with a wide brush. Verna, shivering and undulating in ecstasy and triumph, murmured over and over, but loud enough for her husband to overhear, "You're my doggie now . . . all my doggie . . . nobody's doggie but mine . . ."

To hear such a noble beast with the noble name of Hamlet addressed as 'doggie' was too much for Arnold to bear. He saw red.

"I want a divorce," he announced venomously.

"That's quite all right with me," Verna answered. "You're in the way around here, Arnold. A divorce will be fine, as long as you pay for the support of me and my doggie."

"I'll pay your separate support. But Hamlet comes with me."

Verna raised her head and fixed him with a malignant stare. "What do you bet," she taunted him, "that the court will give me the custody of my doggie?"

In a moment of black despair, Arnold realized that she would in all likelihood win that wager. He knew a little about divorce courts. Their proceedings had held a certain wishful fascination for him for some years now. Almost inevitably, the judges were kind to the wives.

Then the black despair was superseded by a red rage. The pent-up frustrations and furies of all these recent months burst their civilized bonds, and like a savage brute from the wilderness he'd so long idylized in his daydreams, Arnold sprang upon Verna; the lean, wiry beast of prey against the fat, sluggish, bovine victim—an unequal contest.

He used Hamlet's leash. The tough leather was ideal for the task. In a trice he had it circling Verna's neck, then crossed its ends at the back. As he tightened this hasty noose, the leather bit deep and disappeared into the thick folds of

flesh, and Arnold set himself hard.

Verna reared up in terror, but Arnold hung on grimly, like a leopard astride a ponderous tapir. The harder she tried to shake him off, the more determinedly did he tug at the leash.

It was finished quite quickly. Verna did not have a great lung capacity. From his position behind her, Arnold was spared the sight of her face, its empurplement, the lolling of her tongue, the bulging of her eyes. When she went limp, he was not satisfied, but maintained the tautness of the noose until he was completely sure. Then he let go, and her body slumped to the floor like a bag of potatoes someone had kicked over.

Where Hamlet's sympathies were during these proceedings were not, nor could ever be, known. A lean and active dog might have defended his mistress, and his great dripping jaws certainly would have been capable. But he was fat and torpid, so he merely looked on enigmatically, though perhaps with curiosity, at this odd human interlude. If Verna had sinned in the matter of dog feeding, poetic justice had overtaken her.

Arnold stood up, breathing hard, but he felt exalted and free. He had accomplished a double goal—a hated object was destroyed, and a loved object was his and his alone,

forever. He gazed fondly at his pet.

"Hamlet, old friend," he said when he had recovered himself a little, "the new order has arrived. We don't have to listen to Verna's silly prattle anymore. In six months, if I work hard, I might even get out of debt. We'll put a chain-link fence around the yard, and all day long, while I'm at the store, you can romp and breathe the suburban air. Then on weekends, we'll start getting you in shape, old boy. We can kiss that vet good-bye, because you'll have the right diet and exercise. Oh, Hamlet, we'll have a great life together."

Impulsively emotional, he knelt beside the dog and gave him a few masculine pats on the head.

It was then, for the first time, that he realized that he had committed murder. The knowledge hit him like an electric shock. Murder . . . and all its aftereffects . . . the police . . . questioning . . . jail!

"No!"

He stood up again, shouting his rejection of that notion. Hadn't it been justifiable homicide? His wife had stolen his dog. But no, he was afraid that the jury, not having lived with Verna and loved Hamlet, might not appreciate the enormity of the woman's crime. If their verdict was against him, he would be separated from his dog, and dogs didn't live as long as people. Ham-

let might be dead before he was released from prison, and where would the profit be in that?

He had been brave and decisive in the actual killing of Verna. Now he must show the same qualities in escaping punishment. He either had to make the murder look like an accident . . . No, that would be rather difficult, an accident in which one gets strangled in the rather definite way Verna had been strangled—or he had to blame the murder on someone else. Who? A burglar . . . yes, that was good . . . and then Arnold got lost in mazes of planted clues, footprints, jimmied locks, valuables missing. No, that would take time, and he didn't have time. There was Verna's ugly, plump little body . . . Get rid of it!

Yes, the best alternative of all; conceal the fact that a murder had been committed at all by concealing the corpse. So simple; simplicity, the real hallmark of genius.

Arnold looked at Hamlet, and the dog stared back.

"Old pal," Arnold said, "I know you can do this for me. I'm not up to it myself. The inhibitions of civilization, you know. But what do you say we put off switching to the 'canned dog food for a while?'"

Everything worked out splendidly. Nobody missed Verna very much. To the one neighbor who inquired with only the faintest curios-

ity, Arnold said, "Verna went home to her mother. I think it's all over with us." The neighbor expressed polite condolences, and didn't seem to know or remember that Verna had been an orphan. The police weren't interested at all. They simply never discovered that there was anything in which to get interested.

After a certain period of over-eating, Hamlet, fatter than ever, was at length put on a strict diet. "I'm sorry to have to do this, old boy," Arnold explained to the animal, "but it's for your own good. You have to slim down, and the sooner we get it over with, the sooner we can start our outdoor life. Understand? So I think it ought to be a crash diet. Can't consult the vet in this, you know, but I think for the sake of your health, old man—burden on your heart and all that—we ought to take drastic steps."

For the next two weeks, Hamlet got water and a few scraps, a very few. He didn't like the new regimen. He whined, whimpered and growled softly and protestingly. Arnold was sympathetic but firm.

"This hurts me more than it does you, old chum," he assured Hamlet. The whole procedure was mutually painful, but it worked. Hamlet grew quickly and noticeably slimmer.

As with a human dieter, however, Hamlet also grew cross and irritable. He kept up his strength by living off his accumulation of fat and, far from being weak from hunger, he grew more and more active, pacing constantly. Even when he lay down, he seemed restive, and seldom did his gaze leave Arnold. It was as if his mind always dwelt on the subject of food. *I'm hungry, old chap*, his large brown eyes pleaded silently.

Arnold had kept up his subscriptions to the men's magazines. He studied animal lore, the lore of all kinds of animals, the better to be a good parent to Hamlet. One of the articles he read contained this sentence: "Once they have sampled human flesh, both lions and tigers acquire a taste for it, and become man-eaters." But the article made no impression on Arnold. It was talking about cats, of course.



That which challenges one's credulity may, on occasion, incur unforeseen ramifications.



LEANING OVER the random scatter of ancient objects on the table, Howard Mitchell was visited by the sudden, almost intolerable excitement of the avid collector who spots a treasure.

His heart lurched. He drew in a deep breath and leaned closer to the ceramic figure of the lute-player, breathing mental thanks to the clerk at his Hong Kong hotel who had directed him to Mr. Cheong's Emporium of the Suffering Dragon.

Mr. Cheong's antique shop presented a hodgepodge of supposed

antiquities for sale to the credulous tourist, from Chinese weapons and armor to tatters of resplendent costumes once worn, no doubt, by noblemen and prostitutes before China became The New China.

Mitchell knew very little about antique armor or clothing but he did pride himself on a fairly broad knowledge of ceramics, and unless his eyes deceived him, he had dis-

covered among the junk of Mr. Cheong's shop a true piece of ancient Chinese pottery. The lute-player was small—not more than six inches high—unglazed and dusty, but beautifully molded and fired. It was exactly the kind of piece originally placed in the tombs of prominent Chinese persons long ago.

How long ago? Mitchell leaned closer for better scrutiny. T'ang? Almost certainly, and that would make the little lute-player about twelve hundred years old, give or take a few. It would also make the lute-player a notable addition to the ceramic collection which occupied most of Mitchell's time and attention, now that his wife had died and left him alone with his money.

He became aware of shuffling footsteps and looked up to see an amiable Chinese gentleman regarding him. The shop's proprietor, if it were he, wore a shabby western business suit with vest, and looked every bit as ancient as his stock of merchandise.

"Very nice antiquities, sir," he said to Mitchell with the air of a man who has greeted ten thousand tourist shoppers with exactly those words. His English was excellent.

"Are you Mr. Cheong?" asked Mitchell.

Mr. Cheong bowed. "At your service, sir. Have you found something that strikes your fancy?" Mitchell

noticed that under almost nonexistent lashes, Mr. Cheong's black eyes were shrewd.

Mitchell cleared his throat and tried to speak casually. "This . . . this ceramic figure," he said, indicating the lute-player with an index finger that trembled slightly with eagerness, "is it a genuine antique?"

"I have nothing but genuine antiques in this emporium," Mr. Cheong replied mildly, unperturbed by Mitchell's skepticism.

"Of what period is the figurine?"

"T'ang dynasty," Cheong said, spreading his hands in an Oriental gesture. "It is perfectly typical, I assure you."

"T'ang!" breathed Mitchell. He had been right. "How much do you want for it?"

Cheong smiled a faintly apologetic smile and shrugged his narrow shoulders. "It's a very nice piece, sir. Authentic T'ang, in good condition, is very hard to find these days, you know." He jerked his head in the general direction of the New Territories and Red China beyond them. "So I must ask a reasonably high price, you understand that."

"How much?"

"One thousand dollars," Cheong said.

Mitchell's excitement grew. "Hong Kong dollars?"

Again the faintly deprecatory

smile. "Please, sir. American." He seemed amused, if anything, by Mitchell's question. "And I must warn you, sir, that it will do you no good to bargain with me. A thousand dollars is a very fair price. Ask anyone who knows antiquity values."

Mitchell felt a touch of self-consciousness. Hagglng always made him uncomfortable. "I don't need to ask anyone, Mr. Cheong," he said. "I *know* it's a fair price."

As indeed he did. The going price for genuine T'ang figures, now very fashionable among the affluent citizens of the United States, was about two thousand dollars apiece. Only a month ago he had, himself, willingly paid a New York dealer thirty-one hundred dollars for a T'ang soldier not as perfect as this jewel of a lute-player.

For the first time, he reached out a hand and touched the figurine, lifting it tenderly from its perch among the welter of objects on the table. "I'll take it, please. Will you accept traveler's checks?"

Mr. Cheong bowed. Mitchell wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a lively pleasure in the black Chinese eyes. "Thank you," Mr. Cheong murmured. He took the figure from Mitchell's hand, leaving dust on his fingertips, and went behind a counter at the rear of the shop, where he proceeded to wrap

the fragile lute-player in layer after layer of cotton and dirty newspapers. "Is there anything else my poor emporium can provide?" he asked with stereotyped Chinese humility as he worked. "I have other fine items, sir."

"That's all I want," Mitchell said. He was feeling very pleased with his luck. "Unless you have some more of those T'ang figures kicking around."

Mr. Cheong's hands grew still. He shot a glance at Mitchell. "Are you a dealer, sir?"

"Not a dealer, no. A collector. Of ceramics—Chinese, Etruscan, Persian. Only a beginner, but I'm learning." Mitchell gestured at the piece Mr. Cheong was now inserting in a sturdy cardboard box. "I recognized that one as a beauty, anyway."

Mr. Cheong finished wrapping the lute-player and watched quietly as Mitchell signed traveler's checks and passed them over to him. He put the checks in a drawer and turned back to Mitchell. He said, "A moment ago, I remarked that T'ang pottery is hard to find these days. I was telling the truth. But when one has the proper contacts in Red China, these things can be arranged."

Mitchell considered that oblique remark for a moment, then said, "Are you trying to tell me that *you*

have contacts in Red China, Mr. Cheong?"

Cheong bowed.

"And that therefore you *do* have more of these T'ang figures available?"

Cheong repeated his bow.

"Well, I'll be damned!" blurted Mitchell. Excitement surged through him again, but caution overrode it instantly. He had seen too many fakes masquerading as genuine antiquities to rely on the word of a strange Chinese. Yet there was the lute-player. What harm could come of looking? "Where are they?" he asked. "Here in the shop?"

"Where else?" The Americanism sounded quaint from the mouth of the venerable Mr. Cheong, despite his western suit and vest which were now making him sweat. "Will you come along with me, please, Mr. . . . ?"

"Mitchell." He followed Cheong into a curtained alcove lined with wooden shelves. Cheong lit a dim bulb in the ceiling by pulling on a grimy string, and there, incontrovertibly, lined up at the back of one of the shelves among a miscellany of bangles, teapots and jeweled chopsticks, stood a row of small ceramic figures that looked to Mitchell quite as authentic as the T'ang piece he had already purchased.

"I keep them back from the edge," explained Mr. Cheong, "to prevent accidents."

His heart beating fast, Mitchell's eyes rapidly traversed the row of small figures: musicians, horses, soldiers—twenty-eight of them, in prime condition. He picked up one, went into the main shop, examined the figure by daylight at the front window, and returned to Mr. Cheong.

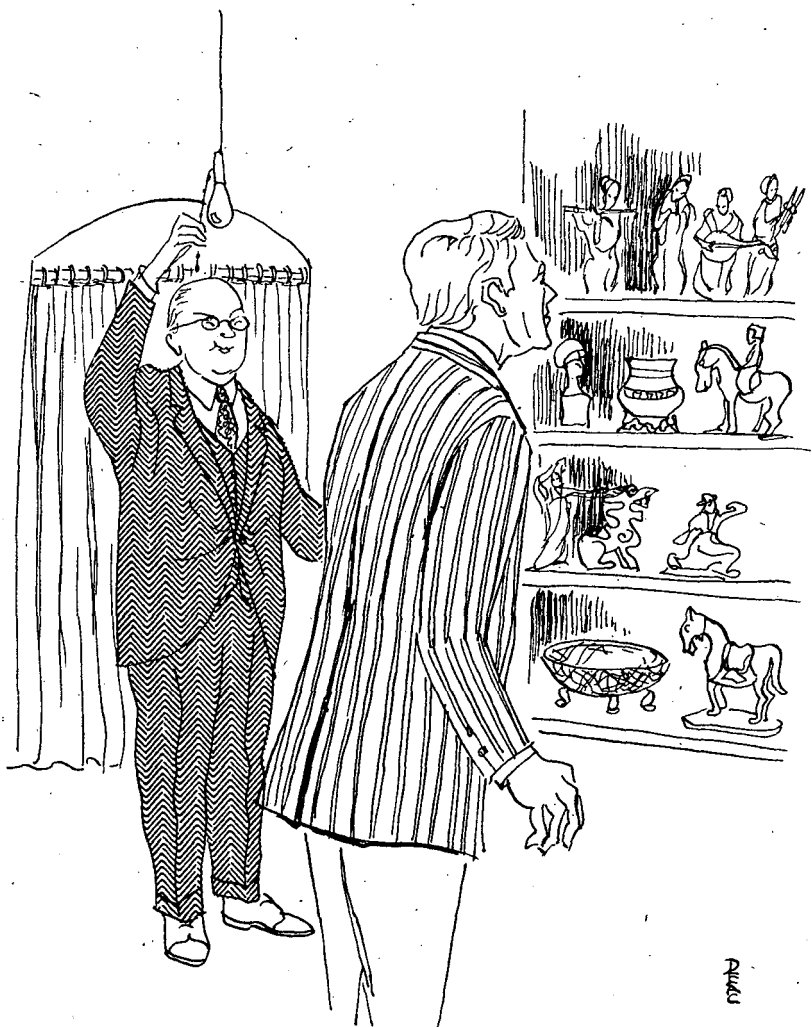
Cheong smiled. "Authentic T'ang," he intoned earnestly. "Very rare, very good condition, very cheap."

"If they're genuine," said Mitchell, unable to contain his suspicion, now reawakened a hundredfold. "As I told you, Mr. Cheong, I'm fairly new at this collecting business, and not at all sure of my own ability to distinguish genuine pieces from fakes. But you must realize," he jerked a thumb at the row of figures, "that this is too good to be true."

Cheong nodded. "I understand your feelings. But I told you that I have good contacts."

"Good is too mild a word. Sensational would be better, I think."

"These pieces are genuine," Mr. Cheong said mildly. "You have my word." He dangled the carrot. "And only one thousand dollars apiece. If you do not wish to own so many T'ang pieces yourself, you



could use them to trade with fellow collectors for other ceramics, could you not?"

Mitchell struggled to retain his perspective. The figures *must* be

fakes, probably manufactured by the hundreds in some hidden Hong Kong factory for the tourist trade. He began to regret buying the lute-player.

Cheong seemed to read his mind. "You suspect these are modern copies, Mr. Mitchell? Tourist souvenirs?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. But I do."

"Do not blame yourself. There are many such in Hong Kong. I am aware of that. But not these. Why not assure yourself of their genuineness?"

"How?"

"Submit them to a true expert in Chinese pottery, perhaps? For certification?"

"Whom do you have in mind?"

"You are American," said Mr. Cheong. "You live in New York?"

"Yes."

"You know Philadelphia, then? In Pennsylvania?"

"Sure," said Mitchell, intrigued by the geographical turn of the conversation. "What about Philadelphia?"

"One of the greatest experts on Chinese ceramics in the world," Cheong said, "resides in Philadelphia. You could have him authenticate these figures as true T'ang pieces."

Mitchell said, "What good can your expert do me when he is in Philadelphia and these figures are in Hong Kong?"

"His evaluation of these pieces can be arranged without financial risk to you, if that's what you mean, Mr. Mitchell?"

"Really?" said Mitchell. "How?"

"Suppose you were to pay me, today, the current souvenir price for these figures, as though they are copies? Then, after consultation with Dr. Kam Soon Fat in Philadelphia, if he finds the pieces genuine, you could mail me the proper price for them."

"You mean you'd *trust* me?"

Mr. Cheong bowed his amiable bow. "Thus you would risk only five American dollars for each of these T'ang figures, Mr. Mitchell, until you are satisfied they are authentic."

Mitchell said weakly, "But the matter of customs duty . . ."

"Declare the lute-player at its true value," Cheong suggested, "and declare these other twenty-eight figures as souvenirs at five dollars apiece. I shall give you a sales slip to that effect."

Mitchell was silent, considering wistfully the row of ceramic figures in a dusty Hong Kong shop, and thinking he'd like very much to own them, fakes or not—and they *must* be fakes. But if Cheong was willing to trust him, wouldn't it be very ungracious of him not to respond in kind?

He made one more cast before succumbing to the lovely temptation. "How do you happen to know this Dr. Fat—was that his name?—in Philadelphia?"

"I don't know him personally. Only his reputation as a preeminent Oriental scholar. Everyone seriously interested in Chinese art knows of him. He is head of the department of Oriental Studies at Widner College." Mr. Cheong paused and looked at Mitchell doubtfully. "If you collect Chinese ceramics, Mr. Mitchell, I am very much surprised that *you* haven't heard of him."

"I have," said Mitchell, smiling. "That's why I'm going to take you up on your offer, Mr. Cheong. I'll take all twenty-eight of these figures at five dollars a head, as you suggest, and I'll send you my check for twenty-eight thousand dollars if Dr. Fat certifies they are authentic. Thank you for selling them to me, Mr. Cheong. Whether they are copies or originals, they are still very beautiful."

Mr. Cheong bowed. "That is far more important than price, is it not?" Politely, he held out a fountain pen for Mitchell to use in signing two more traveler's checks.

Professor Kam Soon Fat, B.A., M.A., Ph.D., M.F.A., belied his name. In his mid-thirties, he was slender, almost emaciated, and his thin body gave no promise whatever of later obesity. His long-chinned studious face was saved from severity by his spectacles—

half-moon reading glasses over which he peered genially at his visitor, like a mischievous teen-ager experimenting with granny glasses.

Mitchell sat down in the indicated chair beside Professor Fat's desk and held his leather case on his knees before him.

"It was good of you to see me," he said. "I know you have a busy schedule."

"Never too busy to help a fellow-admirer of Chinese ceramics," said Dr. Fat. "Especially when I can earn a consulting fee by doing so." His English was fluent and unaccented. He gave Mitchell a quiz-zical look. "You see, I like money, as well as Oriental art."

"Who doesn't?" said Mitchell, amused at the frankness of this internationally-known scholar.

"Your letter mentioned T'ang figurines," said Dr. Fat. "You have reason to question their genuineness, you said."

"Yes. And I'm counting on you to tell me whether I have a treasure here or a set of fakes." Mitchell explained that he was a recent newcomer to the ranks of collectors and not yet confident of his own judgment. "Particularly," he said with a smile, "when quantity as well as quality is involved."

"Quantity?"

"I have twenty-nine pieces here," Mitchell said, opening his

case and beginning to unwrap his figurines. "All acquired from a single source at the same time, in one transaction."

"I see. From a questionable source then, I take it?"

"Right."

"Almost any reputable dealer, or even collector," said Dr. Fat, "might come up with twenty-nine authentic pieces—"

"But not the obscure antique shop where I bought these," Mitchell interrupted.

"An American shop?"

"No, in the Orient." Mitchell saw no reason to be more specific. "The place catered largely to tourists. So it's stretching credulity a bit, in my opinion, to believe that all these figures are genuine."

As Mitchell removed the wrappings from each figure, he placed it on Dr. Fat's desk top. Over his spectacles, Dr. Fat watched with fascination as the collection of horses, soldiers and musicians grew. "They are lovely, aren't they?" he murmured. His eyes caressed the figures. "Is that the lot?"

"That's it," said Mitchell. "Twenty-nine."

Dr. Fat regarded the figures on his desk for a moment without touching them. Then, slowly, he stretched out a lean hand and picked up one of them. He examined it carefully through his half-

glasses, turning it this way and that, missing no tiny area of its surface. Then he took from his desk drawer a powerful magnifying glass and repeated the inspection, even more deliberately. Finally he set the piece aside and repeated the performance on a second figure, humming the while in a barely audible undertone, completely preoccupied. One after another, he scrutinized the twenty-nine pieces of pottery, while Mitchell sat quietly in his chair, too engrossed to venture even a single question.

When the specialist finished his inspection, there were twenty-eight figures at the right side of his desk, and at the left, a single ceramic figure of a trotting horse.

Dr. Fat straightened, stretched, looked over his spectacles at Mitchell, and smiled. "That's the best I can do, Mr. Mitchell," he said. "There's not a question in the world about twenty-eight of your pieces." He waved at them.

Mitchell's heart sank. "Forgeries?" he asked.

"Not at all. Genuine Tang, beyond any doubt. I'll gladly stake my reputation on them."

"That's wonderful!" Mitchell exclaimed. "They looked so right to me, and yet I couldn't quite believe it . . ."

"You can believe it now, I'm happy to assure you. You have

twenty-eight authentic pieces here, Mr. Mitchell. As for this one . . .” Dr. Fat pointed to the trotting horse at his left hand, “I reluctantly must admit to uncertainty.”

“You think that one’s a fake?” Mitchell felt a faint relief that it wasn’t his lute-player.

“It is possible, yes.”

“What makes you think so? Isn’t it just like the others?”

“Not quite. There’s a minute variation in the clay which disturbs me.” Dr. Fat offered his magnifying glass, and Mitchell examined the horse. He saw nothing remarkable about it except for a tiny chip in one hoof. Dr. Fat went on, “This piece could merely have been carelessly fired twelve hundred years ago. Or it could equally well be only twelve years old instead of twelve centuries.” He smiled at Mitchell. “Which would make quite a difference in its value.”

Yes, pondered Mitchell, how much would he pay Mr. Cheong at the Emporium of the Suffering Dragon for a possible fake? Five dollars . . . or a thousand? Or something in between? He said, “If *you* can’t give that one a clean bill, I guess there’s nobody who can.”

“Not so,” said Dr. Fat. “If you are willing to risk another hundred and fifty dollars on a possible fake, there is a way to determine whether this figure is genuine T’ang

or not, a scientific certification.”

Mitchell was surprised. “I thought you were the last word on that,” he said.

Dr. Fat shrugged. “The last *living* word, let us say. There is a mechanical method, a new one, which can also separate the sheep from the goats. Infallibly.”

“Infallibly?”

“Yes,” Dr. Fat said. “Not many ceramics defy my own analysis; perhaps one in a hundred, like your horse here. But I am only human, therefore fallible. So in these rare cases, I recommend that this mechanical method be utilized to resolve the puzzle. The technique, I must say, is a remarkable example of the application of science to art, and recourse to it not only confirms or disproves my own judgment on a piece, but makes me feel much better about accepting a consultation fee for my advice.” Dr. Fat put his fingertips together, steeple-shaped, and gave Mitchell a sudden boyish grin. “You’re sitting there wondering why I didn’t refer you to the infallible machine at once, aren’t you?” he asked. “If it’s so much more reliable than an expert’s opinion?”

Guiltily, Mitchell said, “Well . . .”

“It is also very much more expensive,” Dr. Fat said. “Each piece of pottery submitted to the process costs the owner a hundred and fifty

dollars for its analysis—three times the amount of my consultation fee—in addition to a certain amount of inconvenience involved. Thus, I consider that only really questionable pieces merit the expense.”

“Tell me about it,” Mitchell said. “I’ve never heard of such a process.”

“Few have. It’s quite new, as I said. It was devised originally by a geochemist at UCLA, and perfected only very recently at the Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art at Oxford. So far, there are only a couple of laboratories in the world considered capable of doing it successfully. One of them is at Oxford, of course, and the other, happily for us, is at the University Museum right here in Philadelphia. The method requires a great deal of very expensive equipment, sophisticated instruments. That’s the reason for the high charge per analysis.”

“I see,” said Mitchell. He was impressed.

“The method itself is based on the fact that all pottery contains at least some trace of radioactive isotopes, or atomic varieties, of such elements as uranium, thorium, and potassium. In the years after the pottery is fired, this radioactivity tends to damage the crystals of quartz, feldspar and other minerals in the clay. Are you with me so

far?” he asked Mitchell doubtfully.

“You lost me back there with the isotopes,” Mitchell said. “My line was steel forgings. But please go on.”

“Very well. If a piece of pottery is reheated years later, these damaged crystals in the clay give off a faint blue light, invisible to the naked eye, but readily detectable with special instruments.”

“Reheat? How can they reheat a ceramic piece like my horse without ruining it?”

“They drill out a tiny sample from the base of your figure, where it doesn’t show, and heat the sample up to 500 degrees centigrade. If cumulative radiation damage is present, the sample will emit the blue light. If the piece is a fake, of recent manufacture, the sample will emit no light . . . because there has not been enough radiation damage as yet.”

“Sounds complicated to me,” Mitchell said.

“It is. From the amount of light emitted, the date when the piece was fired can be roughly estimated. Not very precisely, but close enough to detect a recent copy at once.”

Mitchell looked fondly at his ceramic horse which might be a fake. He said, “So it is possible to get an accurate answer about my horse, right here in town, for a hundred

and fifty dollars? Then I'd be sure?"

Dr. Fat nodded. "And I heartily recommend it. Then you know what you've got, without question."

"You said this machine confirms or disproves your judgment on a questionable piece," Mitchell said. "What is your best guess on my ceramic horse?"

"Genuine," replied Dr. Fat promptly. "I'm sixty percent sure but forty percent doubtful."

Mitchell made up his mind. "Let's find out for sure, then. How do I go about it?"

"I'll give you a note to the director of the Museum."

"Fine. And thanks for everything, Dr. Fat. I'll let you know the verdict on the horse."

"I'll be most interested," said Dr. Fat.

Two weeks later, Dr. Fat received a long-distance telephone call from Hong Kong.

"Nephew?" inquired a thready voice above the satellite hum.

"Yes, uncle," replied Dr. Fat, recognizing the voice despite its distortion.

Mr. Cheong, venerable proprietor of the Emporium of the Suffering Dragon, switched to Mandarin. "I received a check in the mail today, nephew, for twenty-eight thousand dollars. From Mr. Mitchell. I thought you'd want to know. I

shall bank your half as arranged."

"Good," said Dr. Fat with satisfaction. "Let us hope this is but the first of many such coups."

"I see no reason to doubt it. Did everything go smoothly?"

"Like clockwork. I solemnly certified the twenty-eight forgeries as genuine, and raised reasonable doubts about the only authentic T'ang piece, the horse, recommending he have it tested mechanically. Which reminds me, uncle. I *am* an authority on ceramics, you know. I can distinguish genuine T'ang figures without your help. The nick in the horse's hoof was almost flagrantly evident."

"Forgive me. That was merely double protection against error. It shall not happen again." Mr. Cheong paused. "Mr. Mitchell did not question any of the forgeries? He had only the genuine piece tested?"

"That's right, uncle. And when the laboratory gave him the verdict on his horse, he couldn't thank me enough for being honest about my doubts of it."

Mr. Cheong laughed softly. "I expected as much." He controlled his merriment and continued, "The western mind is so illogical. It tends to jump to conclusions on insufficient evidence. For example: if one T'ang figure proves genuine, the twenty-eight others must be

genuine also." He chuckled wryly.

"Your own conclusion, uncle, or something that Confucius say?" Dr. Fat laughed, too.

"Neither. I had a professor of anthropology at Stanford in my youth," said Mr. Cheong. "His favorite example of this western tendency to leap to conclusions dealt with an explorer who, returning from a trip through the North American wilderness, stated unequivocally that American Indians walked in single file. 'How can you be sure of that?' asked a friend, and the explorer replied, 'Because the only Indian I encountered was walking that way.' You see my point, nephew?"

Dr. Fat said, "I do indeed. May I ask another question?"

"Of course," said Mr. Cheong tolerantly. "It is proper that youth learn from age."

"How could you be sure that Mitchell would send you the money?"

"That same Stanford professor," said Mr. Cheong. "He made another pithy observation that I have never forgotten. It was to the effect

that, in the American free enterprise system, no man can afford to be completely honest until he is financially independent. Yet when financial independence is achieved, most Americans are almost fanatically honest, to make up for early laxity, I presume. Thus, I felt that our Mr. Mitchell could be trusted."

"Because he is financially independent?"

"Of course."

"And how did you know *that*?"

Mr. Cheong chuckled. "Very simple, nephew. Your cousin, Hsien, who works as a clerk at the Hong Kong Hilton, looked Mr. Howard Mitchell up in *Who's Who in America* and *Dun and Bradstreet* before he sent him to my shop."

"Ah," said Dr. Fat admiringly. "You think of everything, uncle."

"You did very well for a first venture, nephew. Congratulations."

"Thanks. At least, let it stand to my credit that I *did* tell the unvarnished truth to Mr. Mitchell in one respect."

"Which was?"

"That I am fond of money, as well as Oriental art."



When your fallacies start showing, it might be wise to try a little "tenderness."



*by Bill
Pronzini*

AT 11:23 P.M. on Saturday, the twenty-sixth of April, a small man wearing rimless glasses and a dark gray business suit walked into the detective squad room in San Francisco's Hall of Justice and confessed to the murders of three Bay Area housewives whose bodies had been found that afternoon and evening.

Inspector Glenn Rauxton, who first spoke to the small man, thought he might be a crank. Every major homicide in any large city draws its share of oddballs and mental cases, individuals who confess to crimes in order to attain public recognition in otherwise

unsubstantial lives, or because of some secret desire for punishment; or for any number of reasons which can be found in the case-books of police psychiatrists. But it wasn't up to Rauxton to make a decision either way. He left the small man in the company of his partner, Dan Tobias, and went in to talk to his immediate superior, Lieutenant Jack Sheffield.

"We've got a guy outside who says he's the killer of those three

women today, Jack," Rauxton said. "Maybe a crank, maybe not."

Sheffield turned away from the portable typewriter at the side of his desk; he had been making out a report for the chief's office. "He come in of his own volition?"

Rauxton nodded. "Not three minutes ago."

"What's his name?"

"He says it's Andrew Franzen."

"And his story?"

"So far, just that he killed them," Rauxton said. "I didn't press him. He seems pretty calm about the whole thing."

"Well, run his name through the weirdo file, and then put him in one of the interrogation cubicles," Sheffield said. "I'll look through the reports again before we question him."

"You want me to get a stenographer?"

"It would probably be a good idea."

"Right," Rauxton said, and went out.

Sheffield rubbed his face wearily. He was a lean, sinewy man in his late forties, with thick graying hair and a curving, almost falconic nose. He had dark-brown eyes that had seen most everything there was to see, and been appalled by a good deal of it; they were tired, sad eyes. He wore a plain blue suit, and his shirt was

open at the throat. The tie he had worn to work when his tour started at four p.m., which had been given to him by his wife and consisted of interlocking, psychedelic-colored concentric circles, was out of sight in the bottom drawer of his desk.

He picked up the folder with the preliminary information on the three slayings and opened it. Most of it was sketchy: telephone communications from the involved police forces in the Bay Area, a precursory report from the local lab, a copy of the police Telex which he had had sent out statewide as a matter of course following the discovery of the first body, and which had later alerted the other authorities in whose areas the two subsequent corpses had been found. There was also an Inspector's Report on that first and only death in San Francisco, filled out and signed by Rauxton. The last piece of information had come in less than a half-hour earlier, and he knew the facts of the case by memory; but Sheffield was a meticulous cop and he liked to have all the details fixed in his mind.

The first body was of a woman named Janet Flanders, who had been discovered by a neighbor at 4:15 that afternoon in her small duplex on 39th Avenue, near

Golden Gate Park. She had been killed by several blows about the head with an as yet unidentified blunt instrument.

The second body, of one Viola Gordon, had also been found by a neighbor—shortly before 5:00 p.m.—in her neat, white frame cottage in South San Francisco. Cause of death: several blows about the head with an unidentified blunt instrument.

The third body, Elaine Dunhill, had been discovered at 6:37 p.m. by a casual acquaintance who had stopped by to return a borrowed book. Mrs. Dunhill lived in a modest cabin-style home clinging to the wooded hillside above Sausalito Harbor, just north of San Francisco. She, too, had died as a result of several blows about the head with an unidentified blunt instrument.

There were no witnesses, or apparent clues, in any of the killings. They would have, on the surface, appeared to be unrelated if it had not been for the conceivably coincidental facts that each of the three women had died on the same day, and in the same manner. But there were other cohesive factors as well—factors which, taken in conjunction with the surface similarities, undeniably linked the murders.

Item: each of the three women

had been between the ages of thirty and thirty-five, on the plump side, and blonde.

Item: each of them had been orphaned non-natives of California, having come to the San Francisco Bay Area from different parts of the Midwest within the past six years.

Item: each of them had been married to traveling salesmen who were home only short periods each month, and who were all—according to the information garnered by investigating officers—from neighbors and friends—currently somewhere on the road.

Patterns, Sheffield thought as he studied the folder's contents. Most cases had one, and this case was no exception. All you had to do was fit the scattered pieces of its particular pattern together, and you would have your answer. Yet the pieces here did not seem to join logically, unless you concluded that the killer of the women was a psychopath who murdered blonde, thirtyish, orphaned wives of traveling salesmen for some perverted reason of his own.

That was the way the news media would see it, Sheffield knew, because that kind of slant always sold copies, and attracted viewers and listeners. They would try to make the case into another

Zodiac thing, or the Boston strangler. The radio newscast he had heard at the cafeteria across Bryant Street, when he had gone out for supper around nine, had presaged the discovery of still more bodies of Bay Area housewives and had advised all women whose husbands were away to remain behind locked doors. The announcer had repeatedly referred to the deaths as "the bludgeon slayings."

Sheffield had kept a strictly open mind. It was, for all practical purposes, his case—the first body had been found in San Francisco, during his tour, and that gave him jurisdictional priority in handling the investigation. The cops in the two other involved cities would be in constant touch with him, as they already had been. He would have been foolish to have made any premature speculations not based solely on fact, and Sheffield was anything but foolish. Anyway, psychopath or not, the case still promised a hell of a lot of not very pleasant work.

Now, however, there was Andrew Franzen.

Crank? Or multiple murderer? Was this going to be one of those blessed events—a simple case? Or was Franzen only the beginning of a long series of very large headaches?

Well, Sheffield thought, *we'll find out soon enough*. He closed the folder and got to his feet and crossed to the door of his office.

In the squad room, Rauxton was just closing one of the metal file cabinets in the bank near the windows. He came over to Sheffield and said, "Nothing on Franzen in the weirdo file, Jack."

Sheffield inclined his head and looked off toward the row of glass-walled interrogation cubicles at the rear of the squad room. In the second one, he could see Dan Tobias propped on a corner of the bare metal desk inside; the man who had confessed, Andrew Franzen, was sitting with his back to the squad room, stiffly erect in his chair. Also waiting inside, stochically seated in the near corner, was one of the police stenographers.

Sheffield said, "Okay, Glenn, let's hear what he has to say."

He and Rauxton went over to the interrogation cubicle and stepped inside. Tobias stood, and shook his head almost imperceptibly to let Sheffield and Rauxton know that Franzen hadn't said anything to him. Tobias was tall and muscular, with a slow smile and big hands and—like Rauxton—a strong dedication to the life's work he had chosen.

He moved to the right corner of

the metal desk, and Rauxton to the left corner, assuming set positions like football halfbacks running a bread-and-butter play. Sheffield, the quarterback, walked behind the desk, cocked one hip against the edge and leaned forward slightly, so that he was looking down at the small man sitting with his hands flat on his thighs.

Franzen had a round, in-offensive pink face with tiny-shelled ears and a Cupid's-bow mouth. His hair was brown and wavy, immaculately cut and shaped, and it saved him from being nondescript; it gave him a certain boyish character, even though Sheffield placed his age at around forty. His eyes were brown and liquid, like those of a spaniel, behind his rimless glasses.

Sheffield got a ball-point pen out of his coat pocket and tapped it lightly against his front teeth; he liked to have something in his hands when he was conducting an interrogation. He broke the silence, finally, by saying, "My name is Sheffield. I'm the lieutenant in charge here. Now before you say anything, it's my duty to advise you of your rights."

He did so, quickly and tersely, concluding with, "You understand all of your entitled rights as I've outlined them, Franzen?"

The small man sighed softly and nodded.

"Are you willing, then, to answer questions without the presence of counsel?"

"Yes, yes."

Sheffield continued to tap the ball-point pen against his front teeth. "All right," he said at length. "Let's have your full name."

"Andrew Léonard Franzen."

"Where do you live?"

"Here in San Francisco."

"At what address?"

"Nine-oh-six Greenwich."

"Is that a private residence?"

"No, it's an apartment building."

"Are you employed?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I'm an independent consultant."

"What sort of consultant?"

"I design languages between computers."

Rauxton said, "You want to explain that?"

"It's very simple, really," Franzen said tonelessly. "If two business firms have different types of computers, and would like to set up a communication between them so that the information stored in the memory banks of each computer can be utilized by the other, they call me. I design

the linking electronic connections between the two computers, so that each can understand the other; in effect, so that they can converse."

"That sounds like a very specialized job," Sheffield said.

"Yes."

"What kind of salary do you make?"

"Around forty thousand a year."

Two thin, horizontal frown lines appeared in Sheffield's forehead. Franzen had the kind of vocation that bespoke of intelligence and upper-class respectability; why would a man like that want to confess to the brutal murders of three simple-living housewives? Or an even stranger question: if his confession was genuine, what was his reason for the killings?

Sheffield said, "Why did you come here tonight, Franzen?"

"To confess." Franzen looked at Rauxton. "I told this man that when I walked in a few minutes ago."

"To confess to what?"

"The murders."

"What murders, specifically?"

Franzen sighed deeply. "The three women in the Bay Area today."

"Just the three?"

"Yes."

"No others whose bodies maybe

have not been discovered as yet?"

"No, no."

"Suppose you tell us why you decided to turn yourself in?"

"Why? Because I'm guilty. Because I killed them."

"And that's the only reason?"

Franzen was silent for a moment. Then slowly, he said, "No, I suppose not. I went walking in Aquatic Park when I came back to San Francisco this afternoon, just walking and thinking. The more I thought, the more I knew that it was hopeless. It was only a matter of time before you would have found out I was the one, a matter of a day or two. I guess I could have run, but I wouldn't know how to begin to do that. I've always done things on impulse, things I would never do if I stopped to think about them. That's how I killed them; on some insane impulse; if I had thought about it I never would have done it. It was so useless. . . ."

Sheffield exchanged glances with the two inspectors, and then he said, "You want to tell us how you did it, Franzen?"

"What?"

"How did you kill them?" Sheffield asked. "What kind of weapon did you use?"

"A tenderizing mallet," Franzen said without hesitation.

Tobias asked, "What was that

again? What was that you said?"

"A tenderizing mallet. One of those big wooden things with serrated ends that women keep in the kitchen to tenderize a piece of steak."

It was very silent in the cubicle now. Sheffield looked at Rauxton, and then at Tobias; they were all thinking the same thing: the police had released no details to the news media as to the kind of weapon involved in the slayings, other than the general information that it was a blunt instrument. But the initial lab report on the first victim—and the preliminary observations on the other two—stated that the wounds of each had been made by a roughly square-shaped instrument, which had sharp "teeth" capable of making a series of deep indentations as it bit into the flesh. A mallet such as Franzen had just described fitted those characteristics exactly.

Sheffield asked, "What did you do with this mallet, Franzen?"

"I threw it away."

"Where?"

"In Sausalito, into some bushes along the road."

"Do you remember the location?"

"I think so."

"Then you can lead us there later on?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Was Elaine Dunhill the last woman you killed?"

"Yes."

"What room did you kill her in?"

"The bedroom."

"Where in the bedroom?"

"Beside her vanity."

"Who was your first victim?" Rauxton asked.

"Janet Flanders."

"You killed her in the bathroom, is that right?"

"No, no, in the kitchen . . ."

"What was she wearing?"

"A flowered housecoat."

"Why did you strip her body?"

"I didn't. Why would I—"

"Mrs. Gordon was the middle victim, right?" Tobias asked.

"Yes."

"Where did you kill *her*?"

"The kitchen."

"She was sewing, wasn't she?"

"No, she was canning," Franzen said. "She was canning plum preserves. She had mason jars and boxes of plums and three big pressure cookers all over the table and the stove . . ."

There was wetness in Franzen's eyes now. He stopped talking and took his rimless glasses off and wiped at the tears with the back of his left hand. He seemed to be swaying slightly on the chair.

Sheffield, watching him, felt a curious mixture of relief and deep

sadness. The relief was due to the fact that there was no doubt in his mind—nor in the minds of Rauxton and Tobias; he could read their eyes—that Andrew Franzen was the slayer of the three women. They had thrown detail and “trip-up” questions at him, one right after another, and he had had all the right answers; he knew particulars that had also not been given to the news media, that no crank could possibly have known, that only the murderer could have been aware of. The case had turned out to be one of the simple ones, after all, and it was all but wrapped up now; there would be no more “bludgeon slayings,” no public hue and cry, no attacks on police inefficiency in the press, no pressure from the commissioner or the mayor. The deep sadness was the result of twenty-six years of police work, of living with death and crime every day, of looking at a man who seemed to be the essence of normalcy and yet who was a cold-blooded multiple murderer.

Why? Sheffield thought. That

was the big question. *Why did he do it?*

He said, “You want to tell us the reason, Franzen? Why you killed them?”

The small man moistened his lips. “I was very happy, you see. My life had some meaning, some challenge. I was fulfilled—but they were going to destroy everything.” He stared at his hands. “One of them had found out the truth—I don’t know how—and tracked down the other two. I had come to Janet this morning, and she told me that they were going to expose me, and I just lost my head and picked up the mallet and killed her. Then I went to the others and killed them. I couldn’t stop myself; it was as if I were moving in a nightmare.”

“What are you trying to say, Franzen?” Sheffield asked very softly. “What was your relationship with those three women?”

The tears in Andrew Franzen’s eyes shone like tiny diamonds in the light from the overhead fluorescents. “They were my wives,” he said.



After tying up loose ends, one may find himself with another ball of twine.



NOTICES

REWARD WANTED
 for Krasser or others
 SOPHIE ROCKING
 no any information of
 of Bernard Krasser,
 tiner, deceased, late
 Newark, State of New
 Jersey, wife of Emil R.
 Tomson & Cummins,
 Newark, New Jersey.
 Phone AL 4-5593

01-24 Lost And Found

LOST no reward Nemo Miniatur
 German Shepherd return to owner
 2228 SW 44 Ave.

YORKSHIRE Terrier, male, victim
 of Sunset Dr. and Cricket Clut
 lost Apr. 25. Will woman who found
 dog please call. My wife is on very
 nervous breakdown. reward.

LOST White English Setter, brown
 markings, Gabes, age 4-5, 1994.
 LOST light brown and white Bassett
 and answers to Geraldine 5 months
 old. Madeira Ave and Seward
 AVEWARD 443-7473 after

Siamese, collared, name is "D".
 Reward

THE VIOLET BUSINESS



by Jack Ritchie

WHO IS IT you want killed?" I asked.

"Me," Ralph Lynch said.

Ah, I thought, *another one of those*. I said, "It is not necessary that I know why you want to die, but perhaps you could satisfy my curiosity?"

"I'm deeply in debt. My insurance would cover that, and also there would be enough left over to provide comfortably for my wife and two children."

"Are you positive this is the only solution?"

He nodded. Ralph Lynch was an intense man in his early thirties.

"Are you a good shot?" he asked.

"Excellent."

"I would like to be shot through the heart."

"A wise choice," I said, "and

neat. Most people prefer the open-coffin viewing. A closed coffin can lead to so much rumor and wild imagining. Do you have any particular time in mind?"

"Yes. Between twelve noon and one o'clock would be ideal." He explained further. "I am an accoun-

ant at the Bayfield Savings and Loan Association. Twelve to one is our normal lunch hour, except that on Fridays I am officer of the deck, so to speak. At that time only I and Miss Pendell will be in the office."

"You want the girl as a witness?"

"Yes. I feel that if I am killed without a witness, there might possibly be some doubt about how I died, and that might lead to some complications with the insurance."

"I walk into the office at approximately 12:30 on Friday and I shoot you?"

"Through the heart," he said again. "I thought we could make it look like a holdup."

"There is the question of payment."

"Of course. How much will that be?"

"I tried a figure. "Ten thousand." He frowned thoughtfully, "I'll



pay you five thousand down and the rest after . . ." He stopped.

I smiled. "Obviously there will be no 'after'."

He conceded that, but still he was not a man to pay in full for a service before it had been rendered. "We'll do it this way. I'll pay you five thousand now and I'll put the rest into an envelope and leave it on the counter at the office. After you shoot me, you may take the envelope and leave."

"How can I be positive that you haven't filled the envelope with newspaper strips or something of the sort?"

"You may look into the envelope first and *then* shoot me."

It seemed reasonable. "In view of the fact that you are almost bankrupt, how did you manage to get together the ten thousand dollars?"

"I embezzled it from the firm during the last two months." He studied me. "Tell me, do you get people like me often?"

"Not too often."

As a matter of fact, during the course of my career, I had handled only four cases such as Lynch's, three of them to my satisfaction.

The exception had been Elmo Peterson.

Elmo had been a mathematics instructor in a high school in this city. He had fallen desperately in love with a Miss Stevens, who taught

home economics. Unfortunately, Miss Stevens did not return his passion and chose instead to marry a member of the school board.

Elmo had manfully attended the church wedding, but immediately thereafter had taken a long walk which eventually culminated in a waterfront bar where he had met Julius Farrow, one of my agents. After four whiskey sours, Elmo had confided to Julius that he wished sincerely to die, though he did balk at doing the job himself.

Julius had passed him on to me.

"I suppose some people change their minds about dying after they've hired you?" Lynch asked.

"Yes."

"But once you've been paid to kill a man, you cannot be dissuaded? No matter how they plead or beg?"

I smiled.

"I will not plead for my life," Lynch said firmly.

"But will you run away?"

"No. I will *not* run away."

But Elmo Peterson had. I still regarded him as unfinished business, a loose thread that waited to be gathered in.

Lynch removed a fat envelope from his pocket and counted out five thousand dollars in one hundred dollar bills. "Just drive into Bayfield, shoot me, and drive out. It shouldn't take more than ten min-

ites. And remember, through the heart."

When he was gone, I locked the door. I moved to the door adjoining the next suite and unlocked that.

When I meet with prospective clients, I always make it a practice to rent two adjoining rooms or suites. It is a precaution taken on the remote possibility that someone might be waiting to follow me.

Inside the second suite, I removed the Vandyke beard which I had been wearing, the green-tinted sunglasses, and the light-haired wig.

I stuffed the items, together with my shirt and suit coat, into the compartments of my golf bag.

I slipped into a sports shirt, adjusted a billed cap, and shouldered the golf bag.

When I left, I was simply someone going off for a round of golf.

As I reached the hotel parking lot, I observed Lynch driving off in a light blue sedan. I made a mental note of the license number.

I drove to the Binnacle Bar on Casey Street where I was to keep my appointment with Julius Farrow.

I have a number of agents—I really prefer to call them associates—scattered about the country. When one of them isolates a prospective customer, he inserts an ad in the Lost and Found section of his principal local newspaper: *Lost*.

Brown and white collie. Answers to name of Violet. Reward, and includes his telephone number.

Through the years my associates and I have enjoyed amicable relations, with only minor difficulties, principally the finding of good homes for thirteen collies named Violet.

Superficially at least, I am no different from my neighbors, except that I subscribe to seventeen American and two Canadian newspapers.

Julius Farrow possesses a quite genuine graying beard and the quiet eye of the listener. He invariably wears a pea jacket and the visored cap of a merchant marine skipper. One might reason that he has spent a lifetime upon the water; however, he is in truth a retired bookkeeper on Social Security.

He lives in a suburb, but every afternoon after lunch, he dons his uniform and drives carefully to the city and the ocean. He spends his time wandering about the waterfront and its bars, listening to the sea talk, occasionally treating, and in general becoming at least a fringe of the maritime life which he had foregone for early marriage and five children. He returns to the room in his son-in-law's house before nightfall.

I found him at a scarred wooden table nursing a beer.

"How much did you get?" he

asked. "You bring it with you?"

"He gave me five thousand in advance." I opened the envelope underneath the table and counted out two thousand dollars.

I pay my agents a forty percent commission. I suppose some people might consider this too high, but I feel that my associates do fully as much work, if not more, on the prospects as I do.

Julius Farrow is one of my new men. So far he has sent me only two clients: Elmo Peterson and now Ralph Lynch.

He folded the bills and slipped them into a pocket of his pea-jacket.

"How did you happen to find Lynch?" I asked.

"Actually he seemed to find me. I was sitting here reading the afternoon newspaper when he came in and got a beer from the bar. He took a seat at the table next to me. When he finished the beer, he looked over at me and said, 'What'll you have?' So I said beer. He got two of them and sat down at my table. It didn't take him long to get around to telling me his troubles and what he thought could be done about them."

"Did he know your name?"

"No, and I never gave it."

"But he came to you and almost immediately began talking about his problems?"

Farrow nodded slowly. "Come to think of it, he did all the leading."

We thought about that for a while and then I said, "You're positive that you've never told anybody about our business relationship?"

"I swear," Julius said firmly. "A captain's oath. Nobody in the world knew about the connection between us. Except Elmo Peterson, of course."

Peterson? Was it possible that Lynch had sought out Farrow through Peterson?

My associates never give their real names or addresses to the clients, but still Peterson might have possessed enough information to help Lynch find Farrow.

There was Farrow's uniform, his beard, the fact that he frequented the waterfront—and now that I noticed it, the small star-shaped scar above Farrow's right eyebrow.

Yes, someone wanting to find Farrow would not have had too difficult a job.

Very well, I thought, suppose that Lynch made the connection through Peterson, what difference did that make?

"Julius," I said, "I don't think you'd better spend any of that money just yet. At least not until I give you the word."

He seemed to be reading my mind. "You think maybe it's marked, or the police have the se-

rial numbers?" He smiled faintly and sadly. "I hope we don't have to throw it away."

So did I.

The next day I drove to Bayfield, Ralph Lynch's town, a trip of some two hundred miles, and arrived there a little after two.

Bayfield seemed to be a farm town, with most of its businesses on Main Street. A sign at the town limits indicated it had a population of 2,314.

I parked my car and entered a drugstore. I went to the phone booth and riffled through the town's directory. The yellow pages—twenty-two of them—indicated that among other things, Bayfield boasted three doctors, one chiropractor, two dentists, six taverns, four churches, one savings and loan, and four attorneys.

I noticed that one of the attorneys was Ralph Lynch. I gave that a little thought. Lynch had said that he was an accountant at the Bayfield Savings and Loan. Could he be an accountant and practice law too?

Turning to the white pages, I discovered there were three Petersons in town. None of them, however, had the first name of Elmo.

I left the drugstore and strolled slowly down Main Street. I stopped at a barber shop and studied the election posters.

It appeared that Ralph Lynch was also running for district attorney.

I sighed and walked past the Bayside Savings and Loan office. There appeared to be three or four clerks and half a dozen customers inside. I did not see Lynch, but he could have been in an inner office.

I turned into the nearest bar. It was a cool, quiet place with two men in overalls and jackets at the bar talking to the proprietor.

I ordered a bottle of beer and sat at one end of the bar, drinking and listening. I learned that dairying doesn't pay anymore and that with the price of hogs at \$21.50 per hundredweight, you might as well go out of that business too.

When they finished their beers, the two men left.

The bartender wiped the bar and edged my way, ready for conversation. "Stranger in town?"

I reflected that he could not possibly know every one of Bayfield's 2,314 population, and yet I was marked as a stranger in town. Probably because at this time of the day anybody who wore a business suit would be working, and obviously I wasn't.

During the consumption of three more beers—one of which was on the house—I learned, among other things, that Ralph Lynch, a bachelor, was running for district at-

torney, but it was an uphill fight because his opponent came from the county seat which had a population of over eight thousand, and people tended to vote for home-town boys. I also learned that Police Chief Dakin's wife was Clara Lynch, Ralph's oldest sister, and that his younger sister, Amy, had just married the new math teacher at the high school.

And who was the new math teacher?

Fellow by the name of Wilson. Jerome Wilson.

I left the bar at quarter to three and walked back to my car. I had no difficulty finding the Bayfield High School. I parked near the new building and watched the school buses lining up, waiting for their charges.

At ten after three, bells inside the building were audible. Thirty seconds later, students streamed out of the building, the majority of them heading for the buses.

Most of the buses had filled and departed before the first of the teachers began leaving the building.

I waited and finally saw Elmo Peterson, or as he now evidently preferred to be known, Jerome Wilson. He was tall, slightly stooped, and in his late twenties.

I watched him go to his car. If he noticed me at all, it didn't matter. The only time we had met, I had

worn the Vandyke, the sunglasses, and the wig.

In Peterson's case, I had contracted to kill him for three thousand dollars in advance, which, being a schoolteacher, was all he was able to muster.

No specific time had been mentioned for his demise—he preferred not to know when it was coming—except that it should take place within the week.

When I went looking for him, three days later, he had disappeared.

I learned later, by reconstruction, that within twenty-four hours of seeing me, Peterson had decided that life was still sweet, though not overly, and he did not want to die.

He had rushed back to the hotel where I had met him, but I was, of course, gone. I believe in a certain immediate mobility.

From there he had returned to the bar where he had first encountered Julius Farrow—but Julius had left that morning for an upstate visit to some of his grandchildren and so was not to be found.

Peterson panicked, packed his suitcase, and disappeared.

I watched Peterson-Wilson now as he got into his car and pulled away. I followed.

Six blocks later, he pulled up to the curb before a large mid-Victorian residence. He left the car and

romptly entered the building. As I drove past, I made a note of the address. I also noticed Ralph Lynch's light blue sedan parked directly in front of Peterson's car.

That brought my mind back to Lynch.

He had lied to me about being married and having two children. What was the point in that? To make his motive stronger for having himself killed?

What the hell was he really up to?

I turned back to Main Street and parked behind what appeared to be Hayfield's only hotel. I registered and took my suitcase and golf bag up to my room.

The next morning, Friday, I had a late breakfast and took another roll down Main Street. I passed a heavy man in a police uniform. From his age and demeanor, I guessed that he would be Police Chief Dakin.

I walked up the steps and into the town library. I found a book and settled down at a table near a window facing Main Street. From here I could get a clear view of the Hayfield Savings and Loan building.

At ten after eleven, I saw Chief Dakin again—this time entering the Savings and Loan office.

I waited.

He did not leave it.

Eleven-thirty, twelve, twelve-

thirty. He still hadn't come out.

At one o'clock, Ralph Lynch came out of the Savings and Loan building. He looked up the street. He looked down the street. He checked his watch and went back inside.

Still I waited, curious about Chief Dakin. Would he ever come out?

At quarter to two I gave up. It was time to leave town. I put the book back in its place on the shelf and walked back to the hotel.

When I opened the door to my room, Chief Dakin was waiting with his revolver in his hand.

He smiled. "So you decided not to show up at the Savings and Loan?"

For what it was worth, I became innocence personified. "Show up? Show up for what?"

He moved forward and patted me down, but he didn't find a weapon.

I noticed that he had gone through my suitcase and also the golf bag. My Vandyke beard, the sunglasses, and my wig lay on the bed.

He holstered his revolver. "When you didn't keep the appointment, I got to wondering why. Here was this five thousand dollars just waiting to be picked up and you didn't come for it. Why not?"

I said nothing.

"You got suspicious about the setup?" He grinned. "Lynch is wearing a bulletproof vest. After you shot him he was supposed to drop to the floor pretending he's dead. Then I speak up from where I'm hidden and tell you to drop the gun or I'll blow your head off."

So it had been a trap after all.

Dakin proceeded to fill me in further. "The whole thing started with Jerome Wilson. Or maybe I'd better call him Elmo Peterson. One night back about a month ago, the three of us, Peterson, Lynch, and me, were celebrating the fact that Peterson was about to become a relative by marriage. Peterson isn't used to the stuff, so after a while the whole story came out; about him hiring you to kill him and how he had to run away to save his life. He thinks you're probably still gunning for him."

Dakin smiled again. "That gave Lynch an idea. He's running for DA and he needs help to win this election. He figured that getting credit for risking his life in order to break up a murder syndicate is more than enough to sell him to the voters. So he came up with this little plan."

Dakin removed what seemed to be a celebratory cigar from the inside pocket of his uniform. "Yes, sir; like I said, while I waited over at the Savings and Loan, I thought to myself maybe you got suspicious

and just passed up the whole deal. But what made you suspicious? Suppose you checked into town last night and did some asking and looking around this morning and didn't like what you heard or saw. Did that make you leave town? Could maybe you were still here, watching to see if it's a trap?"

Dakin lit the cigar. "I picked up the phone and got Cecil here at the hotel—he's the desk clerk—an asked him whether there was anybody registered he'd never seen before. He came up with you and you hadn't checked out yet. So I left the Savings and Loan by the back door and worked my way around to the hotel. I let myself into your room and did some searching." He indicated the things he'd taken from the golf bag. "I guess if you put those things on, you'd fit the description Lynch gave me of you."

I sighed. Because I was about to go to jail for murder? No. Jail perhaps, but not for murder.

The simple truth is that my associates and I are frauds. We have never killed anyone, anywhere, at any time.

We accepted the money to do so of course, but then we disappeared without doing the job. Not, however, without sending the intended victim an anonymous note informing him that someone was anxious to see him dead and naming names.

This alerted the victim, if nothing else.

Also, we sent another note to the police with the same information. I doubt very much whether this ever resulted in any arrests, since solid proof and witnesses were lacking. However, I do believe that the simple police check-out interview of my clients sufficiently frightened them so that thereafter they abandoned any further murder plans.

In short, we saved lives, and made a rather nice profit doing so.

We have never had any complaints from our clients. After all, a man who hires me to kill someone does not go to the police because I fail to fulfill the murder contract.

In the self-destruction cases, such as Lynch's and Peterson's, I always allowed several days to elapse before I sought them out. Invariably I found that they had changed their minds about dying and so I "allowed" them to live, for which they were so grateful that none of them had ever requested refunds.

I had not come to Bayfield with the intention of shooting Lynch and

thereby picking up the five thousand dollars.

I had come here for what had been basically an errand of mercy. I suspected that Peterson might be in Bayfield or the vicinity, and I had intended to find him and inform him that I had given up the intention of killing him.

Chief Dakin slowly puffed the cigar. "Yes, sir, I did some heavy thinking while I was waiting."

He studied me while thirty seconds passed.

"Nobody knows I'm here," he said. "Not even Lynch."

I frowned, trying to figure out the reason for that.

Thirty more seconds passed.

Finally he seemed to make up his mind. "It's my damn wife. I can't stand living with her any longer and she won't give me a divorce." He leaned forward. "I got four thousand dollars in the bank and I'm willing to give it to *anybody* who can come up with a *solution* to my problem."

I stared at him. Then I relaxed.

I had another customer.



The brain works in ways mysterious its havoc to perform.

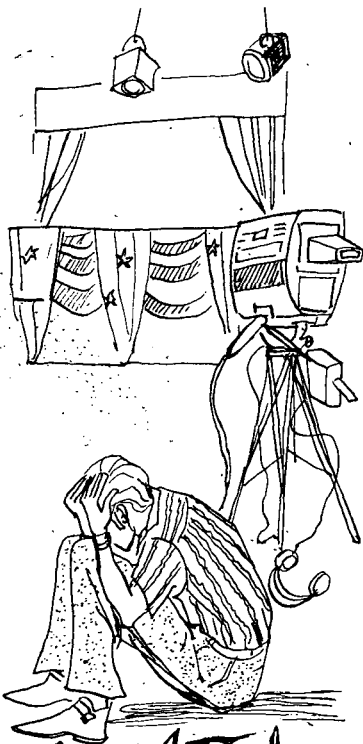
WITH HEAD IN HANDS

WHEN THE ELECTION result was clear, Tolliver came over to my campaign headquarters to shake my hand. It was a grandstand play, but he had the personality to pull it off. I didn't hold it against him.

A lot of my supporters had drifted off during the evening rather than face the inevitable final count. Now it was late and gloom occupied the headquarters. The champagne was going flat in the ice buckets, and instead of a victory celebration we were having a wake.

"I know how hard you worked, Phil," Tolliver said, "and it almost paid off—you really came close."

"That only counts in horseshoes," I answered. It wasn't very clever, but I eased it by finding some kind



of a grin for him. "Congratulations."

Tolliver was a big, blond guy, almost my height but a lot heavier.

Judging by the redness of his face and the coldness of his hand when I shook it, he'd walked over from wherever his own victory party was in progress. Well, it went with his image as a young, vigorous state senator who ventured out alone to slay dragons for the people. Soon they'd be saying he could be the next governor.

Tolliver took his winner's glow with him when he left, and it made the headquarters gloomier than ever. It was the dead end of the Phil McCoy campaign—*The Real McCoy*, as my publicity called me—and my wife, for one, was glad to see it finished.

"I'm glad Tolliver came over," she told me. "It makes it better. After all those things he said about you."

"We said just as bad about him."

"He called you a phony."

I laughed. It suddenly struck me how really tired I was, utterly spent; but when Mary stuck up for me and let her love show through, it gave me a lift. She could always do that. I put my arm around her and she buried her face in my coat.

"You're the real McCoy," I said.

"Anyway, I'm glad Tolliver came over," Mary said. "It was a very decent thing to do."

That was how the campaign ended. We dragged out of the headquarters into the dark November

night, and I don't think I felt anything. I was just tired and frustrated and empty.

So, if Tolliver's visit to my headquarters helped to cheer Mary, I was glad. I didn't tell her it was just smart politics on his part. Plenty of my people had still been there to see him, and it didn't hurt Tolliver's image a bit. He wanted to make sure he didn't have any more political enemies than necessary. I would have done the same thing to him if I had won.

But Mary had appreciated his gesture, and that's what I remembered most. When the crazy thing happened, I remembered how Tolliver had helped to make Mary feel better when he didn't have to. I felt I owed him something. Tolliver sure didn't deserve what I ended up giving him.

Death Valley is a nice place to visit in November, if you want to get away from everything. It's warm and dry and you can count on the sun coming out every day. I wasn't due back at work for a couple of weeks; so Mary and I flew to Los Angeles and rented a car. We drove into the desert, and once we left the interstate and headed down the narrow state highway into Death Valley, I could feel the world dropping off behind me.

We stayed at Furnace Creek, on

the floor of the valley. The stillness was overwhelming. Snow dusted the tops of the Panamint Mountains, far off to the west across the desert, and the mountains were a shelter between us and the cities. Except for an occasional jet trail, almost invisible high in the blue-white sky, there was nothing to remind us that the rest of the world existed. The silence took some getting used to. We did a little sight-seeing to Dante's View and Zabriskie Point, but for the most part we just stayed around the swimming pool at the oasis.

Mary asked me if I was sure I wanted to give up news reporting.

"I'm positive," I said. The TV station seemed a long way off. "I'll feel a lot more honest as a cameraman, at least for now."

"It'll seem funny not seeing you on the tube, Phil," she said. "At least as a candidate, you got on once in a while."

I'd taken a leave of absence to run for office. The theory had been that I'd had a million dollars' worth of free TV exposure as a political reporter before the election. That was supposed to put me a leg up on Tolliver, even though he'd been in office for eight years. It was a great theory. The only problem was, the voters didn't buy it.

"It fell apart when they called me a phony," I said. "They really

put their finger on it. There we were, trying to sell me as the *real* McCoy, when all the time Tolliver was the real flesh-and-blood guy, the one who was out on the street with his sleeves rolled up. I was just a two-dimensional jerk they were used to seeing nineteen inches high on a screen in their livingrooms. It *was* a phony campaign, and that's why I don't want to go back on the tube, at least not for a while."

"What makes you think you can run a camera?" Mary was teasing now, trying to jolly me out of my mood. I'd been a cameraman for a long time before I ever made it as a reporter. I'd been a cameraman when we were married.

"I can probably learn how," I said, going along with her. "I think there's a—what do you call it?—a microphoné thing that people talk into, and a cord from there carries the little voices into a box. Then the box amplifies them and puts them through another cord into the camera, where they get mixed with the little picture things. The main thing is knowing how to flick the switch that starts it all."

She smiled. I rolled over onto my back to collect some more sunshine on my face.

The letter from Wheeler arrived the next day.

Now you know how they do it, he wrote. When they put the Big Lie to

work the so-called little man doesn't have a chance. I voted for you but now direct action must be taken. When you said our way of life is threatened they had to steal the election, like they steal everything from the taxpayers . . .

The letter went on like that, not making any sense. "The station must have told Wheeler where we are," I said to Mary. "I didn't know he was such a fan of mine."

Mary didn't think it was amusing. "He makes me feel slimy," she said. "I don't know how you can stand to work with him."

She had a point; Wheeler was certainly unpleasant enough. The station kept him on only because he'd been there for twenty years, like a bad habit. You could count on Wheeler missing at least one day a week 'because he was off on a drunk. The rest of the time he had the shakes, and when he shot film with the hand camera it was jumpy and jerky. He did better with the big sound camera on a tripod, but his health was so shot now that he had trouble lugging the gear around.

"I won't have to work with him anymore," I told Mary. "He'll be shooting film for the other reporters, just like I will."

Normally, you'd feel sorry for someone like Wheeler. He was a skinny little guy and he lived alone

in a cheap hotel room; but he was sick and vicious. I figured him for a paranoiac. Wheeler talked a lot about vigilantes and shootings and police states. Often he tried to talk politics with me, but I couldn't make sense out of his ramblings.

I didn't like Wheeler any more than Mary did, but he didn't frighten me the way he frightened her.

I wish I'd been guided by her intuition.

A chill wind struck us as soon as we stepped off the plane. It seemed a lot closer to Christmas than it had down south in the desert. The holiday decorations were up all over town as we drove home from the airport. The mail waiting for me was less festive. I opened a few letters and then quit.

"Hate mail," I said. "What gets into people to make them kick a man when he's down?"

"It's the times," Mary said. "These are scary times to some people."

When I showed up at work the next morning, the newsroom was the usual madhouse. The cop radio was blaring away and Rowe, the anchor man for the noon show, was screaming bloody murder because he couldn't find last night's scripts. Someone was in the projection room running what sounded like a

cattle stampede, and back in one of the editing booths the gain on a sound reader was turned way up, shooting loud staccato bursts of Donald Duck gabble.

The assignment editor, as usual, was frantic.

"McCoy!" he yelled. "You've got to go to the Benton Hotel for Tolliver's press conference! Wheeler's off on a toot and we can't find his gear!"

"Calm down," I said. "What do you mean, you can't find his gear?"

"He's got it hid, that's what I mean! I don't know why we put up with that nut. Tolliver's announcing a new tax plan or something, so you might as well get your feet wet by shooting it. But first you're gonna have to find the camera Wheeler hid. He doesn't answer the phone at his hotel, so I don't know where it is!"

"It's probably in the basement," I said. "That's where he does his tinkering."

"Yeah, well, Horstrup's down there looking for it. See if you can help him. He'll go with you."

The camera and the rest of the gear was assigned to Wheeler, but it belonged to the station. He was supposed to keep it in the trunk of his news car, so if he didn't show up, one of the other photographers could use it. But Wheeler was very secretive with his stuff.

Horstrup, a reporter, was down in the cluttered basement room we sometimes used to edit film.

"Hi, Phil," he said. "Welcome back. Will you look at this?"

Horstrup had found Wheeler's gear. It had been locked in a closet, the camera and accessory bag on a shelf and the big tripod on the floor. A couple of blankets had been thrown over them.

"Wheeler's really crazy," he said. "I mean ding-a-ling crazy. Why would he hide this stuff?"

"I don't know."

"Me neither. We better go—we're already late."

Horstrup took the tripod and I got the camera and accessory bag.

"You got lights?" I asked.

"They're in the car. There's film there, too."

"Let's go."

I drove to the Benton, and Horstrup sat on the passenger's side and smoked a cigar. It was a nice change for me. A couple of months ago I would have been on the passenger's side worrying about how to do the story, especially since we were late; but now, all I had to do was shoot film. I was feeling good and relaxed; I began to think I might take Mary out to dinner.

"Did you know the President was supposed to come here this week?" Horstrup asked. "We just found out he canceled the trip."

"I didn't know. I've been out of town."

"Yeah. Well, it was very hush-hush. Too bad he canceled, though. I would have liked to cover it."

"You just think so. Fighting the crowds and the secret service men is miserable work."

The Christmas decorations were strung downtown and there was already a Santa Claus on the sidewalk in front of the Benton Hotel, even though it was still November.

What's going on?" the Santa asked as we walked past him. Horstrup had the tripod and lights and I had the rest of Wheeler's gear.

"Senator Tolliver," Horstrup said. "News conference."

"Oh, he's a good man." Santa held the door open for us. He looked right at me, a twinkle in his eye. Maybe he didn't know I'd run against Tolliver; or maybe he was pulling my leg.

Horstrup and I rode the elevator up to the mezzanine and walked into the tail end of the news conference. I set up the tripod and hoisted the sound camera on top of it.

"I hate to come late to these things," Horstrup muttered. "It's embarrassing."

A couple of other stations and some radio and newspaper guys were there. Tolliver was just finishing his answer to a question. He had

a suntan, just like mine, and I wondered where he'd gone after the election. Hawaii, probably. The other TV guys were already breaking down their equipment; we were good and late.

I opened the camera and put on a 400-foot magazine of film. I plugged into a wall socket and then threaded the film through and closed the camera.

Horstrup had a copy of Tolliver's statement. "I just want him to read a little bit of this," Horstrup said. "You can put a lavalier mike around his neck. I won't be in the shot."

I nodded and kept working. Tolliver had finished talking and poured himself a cup of coffee, but the other guys were going to stick around. There were a few wisecracks about me working the camera instead of being in front of it. I smiled and ignored them. The guys wanted to see what Tolliver and I had to say to each other.

I strung the amplifier to the tripod and plugged it into the camera. There's a kinesthetic pleasure in getting ready to shoot film; you go through your little routine, mentally checking off each completed act, and it feels good because you know you're doing everything properly. There were two microphones in Wheeler's accessory bag. I took out the one that had the cord

wrapped neatly around it; there was no reason for it—I was just being extra methodical because people were watching me.

The other guys still had their lights up and said we could use them, so I didn't have to assemble mine. I took a reading with the light meter, plugged the mike cord into the amplifier and nodded to Horstrup that I was about ready.

"Senator, if you will," Horstrup said, "I just want you to read this part of your statement."

Tolliver put down his coffee cup and looked at the paper Horstrup was showing him. "Okay if I ad-lib it?"

"Sure," Horstrup said. "Can you keep it down to a minute, minute and a half?"

"Sure." Tolliver gave him his state senator smile.

I should have noticed that the microphone was too heavy. Afterwards, I remembered noticing that there was something wrong with the mike—but the guys were watching me and I was distracted. I strung the mike around Tolliver's neck and fastened it with a cord.

"You're looking well, Phil," he said.

"You, too. That's a nice suntan."

He grinned. "I imagine the governor will blister it off me when he hears this tax plan."

I went back to the camera and

focused on Tolliver. He was standing alone under the lights.

"You can just look at the camera and give your statement," Horstrup said. He gave me a sign to start rolling.

Tolliver was smiling at the camera when I flicked the toggle switch. That put juice into the microphone cord and set off the charge that Wheeler's demented mind had planned for the President. The explosion blew Tolliver's throat out.

Like everyone else in the room, I dropped to the floor when the explosion went off. But even before I hit the carpet, I knew what had happened. I felt it in my finger while it was still on the switch, and I saw it through the view finder. I didn't know about Wheeler's plans for the President—that didn't come out until a couple of days later—but I knew I had killed Tolliver.

Horstrup knew, too, right away. I flipped him the hand camera and told him to start shooting news film; I couldn't do it. Then the other guys got up and started shooting film. They shot Tolliver, and they shot each other, and they shot the hotel guests who poured into the room, including the Santa Claus, and they shot plenty of me.

I made the front pages, sitting there with my head in my hands, and there was nothing phony about

it this time. I was sick—sick at what I'd done, and sick at doing the dirty work for a rat like Wheeler. Sick at thinking how Mary was going to feel—and yes—sick for my political career.

I made the news the next day, too, when I was arraigned on a murder charge. The district attorney knew he couldn't make it stick, but he raised the devil when I told him *no comment*. He was half out of his head from the pressure, and with a dozen eyewitnesses against me, I wasn't about to put a statement in his hands. Then my lawyer raised hell when I wouldn't let him post bail.

"If I bail out, they're all going to think I'm guilty," I said. "I'll wait it out."

Wheeler skipped town, but they picked him up in a couple of days. He claims the rigged mike was for self-protection but that he might have used it if the President didn't stop picking on him. He's charged with murder, but the D.A. isn't sure he can get a conviction. The jail doctor says Wheeler has a brain tumor.

The charge against me was

dropped in a hurry, and that got me another headline. I still haven't made a public statement; the picture of me holding my head in my hands speaks for itself.

I haven't gone back to work yet, but I've had a poll taken. It shows thirty percent of the voters with no opinion about me at all—but of those with an opinion, eighty-seven percent totally reject the suggestion that I'm guilty. My former campaign manager thinks I'll get a big sympathy vote if I run again, but I don't know. Mary doesn't want me in politics anymore. Maybe she has a point.

However, I do know this: I'm through being a cameraman—and frankly, the thought of getting in front of a camera again—like Tolliver—that scares me, too. So I'm not sure what I'll do. Horstrup has already quit. He said he's ashamed of himself for shooting film of Tolliver instead of running for a doctor. I told him Tolliver was already dead and there was nothing he could have done, but he wants to know how I can be so sure. He says none of us in the room that morning bothered to check.



Contrarily, the culmination of prolonged anxiety may bring craved relief, yet leave one vacuously unfulfilled.



EVELYN HAD THE PHONE installed as soon as she moved into the house, not that there was anyone to call her, but so she could call out if necessary. A woman alone in a remote

little house needs to know that at the end of the line someone is ready to help; not that Evelyn had ever yet needed help, nor that the little house was actually remote. It wasn't even completely lonely, for there was Gwendolyn, the cat.

Living in this almost-remote little house with only Gwendolyn for company offered regular periods of excitement, however. Starting each evening at six o'clock, when Evelyn snapped the aisle chain of her checkstand to total her cash register, the excitement began, mounting as she left the supermarket to walk the five winter-dark residential blocks, becoming breathlessly overwhelming as she passed the big unlighted house in front, moved among the overhanging trees in the yard and then turned the key to the little dark house at the back of the lot.

Once inside, with the lights lit, all corners investigated and the bed fearfully looked under, the excitement was abruptly gone, leaving an empty sense of loss. "Well," Evelyn always said at this moment, her shoulders folded like wings,

"there's nobody here, Gwendolyn," and nobody ever was.

The evening then settled down to the sober monotony of all the evenings that had gone before. She fed Gwendolyn and forced her from the house with the words, "But you *must* go out sometimes. It's the way cats *do*. Run. Get some exercise." Then reluctantly and apprehensively, Gwendolyn slunk into the night to sniff suspiciously of the acacia and jacaranda trees. She made a quick, tight circle of token exercise around the house, never far from the puddles of window light, and back to the door to claw for safety.

As always, Evelyn let her in with the remark, "For heaven's sake, Gwendolyn . . . All right, come in. See? Nothing got you. Anyway, you're not really afraid, you're just making a game of it." But to Gwendolyn, safe again and washing all the terrible possibilities from her fur, hers was no game but real fear,

based on the sure knowledge that a lone female is a creature to be preyed upon.

When Evelyn had rented the little house, the elderly couple in front had asked, "Now, you won't be afraid all alone?"

"No," she said.

"We travel a lot, now that I am retired," offered the elderly gentleman.

Evelyn smiled in sympathetic approval.

"One reason we're renting out the guest house is to be sure that someone is on the property while we're away," said the elderly lady. "It makes us feel—you know—more comfortable."

"Yes," agreed Evelyn.

"Now, if you're absolutely sure you will stay," they spoke in unison, "and are not afraid. . ."

Evelyn was sure she would stay and felt not fear but, rather, a fearful excitement, a shuddering anticipation which brightened days checking out indifferent grocery customers, and warmed nights spent with an inattentive cat.

The cat had arrived at her door early in the fall on a night of chilly mist. Over the muted voice of the television speaker, Evelyn heard the sound.

She snapped off the set and arose, alerted. She jerked her head toward the half-glassed door, her eyes wide



and staring. "Yes?" she called, her voice clogged with alarm. "Is anyone there?"

Silence. Then the scratching again.

Pictures flopped in Evelyn's mind of a bearded desperado, a prowler with fiery eyes, a sex maniac slaving desire. She trembled, calling again, "You! Who are you?"

"Meeow-w-w," came the cry.

Evelyn gasped. "A cat!" with a let-down slide of her voice. She brought the half-grown, half-starved, half-drowned cat into the house, fed and kept her, named her Gwendolyn, and raised her to calico plumpness and sleek adult cowardice.

The cat was better than the occasional wrong-number call she received and just as good as actually and finally seeing her name, address and telephone number in the directory which was waiting for her on the tiny porch on a memorable purple evening when she arrived home from the supermarket.

Her routine was interrupted while she feverishly flipped through the "D" pages, her finger racing down the list of names . . . "Dahlquist, Dalgeish, D'Ambrogio. Darden. She stopped in paralyzed wonder, for there it was—Darden, Evelyn—right there, her very own name to give her a sense of identity. "As if I am here," she told herself,

"whether anyone knows it or not."

She hung over her name for long minutes, reviewing the miraculous fact that the address was right and the telephone number correct. She was there on that page: herself, her home, her communication.

Then, remembering her nightly search, she scurried to peer in the corners and peek under the bed and inform Gwendolyn that no one was hiding.

It was as if the telephone number, written out in black and white, had, indeed, marked her as an individual, for she received no more wrong numbers.

But she did receive calls—personal calls, stamped with her name. It was late November, with winter chill and winter storm, when the first call came.

The evening had been the same as all Evelyn's evenings, with the fruitless search, the struggle to eject Gwendolyn into the rain, then to admit her. "Come on now, it wasn't that bad. You're just blaming me because all you found was rain." Gwendolyn turned her back to smooth her coat. "That's right, get pretty now that there's nothing to be pretty for."

Evelyn, too, preened for the night. Like a butterfly shedding its cocoon, she took off her below-the-knee skirt, her buttoned-down-tight blouse and stepped into a di-

aphanous nightgown, turning thus from the never-seen spinster to the seen-never seductress. Then she went to bed.

The call came at three o'clock in the morning.

Evelyn was up like a shot and half out of bed toward the partly open window and flapping curtains, not knowing what had awakened her. The phone rang again. She lunged back across the bed, snapped on the lamp and stared at the instrument on the night table, not believing its clamor. Cautiously, she reached. The bell vibrated against her fingers. Lifting the phone slowly, she held it up and away from her ear, hearing herself say, "Hello?"

"Hello, Evelyn."

Evelyn froze. She wanted to ask who it was and how he knew her name. Her lips moved without sound.

"Evelyn," repeated the voice; "Evelyn," with a caressing sound, spreading round the vowels, softly sounding consonants like syrup.

"Are you in bed, Evelyn . . . with the storm and the cold outside? Are you cuddled in blankets, all warm and wishful, Evelyn?"

She widened her eyes and clutched at her crazily beating heart. The softly intimate voice seemed insidiously near, creeping into the room to fill the corners.

"HELLO, EVELYN"

She slanted her eyes in panic, to the right and the left, without moving her head, and saw the cat then, watchful in the doorway, her knowing gaze upon Evelyn in round-eyed accusation.

Evelyn dropped the phone to its cradle with a clatter. She fell back upon her pillow, spent, and slept no more that night.

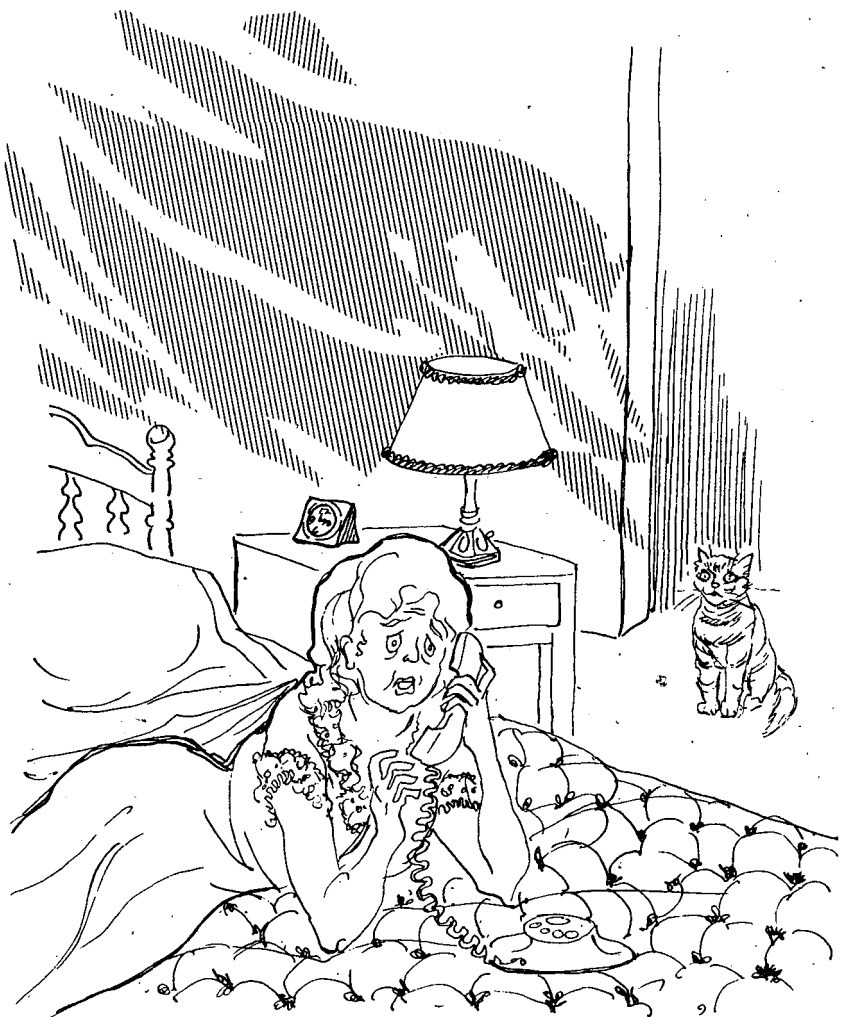
The velvet voice and the suggestive words it had spoken formed a repetitious rhythm in her mind, jolting her with echoes of terror. She said her name aloud in the softly-lighted room, giving it the same flowing murmur, the same breath of sound—and shuddered.

With daylight, the remote little house was different and so was Evelyn, for here was a place where things happened and Evelyn a woman to whom they happened. She went to work in the last of the rain, with the sound of her name curling softly around her memory, as refreshed as if she'd had a good night's sleep.

"I had a terrible experience last night," she said to the checker in the next aisle during the early afternoon customer-lull.

"Yeah? What?" asked the checker, used to terrible experiences with two fatherless teenagers and a complaining mother.

"It was this morning, really. A phone call at three o'clock. This



man . . .” Remembering the dark and the storm and the whispering voice, Evelyn hugged the collar of the supermarket smock tight around her throat. “The things he said!” she breathed.

The checker alerted to attention. “You mean obscene?”

Evelyn recoiled from the label, then drew toward it with interest. “Well . . . maybe,” she decided. Recalling the murmured words, she

blushed, let go the collar of her smock and blew cooling breath on her face. "It was more like . . . well, personal. He knew my name. He kept saying it. How would he know my name was Evelyn?"

"It's in the phone book, isn't it?" asked the checker. "Right out there so every kook that's runnin' his finger down the page for a number to call can call it. I think a woman's askin' for it that puts her first name in the telephone directory. I wouldn't do it. Mine's listed with my initials. Then they think it's a man. Well, don't worry about it. He can't do anything to you through a phone wire, maybe miles of phone wire for all you know. He may be callin' clear from the other side of the city. Anyway, he probably won't call again."

Evelyn felt unaccountable disappointment. She worked her checkstand without interest and approached her house without anticipation. She searched the corners and under the bed, fed the cat and sent her out into the cold and alarming dark. "You aren't fooling me, Gwendolyn," she said upon letting her in again. "You really want something to happen to you out there in the night."

Gwendolyn looked up at her with slant-eyed contempt and turned to smooth the cold and misconception from her coat.

Evelyn donned her fancy nightgown and built fanciful dreams, but she did not sleep. Every slap of a curtain, the whirr of the refrigerator, a crack of an outside branch brought her upright, heart pounding. "Gwendolyn, is that you?"

Gwendolyn, curled warmly on the foot of the bed, opened a knowing amber eye for an instant, and closed it.

The phone did not ring again, after the first time, for five days. When it did, Evelyn did not believe it. She switched on the bed lamp and stared at the instrument, sure the sound had been a part of her dream. It rang again and she fell upon it sobbing, half in welcome, half in terror. She lifted the receiver.

"Evelyn? Hello, Evelyn . . ."

Her fingers rose stiffly to press hard against her lips.

"Evelyn . . ." giving the name a sugar-drawl, "Evelyn, are you lonely? Have you been waiting, Evelyn?"

She crashed the phone to its cradle, her body arched over it in taut but hypnotized fear, the name still crawling around the room as the voice had spoken it, sneaking up the walls and clinging to the corners in over-ripe mellowness.

The next day the checker remarked during a lull, "You look like death warmed over."

Evelyn did not want to talk of it, yet she did—just as she was afraid of the voice, but needed to hear it again. “He called again at midnight,” she said.

“Who?” The checker had forgotten.

“That man. The one who called before.”

The checker became instantly interested. “You mean you got another obscene call?”

“It isn’t obscene.” Suddenly, Evelyn could define the words, the tone, the meaning as *obscene by innuendo*. “No, it’s just . . .” but she could not define it aloud.

“Well!” The checker turned prim. “If it was me, I’d sure do something about it. The very idea! I wouldn’t have just any old weirdo using *my* telephone number.”

“What would you do?” asked Evelyn.

“I’d call the police. That’s what we’re payin’ ’em for, isn’t it? Protection? Or the telephone company. They’ll give you a new number. Then when he calls your old one, he’ll get nothin’ but a recording. I saw a TV program once that said when you got an obscene call to blow a whistle in the mouthpiece. One of those little whistles like you can get at a dime store. Just have it there and when the joker calls and talks dirty, blow.”

“But he doesn’t talk dirty,” pro-

tested Evelyn. “Not really. Not actually.”

“Okay. What do you think he’s leadin’ up to?”

Evelyn shuddered with an icy chill. At the same time, hot perspiration trickled down her spine. “I don’t know. What do you think?”

“It isn’t the start of a pitch for a magazine subscription, that’s for sure. You go out and buy that whistle. The guy’s a nut.”

There was a dime store in the shopping center where Evelyn worked. She bought the whistle during her afternoon break, and that evening when she arrived home, excitement again her security blanket, she placed the whistle on the night stand beside the telephone. *There*, she thought in triumph, *that will stop him*.

She hesitated then while memory, out of the night, curled her name about her, spoken softly and warmly, so that she became sick at the thought of its loss, and her fingers fluttered, then snatched at the whistle, dropped it into the drawer and slammed it shut.

The night grumbled warning of a new storm. Evelyn fed the cat and opened the door. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, go on out, Gwendolyn. You’re lucky. You’re a cat. You can prowl.”

She stood in the open door,

watching the clouds curtain the moon, until Gwendolyn, after circling the house, leaping from one safe island of light to the next, raced into safety. Evelyn closed the door to look down at the cat who had jumped to the window seat to gaze out with mockery at the night and its terrors. "Gwendolyn, I think you want to be scared. Or maybe it's something else you want but won't admit it."

Gwendolyn stared back at her blandly, and yawned.

At eleven, the rain came and with the rain, the blast of the phone.

Evelyn roused instantly from her first restless doze, reached for the lamp with one hand and the phone with the other.

"Hello, Evelyn," she heard softly against the storm. "You were waiting, Evelyn? Were you dreaming and waiting? Is the dream still in your eyes? Are you limp with dreaming and wanting and waiting, Evelyn?"

She clung to the phone, hardly breathing.

"Evelyn, are you waiting . . ." and the velvet voice murmured obscenities Evelyn had never heard before, sounded out erotica with loving languor, chuckled with salacious inertia. She released her breath in a startled gasp and clapped the phone to its cradle.

"HELLO, EVELYN"

Then she yanked open the drawer, snatched the whistle and blew.

Gwendolyn rose in the air, spun, tail fanned, back arched, eyes blazing, every muscle taut and quivering.

The sound split the moan of the wind outside and splashed the steady rain. Evelyn dropped the whistle to the bedside table and crumpled. The voice enveloped her again, not with the liquid vowels of her name, but with gross discord.

Gwendolyn settled again to wait, eyes warily slitted.

Evelyn moved from the bed, smoothed the sheets and walked the small dark rooms to allow cold air to fan her body. The words she had heard, still heard in her mind, caressed her with filthy fingertips, sending her, finally, stumbling to the bathroom where she showered in cold water. She left the filmy, dreamy nightgown in a heap on the floor and wrapped herself in a terry-cloth robe, pure and prosaic.

Just as she reached the bed, the phone rang again. "No!"

She cowered from it and Gwendolyn raised her head. Branches crashed against the side of the house, wind whipped the fallen leaves. "No!"

The ring was shrilly insistent. Evelyn stared at the instrument, willing it, with clenched-fists, to si-

lence. It defied her and continued.

She lifted the phone at last, to hold the receiver well away from her ear and heard, "Evelyn . . . Listen, Evelyn . . ." and the words again.

She reached, with cold fingers, for the whistle. She brought it to stiff lips and attempted to blow. Her cheeks filled with air and she gagged against metal. She dropped the phone and sobbed.

It rang again almost immediately. She broke the connection by lifting it, slamming it back, jabbing it viciously again and again to the cradle. Then, when she was sure of the purr of the dial tone, she kept it off the hook, and pulled out the telephone directory, the directory with the bookmark in the D section where Darden, Evelyn was underlined, to give her substance and a sense of identity.

The word Emergency leaped out at her from the inside cover. Her finger ran down the list: Fire, Ambulance, Police . . . *There!* Her finger moved under it into a blank column and the words: "Write in your police number." She gritted her teeth, her eyes wildly leaping over the page and at the bottom, Police or Sheriff, with towns and suburbs, were listed with the numbers. She made a mark with her fingernail, picked up the phone, listened to the dial tone. Then she dialed the dig-

its that would bring her salvation.

When the answer came, Police Department, so-and-so speaking, she didn't know what to say. Finally, she got it out—the calls that were so frightening—and was interrupted for her name and phone number.

"Listed that way, ma'am?" asked the speaker.

"What way?" she said with irritation. The panic, the horror, had begun to subside and she was left feeling empty and foolish.

"Your first name and your last. Evelyn Darden."

"Of course it's listed that way. It's my name. What other way would I list it?"

"Well, Miss, these kooks look for women's names. Then they call. Next time, better have your number listed with only your initials, then they don't know whether you're a man or a woman."

"But what about *until* next time?" Evelyn was frantically eager to keep this nice, if hurried and rather bored, young policeman on her line. "These calls, they're driving me crazy."

Gwendolyn sprang from the bed, gave a half-yawn that looked like a grin and leisurely and remotely washed her face.

"Don't answer the phone, Miss."

"Don't *answer* it? I *have* to," cried Evelyn.

He immediately jumped to a wrong conclusion, his voice understanding. "Yes, I know, Miss, you think it's an important call, coming from someone you know; family, maybe sickness or accident." His compassion dripped as he imagined a situation that did not exist so Evelyn could not and did not explain that she knew no one, really, had no family and therefore did not know why she must answer that insistent ring, knowing exactly who it would be—but she did have to answer it.

"Tell you what, Miss, why don't you call the phone company and have them change your number?"

"Yes, well . . ." Evelyn was not satisfied with the solution. It left a wide and over-simplified gap between softly obscene suggestion and nothing at all. It reduced her importance.

The officer further reduced her importance by adding, "We *could* have a tap put on your phone, but it still wouldn't identify the caller, only where he was calling *from*, which would probably be a public phone booth. And he has made only three calls."

"Four," corrected Evelyn.

"Well, four, then. He'll probably get tired if you don't listen to him. They usually do. You'd be surprised, Miss Darden, how many of these calls go through all the time. Some we hear about, some we

don't. They're just calls, though. They don't go any further than that. These nuts get their kicks talking to a woman they don't know, they don't do anything more. Remember that. And if they go on, you just get your number changed, and the next time get it listed under your initials. Okay?"

"Okay," said Evelyn wearily.

Gwendolyn walked with dignity from the room, her tail switching.

"If you have too many more of those calls, you contact us again. Right?"

"Right," said Evelyn and hung up.

She felt at a loss. She tried to recapture the tingling fright of the whispers, the startled anxiety of the ringing phone, but all her mind found was a sense of anonymity. She padded across the room to stand in the doorway and search the darkness for the cat.

Wind still whipped the branches and rain lashed the windowpanes. The livingroom was a cold black cavern. She reached into the blackness, seeking the wall switch. Her hand fluttered still as, in a quick lightning flash, she caught sight of Gwendolyn outlined on the window seat, stiff and watchfully alert, looking out at the night.

Evelyn backed from the doorway into the soft light of the bedroom. The phone book still lay open on

the bed. She reached, and as she bent to pick it up, the phone rang. She whirled, the heels of her hands pressed to the sides of her head, and once more heard the whispers, the softly rounded vowel tones—the promise, the terrible, terrible promise snaking into the shadows, climbing the walls, crouching in corners. “*Don’t answer it,*” the officer had advised. She stared down at the coiled white snake rattling its warning. Hypnotized, she reached for it.

“Hello, Evelyn.”

She stood on ankles of air and held the phone in numb fingers.

“Evelyn, listen. Now, listen . . .” the voice flowed with persuasion and embraced her with arcane suggestion.

“*He’ll probably get tired if you don’t listen to him,*” the officer had explained. “*And if the calls continue, get your number changed.*”

All right. She would.

She cut the connection and turned to the open telephone book. Frantically, she started at the front again. Index . . . Local Calls . . . Long Distance . . . Prefix Locations . . . The book was *crammed* with nonessentials . . . Area Codes. *There!* General Business.

That’s where you called to get something done about your telephone number. With her finger on the book, she turned toward the phone and it rang, startling her

with the thought, *It’s as if he knew and is trying to get in as many calls as possible before it’s too late.* She lifted the receiver and banged it down. Then, cautiously, she lifted it again and listened for the dial tone, that blessedly impersonal hum. She dialed the number and blankly heard a mechanical recording explain the 8:30 to 5:00 o’clock business hours, with the request that she phone the business office again within those times. It was then she realized it was 1:15 in the morning, but petulantly and unreasonably wondered why they couldn’t work at night for people like her.

The phone rang intermittently through that wild dark night. Sometimes Evelyn listened, her mind writhing but listening, nevertheless, as if this must be her punishment for living alone, unloved and unprotected.

She rose when the storm had turned from black to gray, surprised that the house was just the same as it had always been—neat, tidy, a spinster-house—when it should be disheveled and unkempt from the night.

“You look awful!” her checker-companion exclaimed. “What in the world happened to you?”

Evelyn told of her night on the phone. “I got the telephone company this morning before I left the house,” she said. “They promised to

change the phone number for me."

"When?" asked the checker.

"Right away. As soon as possible. The girl said she'd put a 'rush' on the order and they'll notify me as soon as it's been done."

"I hope so," said the checker. "You sure look like you could do with some sleep." She had a sudden inspiration. "Why don't you take the phone off the hook?"

"I'm on a party line," said Evelyn. "What if the other people on the line needed the phone? In case of fire. Or they might have children and have to have the doctor."

The checker had children. They were of the type who might start a fire, too, and *she'd* need a doctor, so she understood doubly and nodded her head with sympathy. But Evelyn wondered, was that *really* the reason she hadn't employed this obvious, most simple solution of all? Was she *really* thinking of nebulous parents and careless smokers, both of whom would probably be in bed and sound asleep, unaware of the sacrifice being made in their behalf?

Remembering the business-office hours, Evelyn called the telephone company in the late afternoon. She had to brief the girl (same girl, for she recognized her voice) who had forgotten and couldn't seem to find her papers. Evelyn perspired in the glassed-in market telephone booth,

"HELLO, EVELYN"

watching the manager watching her. Grocery customers and their piled-up carts were queued up before every checkstand except hers, where the light was off and the chain snapped closed. Everything about the manager, the impatient movement of his feet, the droop of his fish-mouth, telegraphed his question: *Is this call necessary?*

Yes, it is necessary, thought Evelyn. She jumped at the voice again on the phone. "That hasn't gone through yet, Miss Darden. We will notify you."

So her phone number was the same. Then everything would be the same. Back at her checkstand, she looked through the wide glass show windows at the rain forming a lake now in the jammed parking lot.

The night would be the same.

And that night, the call came at ten o'clock, just as Evelyn was slipping out of her below-the-knee skirt and unbuttoning her blouse. She refastened, rebuttoned quickly and snatched up the phone. "Yes?" she answered severely. She was Dealing With Things now. This wouldn't go on much longer.

"Hello, Evelyn," and she turned limp.

"Evelyn, are you all dry and warm now after being soaked on your way home from work?"

Her eyes widened, her knees

buckled her to the edge of the bed. "Evelyn, have you put the cat out?"

She gave a small, half-strangled gasp of terror and slammed down the receiver.

There was a sound somewhere, a scraping sound as of something or someone trying to get inside. She jerked her head from left to right like a cornered rat, but of course it was the storm, the interminable, turbulent storm. Movement jerked her eyes to the corner of the room where she saw Gwendolyn hunched in the shadowed triangle, her gaze steadily upon Evelyn, smelling fear, bristling with its odor.

"He knows about you," cried Evelyn in accusation, and Gwendolyn rose on her back legs to arch her back, her mouth half open in a silent scream.

Evelyn raced to the door to be sure it was locked—the door that was always locked—then back to the phone. She lifted the receiver, laying it on its side. Frantically, she scrambled the directory from the shelf of the stand and laid it on the bed. She opened the cover, noted her fingernail mark under the telephone number, listened for the dial tone and tremblingly dialed the number of the police station. She babbled her identity and began the babble of her fears.

This was not the same so-and-so

of the Police Department with whom she had talked the night before. This one, like the telephone office girl, had to search among his papers for Evelyn. "Oh, yes," he said finally and calmly, "you are the victim of the obscene telephone calls."

"It's more than that," she cried. "He knows about me. He's been watching me," and she told about the cat. "How would he know I had a cat unless he hid in the trees and watched?"

"Well, now," soothed the officer, "he might have heard it over the telephone. He might have heard it meow and remembered. These kooks, you know—"

"No!" cried Evelyn. "He didn't."

"Or he might have assumed it," continued the officer, his voice a comforting monotone. "He guessed you had a cat. It was just a lucky guess."

So now he was putting her in the spinster class—spinster-with-a-cat. One always thinks of spinsters-with-cats, not spinsters-without-cats.

The officer's voice chuckled companionably. "There's a saying when you get ready for bed. 'Turn off the lights and put the cat out.'"

"But he knows I work," she desperately tried again. "He said something about my coming home from work in the rain."

The officer had an answer to

that, too. "A normal assumption," was his answer. "Most people work and everybody went home through the rain."

Evelyn felt the solid island of carpet beneath her feet slip away from her. "He's spying on me," she screamed into the phone. "I know he is. I want protection." She shouldn't have said that in quite that way, for the officer would label her a hysterical female, which he did, immediately, as he over-soothed and over-comforted.

"We'll direct a patrol car into your area." He searched her address again and read it out. "We'll see that your street is patrolled all night, rest assured, Miss. A tap on your phone is no good. By the time we get it set up, the number will be changed. But you'll be protected, don't worry. And, Miss, these kooks only phone. It's all they do. It's the way they get their kicks."

"I hope that's all," said Evelyn hopelessly.

"So you just rest easy. There'll be a patrol around your block every hour."

She hung up, wondering, *What if something should happen between those hours?*

Gwendolyn still watched her, bristling with echoed fear.

Evelyn was now faced with a desperate decision. Should she leave the phone off the hook so it

would not ring and she could sleep? Or should she leave it on, to know for sure that the voice was still there, somewhere distant, and not skulking outside her windows? She left it on and stayed awake in panic because the phone never rang. So where was he?

Sick gray dawn brought only the comfort that night was over.

It was not until late afternoon that she felt a sense of relief when, inside the glassed box, the telephone girl informed her that yes, her number was now changed, and she took it down with trembling fingers, feeling a sense of consolation and of loss.

"See?" said the checker from her comfortable position of security. "You haven't got a thing to worry about. The next time that kook dials your number, he'll get nothin' but an earful of recording."

"But he knows my address."

"Look, if he'd wanted to use your address, he'd have used it before now. In that television thing I watched, they said those kooks never, but never did anything but talk on the telephone. Personal contact? That's out. It's some kind of sex hang-up they've got."

The same explanation, in essence, as that of the police officer: "*He probably heard the cat and remembered . . . or he guessed and his was a lucky guess.*" Evelyn then

compromised. She compromised her bewildered fears with the officer's experienced knowledge. She compromised her almost-known anxieties with the delightful excitement of the unknown, and settled, with only a quiver of revolt, for the sleep-filled nights that spread before her.

"I suppose it's all over," she said to the checker.

"Now you can get a night's sleep."

At six o'clock, she snapped the chain of her checkstand and went out into the dark pattering rain. She walked the five residential blocks and just as she turned to pass the big unlighted house in front, she saw the patrol car creep down the street, its red dome light a beacon of friendship.

The compromise became a resolve, for there was the patrol car to protect *her*. A new telephone number to protect *her*. . . She hurried through the shadows, no longer uncertain.

It was over. The nights of terror, days of anxiety were over. She felt safety in her bones, offered up,

given to her by all those people who *knew* that she was Evelyn Darden, living here. They were her friends and watched over her.

She fumbled in her bag for her key. She turned it in the keyhole of this remote little house that was not remote at all.

She opened the door and out streaked Gwendolyn.

Evelyn swayed a moment, peering into darkness that had swallowed up the cat, and laughed with this new lightheartedness. "So you aren't afraid either," she called into the night. "You are acting like a regular cat at last."

She turned on the lights, closed the door, made a cursory habit-patterned search of the livingroom, then walked to the bedroom, stepped into the darkness, and started for the lamp by the bed.

"Hello, Evelyn."

The familiar, spun-sugar sound halted her.

"Evelyn."

Her scream, at first the choked cry of startled excitement, changed to terror.

Then it abruptly ceased.



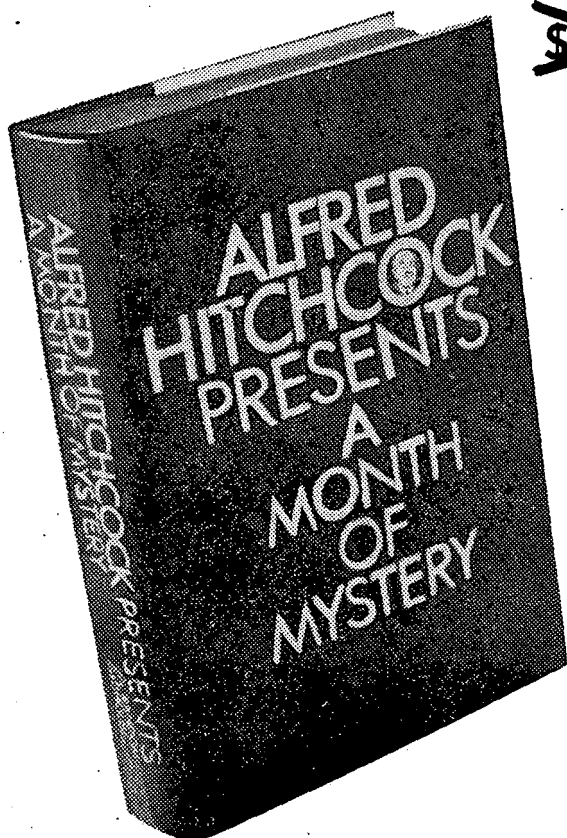
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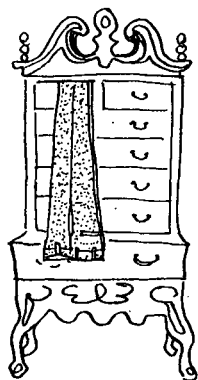
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A life that is ingrained with particular habits often makes an indelible impression.



FOR THE LIFE OF ME



by Fred Levon

SHE DREW in a full breath and exhaled slowly. "Even now," she said, "three months later, I keep expecting Oscar just to turn up with a smile and some explanation."

"Don't dwell on it, Aunt Alma," said Miles, "You know it's not likely, and it's best to accept the facts and try to start a new life."

His uncle's boat had been found overturned, empty, the oars and fishing gear gone as well. Alma had

a recurring nightmare of Oscar hooking some sort of huge monstrous sea-creature which pulled him overboard and dragged him under before he realized what was happening. An experienced fisherman, frequently out alone on the Sound, he had never before had an accident.

"Fortunately," Miles continued, "you're well provided for and who knows, in time—"

"No, Miles. Time may dull the aching but it will never obliterate it. I shall never adjust to life without Oscar."

Miles shrugged. "In a way, you know, that's the price you pay for a good marriage. One suspects all those wealthy widows who winter happily in Miami."

"I keep wondering if I should give up the apartment. It's full of him—all his suits in the closets, his desk, his toilet things." She shook her head. "I keep thinking he'll come back."

"Aunt Alma, why don't you stay with us another few days and we'll get someone to freshen up the apartment and pack his things?"

"No, no, Miles, thank you, but I've got to start facing life for myself. You and Martha have been wonderful, nursing me these three months, listening to me over and over again. But I've arranged to have Violet come back tomorrow, and she'll help me with what must be done. And I have an appointment with Dr. Stein Friday morning. He insists on checking me at least every four weeks. He's afraid I'll have another attack, like just after Oscar disappeared." She laughed without a hint of humor. "I guess I almost made it a double disaster."

"You know you're always welcome with us. Even when I was a kid, Uncle Oscar was my favorite.

And you were very good to him; you made him very happy."

Alma dried the corners of her eyes. "It was a sort of natural thing. We made each other happy without going to any effort. Your uncle was very considerate. Strong-minded, set in his ways, with dozens of little habits I've never seen in anybody else, but very gentle and kind. . . ." Again her lids lined with moisture and she raised her handkerchief, but midway her hand deflected to her chest, closing into a fist and pressing against her breastbone.

"What's the matter?" Miles asked. "Do you want your pills?"

"Yes—yes, Miles—please—open my purse."

He found the vial and shook the tiny white tablets onto his palm. She took one and slipped it under her tongue. After resting a moment with her eyelids closed, she sighed again. "There, I'm better now."

"Are you sure you're ready to leave?" Miles asked. "You know you're no trou—"

"Thank you, Miles. You're very kind, and it's lovely here. . . ."

They were seated on the patio overlooking the Sound and Miles' private beach, which he had had created with the finest coral-colored sand, specially imported. She was already dressed for the train trip, lacking only her coat, hat and

gloves. Miles lounged in his expensive Sunday casuals: an ascot at the throat of his sport shirt, tapering trousers, laceless nautical shoes with rubber soles corrugated in transverse ridges. His hair was too long by about three weeks. He was unlike his uncle, who had shaved every morning and dressed impeccably, even on holidays, as though always prepared for the office. Even before his first cup of coffee, he wore his tie and jacket.

Deep inside the house the telephone began to ring and Alma tensed, thinking again: *Oscar! They've found him!* The second ring was broken midway and in a moment Martha came out with an extension telephone. Seeing Alma's expression, she smiled and said, "Relax, Auntie, it's only your lawyer." She plugged the jack into the patio outlet.

"Yes, Burton," said Alma, her heartbeat slowing.

"Alma, how are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Miles and Martha have spoiled me."

"I hear you're returning to your apartment tomorrow."

"Today. As a matter of fact, I'm taking the train in a few minutes."

"Well, I don't want to rush you, but—"

"I know, Burton, and I'm sorry to keep putting you off."

"You don't have to come to the

office; I'll be glad to bring the papers to your apartment."

Miles pointed to his watch and whispered, "Aunt Alma, we have to leave for the station—"

"Thank you, Burton, I appreciate it. How about Wednesday?"

"Fine, Alma, fine. I'll call you Wednesday morning."

Martha kissed Alma good-bye at the door. "Now, remember, Auntie, you keep in touch, and feel free to come back whenever you're lonely." She spoke in squeaky curlicues that seemed to indicate comas. Her teeth were too even and too white. In the sunlight her hair gleamed with that spurious coppery shade that just misses being brass.

Miles drove Alma to the station. On the platform he told her, "You know, Aunt Alma, I'd be glad to drive you to your apartment. It's not too much of a ride from Larchmont to midtown Manhattan."

"No, Miles, I've always found the train restful, and Sunday-evening automobile traffic on the Westchester roads makes me nervous. The cabdriver will carry my suitcase. And I'll notify Dr. Stein right away that I'm back." They smiled and kissed, and she thanked him again.

Again, on the train, she began to fear the loneliness in the apartment she had shared so happily with Oscar. At Grand Central she had no

trouble finding a taxi, and the driver carried in her suitcase and placed it at her feet in the elevator.

Immediately upon opening her door she had the sense that the apartment was occupied. One of the livingroom windows was slightly open—had she left it that way?—and the room smelled fresh, aired, *fragrant*. The fragrance puzzled her until suddenly she realized it was the scent of Oscar's after-shaving lotion! How could it be? Had she or Violet left the bottle out, uncapped?

Quickly removing her coat and hat and gloves, she crossed to the bedroom. Here, too, everything was wrong! Oscar's bed appeared rumpled, as though someone had taken a nap on the coverlet, and there, at the highboy, Oscar's trousers were hanging inverted from the top drawer, the way he hung them every night, opening the drawer and shutting it on the cuffs. "Oscar?" she called in a small shivery voice. "Oscar?"

She moved to the bathroom, and instantly she saw the soap! It had been Oscar's frugal habit to press a small, almost-used piece of soap onto a fresh cake, gluing them together; and here was a new bar of soap with a little sliver pasted on top! Alma touched it; it was moist!

Her vision began to fade, her breath caught at the base of her

throat, her legs trembled, and then she lost all support. She fell to the floor, her left cheek pressed against the bathroom mat, dislodging her eyeglasses.

She spent four days in the intensive care unit, wired to a cardiac monitor. In the next bed a man kept vomiting blood and he received transfusions daily. All lights were on day and night, and she had to be fed because of the electrodes strapped to her wrists.

On the fifth day she was transferred to a private room with special-duty nurses around the clock. "Well, you pulled through again," said Dr. Stein, "and there's no evidence of damage to your heart. But let's keep visitors down to ten minutes."

Her first visitor was Burton, her lawyer, bringing his papers. She told him to put the papers aside, and she gave him instructions. She shushed her nurse and kept Burton busy for twenty-five minutes.

Next came Milo, looking distraught and shaken. "Gosh, Aunt Alma, we thought we were going to lose you."

"But you didn't, Miles; I'm still here."

"And you look fine, thank God!"

"Do I? That's nice. How's Martha?"

"Martha? Why, she's fine. She wanted to come with me, but Dr.

Stein said he didn't think she—"

"Did she miss you, Miles, when you didn't come right home after you put me on the train? What excuse did you give her?"

"Miss me? Why should she? What do you mean?"

"I mean, while you raced from the Larchmont railroad station down to my apartment, to get there before my train reached Grand Central. Did you borrow my key from my purse, Miles, and have it duplicated during the three months I was visiting you?"

"Aunt Alma, are you serious?"

She laughed. "Deadly serious. I squirm when I think how carefully you must have listened to all my stories, to remember so exactly about the window Oscar opened, his afternoon naps, how he hung his trousers from the highboy, the after-shave lotion he used, the way he conserved soap. How you must have planned! Did you have that soap all prepared and ready to take down with you?"

Miles swallowed repeatedly. He shook his head. "Aunt Alma, are you actually accusing me of—of—"

"Of trying to scare me to death? Yes, Miles, and you needn't try it again, because Burton has been here and I've changed my will. You get one dollar, that's all, and don't think you can contest it."

Miles kept shaking his head. "It's fantastic! How can you believe, Aunt Alma—How could you possibly think—"

The nurse opened the door. "Just another minute!" Alma called. And then to Miles: "I'm tired, Miles; you'll have to go. But let me assure you that I haven't been giving you guesswork. When I awoke that evening on my bathroom floor, right in front of my eyes—pressed into the soft bathroom rug—was that special coral sand from your beach, in the corrugated pattern of your shoes. Burton's gone to the apartment to collect some of the sand in a vial, to keep in his safe just in case it's needed as evidence. So I think you have no choice but to behave."

His face, bloodless, showed only an unreal residual shade of suntan. He opened his mouth but his lips quivered silently. After a moment, he rose and left the hospital room.



Notwithstanding Madison Avenue's flamboyant promotional efforts, it would seem that advertising does have its limitations.



AS TO WHY they found him floating off Malibu, dead, wearing those odd shoes, it was, basically, because of the rubber stamp.

Rowland Pinemount showed me the rubber stamp the same day he got it from the shop on Western Boulevard. We were having coffee at a drive-in delicatessen down at the ocean end of Santa Monica, in my car. Rowland's girlfriend, Kinny, had lost his car again.

"Where'd she lose it?" I asked him.

This was in June or July, smoggy

by
Ron Goulart

and up in the high eighties, and Rowland had his dark glasses perched on top of his crew-cut head and was rubbing his eyes. "Don't you want to know how?" He was a large, loose-fleshed man, thirty-four, with a small fuzzy beard.

"I know Kinny, so I can imagine how. But I wonder where."

"Portland, Oregon." Rowland finished his smoked salmon sandwich, wiped his mouth and then

jabbed a plump hand into his pants pocket. "She says she loaned it to a fireman."

"To go to a fire?"

"Yes, she says."

"Doesn't he have a fire truck?"

"He's a volunteer fireman, she says." Rowland pulled a paper bag bound with a rubber band out of his pocket. "I don't think she's really in Portland. I think she's shackled up with Alden Orczy."

I didn't reply. I chewed on some ice from my paper teacup.

Alden Orczy was one of Rowland's obsessions. Rowland was, at that point in June or July of 1970, a pretty good script writer for television, and successful. He had a knack for dialogue and a tremendous gift for verbally selling an idea. Myself, I was in the advertising business, which doesn't involve talking to many people directly. Alden Orczy was a television writer, too, about our age. Orczy was more flamboyant than Rowland, a lot thinner. Ever since Orczy had butted Rowland in the stomach with his head one night a block from The Daisy, Rowland had been obsessed. He didn't like Orczy. He didn't like his pranks. He didn't like his work. Rowland would watch every show Orczy wrote and copy down the dialogue. He claimed Orczy wrote the worst dialogue in Hollywood and he kept a cardboard box full of

steno notebooks of Orczy's terrible dialogue. He loved to quote his favorite awful patches. Rowland usually described Orczy as a combination of Sammy Glick and Woody Woodpecker. Besides his dialogue, there was the fact that Orczy was apparently dating Rowland's girl on the sly.

"Look at this," Rowland said.

I'd been leaning back watching the giant plastic bagel rotate over the place, swirling in the brown air. "What?"

He shook a rubber stamp and an ink pad out of the bag, thwacked the brand-new pink stamp into the fresh ink, grabbed up the check and stamped it. "I ordered it last week and it was ready today."

On the back of the check it now said: *Orczy must go!* I read it aloud, grinned. "You starting an advertising campaign against him?"

Rowland said, "I'm going to use it on all my letters and envelopes and checks." He laughed and stamped *Orczy must go!* on my palm, then on the windshield and on his own pants' knee. "Nobody who writes such awful dialogue deserves to live."

At times Rowland's sense of humor was quite a bit like Orczy's. When he had finished trying out the stamp, I asked him, "Have you heard about the new series yet?"

"*Slum Doctor?*"

"I thought it was *Ghetto Medic*?"

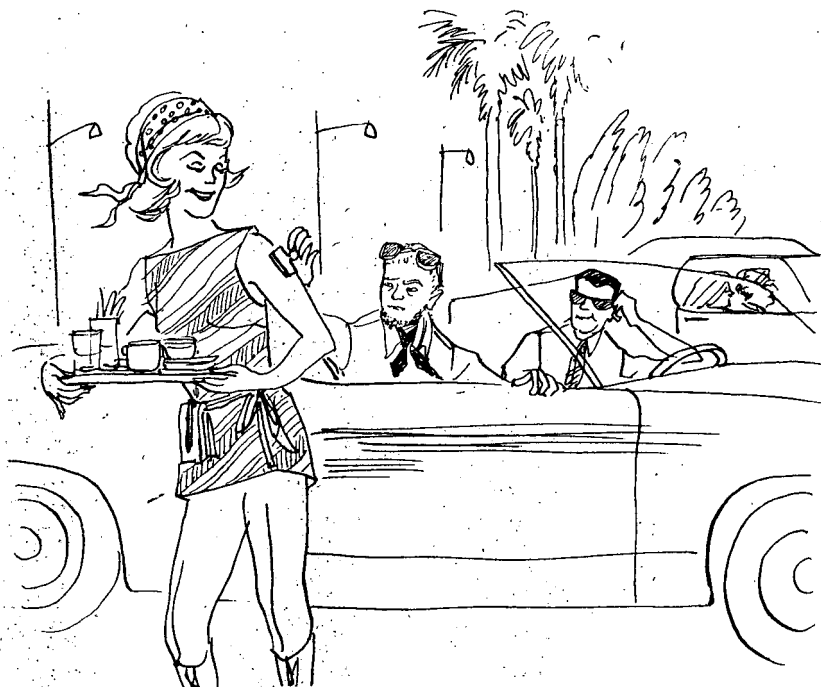
"Changed the title again," said Rowland. "Yes, it looks like I'll get to do at least six segments for next season. I have to check back next week."

The waitress came over to collect and Rowland re-inked his stamp and put *Orczy must go!* on the plump part of her arm just above the elbow. We laughed for a while. Then we left and I dropped Rowland off on Wilshire near his agent's and went back to my ad agency.

I saw the billboard before I saw Rowland again. I'd been back in

Connecticut and Massachusetts looking for a covered bridge which we needed for an instant-mush commercial, but we couldn't find one they'd let us paint blue to match the box and so I came back. The billboard was up over Sunset Boulevard, near where that giant girl spins around. It was a big one-color run, black on white. In large black sans-serif letters it said: *Orczy must go!*

A couple of days later I had lunch with Rowland at the Afro-mat, a soul-food cafeteria off Wilshire. "You've gone beyond the rub-



ber-stamp stage," I said when we'd seated ourselves at an outdoor table in the patio behind the Afromat.

"That pipsqueak," said Rowland. Then, "Would you like to buy an electric typewriter?"

"No," I said. "Yours?"

"One of mine." Rowland liked to have at least two electric typewriters in his house out in the Valley in case one went on the fritz. "I used most of my savings-account balance to buy the billboards."

"Plural? You bought space on more than one?"

"You get a better rate if you take six," explained Rowland, wiping a dab of grits off his beard.

"I only saw the one on Sunset."

"They didn't give me the best locations."

"Aren't you going to get some money from *Slum Doctor*?"

"*Black Intern* is the name of the show now," he said. "And, no. That pipsqueak Orczy went in to Neff and got the assignment away from me."

"How'd he do that?"

"Orczy stole all my diseases."

"Diseases?"

"You know how I pitch ideas for scripts. I go in and hit them with one-liners. 'Crippled baby stuck in elevator,' and so on," said the still-plump Rowland. "So I was all set to hit Neff with six terrific diseases for this intern to treat in six successive

episodes. Neff tells me he just signed Orczy to do the same six diseases."

"A coincidence?"

Rowland snorted, setting his Powerburger down with an angry slam. "Kinny must have told him in a rash moment."

"You're really sure your girlfriend is seeing Orczy?"

"She admitted it. Orczy's house out in the Palisades is one of the places she goes when she borrows my car."

I drummed my fingers on the tabletop for a minute. "Look Rowland," I said finally, "why don't you forget about both of them, Kinny and Orczy?"

"Not a chance," he replied. "I love her and I hate him. Don't worry. I'm going to keep up my campaign and drive that pipsqueak into the ground."

"I notice a couple of the trade papers have mentioned the billboard. So far your campaign is giving Orczy publicity and you nothing."

"Don't start talking like a professional ad man," said Rowland. "The kind of advertising I'm doing I know more about than you. I feel this."

"So how are you going to pay for it?"

Rowland traced his moustache with a plump forefinger. "I'm

about set to pitch a movie to Lenzner out at Conglom Pictures. I won't even tell you the idea, but it's a sure sell."

I wished him luck.

In the latter part of September I had to fly to Omaha and spend three weeks looking at experimental cornfields. These were growing indoors, and one of our clients was exploring the idea of introducing organic corn flakes. I missed the next phases of Rowland's advertising campaign against Alden Orczy. From what Rowland and some of my friends and a girl who used to work at the same model agency as my wife told me, I put together what must have happened next; and my wife had clipped out all the *Orczy must go!* newspaper and local magazine ads and showed them to me when I got back from Omaha.

Apparently, in a moment of creative elation, Rowland had told his girl Kinny the basic premise for his movie. Pacing excitedly around his big house in the Valley, Rowland had bellowed, "The first drug peddler in the Old West. Isn't that beautiful? It'll be bigger than *Easy Rider*."

Kinny really was dating Orczy on the side and she must have mentioned the idea to him. At any rate, when Rowland walked into Conglom to sell them verbally *Mari-*

juana Cowboy, he discovered they'd signed with Orczy the day before to do *High In The Saddle*. They were going to give Orczy \$100,000 for his drugs in the Old West script, plus five percent of the gross.

Rowland didn't attempt to prove his idea had been swiped by Orczy. He didn't bother the Guild with any charges against him either. Instead, he decided to step up his campaign against the prankish writer. He took out a loan and bought space in newspapers and magazines. A few of Rowland's closer friends and associates suggested, as I had, that he drop the campaign and let Orczy have Kinny. Rowland told everybody that this wasn't an obsession but simply a quite rational campaign to purge the Los Angeles area of Alden Orczy.

Mostly, though, the *Orczy must go!* ads added to Orczy's stature. He began appearing even more frequently on the local talk shows. Orczy had adopted a youthful style of dress, favoring bell-bottom pants, leather vests and polka-dot shirts. Seeing Orczy on television, in full color on both of his two TV sets, antagonized Rowland further. Nevertheless, he patiently wrote down all the inane things he felt Orczy was saying and filled several more notebooks. Many of the people

Rowland knew had shared his initial dislike for Orczy, but now they weren't prepared to spend as much time loathing him as Rowland was. Rowland was more often at home as a result. He bought mailing lists from some mail-order advertising firms and sent out *Orczy must go!* broadsides to selected groups of people in the Los Angeles area.

Kinny was a tall, slender, blonde girl, an actress who once in a while did small parts; very pretty in a frail and vaguely nasty sort of way. Sometime around the middle of October she stopped seeing Rowland at all and moved in with Orczy. She then took all Rowland's furniture and appliances and had them moved out to Orczy's place on the cliffs above the Pacific. During one of his divorces, Rowland had had Kinny buy all his furniture in her name, so that his wife or some creditor couldn't attach it. Only one typewriter, a rug and a desk chair were left to Rowland, and possibly one small black and white TV set. He blamed Orczy for what Kinny did. Orczy's home was already completely furnished and the frail blonde didn't need any more furniture there. Rowland mortgaged his house and went into television commercials in his campaign against Orczy. At first he used only ten-second spots, showing him sitting in his empty house and saying once,

somewhat plaintively, "Orczy must go!"

This didn't satisfy Rowland for long and he began producing minute commercials. This gave Rowland a chance to advertise against Orczy and an opportunity to try out some of his own ideas about cinematography. His sixty-second commercials were quite beautiful, in brilliant color, and reminding you of both Fellini and the young Orson Welles. In fact, only last month one of his commercials won a certificate in a Los Angeles advertising-art directors' show, but too late to help Rowland.

The last time I saw Rowland was early in December of 1970 at a hot-dog bistro on La Cienega. Rowland was thinner, his beard quite shaggy. He was living in a character actors' hotel off Sunset and trying to get some fiction assignments from a girlie-magazine chain in Hollywood. He'd spent over \$100,000 on his *Orczy must go!* campaign. I was getting ready to leave for New York to supervise a cigar commercial that required a snow storm and was thinking as much about that as I was about Rowland, so I suppose that's why I didn't think he was serious about his plan for raising quick money.

"Mary Macklin's golden slippers," he said, finishing a Pizzafurter.

"Who? The old 1930's musical actress?"

Rowland nodded. "You remember the famous golden slippers she wore in *Sleeping Beauty* in 1939. People still talk about her sleep-walking tap dance up the palace steps."

"So?"

"A lot of movie buffs put a tremendous value on stuff like that, memorabilia," said Rowland. "Look at what some of that stuff at the MGM auction brought in. Anyhow, I ran into some collector at a cocktail party out in Brentwood who said he'd pay ten thousand dollars for those slippers."

"Why doesn't he buy them from Mary Macklin? She's still got them, I heard."

"The old broad won't sell."

"That ends that."

"I've been thinking," said Rowland after ordering another hot dog. "You know Mary Macklin has that big mansion out in Pacific Palisades. She has a personal museum in back of the place. There's a life-size dummy of herself, wearing those famous golden slippers. The thing is, she's going to be in Europe all this month and she's only got one seventy-six-year-old caretaker looking after the whole setup."

"How come you know all this?"

"Well," Rowland replied, "Kinny told me."

"You're really seeing her again?"

"Oh, once in a while. She comes over to the hotel to see me sometimes. I don't know if she's contrite or slumming. I still love her. With ten thousand dollars I can get out of the hole and back on my feet."

I asked, "Are you talking about stealing those shoes?"

Rowland shrugged his thinner shoulders, "Maybe."

"Come on, Rowland," I told him. "Campaigning against Alden Orczy is one thing. Even there, he could have sued you if he hadn't enjoyed the whole thing so much. Burglary is something else again. Now, forget it."

Rowland shrugged once more. "Will you see me to a third hot dog?"

I did.

He went ahead with the idea, however. The rest of this happened while I was back in New York. I've been able, from various sources, to put together an account of what happened. Around midnight of the 20th of December Rowland drove out to Pacific Palisades in a rented car. He was dressed in a black pull-over, black jeans and dark sneakers. He'd rubbed soot on his face and was wearing gloves. Somewhere he'd got hold of a .38 revolver and had that tucked in his waistband. Kinny, whom he'd seen that afternoon, told him the old caretaker at

Mary Macklin's estate always bought a bottle of discount Scotch on Friday afternoons and by midnight he'd be safely asleep.

Rowland parked a block from the mansion and went skulking silently through the night, keeping in shadows. He had cased the area a few days before and knew where he wanted to go over the wall. Rowland climbed up into a gnarled cypress at the edge of the grounds and swung to the top of the stone wall circling the estate. He was much lighter now, which increased his agility. He got over the wall with no trouble and went along it toward the house.

Mary Macklin's mansion was all spires and turrets, ivied stone walls, stained-glass windows and wrought iron. Her private museum was located in a converted greenhouse at the back of the main house.

Rowland approached the glass museum so quietly the gravel surrounding it did not even crunch. Mary Macklin had considerable faith in the old caretaker and had never bothered to install burglar alarms. Rowland was able to get one of the doors unbolted.

The big room smelled of dusty cloth and its jumble of nostalgia all glowed pale blue in the night. Rowland stalked by steamer trunks and clothes racks, parasols, hoopskirts, Oriental gongs, pith helmets, fat scrapbooks, a suit of chain mail, three saddles. Then, on a low wooden pedestal, he saw the golden slippers on the feet of a figure in a yellowing white ball gown.

"Ah, the sleeping beauty," murmured Rowland as he reached out for the shoes.

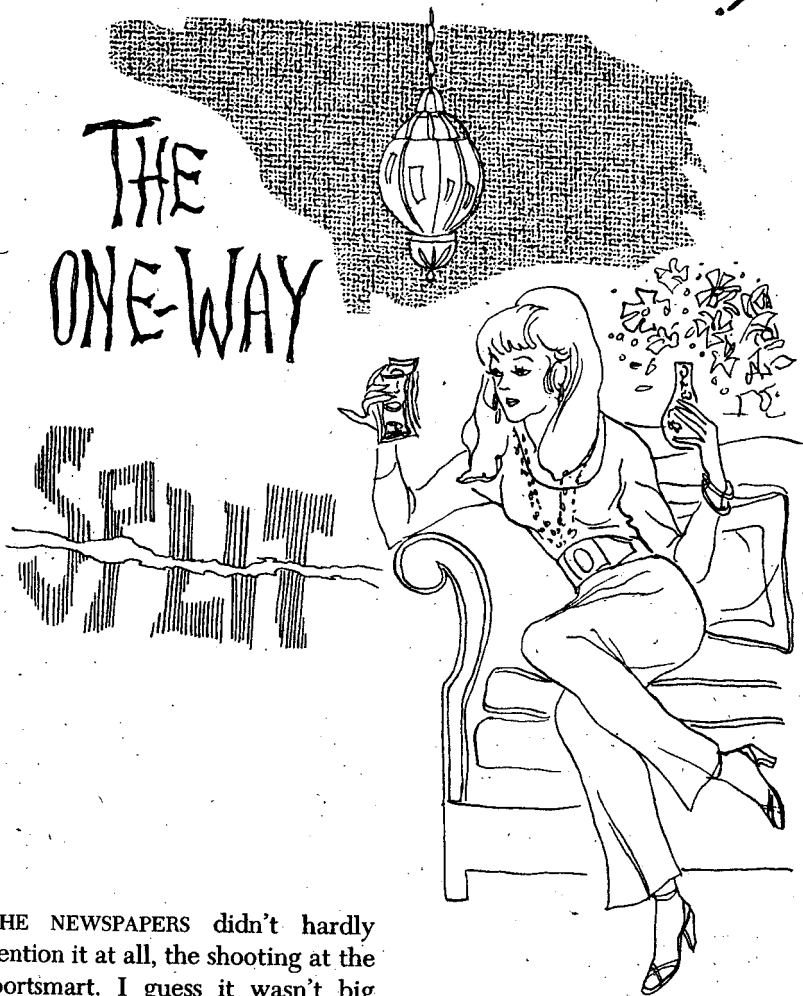
"Guess again, you stupid idiot." The shoes danced away from him, off the pedestal. Alden Orczy tossed aside the ball gown and laughed. "I've got you this time, Rowland, you poor simp. Burglary, breaking and entering, grand theft, carrying a concealed weapon. You're all washed up, simpo." Orczy gave a little leap and kicked his gold-slippered heels together. "I've had all the laughs out of you I can stand, Rowland. Now I'm tired of you and your advertising campaign."

Rowland nodded. "Yes, there's only so much you can do with advertising," he said, and he shot Orczy dead.



Most attractive returns can come to those who pay as they go.

THE ONE-WAY



THE NEWSPAPERS didn't hardly mention it at all, the shooting at the Sportsmart. I guess it wasn't big news like a movie star getting shot,

but it was a *slick* shooting. It was so slick the cops didn't even know it was murder.

I knew it, though, because I was Sali's girl. Of course for a long time I didn't know what he was planning. He would say to me, "Greta, it sure would be nice if old Morris would kick off, huh? Then the store would be mine, a one-way split."

Sali called him *old* Morris. Morris was his partner in the Sportmart. I had an idea of a real old guy, and then when I met Morris I was pretty shook because Morris was the same age as Sali. He had bright, black eyes, quick as spilled ink, and the first time I saw him he noticed my hair—blonde.

by
Arthur
Moore

Sali never did. I could have cut it off. Sali had a one-track mind. He was thin and nervous and he liked to play the horses. Usually he lost. But it was fun going around with him to nightclubs, fancy restaurants and the track.

So me and Sali got to be a thing. He bought me clothes and some jewelry. When I met him I had

hardly nothing, you know what I mean? A girl has to dress and all. Then he got me a nice apartment and was there almost every night.

He was sometimes very moody, too. He would tell me his troubles, and mostly Morris was it. Morris was holding them back. Sali wanted to expand the business, but Morris wanted to go slow and pay for everything along the way.

It was a successful store they had, with a couple of clerks and a big inventory. There were offices and a storeroom in the back. There was a rear door that they never locked; it was metal and barred on the inside. Sali explained to me how no one could get in from the alley; they only used the rear door for deliveries.

The few times I was in the store with Sali, all he and Morris did was yell at each other. Sali said Morris was tight and Morris said it was a good thing someone was. But Morris would notice my dress and say it was pretty, and I saw him looking at my legs, too. I sure couldn't figure why Sali called him old.

I used to ask Sali why he and Morris didn't split up. He said it would cost them a tax loss or something if they did. But they didn't like each other. Whenever Sali had a few drinks he would right away begin talking about how nice it would be if old Morris would kick

off. I sure got tired of hearing it. Once I said, "Oh, Morris don't look so bad to me . . ." and Sali jumped all over me. He raved about how Morris was always at the store at exactly the same time every morning, how he'd go through the mail with exactly the same expression, how he noticed if anyone took a second off or if he mislaid a pencil, and on, and on, and on.

He yelled about Morris so much that it was a change when one night I found him making marks on a piece of paper instead. He wouldn't tell me why. All he would say was, "Old Morris always works late at the office on Fridays, going over the books." But I already knew that. If he had told me once he had told me a thousand times how Morris was always snooping into every item in the store.

Sali complained about Morris being a skinflint, but he wasn't so lavish himself. I never could put away a dollar. It was OK having the apartment and the clothes, but I never got any bucks ahead just in case. He gave me dough to run the apartment and feed him and keep him in liquor and that was all. He knew the prices of everything. He used to put the dough in a little Chinese vase. "Here's the rent money, Greta," he'd say.

It was a kind of game. As soon as he left I would grab the vase and

see how much he'd given me. It was never enough.

Anyway, for months I had listened to Sali saying, "I wish old Morris would kick off." Then one day I realized that he hadn't mentioned it for a week. That was sure unusual, so I took a good look at Sali. He was going around very preoccupied. He had something on his mind, all right.

Just a few nights later I came across a gun in his overcoat pocket. It was a little nickel-plated pistol with pearl handles. I didn't touch it, and I didn't mention to Sali that I'd seen it.

That was the very first minute it occurred to me that maybe he was serious about his one-way split.

So I wasn't surprised when Sali asked me to throw a party on Friday night for some of his friends. I asked him if Morris would be coming and he laughed very loud.

"Morris is gonna have like his own party." That's all he would tell me.

He made up the guest list himself, and I think he invited every boozier in town. But he did put extra dough in the Chinese vase. It wasn't too hard for me to guess that Sali wanted the party as a cover, an alibi. It was only ten minutes by car from the store.

I found out the other details later. You know, how he'd planned

it. Sali was a real slick guy and he had worked out a very smooth plan so the cops would figure a burglar had come in the rear door. The door was barred and there was a wedge that kept the bar in place. He removed the wedge before he went home Friday evening. I saw the back door and Sali's car parked in the alley with the engine running; I saw them in a couple of flash pictures the cops took and showed me.

Anyway, he slipped a knife blade through the door crack and pushed up the bar and opened the back door of the store.

That's when Morris shot him. Right through the ticker.

A couple days later, after the cops had come around to say they were sorry to inform me that Sali had been shot trying to kill his part-

ner, Morris showed up at the apartment. We had a drink of Sali's wine and he looked at me over the glass with his quick, black eyes.

"I told the cops it sounded like a burglar at the door. How could I know it was Sali? It was dark as hell."

I said, "Yeah, it was too bad."

Then he told me about the wedge. He said, "They found Sali half in and half out of the door, with a gun in his hand, and a dozen guys told them about Sali making remarks how he'd like me to kick off." Morris shrugged.

"Yeah, I guess so," I agreed.

Morris had noticed the wedge. He noticed everything. He even noticed my rent slip on the table.

When he went out that night he put some dough in the Chinese vase.



Dear Fans:

It is always a pleasure to welcome new members into the ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, and it is very rewarding to hear from our enthusiastic and loyal present members.

Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:

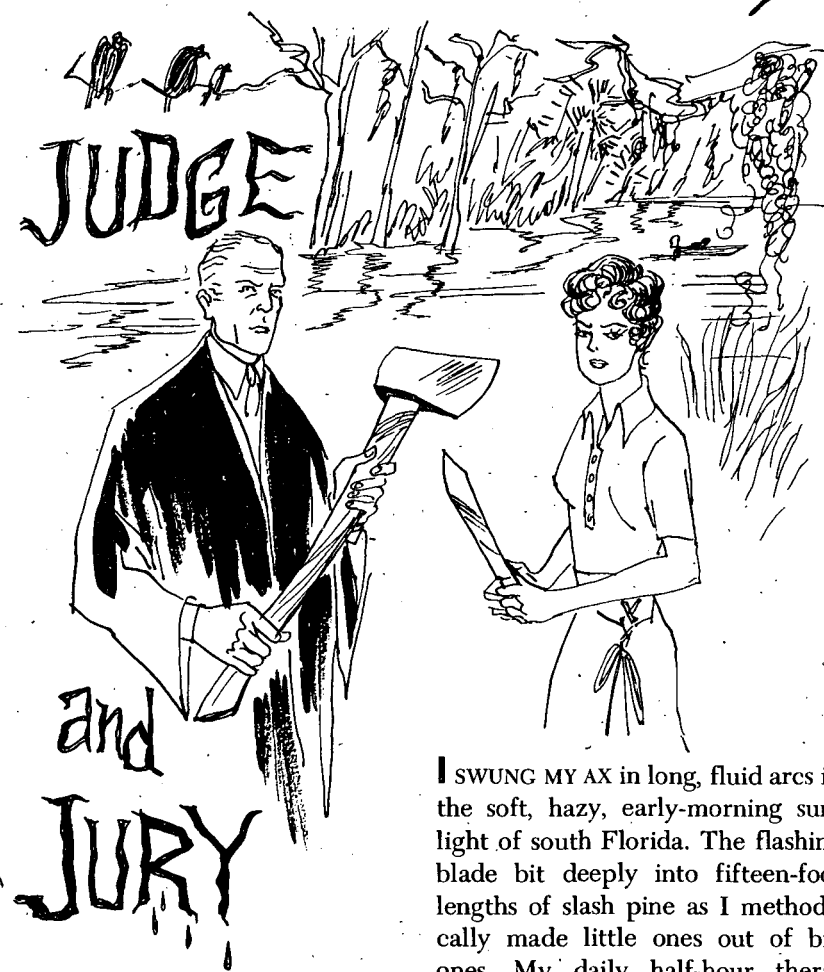
ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, P.O. Box 5425, Sherman Oaks, Calif. 91401

I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

Similar interests are a prerequisite to a happy marriage.



I SWUNG MY AX in long, fluid arcs in the soft, hazy, early-morning sunlight of south Florida. The flashing blade bit deeply into fifteen-foot lengths of slash pine as I methodically made little ones out of big ones. My daily half-hour therapeutic ritual of chopping for ten minutes and stacking for five had

the entire back wall of the garage covered head-high with eighteen-inch fireplace logs, and I was starting on the second layer.

Through the freely streaming perspiration I could see the house from the corner of my eye. Its field-



stone pile was set back at the end of a curving drive between green lawns. The house backed up on intersecting canals, the south branch connecting with the Intracoastal. House and grounds were enclosed in an eight-foot hedge of bougainvillea, the species called *Spectabilis*, the body of the hedge consisting of tough, hooked spines. It was so thorny even a small dog couldn't get through it, but the deep-rose blossoms perfuming the delicate morning air made it beautiful.

My wife, Joyce, came out the back door of the house carrying a coffee cup. She was in a terry-cloth jacket which bared her beautiful legs to mid thigh. Joyce often came out in the mornings to watch my workouts. She seated herself upon an upended log which served her as a chair.

Joyce is fifteen years my junior. She's tall, lissome without being at all slender, and heads turn when she walks by. She has high cheekbones, a strong nose, raven hair, and coppery skin with the dark flush of health. Her boyish hair style shapes the sleek perfection of her shining black curls to her regally small head.

"Aren't you tired of all that chopping, Bob?" she asked lazily, studying the height and depth of the woodpile. "And what are you going to do with all that wood?"

by
Jaime Sandaval



"Well," I grunted between swings of the ax, "we could . . . gift wrap it and . . . give it to our friends . . . at Christmastime . . . for door stops."

She laughed. "When are you going to decide you've had enough of this routine?"

"When I'm back in shape."

I'd come to Florida eighteen months before. I'd been in a line of work that gets no headlines except

when things go wrong; sometimes not even then. I'd gone to the well once too often, been hospitalized for five months, and convalescent ever since. The house and a comfortable income were in the nature of a pension for seventeen broken bones and psychic scars which would be longer in healing than their physical counterparts.

I still woke screaming from nightmares to find myself in Joyce's arms as she tried to quiet me. At moments like those I could still hear John Carrington's dry, professorial tones as he indoctrinated us in the dingy agency building: "We know that you are patriotic, gentlemen, or you wouldn't be here. But we know that you are human. Only two-thirds of you will wear the pouch with its poison-pill." I had never worn mine. "And forty percent of the two-thirds will fail to use it when captured, which means that some of you gentlemen were born to die unpleasantly. Yes, look around you. It will always be the other fellow, of course."

It had been the other fellow for a long time, and then one hellish night it hadn't been. I hadn't died unpleasantly, quite, but I'd certainly lived unpleasantly for more days than I liked to recall.

I'd met Joyce shortly after getting out of the hospital. When I saw that she was attracted to me despite

the difference in our ages, I still waited six months before proposing. Her youth demanded that I somewhat resemble a man again. There had never been a doubt in my mind that she was for me from the first moment I laid eyes on her. I couldn't carry her over the threshold on our wedding day, but our marriage had been surpassingly good, and it seemed to be getting better each day.

Not that Joyce was an angel or a shrinking violet. She had a sultry, explosive temper at times which required a firm hand on the reins. Initially she was surprised to find I had it, but then she adjusted. There were moments when ours resembled a father-daughter relationship, but never in bed.

"Are you going to swim this morning?" Joyce asked as I laid aside the ax.

I said, "Absolutely," and she discarded her jacket while I rinsed off in the poolside shower. We never bothered with swimsuits in the mornings. We dived in and began a steady side-by-side traverse of the pool's fifty-foot length. Joyce dropped out after fifteen laps and hoisted herself up on the rim. She sat in silence and watched while I completed another twenty.

"What about this loan Ed wants, Joyce?" I asked her when we were under the shower. Ed Tennant was

Joyce's brother, a giant of a man with the physique of the ex-athlete only slightly gone to flab. He operated a couple of shrimp boats and had various other interests, none of which seemed able to support him in the style to which he felt accustomed. From the first time I met him I tabbed him as being on the shady side. Not that it had bothered me. It wasn't Ed Tennant I was marrying.

Joyce's lips were compressed as she handed me the soap. "He promised me he wouldn't do that," she said quietly.

"Well, should I give it to him?"

"Why ask me, Bob?"

"Just tell me yes or no."

"And you'll do it?"

"That's right. Although I should probably check out his shrimp-boat operation to see if he's solvent. I've hinted for an invitation aboard one of his shrimpers, but I've never received it."

Joyce threw her towel aside and shrugged her arms into her jacket. "I'm not going to make the decision," she stated firmly, "but there's something I can tell you. If you give it to him, Ed will be back with his hand out again. I know him. Do you want that?"

"Not unless you want it. I guess you know the money's not too important."

She took my arm, and we started

around the garage toward the house. "I'm not going to say," she repeated. "It's up to you."

The open garage doors revealed Joyce's Cadillac, my T-bird, and Ed Tennant's dun-colored swamp buggy, a big, balloon-tired job on a Land Rover chassis. Its tires stood head-high to a six-foot man, and the whole thing was swung so high off the ground it barely had clearance in the garage. It was a brutish-looking vehicle.

Tennant had asked me to let him garage it at my place after Joyce and I were married. "It'd be handy for me," he explained. "I use it to get out to my shack in the swamp an' hunt 'gators."

"'Gators? Isn't that illegal?"

Tennant winked. "So's adultery." He smiled a big-toothed smile.

Since the space was available, I had let him garage the swamp buggy.

"I'm going to the hairdresser's," Joyce said as we entered the house. "But I'll only be an hour."

"Maybe I'll take a spin down the canal in the runabout," I responded. Upstairs in our large, airy bedroom I put on slacks, T-shirt and sneakers. Joyce kissed me good-bye when she was dressed. Her kisses were always full upon the lips, and even at a brief parting were warm and promising.

She went out to the garage and

backed out her car. I left the house via the back door and crossed the sloping lawn to the boat landing. I stripped the canvas covering from the 18-foot runabout and pressed the electric starter. The engine roared obligingly, and I let it warm up before I backed away from the dock.

Two nights before I'd seen one of Ed Tennant's shrimpers tied up at the foot of nearby Fort Lauderdale's Poinciana Street. If Joyce wouldn't give me the word on her brother's requested loan, I should be able to make up my mind for myself after looking over a part of his business operation.

I had never been able to understand Tennant's shrimp-boat operation. By far the majority of the fleet was based in Key West, where they refitted when necessary. For reasons of his own, Tennant maintained expensive wharfage in Fort Lauderdale, and brought his boats here for refitting. It seemed hard to justify.

The runabout putt-putted along winding pleasantly sunlit, tree-lined waterways. It took me better than half an hour to reach Poinciana Street. It looked so different from the water side, I'd have passed it except that I recognized the squat, tubby outline and the dangling winch ropes, boom arms, and radar dishpan of the shrimper tied

up at the dock. The nameplate under the sternpost read *Joanna, Key West*.

The *Joanna* was a big shrimper. Most of them ran thirty to forty tons, but this one looked at least fifty. I knew that the largest could take on fifteen to twenty tons of ice and stay out for eight or ten days, icing down their catch.

At close range the *Joanna* looked in need of refitting. The paint was scabby and peeling, and barnacles were visible below the waterline. I couldn't see anyone aboard. A manila line trailed down over the side amidships, its end disappearing into the water. I coasted up to the ship's salt-encrusted side, gave the line a yank, and found it to be secure.

I fished the end of it from the water and made the runabout fast. Then I took a hitch in my belt and started up the line, hand-over-hand. Two-thirds of the way up I wondered if I were going to make it, but there was nothing to do but keep going. It was times like this that made me really angry with myself. Two years ago I'd have gone up that line as quickly as any monkey.

I muscled myself over the rail finally and thumped down onto the deck. I was wheezing badly. The woodchopping hadn't yet removed all the rusty scale from my boiler. I stood flat-footed on the broad-

planked deck, trying vainly to control the rapid tempo of my breathing.

"Hey, you!" a voice called. The tone was not loving. "No trespassin' aboard!"

When I turned, a man in a dirty yachting cap and faded khaki pants with nothing but a chestful of hair in between was advancing purposefully upon me with a belaying pin in his right hand.

"Hi," I said, sauntering toward him. "I'm Bob Williams, Ed Tenant's brother-in-law."

"I don't care if you're—" Khaki Pants stopped in his tracks. He looked and sounded confused. "You're Ed's—you're married to Joyce?"

"That's right."

I could see that the belaying pin was suddenly an embarrassment to Khaki Pants. He didn't know how to get rid of it.

"Is Ed around?"

Khaki Pants still seemed to have trouble readjusting. "Ed? He's—expected. Somethin'—anything I can do for you?"

"I'm just looking around."

Khaki Pants had turned his attention to the dock. There was a man standing on it beside a shed. No words were exchanged, but the man disappeared inside the shed from which telephone lines trailed up to the street. If Ed hadn't been ex-

pected before this, he was now.

"Are you refitting the *Joanna* here?" I asked.

He swallowed visibly. "Refit—? Oh, yeah. Sure. Refitting. That's what we're doin'. Say, I got coffee down in the galley. Care for a mug?"

"Sure. Bring one for yourself, too." I walked past him toward the bow. He followed, plainly reluctant to leave me. I was supposed to have accompanied him below-decks to the galley.

Standing in the sloping bow, I made a production of glancing aloft at the canted steel-tipped boom arms lashed to the stubby mast. Actually, I'd already seen something more interesting at closer range. Three fresh holes in a triangular pattern had been drilled in the worn planking at my feet. They made bright scars against the otherwise grimy wood.

The scars were bolt holes for a tripod. A weapon had been mounted there. I know something about weapons, and the holes were too far apart to take any tripod I'd ever seen for a Thompson or any other .30 caliber machine gun. A .50 caliber Browning, possibly? A weapon like that could bring down a plane, if it weren't a jet. Maybe even if it were.

Khaki Pants moved in beside me, and when he stopped his brogans

were firmly planted on the tripod holes. "We could have that coffee now, sir," he suggested. Diffidence, uncertainty, and outrage mingled in his voice.

"Sure. That'll be fine." I had boarded the starboard rail of the *Joanna*. I started aft down the port side, past the elevated wheelhouse set two-thirds of the way forward. My guardian angel was right behind me, almost twittering. Before I reached the stern I saw what I was looking for: freshly drilled holes in the planking there, too. Fore and aft gun mounts . . . Ed Tennant must have found a breed of shrimp that could fight back.

A sound from dockside turned our heads. A black car sped down the narrow alley alongside the shed with the telephone and braked to a fast stop. Ed Tennant's bulk detached itself from the wheel and moved toward us at a pace just short of a trot.

"There's Ed now!" Khaki Pants said happily. He almost sang.

I advanced to meet Tennant as he vaulted over the rail. "I thought I'd invite myself aboard for a look since you hadn't done the honors," I said.

Hard gray eyes—Joyce's eyes dipped in ice water, I realized suddenly—studied me as Tennant brushed his palms together to free them from the rail grit. The entire

topside of the shrimper was indescribably filthy. "Never knew you to take an interest," he said mildly. "Been below?"

My "Not yet" mingled with Khaki Pants' explosive, "No!"

"Then let's take a look at the wheelhouse before we get us a cup of coffee, Bob," Tennant continued. He crossed the deck with long strides and ran up a short iron ladder leading to the elevated structure. Khaki Pants disappeared below.

I followed Tennant. The wheelhouse was like wheelhouses the world over, a glass-enclosed cubbyhole affording unlimited vision fore and aft and port to starboard. There was a curtain-shrouded chart desk in one corner, and a row of sea boots along one wall. My eye lingered longest on the array of electronic gear crammed in beside the throttle panel. I recognized segments of radar, sonar, radio, and ship-to-shore telephone. "Some of the shrimp must be really elusive," I said.

"We find it pays to be ready for 'em," Tennant said blandly. He left the wheelhouse, descended the ladder, and started down the wooden companionway leading below. I stayed close behind. Khaki Pants popped his head out of a doorway from which the odor of coffee emerged. "Putty up the broken

glass in the fo'c'sle forward, Frank," Tennant said to him.

"Broken . . . oh, sure. Right away." Frank slithered past me and climbed the steep wooden ladder. He was plainly relieved that decisions had been removed from his hands. I knew it was the bolt holes in the deck planking that were going to receive the putty.

The galley was so cramped that standing in it Tennant could have literally touched all four walls. The grease accumulation of years clung to everything. Tennant poured coffee as thick-looking as molasses into chipped mugs and handed one to me. He rummaged in a locker among a lineup of bottles that all seemed to be about an eighth full. "Brandy," he said, flourishing a retrieved bottle above my mug.

I would have said no to the brandy, but I had already tasted the coffee. I've heard it called paint remover, but this was the first time I'd run into it. Tennant doused the mugs with a generous dash of brandy, then eased his broad back against a stained wall and took a huge swallow while he considered me thoughtfully. "How we doin' on the loan?" he said at last.

I'd been expecting it. "The answer is no, Ed. I can't do it." The appearance of the *Joanna* had made up my mind.

Tennant nodded. He didn't ar-

gue. He didn't even appear disturbed. I relaxed a bit. It was damn close quarters to be turning down a man as big as Ed Tennant for a loan if it were important to him, and particularly if the man were as volatile as Tennant's press notices made him out to be. Joyce never talked very much about her brother, but I'd heard stories. "Anything else in partic'lar you'd like to see?" he asked.

"Anything I should see?" I countered. I knew I wasn't going to find anything of illicit interest aboard the *Joanna* with Ed Tennant as a guide.

"Nothin' special," the big man confirmed my surmise that the tour was over. "I saw the runabout," he continued. "Maybe I'll hitch a ride back to the house with you. I left a toolbox in the swamp buggy."

"'Gators again?"

He chuckled, a deep, rich sound. "I don't really hunt 'gators, ol' buddy. I just tell that to Joyce. That there buggy's my li'l ol' gal-wagon. I coax 'em out for a ride in it, an' where I take 'em they don't come back till I'm ready to bring 'em." He favored me with his white-toothed smile. "Women got no stamina when there's no one around to hear 'em caterwaulin'."

I choked down the remainder of my brandied coffee. "It sounds a bit rough on the women."

"You'd be surprised, the ones been out to the shack more'n once. Joyce tell you where my place is?"

I nodded.

"Before I had the buggy, I had to take a boat to the second landing on Dundee Creek an' then walk in over a blazed trail. It'd sure as hell be overgrown now. I'd have to chop my way in with a machete. If a stranger took the wrong turn he might never get out. I tell you that swamp's mean, man. You set to go?"

"Yes."

I followed again as he led the way up on deck. "Want you to see this view," Tennant said, taking me by the arm. We moved a dozen paces along the deck until he stopped and pointed with his free hand. "Ain't that a pretty picture now?"

He was indicating a drab expanse of canal stretching away to a nearby buttressed drawbridge. *Everyone to his own pretty pictures*, I thought, and turned my head to say something innocuous. I hadn't felt or heard him move, but Ed Tennant was eight or ten feet away from me, still staring toward the bridge.

Khaki-Pants Frank was standing on the other side of him, and his face looked set and strained. I started to speak, then stopped when I heard a noise. It sounded like a high whine. I looked toward the

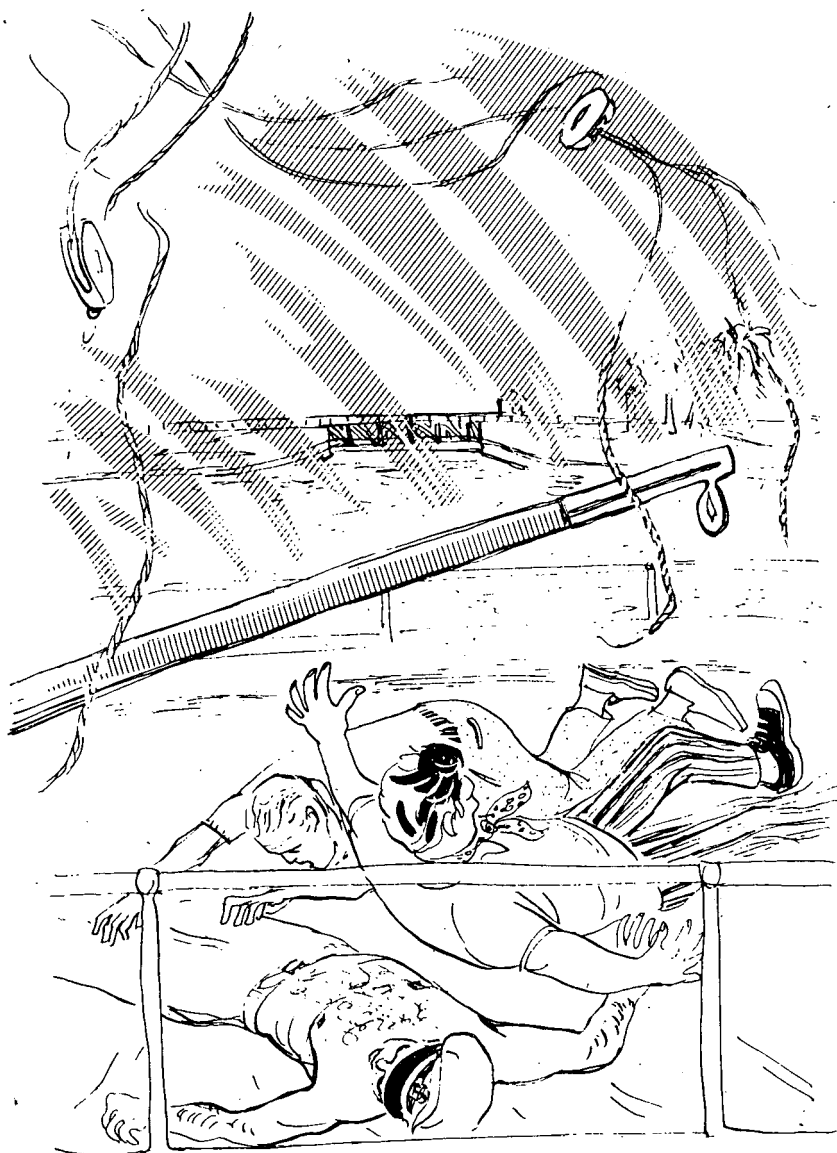
dock, and as I did Frank's eyes flicked aloft.

Then I knew.

I lunged sideways into Ed Tennant as hard as I could. I took him across the thighs with my full body-weight. I didn't move him easily, but I moved him. We both caromed into Frank, and the three of us went down in a thrashing tangle against the lee rail. The whine increased in pitch to a soul-searing shriek as an overhead boom arm, released from its restraining lashing, snaked its cables through the blocks, and fell with a shuddering, splintering crash right where I'd been standing—right where Ed Tennant had positioned me.

I lay sprawled on the deck, half on top of Tennant, trying to breathe. The steel-tipped boom arm had gouged eight inches deep into the planking, tearing up a chunk as big as a football. If the boom arm fell free a hundred times, it would ride its channel guides down to the same six-inch target each time. If I hadn't moved the second I did, the deadly thing would have split me to my knees.

Tennant surged up from beneath me, shaking me aside like a rag doll. He reached down and plucked me to my feet with one hand, standing me upright. Even as blue-funked as I was, Ed Tennant's strength was something at which to marvel.



"You all right?" he inquired with every indication of anxiety. "Damn you, Frank, I ought to take your rat-in' for not makin' that boom arm secure. You fixin' to get someone hurt?"

The white-faced Frank didn't say anything.

I didn't say anything.

I couldn't have said anything.

There was no way it could have been an accident, given the circumstances, and I had just learned something unpleasant about myself. In the past I'd had close calls and bad times, but that was before my hospitalization. I wasn't the man I'd been before that. It wasn't only my muscles that had gone flabby. That boom had scared me worse than I'd ever been scared. I was showing it, and I knew it, and there was nothing I could do about it. My stomach was still heaving.

Even the face-saving anger that rose as the adrenalin pumped faster wasn't enough to save face fully. Directed as it was at Ed Tennant, the anger steadied me, but it wasn't a cure for what ailed me. I could even feel a grudging admiration for the cast-iron nerve it took for Tennant to stand scant yards to one side of the down-thundering mass of weighted steel and wood, rigidly channeled though it might be, and not by the twitch of an eyelid give away its imminent arrival. I could

feel the anger and the admiration, but most of all I could feel the fear.

"You fix up this deck an' have Harry rig us a new boom arm," Tennant was saying to Frank. He turned to me, the hard gray eyes sweeping my face. Amusedly? Mockingly? Warningly? From all appearances, Ed Tennant couldn't have cared less what I was thinking. "Good thing you moved when you did," he said to me with great unconcern. "I don't believe I'll ride out to the house with you right now, Bob. Maybe I'll see you tonight."

He walked casually to the rail, vaulted it lightly to the dock, and strolled to his car.

I avoided looking at Frank. I was still in shock. All I wanted was to get away from there. I forced my almost unresponsive legs to move me in the direction of the line trailing over the side amidships. I eased myself over the rail, took a handhold on the line, and started down.

I should have known better. My nerves were so shot I had no strength in my hands. I slid straight down into the runabout, burning my palms, the bottoms of my sneakers slapping hard into the cockpit. The left gunwale nearly went under. I regained my balance and crouched breathlessly for a moment, once more trying to pull myself together. Finally I touched the

starter button, pushed off from the side of the *Joanna*, and started back through the canal system to the house.

En route I had time for some hard thinking.

Ed Tennant was doing something illegal with the *Joanna*, probably running guns. He would have killed me as casually as he would have thrown away a cigarette butt, and for what? Because I'd gone snooping aboard the *Joanna*? Because I'd refused him the loan? Because with me dead he thought he could get it from Joyce?

But what difference did it make *why*? The big man plainly was a pro at killing, and from the way I felt it was just as plain I was no longer a pro at anything. I liked the way I was living, didn't I? Then what was I doing sticking my nose into a situation that was no concern of mine? From now on, my response around Ed Tennant was going to be limited to "Yes, sir," perhaps even to requests for a loan. A steel-tipped boom-arm can make even a substantial sum of money seem remarkably unimportant.

I was glad that Joyce wasn't home when I arrived. I went upstairs and tried to take a nap. My nerves wouldn't let me. I gave up trying to get to sleep and rolled onto my back in the wide bed, my eyes roving the tiny ceiling-cracks.

Well, man, you found out something about yourself today. You're a gutless wonder. You're afraid he'll try it again, and you're even more afraid he'll succeed. Take a good look around you, man. You've got it made here. You need trouble? Let Ed Tennant play his stupid little games.

I rolled onto my side, closed my eyes, then opened them again. Open or closed, all I could see was the jagged gash in the deck planking torn up by that boom arm. I got off the bed at last and paced the room in stockinged feet. When I looked at my watch, I was amazed to see that it was still only half an hour after noon. I felt as though I'd been away from the house for two weeks.

Then the extension phone in the bedroom rang. It did nothing for my jangled nerves. I picked it up gingerly. "Yes?" I said tentatively.

"It's me." Joyce's voice was breathless. "Don't do what he says, Bob! Don't do—"

There was a sharp sound and a stifled exclamation. "Tell it like I want it told, sis," Ed Tennant's voice growled in my ear. "Or you ain't goin' to look so pretty by somewhat. Hey, you! Nosy!"

"Yes?" I said.

"I'm takin' Joyce out to the cabin in the swamp."

I edged toward the bedroom win-

dow, straining the telephone cord. I could see the garage. The swamp buggy was gone.

"Bring your checkbook. I told you how to get there." The heavy voice dripped menace. "You better show, man. I'm pushed. You get out here or I'll stake Joyce down an' let the 'gators have her. An' if you think I'm foolin' just because she's my sister, sit tight an' wait till they find what's left of her."

"Let her go, Tennant," I said hoarsely. "I'll give you money. I'll—"

"Shut up an' get out here." There was a click, and the connection was gone.

I replaced the receiver slowly. I knew Tennant didn't want my checkbook. He wanted me. He wanted Joyce to be a rich widow. Or perhaps he planned to do away with her afterward, too. Joyce had no other relative, no one else to compete with him for the estate.

I should call the police immediately. A helicopter could reach the swamp island and surprise Tennant. I was reaching for the phone when it rang again, I was so startled I almost dropped it. In my confusion I put the mouthpiece to my ear first. Finally I got organized.

"You call the police, man, an' none of you is gonna like what you'll find," Tennant's voice snarled in my ear. "If I see sign one

of the boys in blue around the hammock, your wife's gonna be one sad-sack female." The connection was instantly gone.

Tennant's timing on the phone call was so uncanny that I shivered. I stood there staring at the wall. I needed time to think, and I didn't have time. If I didn't appear at the cabin in what Ed Tennant considered to be good time, who knew what he might do to Joyce? He sounded like a desperate man.

I went to the closet, found the roughest clothing I had, and pulled it on with nervous hands. At the back door I slipped into a pair of snake boots I always wore hiking. But there was no gun in the house, and Ed Tennant knew it. I tried to close my mind to the thought of myself approaching the thickly wooded little hammock across the wide-open expanse of marsh and swamp, an inviting target. "You were a man once," I lectured myself. "Get moving."

I entered the garage to get a machete, then changed my mind and picked up my ax instead. An ax I knew. A machete would tire a whole new set of unused muscles. I filled a canteen at the garage sink and hooked it onto my belt. No one could drink swamp water safely.

I kept moving without giving myself time to think. I picked up a can of insect repellent, trotted

down the green sloping lawn to the boat landing, piled myself and my gear into the runabout, and took off.

Two hours later I was a mile along a faintly blazed trail after docking at the second landing on Dundee Creek. I was covered with sweat and, despite the repellent, a cloud of mosquitoes.

The first half-mile of trail hadn't been bad. I was feeling good about it until I came to a burned-out cabin that had been the reason for the fairly decent trail. After that it thickened murderously. I had to cut and hack and slash and wade every foot of the way beyond that point.

Two months ago I couldn't have made it, physically. I tried to take pride in the fact, but it didn't alleviate the burning heat or the approaching exhaustion. Then, suddenly, the thickly tangled growth of the swampland gave way to a treeless marsh, a morass where I put each boot down with caution, never knowing whether it would sink in for six inches or six feet.

The sun beat down even more mercilessly, but at least the dark wedges of mosquitoes thinned out. I plodded carefully across tussocks of yielding grass and muck and high weeds, always with one eye on the faint path through the marsh.

I could see where it was headed. To my right was a stand of tall trees

set down seemingly at random in the center of the marsh. I was tempted to cut my exposure time by taking a shortcut directly to the trees, but I knew the path would avoid the sinkholes. I stuck to the path as it wound first north and then east before finally straightening out in a gratifyingly direct course toward the trees. The closer I came the more tensely my nerves were wound. A bullet from Tenant in the trees would settle it all.

Despite the conditions, I ran the final hundred yards. I collapsed, gasping, on firmer ground. When I could stand up again, a sticky miasma of heat enveloped me in my saturated clothing. Despite the absence of sunlight due to the green jungle overhead, it seemed hotter than out on the exposed marsh, and the mosquitoes renewed their attacks in well-organized squadrons.

Under the trees the trail was in much better shape. I still had some chopping to do, but not nearly as much. I made better time except for having to tread cautiously over fallen tree trunks serving as bridges over stagnant pools of slime-covered water. I paused just once to drink sparingly from the canteen.

I came out of the gloom of the trees into a clearing on which a shack stood. It was so unexpected that it took me by surprise. Instinctively I dropped to the ground.

There wasn't a sound except for the continuous buzz of insects. Where was Ed Tennant?

The shack was more elaborate than I expected. It looked like a three- or four-room building, solidly built despite its tar-paper roof and exterior. I wondered why my ax-swinging progress along the trail hadn't announced me to the shack's inhabitants, then wondered if I were already too late.

I left the trail and moved through the brush to a side of the shack that had no window. When I placed an ear against the tar paper, there was no sound from inside. I eased around the corner, flat against the wall, and came up on the first window. It must have taken me sixty seconds to move far enough across it at eye level with its bottom edge to be sure there was no one inside. It was a small kitchen.

I rounded another corner and approached a second window. It looked in on a bedroom with no one in it. I inched my way to the third side of the shack. The first thing I saw was a water tank set up on stilts, evidently the sum total of the facilities provided.

The next window looked in on a combination lounge-sitting room with a fireplace. Then my eye was distracted. Huddled on a sofa was a motionless bundle—Joyce.

There was a door just beyond the

window. I knocked it from its hinges with one swing of the ax, then rushed in with the ax head-high. Nothing happened. Joyce was bound hand and foot, and gagged. I cut her bonds with the knife-edge of the ax and gently removed the gag. She ran her tongue gingerly over dry, swollen lips. I offered her the canteen, and she drank deeply.

"Where's Ed?" I whispered.

"He's too clever to do it here," Joyce said in a muffled tone. There was a swelling on her right cheek and a dark bruise on her forehead. "He's in town somewhere, setting up an alibi. Then he'll probably be waiting for us somewhere between Dundee Creek and the first canal."

"And there's only one way off this godforsaken island?"

"That's right," she said soberly. "You shouldn't have come, Bob. It's what he counted on. You're the one he wants. He thinks he can manipulate me."

"We'll have to show him he's wrong on all counts," I said with attempted lightness that I was far from feeling. "But suppose we just stayed here until we were missed and a search was made?"

"He could just tell everyone we suddenly decided to go away on a trip," Joyce replied. "And when he left here in the swamp buggy, he took all the food with him. How long do you think we could last?"

Not long. Especially if Tennant had thoughtfully drained the water tank, too. "There's something that doesn't feel right about this setup," I said uneasily.

"What do you mean?"

"All this finesse. It isn't like your brother. He's the bulldozer type. I'd have expected him to drop me at a thousand yards while I was coming through the marsh."

"But then he couldn't have set up an alibi," Joyce pointed out. "Or one not nearly as good. I think we ought to get out of here right away and meantime try to figure out a way to handle Ed."

Without a gun? We didn't have a prayer. "Okay," I said, because there was nothing else to say. "Let's go."

We went out through the shattered door, circled the shack, and started back along the trail with me three steps in the lead. I was trying furiously to think of some way of turning the tables on Ed Tennant's upcoming ambush, which I could feel all the way to my toes. How could we—

"Howdy," a harsh voice drawled to one side of the trail. "Ol' Ed said y'all'd be along."

I turned so swiftly I nearly stumbled.

A lean, red-eyed, beard-stubbled character in worn boots and weathered bush-khaki like my own

l lounged under a live oak tree draped with Spanish moss. He was wearing a simulated Spanish-American War campaign hat which shaded his features, and he blended almost perfectly with the background. He was hard and capable-looking.

The newcomer stood with his arms folded across his chest, a sneering half-smile on thin lips gashing his hatchet face. He never even looked at Joyce. As I stood there paralyzed, he moved unhurriedly onto the trail between Joyce and me. We gave him room. He unfolded his arms, and he had a knife in his right hand. I couldn't take my eyes from its shining eight-inch blade.

Ed Tennant had no need of an ambush now. He'd planned a little better than that. The knifeman would dispose of me here while Tennant established an ironclad alibi elsewhere. I cursed myself for not anticipating this obvious gambit.

"Nice day for it," the harsh voice resumed. "Sun shinin', nary a cloud." He took two deliberate steps in my direction. "I ask 'em all, mister, so I'll ask you, too. How do it feel when you know it's a-comin'?"

I backed away from him. I don't like knives.

"Most on 'em don't never answer

me," the voice regretted. Another two steps brought him within five yards. "Some on 'em scream, some on 'em run. Which you gonna do, mister, afore I get to play with yore wife?"

I could break for the marsh, but from the whippet look of the hot-eyed knifeman I wouldn't last to make it. I couldn't understand his slow approach until I remembered the ax in my hand. It added an ingredient he probably wasn't used to encountering. I couldn't run anyway, I told myself. There was Joyce.

Joyce picked that instant to charge the knifeman from behind. She had no weapon, not even the branch of a tree. She must have hoped to crash into him and cause him to drop his weapon.

The knifeman never even turned his head at the sound of Joyce's feet on the path. He pivoted with elbows extended in the manner of a rebounder coming down off the offensive boards with the basketball and clearing room for himself. I winced as Joyce impaled her abdomen on a sharp elbow. I could hear the sharp "Whuff!" of her escaping breath as she doubled up involuntarily and slid with pain-racked features to the side of the trail.

The impact had driven the knifeman a pace closer to me. He had

never removed his eyes from mine. He resumed his painstakingly slow advance, knife low and pointed upward. Then he lunged. "Run, damn you!" he shouted.

I almost did.

It was intended to panic me, to set me in flight and present my back to him, but from somewhere I summoned up the willpower to go the other way. There was a brassy taste in my mouth as I raised the ax and rushed him, swinging the bright blade ahead of me.

He slithered to one side, surprised. He was a lot more used to seeing them going away from him. His evasive maneuver escaped the broad sweep of the ax-blade, but the haft caught him on the shoulder, spinning him against a tree.

Before he could recover, I reversed the swing and caught his fending left arm against the tree trunk. The ax severed his arm cleanly above the elbow, but I was still watching the knife in his other hand. He pitched to his knees with a hoarse yell that sent the birds flying from the treetops, a thick stream of blood gouting from his stump.

I wrenched the ax from the tree and staggered backward, barely eluding his vicious slash from the ground at the back of my knee. Had it landed, he would have had me in the dirt beside him and could have

cut me to ribbons for as long as he lasted. I took a single step forward again and swung the ax for the second time, sinking it heavily in the joint between his neck and shoulder. He screamed, jerked convulsively, kicked twice, and seemed to collapse inward upon himself, suddenly much smaller.

I stood there in the trail until my ragged breathing quieted a little. Joyce stumbled to her feet, both hands clasped to her middle. "You were a tiger," she husked, and contemptuously kicked dirt into the face of the body.

"I used to be a tiger," I said.

"What now?" she wanted to know.

"I'm damned if I'm going to face any kind of a charge for this piece of crowbait." When the blood stopped gushing from the two ax wounds, I dragged the body twenty yards off the trail to a winding creek, rolled it in, and stuffed it under water beneath a mangrove root.

Joyce was standing in the trail holding the Spanish-American campaign hat which had rolled to one side when the corpse hit the ground. "Put this on," she said. "You're about the same size, and you're wearing the same type clothing. Wherever he planned to meet us, Ed is expecting to see that—" she glanced toward the creek, "herding me along the path in front

of him into big brother's arms."

"You don't think he'd just stay in town to wait for the word?"

"Not Ed," she said positively. "I know him." Her mouth twisted. "He'd want to stamp his bootprints a little more effectively on me before he let me report back to civilization—if I ever got that far." She interpreted my look correctly. "Yes, I know it's my brother I'm talking about. I'll say it again: I know him."

"We'd better get going," I said with a glance at the setting sun. "I'd sure hate to be caught out here in the dark."

"Leave the ax," Joyce said. "He's not going to expect to see the ax." She stooped and picked up a dead, gnarled branch from beside the path, walking-stick in size. "When we reach him, he won't be looking at you. He'll be looking at me to try to decipher my attitude and see how much more pressure he needs to apply before I'll do as he says. Lag back a little until I'm standing beside him, then attract his attention. All right?"

"All right," I agreed. Privately I determined not to lag back too far.

Joyce bent down again and picked up the corpse's knife which I hadn't seen fall from his dying hand. She stuck it in her belt at the small of her back.

We started along the trail.

All the long, hot, tiring, mos-

quito-infested way out through swamp and marsh, my brain was churning feverishly. At each wrenching, mud-sucking step a single thought hammered at me: how was I going to handle Ed Tennant when the showdown came? Time and distance alike brought no solution.

We both saw him at the same time, when I was beginning to hope my guess about him remaining in town might be correct. He was waiting at the Dundee Creek boat landing. "Pull that hat down over your eyes," Joyce said without turning her head as she preceded me along the path. She still carried the tree branch, muddled for half its length.

"Well, sis," Ed Tennant boomed when we were still yards away, "you got the picture now, who's at the throttle? Or am I still gonna have trouble with you?" A .45 dangled negligently from his right hand, his huge paw dwarfing the large gun. "You jus' better make up your cantankerous mind—"

Joyce stopped when she was standing beside him.

"Hi, Ed," I said.

He turned, his mouth agape.

Joyce broke the tree branch over his head.

Ed Tennant went to his knees, but it didn't knock him out. I dived for the gun that had been shocked from

his hand, and came up with it. Tennant shook his head dazedly, then looked up at me coolly. "Maybe I been underestimin' you, ol'-timer," he said softly. "How'd you get away from ol' Rudy?"

I didn't answer him. I looked at Joyce. "We take him into town and turn him in?"

She considered it. "No," she decided. "First, there'd be the logistics of the three of us in the runabout. Unless he was unconscious, we couldn't risk it. But it's more than that. In jail, he'd fester, and they have quick paroles in Florida. We'd never be able to hide from him when he got out."

Tennant had been eyeing the gun in my hand. I could see him shifting his weight on his knees. Sooner or later he was going to rush me, gun or no gun, but at Joyce's statement, he turned his head to look at her. He sounded amused when he spoke. "So what you're sayin', little sister—"

"Is that you've had it, Ed."

He was grinning as he returned his attention to me. Joyce plucked the knife from the back of her belt and swung it in a long arc that ended with only the haft in sight as it jutted from his thorax.

He made a choking sound as his eyes bulged incredulously. Both huge hands seized the handle and pulled the knife free. "More like me

... 'n I thought, sis," he gasped. The weakness in his voice appeared to sting him. He started toward me, swayed, and sat down on his heels before sagging onto his side. He started to say something but never completed it as a look of dull surprise was imprinted upon his suddenly pale features.

Big Ed Tennant never did say anything else.

We weighted and sank the body two hundred yards from the boat landing. We towed the boat that had brought him to the landing a quarter-mile up Dundee Creek before sinking it at the end of a dead-end turnaround.

Joyce studied me when we were in the runabout and on our way through the green-banked waterways with the long-slanting, late-afternoon shadows crisscrossing the

slow current. "Hardly the basis for a healthy marriage, would you say?" she asked when she realized I wasn't going to say anything.

I thought back to the years preceding my twenty-four month hospitalization and recuperation. "I could introduce you to a lot of people who would swear we were made for each other," I answered her.

She smiled—an untroubled smile.

The runabout putt-putted its way along the ghostly inland waterways.

I had no doubts at all about the solidity of our marriage. This was a very special woman. I'd never have made it out of the swamp alone. In a world of semiprecious stones, she was truly a jewel; not perfect, but then my carats were flawed, too.

We continued on to the house in comfortable silence.



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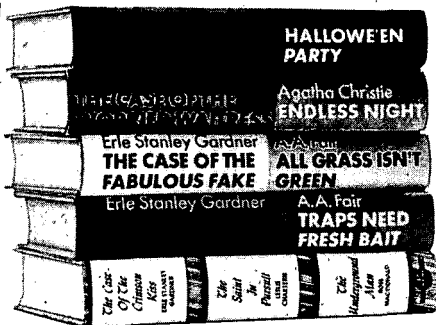
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