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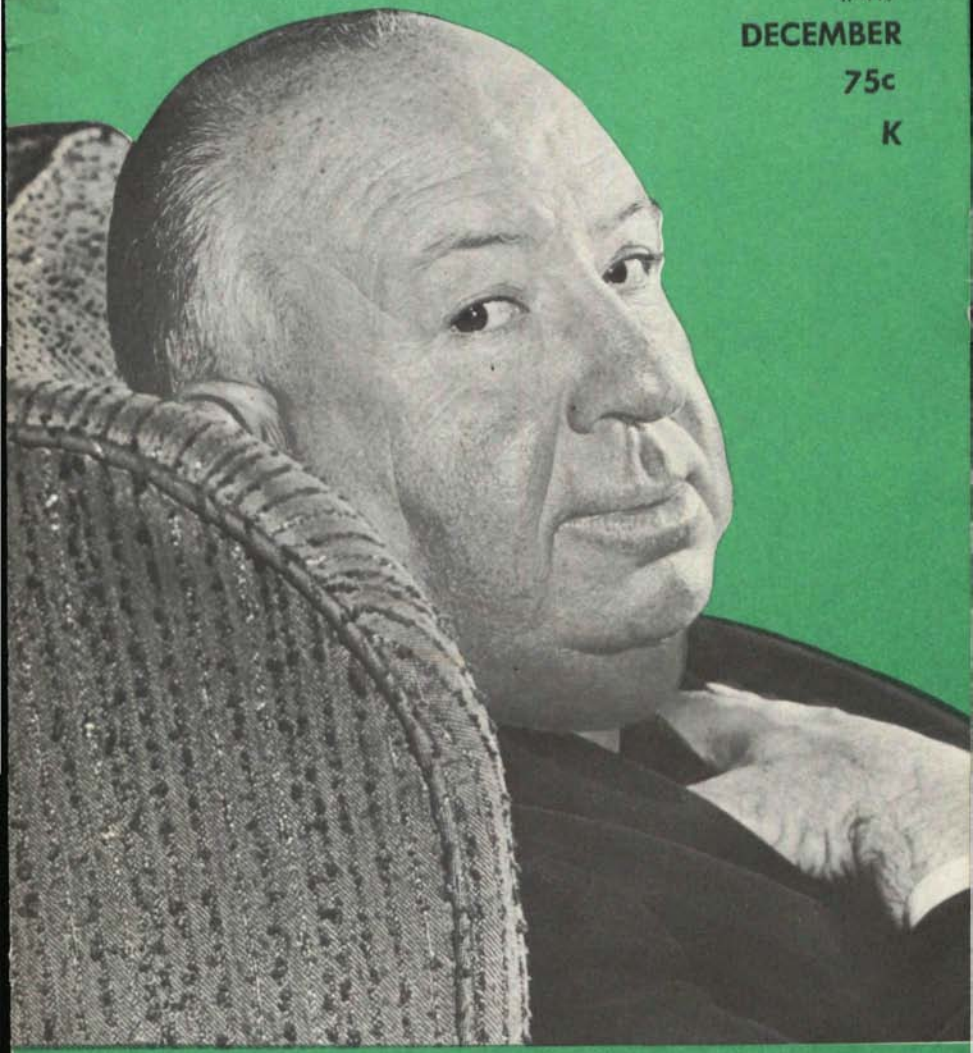

NEW stories presented by the MASTER OF SUSPENSE

December 1971

Dear Reader:

Despite evidence to the contrary these days, there is much for which to render annual thanks, and part of that gratitude may be for keeping out of the grip of those you will meet in these pages. From *Martin for the Defense* by Jaime Sandaval through *The Diver* by Clark Howard, you will want to remember that these are but fiction. (Are they not?)

So while your turkey roasts, you may shiver, since what you read herein you read for the first time. Unless, of course, you are the author of one of these new stories. In that event, fourteen-fifteenths of the contents is still a unique experience.

If you should, incidentally, meet any of the living counterparts of those within, my advice would be to run. It is good for the wind and often aids longevity. In my case, it is not so simple. A fast car is more to my liking. Which reminds me: it is time to get out of the way of those who speed to their fates in what follows.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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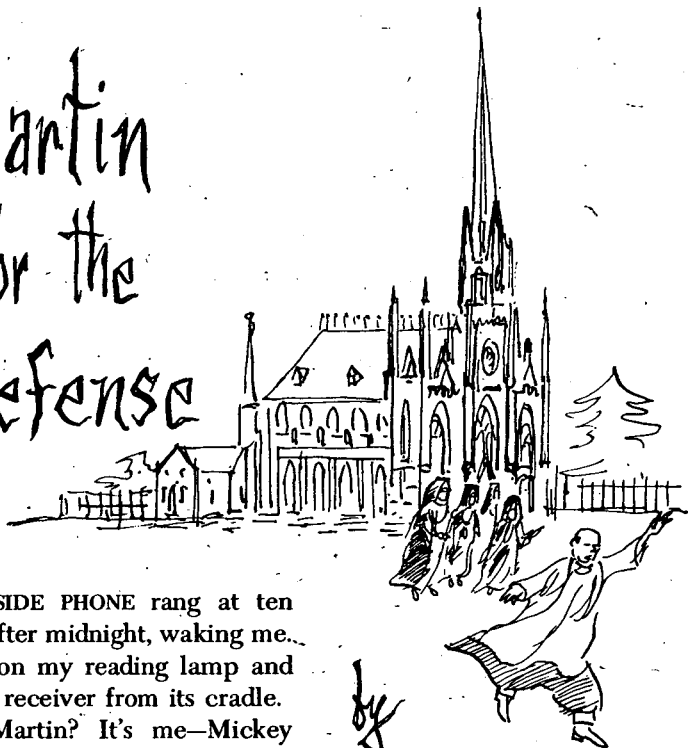
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 16, No. 12, Dec. 1971. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions $9.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404.

One may find he receives about the same amount of credit as he extends.

Martin for the Defense



by Jaime Sandaval

MY BEDSIDE PHONE rang at ten minutes after midnight, waking me. I turned on my reading lamp and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

"Mr. Martin? It's me—Mickey Bananas," a bass voice said hurriedly. "I'm in trouble. They just booked me at headquarters. How soon can ya get down here?"

I dropped the receiver back in its cradle, clicked off the light, and rolled over. As far as I was concerned, whatever problem Michael

"Mickey Bananas" Murdock was having with the police this time was destined to remain his alone. Lawyer I was, but fool I wasn't. The last time Mickey had crossed swords with the law, I had given him my all, but he had paid only half my fee. This is an unforgivable breach of the lawyer-client relationship.

There was no danger of him calling back again and once more disturbing my sleep. Prisoners are allowed only one phone call, and he'd made his. In the morning, however, a man being released carried a message to one of Mickey's friends, and a bondsman bailed Mickey out. By noon he was at my office, badgering my secretary and demanding to see me.

I waited until the noise from the outer office made it difficult for me to concentrate on my crossword puzzle, then pushed the button on the intercom and told my girl to show him in.

"What'd ya hang up on me for?" Mickey demanded as he charged into the room and came to a lumbering halt in front of my desk. He was a red-faced, soft-looking man in his mid-forties, standing six feet and weighing close to three hundred pounds, a combination of physical traits which in the past had made him susceptible to recognition and identification from the witness stand. "What'd ya hang up on me for?" he repeated, his initially belligerent tone fading to injured puzzlement. "Didn't I tell ya I was in trouble?"

"I'm a very busy man, Mr. Murdock," I said with great formality. "I have time for clients only."

"But *I'm* a client!" he protested.

"You *were* a client," I corrected

him. "You ceased to be a client one burglary trial, three months, and five thousand dollars ago."

Mickey hates to part with money, but he knew when he was in a vise. With the police pushing him from one side and me squeezing him from the other, he had to come up with cash or resign himself to a few years in the pokey. Since he wasn't about to take the train to Sing Sing or Attica without giving the police a battle, he reluctantly produced a stack of fifty mint-fresh hundred-dollar bills.

I made the currency disappear after verifying its validity, then leaned back in my chair and nodded approvingly. "That takes care of old business," I said. "Now, did you wish to place me on a retainer?"

I waited while an additional stack of bills was even more reluctantly produced. Mickey counted them three times before shoving them across the desk to me. "You'd better be worth it!" he growled.

"You know I'm always worth it," I said equably, "or you wouldn't be coming to me. You'd-better let me have the gory details."

Criminal clients come in three categories: those who lie and whom no lawyer can successfully defend; those who claim neither innocence nor guilt but simply say, "Here's my story," and tell it; and those who relate everything down to the most minute detail, thereby keeping the prosecution from presenting the defense lawyer with unpleasant surprises.

Mickey was one of the last group, and he told it all, holding back nothing despite the damage it must have done to his pride. He had stolen an oil painting from a cathedral in the inner city, in full view of half a dozen witnesses, all nuns. He had been captured minutes later by a middle-aged priest, a former Fordham all-American, who'd tackled Mickey a few blocks away as he tried to hail a cab.

I drummed thoughtfully on the desk top with my fingertips. It was hardly a prepossessing set of circumstances. It looked as though Mickey's life of crime had finally caught up with him.

"What's the charge?" I asked him.

"Grand larceny. The painting's worth a couple hundred G's."

That made it just about perfect—for the prosecutor. Not only had Mickey been caught with the loot in his hands, but there were six witnesses to the theft whose word no jury would doubt.

"Do ya think ya can get me off?" Mickey asked. He smiled feebly and nodded his head in an unconscious effort to prod a favorable reply

from me, but without conviction.

I refrained from replying. If I were ever going to collect an entire fee from Mickey, this seemed like an auspicious occasion. Once a client is lodged in the Walled-off Astoria, I've found he's noticeably dilatory in the payment of his legal fees. I told Mickey I wasn't working for him in the present case until I had the full fee, and I named a figure.

It was a measure of his current anxiety that he had the money for me in twenty-four hours. I used it to finance two weeks' fun and frolicking in Las Vegas. Mickey's case wasn't the kind a lawyer can prepare for in advance, so I wasn't cheating him of my time. All I could do was hope for a miracle, and I could do that in Las Vegas as well as in my office.

Over a year passed before Mickey's case came up on the court calendar. We had drawn Judge Charles Fitch on the bench. Fitch was an eccentric, but in a manner uniquely his own. I had observed in the past that defendants who had model trains in their basements, or who had coin or stamp collections, seldom received maximum sentences from him. I told Mickey to buy an old stamp album and carry it to and from court every day. If things turned out as badly as I suspected they might, providing him with that piece of advice was about all I'd be able to do to earn my fee.

The prosecutor was Bill Ogden, a courtroom veteran of twenty years. Bill didn't make many mistakes and his carefully coached witnesses didn't, either. We'd been adversaries a couple of dozen times before, and we were about tied for wins and losses. I could tell from the flare of Bill's nostrils that he was counting upon this case to put him into the lead.

The selection of the jury went quickly with neither of us bothering to use up a challenge. Then Bill Ogden called the six nuns to the stand, and one by one they described the theft and identified Mickey. After that, the arresting officers and the priest who had tackled Mickey came to the witness stand. They described Mickey's capture with the painting in hand. I listened carefully to what was said, but declined to cross-examine any of them, although I could see Mickey was getting nervous.

After that, Bill Ogden had the stolen painting entered into evidence as the state's Exhibit A. He then called to the stand Monsignor O'Malley, the cathedral's sixty-year-old administrator. As the painting's guardian, although not its owner, the monsignor had been the one who signed the criminal complaint that made my client's arrest

legal. I couldn't contest that.

It's almost impossible to cross-examine a clergyman without making the jury angry at both you and your client, but this time I had no choice. When Ogden finished with his questions, I stood up and asked mine.

"Monsignor O'Malley, you are the one who reported the theft of the painting to the police?"

"Yes."

"Was it a full report you made?"

"I reported that it had been taken from the cathedral, if that's what you mean."

"Did you make a statement as to the value of the painting?"

Bill Ogden rose to his feet immediately. "I object to that, your Honor. I don't think it's relevant at this time."

Judge Fitch mulled it for a moment, then turned to me. "Mr. Martin, I don't know that Monsignor O'Malley is an expert on art, but if it's your intention to call upon him for a statement of value, I will allow it to be done now rather than have him returned to the stand later."

"Thank you, your Honor," I said. I turned back to the witness box. "Monsignor O'Malley, at the time you reported the theft, did you give the painting's valuation?"

"I told them that the painting was one of reportedly great value," he returned guardedly. His answers were such that I could see that Ogden had been telling him some truths about me.

"Did you say what that reportedly great value was?" I asked.

"I did not. It was taken from newspaper accounts published at the time the painting was given to the cathedral."

"Newspaper accounts," I repeated. "When was the painting given to the cathedral?"

"I believe in 1955 or 1956. Somewhere in that period. I'm not sure of the date."

"Do you know what valuation was given at that time?"

Ogden was on his feet again. "I object to that, your Honor. It's hearsay."

"If he knows of his own knowledge, he may answer," Judge Fitch ruled.

But Ogden wasn't about to be put down so easily. "Your Honor, the question as phrased asks for the value given by someone else, and I would therefore be put in the position of being unable to cross-examine as to that value." Ogden gesticulated a lot when he talked. I can always tell when a prosecutor has watched a lot of Perry Mason reruns on TV.

Judge Fitch looked at me. "Mr. Martin, the objection is sustained as to the form of the question."

I decided to try a different approach. "Monsignor O'Malley, do you know who donated the painting to the cathedral?"

"Yes."

"By whom was it donated?"

"By Mr. Nicholas Fisher."

"The same Nicholas Fisher who is an actor in the movies and on television?"

"Yes."

"Is Nicholas Fisher a member of your congregation?"

"No."

"Do you know why he gave the painting to the cathedral?"

"No."

"Did he make the donation in person?"

"No."

"Who made the donation for him?"

"Mr. Sylvester Benton."

"Is Mr. Benton a local resident?"

"If Brooklyn is considered a local residence, yes." The monsignor permitted himself a small smile.

"Do you know Mr. Benton's occupation?"

"He is a professional art critic and appraiser."

I nodded knowingly. "When Mr. Benton made the donation in the name of Mr. Fisher, were there accompanying certificates or documents attesting to the authenticity of the painting?"

"I don't recall any."

With that we ended the first day of the trial.

I was feeling pleased with the outcome thus far, but Mickey Murdock didn't share my satisfaction. He didn't see that I'd made any progress. "You ain't tryin' to rip me off, are ya?" he glowered as we headed for the building exit.

"Mickey," I said reasonably, "you've been charged with grand larceny, but so far no one has proven the painting is worth ten cents. They can prove you took it from the cathedral, but that isn't good enough to justify a charge of grand larceny. They must also prove the value of the painting. Rather than go to the expense of bringing in an expert witness, I think the prosecutor may let you cop a plea to a lesser charge when we get back in court tomorrow."

But I was wrong.

Instead of offering the expected deal in chambers, Ogden called Sylvester Benton as the morning's first witness. Benton was a small man, well below average height. He was balding, a fringe of white hair framing a pink scalp. I noticed that his ankles seemed to be exceptionally high above his shoes, indicating he wore lifts to make himself taller. At his age, it was quite a proclamation of vanity, and I was interested to see it. In this case I was going to need any edge I could get.

Benton was sworn in and Bill Ogden began the questioning. "Will you state your name, please?"

"Sylvester Benton."

"What is your business or occupation, sir?"

"I'm an art critic for a newspaper and several magazines in the city. I'm also an art appraiser, specializing in the Italian masters."

"You live in New York City or thereabouts?"

"Yes. Brooklyn."

"Where did you attend undergraduate school?"

"Columbia University."

"And what did you study there?"

"Art and art history."

"Did you do graduate work?"

"Yes."

"Where was that, sir?"

"At the University of California in Los Angeles, and at the *Akademie Der Bilden Kunsten* in Munich, Germany."

"Did you receive a degree?"

"Yes. A master's."

"Have you studied anywhere else?"

"Yes. I studied at the *Kunthis Torisches Institut* in Florence, Italy. It has a German name because it's operated by the German government."

"How long did you study there?"

"About a year."

"How long have you been an art critic and appraiser?"

"Over twenty years," he replied.

Ogden nodded with satisfaction and addressed Judge Fitch. "Your Honor, at this time I would tender Mr. Benton as an expert not only on art, but an expert on the art of the Italian masters."

"Do you desire to cross-examine as to the witness's qualifications, Mr. Martin?" the judge asked me.

I stood up, said "No," and sat down again. Mickey scowled at me. I ignored him.

"Very well, you may proceed, Mr. Ogden," Judge Fitch said.

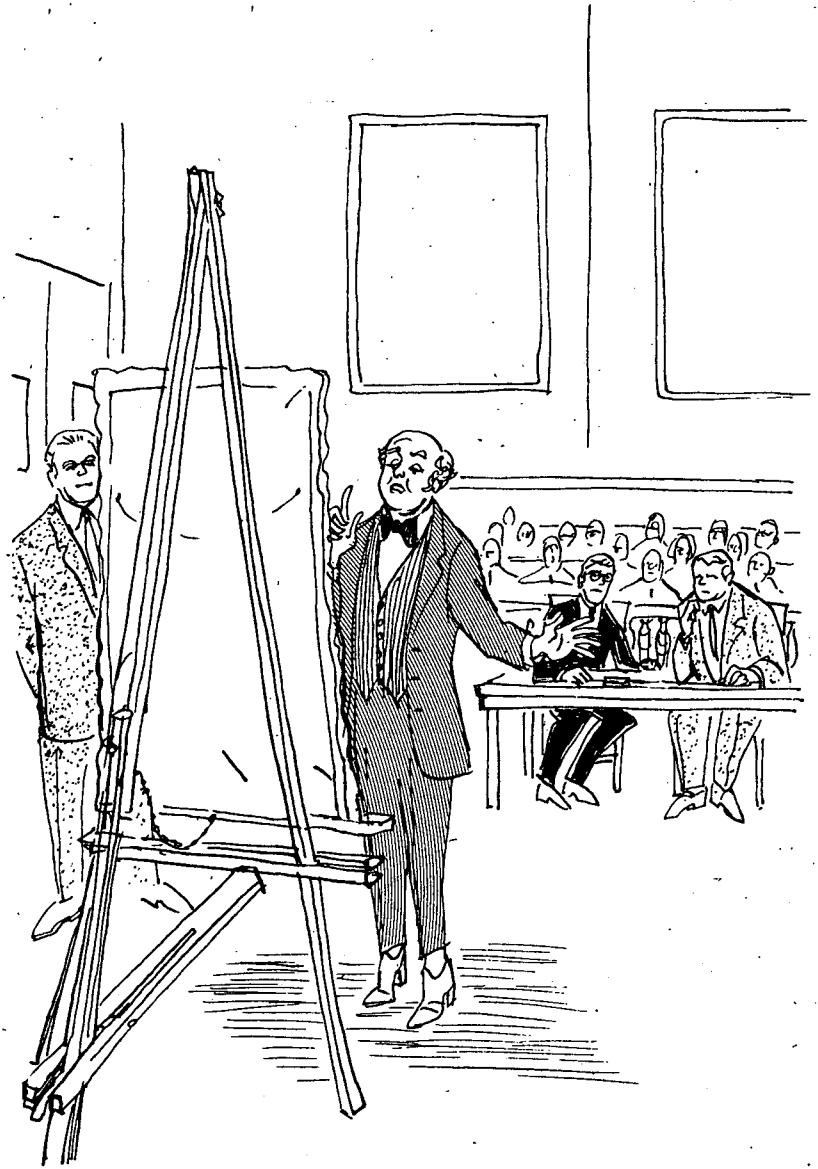
"Your Honor, I would like the easel to be placed closer to the jury so they may observe the painting more easily."

"You may move the easel," Judge Fitch said.

Until then the painting had been on an easel in front of the judge's bench. Ogden, with the help of a couple of bailiffs, placed the easel between the jury box and the witness chair, facing the courtroom, so that everyone could see the painting plainly.

When he was satisfied with the position of the painting, Ogden returned to the direct examination of his witness. "Mr. Benton, will you please step down for a moment for a closer look at this painting?"

Benton left the witness stand and took a position beside the painting. The picture was thirty inches wide



by forty inches high. From its place on the easel, it towered over the little appraiser. I had a mental picture of Mickey Murdock trying to wrestle it into the back seat of a taxi. I glanced at him, and—reading my mind—my client had the grace to blush.

"Have you had a chance, sir, to examine this painting before today?" Nothing equals the studied respect a prosecutor shows his witnesses except, perhaps, the careful disdain he reserves for opposition witnesses.

"Yes," Benton answered. "I examined it carefully for an appraisal Mr. Nicholas Fisher asked me to make prior to his donating the painting to the cathedral."

"Did you reach an opinion as to the antiquity and the value of the painting?"

"I have no doubt at all that it's a work performed between 1500 and 1530, probably closer to 1530. I estimate its current value at approximately two hundred thousand dollars."

Ogden smiled broadly. "Would you please state to the ladies and gentlemen of the jury and to his Honor and to everyone present, including Mr. Martin, the basis of that opinion and how you arrived at it?"

Benton indicated the painting with a sweeping gesture. He was obviously enjoying the limelight. "There are quite a number of paintings very similar to this one which are known to be the work of Marco Delgardi and his students. Few, however, show the fine workmanship of this particular painting, and I therefore attribute it to the master himself."

Benton stood on tiptoe, preening himself. "Delgardi and his students turned out a hundred Madonnas similar to this. The same pattern was followed in each case. The Virgin is shown either seated or standing in front of a fabric backdrop. This curtain is usually green as it is in this instance. The Christ Child is held in the Virgin's arms or is seated or standing on her lap. There are hills and clouds in the background, and—"

"Who are the other two people in the foreground?" Prosecutor Ogden interrupted.

"The kneeling man who is being blessed by the Christ Child is a representation, a portrait if you will, of the person who commissioned the painting. The long hair, not unlike today's style, was common in the Veneto, the area around Venice. The fourth person is the patron saint of the kneeling man, shown presenting him to Virgin and Child. In this case, the patron saint is St. Nicholas of Bari, as indicated by the bishop's biretta and the three gold

balls in his hand," he elaborated.

Benton was warming to his task. "St. Nicholas appears in many of these paintings because there were a great many men named Nicolo in Italy at that time. He is identified first by the bishop's hat, the biretta, although there are many bishop-saints, and by the gold balls which symbolize one of his good deeds. It seems a poor woman wanted to marry, but had no dowry to bring to the union. St. Nicholas came one night and left the three gold balls beside her while she slept. It's this story which led to the use of St. Nicholas as a giver of gifts at Christmas time, and in Europe his name-day is celebrated almost to the same extent as Christmas."

"Mr. Benton," Ogden asked, "can you tell us more about the technique of the artist?"

"Certainly. This painting was produced entirely in the Delgardi manner. The most difficult part of the painting, the Virgin, was rendered with transparent glazes over a white ground. This technique gives the color more intensity than is common with other schools of painting, and the style existed only until 1530 at the latest.

"Factors like the positions of the figures and the color of the Virgin's gown, in this case blue, often varied. The artists may have tired of doing everything exactly the same each time they painted a Madonna upon commission, and the choice of colors would have affected the cost of the painting, since some pigments were more expensive than others. But the typically Venetian colors and the expert brushwork make me certain this is a genuine Delgardi, painted when his artistic powers were at their fullest."

"I have just one more question, Mr. Benton," Ogden said suavely. "You have stated you believe this painting to be worth two hundred thousand dollars, is that correct?"

"It is."

"Will you kindly tell us how you established the figure?"

"A few months ago a Chicago museum purchased a similar work at an auction in Sotheby's London showroom. The price paid was seventy-five thousand British pounds, approximating two hundred thousand American dollars. I feel that this painting is in every way comparable to the work which was auctioned."

"Thank you, Mr. Benton. I have no more questions at this time," Ogden said.

"We will have a ten-minute recess," Judge Fitch announced, and then instructed the bailiff to take the jury to the jury room.

Mickey and I stepped outside into the corridor so he could smoke a cigarette. I abandoned the

noxious weed some years ago. Mickey puffed hungrily and asked me how I thought things looked. I made confident-sounding though noncommittal noises while I continued to do what I had been doing all along—hoping for a miracle.

Not that I wasn't thinking furiously. A successful criminal must be able to imagine himself in the position of the police; a successful policeman must be able to put himself in the criminal's place; and a lawyer has to be able to outguess both or he'll lose more cases than he wins.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to put myself in the art expert's place. Since I hadn't expected to have to cross-examine him, I wasn't prepared to do so. I hadn't anticipated that the value of the painting would be established by expert testimony, rather than sales receipts or other documentation. Now I was going to be forced to ask questions whose answers I didn't already know, the most dangerous thing a trial lawyer can do.

Mickey dropped his cigarette stub into an urn at the door to the courtroom, and we returned to our seats. The judge went back to the bench, the clerk called the court to order, and the jury filed back into its box. Benton resumed his seat in the witness chair, and I began my questions.

"Mr. Benton, are you the person who donated this painting to the cathedral?"

"Acting as Mr. Fisher's representative, yes."

"Monsignor O'Malley testified earlier there were no documents attesting to the painting's antiquity at the time you presented it to the cathedral. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"You have testified you made an appraisal of the painting's value prior to its being given to the cathedral. Would you please tell the jury what value you placed upon the painting at that time and how you arrived at it?"

"I appraised the painting at one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, after satisfying myself that it was indeed a genuine Delgardi. The valuation was based upon the then current demand, the prices being asked and received for Delgardi and Delgardiesque Madonnas."

"Don't you feel that the absence of documentation certifying the painting's history may indicate the work is a forgery?"

"On the contrary, I seldom pay much attention to a painting's certification. Such papers are far more easily counterfeited than a painting itself. I trust my own judgment more than any documents."

Mr. Benton's cocksureness wasn't making a favorable impression with

the jury, but his words were. I groped for a lever with which to pry him from his pedestal. "Mr. Benton, as an expert on Italian art, is there any reference work you would recommend to someone wishing to learn more about Delgardi and his paintings?"

"*Delgardi E I Delgardiani*, which means Delgardi and the Delgardi-like painters, is a fairly complete work on the subject. The book is in Italian, however, and has never been published in English."

"You read Italian?"

Benton smiled. "Of course."

"Why do you say—" a blinding revelation struck me too late, "—of course?" I stumbled to a conclusion.

"Because I wrote the book."

Prosecutor Ogden half-hid a smile behind his hand. Judge Fitch was almost visibly embarrassed for me. I had started out attempting to impeach a witness' credibility and had ended by establishing his expertise to an even greater extent than the prosecutor had.

"Mr. Martin," Judge Fitch said charitably as I stood there like a fish out of water, "do you have many more questions for this witness?"

I glanced at the wall clock and saw it was a few minutes past noon. I couldn't think of a single thing to ask Sylvester Benton right then, but I grasped at the offered straw. "Yes, sir," I lied. "I have quite a few more questions."

"In that case it would appear to be an excellent place to stop for lunch," Judge Fitch announced. "Court will recess until two o'clock this afternoon."

Mickey and I left the courtroom together, but we separated outside. He crossed the street to have lunch, while I grimly took a cab to the 42nd Street Public Library. Mickey returned to the courthouse with a stomach full of lasagna, and I returned with a head stuffed with facts. I had a feeling Mickey was going to see me earn my fee. Of all the charges that could have been proved against Mickey, I was hopeful that the prosecutor might have selected the one he couldn't prove.

I waited until art expert Benton had settled down in the witness chair again, then began. "It's true, isn't it, Mr. Benton, that various pigments were used at different times to produce the colors employed by artists, and that the types of pigment used can indicate the age of a painting?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Did you make any tests to determine exactly which pigments were used in the painting of this alleged Delgardi Madonna?"

"It's not alleged!" he bristled. I had reached him for the first time. "You're attempting—"

"You will please answer the question, Mr. Benton," Judge Fitch instructed him.

"No," he said reluctantly.

"Can you tell us what material the Madonna was painted upon?"

"The wood, you mean?"

"You're the expert, Mr. Benton. Is it wood?"

"Yes," he replied sullenly. I wasn't playing by the rules and salaaming to his expertise.

"When was it that artists first began painting on canvas?"

"About the middle of the 16th century. After the middle of that century, about 1550, it became so prevalent that wood was hardly used anymore." He was gaining confidence again from the sound of his own voice.

"Can you tell us what kind of wood was used in this case?"

"Well. . ." he stumbled. "Since it's an Italian painting, it would be on some kind of Italian wood."

"But you don't know what it is?"

"No," he said defensively. "The back of the painting is covered by a cradle."

"A cradle?"

"Yes. Old paintings on wood are often fitted with what is known as a cradle to keep the wood from buckling."

"So you can't say with any certainty what type of wood is beneath this painting?"

"No, not with any certainty."

"It might possibly be modern plywood?"

"Of course not! Why, I—"

"But you've testified you didn't examine the wood, therefore it could be *any* kind of wood, isn't that so?"

"Well, yes."

"Can you tell us why you didn't make a more careful examination of this reputedly valuable painting, Mr. Benton?"

"I didn't believe it was necessary," he said stiffly.

"Have any so-called old masters been forged successfully?"

"How do you mean, 'successfully'?" he asked suspiciously.

I pretended an air of great patience. "Has anyone been able to create a painting which, without detailed examination, has appeared to be the work of a famous artist of an earlier era?"

"Well, there have been some instances—but a scholar who knows his business should be able to detect a forgery."

"Are you familiar with the name Hans von Meegeren?"

Benton looked as though he had bitten into a sour apple. "I've heard of him."

"He was an art forger, was he not? A professional art forger?"

"Yes." Benton's lips were compressed tightly.

"He sold millions of dollars' worth of paintings which experts had sworn were genuine Vermeers, is this not so?"

"Yes."

"And this forger produced paintings which were completely different from one another, but all of which were still in the style, subject matter, and execution to be expected of a genuine Vermeer?"

"Ah . . . yes, I believe that is so."

"Then wasn't the feat which Hans von Meegeren accomplished far more difficult than merely following a format established in several dozen paintings of similar subject and design? By comparison, wouldn't it be far less difficult for a skilled forger to produce a fake Delgardi?"

There was a silence. Judge Fitch stared at Benton. "Yes," the witness replied.

I paused to allow the jury to digest the full significance of my questions and Benton's answers before I took off in another direction.

"Mr. Benton, you've testified that Mr. Nicholas Fisher hired you to make an appraisal of this painting, and that you also acted as his representative when it was given to the cathedral."

It wasn't a question but Benton answered, "Yes."

"Have you made other appraisals for Mr. Fisher?" I then asked.

"Yes."

"Of paintings?"

"Yes."

"And were these—" I made a face more sour-looking than Benton's previously, "*—works of art* subsequently given away?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell us why Mr. Fisher was so concerned with establishing the value of items he didn't plan to sell or keep?"

Bill Ogden was on his feet instantly. "Your Honor, the witness is an art expert, not a mind reader." Ogden glared at me. "He can't be expected to know what motives, if any, his employer might have had."

I couldn't afford to have the objection sustained. "Your Honor," I protested, "I'm sure Mr. Benton's answer will show that Mr. Fisher's action was not unusual and that Mr. Benton was well aware of the reason for it."

Judge Fitch nodded. "If the witness can answer from his own personal knowledge, he must do so."

I turned back to Benton. "Well, Mr. Benton, why did Mr. Fisher want an appraisal of the paintings, this one and the others you mentioned?"

Benton hesitated, then spoke slowly. "It's a standard practice for people who plan to give an art work to a charity or other non-

profit organization to have the item appraised first."

"Why is that, Mr. Benton?"

"For tax purposes. The appraisal establishes the current value of the work of art."

"In other words, your appraisal sets the amount of tax deduction a man can claim legally when he donates a work of art?"

"That's correct."

"You are paid a fee for your appraisals?"

"Yes."

"You are paid well?"

"Moderately well."

"Then it wouldn't be in your best interests to be too critical of paintings brought to you for appraisal?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," I said, advancing upon the witness stand and shaking a finger in front of Benton's suddenly pasty-looking face, "it's to your advantage to have large numbers of paintings brought to you for appraisal, and by giving high appraisals to doubtful paintings, you insure there will be future high fees."

Bill Ogden was erect, baying at the moon. "Your Honor, I must protest defense counsel's behavior! He's badgering the witness!"

"Objection sustained," Judge Fitch pronounced, but with no fire in his voice. "Kindly confine yourself to relevant questions, Mr. Martin, and refrain from attacking the witness in your interrogation."

"I apologize, your Honor." I turned back to Benton with a ferocious gleam in my eye that Judge Fitch couldn't see. "Mr. Benton, if this painting were a forgery, what would its value be?"

Bill Ogden jumped up again. "Your Honor, Mr. Benton isn't—"

"If a witness is qualified to set a value on a genuine painting," I broke in, "I submit he should know what a proven forgery would be worth."

"The witness may answer," Judge Fitch decreed.

"If it were a forgery," Benton conceded, "I don't know that it would have any value, except as a curiosity."

"Thank you, Mr. Benton. Now, are you familiar with the methods of art forgers, men like Hans von Meegeren?"

"Yes, in a general way. They try to do everything exactly as it was done in the past by the artist they are impersonating."

"You mean they use the same type of materials, wood or canvas, pigments, brushes, and so on?"

"Yes. They also try to duplicate the artist's technique."

"In other words, a forger tries to use materials which are identical to the ones the original artist used, and he tries to do everything the original artist would have done? He

copies methods and materials as exactly as he can?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Benton, did it ever strike you as strange that the artist, whoever he was, gave us Nicholas as the name of the person who commissioned the painting?"

Benton stared at me with renewed suspicion at this new tangent. "No, why should it? I mentioned that Nicolo was a very common name in Italy during that period."

"Mr. Fisher's first name is also Nicholas."

"Coincidental, surely," Benton answered.

I went to the defense table and opened my briefcase. I removed a movie fan magazine and held it up. "I purchased this magazine during the noon recess," I said.

"Your Honor, I hardly see where Mr. Martin's choice of reading matter has any bearing on this case!" Prosecutor Ogden snapped.

I approached the bench. "If you will allow me to continue, your Honor, I'll soon make everything clear."

Judge Fitch considered for a moment. "Proceed, Mr. Martin," he said at last. Ogden sat down with an exasperated look on his face.

I opened the magazine to a page I had marked while I was in the taxi returning to court. It carried a profile photo of a tall, middle-aged man whose head was completely bald. The effect was similar to that achieved by Yul Brynner, but the photo suggested self-indulgence rather than Brynner's lean masculinity.

I handed the opened magazine to Benton. "Is this a photo of your employer, Nicholas Fisher?" Since the photo's caption identified the actor as Nicholas Fisher, I had no doubt of Benton's answer.

"Yes, this is a picture of Mr. Fisher."

"May I call your attention to the painting of the Madonna? You stated earlier, during direct examination by Mr. Ogden, that the kneeling figure is a representation, a portrait, of the person who commissioned the painting. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Examine that figure's head and face, Mr. Benton, and then tell me if you see a resemblance to your client, Mr. Fisher."

"Why, no," Benton replied in a voice intended to indicate I was putting him on. "I see no resemblance at all."

I took the magazine photo from his hand and drew thick sideburns and longish hair on the actor's profile. Nicholas now wore the same classic hair style as the painting. "Take another look," I told Benton,

holding the altered photo for him to see.

Benton was even more suggestible than I'd hoped. His mouth dropped open, and his head swiveled back and forth from photo to painting. He looked like a spectator at a tennis match. "Why, it's Mr. Fisher!" he exclaimed.

"Thank you, Mr. Benton. No more questions, your Honor."

Prosecutor Ogden tried desperately to repair the weaknesses I'd revealed in his case, but he was flustered. During redirect examination he made the mistake of concentrating on the implication of tax fraud, while overhanging the courtroom was the subtle thought of an actor so vain he commissioned an art forger to paint the actor into the forgery. Ogden didn't recall Benton to the stand to have him reaffirm his appraisal of the painting's value.

When the prosecution rested its case, I quickly rested mine. Then I made a motion for a directed verdict of acquittal on the ground that the value of the painting had not been established sufficiently to justify a charge of grand larceny.

Mickey Murdock left court a free man, and I felt rather pleased. I felt even better when I read in the paper ten days later that the Delgardi Madonna had been examined by several experts who had subjected it to various tests to determine its age and authenticity, and it was their unanimous opinion that it was actually a clever forgery, possibly no more than fifteen years old.

The night the article appeared in the paper, my bedside phone rang at ten minutes after midnight, waking me. I turned on my reading lamp and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

"Hey, Martin!" a voice I recognized as Mickey Murdock's boomed over the wire in alcoholic belligerence. "Didja see that piece inna paper? You owe me that fee back. I really *was* innocent of grand larceny, an' I'da never hired ya if I'd known that. Ever'body knows heaven pertecks th' innocent."

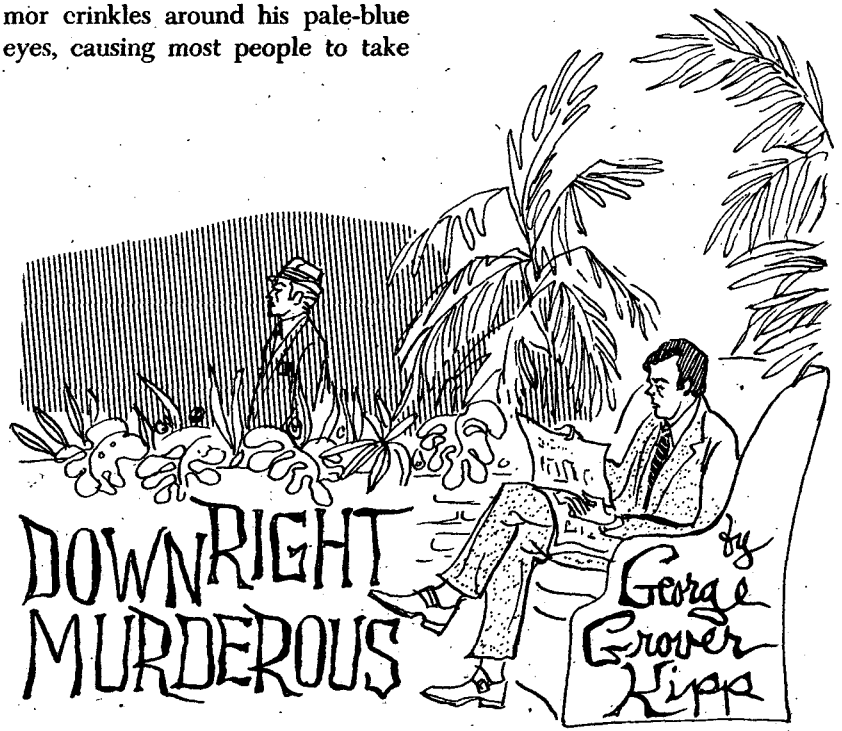
I hung up on the blithering idiot, then on second thought left my phone off the hook.

Can you imagine the nerve of that crook?

That competition which is said to be a natural adjunct to business can, upon occasion, be downright murderous.

I SPOTTED LUKE RASKIN as he crossed the sun-splashed parking lot of the Metropole Hotel in downtown Seattle. He was impeccably attired as usual, in a snappy brown suit with matching hat and shoes. Luke is tall and distinguished, with neatly groomed gray hair and humor crinkles around his pale-blue eyes, causing most people to take him for a retired schoolteacher or businessman. He is neither of these. He is a keeper of the books for the syndicate in a large city on the eastern seaboard.

His most admirable accomplish-



ment, however, has nothing to do with the intricacies of figures or books. You see, he has this memory thing going for him. He can lay out maybe half a deck of cards, face up, in neat rows and study them for a few minutes. Then he turns them face down and selects them as they are called to him by somebody. He rarely misses, and it is not because the cards are marked, or because the man calling the cards has been coached. Luke can do the same trick with anybody's cards, at any time.

His more outstanding successes, though, have come from remembering people. If he's seen a person once, even for a matter of seconds, he can pick that person out of a crowd, regardless of how he might be disguised. Rumor has it that Raskin's mind records the less obvious characteristics of the individual: the way he walks or talks, or lights a cigarette, or devours a sandwich . . .

Luke Raskin is a finger-man, the best in the business.

When the Brotherhood decrees that some specific individual should die, Luke goes forth to ferret him out. Once he has spotted the potential victim, he points him out to the hit-man and then cuts out, his task accomplished.

Being a hit-man myself, I'd previously encountered Luke Raskin.

Before Luke came through the door into the lobby of the Metropole Hotel, I was well hidden behind a pair of potted palms and an imitation mahogany room-divider filled with artificial ferns. He took a seat giving him an unobstructed view of the elevators and the front desk and pretended to read a newspaper, but his eyes were constantly shifting around the lobby, sifting through the knots of conventioneers and their wives or girlfriends.

Things had been hairy enough *before* Luke's arrival. With him on the scene, I could see my best-laid plans going down the drain. I waited until he was momentarily distracted, then went out a side door and headed for a pay telephone. Charley, my boss, came on the line on the fourth ring. I didn't bother to apologize for disturbing him. Instead, I let him have the whole package point-blank.

"The Harlem organization is up to something out here, Charley, and I don't like it. Their number one finger-man is staked out in the lobby of the Metropole Hotel like he just bought the joint."

Charley sucked in his breath. "Are you sure? I haven't been over in that part of town in a long time, but if anything was happening I'd have heard about it. You sure you haven't been watching too many

late-late shows on television?"

"Late-late shows, indeed," I growled. "This is the same guy who came to Boston last fall and stayed at the Roxbury Hotel. If you'll recall, two hoods were found in the Roxbury the next day with holes in their livers. This is the same setup all over, right down to the way Raskin is staked out in the lobby."

For a long minute the phone was silent. "An unexpected situation, Joey, that calls for improvisation, nothing more. You didn't get to be the best hit-man in the business by spooking at shadows. You'll just have to draw on your years of experience and do the best you can under the circumstances. After all, we're not in the law-enforcement business, and the country being famed for its free enterprise system . . ." Charley chuckled amusedly. "You know how it is."

"Yeah," I growled. "I know how it is. And here's something you'd better know. Doing a job is one thing; sticking my head into a cement mixer is another. The Small Boat Manufacturers' Convention at the Metropole brought out every pickpocket and dope-pusher in King County; then the local anti-pollution gang came out in force, signs and all, and began picketing the hotel. It seems they don't like the way small boats louse up the water. Needless to say, this combined bit of vice and virtue pulled in a lot of law. The Metropole is crawling with cops. So if Luke Raskin sets up a hit before my man shows, all hell is going to break loose out here." I paused to let my words sink in. "I want all the information you can get, as fast as you can get it. Nick Visconti didn't send Raskin three thousand miles just for a change of climate. If you can't get me any information, just forget the whole deal. You can also send somebody else to take over this job."

Another long silence came out of the phone. "All right, Joey. I'll do the best I can. Just don't make any rash moves. Like I told you before you left for Seattle, this job carries a nice bonus . . . if you manage to wrap it up in your usual neat fashion."

I got back to the Metropole just in time to see Raskin fold his newspaper under his arm and mosey out the door. Keeping a discreet distance behind him, I followed him the four blocks to the Harris House. When he halted at the front desk for his key, I counted off the slots. His key had come from the second row of cubbyholes, fourth slot from the right. It took but a few seconds to determine his room number was 218, and the register gave his name as Harrison Myers, of Fort Worth, Texas.

When Raskin came through the

front door of the Metropole the following morning I was already behind the potted palms and the divider with the ersatz ferns. The morning was a complete bust. Nothing happened, nothing at all. At lunch time, when he moved across the lobby toward the coffee shop, I headed out the side door and around the corner for a fast hamburger and a chocolate malt. I got back to the lobby ten minutes before he returned to his seat and took up his vigil. The afternoon was a repeat of the morning; the evening was a rerun of both. When Raskin finally gave up for the day and walked out the door, I returned to my hotel and tried to call Charley, but there was no answer.

The man Raskin had been waiting for entered the Metropole Hotel lobby the next morning shortly before noon. He was thirtyish, of medium build with brown hair and moustache, and was wearing dark glasses. The only sign of betrayal in Raskin's manner was the slow squinting of the eyes as he watched the man move from the door to the front desk, and then from the front desk to the elevator. When the elevator door closed behind the newcomer, Raskin tucked his folded newspaper into his pocket and moved casually across the lobby to the front desk. I moved right along with him, but at the front desk I turned my back to him, one elbow on the counter, and ordered a pair of cigars. I was sure Raskin didn't know me, but I still wasn't taking any chances.

From the corner of my eye I could see him beckon to one of the other girls. "That gentleman who just checked in. Isn't he Angus MacGregor from Dallas?"

The girl ran her finger expertly down the row of registration cards. "I'm afraid not, sir. That was Mr. Orbison; Mr. James Orbison of Palm Springs, Florida."

Raskin shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "My mistake. The resemblance is amazing. I could have sworn he was Mr. MacGregor." Then he moved away; not back to his seat, but out the door and up the street.

I turned as he moved away and eyed the room number on the registration card, which was exactly what Raskin had been doing. James Orbison was registered in room 616.

I caught up with Raskin a half-block away, just as he stepped into the phone booth on the corner. Moving in close, I pretended to light a cigarette as he dialed. The number was 264-7771, a local call. I had no way of knowing who was on the other end of the line, but I was willing to bet it was the hit-man.

When Raskin had completed his

call and gone on his way, I entered the booth and dialed the same number. "Fargo Hotel," a sleepy male voice responded.

"Sorry," I said. "I must have dialed the wrong number."

From the phone booth I crossed the street to a tavern and indulged in two tall beers and some even taller thinking. The way things were shaping up, I was courting disaster by hanging around the Metropole. I could have run, but all that ever improved was the lungs and the legs. Not that my lungs and legs couldn't have stood some improving, but my bankroll needed it more. I was real short on long green. When I got back to my hotel room the phone was ringing. I scooped it up and held it to my ear. "Joey Parker here."

"Where in hell have you been?" Charley's voice rasped impatiently. "I've been trying to reach you for the last three hours."

"Out on business," I said. "Did you call to tell me something, or are you just lonesome?"

Charley exhaled noisily. "The mark's name *is* Mark. Mark Leopold. He's a two-bit punk who managed to get a gun and an oversized inspiration at the same time. He shot up two of Nick Visconti's boys a couple weeks ago, right in the middle of Harlem, and relieved his bagman of his satchel. It happened right after the last stop for a collection, so the take was considerable—about two hundred thousand. Needless to say, Visconti has smoke coming out both ears. If Leopold gets away with the caper, it will be open season on Nick's entire operation. Every creep with a gun will be waiting in the dark for his bagman to show. He *has* to nail Leopold. Nick would have lost out completely, but Leopold's girlfriend got cold feet and decided to switch sides. She went to Visconti and gave him the whole story, even the part where Leopold was checking into the Metropole in Seattle. His next move is to catch a plane for the Orient."

"He won't ever see the Ginza," I said. "He showed up today and it took Raskin all of sixty seconds to make him. Even money says he gets hit tonight."

"No sign of *your* man?" Charley probed worriedly.

"No sign," I said. "And with Luke Raskin setting up a hit, and the place crawling with cops, maybe it's all for the best."

"Don't talk like that!" Charley hissed. "I promised our client the job would be done and he's already paid for your services. Find a way, Joey. Find a way—*please.*"

I didn't want to say yes, but Charley and I go back a long way. "Anything on Visconti's hit-man?"

"Just that Raskin was to lay over in Detroit and pick him up on his way to Seattle," Charley said. "It was a real fluke that Raskin's man and ours both headed for the Metropole Hotel."

"No fluke," I said. "My information was that the bell captain in the Metropole has helped a lot of sweating characters slip out of the country. The Metropole is the *in* place for people on the lam these days."

"Then you will try?" Charley coaxed.

"I've *got* to try," I said. "If I blow this one, twenty years of perfection and my reputation go down the drain. How much is the hit-man getting for the job?"

"Ten thousand," Charley said, "which gives you a good idea of how badly Visconti wants him nailed."

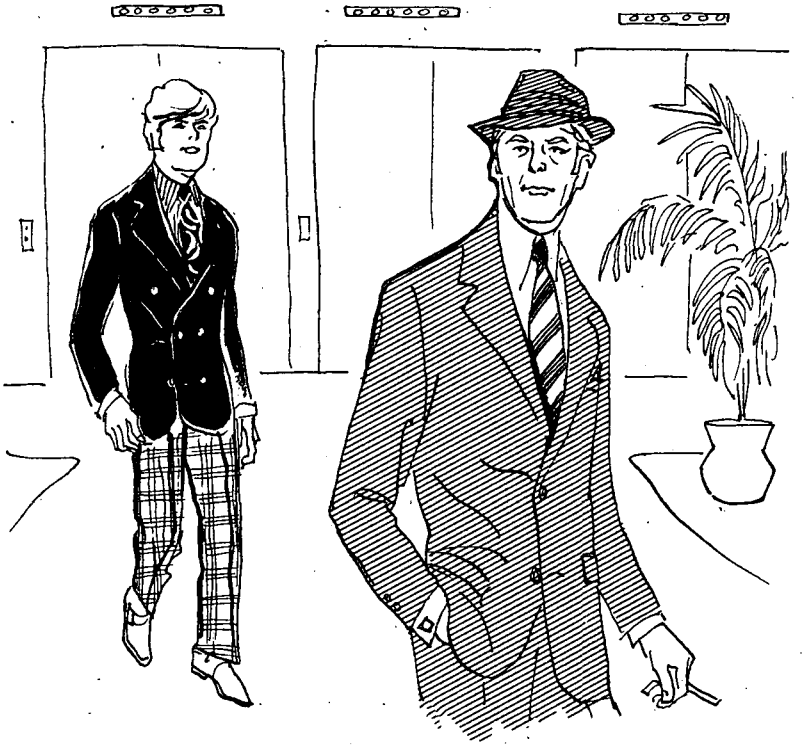
"Thanks, Charley," I said. "You did a real good job. Did anybody ever tell you that you should have been a detective?"

Charley's reply almost scorched the wires. He has no use for cops of any kind.

The man I'd been waiting for walked into the lobby of the Metropole at two o'clock that afternoon. That was when my mind slipped into high gear. It was his surprisingly close physical resemblance to Mark Leopold that triggered the brainstorm. Usually I'd have noticed the similarity a lot sooner, but I'd been concentrating on Luke Raskin and Mark Leopold instead of the man for whom I was waiting. It must have been my lucky day, because my man drew room 626, right down the hall from Mark Leopold. The whole setup was made to order for a man with a bit of imagination, and I've got an imagination that won't quit.

It was late in the afternoon when Raskin entered the lobby of the Metropole. A discreet distance behind him was a blondish, baby-faced type no more than twenty-five; young for a hit-man. He was just everyday mod until I got a good look at the flat gray eyes. They were cold and unblinking, just like a rattler's. His lower lip was overly full and effeminate. I'd seen his type before. They never care who they hit, or why, or even how much they're getting paid for the job. Basically they're the same as the pyromaniac or the sex maniac. Even when reliving their greatest triumphs, their eyes glisten. They are sick . . .

When Leopold emerged from the elevator at dinner time, Raskin flicked a gold cigarette lighter and applied the flame to the cigarette he'd placed in his mouth earlier. At the same time he nodded to the blond hit-man, seated so that he



faced the row of elevators. Raskin stood up then, in a leisurely fashion, and moved out the door into the night. Leopold had been marked for death before a whole herd of unsuspecting conventioneers and policemen. It had been smooth, *real* smooth.

The hit-man followed Leopold into the coffee shop and took a seat at the end of the lunch counter, from where he could study his potential victim discreetly. Nothing was going to happen right away, which was what I had hoped. I cut out the door and began looking for Raskin. For a bit I couldn't find him, and my heart dropped down past my knees. Then he emerged from a delicatessen that set back from the sidewalk. He was licking contentedly at a twenty-five cent cone—just a kid at heart.

I followed him to his hotel, Harris House. He went upstairs, and a short time later he was stepping off the elevator, his bag in his hand. His job was done and he was leav-

ing town. I summoned a taxi and headed back for the Metropole.

Leopold was just finishing a steak when I looked into the coffee shop, and the blond punk was still dawdling over a cup of coffee at the end of the counter. For a second I felt sorry for Leopold. He was theoretically as dead as a man could get, and he didn't have the faintest idea of what was happening right under his nose. I shrugged the feeling away. Leopold had gambled for the chunk; now it was time to pay for the chips.

The hit-man waited until Leopold stepped onto the elevator before he headed out the door into the soft summer night. He walked briskly, as though he were in a hurry to get it over. I summoned another taxi, and instructed the driver to take me to the Fargo Hotel. When we got there I handed the driver a ten-spot. "Wait around the corner for me. I won't be long."

When the blond punk came through the door I was behind a revolving rack of paperback books, well hidden from his serpentine orbs. "The key to room two-twelve," he said to the clerk in a reedy voice.

I paused at the desk as soon as he was out of sight. Room 212 was registered to a Harry Green. With that vital bit of information tucked into the back of my head, I eased out the door and around the corner to the waiting taxi.

When Harry Green entered the Metropole lobby twenty minutes later, I was waiting for him. He carried a briefcase under his arm, and his eyes had taken on a bright glitter. He was wound up tight, slavering toward the ultimate thrill. I grasped his elbow as he neared the bank of elevators and steered him toward a momentarily deserted corner. "Leopold just pulled the old switcheroo on you."

Green let his eyes widen innocently. "Leopold? I don't know anybody by that name. You must have me confused with somebody else."

"You know him," I growled. "And while you're remembering him, throw in a few other tidbits. Like Nick Visconti . . . a two-hundred-grand hit . . . James Orbison from Palm Springs . . . Luke Raskin . . . and a ten-grand contract." I paused to light a cigarette and let the words sink in. "So you don't believe me. So who gives a damn! Go on up to room six-sixteen and pull your boo-boo. Just remember: *Leopold isn't there!*"

Instant sweat peppered Green's brow. "Who the hell are you anyway?"

"I'm Nick Visconti's insurance agent," I said, with just enough weariness to make it sound con-

incing. "He sends me along on all ıe important matters so punks like ou don't goof and blow things into cocked hat—like you were just etting ready to do."

Green *wanted* to believe me; ;reen *didn't* want to believe me. 'or a minute he teetered one way nd then the other, but I knew too ıuch about the matter to be dis- ounted. "Nobody said anything to ıe about you being on the scene," ıe blustered, finally.

I managed a tolerant smile. "If ou hadn't been all set to goof, you vouldn't have found out about me t all. I don't announce myself vhen things are progressing as ılanned. You could call Luke Ras- in and ask him about me, but he hecked out of Harris House at even o'clock. Right now he should ıe high in the sky on his way back o New York. And you won't be ble to get in touch with Nick Vis- onti either. He'll be up at his lodge n the Adirondacks, just like he is very Saturday; incommunicado, as hey say. It's just you and me, Harry Green. Louse up this hit and before he week is out Visconti will have a ontract out on you. He hates stu- ıidity, even in small matters. And his job is important. *Blow this job ınd you're dead!*"

Green tried to swallow. I could ılmost hear the dry scrape of his ongue against the roof of his mouth. "Okay. I'll play it your way. You call the shots."

When the elevator let us out on the sixth floor, I pulled my ring of master keys from my pocket and selected one. At the same time, Green was deftly twisting a silencer onto the muzzle of the .38 automatic he'd pulled from the briefcase. When I eased the door to room 626 open, he was right behind me. There was just enough light coming from the neon sign across the street to make his work easy. Laying the barrel of the .38 across his left forearm, he zeroed in on the semi-exposed back of the sleeping man and squeezed the trigger. Like magic, a neat hole appeared at the juncture of the man's spine and shoulders.

This was the moment I'd feared most, but I had no worries. Instead of moving forward to examine his gory work, Green stood like a zombie, his eyes glassy, tongue caressing his lower lip.

"Watch the door," I hissed, moving across the room. I checked the body, then went through the pants hanging over the back of a chair, and finally the suitcase at the foot of the bed. "He's real dead, and there's no sign of the money. Let's get out of here."

Green moved lethargically. He didn't begin coming out of the trance until we were almost at the main floor. When the elevator door

slid open he moved straight ahead, never looking back. I waited a few minutes, then stepped back onto the elevator and stabbed the button for the sixth floor. Leopold was flat on his back in bed when I eased open the door to his room, his lips fluttering gently with each exhalation. He never knew I was in the room until the cold snout of my .32 automatic pressed against his throat. Before he could get his eyes open, I'd fished his gun from under his pillow and slipped it into my pocket. When he came awake, it was all at once, his eyes wide with fear. I backed away, flicked the lights on, and began tossing him his clothes. "Get dressed, punk."

"Look," he squeaked shrilly. "Why don't we talk this over. I mean I can top whatever price you're being paid."

I gave him my best sneer. "You should be able to, Mr. Leopold-Orbison, or whatever you want to call yourself. With two hundred grand of Nick Visconti's money you can probably top a lot of prices. There's just one small detail you've overlooked: I'm not interested." I flipped his hat and coat at him. "Let's go."

"You can have *all* the money," Leopold screeched desperately. "Every bit of it. Nobody will ever know."

I made with another sneer. "Sure I can. And you've got it all right there in your suitcase. What kind of hayseed do you take me for anyway?"

Leopold's head snapped back and forth like a runaway metronome. "Not here." He stabbed a hand into his hat and brought out a key that had been fastened there with transparent tape. "It's in a locker at the bus depot. *Honest*, it *is*!"

I rubbed my chin and let a few wrinkles gather across my brow. "You got enough money to get out of the country on?"

His head bobbed up and down like a high-speed Yo-Yo. "I took a thousand out of the bundle for expenses."

"Okay," I growled. "We go to the bus depot. But I'll have my eye on you every inch of the way so don't get any silly ideas. If you run, you bleed."

With his life hanging in the balance, Leopold was too scared to try anything. When we reached the bus depot, he stood to one side while I opened the locker and flipped the catch on the briefcase. The money was there all right; piles and piles of impressive packets of green.

I turned to Leopold. "You just bought yourself a headstart. Be smart and use it wisely. But before you go, I'll need some of your identification."

"Identification?" he squeaked.

He was so scared he couldn't even think.

I nodded patiently. "I'll need it to leave with a suitable body somewhere. That way everybody will think you're dead—and they will continue to think so as long as you play it smart and stay gone. By this time tomorrow you should be well on your way to South America with a one-way ticket."

Leopold handed me a credit card, his driver's license, and a membership card from a garment worker's union in New York City. Then he turned and wheeled out the door. I was reasonably certain he'd never be back.

After I'd mailed the briefcase to myself at my Brooklyn address and made reservations on the next eastbound flight, I walked back to the Metropole Hotel and took the elevator up to the sixth floor. With Leopold's identification exchanged for that of the man the blond hitman had killed, my work was done. The fact that I hadn't killed the man myself, as I'd contracted to do, would in no way diminish my delight when I collected for the hit. The slob had been a ruthless dope-trafficker who preyed on wealthy kids. He'd managed to outwit the law at every turn, but somewhere a parent found him out. That was when Charley sent for me . . .

Actually, my exchanging the identification was nothing more than a courtesy gesture. Harry Green had done all right by me, and it was no more than fair that I reciprocate. It would keep him from getting racked up for hitting my man instead of his.

As for the two hundred thousand dollars, I'm not a greedy person by nature, but long years in the business have taught me the cold, hard facts. My business is the same as any other, with new faces appearing on the scene, crowding the older men out. They force the prices down, and do sloppy work. So you can see, job-security-wise I'm totally unprotected. No fringe benefits, no nothing, so I have to make out the best I can.

It's the increasing competition that really bugs me anymore, though. Sometimes it gets downright murderous . . .

There is one customer extant who is definitely not "right."

Monologue in a MEAT MARKET

FROM THE GREENHOUSE to the meat market is a matter of minutes by car, but on this fine April morning I do not go by car. I can't find the keys. Bonnie has secreted them away somewhere. Her nature is secret, I fear, and always has been.

Strictly speaking, I don't leave from the greenhouse itself. My point of departure is the cottage, our little red cottage so trim outside, so soiled within, which sits some fifty feet in front of the greenhouse (hothouse, I'm inclined to call it now) and a bit to the left near an old sundial tilted toward inaccuracy.

Greenhouse, cottage, hothouse. What difference? All are approximately equidistant from the market, either by car or afoot. I'm walking—and rather swiftly, too, for a man confined of late by what they called a debilitating illness. I take Maple Terrace in long strides, heedless and seemingly unseen, carrying the spoiled meat wrapped in butcher's paper and tucked inside a string-handled shopping bag. Not a neighbor in view, not even a neighbor's child. I spot an abandoned tricycle leaning against a winter-wounded hydrangea bush. That is all.

The welcome silence extends from Maple to Poplar, from Poplar to Oak, from Oak to Sycamore. Not a sound except the occasional rustle of budding branches against a gentle movement of air. But here at

Grove, as always, rises the first small clamor of traffic: a panel truck, several cars, a boy on a bike, a . . .

When the light turns green I hurry across the intersection to the market occupying the opposite cor-

ner: SLATTERY'S FINE MEATS. I've only just learned that Slattery is no longer there. Sold out and retired. Gone south with his fat, rosy-cheeked wife, leaving behind his name in possession of a new owner, one who obviously regards the adjective *fine* with far less rectitude than did Slattery during a long carving career.

The shopping bag begins to drag like an anchor from my left hand. I switch it to my right. The door invites me to PUSH. Across the threshold I smell sawdust, fresh ham, an unnameable cheese, congealed gore. The premises are immaculate, more so than during Slattery's tenure, which of course makes it easier to slip a poor piece of meat to an undiscriminating housewife. They become dupes to the decor. Lamb chops in paper panties turn them on. Hamburger in pink plastic, too. Cherokee roses actually stand in a vase on a shelf above the dairy refrigerator. I wonder if these come from our—my—greenhouse, hothouse, cold frame. No doubt about it. Insult being impudently added to injury.

Half a dozen customers wait here. In the act of serving them are a very young man, one not so young, and one quite old whom I vaguely recall from the days of Slattery—a holdover. He winks and blinks at a tall thin wraith of a woman who wavers uncertainly over two porcelain trays of cold cuts. Bag in hand, I approach the counter presided over by the second man; the new proprietor. By name, Herbert Balzer.

I recognize him from Bonnie's sketchy description. The "wholesome" face is round and pink, with the textural glister of a pork sausage: the late Heinrich Himmler in a white smock, green eyes modestly uncommunicative behind steel-rimmed glasses. The smock itself is fairly clean, the upper half at least, but around the waistline are the unmistakable hints of blood. A black signet ring with a white scripted *B* enlivens the little finger of the pallidly plump left hand. He is telling

the frizzle-headed blonde in front of me that the rib roast will cut like butter. What barefaced chicanery! I itch to denounce his meat right now, in all forms, cuts and joints, but I bide my time.

Frankly, I fail to comprehend what Bonnie can see in a butcher. One should think that after five years of marriage to me, an artist at heart, though necessarily a florist by trade, she would find a gent of this stripe beneath notice.

Granted, times were tough while I was away involuntarily, but the situation had been going bad before that. The sudden lack of everything—money, silence, love, fair weather—were a deepening torment. I couldn't cope with it. Once, in a red moment, I tried direct action. Taking a scythe, I rushed into the hothouse and inexplicably flicked the full-bloom heads off three hundred chrysanthemums—golden yellow, burnt orange, soft lavender rolling in hapless clusters on the stone floor. A year's labor, a month's inventory. I shudder to remember it. I was terribly wrong, terribly stupid.

Yet my pathetic ferocity is no reason why Bonnie should have lowered her standards. The first time she accepted so much as a brisket from a man like this Balzer here, a gross brute, she besmirched my name and sullied her own soul.

It's a simple credit proposition, she says. Herbert trusts me; I mean us. He trusts *us*.

My skepticism forms a sad smile. Herbert, is it? Perhaps at times Bert—or Herbie?

The true story is disclosed by the well-stocked freezer in the cellar of my cottage: twelve sirloin steaks, ten porterhouse steaks, six club steaks, three seven-rib roasts, four rolled rumps (alas!), two loins of pork, three legs of lamb . . . And much of this meat is stamped *USDA Commercial*. Not *Prime*, not *Choice*, not even *Good*. Oh, no. *USDA Commercial*. A bitter pill to swallow.

The blonde barrier between me and Balzer has vanished. His steel-rimmed glasses, two rhomboid glitters, send a signal. His thin wet lips move, or writhe, really. He is speaking. I prepare to listen. What he says may be of some importance. Moistly, soundlessly, his lips continue to move. His pink brow ruffles under a sequence of querulous wrinkles. Then he begins to come through, as if he has stepped within range of a hidden microphone.

May he be of service to me? (That is his message, just that.)

I sincerely hope so, I reply, placing the shopping bag on the counter and suppressing a desire to laugh outright. But first I believe I should introduce myself.

This proposal causes him to clear his throat. His green eyes, swollen behind the off-center glasses, dart up, down, off to the left.

Noting but ignoring these signs of discomfiture, I recite with a muster of pride my name in full. His lips fall wide apart, an actual gape. Amid the liverish interior of his mouth a gold cusp gleams. It seems to me he moves back half a pace. I grin mischievously.

He finally speaks just above a whisper. He doesn't profess to be pleased to meet me. He says nothing like that. Instead he tries to appear to be confidential. He understands that I have been . . . he has been reliably informed that I have been . . . a customer recently told him that I was . . .

Away? I present him the elusive word.

Away, yes.

Not since yesterday, I retort. Certain unpleasant rumors kept filtering through the walls of my . . . uh . . . refuge until finally I felt compelled to take French leave. You appreciate my position, I continue.

Like a puppet, he nods a dozen times in wooden agreement.

In that case, sir, you may also appreciate that I dislike coming home to find meat of low quality on my table. Tainted, in fact.

Still nodding, he casts a fearful glance at the other customers and confides in a whisper that he will make everything good.

Indeed you will, I declare, pushing the shopping bag across the counter against his smocked belly. This article is a disgrace to the memory of Slattery. Look for yourself.

Continuing to nod like an automaton, he extracts the bulky package from the bag and starts to unwrap it with fumbling fingers. Sidelong glances are hitting us from all directions. I relish the butcher's well-deserved embarrassment.

At last the package is open. I blink in disbelief. There, in plain view, is a huge golden-yellow chrysanthemum. What happened to the meat, I wonder? Leaning forward to see better, I then realize it isn't a chrysanthemum after all. It's Bonnie.

Credence there may be in the belief that virtue and riches seldom settle on one man.

THE CALL from St. Stephen's Registry came at 7:10 on a Wednesday evening, exactly one week since I'd registered my availability for private duty and ten days after my arrival in San Francisco. The woman's solemn voice on the other end of the line alerted me to the fact that I was speaking to the owner-manager herself, a tall,

The Very Best People

gaunt, dreary woman with whom I'd talked briefly during my interview.

"You must realize, Miss Cowell," the woman was saying in a maddening, supercilious manner, "that although we have checked your qualifications rather briefly in a long-distance call to the hospital in Miami, your last place of employment, you are to some degree virtually unknown to us, and it is not our policy to send out a new registrant until *written* verification of her qualifications is in and on file."

I fumbled for a cigarette in my open purse on the table near the phone and, pushing back my irritation at the woman's arrogance, said in my professional nurse's voice, "I can assure you that my qualifications and training are exactly as stated on my registration form. However, if you have any doubts at all, I would prefer not to take whatever case you have in mind."

"I had not in any way intended to impugn your ability, Miss Cowell, or to suggest that St. Stephen's does not wish to use you. As it happens, *you* have been specifically asked for."

I flicked my lighter, then blew a wreath of blue smoke into the modern confines of my small studio apartment and said with polite surprise, "I can't imagine anyone specifically asking for me. As I mentioned, I'm new to the city—"

"Not for you *personally*, Miss Cowell." The woman's voice dripped with disapproval that I might even think such a thought. "You were requested because of your rather extensive background in geriatrics. You were supervising night nurse in the geriatric wing for six months, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's correct." I leaned my back against the wall and thought about all the elderly patients I'd seen in those six months, all of them waiting to die, some cheerfully, some unwillingly and others like patient, decaying vegetables waiting for the turn of the furrow. All in

all, geriatrics, the care and study of the diseases of the aged, is a depressing business. In Miami I had just sort of fallen into it, simply because no other nurse of supervisory capacity wanted to take it.

That was, to some degree, the story of my life as well as my career. I was always coming along with stoic fortitude doing the jobs that no one else wanted to do. Not that I was knocking my profession; I loved nursing, and in its turn nursing had been good to me, but it had taken its toll. I was thirty-seven years old, totally unattached except for a brief, bad marriage long in the past and, as my slippered feet reminded me, I was tired; not the kind of tired that a good night's rest or a two-week holiday can cure. I wanted to sit down for a long, long time, on the deck of a cruise ship or in the first-class section of a 747, and when I got up again I wanted to be far, far away, with the financial independence to remain there. Smothering a sigh, I turned my attention back to the self-important female from St. Stephen's.

"You must understand, Miss Cowell," she was being supercilious again, "that our registry deals *only* with doctors and professional medical people. Ordinary people cannot call here and demand this type of nurse or that, but because of Dr. Felton's eminence—he's very much sought after by all the best people . . ."

An expensive society doctor, I supplied in my mind, wrinkling my nose and blowing another wreath of smoke to show what I, as a nurse, thought of society doctors.

". . . and because of the prominence of the family he is attending, the Dunstads, I permitted Mr. Lucian Dunstad to make a personal choice from the nurses listed with the registry for someone to care for his elderly mother, Mrs. Abigail Dunstad. The choice was narrowed down to you, Miss Cowell."

She paused, as though I should genuflect or something. When I refrained from any vocal knee-bending she went on to give me a rundown on the exalted status of the Dunstads.

". . . a very fine old banking family, settled here before the turn of the century. Perhaps none of this is very meaningful to you as a stranger to the city, Miss Cowell, but I'm telling you only to illustrate the fact that St. Stephen's Registry deals with the very best people and therefore it's important—"

I let her ride her merry-go-round of words back to the subject at hand before I broke in crisply and said, "Fine. I believe I understand the importance of the Dunstad family and the tradition of the registry,

and also the fact that Mrs. Dunstad is quite elderly and in need of expert care. Since Mr. Dunstad has requested someone of my qualifications I will be glad to take the case. What is the address and when am I expected on duty?"

She gave me a Nob Hill address and told me I was expected immediately, then added by way of a short, incomplete explanation, "One of our nurses was on duty at the Dunstad home until an hour ago. It seems there was some sort of misunderstanding and she felt it impossible to remain on the case. She left rather . . . uh, abruptly. Dr. Fenton is there at present, waiting to brief you. He must leave shortly for another commitment, so please do try to get there as quickly as possible."

I agreed to be on my way immediately and hung up, then dialed for a taxi. I put the small weekend case, which I always keep packed and ready, by the door of my apartment, then went into the small dressingroom and changed into a crisp white uniform, stockings and shoes. I was standing in the lobby, navy cape over my shoulders, small white cap perched on my upswept blonde hair by the time the taxi arrived at 7:30.

Settling into the back of the cab and driving off into the gray mists of the fogbound city I began to feel the first tingle of excitement about the private duty ahead of me, aware as always of the unique sense of drama inherent in nursing. Perhaps that's what attracted me in the first place, drama (of the stage variety) being my first avocation in life, but not one at which I was fated to be a success, although I tried it.

"You new in the city, nurse?" The taxi driver stopped at a light and glanced over his shoulder with a friendly grin.

"Yes, I am."

"I thought so. It's the cape. You don't see many of them around here anymore. Most of the nurses just wear ordinary coats over their uniforms. No class. Can't tell 'em from waitresses these days."

I smiled, pleased that someone would appreciate as I did, this special overt and dramatic symbol of the nursing profession.

"Who's sick at the Dunstad place?" the driver asked.

He caught my startled glance and chuckled. "I got all them numbers up on that fancy hill memorized. Most of us cabbies do. You'll find out that San Francisco is just a big small town. If you want to know what's going on with the V.I.P.'s never mind the society columns, just ask a cabdriver. So who's under the weather?"

"I believe it's the elderly Mrs. Dunstad."

"That's the only Mrs. Dunstad there is—the very elderly, and *very* wealthy Mrs. Dunstad. The two boys ain't married, at least not at the present. One of them, Neville, marches to the altar periodically, but Mama always buys him back. That's the way it is with them rich kids, even *old* rich kids." The driver sighed philosophically. "Maybe you can get yourself a rich husband up there," he said. "That is, if you're not married already."

"I'm not married," I replied quietly to the question implied in his remark.

"Well, Neville should be likely pickings. Not bad-looking in a weak-chinned way. You wouldn't want Lucian, I don't think. He's too fat—and too old. Come to think of it, they're both a little old for you." The cabdriver glanced around, his dark eyes twinkling admiringly, and I felt a little less tired and a little less thirty-seven.

"Both of 'em in their late forties, I'd say. At least, Neville is. Lucian's probably in his fifties."

I was absorbing this bit of information when the cab came to a stop and then made a left turn into a private driveway of an estate, the grounds surrounded by a high wrought-iron fence. Ahead stood the ugly Tudor mansion, half obscured by drifting sheets of mist.

In front of the porticoed door the driver handed me my bag and a small white card. "This is the cab company's unlisted line," he said. "The next time you need a taxi call this number and ask for Jack Kaye. That's me. Or if you can't remember my name, ask for the short guy who smokes a pipe." He grinned and I looked across at him. He was just about my age and height. "I'm not married either," he added hopefully.

I smiled and thanked him, but my thoughts were already on the job ahead.

"It's about time you got here." The hatchet-faced, middle-aged woman in the dark uniform who opened the door took my bag unceremoniously and led the way up the handsome, circular stairway. "The doctor's impatient to git going."

It was, of course, quite useless to point out that I had arrived in less than forty-five minutes from the time I was called. Besides, it doesn't pay to get off to a bad start with servants in a house. They can make a nurse's existence miserable, with cold meals from the kitchen and surly unwillingness to sub in the sickroom for even a few minutes.

"I'm Mrs. London, the housekeeper," she offered dourly over her shoulder. "Thought I was going to have to sit with the old lady myself tonight. That would be all I'd need after a day like today!" She

didn't elaborate, but opening one of the doors in the upper hall she added, "This here's your room. Right next to the old lady's. It connects through the bathroom. You'll have to keep both doors open all the time, in case she calls. I'll go let the doctor know you're here. He's all dressed up, 'specting to go to the opera tonight. Having a regular cat-fit thinking he might have to miss some of the caterwaulin'." Mrs. London sniffed to show her opinion of opera and took her leave.

I had just slid off my cape and put it on the bed, glancing around with interest at the big bedroom with its heavy traditional furniture, when a brisk knock sounded at the door to the hall.

"Nurse Cowell from the registry, I believe?" He was tall, with the kind of aristocratic good looks that make for successful society doctors, his dark hair going iron-gray at the temples and his slim figure elegant in white tie and tails. All that saved him from being too overbearingly perfect was the glint of humor in his keen, hazel eyes. "I'm Dr. Fenton and I'm going to cut this short because I'm in one hell of a hurry. This is the opening night of the opera and I made a solemn promise to arrive early so that my wife can be photographed in her new gown."

He paused and smiled and I smiled back. He had a very likable human quality, and like all nurses going on special duty, I was relieved not to be greeted by a frozen stick of a doctor with enough instructions to make a centipede wish for another pair of legs.

"Are you an opera buff, Nurse Cowell?"

"Not if I can help it."

He laughed heartily at that. "Atta girl. Keep it to cool jazz in dark clubs and life will be a lot simpler. Okay, here's the patient's chart. As you can see, she is on seven different medications. Here's the time sheet, and the dietary restrictions on those. You can look it over later. I'll drop over tomorrow afternoon and you can ask any questions then. The big thing here is Mrs. Dunstad's age. She's eighty-six years old and a tribute to human willpower. She has enough things wrong with her, incident to advanced age, to fill a textbook on gerontology; heart, lungs, not good, creeping paralysis in her right side, an arthritic condition in her hands and arms, high blood pressure, the works. She's on the usual supportive drugs in each case, the doses relatively small in order that her system can tolerate the fairly wide range of medication. In case of an emergency, get her to the Oceanside Clinic as soon as possible. She'll need special apparatus. Okay, any

other questions on your mind?"

"What further medication is scheduled for tonight?"

"Nothing now until the morning, except for a multivitamin tablet at 8:30 and a *Lulprol* tablet at nine. *Lulprol* is a tranquilizer, but Mrs. Dunstad takes it as an aid to sleep. Make sure she never gets more than one of those. We don't want to send our little old lady on any wild drug trips now, do we?" Dr. Fenton flashed square white teeth in a brilliant smile.

"No, Doctor," I said and found myself smiling dreamily back at him like some dazzled student nurse.

"Good. Come along now and I'll introduce you to our patient."

"Doctor . . . " I hesitated, then plunged in. "Perhaps it isn't any of my business, but if Mrs. Dunstad should allude to it, what is the story on the nurse I'm replacing? The one who was on duty here until a couple of hours ago?"

Dr. Fenton paused and clasped his hands thoughtfully behind his elegant 'tails'. "That's a long story, or a short one, depending upon how you look at it. Frankly, I don't know why in the hell Neville chose this particular evening and this particular time to have one of his snits. Neville Dunstad is Mrs. Dunstad's younger son, by the way. It seems Nurse Meekon—an excellent nurse, too—who had been here three months, became quite a favorite of Mrs. Dunstad's. A couple of weeks ago Mrs. Dunstad was picking through her jewelry box, a favorite old-lady pastime. Anyway, she came across a small, old-fashioned amethyst brooch and gave it to Miss Meekon as a personal token of appreciation. I thought it an extremely nice gesture, and Miss Meekon was completely overcome. She pinned it on the collar of her uniform and has worn it every day since. As I say, this occurred two weeks ago and I'm quite sure Neville was aware of it, and why should it matter anyway? The piece wasn't worth that much. But tonight when Miss Meekon was eating her dinner in the kitchen, Neville came in for ice cubes or some damn thing, saw the pin and blew sky-high. Accused the poor girl of coercing it out of his mother, a sick, childish old lady who didn't know what she was doing . . . and on and on. It was a terrible scene, and an absolutely infantile and unnecessary one.

"Naturally, Miss Meekon retaliated in kind. I won't go into details, but suffice to say that she was packed and out of this house within fifteen minutes, with all hell breaking loose in her trail. Mrs. Dunstad was very angry and upset, and I was called because Lucian, the older son, thought his mother was going

to have a heart attack, or worse. I didn't think that was likely to happen. She's a strong old lady, at least when it comes to family scraps—I think she thrives on them, but I came anyway. More a question of my presence than my power, as I suppose you understand, Nurse."

I nodded and Dr. Fenton flashed me a conspiratory grin and led the way to Mrs. Dunstad's room.

"What made you come to San Francisco?" Mrs. Abigail Dunstad was following my movements about the room with dark, alert eyes that seemed startlingly youthful in the sunken ruins of her face, and behind those eyes, I supposed, burned the tenacious willpower that was keeping her crumbling old body alive.

"A need for a change," I told her truthfully. Old people, like children, don't like to be conned or talked down to.

"Well, this is some change, all right." She gave a laugh that was more of a cackle. "What do you think of this fog, eh? After all that sunshine in Miami. I was in Miami once." Her lively eyes took on a faraway gleam of satisfaction that told me she was enjoying an especially good memory. "Mr. Flagler had just run his railway to the Keys. I was only a slip of a girl then, and a very pretty girl, too. Would you guess that to look at me now?" She grinned at me archly in that grotesque manner that old women sometimes have of doing, the lamplight glinting obscenely on her perfect set of synthetic teeth.

"Yes, I would," I said quietly, ignoring the erosion of age and concentrating on the high patrician cheekbones and the long straight nose, which were the signs of once-great beauty.

"Thank you," she said, pleased. "I believe you. But I haven't been to Miami for years and years. I almost forgot that it was still there." She chuckled ruminatively deep in her old throat. "Except for Neville, of course. Neville's my younger son. A handsome devil . . . The girls are always after him. Neville goes to Miami, or somewhere near Miami. Polo, you know. He likes polo. Used to play, or does he still play? I forget now." She looked confused and I sighed. The conversation of old ladies can be very wearing.

"It's time for your pill now, Mrs. Dunstad."

"My sleeping pill? Oh dear, is it bedtime already? But then it has been a very long, very tiring day."

She was sitting propped up with several pillows behind her back and I helped her ease forward while I gave her one tablet and a small glass of water. Then I settled her for the night, clearing her night table, which looked like the counter

of a pharmaceutical house, pushing all the bottles well back against the wall except for one, an aspirin bottle heavily wrapped in adhesive tape. She was allowed two aspirin during the night for arthritic pain and the bottle was wrapped so that she could identify it in the dark. It gave her a feeling of independence, Dr. Fenton had explained, if she could help herself. It also allowed her nurse to sleep undisturbed, something that was very much appreciated by me and I'm sure by my predecessors, as well. Elderly patients can have enough real emergencies at night without awakening a nurse for two aspirin tablets.

"Oh, but you mustn't leave me, Nurse," Mrs. Dunstad protested in her high old voice as I moved about the room snapping off lights. "I want you to sit here and talk to me until I fall asleep. Nurse Meekon used to do that. Sometimes she sang to me—"

She was interrupted by a perfunctory knock at the door, followed by the entrance of a short, thickset, middle-aged man with dark, penetrating eyes set deeply in his huge head, eyes that warned he was not a man to be provoked or taken lightly.

"Good evening, Nurse. I'm Lucian Dunstad. I stopped in to say good night to my mother. It's her bedtime, I believe." He looked at his watch with grave deliberateness as though to indicate that I had better not be derelict in my duty.

"Yes," I said, "Mrs. Dunstad just had her pill."

"Hmmph. Well, Mother, you've calmed down, I see. Good. Get a good night's sleep and don't think about that silly business with Neville and Nurse Meekon anymore."

"Neville's a bad boy," she said, her voice wavery and weak as she began to relax under the first thrust of the tranquilizer. "I should have spanked him more as a boy."

"Well, you didn't, Mother, so now you have to live with the consequences. Get some rest."

Lucian Dunstad patted the thin old arm but his expression remained remote and aloof.

"What's this about *spanking* me?" Neville Dunstad's entrance to the room was jaunty. He was tall and slender, with a thin face that would have passed for handsome in his younger days. Now, it was merely slackly good-looking with an air of spoiled self-indulgence about the narrow lips. Still, it was apparent that he had a certain spurious charm.

His mother reacted to his presence like a bear to a honeypot. "Oh, Neville," she somehow managed to gush cheerily, her voice strengthening and her dark eyes

taking on an almost girlish glint of coyness, "you've been eavesdropping. But it's true, you were a bad boy to hurt Miss Meekon's feelings and send her away like that."

"Nonsense. She sent herself away. I thought I apologized quite decently."

"But too late," Mrs. Dunstad insisted, then added playfully, "I should cut your allowance for such naughtiness."

"Oh, come now," Neville replied, less jaunty but still endeavoring to maintain a pretense of lightness. "I'm a grown man and you can't cut a grown man's allowance."

"Oh, yes, I can," she replied and a certain threat seemed to sound under her playfulness. "I'm still in control and I can do anything. Can't I, Lucian?"

"Yes, Mother," Lucian replied, his face so withdrawn and impassive that I had almost forgotten his presence. "You're still in control and you can do anything—within reason, that is."

A certain veiled counterthreat hung in Lucian's words and Mrs. Dunstad's expression began to harden in anger as she assimilated it. It was Neville who defused the tense situation by stepping quickly forward and kissing his mother on the forehead.

"But you wouldn't, old dear, would you? We're just a couple of rowdy boys, but you love us, right?"

"Yes," she said slowly, "I suppose I do. You were both cute children. Especially Neville. I remember the time I bought him the blue velvet rompers . . ."

The Dunstad brothers quietly left the room as the old lady's words drifted off and her eyes began to close in sleep.

I had turned off the rest of the lights and was reaching for the one on the night table when her voice stopped me.

"You haven't talked to me, Nurse. I like to talk before I go to sleep."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Dunstad. I thought you were asleep."

"No, just dozing . . . remembering things. I can't seem to settle down tonight. I think I need another sleeping pill."

Since Mrs. Dunstad kept referring to her tranquilizer as a 'sleeping pill' I realized she didn't know the difference. Not that it mattered. Dr. Fenton had obviously jollied her along, not letting her know that she was too frail to be given anything as strong as an old-fashioned 'sleeping pill'.

"You've already had one pill," I admonished. "Dr. Fenton wants you to get to sleep on that."

"Well, I can't," she said peevishly. "I need another pill or I'm not going to get any rest at all."

Without further ado I gave her another pill. Psychology being a major part of the care of the elderly, give them what they think they need and keep them happy. The results are just about the same anyway.

"Now you rest quietly," I told her, "and I'll get my knitting and sit by you until you fall asleep."

"Knitting!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know southern girls knew how to knit. I thought all they did was cavort in the sand and have babies."

Getting my knitting out of my bag, I couldn't resist smiling. This old lady had wit and style, even if she had lingered too long beyond her time, fighting the grave and holding on too tightly to her money and her 'boys'.

"I've lived in Miami for several years," I said, drawing up a chair, "but I wasn't born there. I'm originally from the Midwest."

"The Midwest . . . I was there as a girl. Chicago. I remember rowing on the lake, a very handsome young swain paying court, too. But I never liked it. The weather is miserable and very bad for the complexion. Did you know that, Nurse?"

I confessed that I hadn't been aware of it.

"That's what I told Neville. 'Any girl from the Midwest must have a terrible complexion'—but he married her anyway. I wouldn't have minded so much about her complexion, but she was a show girl! My son marrying a show girl! Lolly Larue. Isn't that a terrible name? Imagine calling anyone *Lolly*! Oh, my! But Neville thought it was charming—'Lolly Larue' up in lights outside of some burlesque theatre in Detroit. I wrote him begging him not to marry her, but he wasn't quite himself, poor boy. Battle fatigue, you know. He was just back from Korea. He had a commission in the reserves and they *made* him go. It was awful. As I explained to our Congressman, Sam Wilson, Neville just doesn't have the *temperament* for war . . ."

She rambled on, flitting from one vague piece of remembrance to another until suddenly she dropped off to sleep, her mouth open to form one last unspoken word.

I slept better than I had expected, awaking the first time to hear furtive fumbling noises in Mrs. Dunstad's room, like rats gnawing at stolen foodstuffs. I realized it was Mrs. Dunstad laboriously uncorking her aspirin bottle and after a few minutes of listening to her noisily assisting herself, I forced myself back to sleep. The second time, the sounds were gasping, sniffling, choking noises that never quite made it into a scream, but the fear and horror they contained was very

real indeed. I was at her bedside in seconds, going through the quick, well-rehearsed routine. An hour and a half later I arrived with her in an ambulance at the Oceanside Clinic. Some forty minutes later she was dead. She had lapsed into a coma from which she never emerged.

The dim light of a pearl-gray dawn was just breaking through when Dr. Fenton, looking sleepless and haggard, stared across at me and shook his head ruefully. "I never expected this," he said slowly. "Never. Her heart was bad, but she was a tough old girl. I knew it was coming, but not now. Not this soon. Well, it won't be the first time I've been fooled." He rubbed a weary hand across his gray face traced with the first stubble of a beard. "Acute coronary thrombosis. Wonder what brought it on?" He shook his head again. "We'll never know, I suppose, unless it was that silly business with Neville . . . Well, never mind. Let's go down to the office and get this business over."

He led the way with a weary step and I could see that the pants he was wearing with his white hospital coat were the ones with the black silk trim that he'd worn to the opera. He could not have gotten more than one or two hours' sleep, if he'd been to bed at all. As Neville had predicted, the man was 'beat'.

"It was all a matter of timing," Neville enthused later that day in the Dunstad study, "getting rid of Nurse Meekon and causing a general uproar on the opening night of the opera. Maynard Fenton wouldn't make a house call for God himself on opening night, but then mother, being a Dunstad, was something else again. It threw the good Dr. Fenton off balance from the start and kept him there. Then, of course, the rest was up to you, Lolly. The drug overdose that brought on Mother's fatal heart attack, followed by the right emergency care and the arrival at the hospital . . . all just a *little too late*! Timing. All of it timing! But then your timing always was pretty good, Lolly, as I remember."

He stared pointedly at the crisp bodice of my uniform and grinned slyly.

"I no longer twirl windmills, if that's what you're implying," I said coldly. "All that ended long, long ago."

"I know that, Lolly. But who could imagine *you* entering nurses' training and putting yourself through on the settlement money mother sent you for divorcing me? I tell you, when I ran into you last spring in Miami and found you'd become a nurse—"

"Stranger things have happened," I said acridly. "Besides, you seem to forget that while I was stripping and twirling at the Old Gaiety—and it was honest labor, more than you've ever done—I was also studying very seriously with an excellent actors' workshop. The breaks, the *real* breaks in the theatre just didn't come my way, that's all."

"If you please," Lucian Dunstad broke in coldly, looking at his watch, "I find this rehash of a sordid past both distasteful and irrelevant. Let's get on to the business at hand. You, Miss Larue, have kept to your bargain admirably."

"My name is Cowell," I said quietly, trying hard to contain my annoyance at his attitude. "Larue was a stage name."

"Yes, well . . . whatever. I don't think it matters in the least what you call yourself. Here, anyway, is your money." He handed me an envelope. "There's ten thousand cash in there, as you specified."

"And here," said Neville scooping another envelope off the desk, "is the rest. Two checks for twenty-five thousand apiece, made out to Mrs. Lolly Dunstad. One certified now, the other postdated six months, when the estate will have been settled. Should any question arise at all, it would only seem that I am very, very generous toward my ex-wives. Especially one with a good build who can twirl windmills."

"Shut up, Neville," I said coldly, but without rancor. I had almost forgotten how childish and naive he was about matters pertaining to women and to sex, and the years hadn't changed him. But he was more pathetic than anything else.

"My sentiments exactly," said Lucian sternly. "Shut up, Neville. Now you're sure, Nurse . . . uh, Cowell, that everything is in order? Dr. Fenton signed the death certificate, so therefore no autopsy is required and no questions will be asked?"

"That's right. Your mother died in a hospital under her own physician's care. An autopsy could have been called for had she died at home. Then again, maybe not, since she had been under Dr. Fenton's continual care. But it was best not to take the chance."

"Risky," Lucian said, blowing out his breath through fat, heavy jowls. "Very risky. I told Neville that when he came home from Miami spouting off about having met you, and how, with your help we could . . . uh, assist Mother to her eternal reward. Very risky."

"But it worked," Neville all but crowed. "It worked."

"In the event an autopsy had been called for, wouldn't suspicion

have fallen on us?" Lucian still seemed anxious, although this occurrence was no longer a likelihood.

"No. I put the aspirin back into her wrapped aspirin bottle as soon as I found her in the workings of a seizure, and I returned the rest of the *Lulprols* to their correct container. In an official count, two *Lulprols* would be missing, along with the extra one she had insisted on taking herself. They would turn up in the stomach analysis, but no trace of aspirin, keeping it within the realm of possibility that she had somehow gotten hold of the wrong bottle. Anyway, under ordinary circumstances *Lulprol* is not that dangerous, but used in combination with other drugs, in overdose quantities and for a sick, elderly person, three or four constitutes an overdose, and can be fatal. They're downers. They bring bad dreams."

"Poor Mother," Neville sighed, "dying of bad dreams."

"She died of a heart attack brought on by fright culminating in an epileptic-type seizure," I said, putting the envelopes into my purse and getting to my feet. "She had a very, very bad trip."

"You're leaving now?" Lucian asked with an undisguised note of relief in his voice.

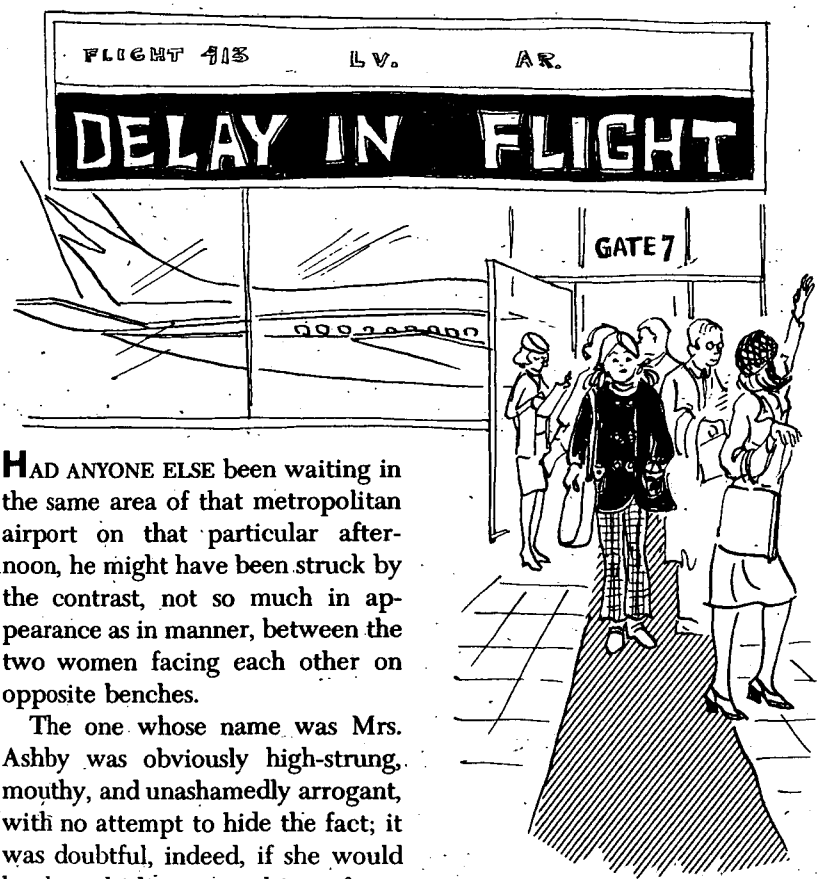
"Yes."

"Well, thank you for your . . . uh, efficiency. You can call a taxi in the hall."

At the hall telephone I pulled out the little white card given me by the personable cabdriver and began to dial his number. Midway through I stopped, and wadded the card and threw it away.

Why form an attachment, I reasoned, with someone as transient as a taxi driver in a city I was about to leave? As my mother-in-law, the late Mrs. Abigail Dunstad would have said—and certainly would have most heartily endorsed—I was above all that now. The Dunstads, or at least the Dunstad money, was meant for better things. Humming a little tune, I dialed the operator and asked for the number of that other cab company, thinking all the while of tropical isles and hidden coral reefs, and rich bachelors lying on the beach.

Rarely, indeed, does one find a person whom love so forcibly draws or holds so fast.



HAD ANYONE ELSE been waiting in the same area of that metropolitan airport on that particular afternoon, he might have been struck by the contrast, not so much in appearance as in manner, between the two women facing each other on opposite benches.

The one whose name was Mrs. Ashby was obviously high-strung, mouthy, and unashamedly arrogant, with no attempt to hide the fact; it was doubtful, indeed, if she would bother hiding anything from

anybody, except possibly the true color of her blonde hair. She smoked continually, rattled a dozen bracelets, toyed with rings and ear pendants, and finally, unable to keep it to herself any longer, proceeded to ventilate her impatience on the other woman, a cool, self-absorbed type who might have faced Mrs. Ashby all night without being moved to utter a single word. Though not so stylishly dressed as Mrs. Ashby, there was a look of modest refinement about her as she sat there with hands calmly folded in her lap, neither smoking nor fidgeting nor taking compulsive glances at her watch. Only once in the hour she'd sat there had she inquired at the desk if Flight 413 was on time.

More impulsive than analytical, Mrs. Ashby would not have cared if it was Mrs. Fox's animal serenity or her air of being a potentially sympathetic listener that encouraged her to speak to the woman; it was simply her nature to speak to people, just as it was not Mrs. Fox's.

"You always know when they're lying." She said this with an air of having been subjected to this torture many times before.

Mrs. Fox looked up. "I beg your pardon?"

"Saying it's on time." Mrs. Ashby tapped a scarlet nail against her wristwatch. "They always switch on that Betty Crocker smile—all the ingredients pre-mixed and laboratory tested. They don't fool me. Any other time it might come in early, but not today. Today it won't even be on time, you just see. I've got to be back downtown at a meet-

ing at six o'clock sharp, which is going to be cutting it nastily close to the bone as it is. I *know* it's going to be late. I can *sense* it. Cigarette?"

The other woman declined with a quiet, sympathetic smile. "You mustn't fret, you know. It'll get here."

Despite the faintly admonishing tone, Mrs. Ashby was sufficiently encouraged to get up and sit down beside Mrs. Fox.

"I know; but when? I'm Peg Ashby."

"How do you do. I'm Mrs. Fox."

"But isn't it maddening, my dear? If they'd only tell you, without all that pussyfooting politeness that's really double-talk." Another peek at her watch. "There, it's four-thirty. I was right. I knew it would be late."

"Don't you worry," purred Mrs. Fox. "It'll soon be here."

Mrs. Ashby now spoke with an unaccustomed note of apprehension, as if forced to give voice to something she would have preferred to leave unsaid. "That's probably what people kept saying two months ago before they heard about the crash." Then, with conscious dramatic effect: "I'm waiting for Flight 413. My daughter's on it."

"So is mine," said Mrs. Fox.

Mrs. Ashby looked somewhat deflated. "Is she really? Well . . ." And then more briskly, "There are going to be twenty-five people pouring into that conference room in—" another glance at her watch, "precisely fifty minutes, and if yours truly isn't there to chair the damned meeting they might as well assemble in the Tower of Babel. Oh, drat that child!" A superstitious dread quickly followed this outburst. "I take that back. It's not Lu Ann's fault. But, really, any other kid would just as soon take the limo. She's thirteen. It's time she acquired a little spunk, wouldn't you say?"

Mrs. Fox's expression became less remote at this point, as if she were listening for the first time to what the other woman was saying. "Oh, I don't know. Thirteen's not so very old."

"Not when *we* were thirteen, no. We were babies. Nowadays, good heavens, talk about your worldly creatures. I could tell you things about thirteen-year-old girls you positively wouldn't believe!"

"I think I would. Geraldine's thirteen."

Mrs. Ashby lit another cigarette and looked longingly toward the coffee machine. "Geraldine?"

"My thirteen-year-old."

"Well now, isn't that a coincidence?"

Mrs. Fox was opening her purse. "I've got bundles of pictures. Here.

She sent me this one from her grandmother's. That's where she's been. On a visit."

"Oh, how sweet. What adorable curls."

Mrs. Fox dragged out several more snapshots until Mrs. Ashby grew restive, her comments vague, and she finally in sheer defense reached for her own purse, which, unlike Mrs. Fox's, was not a family shrine. All she could offer was one blurred snapshot. "Lu Ann's at Briarwood School."

Despite its poor quality, Mrs. Fox did more than justice to it, studying the almost indiscernible likeness until Mrs. Ashby snatched it away and thrust it back into her purse. "It's a rotten snap. Phil took it when he was smashed. I'm surprised it came out at all. Wait till I get my hands on him, the big louse. No reason on earth he couldn't have taken time to come out here himself. He knew what a tight schedule I was running today. Oh, where *is* that wretched airplane?"

Her agitation seemed to amuse Mrs. Fox. "It'll *be* here. They always announce any extended delay."

"I'm not so sure about that. Excuse me a sec. I'm going to check once more."

From the look on her face when she returned, the encounter hadn't been wholly unsatisfying. "You should have been there," she crowed. "I blistered their lily-white ears for them, let me tell you. And it *is* late. Officially. An ATC delay. Some nonsense about Binghamton. Since when did this flight even go *near* Binghamton? Golly, now I'm really on the rack. No two ways about it, I've *got* to be at that meeting. I mean, I called the damned conclave and it's a critical strategy meeting. I can't sit here twiddling my thumbs while twenty-five bright-eyed administrative flunkies are cooling their heels downtown. If there were the slightest chance I could get through to Phil I'd call him and insist he haul his carcass out here and get me off the hook."

"Now, now," murmured the totally unflappable Mrs. Fox, "do calm down. I'm sure we haven't much longer to wait."

Mrs. Ashby eyed her with quite as much resentment as envy. "How do you do it, honey? Self-hypnosis?"

"Faith."

Mrs. Ashby found this word uncomfortable. "I'm going to get us some coffee. I'll go out of my wig if I don't have *some*thing."

She was a long time getting back, and when she did the coffee was almost cold. "Sorry, dear. As long as I was over that way I thought I'd bug them again. Now they say it'll be another ten minutes. As it is, I'm

going to have to drop Lu Ann off downtown at my sister's, whether she likes it or not."

Mrs. Fox's face softened. "I suppose Geraldine will be starved, as usual. We'll have to stop at some nice place for a bite. She'll have so much to tell me I won't be able to shut her up for days. I know she can't wait to get home. She adores the country."

"Oh? I wouldn't have taken you for a farmer's wife. No offense or anything. I worship the great outdoors myself. But you look so chic in that little suit . . ."

"Oh, Clayt wasn't ever a farmer. He was an illustrator and naturalist. He wanted to live in the wilderness and that's just what it is. No one would ever find it without a map, not in a million years. Geraldine's crazy about it. Like her daddy in so many ways. How she does miss him now that . . ."

"I'm sorry. He's—"

"He died three years ago. We've been alone ever since. No relatives, no friends, no neighbors. Just the two of us. I didn't want her to go away, even for two weeks. But her grandmother was dying and she wanted to see Geraldine once more. I couldn't very well refuse. Oh, but it'll be heaven to have her back again."

"I envy you," said Mrs. Ashby, not altogether honestly, "It sounds like a very peaceful sort of life."

Mrs. Fox smiled. "Dull, you mean."

"Living perpetually on the brink of crisis, believe me, honey, I could do with a stretch of dullness. A cabin in the wilderness sounds like paradise."

"That's about what we have. No electricity. A pump for water. If we died out there nobody would know it for months, maybe never."

Dismayed by the prospect of such an existence and wondering how this poor woman kept herself looking so well, Mrs. Ashby said nothing.

"It's more than rustic, you know," added Mrs. Fox, dreamily. "It's elemental. That's what Clayt called it."

Suppressing a shudder, Mrs. Ashby launched another offensive of invective against the airline and all its employes, squeezing the empty coffee cup in her hand as she talked until, abruptly becoming aware of what she was doing, she looked at the crumpled container with a kind of horror, dropping it to the floor and nudging it out of sight with her heel.

"You don't suppose . . ." she didn't finish the thought, looking instead at Mrs. Fox as if expecting her to read her mind and offer reassurance; however, all Mrs. Fox did was smile inquiringly.

"I mean, there's not much chance the same flight would . . ." Still Mrs. Fox made no response, merely smiled her bland, imperturbable smile, and Mrs. Ashby felt rather like a heartless ghoul for even mentioning the recent crash. It was almost as if she resented the other woman's serenity so much she felt impelled to destroy it. "I mean, they still come in over those same wicked mountains. Wasn't it ghastly? Not even being able to identify the bodies."

Mrs. Fox looked as if she hadn't really heard this remark, saying absently, "Worst thing of all would be knowing they were still out there, unburied. If they could only be decently buried . . . brought back and buried . . ."

This was an even more ghoulish reflection; Mrs. Ashby quickly changed the subject. "Talk to me about something else, honey. Tell me about Geraldine."

Thereupon, without really listening to it, Mrs. Ashby heard the story of Geraldine Fox's life from the age of zero, the whole bit, when she started to walk and talk, what she said, what she liked, what she disliked, what diseases she'd had, what dental calamities. In the end, Mrs. Ashby was sorry she'd asked and was almost glad when her cigarette burnt her finger slightly and gave her a chance to terminate the tiresome monologue. "Listen, I've had it. I'm going over there and rattle their cages again."

"Oh, but it will be here any *minute* now."

"We'll see," retorted Mrs. Ashby, nursing her burnt finger as she charged off toward the counter. When she came back this time she was so overwrought there were beads of perspiration on her flushed face. Her tone, however, was deadly calm.

"The dunces have admitted it won't be in for another half hour. Well, that does it. I've got just time to make it downtown. I'll have to make arrangements for Lu Ann to get home in the limo. She'll be sore as hell but there's nothing I can do about it. Well, ta ta, dear. Thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder like a . . ."

Suddenly Mrs. Fox was struck by an idea. "Listen, is there any reason why I can't meet your Lu Ann? For all we know, she and Geraldine may be bosom pals by now. Just tell me where you live and I can drop her off."

There followed a certain amount of protesting, urging, and counter-protesting, but Mrs. Ashby was finally assured it would not be out of Mrs. Fox's way as she had to go through the city anyway.

"You're a godsend!" cried Mrs. Ashby. "I'm going to pay you—"

"Oh, no, you're not. Just tell me what Lu Ann looks like. The snapshot *was* a trifle fuzzy."

"You can't miss her. Just look for a weedy redhead who looks scared to death. And she'll be wearing an awful leather coat and probably those hideous white boots. Oh, now let's see. I'd better write her a note you can give her. She'll be really frosted when I'm not here. Tell her to blame the stupid airline, not me."

She whipped out a tiny gold pen and scribbled a note to the effect that Mommy's friend, Mrs. Fox, had kindly offered to pick her up because Mommy simply *had* to get downtown to a very important meeting.

Mrs. Ashby, having divested herself of this tiresome chore, was soon a different woman. After a swift repair job on her face and a quick trip to the ladies' room, she was the picture of a highly competent businesswoman as she gave Mrs. Fox a hasty kiss on the cheek and rushed off to settle the world's complicated affairs.

Mrs. Fox, finding the ensuing peace very agreeable indeed, smiled as she sat down and refolded her hands in her lap, an aura of even deeper contentment about her as she resumed her vigil, as if she'd been given secret information that the flight was even now circling the field. She pictured Geraldine's face pressed eagerly against the window, trying impossibly from way up there to spot her mother on the observation deck.

It was to that vantage point Mrs. Fox made her way when the loudspeaker finally announced the arrival of Flight 413. Up there, she watched the big jet's incredibly graceful descent, and the moment it stopped she put her fingers to her lips and said aloud: "Geraldine, Geraldine!"

She hurried downstairs and half ran along the endless corridor to Gate Seven where she rudely elbowed her way through the crowd of assembled welcomers, and when the passengers, wearing identical expressions of vague disorientation, began trickling in she bit down hard on her lip for fear of making some jubilant outburst.

When she spotted the girl at the door she did, in fact, cry out Geraldine's name, and she knew with fierce determination that she wouldn't ever let her go away again. If Geraldine ever teased to go away again she would do anything—kill her, kill them both, do anything—rather than let her go. From now on they would be together forever. Hardly aware of clutching Mrs. Ashby's note in her hand, she did her best to hide her excitement as she hurried to greet

the waiting child in the doorway.

Hours later, it was Mrs. Ashby's husband who was now imploring her to relax, with even less success than Mrs. Fox had had earlier.

"For Pete's sake, hon, we'd have been notified if anything like that had happened."

"How do you know? Sometimes they wait for hours. If the plane crashed and they had to identify—"

"Now cut that out! We'd have heard if the plane crashed. Can't you get that through your head? We'd have— Now what is it?"

She was holding back. "Honey, I don't want to go in there. You go. I'll wait here for you."

He gave her arm a jerk, propelling her through the open doors and then half-dragging her across the concourse to the airline's desk, where they soon ascertained that Flight 413 had landed hours ago, with all passengers accounted for.

"But that's impossible!" she shrieked. "*She's* not accounted for!"

The counter was manned by a different pair of attendants now, which only made it more hopelessly exasperating.

Phil Ashby was doing his utmost to keep from looking alarmed. "It still beats me, Peg, why you didn't get this dame's address."

"Sweetie, I'm surprised I even remember her name. I was ready to climb the walls. If you'd had the human decency—"

"Now don't go trying to lay this mess at my doorstep. You hand your daughter over to some perfect stranger you'd never set eyes on before—"

"She was a *lady*. And I'm a pretty good judge of character or I wouldn't be where I am today. She was very refined. You talk as if she were some sort of crackpot. Her name was Fox—"

"Oh, that's great. That's perfect."

"It was. She showed me pictures. Oodles of pictures of her little girl, Geraldine. I saw her name on some of them. She was here to meet her, to pick her up. She was coming in on Flight 413, just like Lu Ann."

"Pardon me," put in the young man behind the counter. He and the young woman beside him had been listening to all this with professional patience. The Ashbys stared at him. He and the young woman exchanged doubtful glances.

"Well?" said Mr. Ashby.

"I think I know the woman you mean."

Mrs. Ashby gave a little snort of triumph. "Now we're getting somewhere."

Mr. Ashby looked as if he'd like to shake the young man. "Well, who the hell is she?"

"She is Mrs. Fox, as far as I

know. That's what she gave us."

"We already *know* that," snapped Mrs. Ashby.

"She was here this afternoon. I didn't see her, but Kelly did."

"Who the hell is Kelly?" Mr. Ashby demanded.

"The fellow here in the afternoon. When I came on, he mentioned she'd been here again."

Mrs. Ashby started to light a cigarette, then dropped the match as if there were something highly explosive nearby.

"I don't get it. What are you trying to say?"

"Well, we all joke about it." He suddenly blushed, as if realizing he'd said something offensive. "I don't mean that exactly. It's not funny, actually. Don't get the wrong idea. It's just—odd, you know. When I came on duty Kelly said she'd been here again, very calm and cool, as usual. Came over and asked if Flight 413 was on time."

Mrs. Ashby spoke with an immense effort at self-control. "What is it you're trying to tell us? I've had all the double-talk I can take for one day. I *know* she was here. She was waiting for her daughter. She was coming in on the same flight."

The young man shook his head. "She never got here."

Mrs. Ashby's hand flew to her throat. "But you said—you mean the plane—"

"No, no. I mean Geraldine Fox was on Flight 413 two months ago. The one that crashed."

The Ashbys stared at him.

"Mrs. Fox has come in every day since it happened. She asks if Flight 413 is on time and then she just sits and waits till it comes in. Then she leaves. Just like that."

Mrs. Ashby's face was beginning to sag even before the young man stopped speaking.

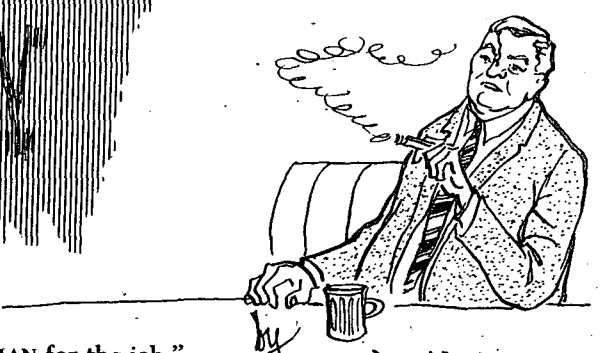
"You mean—she knows her daughter's dead—and yet she—"

"Her mind just can't accept it, I guess. She still expects her to arrive on Flight 413."

Trained for crises, the young woman behind the counter had already started for the water fountain, knowing even before it happened that Mrs. Ashby was about to faint.

Few, indeed, are those who would dispute Aristotle that, "Man is by nature a political animal."

Home-Town Boy



by Jack Ritchie

"YOU'RE JUST THE MAN for the job," Carson said.

Slater eyed him cautiously. "That right?"

"The whole thing is a setup. Nothing to it."

"If you're so positive about that, why don't you do it yourself?"

Carson showed crooked teeth. "It's my home town. Just look at me. Do you think a mask could hide me from the people who've known me all my life?"

Carson was a heavy-paunched man, nearly six-feet-five-inches tall. A snake-like scar ran from his right temple to the bridge of his nose.

Slater tasted his beer. "How did you happen to come to me?"

"I bought people drinks. I listened to what they had to say, and eventually one of them spoke about you."

"I'm clean," Slater said. "And going straight."

Carson smiled. "Then why are you sitting here in a bar, drinking beer and whiskey? That violates your parole, doesn't it?"

Slater, a small, intense man, finished the rest of his beer and wiped

his lips. "All right. I'll listen. But I promise nothing."

"It's just a small branch bank," Carson said. "A one-story building, and there are only two rooms: the big main room and the manager's office in the back."

"How much money?"

"There's always about twenty thousand in cash."

"How do you know?"

"Once I asked." Carson puffed his cigar. "One-thirty in the afternoon would be just about the best time to hit. The sheriff will be taking his nap then. He's got a cot in the back room of his office."

Slater grinned. "Everybody in town knows that he takes a nap?"

Carson nodded. "The bank is on Main Street. Everything's on Main Street. It's on the right-hand side as you come into town from the west. You can't miss it. It's the only bank in town and Main Street is only four blocks long."

"Who'll I find inside the bank?"

"Just the branch manager—his name's Prescott—and Alice Warner. She's the cashier."

"What about customers?"

"There could be some, but I doubt it. Things are pretty dead in town the early part of the afternoon. You can take Prescott and Alice into the manager's office and tie and gag them. That ought to give you plenty of time to get out of town. It could be a while before anybody finds them."

"You really got this event cased?"

"Right down to the last button," Carson said. "I've been thinking about it for some time."

Slater rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "The job's too much for one man to handle. I'll need somebody with me."

Carson agreed. "Can you get anybody?"

"Sure. But that means we split three ways. All even." Slater drummed his fingers on the booth table. "There's just this sleepy sheriff to worry about?"

"Just him, and he'll be taking his nap."

"An old, old man?"

"He's not so old," Carson said, "and it's better not to sell him short. Eleven years ago he killed two convicts who escaped from the state prison. He stopped them at a roadblock just outside of town, and when the shooting was over, both of them were dead."

"I'll bet that made him the hero of the county."

Carson nodded. "But you got nothing to worry about. He's been taking a nap at that same time for years and never missed a day."

"Where do we split the money?"

"I'll meet you right back here on Sunday. About two o'clock." Car-

son put the cigar butt into the ash tray. "Nothing can go wrong. Nothing at all."

"This is the quietest town east or west of the Rockies," Prescott said.

Miss Warner leafed through canceled checks. "I like it that way."

Prescott stood near the plate-glass windows. "There's the sheriff."

"What's he doing?"

"The usual. Watching the cars pass. There ought to be one along any minute now."

Miss Warner glanced up at the wall clock. "Isn't it his nap time? He's half an hour late."

"I'll bet his watch stopped. He's yawning though." Prescott laughed.

Miss Warner frowned slightly. "Everybody likes him. He's a nice, good man."

"I guess you can say at least that for him." Prescott watched the sheriff cross the street. "He's coming over here now. He's going to come in and say, 'Hot day.' And before he leaves, he's going to ask if he can have a drink from my water cooler. It's part of the routine."

The sheriff pushed his way past the glass door. "Afternoon, Alice. Jim." He took off his broad-brimmed hat and mopped his brow. "Hot day."

Prescott smiled. "That's right, Sheriff."

The sheriff watched a truck rumble by and suppressed another yawn.

"A little late today, Sheriff?" Prescott asked. "Thought you might be getting in your nap about now."

The sheriff glanced at the wall clock and then at his watch. "Doggone. She stopped," he said, winding the stem of the watch and setting the hands ahead. He moved toward the door, but then seemed to remember something. "I'm a little thirsty. Do you suppose I could . . . ?"

Prescott grinned. "Sure. Help yourself."

The sheriff ambled to the water cooler in Prescott's office.

Outside, a light-blue sedan pulled up to the curb. Slater and a red-haired man got out. They came through the door with their guns drawn.

In Prescott's office, the sheriff eased the service revolver from its holster and released the safety.

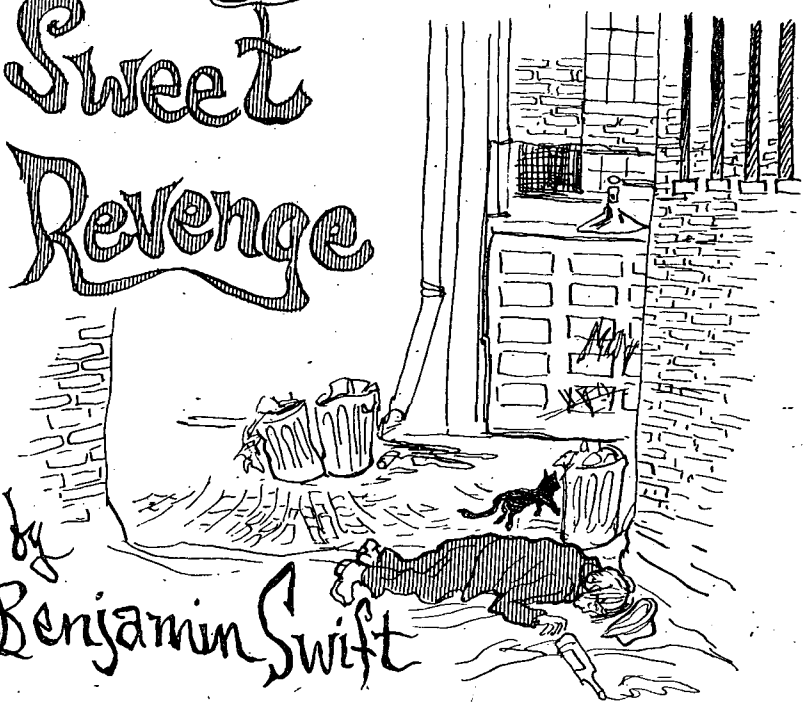
The sheriff was a heavy-paunched man, nearly six-feet-five-inches tall. A snake-like scar ran from his right temple to the bridge of his nose.

Now they'll all have respect for me again. He began firing.

For whatever intent or purpose, apparently the fine art of duplicity is not confined to singular usage.

Sweet, Sweet Revenge

by Benjamin Swift



WE WERE GATHERED around the massive oak dining table of my Russian Hill apartment—Cissy Regent, Andy Kinder and I, David Bart. The business, of course, was to be Hood Society business, but we were still relaxing over marinated cracked crab, a fine green salad,

fresh San Francisco French bread and an exceptional dry white, all selected and prepared by Freddie, who runs my bachelor household.

He came in midway, dressed in his usual mod clothing, his exuberant smile lighting his dark Filipino face. "How's she go, hey?"

"Damned well, Freddie," Andy said in his bass voice. "You constantly exceed your own supposed limits of achievement."

"Okay, right?"

"Absolutely," Cissy agreed, nodding her beautiful golden-haired head.

Freddie scuttled back to the kitchen with such eagerness that I knew positively that he had his current wench back there. Knowing he was so engaged, I poured the after-dinner brandy, then said, "All right, Cissy?"

She placed a cigarette in the delicate holder she uses. Andy—tall, rangy, with an untamed thatch of gray-brown hair topping his wide, rugged-looking face—lit it for her with a heavy silver lighter. Then, beginning to demonstrate her uncanny memory for the details given to her by our investigative branch of the Society, she said, "Skid-row con. Involving life insurance. And drunks."

Andy shook his large head, making apparent his usual pain when confronted with someone's lack of morality. "Surely not the old beneficiary thing?"

"Afraid so," Cissy said. She is as successful a fashion designer and artist as Andy is a corporate lawyer, and I an investment-firm head, but when she is on a Hood Society assignment she demonstrates the cold hate of a fer-de-lance going after the intended victim . . . despite her lovely smile.

"For a few bottles of booze," I offered, "the drunk makes the supplier the new beneficiary of his insurance. The supplier then picks up the payments to make sure the insurance is effective when the sucker dies."

"Precisely," Cissy said. "Only in this case it was even more cold-blooded. Each one of the victims managed secretly to get his policy from where it was kept at home, even though each one had deserted his family here in the city for the bottle and skid row. In all cases the wives had kept up the payments. But how often do people get out a life-insurance policy to examine it? And so each man died before the next payment was due. Not one of the wives knew the policies were gone and into someone else's hands until it was too late."

Andy was shaking his head in disgust. "How many?"

"Five," she said calmly. "Mugged to death while drunk on the row."

Andy banged a fist on the heavy table, incredulous as always over man's inhumanity to man.

"What do the police have?" I asked.

"Not what we do. Not yet."

"Let's hear it, then," Andy said brusquely, brown eyes flashing.

Cissy sipped her drink, then said, "All male, all in their late forties, all veterans of World War Two. And each one left his family in an understandable mess. Two of the younger offspring need special medical attention they won't get now. One of the older ones is especially brilliant, but now he's going to have to quit his education to support a mother that's bedridden. On and on. Because all of the insurance went to one man."

"Who?" Andy asked harshly.

"A man named Herbert Sickles—he runs a cut-rate liquor store on the row."

"Once he knew he was the beneficiary, he simply waited for them to die or get killed, is that it?" Andy asked.

Cissy smiled again, her green eyes looking childlike. "Our people think differently."

"You mean he did the job on them himself?" Andy said in outrage.

Cissy shrugged. "All of them signed over their policies to Sickles within the last month. They're all dead now; beaten to death within the same month. What the police don't know is that Sickles was the beneficiary in each case. They will in time, of course. But—"

"In the meantime," I interrupted, "we've got to move in before he spends the money, retrieve it and redistribute it among those families."

"Yes," Andy exploded. "But *how*?"

Both then looked at me, because the means to the end is always my responsibility. I sat musing it as I would a stock investment, knowing there were several potentials. Finally I opted on the most obvious and told them what it was.

Andy stared at me with his usual surprise—he simply cannot get used to the idea that a stockbroker, who usually appears to be the gray-suited figure of conservatism, is actually one of the world's most audacious gamblers—but finally he nodded, eyes mirroring determination.

Cissy, who loves recklessness, leaned over to kiss my cheek, murmuring, "Marvelous, darling."

So the next night, after dark, Cissy drove us to a parking lot near Third. Andy and I rode in the back seat to keep from being too conspicuous, and Cissy was most careful not to break any driving regulations. If she'd been stopped for

ınything, and Andy and I were dis-
:overed in the condition we'd
:reated for ourselves, there was no
loubt we'd make the next news-
)aper out, but that was always one
)f the risks we took.

The selected lot, when we ar-
ived, was half-empty, semidark,
ınd a dim figure was obviously
)assed out near the rear of it. There
vas summer fog in the air so that
he street lamps and passing car
ights were blurred.

"Let's go," Andy said with mean-
ng.

"Keep the doors locked, Cissy. If
ınybody should—"

"I'll make a face and go boo," she
aid, laughing musically.

Grinning, I got out with Andy,
vell aware that Cissy owned the
ıerve of a tightrope performer.
'Ready?" I asked Andy.

In form of reply, Andy—who
vore a filthy-looking jacket, shirt
ınd pants, his face equally dirty and
ramatized by a ragged false beard,
:yes reddened by the solution we'd
pplied earlier—suddenly went
tumbling in drunken fashion away
rom the lot onto the sidewalk to
he street lamp which he grabbed
nd held on to, swaying. "Come on
here, ol' buddy!" he called to me in
slurring voice.

Dressed and bearded in similar
ashion, looking as much a veteran
treet drunk as Andy, I went pitch-
ing after him in a bizarre dance.

Five minutes later we were in-
side the liquor store owned by Her-
bert Sickles, our entrance audibly
announced by the ringing of a bell,
a sound created when the door was
opened and hit the bell.

The room was over-lighted with
harsh ceiling neon to prevent theft
of bottles. Sickles stood distrustfully
behind his counter, short, bald, with
nearsighted eyes peering at us from
behind thick-lensed glasses which
reflected the white neon above him.
Andy started another sideways
lunge, and Sickles barked in a high,
irritating voice, "Break one bottle,
you'll land in jail!"

Andy caught himself just in time
by grabbing the edge of the counter
and stood there leering at Sickles.

"Say what you want, pay for it,
and get out of here," Sickles or-
dered.

"Wine," I said.

"Money first," Sickles replied.

We began arguing with him
about that, but he remained firm, as
we'd expected. Finally Andy leaned
forward and whispered to him.
Sickles immediately began blinking
behind those thick light-reflecting
lenses. He said in reply, "Who gave
you an idea like that?"

"Danny," Andy slurred, using
one of the names Cissy had given
us. "Ol' Danny Brown. Haven't
seen him lately. But he told me.

You did it for him, you do it for me and my buddy here, huh?"

"How much?" Sickles whispered.

"Ten."

"What kind?"

"GI."

"Both?"

"Bet your damn life," I said.

Sickles wrote his name on a piece of paper and shoved it into the breast pocket of Andy's filthy jacket. "Try to remember that's in your pocket. Get it done at the VA office. When I see it I'll believe it. Now get out of here."

When we returned the following

night, Cissy was with us, appearing to be the cheapest tramp in the neighborhood. She wore a bright red wig. Her mouth was a glob of heavily-applied orange lipstick. Her green eyes were rimmed with dark mascara. She is slender, but padding under her red sweater gave her a grotesquely top-heavy look. She had on a black micro-mini; her equally black panty hose were ragged at the knees.

She went into that brightly-lit interior ahead of us, swinging her hips with dramatic accentuation. Sickles stared at her, obviously making up his mind about her profession. Then Andy handed him the two phony insurance policies the Society had prepared for us, and he forgot about Cissy. When he was convinced that he'd been properly designated as the new beneficiary of the equally phony names listed on the policies, he nodded abruptly. Then he shoved two bottles of the same throat-disintegrating wine he'd given us the night before across the counter.

"*Good* stuff!" Andy snapped.

Swearing, Sickles got two bottles of low-priced bourbon and put them on the counter.

Andy and I each took one, as Cissy eyed them hungrily. When we went lurching toward the front door, Sickles was already heading for the back storage room. Andy opened the door, making it hit the bell. He paused, then shut it again, with the bell ringing once more, and locked it. I turned the card in the display window around so that it read CLOSED.

Then the three of us went quickly and silently to that back room. Sickles was on his knees in front of a small, but sturdy-looking, safe. We waited until he'd turned the combination and pulled open the door. Then Andy said in his bass voice:

"Now just hold it that way. Don't make another move until we tell you."

Sickles froze in position.

Andy and I walked over to him, and I said, "Get up and turn around."

Sickles did as he was ordered, his eyes looking very large and frightened behind his spectacles. He blinked once, then looked down at the safe as though preparing to kick the door shut.

"I wouldn't," Cissy said sweetly, pointing a small pistol at Sickles.

He stared at that pistol for several moments, then croaked in his high voice: "Crooks!"

"Out of the way," Andy said gruffly, and when Sickles had stepped a few paces to the right, Andy bent down and began removing stacks of currency. He counted them and nodded. "Half, anyway.

But we'll find the rest, Sickles."

"That's my money!" Sickles said in a voice that was now quivering.

"How'd you get it?" I asked.

"I earned it!"

"Maybe you did," I said. "Killing isn't easy, is it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Danny Brown," I said crisply. "Morris, Henley, Harrison, Brewster."

He was blinking again.

"You were trying to pull the same deal with us," I said. "Only it wouldn't have worked this time because we gave you phony policies." I got out my wallet and flipped it open to show him the false police ID the Society had provided. "Five men made you their insurance beneficiaries. Then you killed all of them."

"That's a lie!"

I looked at Cissy and said, "Use his phone. Call for a car to take him to the lockup." I removed my own pistol from the holster under my jacket and stood pointing it at Sickles.

Cissy started toward the phone which was on the counter in front, but Sickles said in a screeching voice, "I didn't kill them!"

"Then who did?" Andy asked threateningly.

"I . . . can't tell you!"

"Then you're going to take the rap for five murders, premeditated, for gain, and all by yourself, Sickles. Go ahead," I said to Cissy. "Use the phone."

"No!" Sickles wailed. He wagged his head forlornly. 'If I told you, I'd get killed even in prison! Connections . . . !"

I looked at the currency in Andy's hand. "Twenty-five thousand," I said. "There should have been fifty. What did you do? Split the take with someone because he did the killing for you?"

Sickles kept wagging his head, unable to reply now.

I motioned Andy and Cissy to the other end of the room, keeping my pistol pointed at Sickles as he looked back at us fearfully. "I've got an idea," I said. When I'd completed giving it to them, I added, "Risky. Maybe especially for you, Cissy. So if you don't—"

Cissy smiled softly. "Let's go with it."

"Andy?" I asked.

He nodded and we returned to Sickles. "We've got a deal for you," I said to him.

"Deal?" he managed.

"Phone your friend. Say you've set up two live ones. Tell him we just left your place. Tell him which direction. When he makes the try, we'll take care of him."

"But that won't do me any good!" Sickles protested. "He'll

know I set it up with you. And you'll still say I was an accomplice or that I hired it to be done or however you're going to do it. That isn't going to do *me* any good at *all*!"

"All we care about is the man who did the killing," I said. "If we can bag him, he's the one who'll get the book thrown at him and put away forever. He can't get to you from death row, Sickles. Now, even if you have to serve a little time yourself—all right. But if you cooperate, it won't be for long."

"But the money! If I can keep it, hide it before you—"

"Evidence, Sickles." Smiling, Andy placed it in a pocket of his jacket.

"But you don't give me any choice!" he said wildly.

"One," I said, pointing toward the front of the store where the telephone was.

He stood there, blinking. Then his eyes looked brighter behind the thick glasses. "Which way do you want to go to trap him?"

"Out your back door and south on Third," I said.

He nodded and walked up front to the telephone. I followed with my pistol pointing at him, stopping at the doorway of the storage room. He dialed. He whispered. He listened. He whispered again. He hung up. I motioned him back into the storage area. "What's his description, his appearance?"

"Big," Sickles said. "Always wears a black leather jacket. No hat. Blond. Scar across his left cheek."

"What's his weapon?" Andy asked.

"A sap," Sickles acknowledged.

"Watch him," I said to Cissy. "And close."

She smiled. She pointed her handgun at Sickles. "I'm watching," she said. "Close."

Andy and I left, carrying those bottles, out the back door. We moved slowly, staggering, listing, laughing drunkenly; but we were keeping our senses acutely aware of every movement and sound around us. We were accosted a half-dozen times by men wanting our bottles, but they were easily pushed aside because we were sober and they weren't.

At last we moved into an alley just out of the brighter light of the street. We slumped down on a concrete stoop and half-lay there, mumbling, laughing, waiting for the large blond man with a scar on his cheek and wearing a black leather jacket.

A scattering of assorted types went by the mouth of the alley. Then there appeared a woman with scraggly white hair, wearing dark glasses, tapping a white cane with one hand, holding a tin cup and a

dog leash with the other. On the end of the leash was a German shepherd. The woman was limping badly, dragging a worn-shoed foot in pitiful fashion. She walked humped over as though semiparalyzed. Her mouth was an ugly puckering of bitterness.

She was nearly past the mouth of the alley when suddenly she turned, letting go of the leash. The dark glasses went into a pocket of her tattered sweater. Gone was the limp and the humped-over position. She ran toward us, swift as an athlete, the dog following her, its golden eyes looking merry and bright.

The woman lifted her cane and brought it down viciously in the direction of Andy's head, but he was already rolling, fast. I was up quickly, removing my pistol from under the jacket. Her eyes widened when she saw it. She started to whirl and run, but I was in front of her, putting an arm out to stop her. The dog stood watching the action with those merry gold eyes, tail wagging.

Andy, on his feet now, flipped out his wallet, letting her see the police ID the Society had prepared.

"I don't know what—" she began.

"Brewster," I said. "Morris, Henley, Harrison, Brown. With that cane, which I figure is weighted to do the job just perfectly."

She looked from my face to Andy's and back again, her eyes showing panic. "How—?"

"Sickles," I said. "We hooked him up with the insurance paid. He broke and confessed."

"But I just talked to him . . . " She stopped.

"He was in custody when he made that call. He still is. Now let's get going."

"You're taking me to jail?" she said, her ugly mouth quivering.

"That's right," Andy said. "But not before we look your place over."

She knotted her hand around the cane, hard. Her eyes darkened with hatred.

"You try to use that thing again," I said, "I'll shoot you between the eyes. Now, let's move!"

Home, for her, was a nearby hotel whose huge, muscular desk clerk looked at us suspiciously as we moved into the lobby on either side of the woman. I had my pistol pointing from inside my jacket, and I knew that she could feel its pressure. She'd put on her glasses again and limped along with one hand using the cane, the other holding the leash of what was surely the best-natured German shepherd ever born.

"All right there, Maggie?" the clerk asked.

"Just fine, Harold," she said.

"These two boys are my friends."

He reexamined us, then shook his head and continued reading a paperback sex novel.

We took an elevator to the second floor and accompanied her into a room which was in a massive state of disorder. It was crammed with junk. It was dirty and unkempt. It didn't smell good.

Maggie stood in the litter, looking defeated. She removed her glasses and put them on a dusty bureau top, and let go of the dog's leash. She appeared ready to cry. "I didn't do what you think I did," she said. "I saw you in the alley. I was carrying a little bit of money, and I was afraid you'd follow me and take it away from me. I was just going to give you a little tap. I'm just a poor old lady who—"

"Fakes blindness," I continued, "and that humped-over look and the limp—and I also figure you're about fifteen years younger than you want people to think you are. Sure, you're a nice, little old lady. But you hire out as a killer, don't you? Go to it, Andy."

Andy began tearing the place apart.

Maggie again gripped her hand so hard around the handle of that weighted cane that her knuckles were white. She began swearing, using filthy epithets. "*Stop* him!" she called to the dog.

The dog merely waved its tail happily and watched Andy with its bright and loving eyes.

Then Maggie raised the cane to use it on Andy. I struck her wrist, sending the cane flying across the room. She began swearing again, but by now the job was done, and Andy counted out a little over twenty-two thousand dollars in currency which had been hidden in every corner of Maggie's abode. Andy shoved it into a pocket.

"You *can't*!" Maggie said in a soft scream, tears beginning to run down her cheeks.

"We are," Andy said.

"And then you're going to put me in jail!" she said, tears flowing.

"No, we aren't, Maggie," I said. "We're going to give you a nice little break. My friend and I, we'll keep the money, see?"

"But . . . that's robbery!" she said pleadingly. She had returned to her role of the little old lady, and I suspected that she had been acting it for so long, she at times believed herself to be just that.

"Maybe," Andy said. "But we all come out, don't we? This way we keep the money. And you get your chance."

"What *kind* of chance?"

"Run," Andy said. "That's nice enough of us, isn't it? We'll give you a decent start." He grinned, then bent down and yanked the

telephone line away from the wall.

In the lobby, with the giant desk clerk named Harold watching us closely, I moved drunkenly into a public booth and dialed. Moments later I heard Cissy saying, "Hello?"

"We nailed the killer, Cissy, and we're coming right over. So maybe you'd better not try that the way we talked about it. I don't want—"

"I'm sorry," she said. "We don't deliver." She hung up.

I stepped out of the booth just as a uniformed cop hurried into the lobby, looking us over with alert, practiced eyes, saying to the desk clerk, "What's the trouble, Harold?"

"Maggie. Her room's right over this desk. This pair went up with her and it sounded like all hell was going on up there. You better check her, Frank. I can't even get her on the switchboard."

The cop stared at Andy and me. "You stay where you are," he ordered.

"They're so drunk," Harold said from behind the desk, "they couldn't get halfway to the door ahead of me."

The cop nodded, then got onto the elevator and disappeared.

The clerk gave us an evil smile. "You done anything to Maggie," he said, "you're on the way to real trouble. Maggie's a sweet lady and we all know that, my friends."

"Tha's right," Andy said, weaving up to the desk. "Swee' ol' lady." Then one of his large fists looped over the desk and struck the tip of Harold's jaw. The large clerk's eyes looked stunned; then he slowly disappeared behind the desk.

Andy and I went out of there, fast, down the street, and around to the back of that liquor store.

The door was open. We stepped inside and looked at Cissy lying facedown on the wooden floor.

I swore silently, hurrying across the room with Andy.

"Cissy . . . " I said, looking at her face.

One eye opened. She winked.

"Now, damn it all!" Andy exploded. "You had us thinking—"

"I'm sorry," she said, as we helped her up. "I wanted to make sure it was you, and not Sickles."

"How'd you do it?" I asked.

"When I hung up the telephone on you, I came here and told him to stay where I could see him. But then I tripped, on purpose, and let the pistol skid across the room. He retrieved it like a squirrel going for a nut and fired it at me four times. Believe me, I was glad there was some distance. It didn't make much noise and it was loaded with blanks, but just the same you can get hurt that way. But I didn't. And I did a great death scene, you know. Honestly, I was magnificent."

"You've got to be crazy, Cissy," I said affectionately. "Absolutely. But I agree, you're also magnificent." I kissed one of her rouged cheeks.

She smiled with dazzling brilliance. "But now the guy who did the killing—"

"No guy," Andy said. "A little old lady, with murderous instincts."

"Lady?" Cissy said in surprise.

"Well, no—that was no lady," I said. "But she's the killer, all right. We got most of her insurance. We can have our people redistribute it directly."

"But what's the woman going to do?" Cissy asked.

"Run," Andy said positively.

"And Sickles?" she said.

"He figures he killed you," I said. "So he'll dump the weapon, then spend just a little time looking for us, dead, with his twenty-five thousand on us. Maggie's never failed him before, after all. But when he doesn't find us, he'll start running, too."

Cissy nodded, looking pleased. "And that's it, right?"

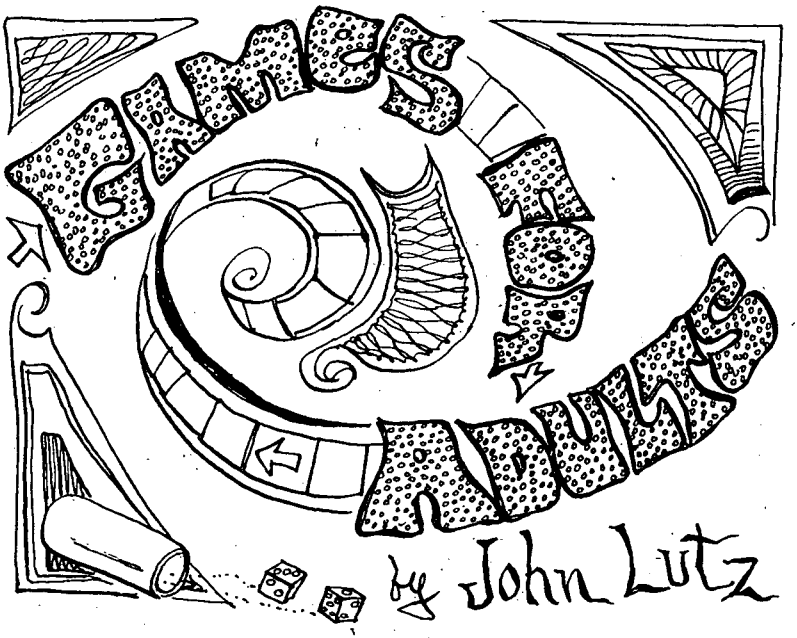
"All except for this," Andy said.

We followed him up front where he picked up the telephone and dialed. Moments later he said into the phone:

"Take this down and get it right. Herbert Sickles—insurance beneficiary of five men killed on skid row. Names—Brewster, Morris, Henley, Harrison, Brown. Sickles owns a liquor store on the row; he's short, bald, wears thick glasses. He had a woman named Maggie do the killing. She's been doing a fake blind routine. She might look like a crippled old lady with dark glasses who moves with a limp, taps a white cane—her murder instrument, by the way—with a guide dog with her, a shepherd with golden eyes and a great disposition. Or, she might fix herself up, drop the limp and crippled look, throw away the cane and leave the dog behind. Her room was at the Ajax Hotel. Both have been spooked and they're heading out of town. It's up to you to cover the possibilities and stop them." He paused, then said, "Who am *I*?" He grinned. "Let's just say Robin Hood."

He hung up then and the three of us walked out of the store.

In the area of amusement, it is increasingly evident that bigger and more hazardous challenges are involved in "adult" games.



IT WAS SEVEN P.M., and a fine, cool drizzle was settling outside the cozy Twelfth Avenue apartment building, when the Darsts' telephone rang. Bill Darst got up from where he'd been half-reclining on the sofa reading the paper and moved to answer the ring. His wife Della had been in the kitchenette preparing supper, and he beat her to the phone in the hall by three steps. A medium-size, pretty brunette, she smiled at her husband and stood gracefully with a serving fork in her hand, waiting to see if the call was for her.

Apparently it wasn't, but she stood listening anyway.

Bill watched her at a slightly sideways angle as he talked. "Oh, yes, sure I do. Yes," he said. ". . . Well, sort of short notice, but

I'll see." He held the receiver away from his face and spoke to Della.

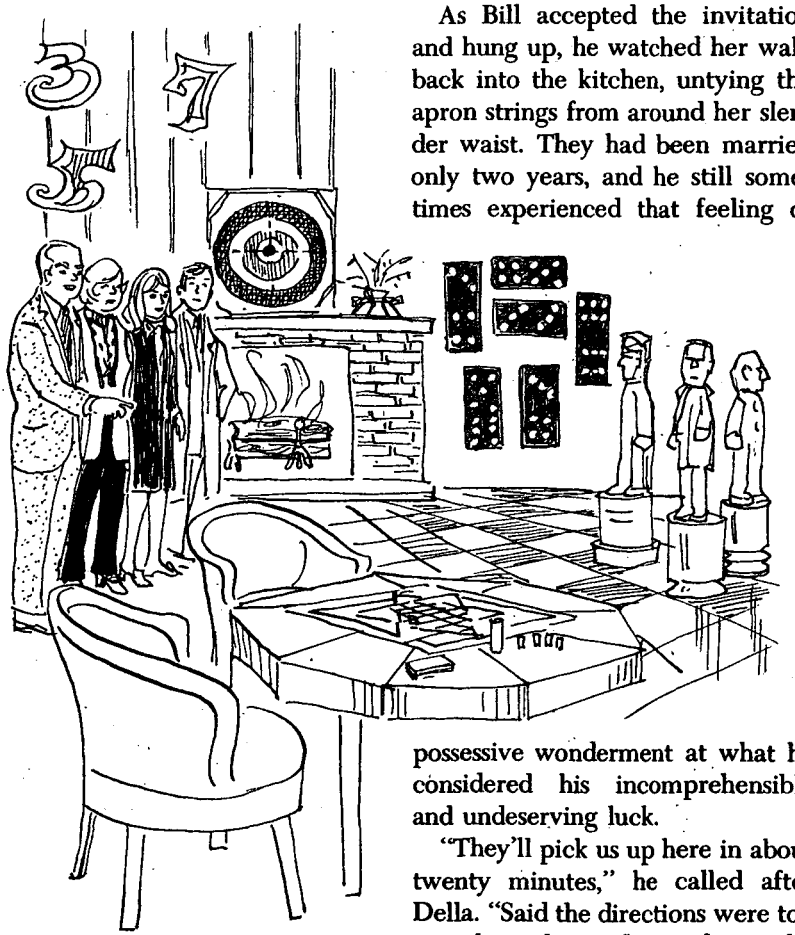
"Is supper so far along you can't hold it up? We have an invitation for this evening from the Tinkys."

"The what?"

"He's on the phone," Bill said impatiently. "Quick, yes or no." He smiled knowingly, aware that she hated to cook and seldom turned down an opportunity to escape the chore.

"Sure," she said, shrugging. "Why not?"

As Bill accepted the invitation and hung up, he watched her walk back into the kitchen, untying the apron strings from around her slender waist. They had been married only two years, and he still sometimes experienced that feeling of



possessive wonderment at what he considered his incomprehensible and undeserving luck.

"They'll pick us up here in about twenty minutes," he called after Della. "Said the directions were too complicated to understand over the phone."

"Fine." Her voice came from the bedroom now, where she was changing clothes.

Della appeared shortly, wearing the form-fitting but modest green dress that he liked on her. "Now, just where are we going?" she asked. "Who on earth are the Tinkys?"

Bill grinned at her. "Cal and Emma Tinky," he said. "Remember, we met them in that lounge on Fourteenth Street when we went there to escape the rain last week."

Recognition widened her eyes. "The toy manufacturer and his wife! I'd forgotten about them completely."

"Well, they didn't forget about us. Cal Tinky said something at the bar about inviting us for dinner and games some night, and I guess he meant it. I don't see any harm in us taking him up on a free meal."

"Games?" Della asked, raising an artistically penciled eyebrow.

"Tinky's the president and owner of Master Games, Incorporated," Bill reminded her, "and they're not toy manufacturers. They make games, mostly for adults. You know, three-dimensional checkers, word games, party games. They're the ones who make crossword roulette."

"We played that once," Della said, "at the Grahams'."

"Right," Bill said. "Anyway, the Tinkys live outside of town and Cal Tinky happened to be in this neighborhood, so he invited us out to his place."

"I hope his wife knows about it."

"He said she does." Bill picked up the paper again and began idly going over the football scores that he'd read before, but he didn't really concentrate on them. He thought back on the evening he and Della had met the Tinkys. Both couples had gone into the tiny lounge to escape the sudden deluge of rain, and they had naturally fallen into an easy conversation that had lasted as long as the rain, well over an hour. Cal Tinky was a large-boned, beefy man with a ruddy complexion and a wide, toothy smile. His wife, Emma, was a stout woman in her early forties. While friendly, she seemed to be rather withdrawn at times, the line of her mouth arcing downward beneath the suggestion of a fine mustache.

Only fifteen minutes had passed since the phone call when the doorbell rang and Bill went to answer it.

Cal Tinky stood in the hall, wearing a wide, amiable grin and a tweed sport coat and red tie that brought out the floridness of his complexion. "You folks ready? Emma's waiting down in the car."

"Sure," Bill said. "Come on in a minute and we can go."

"Evening, Mrs. Darst," Tinky said as he stepped inside.

Della said hello and they chatted while Bill went into the bedroom and put on a coat and tie. He could hear Della's laughter and Tinky's booming, enthusiastic voice as he stood before the mirror and ran a brush over his thick dark hair. He noted his regular-featured, commonplace appearance marred by a slightly large, slightly crooked nose and again counted his good fortune for having Della.

"We'll just take my car," Tinky said as Bill crossed the livingroom and got the coats from the hall closet. "You're apt to lose me in the fog, and it's not so far I can't drive you back later on."

"You don't have to go to all that trouble, Mr. Tinky," Della said, backing into the raincoat that Bill held for her.

"No trouble," Tinky said reassuringly. "And call me Cal—never did like that name Tinky."

Bill put on his topcoat and they left and took the elevator to the lobby, then crossed the street to where Emma Tinky was waiting in a rain-glistening gray sedan.

The ride to the Tinkys' home took almost an hour through the misting, foggy night. They wound for miles on a series of smooth blacktop roads surrounded by woods, listening to the steady, muffled rhythm of the sweeping wiper blades. Cal Tinky kept up an easy conversation of good-natured little stories as he drove, while Emma sat silently, gazing out the side window at the cold rain.

"I hope you won't go to too much trouble," Della said from the rear seat.

Bill watched Emma Tinky start from her silent thoughts, and smile. "Oh, no, I put a roast in the oven before we came into the city. It's cooking now."

The big car took another turn, this time onto a steep gravel road. Bill caught a glimpse through the trees of the distant city lights far below them. He hadn't realized they'd driven so far into the hills.

"I don't suppose you have much in the way of neighbors," he said, "living way up here."

"You're right there, Bill," Cal Tinky said. "Nearest is over two miles. Folks up here value their privacy. You know how it is when you work hard half your life and manage to become moderately wealthy—always somebody wanting to take it away from you. Up here we're not pestered by people like that."

By the looks of the Tinkys' home they were more than moderately wealthy. As the car turned into the long driveway bordered by woods, Bill gazed through the rain-streaked

windshield at a huge house that seemed in the dark to be built something like a horizontal wheel. Its rounded brick walls curved away into the night in perfect symmetry on either side of the ornate lighted entrance. Off to the left of the car Bill saw a small beach house beside a swimming pool.

"Like it?" Cal Tinky asked. "I can tell you it cost more than a pretty penny, but we sure enjoy it, Emma and I."

"What I can see of it looks great," Bill said.

"You shouldn't brag," Emma said to her husband.

"Just giving them the facts," Tinky said heartily as he neared the house and a basement garage door opened automatically.

For just a moment the sound of the car's engine was loud and echoing in the spacious garage, then Cal Tinky turned the key and they sat in silence. Bill saw a small red foreign convertible parked near some stacks of large cartons.

"No fun sitting here," Cal Tinky said. "Let's go upstairs."

They got out of the car and the Tinkys led them up some stairs to a large utility room of some sort. After passing through that room they entered a large room containing some chairs, a sofa and a grand piano.

"Come on in here," Cal Tinky said, "into our recreation room."

Bill thought the recreation room was fantastic.

It was a spacious room, about thirty feet square, with a red and white checkerboard tiled floor and walls hung with large, decorative dominoes and ornate numerals. At strategic spots on the gleaming tile, four-foot-tall wood chessmen stood on some of the large red squares. Several tables were in the room, with various games spread out on them; chess, dominoes, and several complex games that were manufactured by Master Games, Incorporated. A smoldering fire glowed in the fireplace over which hung a huge dart board.

"Let's sit down," Cal Tinky invited. "Dinner'll be ready soon."

Bill removed his coat and crossed an area rug designed to resemble the six-dotted plane of a huge die. He sat down next to Cal Tinky on a sofa embroidered with ticktacktoe symbols.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Della asked Emma Tinky as the heavyset woman took her coat.

"No, no," Emma said, "you are a guest."

Bill watched Emma remove her own bulky coat and saw that she was wearing slacks and a black sweater covered with a heavy corduroy vest. There was something that suggested hidden physical

power in her walk as she left the recreation room to hang up the coats and prepare dinner.

Della sat opposite Bill and Cal Tinky on a chair that matched the sofa. "Quite a decorating job."

Cal Tinky beamed. "Thanks. Designed most of it ourselves. After we eat we can make use of it."

"A house this big," Bill said, "do you have any servants?"

Cal Tinky stood and walked to an L-shaped bar in a corner. "No," he said, "we mostly take care of it all ourselves, fifteen rooms. Had servants, but they stole on us. Now we have someone come in from the city twice a week to clean. Course, most of the rooms we don't even use." He reached for a top-brand bottle of Scotch and held it up. "Good enough?"

Bill nodded.

"Make mine with water," Della said.

Cal Tinky mixed the drinks expertly. When he'd given the Darsts their glasses he settled down on the couch and took a long sip of his straight Scotch.

Emma Tinky came back into the room then, picked up the drink that her husband had left for her on the bar and sat in a chair near the sofa.

"You certainly must be fond of games," Bill said, looking around him again in something like awe at the recreation room.

Cal Tinky smiled. "Games are our life. Life is a game."

"I agree with that last part," Bill said, raising the excellent Scotch to his lips.

"There are winners and losers," Emma said, smiling at Della.

They sat for a moment in that awkwardness of silence that sometimes descends on people who don't really know one another. Bill heard a faint clicking that he'd noticed in the car earlier. He saw that Emma was holding in her left hand one of those twisted metal two-part puzzles that separate and lock together only a certain way. With surprisingly nimble fingers she was absently separating and rejoining the two pieces expertly.

"Winners and losers," Della said to fill the void. "I suppose that's true."

"The basis of life," Cal Tinky said. "Have you folks ever stopped to think that our whole lives are spent trying to figure out bigger and better ways to amuse ourselves, bigger and better challenges? From the time we are infants we want to play the 'grown-up' games."

Bill didn't say anything. It was something about which he had never thought much.

"And business!" Cal Tinky laughed his booming laugh. "Why, business is nothing but a game!"

Now Bill laughed. "You appear

to be a winner at that game." He motioned with his hand to take in the surroundings.

Emma joined in the laughter. She had a high, piercing laugh, long and lilting with a touch of . . . Of what? "Yes," she said then in a suddenly solemn voice though a smile still played about her lips. "Material possessions are some of the prizes."

"Enough talk of games," Cal Tinky said. "I'm hungry."

Emma put the twisted pieces of shining metal into her vest pocket. "We can eat any time," she said, "unless you'd like another drink."

"No," Bill said, "not unless the food's so bad you don't want me to taste it."

Again came her high, lilting laugh, backgrounded by her husband's booming laughter.

At least she has a sense of humor, Bill thought, as they all rose and went into the large and well-furnished dining room.

The meal was simple but delicious; a well-done roast served with potatoes and carrots, a gelatin dessert with coffee, topped by an excellent brandy.

Throughout the meal they had kept up a running conversation, usually led by Cal Tinky, on the importance and celestial nature of games in general. Emma would join in now and then with a shrewd comment, a high and piercing laugh, and once, over the lime gelatin, Bill had seen her staring at Della with a strange intensity. Then she had looked away, spooning the quivering dessert into her mouth, and Bill heard again the soft, metallic, clicking sound.

After the brandy Cal Tinky suggested they go back into the recreation room for some drinks and relaxation. For a short time the Tinkys stayed in the dining room as Cal helped Emma put away some perishables, and Bill and Della were alone.

Della nudged Bill playfully in the ribs and moved close to him. "These people are weird," she whispered.

Bill grinned down at her. "Just a little eccentric, darling. Maybe we'd be, too, if we had their money."

"I hope we find out someday," Della said with a giggle. She quickly hushed as the Tinkys came into the room.

Cal Tinky was carrying a fresh bottle of Scotch. "The first order is more drinks," he proclaimed in his loud voice.

He mixed the drinks at the bar and served them, then he looked around at the many games and entertainment devices. "Anything for your amusement," he said with his wide grin.

Bill smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "You're the game expert, Cal."

Cal Tinky looked thoughtful and rubbed his square jaw.

"Make it something simple, if you will," Della said. "I don't feel very clever tonight."

"How about Bank Vault?" Cal asked. "It's a simple game, but it's fun for four people."

He walked to a shelf and took down the game. Bill and Della followed him to a round, shaggy rug, where he opened the box and spread out the game board. Emma spread four cushions for them to sit on.

When they were seated with fresh drinks, Cal Tinky proceeded to explain the rules.

It was an easy game to learn, uncomplicated, based like so many games on the advance of your marker according to the number you rolled on a pair of dice. The board was marked in a concentric series of squares, divided into boxes, some of which had lettering inside them: 'Advance six squares', 'Go back two', 'Return to home area'. Occasionally there were shortcuts marked on the board, where you had your choice of direction while advancing. Each player had a small wooden marker of a different color, and if the number he rolled happened to land his block on the same square as an opponent, the opponent had to return to the home area and start over. Whoever reached the bank vault first was the winner.

They rolled the dice to determine in what order they'd play, then settled down on the soft cushions to enjoy themselves.

Cal and Emma Tinky played seriously and with complete absorption. Cal would roll his number and move his red block solemnly while his eyes measured the distance his opponents were behind him. Emma would move her yellow block in short, firm steps, counting the number of squares as she moved it.

The game lasted through two drinks. Bill had rolled consecutive high numbers, and his green block was ahead until near the end of the game. Then he had landed on a 'Go back ten' square and Cal had overtaken him to win. Emma was second, only three squares ahead of Bill, and Della's blue block brought up the rear after an unfortunate 'Return to home area' roll.

"Say, I have another game similar to this only a little more interesting," Cal said, picking up the board. "Let's try it."

Bill reached to help him put the game away and found that his fingers missed the block he'd tried to pick up by half an inch. He decided to go easier on the Scotch.

Cal returned with the new game

and spread it out on the soft rug to explain it to them. It was almost exactly like the first game. This time the board was laid out in a circle divided into compartments. The compartments were marked as rooms and the idea was to get back first to the room in which you started. This time the obstacles and detours were a little more numerous.

"Does your company manufacture this game?" Bill asked.

"Not yet," Cal Tinky said with his expansive grin, "but we're thinking about it. It's not the sort of game with mass appeal."

They rolled the dice in the same order. Bill rolled a twelve and moved well out ahead, but on his second roll he came up with a seven, landing him in the dining room where the lettered message instructed him to skip his next turn for a snack. Della moved out ahead of him then, landing in the den. Emma rolled a three, but landed in the utility room where she was instructed to advance ten squares. This brought her yellow block only two squares behind Della's and she emitted her high, strange laughter. Cal rolled snake eyes, allowing him a free roll, and he came up with a twelve. His red block landed on the den, and he placed it directly atop Della's blue block.

"Does that mean I go back to the entrance hall?" Della asked, smiling like a sport but feeling disappointed.

"In a manner of speaking," Cal Tinky said. He drew from beneath his sport jacket a large revolver and shot Della.

The slam of the large-caliber bullet smashing into her chest sounded almost before the shot. Della flopped backward, still smiling, her legs still crossed. A soft sigh escaped her body and her eyes rolled back.

"*Della* . . . " Bill whispered her name once, staring at her, wanting to help her, knowing she was dead, finally and forever. A joke, a mistake, a horrible, unbelievable mistake! He turned toward the Tinkys. Cal Tinky was smiling. They were both smiling.

Words welled up in Bill's throat that would not escape—anger that paralyzed him. He stood unsteadily, the room whirling at first, and began to move toward Cal Tinky. The long revolver raised and the hammer clicked back into place. Bill stood trembling, grief-stricken, enraged and afraid. Cal Tinky held the revolver and the smile steady as the fear grew, cold and pulsating, deep in the pit of Bill's stomach. The floor seemed to tilt and Bill screamed, a hoarse, sobbing scream. He turned awkwardly and ran in panic from the room, from death.

He stumbled through the dining room, struggling to keep his bal-

ance. On the edge of his mind he was aware that Cal had put something in the drinks, something that had destroyed his perception, sapped his strength, and he tried to fight it off as he ran to a window. The window was small and high, and as he flung aside the curtains he saw that it was covered with a steel grill. With a moan, he ran awkwardly into the next room, to the next window. It, too, was barred. All the rooms that had windows were inescapable, and all the outside doors were locked. He ran, pounding against thick, barred windows that wouldn't break or open, flinging himself against doors that wouldn't give, until finally, exhausted and broken, he found himself in the kitchen and dragged his heaving body into a small alcove lined with shelves of canned goods, where he tried to hide, to think, to think . . .

In the recreation room, Cal Tinky looked at his wife over the game board. "I think he's had enough time," he said. "It never takes them more than a few minutes to run to cover."

Emma Tinky nodded and picked up the dice. With a quick, expert motion of her hand she rolled a nine.

Cal rolled a six. "Your shot," he said.

Emma rolled the dice again, a seven. She leaned over the board and, counting under her breath, moved her yellow block forward in short, tapping jerks.

"The kitchen," she said. "Damn! They never hide in the kitchen."

"No need to get upset," Cal Tinky said. "You'll probably get another roll."

Emma drew a long revolver exactly like her husband's from beneath her corduroy vest and stood. Stepping over Della, she walked from the recreation room toward the kitchen. Her husband picked up the game and followed, careful to hold the board absolutely level so that the dice and the colored blocks wouldn't be disturbed.

The sound of the shot that came from the kitchen a few minutes later wasn't very loud, like the hard slap of an open hand on a solid tabletop—but Emma Tinky's high, long laugh might have been heard throughout the house.

The business must be dispatched forthrightly should one wish to bell the Cat.

NICK FARREL considered himself a lucky man; a lucky man, indeed. It proved the truth of the old saying that it's worthwhile to make a play for every pretty girl you meet. Even if you only get a return of five percent on your investment, it's worthwhile.

Anna's slender arm clung possessively to his. Anna's blonde head rested dreamily against his shoulder. Anna's sweet, heady perfume was fragrant in his nostrils. Nick's fingers trembled as he fumbled with the key to unlock his apartment. He never thought she'd come.

How would she react? Would she be frightened? Anna was very young, not more than twenty. Anna's blonde hair was too flashy and her dress was too tight, too low-cut and too daring, but she did not look like the kind of a girl you picked up in a bar. He had known her less than an hour, and he *had* picked her up in his favorite nightclub, but beneath the flashy exterior, Nick could see that she was a girl with quality. Nick Farrel considered himself an authority on women with class.

Anna was not frightened, nor shy, nor too brassily bold. The red lips that had once been so naughty, but that had been coaxed to relax under his gay line of banter, now flashed into a smile and the icy cold had melted out of Anna's blue eyes.

"You didn't think I'd come, did you, Nick?" The words were a challenge, lightly mocking.

Anna's slender fingers squeezed Nick's hand with an electricity that

sent tingles all through him, and he looked so startled that Anna laughed delightedly.

It was astonishing, really. Nick could not help secretly congratulating himself upon his good luck. He had dropped into his favorite bar where he saw this dazzling blonde creature moodily sipping a martini and fending off masculine advances. He had caught her eye and smiled. Unexpectedly, she smiled back, and pretty soon she permitted him to buy her a drink. Two martinis later, Nick, as casually as he could, suggested that they go to his place for a drink. He almost fell off his stool when Anna looked him square in the eye and, reading his thoughts, knowing what was in his mind, the scarlet lips breaking into that wild, mocking laugh, she said yes.

It all puzzled him. In spite of everything, Anna did not look like the kind of a girl a man picked up casually in a bar.

Nick opened the door, snapped on the light, then closed the door behind them. Expertly, he tried to draw Anna into his arms but, just as expertly, she deftly eluded him and the flashing white teeth and the red lips broke into that alluring, mocking laugh.

"What's your hurry, Nick? Didn't you invite me for a drink?" Anna's blue eyes twinkled with an unspoken promise and Nick was encouraged rather than discouraged by the rebuff.

"Sure, honey. No hurry. We've got all night. Just make yourself comfortable." Nick felt very much the man of the world.

Confidently, he went to the bar that stood in one corner of his luxurious apartment and mixed two very dry, very potent martinis. A suave grin was on his confident face as he turned toward Anna. Then the grin faded. Anna's right hand held a tiny, but quite lethal-looking revolver, and it was pointed straight at his heart. Anna appeared nervous and that frightened him quite as much as the revolver. A nervous woman with a gun can make a deadly combination.

"Surprise party, Nick. I want the loot you stole in the Harrison Jewelry Company safecracking."

Nick was incredulous. So far as he knew, the Harrison job was one of his best. The police did not have a single clue to connect him with the robbery.

Cautiously, he risked a step toward the slender girl, but she brandished the revolver and the wild blue eyes looked more nervous and frightened than ever.

"I'll use this, Nick, if I have to. Don't make me kill you. That would be too bad for both of us."

"How did you know about the

Harrison job?" Nick demanded.

"Your M. O., Nick. You were too smart to leave any clues, but the police know your *modus operandi*. The Harrison job tagged you just as cleanly as if you'd left fingerprints all over the place. To an expert in safecracking, the Harrison job had Nick Farrel written all over it."

"What is this, the second-thief caper?"

"Yes, Nick. You've fallen for the oldest dodge in the underworld. Very careless for a smart thief like you."

No words had to be wasted talking about the second-thief operation—letting the first thief take all the risk and then robbing him of the loot. The first thief cannot, after all, go to the law for protection.

"You haven't sold the Harrison jewelry to a fence, so you have to have it. I want it. Now." Anna made a threatening gesture with the gun. "Don't stall, Nick. In a little while some friends will come up and work you over if they have to. You have a really good-looking face. It would be too bad to spoil it."

The thought of being worked over by a crew of strong-arm boys cooled any intention Nick might have had to resist. Reluctantly, as Anna covered him with the tiny revolver, Nick opened a hidden panel in his mahogany-covered wall, revealed a safe, and opened it in grim silence.

"Just the Harrison loot, Nick. You can leave the rest inside."

Nick gazed at the slender blonde in astonishment.

"Put the jewels on the table."

The sparkle of diamond rings, of ruby clips, emerald brooches and gold watches gleamed and glittered as the precious items spilled across the dark wood of the tabletop.

With a swift movement, Anna opened a brocaded party handbag. With her left hand, she removed a pair of handcuffs and tossed them to Nick Farrel.

"Put your right wrist in one side and lock the other to the arm of that sofa."

Nervously, but with obvious clever preparation, she directed him. "Quick!"

For an instant Nick's mind toyed with the idea of resisting, but the idea of a jittery woman with a gun sobered him. She could shoot him before he could reach her. It was annoying to be robbed, but better robbed than dead. There would always be other jobs. The Harrison job was typical. The police must have known it was he, but they couldn't prove it. They could never prove it.

Anna's blue eyes studied him. He was securely handcuffed to the heavy sofa.

"Have you ever thought of what your crimes do to people, Nick? Peter Harrison, the man whose store you robbed, was—or could have been—ruined by you. He was underinsured. A lot of people are careless about not carrying enough insurance, Nick, especially in the jewelry business. A wonderful old man could have been ruined by you."

Nick Farrel was in no mood for a lecture. "What difference does it make to you? You're a thief just as much as I am. Take the loot and get out."

Instead of leaving, Anna moved to the telephone and dialed a number.

"Police headquarters? This is a friend. There has been a robbery and an attempted murder at 1635 Meredith Avenue, apartment 5-C. You will find the loot from the Harrison Jewelry Company robbery there. Will you send a squad car right away, please?"

Calmly, Anna repeated the address, then hung up the telephone.

Turning to Nick, she said quietly: "You're a clever man, Nick. Quite good-looking, too, if it makes you feel any better."

Nick Farrel's reply was unprintable.

"When you get out, try your hand at something honest."

The wail of an approaching police car split the night. Nick Farrel listened in fascinated horror.

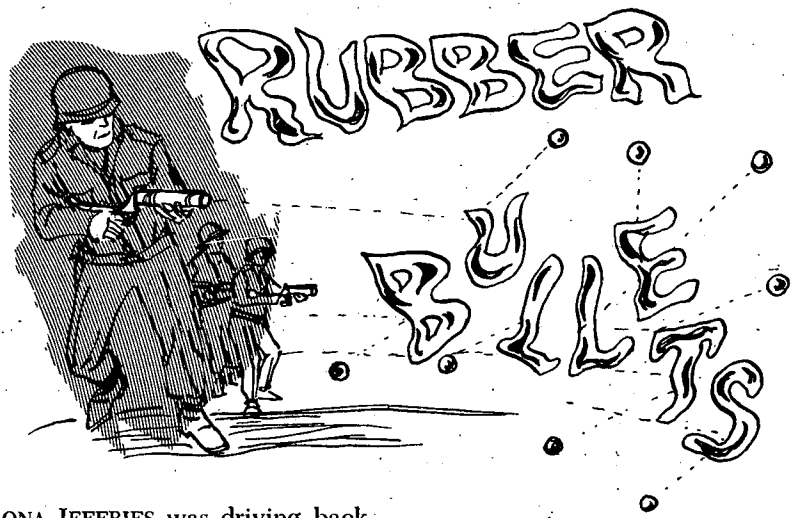
Only then did Anna leave—with the jewels still on the table. She left the door to Nick's apartment wide open, and as the police were only seconds from entering from the elevator door, Anna quietly slipped out the rear stairway.

As she scurried down the stairway, Anna Harrison, the daughter of Peter Harrison, who had almost been ruined by the clever thief, Nick Farrel, quietly slipped off the flashy blonde wig she wore. Putting it in her handbag, she fluffed out her natural dark hair.

No one was watching the back door, and Anna slipped through an alleyway and mingled with a crowd of people walking down Meredith Avenue. There were not many advantages to being engaged to a detective sergeant—when she and Detective Johnny Frazer were married, they would probably never have any money—but when Johnny had told her of his absolute conviction that Nick Farrel was the man who had robbed her father, it had planted the seed of the idea in her mind.

Now it was improbable that Nick Farrel would rob anybody else for a number of years; at last, the police would have the evidence on him.

Supposedly one gets only that for which he bargains—but occasionally much, much more.



MONA JEFFRIES was driving back to the office after lunch, taking the back route along Dakota Street to avoid the traffic lights, when she saw Connie standing on the curb. The sight of her daughter looming up before her like a taunting vision made her slam on the brakes without thinking. The driver behind her blasted his horn, and Connie glanced up, her long brown hair rippling across her face.

"Connie! Wait!" Mona screamed from the car window. "Wait! Don't run!"

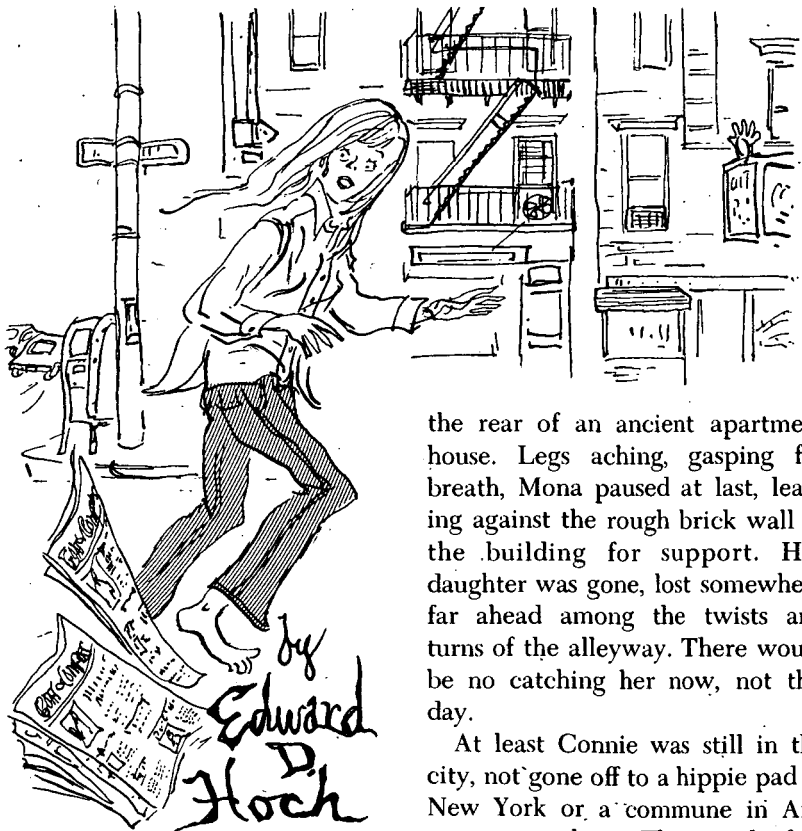
Connie hastily dropped the stack of newspapers she was selling to passing cars, retreated a few feet in something close to terror, and then broke into a run along the pavement. She wore faded dungarees and a boy's blue shirt, and Mona could see the dirty soles of her bare feet as she ran.

By the time Mona had parked the car at the curb, her daughter was a full block away, still running,

avoiding the occasional sidewalk strollers with the inbred agility of a broken-field runner. Pursuit by foot was hopeless, so Mona pulled the car into the traffic lane again and tried to chase her down. For a few minutes she thought it would work, but as she drew abreast of the running girl, Connie shot a glance over her shoulder and ducked down a narrow alley.

This time Mona was close enough to go after her on foot. She slammed the car door behind her and took off running, feeling the tightness in her chest almost immediately. "Connie," she yelled, "please! Connie! Come back!"

The girl ahead swerved suddenly into another alley, a twisting labyrinthine passageway that ran along



the rear of an ancient apartment house. Legs aching, gasping for breath, Mona paused at last, leaning against the rough brick wall of the building for support. Her daughter was gone, lost somewhere far ahead among the twists and turns of the alleyway. There would be no catching her now, not this day.

At least Connie was still in the city, not gone off to a hippie pad in New York or a commune in Arizona somewhere. That single fact

was something to give hope for the future. Catching her breath, Mona walked back the way she had come. Then she drove back to the place along the curb where she'd first spotted her daughter. The papers were still there, drifting lazily across the lanes of traffic. She stopped the car once more and retrieved one of them. It was an underground publication called *Goat & Compass*. Mona had never heard of it before, but it was the only link she had to her missing daughter.

The office was on the fifth floor of a shabby building on the north side of the city. Mona reached it by a creaking elevator that seemed in danger of imminent collapse, and then walked along a dimly-lit hallway to the door at the end. The frosted glass bore a painted black inscription that had all but faded and chipped away. She had to look closely to read: *Flowers Investigations Walk In.*

The door opened to her touch, revealing an empty outer office. The secretary's desk seemed dusty and unused, without even a typewriter, and the inverted glass bottle of a water cooler was empty. The room had a somber look, like something that had been dead a long, long time.

"Come in," a voice called from the inner office.

Mona entered to find a little man with green suspenders and a soiled pink shirt, bent over a wooden filing cabinet that fit in well with the rest of the office. "Are you Mr. Flowers?"

He straightened up, eyeing her in some surprise, as if a prospective client were the last person he expected to walk through the door. "Well," he answered slowly, "I suppose I am. What can I do for you, young lady?"

She glanced around, seeking a chair, and finally he moved over to retrieve a stack of dusty file folders from the corner of a leather sofa. Mona seated herself gingerly on the edge of it and said, "I need help to get my daughter back. I understand you don't charge too much."

"Who sent you to me?"

"Jean Casey. She's a waitress where I eat lunch. She said you helped locate her ex-husband when he skipped out on her alimony payments."

He nodded vaguely. "I guess I remember her. How old is your daughter?"

"Seventeen. She ran away from home three months ago. I thought she had gone off somewhere, to another city, but then two days ago I saw her. She was standing on the curb along Dakota Street, selling copies of that underground newspaper, *Goat & Compass*. I called to

ner, and she ran. I chased her in the car, and then on foot down an alley, but she got away from me. Yesterday I tried phoning the office of that newspaper, but they wouldn't tell me anything. The man was actually rude to me."

Flowers nodded and moved behind his desk. "Have you tried the police?"

"Of course! They've had her listed as a missing person all along, and the man who talked to me yesterday was very sympathetic, but he explained that there are something like 2,000 runaway teen-agers in this city right now, and they just can't assign special men to it. I was telling Jean about it at lunch, and she suggested you. She said you only charged fifty-five dollars to find her ex-husband."

The man behind the desk nodded. "Yes. Well, as I remember that case it was quite a simple one. For that price about all I'd do would be to go with you to the *Goat & Compass* office. But maybe that would be enough. I don't think they'd be rude to me."

Mona Jeffries opened her purse. "I could give you thirty dollars now, and you could bill me for whatever else it cost."

He stood up suddenly and reached for a seedy sport coat that hung on a rack behind the desk. "All right. We can take a ride over there—see if anyone's talking now."

"Thank you, Mr. Flowers."

"My name's Sam, by the way. Sam Flowers. Where's your husband?"

"Why do you ask?"

"He must be someplace. Away, probably, or he could go with you. Save you fifty bucks."

"He's away, you're right about that. He left me two years ago. I've had trouble with Connie ever since. A girl her age needs a father."

Sam Flowers bit off the end of a cigar and carefully lit it. "Where is he? Is he paying alimony?"

"We're not divorced. He simply deserted me. I suppose I keep thinking he'll come back some day."

The private detective shook his head. "They never come back. Take it from an expert." They went out and he locked the door behind them.

"I guess I don't really care if he returns or not," Mona told him frankly. "I have a good job with a television producer, and I don't need his money. What I need is my daughter back."

Sam Flowers nodded his head slowly, like a puppet with a loose string. A sinister puppet, because puppets were always sinister when they were nearly life-size. "We'll see about getting your daughter back. But don't tell me about how

well-off you are, lady. People who can afford better don't come to Sam Flowers for help."

They went down to the street in silence. He told her to leave her car where it was, and led the way to a battered '65 sedan that seemed to fit his personality somehow. Mona climbed into the front seat next to him, grasping automatically for a seat belt.

"No fancy gadgets in this car," he told her. "But it gets me where I'm going."

They drove across town to a block of run-down stores where the editorial office of the underground paper was located. The sign identifying *Goat & Compass* was sandwiched between the cluttered window of a cut-rate drugstore and the colorful posters of a travel agency. Flowers snorted at the latter and told Mona, "The people who live around here don't need any travel agency for their trips." Then, as an afterthought, he asked her, "Your daughter ever take dope?"

"What?"

"Pot, heroin, LSD—any of that stuff?"

"No. At least, not before she left home. I don't know about now."

He nodded and pushed open the door of the paper's office. A long-haired young man was seated behind a shabby desk, and a blonde girl was typing in a corner of the room. Mona hadn't thought anything could be more dilapidated than Sam Flowers' office, but this place surely was, despite some attempts to liven up the walls with pop-art posters and revolutionary slogans.

"You the boss?" Flowers asked the young man.

"I'm the business manager of *Goat & Compass*, if that's what you mean." He motioned toward the girl at the typewriter. "Sue is managing editor."

"I guess you're the one I want," Flowers told him. He flipped open his wallet to show some identification. "We're looking for a girl who sells papers for you. Name's Connie Jeffries." He showed a little snapshot Mona had brought along.

The young man looked at it. When he dipped his head, the long hair fell over his face, giving him the look of a medieval student in some half-forgotten painting she'd once seen. The cardboard sign on his desk identified him as Wes Dixon. "We have a lot of girls selling the paper for us. And fellas too. I might have seen her around." His glance traveled from the picture to Mona. "You the mother?"

"Yes."

He swiveled in his chair and passed the photo to the girl at the typewriter. "Do we know her, Sue?"

She stopped her typing long ough to scan the picture, then nded it back. "Might be Rick ıeman's girl. Looks a little like r."

"Was she selling papers for you y before yesterday, along Dakota reet?" Flowers asked.

"She might have been." The an-ver was sullen, like the face of the rl who gave it.

"All right. Where can I find ır?"

Both of them were silent for a oment, and then Wes Dixon an-ered. "There's a pad for runaway rls over on Chester Street. About dozen of them live there together. ou might find her there."

"Thanks," Flowers said laconally.

Mona followed him out, and got to the car. "You didn't even ask ıe address," she said.

"I don't need it. I know the lace. I also know we won't find our daughter there."

"But " Mona started to protest.

"You gotta watch these kids ev-y minute. As soon as I mentioned our daughter's name, the gal at the pewriter slid a pack of matches ıto her drawer. She could have left ıem there and I never would have oticed them, but her movement as just a bit too stealthy."

"Did you see where the matches ere from?"

He nodded. "Day-glo green. The only bar in town that has matches like that is Operanto's. It's only a few blocks from here. Want me to drop you off?"

She shook her head, as if to clear away the cobwebs. "I'm coming too."

Operanto's was dim and drab, a few steps down off a street lined with little shops that had given up the pretense of calling themselves boutiques. At that hour of the day the bar was empty, though the askew line of stools hinted at the possibility of recently departed lunchtime drinkers. As her eyes became accustomed to the hazy light, Mona saw that Sam Flowers was speaking in low tones to a tall, dark-haired man at the end of the bar.

Presently he beckoned her over and said, "This is Frank Operanto. Mona Jeffries, the girl's mother."

Operanto was the sort who seemed always to exist in a world of half-light, of afternoon shadows. Mona had the distinct impression that he might simply fade away if he should venture into the sunlight unprotected. "I am pleased to meet you," he told her, making it sound as if he meant it.

"Connie was working here as a waitress," Flowers told her.

"Was?"

Operanto shrugged. "I have not seen her in two days. These young

girls . . ." Then, as if realizing the legal ramifications, he added, "She told me she was eighteen. Otherwise I would never have hired her."

"Where's she staying?" Flowers asked him.

"I don't really know. If I knew, I'd have called to see what happened to her."

"Somebody said she was Rick Yoeman's girl."

The dark-haired man nodded. "It could be. I've seen him in here talking to her."

"Where can we find him?"

"There was the demonstration yesterday, at the quadrangle. I think Rick was one of the kids involved in it."

Mona nodded. The police had used tear gas and other weapons to drive the kids out of the campus quadrangle. Seeing it on television, she'd searched the blurred and bloody faces for some glimpse of Connie, and then, half frantic with fear, gone out to search the streets again for her daughter.

"Was he arrested?" Flowers asked.

"I don't know. I saw him on the fringe of the crowd as I was passing by. There was tear gas, and the cops were firing at the demonstrators with rubber bullets."

"Rubber bullets?" Mona repeated. Perhaps it was all an Alice-in-Wonderland world after all.

"European police use thei sometimes for crowd control," Sa Flowers explained to her. "The sting when they hit you, but don do any permanent damage. Our l cal cops are testing them now."

"On people?"

"How else?" he asked with shrug, and she decided that perha life did not have a great deal meaning to him. She wondere which side he was on, if any side all, between the police and th young people.

"I didn't see Rick after the di turbance," Frank Operanto we on. "And he didn't come here la night. Maybe he was with the girl."

"Maybe," Flowers agreed.

"But you must know where h lives!" Mona insisted. All this circu lar conversation was fraying he nerves.

"I think over on Wilder Street, i that apartment off Dakota. The ol place. At least, that's where he use to bed down. Who knows anymor though? They're all high on gras or selling the stuff. They go out f their demonstrations and g zapped by the police. The world changing, Mr. Flowers."

"Yeah," Sam Flowers agreed. H shook the man's hand and then d parted with Mona.

Outside, she blinked her eyes i the sudden sunlight. "Do you kno Operanto well?" she asked him.

"I did him a favor once. He's not bad sort. People think of him as mething of a gangland figure, but 's really not."

They drove in silence for a few ocks, crossing Dakota and then rcling through a network of back reets to come upon the Wilder reet apartment building that he ught. Mona recognized its ancient ick walls at once.

"That's the place!" she told him. Day before yesterday, when I was asing Connie and lost her! It was ght around the back of that build-g!"

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

He slowed to a stop across the reet from the place, but when she arted to get out he held her arm. Wait!"

"What is it?"

"That girl just going in the front ntrance it's Sue, the one from the *oat & Compass* office."

"You think she came to warn em?"

"Could be. Chances are they on't have a phone."

"But she was the one who men-oned his name."

"That might have slipped out. e was also the one who tried to de the matches."

"What should we do?" she asked.

"Sit tight."

They'd been waiting about five minutes when he broke the silence to ask, "How old are you, lady?"

His question startled her. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, you look about thirty, but with a seventeen-year-old daughter running around . . ."

"I'm thirty-nine," she told him. It was a fact she rarely admitted.

"Yeah. Well, I'm forty-three myself. Some people say I look fifty."

"No, you don't," she assured him, wondering at her words. Why did it matter to her, what this little man felt or said?

He touched her arm lightly and pointed toward the doorway. "She's coming out."

Mona watched the girl hurry to the curb, look quickly in both directions, and then cross the street. "She looks scared."

"Yeah. And she sure wasn't there long. Less than ten minutes."

"What do you think?"

"I think we take a look." He got out of the car, moving like some jungle animal who has watched the water hole and finally decided the time is right to spring.

They entered the ancient brick building and paused only a moment while Flowers checked the names on the mailboxes. Then he led the way silently up the stairs to the second floor. He paused before one of the doors and knocked lightly. When there was no answer he tried

the knob. It turned, and the door opened onto a blackened room. "The drapes are closed," he warned her. "Careful."

She stepped through the darkness to the center of the room and pulled the dangling light cord. In the sudden glare the first thing she saw was Connie, stretched out on a rumpled bunk bed.

"Is that your daughter?" Flowers asked.

"Yes."

Mona went to her, cradling the long brown hair about Connie's head. Her daughter stirred, and muttered something, but did not awaken. Looking over Mona's shoulder, Flowers said, "She's sleeping off a bum trip."

"Drugs?"

"Nothing else. She may be coming around, though." He moved away from the bunk beds, as if sensing it was a time for mother and daughter to be alone.

"Connie! Connie, speak to me! It's your mother!"

The glazed eyes fluttered and opened, but the voice that came with them was only a whisper. "I . . . Mother . . ."

"Connie! Wake up!"

Sam Flowers had come back to stand behind her. At last Connie opened her eyes wide and looked up at them. "Mother, I dreamed you were trying to wake me up and pull me out of bed. It was just lik when I was a child."

"It's all right now," Mona tol her, rocking her gently as she ha so many times when Connie was baby. "Rest now." The eyes close again in obedience to her words.

"I'm afraid it's not all right, Flowers said, very quietly. "Com look at this."

Mona followed him into th apartment's dingy little kitchen. boy with long dark hair, wearin faded dungarees and a T-shirt, wa toppled half under the sink, throw there as if with the rubbish. "Oh! Mona gasped. "Who . . .?"

"I think it's Rick Yoeman," Flow ers told her. "He's been shot. He' dead."

Mona leaned against the refrig erator for support, feeling the fa miliar cold hardness of its surface "You're sure that's who it is?" sh asked.

Flowers finished fishing throug the dead youth's pockets and stoo up. "Yoeman's wallet is in hi pocket. And here's a snapshot o them together—Connie and Rick It's him, all right."

"Do you think that girl—tha Sue—killed him?"

Flowers shook his head. "He' been dead for some time, mayb since last night. But she found th body. That's probably what scare her away so fast."

"Couldn't she have come back r something?"

"Sure, but that would be taking a ıance."

"Who else could have shot him?" Flowers shrugged and glanced ıout the room. "Your daughter, r one."

"Connie? That's impossible! You id yourself she was having a bad ug trip."

"People do crazy things under ugs. She's here, and his body is re."

"But the gun isn't," Mona ıinted out.

"No," Flowers agreed with a ;h. "The gun isn't."

"Then that proves she's innocent. ıd we have to get her out of here fore the police come."

The little detective studied her ce. "All right," he said finally. "I ppose that's what I'm hired for."

They managed somehow to get e dazed girl onto her feet, with ona holding up one side and whis- ring words of reassurance to her ughter while they guided her ward the door. They saw no one the stairs, and the street was al- ost deserted when they reached No eyes seemed to notice them they crossed it to the car.

Once inside, Connie seemed to me around a little more. Iother," she sobbed. "I was so aid!"

"What happened, dear? Tell us what happened?"

"They were shooting at us! There was the demonstration and they were shooting at us!"

"Last night," Flowers said. "The police shot at you."

She nodded agreement.

"But not with real bullets!" Mona insisted. "Surely not that!"

Flowers pointed to a little round bruise on the girl's arm that Mona had overlooked. "Only rubber bullets, lady, like I told you. The boy had some bruises too."

"Rick?" Connie asked, catching that piece of the conversation. "Where is Rick?"

Flowers was not a man for delicate innuendos. "He's dead, back in the apartment. Someone shot him."

"Dead! But . . ." The words caught in her throat, and her eyes began to glaze again. She was not yet far enough out of the drug-induced wilderness.

"What did you take?" Flowers tried to ask her. "LSD?"

But Connie was gone again, her head resting on Mona's shoulder. He started the car and drove slowly, following Mona's directions to her apartment on the west side of the city. Between the two of them they managed to get the girl upstairs and into bed.

"What now?" he asked Mona. "I

should report the body to the police."

"I want her kept out of it," she told him, glancing down at her sleeping daughter. "I have her back now, and I want to keep her."

"I realize that."

"Is there any chance Yoeman was wounded by a police bullet and got back to the apartment before he died?"

Flowers shook his head. "The blood is all in the kitchen, and he couldn't have lived more than a few minutes with that wound."

"Then we're back to the girl, Sue."

"Or your daughter."

"No," Mona said. "Not Connie. I won't believe that, even under drugs."

He sighed and stood by the window, looking out. "You're like mothers everywhere, lady. Never ready to face the worst."

"Can't you question that girl, Sue? Find out what she knows?"

"I could try," he admitted. "But it might be better if you came with me. She might open up more with a woman present."

"Even Connie's mother?"

"Even Connie's mother."

She glanced down at the girl on the bed. "I can't leave her now, She might run away again."

Flowers thought about that. "All right. I'll try to get Sue to come here. That might make more sens anyhow. I'll tell her we've got Co nie here."

She listened to him at the phon surprised when he called the polic first to report Yoeman's body. The he called the office of the *Goat Compass*, and she heard him speal ing to the girl. "The police hav found Yoeman's body, Sue. You' going to be in big trouble . . Well, I'm here with Connie Jeffrie and she says you were in the apar ment where he was killed . . Want to talk about it, Sue? . . Yes, I'll give you the address. Yo come over here."

When he'd hung up, Mona aske "Is she coming?"

"Yes. She's scared."

Mona laughed without humo "Aren't we all?"

Connie still slept on the bed, an they moved to the livingroom, ou of earshot. "This is really a job fo the police," Sam Flowers said. ' handle divorces and runaway hu bands and security cases. I don handle murders."

"You can help me, though, can you? I have no one else to turn to."

"I helped get your daughte back. That's all you hired me for.

"I hired you to save her, damn i She's not saved yet!"

Sam Flowers stared at her, seein her, but not seeming to com prehend. "We're just two peopl

lady. The world is against us. No one saves anybody anymore. People just drift through their lives, trying not to hurt each other too much."

"Now you sound like my husband!"

He moved a bit closer to her side, and she was aware again of how short and soiled he seemed. A man from a world not her own, a man to be bought for a purpose. "There was a time when I wouldn't have minded sounding like your husband, lady."

They sat down to wait for the girl named Sue.

Standing in the center of Mona's livingroom, facing the two of them an hour later, Sue seemed older somehow, more experienced. Her hair half hid a face that was still sullen with defiance, but it seemed no longer the face of a child. "I don't know anything about it," she told Flowers, ignoring the chair Mona had offered her.

"Connie says you were at the apartment."

Sue hesitated and looked from one to the other. Finally she said, "I don't believe that."

"Why? Because she was sleeping on the bed when you went there to kill him?"

"I went there to warn him, damn it! His name slipped out when you showed me Connie's picture. I don't give a damn about her, but I used to care a hell of a lot for Rick Yoeman. I figured she'd be with him, and I wanted to warn him the mother was on the prowl with a private detective. Rick had no phone, so I had to go over there after you left the office today. But he was already dead. I didn't kill him. I wouldn't kill him for anything!"

"And Connie?"

"She was on the bunk bed, asleep. First I tried to wake her, but then I realized she was high on something so I left."

"What about the demonstration yesterday? Were you there?"

"No. Wes went to cover it for the paper, but I didn't."

Flowers moved to the window and glanced out. "Wes Dixon's out there now, isn't he? Waiting for you."

"Is there a law against that, too?"

He ignored her question and asked another himself. "You hang around at Operanto's, don't you?"

"What gives you that idea?"

"You had a pack of matches from there. And that's how you got to know Connie. Right?"

"So?" The sullen look was back, if it had ever gone away.

"What's your last name, Sue?"

"I don't need a last name. Smith. Sue Smith."

Flowers smiled slightly. "On the

masthead of the *Goat & Compass* the managing editor is listed as Sue Operanto. That's you, isn't it?"

"He's my uncle. What's that supposed to make me?"

"Nothing special. It helps explain why you were hanging around there. Now, what about the demonstration?"

"I told you I wasn't there." Then, "Where's Connie? You said she was here."

"In the bedroom. She's still recovering from her trip."

Sue Operanto glanced around, moving out of the center of the room for the first time. "Fancy place you got here. I never knew Connie came from a family like this."

"Connie . . ." Mona began, but she was cut off by the opening of the bedroom door. Connie herself stood there, looking from one to the other of them.

"What is all this?" she asked. "What are you doing here, Sue?"

Sue Operanto faced her. "Somebody killed Rick. He's dead."

If Connie had known it before, remembered them telling her in the apartment, she had forced it out of her mind. Now, as the knowledge came flooding back, her face crumpled into tears. "I didn't kill him," she mumbled, sobbing. "I wouldn't kill him. I loved him."

"You don't want to stay here," Sue told her. "Let me take you away."

Mona stepped quickly between them. "She's not leaving. Haven't you and your friends done enough to her already?"

"I think that's up to her to say, Mrs. Jeffries."

The door buzzer sounded, and Flowers moved around them to open it. Wes Dixon had come up from the car. "What's taking so long, Sue? We've got to get back to the office."

"Connie wants to come with us," the sullen-faced girl told him.

"No!" Mona rasped, and the voice sounded strange to her ears. "She doesn't go anywhere!"

Wes Dixon looked past her to the girl. "Connie? Do you want to leave here?"

There was a moment's hesitation, and then Mona heard her daughter answer, "Yes, I think I do."

Mona turned to Sam Flowers. "Stop them! They're taking my daughter away."

Flowers didn't move. He seemed rooted to the spot. "There's nothing I can do," he said at last.

Connie stepped around her mother and went to the door with Sue and Wes. She paused and turned, and seemed about to say something.

"Connie. Come back . . ."

"Thank you, mother, for caring."

Then, abruptly, they were gone.

Mona turned to Flowers, her eyes tearing with fury. "Couldn't you stop them?"

"Nobody could stop them."

"I still can," she said, and whirled toward the bedroom. Blindly, fighting back the tears, she ran to the closet and fumbled for the gun. She had it in her hand, running toward the window, when Sam Flowers grabbed her and knocked it to the floor. "Let me go!" she screamed.

"Isn't one killing enough, Mrs. Jeffries?"

She toppled onto the rumpled bed, close to hysterics. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you killed Rick Yoeman, Mrs. Jeffries. I'm not much of a detective, but I know that much."

Sam held the gun carefully, with a string looped through the trigger guard. "You called the police?" she asked him.

He didn't need to answer. He sat down on the edge of the bed facing her. "I never had a daughter myself," he said. "Or a son either. I suppose it's like this, huh?"

She sighed, staring down at her hands. "Yes, it is. You work all your life for them, and then when your husband's gone they're all you have left. I saw her in the street the other day, and I knew I had to have her back. I ran after her, and lost her, but then last night, seeing the demonstration on television, seeing all those bloodied faces, I had to go out looking again. I went to the apartment house near where I'd lost her the day before, and after a time I saw them going in. It took me a while to find the right apartment, and get him to open the door. By that time my Connie was high on LSD. She didn't know what was happening. I tried to get her out of the bed, but I couldn't. He'd done it to her, that and more! You can't know what I felt in that moment."

"You had this gun in your purse?"

She nodded. "With what they were showing on TV, I didn't dare go out without it. I followed him into the kitchen and we argued. He told me he'd never let Connie go, that she was his now. I took out the gun and shot him."

"And then?"

"Then I tried to get Connie out of there, but I couldn't. I was in an absolute panic. In trying to save my daughter I'd gotten her in worse trouble, left her in a room with a murdered man. I couldn't call the police, and I couldn't get her out of there without help. Finally I had to abandon her. I was hoping she'd come to and get out of there when the drug wore off. But in the event she didn't, I still had to save her. I knew no one had heard the shot, and that the body would go un-

discovered at least till this morning. So I came to you."

Flowers nodded. "Because that waitress said I was cheap, and I looked seedy. You needed someone who could locate that apartment, with a little help from you, and get your daughter out of there, without tumbling to the truth."

She nodded. "You found it quite fast, actually. I didn't even have to help you." Then she looked up, meeting his eyes. "But how did you know?"

"Four things," he said. "Maybe there were more, but like I said, I'm not much of a detective. You said you hired me because I was cheap, because you couldn't afford any better. But you have a good job as a television producer, and you don't even need money from your runaway husband. This apartment is fancy, too. When I saw it, I got to thinking about the other things, and decided you didn't come to Sam Flowers because you couldn't afford better. You came because you didn't want better."

"What were the other three things?" she asked. It had been a long day, and she was tired.

"When we entered Yoeman's darkened apartment today, you walked immediately to the light cord in the center of the room. How'd you know it was there? Most lights have switches on the walls, not cords hanging from the ceiling. That told me you'd been there before. Then, in the kitchen, you pointed out that the gun wasn't in the apartment, using that to support Connie's innocence. But we hadn't even looked for the gun yet. I'd barely disturbed the body. If you knew the gun was gone, it could only have been because you took it."

"And the last thing?"

"Connie said she dreamed of you trying to wake her, trying to pull her from the bed. But of course that was no dream, only Connie's drug-fogged memory of last night."

"You're a good detective, Mr. Flowers. I shouldn't have come to you."

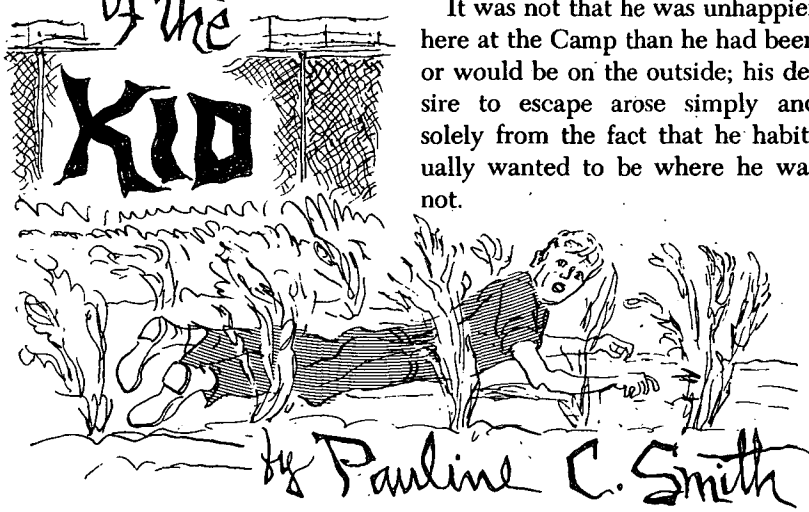
He shook his head sadly and stood up. A car was stopping outside in the street, but she didn't want to see who it was. "The thing you shouldn't have done was kill Rick Yoeman, lady."

"When he saw the gun, he just stood there. He didn't even try to run."

"Yeah," Sam Flowers said. "Maybe he still thought they were rubber bullets."

What is bred in the bone, it is said, will never come out in the flesh.

The Luck of the Kid



by Pauline C. Smith

HE WAS a skinny kid, lacking muscle, weight, blood and purpose. He also lacked the ability to foresee variables in order to judge possible results.

Working rapidly and diligently along the beet and carrot rows, he widened the space between himself and other laboring inmates of the Camp. He had no plan of action. He knew only that once he reached the chain-link fence that hemmed him in, he would attempt to break out.

It was not that he was unhappier here at the Camp than he had been or would be on the outside; his desire to escape arose simply and solely from the fact that he habitually wanted to be where he was not.

Sweat poured from his face and neck to darken the denim hollow between winglike shoulder blades. The salty moisture fell in drops to smart and blink his eyes, but the stroke of his hoe remained rhythmically fast—not efficient, only fast—as he moved from row to more remote row, closer and closer to the

pattern of steel between him and freedom.

His method for escape was, as yet, nonexistent, only the idea of action. He would reach the fence and get out—someway, somehow. The hot sun directly overhead and his empty stomach should have warned him of approaching lunch time with its bell call from the long, low buildings in the distance and noonday attention from the guards, but the kid thought only of the proximity of the fence and not of the approximation of discovery.

He skipped a row and glanced with sweat-bleared eyes at the fence, so close now he could almost touch it. He looked back over the gardens and the working boys, caught in quiescent attitudes of immobile waiting for the sound of the dinner bell that they, at least, knew was at hand.

The bell clanged its summons.

Guards woke from daydreams.

The boys dropped their hoes and turned noisily, like hungry fledglings, toward the buildings, source of food.

Startled by the sudden clamor of sound and activity, the kid sprawled, flattening beets and carrots. He lay there in his own sweat and the water of his fear, waiting to be yelled at . . . *Hey, kid, get the lead out!*

With the sun crystals and heat puddles in their eyes, the guards focused only within the close and clear perimeter of their nearby charges. Anyway, the kid had worked so fast and so far that he had been forgotten.

So it was with his usual luck—all bad—that the kid heard the receding sounds of the boys, marched by guards, toward the regimentation and the protection of the Camp buildings.

He waited, unmoving, before lifting his head just high enough to spit out the dirt and turn it slowly and carefully to see the last of the figures, small now in the distance, swallowed by the doors.

He rubbed the backs of his hands over his eyes, mud-smearing his sweat-soaked face. Then he inched his way on his belly toward the fence, still not thinking of a way out, only thinking of out.

Since there was a morning count and an evening count of the boys, the kid would not be missed at noon. This, too, would be his usual brand of luck, for they would not find him gone until nightfall.

He panicked and became frantic when, on his belly, he reached the fence to discover that the steel bracings were flush with the earth. He raised his hands and crawled his fingers through the lower mesh, too small for a toehold. He twisted his head to look up, noticing now the

heavy barbed wire curled along the top like a crown of thorns. Even if he took off his heavy shoes and managed to get a big toe of each foot in the mesh, then out again, to climb the fence, the thorns of that barbed wire would tear him to ribbons. Vaguely, he was aware of that possibility.

He slithered snakelike, along the edge of the fence, and not more than twenty feet from his starting point he discovered an escape ditch caused by a dog or some small wild animal who had wanted to get in or out.

The kid laid his cheek against the earth, laughing and crying with relief.

His luck was still holding and it was still bad.

He set about, then, to continue to claw the already-softened ground of the ditch in order to make it wider and deeper.

The boys had finished eating and were shoving and jostling in horseplay during their usual after-lunch relaxation period in the recreation rooms by the time the kid had deepened the ditch enough to try it.

His fingers were raw and bloody where they had scraped buried rocks and pebbles, his arms weary and his shoulders sore from the prone position he'd been forced to assume in order to maintain partial concealment.

Now he was ready to get free.

Still flat, he looked back at the buildings, quiet and dark in the sunshine. Then, drawing in his breath, he slid his skinny frame into the still-shallow, still-narrow trench, pushing himself with his elbows. He straightened his arms at his sides, arched his back and wriggled his body so that his head was on the other side of the fence, finally his shoulders, bringing his chest hard against the rise of ground he had been unable to reach and had forgotten to think about.

He could feel the lower steel brace of the fence hot against his bare skin between denim shirt and denim pants. He sobbed once and crossed his fingers at his sides, hoping for luck, drew up one knee so that the brace pressed tight against his back, dug the knee into unyielding soil. It looked there, for one agonizing moment, as if he wouldn't get the luck his crossed fingers prayed for—then he did, his kind of bad luck—popping his head upward, freeing his back.

He closed his eyes against the pain, breathing heavily. At last, he dragged his body out of the shallow ditch, scrambling, pulling himself trembling, to the other side and crawled into the sheltering weeds, where he lay, arms wrapped around his head, waiting for the thunder to leave his ears and the lightning to

leave his brain so he could think.

His scraped back grew alive and became a smoldering fire. The kid drew his knees up, crouching on them, to pull up his shirt and unbuckle his pants so he could lower them to his hips and allow the air to the flame of his back.

He was sobbing now with freedom; dry, aching sobs of exhaustion and pain.

He heard then, the faint explosion of sound from the buildings back within the fence as the boys burst forth to supervised work again in the gardens, and his sobs softened in weary exultation that he had been lucky enough to gain the outside.

He winced as he rebuckled his pants over the scraped raw tenderness of his back, and winced again as he dropped his shirt. He crawled stiffly, his fingers hot and hurting each time he put the palms of his hands down to push himself through sparse weeds.

He crept off to the right, not planning his getaway, but a right-hand direction would take him out of sight of the Camp quicker than straight ahead or to the left. He could *see* that, he didn't have to figure it out. Anyway, the weeds were thicker to the right, into fields that grew only weeds.

When the buildings had become tiny dots on the land behind him, the kid stood at last and walked upright, and every searing ache in his body—hands, fingers, knees, legs, back and shoulders—converged and multiplied so that he could feel no part of himself free of it.

He stumbled on the rough untilled ground and blessed the luck of his freedom.

It was later that the torment of his body numbed to allow the torture of hunger and thirst to be felt. He thought of cold, sparkling water, ice cubes, fruit, juicy hamburgers, falling to the ground as he thought of food and drink, only to rise again, sure that his luck would not desert him—and, his luck did not.

The farmhouse stood on a square of dull, unthrifty grass, mowed short to reveal gray, barren earth patches. It was the first farmhouse within five miles this side of the Camp, and the only one in a section noted for poor soil.

The farm was neat, fields ploughed in clay-colored cakes, planted crops staggered in infertile rows. The sounds of stock animals lowed and lulled from the barns and stalls, shady oases in the shimmering heat of late afternoon.

The woman in the kitchen hated the place and her life here. She cried, "You promised we could leave. Give it five years, you said,

then if you want to leave, okay."

"I unpromise," said the man stubbornly.

"It's been twice that long—ten years—and I've had it up to here . . ." The woman sliced her fingers along her throat.

Without expression, the man explained. "This land will be worth something someday. Things'll move out this way. Just you wait and see."

"Wait. Wait. Wait." She rolled her eyes ceilingward as if his were a refrain she had heard often. "Wait. Wait. All I've done is wait. Never see anyone. Never hear anyone. No one . . ."

"What you want," interrupted her husband, "is the bright lights and a lot of chatter."

"Yes," she cried, "that's what I want. I want people, people to talk to, people to be with . . . not this." She spread her arms wide and with contempt.

"Oh, not this," her husband mimicked her soprano passion. "Not decency and clean air and the solitude to think."

"To *think*?" she screamed. "What do you think about? Those dumb animals out in the barn, and the rabbits that eat the few crops that come up? You know what you do? You coddle the animals and cuddle that gun of yours to kill other animals, and curdle my soul!"

She laughed at her alliteration, feeling clever at having uttered it. She had been a pretty woman who was growing unpretty with lonely frustration.

She left her husband shattered, without answering argument, as he reached for his rationalization and her accusation—the shotgun—cradling it like a baby.

The woman shrugged in momentary truce and turned to the stove where the chicken potpie was ready to take from the oven. Turning, glancing through the screen door, she saw the kid limping up the back path, looking like something her husband might have left behind after he had shot a marauding rabbit raider.

"Hey!" she brightened. Here was company for her and a foe for her husband.

"Hi," she greeted the kid, opening the screen door in wide hospitality.

Luck, the kid thought; he was riding his luck, right into friendly refuge.

The kid hesitated, rocking on his blistered feet. He saw the woman through a mottled red haze.

"Hungry?" she asked. "Thirsty?" bringing into focus his two basic needs.

He stumbled through the door and stood dazed before the leveled barrel of the shotgun pointed at his

guts. He backed to the threshold.

The woman blocked the gun.

Moving swiftly, she crossed the room in front of him, knocked the aim of the gun aside with the flat of her hand and snarled, "What the hell's that for?"

The man's face, still sullen, had added a brooding suspicion. "He's a stranger," he said.

"So. He's a stranger," shrugged the woman and turned to shed upon the kid an indulgent smile. "Sit down, stranger."

The kid half turned, intimidated by the gun and doubtful of the smile, as if to flee toward a place, any but this that was like all others, a place filled with hostility and friendly antagonism.

"I've got a chicken potpie and you must be thirsty."

The kid swayed on his swollen blistered feet. In the haze of his vision, he saw the gun lying harmlessly on the man's knees and the smile resting innocently on the woman's face; his throat felt arid, his tongue bristled dryly, his stomach rolled with hunger, and he sat.

As he sat, the man caught the distinctive insignia imprinted on the shoulders of the kid's denim shirt. He rose in triumph and pointed the gun, waveringly, at the back of the kid's head. "He's from that camp," cried the man.

The woman whirled from the refrigerator, stared at her husband.

The kid twisted rigidly on his chair, his face frozen.

"That camp for bad boys. He's come to steal us blind."

"Hell," said the woman, "what could he steal?"

She drew a crystal pitcher of cold water from the refrigerator. "He's thirsty's what he is." Pouring the water, sparkling, into a tall glass, she handed it to the kid.

The kid took it. Eyes on the gun, he drank in loud thirsty gulps.

"He escaped," cried the man. "Look at him. He got out some way and got away . . ."

"So he got out," said the woman. "Lucky him. He got out."

The man lowered himself, by degrees, to his chair again, and laid the gun slowly across his knees, watching the kid and finding no words to answer his wife, who took the now-empty glass from the kid, half-filled it to hand it back, and turned to the oven, drawing forth the steaming chicken potpie.

"Now, watch it," she warned over her shoulder. "Don't drink too much of that water or you'll be sick all over my kitchen floor."

The kid set the glass down with a thump, and swallowed mightily.

The woman laughed.

She dished the potpie generously into a shallow soup bowl and maternally added a spoon so that the

kid could spoon up all the good rich gravy, and set it down before him, looking over it at her husband with a blank stare.

"They'll be after him," said the man.

"Who's they?" asked the woman.

"Those people at the camp. They'll find him missing, then they'll go out to look for him."

"Okay," said the woman.

"And here you are, feedin' him—an escaped kid."

"Sure," she said. "I'm feedin' him *because* he escaped. He's got a right."

"What are you going to do about him after?"

"I'm thinkin' about it," said the woman.

The kid ate; involved, obsessed with eating, half-chewing the succulent chunks of chicken, swallowing, wishing to call back the swallow, feeling that he had not savored it enough, and shoveling in another mouthful quickly before the taste of the last was gone.

"We're law-abiding people," declared the man in pious fear. "Look at the kid. All bunged up. Maybe he hurt someone—or killed 'em, getting away."

The woman turned to look at the kid, his head in the bowl of potpie, and asked, "How did you get out?"

He raised his head from the bowl, dragged the back of his hand across his lips, the question reactivating the ache of his spine and shoulders, the pain in his legs and knees, the swell of his feet now balloon-tight within the rough inner lining of his shoes, to pour the sweat of his brow in slow clean rivers of memory down his dirt-streaked face. He looked at the woman with indrawn disregard and returned again to the bowl.

"He found a way," said the woman to her husband.

She looked again at the kid who was scraping the bottom of the bowl with his spoon. "More?" she asked.

He did not answer except with his eyes. She took the bowl and went to the stove where she filled it once again.

Returning to the table, she held the bowl just out of reach of the kid's outstretched hands. "What are you going to do for this food?" she asked. "How are you going to pay for it?"

The kid, his eyes never leaving the bowl, spoke for the first time. "I'll work," he promised, his voice rusty as if rarely used. "I can work good. I'm strong."

The woman laughed. "You look it," she said scornfully and set the bowl down.

"I won't have him working here," said the man.

"He'll be company," the woman

answered him. "Something different. Maybe perk up the place."

"He's a prisoner," the man said.

"Sure he is."

"He might be dangerous."

She turned objective eyes upon the kid who ate with waning gusto, breathing deeply between bites, feeling the food and the heat of the food pile up inside him, tranquilizing his aches, pacifying his need for action.

The kid was satisfied, or had arrived as close to satisfaction as he would ever know; he was content as far as he realized contentment; and happy, or as near to happiness as he could judge.

The bowl was empty and he leaned back in the chair.

"Could be he *is* dangerous," conceded the woman. "But what have we got now? No danger, no nothing. And it'll go on like that, leave it to you, waiting for the land to be worth something, waiting for things to move out this way, waiting for people, waiting for excitement, waiting for life."

The woman forgot the kid in her zest for complaint.

So did the man in his need for vindication. "So what's wrong with waiting a while?" he argued. "What's wrong, huh? What's wrong with that? It's a good life here—decent, clean, busy and private."

The kid cleared his throat, edged out of his chair and turned to face the two. He remained in a half-seated crouch. "I just thought . . ." he said in his rusty, seldom-used voice, "I just thought . . . to pay for the stuff I ate . . ."

The woman whirled, her eyes blankly forgetful.

The man stared vacantly.

"I thought maybe I could work . . ." began the kid once more under the steady disregard of the man and the woman. "Help out a little . . ." He spoke against their abstraction so complete it seemed they could neither hear nor see him.

He felt vague and unreal, an urgent need building again, as always within him, mounting into compulsion to move from this place toward another where he might become somebody with substance and meaning . . .

It was his luck that he had stumbled in upon these two during a continued disagreement, interrupted only long enough to use him as impetus.

He swayed, the instinctive impulse to leave, to run, to escape from this place of indifference toward another spreading, expanding, distending until it burst into wild and awkward action, whirling him toward the door with his back to the man and the woman.

Now they both gazed at him in recognition, the man seeing him as

a means of retaliation, the woman as escape from a trap.

In one fluid and involuntary motion, the man rose and swung the gun to point it at the departing kid. The woman, just as automatically, lunged and grabbed for the barrel.

The sounds of scuffle stumbled the kid to a halt. He looked over his shoulder and caught a chair back to steady himself in a half-turn. His mouth dropped open, his eyes widened to see, as separate and distinct acts of violence, rapid and precise, the woman's clutch on the barrel of the gun, her quick yank to set it free, her vicious swing of the stock that felled the man with a crash.

The kid stared in disbelief as he saw her deliberately whip the gun into position, finger the trigger and fire point-blank at the man on the floor.

Floundering in panic, the kid backed off. He had almost reached the door when the woman wheeled and turned the gun on him. "Now look what you've done!" she screamed with only the passion of rehearsal as she planned the accusation aloud, added the cause and explained, by performance, her own legally excusable act of retribution.

The kid reached the door, sobbing and whimpering. He pushed against the screen, blind hands fumbling for the latch.

"You escaped from that camp and broke in here," screamed the woman in cold calculation. "You shot my husband with his own gun when he tried to defend his home from you . . ."

The gun roared, drowning out the last of her words.

The kid didn't hear the report. He felt only the impact as the shot spread in a widening circle, spinning him through the screen to sprawl half in and half out of the house he had been lucky enough to find.

He lay there, looking up at the rosy sky of sunset. They would count the boys now, back at camp, and know that he was gone; really gone, finally gone from one place to another, with no more places left to go. He closed his eyes, thinking of all the places and all his luck—this the worst of the places and dying the worst of his luck.

It has long been said that money alone sets the world afire; perhaps equally so, one might add, does the lack of it.

IT STARTED with a phone call. "This is Charles Margold, the local representative of *Tycoon.* We're interested in doing a story on you. Could you give me some time soon for an interview?"

Well, of course I was sure it was somebody's idea of a joke. Oh, sure, there'd been a paragraph about me once in *Today,* and once in a while my name pops up in one of our local columns, and the *Wall Street Reporter* had once had a semi-facetious editorial, but I knew I didn't rate a full-length profile in *Tycoon*—not yet. (I'm changing all the names, naturally.) "Boy Wonder of the Stock Exchange"—huh! I'm not such a boy anymore, being then 26, and neither am I such a wonder; I'd had a few lucky breaks and I suppose I do have some aptitude, but that's about all.

So I answered smoothly that I was pretty well tied up right then, and could I call him back in a few days. No, he said, they had no office here and he was out of town most of the time. He'd call me—this was Tuesday, so say Friday. I OK'd that.

I talk every day to people in New

York, so the next morning after I'd closed a transaction I asked if the man I was talking to would do me a favor: would he phone *Tycoon* and ask them if they had a representative in this area and if so what his name was. The next morning he told me, yes, they had, and his name was Charles Margold.

So this time, though I still didn't get the point, I told Margold I could see him one afternoon the next week. The Exchange here opens at 7 a.m., to match 10 a.m. in New York, so our afternoons are more or less flexible.

He was a rather heavyset but good-looking blond man, about five or six years older than I, I should think. He brought along a tape recorder. When I demurred about being eligible for that kind of recognition, he just smiled and said, "Let us be the judges of that, Mr. Hallam."

He was thoroughly professional. Besides my business career, he went into all kinds of personal detail—place and date of birth, education, was I married (I'm not), where and how did I live (in a suburb north of the city, in an apartment with a view of the Bay), and I don't know what all. He must have taken up two hours before he was satisfied. I asked him when the article would appear, and he laughed and said, "If you were the oldest stockbroker in America I'd have them rush it, but we make up the magazine five months ahead and there's no guarantee you'd be in till two or three months after that. When it's scheduled I'll submit the manuscript to you, and you can make any corrections you want or add anything that's happened since. I'll bring a photographer then to take some pictures. Perhaps we can take some human-interest shots in your home, too."

So that was that; and that was the last I ever saw of Mr. Charles Margold.

Time went on and it was about seven months later, and I began to

wonder what had happened to that story. Maybe after they saw it they decided I wasn't worth the space after all, but I could hardly call *Tycoon* in New York and inquire. I did try to find Margold in the phone book but he wasn't there; I decided he must live out of town, like me, or was unlisted.

So you can imagine my bewilderment when I got a letter from the Third National Bank thanking me for my business. The Third National isn't my bank and I've never had any dealings with it. The letter was signed "S. P. Chadwick, Assistant Cashier," so I phoned and asked him what it was all about. "Why," he said, "that $2500 you borrowed to cover your trip to Caracas."

"I never borrowed $2500 or anything else from you," I told him. "And I've certainly never been to Caracas—that's Venezuela, isn't it? You must have the wrong guy."

"Not at all," he answered. "We couldn't have, because naturally we checked your credit references, after Mr. Sweet referred you to us." He sounded apologetic. "If that was one of our formal notes of thanks, as it must have been, it's just a polite way of reminding you that repayment is overdue on your note. But with your standing, of course we'd be glad to renew."

By this time I was in a dither. "Who's Mr. Sweet?" I asked, and then *he* was in a dither. Finally we agreed I'd better come in and see him, and he'd get this Mr. Sweet, whoever he was, to come too. We got together the same afternoon.

Sweet, it seemed, was the manager of the Land-and-Ocean Travel Bureau, a little fussy man with a mustache and glasses, going bald.

He was there when I arrived, and as soon as I'd introduced myself he took one look at me and said excitedly, "*That's* not Ronald Hallam! This man is an impostor!"

I didn't know whether to get mad or to laugh, so I laughed.

"Well," I said, "my parents always told me that was my name, and I've had it all my life, and I can bring in any number of people who will testify that it still is. What on earth *is* all this?"

So then Sweet told his story. A few days after that interview, a man had come into his place and introduced himself as Ronald Hallam, giving my address and my business connections. He wanted a first-class round-trip air ticket to Caracas for the following week. He was being sent there by his firm—my firm—on an important deal, something about Venezuelan bonds.

"What did he look like?" I asked.

He described my Charles Margold to the life.

Then I started to give my account, but Sweet said, wait a min-

ute, let him finish. This man—Margold or whoever he was—drew out a checkbook to pay for the ticket; then he made a wry face and said, "It's a nuisance. The auditing procedures at my firm are being changed and that means they won't reimburse me for the trip till I get back. I'll have to advance my expenses out of my personal savings. I can do it, all right, but I don't like to draw that much out in one lump, even temporarily."

"Why don't you just borrow on a short-term note from your bank to cover it?" Sweet suggested.

"I suppose I could, but it's kind of embarrassing. I've just changed banks and I don't like to start out by borrowing from them." He sighed and pulled out his fountain pen.

But suppose he changed his mind at the last minute and said he'd be back after he'd decided what to do about the money? And then suppose whoever he got it from recommended another travel agent?

Sweet, like me, wasn't born yesterday. He excused himself for a minute and called my office and asked if I was really one of the firm. Of course they said yes. He didn't ask to speak to me, because he thought he had me sitting right by his desk. Everybody in this city knows our firm and knows its reputation is irreproachable, so Sweet felt safe in doing w[illegible] before for trustworthy p[illegible] wanted to make sure of the [illegible] for that ticket. "I'd be glad t[illegible] vouch for you at my own bank," he said, "if you'd prefer that."

So—Chadwick chimed in—the two of them had come right over to him and "Ronald Hallam" had negotiated a $2500 loan to cover the Venezuelan trip. Of course Chadwick checked my credit references at once, and I can say modestly that nobody could have better ones.

OK. Sweet and "Hallam" went back to the Land-and-Ocean, the ticket was bought and paid for, and the man who said he was me marched out with that and $1300 more of the Third National's money; and just as I'd never seen or heard from Margold since the interview, that was the last of him as far as either Chadwick or Sweet was concerned. So Chadwick wrote that letter to me.

"There's just one thing we can do to get this thing straightened out," I said. "Let's ask *Tycoon* how we can reach Margold and see what happens next."

Chadwick phoned New York right then and there, and seeing who he was, he got the information, Margold's home address and his unlisted phone number. He called there and a woman, probably his

wife, said he was away but would be back the next day. So the three of us arranged another date, with Margold included—or with further grounds for some kind of action if he ducked out.

He was there, all right, when I walked in, and just as I hadn't been the "Hallam" that Sweet had dealt with (Chadwick, it turned out, had been puzzled but didn't recall the man well enough to want to say I didn't look like him), so the real Charles Margold, ten years older and at least four inches taller, in no way resembled the guy who had made that tape recording in my office.

I told him my story again, and being a newspaperman he thought of angles that hadn't occurred to the rest of us.

"He asked you where and when you were born?" he wanted to know.

"Sure; I told him Minneapolis, and the date. He even asked just where, and I told him the name of the hospital. And he asked my mother's and father's names. He said those personal details added color to a profile."

"They're also necessary to get a passport," Margold commented dryly. "My guess is that this con man immediately applied for a passport in your name, with your data. The description and photograph wouldn't matter; they wouldn't know the difference. As soon as he got it, he left for Caracas.

"Of course he hasn't stayed there. He probably sold the return half of his ticket right away, and moved on to anywhere his little heart desired, doubtless to some big place like Rio or Buenos Aires where he could work out another money-making scheme, if he can talk Spanish or Portuguese. Or maybe to the nearest English-speaking country—what would that be? Panama? Jamaica? Anyway, somewhere where he could glom onto enough more money to get back comfortably to his next major scene of operations. One place it won't be is here—ever. He's evidently making a career of this sort of game, with variations, in heaven knows how many places."

The three others of us just sat and stared at one another for a minute. It sounded only too likely. Then Chadwick began to make noises about the police. After all, it was the bank that was going to be out $2500. *I* hadn't borrowed the money, and Sweet couldn't be held responsible for thinking in good faith he had recommended me.

I put my foot down right away on that. The papers and TV would inevitably get hold of it, and I'd be the butt of the Exchange for sure. I said I'd rather pay the money back

myself, if I had to, to punish myself for being fooled like some old-lady victim of the found-wallet con game, but Chadwick said that couldn't be done.

Besides, what could the police do? What could even the FBI do, if it came within their province? A million people looked like the man who had posed as Margold and then as me, nobody knew his right name, and he might be anywhere on earth. Chadwick suggested miserably that he must have left his fingerprints on the papers he'd signed, but he took the originals and there wasn't a chance of prints on the carbon copies. He'd long ago erased the tape even if we had any idea where to find the recorder, which of course we hadn't. I suppose he'd touched a dozen places in all three of our offices, but how could we distinguish which prints were his after all this time and the hundreds superimposed upon them?

I could see poor Chadwick trembling for his job, or his chances of promotion—and maybe Sweet, too—but making it public would only do both of them harm, as well as me. I don't suppose it was the first time either the bank or the travel bureau had pulled a boner, and the sum was too small to make a big hullabaloo about. Obviously our wily friend had been too smart to ask for enough to arouse suspicion, so he'd got away with it.

Margold—the real Margold—began to chuckle, and we all looked at him sourly. We could hear the wave of chuckles that would engulf us if we couldn't keep the whole thing to ourselves.

"I shouldn't think your magazine would be pleased to know that somebody had picked their representative to impersonate in order to facilitate a crime," Chadwick remarked severely, and Margold stopped chuckling and looked meditative.

"I think the least you could do, to compensate Mr. Hallam for this annoyance, would be to arrange for an actual write-up about him," Sweet put in.

Margold began to sputter something about having no say in such matters, so I put him out of his misery.

"I wouldn't even be interested," I said. "I was an idiot to let that fellow con me into believing I was *Tycoon* material—not at this stage of my career, anyway—and the last thing I want is anything that would draw particular attention to me."

I had a sudden vision of how one of the local newspaper columnists would poke polite fun at the "boy wonder," and how one thing might lead to another.

"I'll have to take it up with my superior, of course," Chadwick said.

"But under the circumstances I guess he'll agree that the more we can keep it in the family the better for all of us. We'll just have to charge it up as a bad debt."

We acquiesced, and that's what happened. (I still get a kind of sinking feeling in my stomach when I open my monthly number of *Tycoon.*) I'm not likely ever to have any dealings with the Third National, but if I ever do take a long vacation trip anywhere I'd feel obligated to give the business to Sweet. So far, I've never seen any of them since, and it's six months now. One person I'm sure I'll never see again—not if he can help it—is that amiable blond man who recorded the story of what he called my "brilliant career."

But now I'm at such a distance from it, I can see the funny side. It seems a shame not to be able to tell it, ever; if it were published somewhere, with fake names and all, it might even put some other poor sucker on the alert sometime.

Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't I write it as fiction and send it to a magazine? Whoa, hold your horses; of course I couldn't. I certainly don't want my name on a by-line, and anyway, everybody knows I'm not a writer and never could be one.

Wait a minute: here's a Machiavellian scheme worthy of our daring impostor himself. Why don't I send it in, using the name of a *real* writer about crime as the author? *I* don't mind if he gets the pay and the glory, so that nobody ever connects it with me. I have to laugh when I picture his confusion when a story he knows he never wrote gets accepted and published as his. Excuse me for being cynical, but I bet $100 he'd keep his mouth shut and deposit the check.

Maybe he'd think he was going nuts—that he really did write it and forget it, and he'd be afraid to delve into the matter for fear that was true. Oh, gosh, I might ruin the poor guy's life. Nonsense; he must keep carbon copies of his stuff, whichever crime writer I pick, and he'd find he had no copy of this.

I don't know, maybe I oughtn't to. Maybe I will, just for kicks.

I guess I will. Here goes . . .

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One never ceases to be amazed at what a little patience and a proper imaginative approach can accomplish.

THE KILLING

by Bill Pronzini

MARTIN COE was a monolithic individual, with features carved from whiskey-veined marble and eyes as warm as frozen Alaskan tundra. In the month I had known him, he had never openly displayed emotion of any kind—until this very moment. Now, he leaned forward across the booth table, staring at me with disbelief plainly mirrored on the hard surface of his face. "What did you say?"

"How would you like it," I repeated slowly, distinctly, "if your wife were suddenly to die?"

He looked furtively around, as if he were certain someone had overheard us, but except for ourselves, two barmen, and three elderly men at a table across the room, the lounge of the Warm Springs Country Club was empty. Coe's eyes came back to me, and he whispered, "Just what are you suggesting, Foster?"

"I was merely speculating."

"I . . . don't care for that sort of speculation."

"Don't you?" I asked him matter-of-factly. "If Sondra were dead, you'd have control of all her money, wouldn't you? And of course, you'd be free to marry Angela."

Coe's mouth opened.

"Oh, yes, I know about Angela,"

I said. "She's very lovely, isn't she, Coe? And so much more desirable than frail and sexless Sondra."

He continued to stare at me for a long moment; then, jerkily, he raised his glass to his mouth and drank half the brandy-and-soda it contained in a single convulsive swallow. He was trying to gain control of himself, and of the situation, but I had the ball and I intended to keep it.

I said, "Frail, middle-aged women are forever dying, you know. Accidents, heart seizures, suicides—there are literally hundreds of ways and means."

Coe seemed to be having difficulty breathing. "Who are you, Foster?" he demanded softly. "You're not an independent financial consultant, are you? And you didn't just happen to strike up a conversation with me accidentally that night four weeks ago, did you?"

"Right on both counts," I said, and smiled.

"Who *are* you?" he asked again.

I shrugged expansively. "Let's just say I'm an eliminator of problems, a remover of burdens."

"A killer," Coe said. "A professional assassin." His voice was more wonderingly interested at the idea than appalled by it, and that confirmed my position. I had him, all right; I had him good.

"I don't care for that particular appellation," I said, "but I suppose it's accurate enough."

"How did you get into a private country club like this? You can't be a member!"

I laughed softly. "No, but I have friends who are, Coe. I really do lead a rather normal existence, you know."

"Am I to understand that you're offering me your . . . professional services?"

"That's correct."

We watched each other for a time, and then Coe said, "You know what I ought to do right now?"

"What's that?"

"Turn you in to the police."

"But you're not going to, are you?"

"No," he said, his eyes fastened on mine.

"I didn't think so," I said. "Of course, if you had so decided, it wouldn't really have mattered—except in the area of finances. I would simply have denied speaking to you as I did just now, and since you would have no proof of your accusation, that would be that. And I do have an impeccable reputation in my home city, if the police cared to check on me."

It was Coe's turn to smile now, but the humor on his mouth did not reach the cold wastes of his eyes. "You must have researched me very

refully, Foster," he observed.
"Oh, I did."
"How did you get my name?"
"I have friends locally, as I said."
"Scouts, is that it?"
"If you like."
He took a thin, almost black panela from the pocket of his suit at, snipped off the end with a ir of gold clippers, lighted it with thin gold lighter, then asked, rough the ensuing cloud of oke, "How much?"
"I like a man who gets right wn to business," I said. "Ten ousand; half in advance, half after mpletion of the contract."
"I'll have to consider it," Coe id. He was his old self now; calm, sured, coldly calculating. "I never ake hurried decisions."
"Take your time," I told him.
"Tomorrow night, at nine?"
"Fine," I said. "And if you decide utilize my services, bring the five ousand in cash, small bills—and a mplete floor plan of your house."
Coe nodded, with an air of deep trospection, and slid out of the oth. "Tomorrow, then," he said, id a moment later he was gone.
At exactly nine o'clock the folwing evening, my second drink id Martin Coe arrived simultaously. When the waiter drifted vay, I raised my glass to Coe, who id slipped into the booth across om me.

"Right on time, I see," I said pleasantly.
"I make it a policy to be punctual for appointments."
"An admirable trait."
"I also make it a policy," Coe said, "never to hedge when a direct approach will suffice." He reached into the inside pocket of his coat and withdrew a thick manila envelope, laying it on the table in front of me. "Five thousand dollars, I believe you said."
"I did." I put the envelope into my own inner pocket without opening it. "And the floor plan?"
"I have it right here," Coe said, and he spread open a sheet of heavy paper and spent the next five minutes explaining the careful drawings on it to me. Then he said, "When will you do it?"
"Whenever you like."
"Thursday night?"
"Fine."
"What time?"
"Midnight, I imagine."
"I'll see that Sondra is alone in the house," Coe said. "It's the houseboy's regular night off, and I can arrange to have the cook and gardener away for the evening without attracting any suspicion."
"What about the dogs?" I asked.
He raised an eyebrow. "You know about them, do you?"
"Of course."
"I'll see that they're locked up.

They won't give you any difficulty."

"Good. And I want you to leave the door to the service porch open for me. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

I nodded. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"I don't think so." He was thoughtful for a moment. "How will you do it, Foster?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Well, not the details," he answered. "But I would like to have a general idea of what to expect."

"An accident, I think," I said. "Did you know one out of every five home accidents results in a fatality?"

Coe smiled icily. "That's an interesting statistic."

"Isn't it?" I raised my drink. "Here's to you, Coe—and to Angela."

"To Angela," he said, and some of the ice in his eyes thawed.

I smiled and drank from my glass.

A few minutes before midnight on Thursday I parked my car in a place where it would not be conspicuous and walked a quarter of a mile to the perimeter of the Coe estate. I followed the high, moss-covered wall comprising its outer boundary to where it curved through a copse of bay and pepper trees, and there pulled on a pair of thin, pliable gloves. Then I climbed the wall, quickly and effortlessl and dropped down on the oth side.

I made my way across the dark wooded grounds, moving circun spectly. The night was silent ar empty, and there was no sign of th three German shepherds which no mally roamed the estate; Coe ha fulfilled that part of the agreeme well enough.

I located the service porch witl out difficulty and tested the door. opened under my hand. I slippe inside, taking the pencil flashligl from my pocket, and eased the do shut again as quietly as possible. stood listening: silence.

Mentally, I again studied th floor plan of the house that Coe ha given me, even though I now kne it perfectly. Then I switched th flash on, shielding the light with th palm of my left hand, and move through the rear rooms until I ha reached the high-ceilinged, vaulte gloom of the entrance hall. I pause there, at the foot of the ornate-bar istered staircase leading to the up per floors, to listen again. It seeme to me that I could hear, from th shadows above, the faint rasping o a woman's snoring; the only oth sound was the gentle pendulu movement of an antique gran father's clock against the near wall

Pleasant dreams, Mrs. Coe, thought cheerfully, and I move

way from the staircase to enter lartin Coe's private study.

It took me exactly eleven minutes to locate and open his wall ıfe, one of those square vault-types 'ith a recessed dial. Inside, I found wo thousand dollars in cash, a diaıond necklace, two sets of pendant-type diamond earrings, and etter than fifteen thousand in egotiable bonds.

Three minutes after I had slipped ll of these items into the pockets of ıy overcoat, I was once again movıg quickly across the darkened esıte grounds. I wished briefly that I ould see Martin Coe's face when e came home from his alibi to find is wife still alive and his safe mpty; the phlegmatic ruthlessness f the man had rankled me from the eginning, and it would undoubtdly be a most satisfying sight.

However, one can't have everything. I would have to settle for the comfortable knowledge that a competent professional assassin, while he probably made a very good living, was necessarily forced to take risks which were great; an equally competent but highly imaginative professional burglar and con man, on the other hand, could make considerably more money for considerably less risk.

You can steal anything, from anybody, with a little patience and the proper imaginative approach. My father had told me that, just before he retired to the French Riviera in 1956 after thirty years of successfully practicing what he preached.

It's really a shame that more children don't listen to their fathers' advice in these trying times . . .

This is what one might call "taking a turn for the worse."

SHERIFF PAUL KEENE was angry, and he wondered why. Guilt, maybe? No reason to feel guilty, he tried to assure himself. He was trying to charge a man with murder, and he sincerely believed the man had done it. Yet was there a doubt?

Passing a hand over the shadowy stubble already beginning to show on his heavy jaw, although it was barely midafternoon, Paul took hi eyes off the road momentarily t glance at the young man besid him. He'd known Danny Parris since the youth was a towheade youngster in kindergarten. What change! Now the hair, darkene through the years to the color o buckwheat honey, hung to Danny' shoulders. A thick, limp mustach reminiscent of the old West hid hi mouth, and a straggling beard al most touched his chest.

Danny caught Paul's eyes o him, and smiled. Behind all tha hair the smile still carried some o the little-boy quality, but all Pau could see was the mocking kille that lurked in those pale eyes. Hi jaw clenched, and he relaxed it wit a conscious effort, only to have i tighten again when his thought moved on.

This nurse they were going t see—would she back up Danny' alibi, after this long?

That's what he was angry abou Paul decided. Danny might get of He pounded a fist on the steerin wheel, and the pale eyes swung hi way again. He couldn't get off! Bu

e might. It all depended on this
ırse, Marjorie Koestler.

He swung the car into the drive
) the old Blackwood mansion,
here the girl looked after the 80-
ear-old matriarch, mother of the
ırrent manager of Blackwood In-
ıstries.

While Danny waited in the re-
eption hall, Paul was ushered into
book-lined room that looked like
something out of the movies, with tooled leather paneling and a mahogany desk with so deep a gleam that it looked as if you could sink a fist into it.

Marjorie Koestler, in a nurse's uniform, was waiting for him there. She was dark, about his height, with a serene face and brown eyes that were serious with the decision expected of her. Paul introduced him-

self. He had set up the appointment with her by telephone, but hadn't given many details of the case.

"I'll give you the background, Miss Koestler," he said, "so you'll have more of an idea of what the situation is and what's at stake.

"Last February, almost a year ago, Rod Granger, the owner of a liquor store in Grandview, was murdered in the course of a robbery. It was a prosperous store and, being Friday night, there was a lot of money on hand. He was brutally and needlessly beaten. At a quarter to eleven he was found by a customer. He was unconscious, and died before the ambulance got there.

"There was only one clue. Rod had a clump of blond hair clutched in his fist when he was found. Other than that, nothing. No fingerprints, no murder weapon to trace, no eyewitnesses.

"Then, last week, a young man named Howard Evans came home from Vietnam. He hadn't heard about the murder. When he did, he came right to me. Howard had been home in February on compassionate leave. His mother had died, and her funeral was that Friday of the murder. He had to leave that same night for the West Coast, from where he was being shipped out to Vietnam. You can imagine how he felt, pretty much wrapped up in himself, walking down tha dark street to the bus station, won dering if he'd ever see the towr again.

"Opposite the liquor store, on the other side of the street, there's a phone booth. Time was pretty tight, but on impulse he stepped in and called a girl he'd been dating before he went into the Army, for a few last words. He said the light bulb in the booth was burned out so Danny Parrish, the fellow I've got with me, didn't see him. But Howard saw Danny, across the street in the liquor store, with Rod Granger. He didn't think much of it at the time, sort of in a fog with his own troubles, but he said they looked as if they were arguing. His bus left at 10:50. He looked at his watch, and it was already 10:35, so he said good-bye to his girl and hurried down the street to the bus station. That was about ten minutes before Rod was found beaten unconscious."

Marjorie had watched with a concerned expression while he told his tale. "Why didn't he say something when he heard about the murder?" she asked.

"He didn't hear about it. It was weeks before he got a letter from his girl, and she didn't happen to mention it. Nobody else in town corresponded with him, and he didn't get the Grandview paper, so

ıe didn't know about it till he got ›ack."

"But where do I come in?"

"I called Danny in to talk to him. He said he had left town the day ›efore the murder, that he'd actually been hitchhiking back to own that night. Nobody had seen ıim around town that day. The hair ve found in Rod's hand could be ıis. It's long, and about the same :olor. Anyway, he says that at the ime he was supposed to be in the iquor store he was with your fa-her, hitching a ride, and he gave us ome details to corroborate his tory."

"Wait a minute! February? Yes, Dad did stop in here. It was on the 18th, because he picked up my ›resent to Mother in time for her ›irthday on the 19th. But Dad :ouldn't back up this man's story. He was killed just the next day in an ıuto accident."

Paul nodded. "Yes, I know. That's where you come in. Danny old me they'd stopped in here to ee you." His stomach tightened un-›leasantly. "But I've got a theory. You see," he explained, "since they were kids, Danny has chummed ıround with a boy named Sparky Henderson. They're both fair, both all and skinny, and they actually ook so much alike that at a dis-ance even their own mothers have :onfused them. It's not hard to tell them apart close up, but with all the hair they've both grown, the resemblance is even greater. Our witness, Howard Evans, knows both boys, and he's willing to swear in court, with no reservations, that the boy he saw with Rod was Danny, not Sparky. Rod's store was well-lighted, with a big front window, and he says he's sure. So it's my theory that Danny's alibi is actually Sparky's. That they set it up deliberately, that Sparky drilled Danny on incidents and bits of conversation, so that if by any chance something went wrong and Danny *was* suspected of the robbery, he could claim he'd been with—well, it turned out to be your father. Except that when they saw on TV that he'd been killed, they focused on you."

Her eyebrows lifted. "Did this Danny tell you I was his alibi?"

"Oh, no. He's too smart for that. He knew your father was dead, all right, but he just gave us his name and let us carry on from there. Then, when we told him your father was dead, he acted as if he was really set back for a while, until he remembered your father had stopped in here, and *maybe* you'd remember him."

Marjorie had turned from him to pace uneasily in front of the big mahogany desk. Her expression showed worry. *This girl cares,* Paul

thought. *At least she'll be conscientious.*

"I'll have to be frank with you, Miss Koestler," Paul went on. "We haven't charged Danny yet. We don't have much of a case, and if you're in doubt about his identity, we'll just have to keep working to try to strengthen the case before we can consider taking it to a jury. But if you can definitely state that this was not the young man who stopped in with your father last year, and are willing to testify to that effect, we're going ahead. Danny is being what he calls 'cooperative'. I call it cocksure. He's lived with this resemblance to Sparky most of his life, gotten out of petty scrapes with it more than once. But if he gets away with this, if he convinces you that he was here, just on the basis of what he calls remembered conversation, it'll be a gross miscarriage of justice."

Marjorie lightly bit her full lower lip, and her eyes narrowed with the burden of decision. "I don't know. I just don't know. After a whole year, and I saw him only once? How can I possibly be sure?"

"We realize the difficulty, and we're not expecting a miracle from you. Just tell us what you honestly think is so." Silently, Paul prayed, *Just don't confirm his alibi.*

She smiled, a wan effort bolstered by goodwill. "Okay."

Paul went to the door and stepped into the hall, beckoning Danny Parrish to join them.

Danny moved toward Marjorie with a confident stride, his hand outstretched and the pale eyes gleaming. "It's nice to see you again, Marjorie," he said. Then his resonant young voice dropped a couple of tones to a more somber note. "May I tell you how very sorry I was to hear of your father's death? Even during the little time we spent together, I kept thinking how much I'd like to know him better."

"Thank you." Her voice was cool and gracious, but Paul noticed with something like dismay that there was response in it to Danny's charm. *Youth to youth,* he thought sourly.

Danny took his gaze from Marjorie's with what Paul hoped would strike her as obviously theatrical reluctance. *See through him,* he cried inwardly. *He's turning it on like footlights.*

"Have you any . . . guidelines, let's say . . . for this confrontation?" he asked Paul. Not hippie talk, Paul noted. He'd heard plenty of that from Danny, but the kid was playing *this* scene straight.

"It's your alibi," Paul replied coldly, and let it hang there.

Marjorie gave him a glance he couldn't read, and Paul winced.

)on't alienate her!. We need her on ur side.

"I've wondered how we'd go bout this," she offered. "I knew here was very little chance that I'd ecognize Mr. Parrish, although he loes seem rather familiar to me. 3ut I could ask some questions. If ıe can answer most of them to my atisfaction, I'd be prepared to say ıe was here when he says he was."

"Danny," the young man said vith an appealing smile.

"Danny," she agreed in a tone hat promised nothing.

He turned to Paul. "Shouldn't we ıave a stenographer or something?"

"It's not necessary at this stage. Tou're not charged, and if we de- :ide to place charges, then we can et it up."

"Okay." Danny shrugged, a ges- ure of dismissal that seemed to en- :ompass the whole body of law and)rder.

"Well, first of all," Marjorie said, 'do you remember what you said vhen my father introduced us?"

The pale eyes glittered with :harm. "That one's easy. I re- narked that your father had been reating me like a son since he)icked me up, so you might as well ook on me as a brother." As if that vould be possible, his gaze said, ınd then moved on to dart a trium-)hant gleam at Paul.

Paul glanced at Marjorie and she nodded, but almost imperceptibly.

"What time did you arrive?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I couldn't tell you that within half an hour. I do know, though, that we left before you were ready to break off your visit with your father, because the old lady upstairs was screaming for her back-rub."

Marjorie nodded again. "Three times a day she has to have them—but if it makes her feel better . . ." She let it trail off. "It seems to me there was one significant fact about my father's visit you wouldn't forget. Can you tell me what that would be?"

Danny's forehead, what little could be seen under the long hair, wrinkled. He pursed his lips and cocked his head to one side, the perfect picture of concentrated thought. "Well, I don't know what you'd have considered the high point, but I imagine it would be handing your father the gift you'd found for your mother's birthday the next day. It was a lamp, and the base was made from a roll that had been used to print wallpaper. You thought it'd be perfect for an end table in your mother's Early American family room."

Paul didn't have to look at Marjorie for the answer to that one. It could only have been right.

"And what did my father say?"

Danny grinned. "He told you it would have been more to the point to find something that had been used to print money, as much as your mother had been spending on redecorating."

Paul's spirits sank. Sparky's coaching had been thorough.

"Then my father told me what my brother was planning to give Mother. Do you remember that?"

There was silence, longer than it should have been. Finally, Danny shook his head.

"I'm sorry. That escapes me. I just don't remember a thing about it." He grinned sheepishly, but as Paul's eyes caught his, a message passed. *It doesn't matter,* those eyes said, *it doesn't matter a damn; I'm already in as far as she's concerned.*

Marjorie looked troubled. She took a moment to glance through the French windows at the smooth, green lawn outside, manicured as only money could manicure a lawn. Paul understood her hesitation. No one wanted to be responsible for sending a charming young man to prison, probably for life, but she was the type of conscientious young person who wouldn't want to turn a murderer free, either.

"Could you describe my father?" She was still staring out the window as she addressed Danny. For a moment Paul felt elation. *She doesn't want to look at him,* he thought. *She's wavering, not quite sure.*

"Well . . ." Danny started, and then he hesitated.

Paul had the strange feeling that he could see right inside the young man. He was all prepared, coached by Sparky, ready to reel off a precise description of Mr. Koestler. Then Danny reminded himself that he had seen the man only once, a year ago, supposedly.

"I'm trying to picture him, but I'm not sure. He wasn't as tall as I am." Danny ranked himself next to Paul. He stood almost six inches taller than the sheriff. "He wasn't fat, but he could have lost a few pounds and not done himself any harm. As I remember, he was rather reddish complected. Yeah! He had red hair all over the backs of his hands. I can see them on the steering wheel now. Smoked cigars most of the time."

Marjorie turned back toward the room. "That's Dad, all right." She looked at Paul rather helplessly. "I just don't know what else to ask him. It seems to me he's pretty well proved he's the same man, hasn't he?"

Danny seemed to grow a couple of inches taller. "There you are, Sheriff," he said. "I've been trying to convince you I was nowhere near that liquor store last year. Maybe now you'll believe me. Howard Evans is wrong, that's all.

He's not the first person to make a mistaken identification."

Paul played with a fleeting thought. He wondered what would happen if he picked up Sparky and said *he* was the one Evans saw. Who'd claim the alibi then?

Danny went on. "I'd appreciate it if you'd drive me back to Grandview now, Sheriff. I've got business in the north end of town, so you can drop me off at the bus terminal."

Paul took Marjorie's hand. "I'm sure you've done your impartial best," he told her. "I still think Danny was never near here, but we'll just have to get more evidence. If you think of anything else, I hope you'll get in touch with us."

Marjorie looked from one to the other. She could hardly tell Paul she was sorry, nor could she congratulate Danny. "I just hope I arrived at the right answer," she finally said. Her voice and the disquiet in her eyes said she wasn't sure.

She walked with them to the main entrance. Beside the massive carved door standing wide, both men turned to shake hands with her again.

"Good-bye, and thank you," Paul said.

"Perhaps I'll see you again?" Danny asked, with a lift of his eyebrows.

"Good-bye. Have a good trip back," she said noncommittally.

Paul started the car moving down the immaculately graveled drive, disappointment heavy inside him. The anger that had gripped him when they arrived had settled into a black depression. After a year, the boy should have slipped up somewhere. Danny was quiet beside him. Thank God he wasn't rubbing it in.

As he neared the wide entrance gates, Paul glanced at the rear-view mirror. Marjorie was running down the drive, awkward on the gravel in spite of her low-heeled nurse's shoes, an arm waving.

Paul jammed on the brakes. Then he reversed to meet her.

She ran up to Danny's side of the car and leaned on the window frame, panting. She looked at Paul, speaking to him. "I thought of something. It would make quite a difference." She swung her gaze to Danny. "When you and my father drove away from here, which way did he turn?"

Paul's heart lurched. He could see the indecision naked on Danny's face. But what a question! Which way *would* they turn? They were going to Grandview, so they'd naturally turn to the right, south. Or would they? What did she have in mind?

He could see that Danny's mind was thrashing through the same

questions. *Okay, boy,* Paul thought, *you've got a choice of two. One's right, and one's wrong. But which one? Should it be north because south is too obvious and there must be some reason behind the question, or is it a trick question that you might be tempted to answer that way, and south is right?*

Paul killed the engine. The silence was painful. For one second he almost felt sorry for the boy, but the tension was too high for him to dwell on it.

"Answer her, man," he snapped.

Danny's head turned, and in the flash of those pale devil's eyes Paul saw the cocky young man and the frightened boy fighting for dominance.

Danny brought the cocky young man to the surface. "South, of course," he gambled, with a careless flick of his head.

Both men watched Marjorie, everything riding on her reaction.

Slowly, seeming almost disappointed, she shook her head. "My father," she explained, not meeting Danny's eyes, "was born with his sense of direction 180 degrees out of whack. Most of the time he'd turn right when he should have turned left, and vice versa. He'd come here to see me so often that he'd learned to compensate—that what seemed the right direction was wrong—so he'd go the right way. But when he phoned me that night to let me know he'd arrived home all right, he mentioned that he'd done it again. Having a passenger to talk to had distracted him, and he'd gone north twenty miles before either one of them realized it."

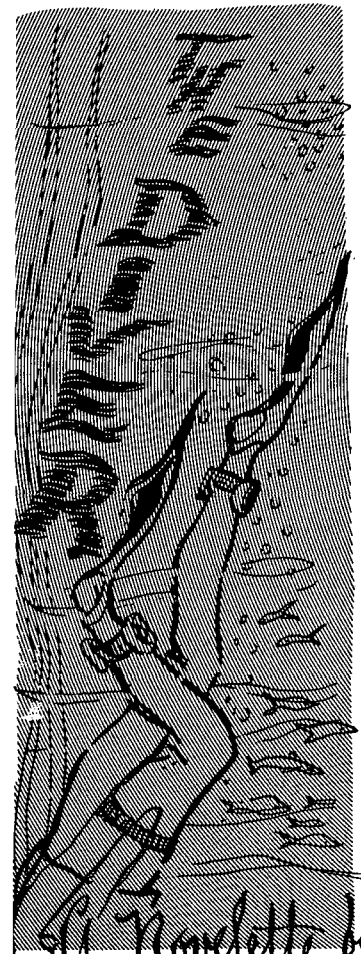
It hung there.

Finally Paul spoke. "They knew your father had been killed, so they concentrated on everything that happened while you were present. Nothing after your father and Sparky left you, because you wouldn't know about it—they thought. And they almost got away with it."

He started the engine and Marjorie stepped away from the car.

"I'll give you that ride back to Grandview, Parrish," Paul said. "But I won't be dropping you off at the bus station. This time you're going right to the end of the line."

Once the past is truly dead and buried, the tomorrows may be most satisfying.



A Novelette by Clark Howard

WHEN THEY found him, Gruver was sitting at a window table in a cheap little Tampico cafe, smoking leisurely, sipping bitter coffee, and dividing his time between watching a freighter being unloaded across the dock outside and looking at Martina, the copper-skinned counter girl he had taken walking on the beach the night before.

They came directly to his table and sat down without being asked. Gruver guessed that Jo would be the one to speak first. He was right.

"Well, Harry, you certainly led us a merry chase. We expected you to break parole when you got out, but we didn't think you'd leave the country."

"I had to," he said calmly to his ex-wife. "My health. I needed the mountain air."

"But there aren't any mountains in Tampico," Jo's new husband said. "It's a seaport."

"I know," Gruver replied. "Some

fast-talking travel agent gave me the wrong information." He took a sip of coffee and sat back to study the man who had taken his place with Jo. His name was Buckhart and his tanned, handsome face wrinkled into a frown as he realized that Gruver had just neatly put him down.

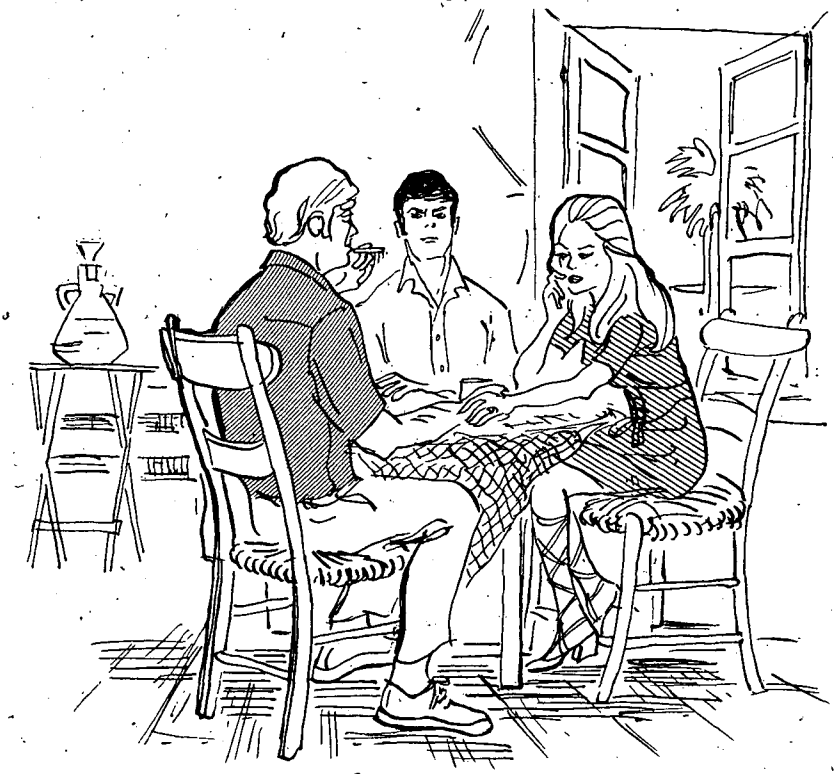
"Still the wise guy, I see," Buckhart said. "Guess prison didn't change you any."

"It didn't make me like cops who frame a guy and then turn around and steal his wife, if that's what you mean."

Buckhart's mouth tightened and his big hands tensed on the table. Jo quickly touched his arm.

"Stop it, both of you," she snapped. She turned to her husband. "Buck, go over to the counter and get me some coffee. I want to talk to Harry for a minute." Scowling silently, Buckhart got up and left the table.

"You've got him as well trained as you had me," Gruver said dryly.



"Look, Harry," Jo said, "what's past is past. You can't blame Buck for what happened. You were running illegal immigrants into the States from Cuba and you got caught at it."

"You know better than that, Jo," he said. He crushed out his cigarette and lighted another. "I was bringing in immigrants, sure; every guy in Key West that had a boat was doing it now and then; you had to when fishing was slow or you couldn't make ends meet. But I had nothing to do with the boatload that got dumped in the ocean to drown, and you know it."

"The officers on the Key West police launch that found the bodies identified your boat as the one they saw leaving the scene."

"No, they didn't," Gruver said levelly. "Two of them said they weren't sure. A third said it *might* have been my boat." He looked over at the counter at Buckhart. "Only one of the cops said definitely that it was mine."

"Buck was only doing his job," Jo said. "It's crazy of you to think he framed you to get me. Why, we didn't even know each other at the time."

"Maybe you didn't know *him*, honey," Gruver said, "but he knew you. Sometimes I think every man in the Keys knew you. Ten years ago you were really something to look at, Jo. When you came down to the waterfront in those tight pants and that white blouse you used to knot in front—well, you were really something to see."

"I'm not exactly the ugly duckling now," she said, "or hadn't you noticed? Incidentally, I saw the look you were giving that sweet young thing behind the counter when we came in. You're a little old for her, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not," Gruver said. "At least, she doesn't think so. And yes, I did notice that you're not the ugly duckling. I'm not blind. You're a good-looking woman, but ten years ago there was something about you that's gone now. Maybe it was a kind of innocence you seemed to have, or maybe it was just sweetness, I don't know. Whatever it was, you sure knew how to use it. You know, only about half of my immigrant-running was to make ends meet; the other half was to get you things you wanted. Dresses from the fancy shops in Miami; that TV set for the bedroom; and those swimsuits that cost thirty, forty bucks apiece—you must have had a dozen of them."

"I had a good figure," Jo said. "I wanted to show it off."

"Well, you did that, all right. You know, ten years ago—"

"Will you stop talking about ten years ago," she said sharply. "Ten

years ago is long gone and there's no bringing it back. It's the past, Harry, and it's dead."

"Sure," Gruver said. He took a long swallow of the bitter coffee. "Sure. It's dead."

Buckhart returned to the table with coffee for Jo and himself. "Well?" he said.

"Harry has agreed that the past is dead," Jo said.

"Right," Gruver said. "Dead and buried." He put out the cigarette he had just finished and lighted still another one.

"Do you always chain-smoke like that?" Jo asked.

"Only when I'm awake," he said flatly.

"You'd better start breaking the habit," Buckhart said. "You'll have to be in top physical condition to dive a hundred and sixty feet underwater."

Gruver stared at him for a moment and then turned to Jo. "You'd better have your husband's head examined, Mrs. Buckhart. I think he just went crazy."

"There's nothing wrong with *his* head, Harry," she said. "It's yours. You don't seem to think as quickly as you used to. We didn't follow you all the way to Tampico just to talk about old times." She leaned forward over the table and lowered her voice slightly. "We need a diver, Harry."

"Find one somewhere else."

"An experienced diver."

"You can hire one out on the dock for three hundred pesos an hour. That's about twenty-five bucks American."

"We need somebody we know, Harry. Somebody we can trust."

"No dice."

"We're willing to pay one-third of six hundred thousand dollars to the right man, Harry."

Gruver's lips parted involuntarily and he looked incredulously at his ex-wife. After a moment he lifted his glass, drained it, and stood up. "I've got a room a couple of blocks from here. We can talk there."

They all left together. Gruver did not even say good-bye to Martina.

The room was on a narrow side street off the *zocalo*, one flight up, with faded French doors that opened onto a small, chipped balcony. Gruver let the Buckharts use the two straight wooden chairs while he sat on the bed. This time it was Jo's new husband who did all the talking.

"I'm sure you already know that about a year after you got sent up, the U.S. cut all diplomatic ties with Cuba," Buckhart said. "When that happened, the ocean traffic between the Keys and Havana was stopped. It completely eliminated the immigrant smuggling that you and most of the others down that

way had been doing to pick up quick cash. But one of your old pals, Nappy Holmes, found a new way to make money. Through a connection in Miami, he started going out at night and dropping anchor near a shipping lane where a foreign freighter was scheduled to pass on its way from South America to New York. At a certain compass position, somebody on board the freighter would drop a sealskin package over the side. The package would have a floater on it to keep it from sinking, and infrared markings so that it could be located. After the freighter passed, Nappy would shine an infrared light around until he found the package, fish it out, and head back to the Keys—"

"What was in the package?" Gruver interrupted.

"Can't you guess?" Buckhart said.

"If it's what I think it is," Gruver said, "you can stop right there. I don't want anything to do with dope."

"Relax, will you, Harry?" Jo said easily. "You're not going to have anything to do with dope. Buck's just giving you the background, that's all."

Gruver sat back against the grille headboard and lighted a cigarette.

Buckhart continued. "When Nappy got the package back to port, he'd throw it in the trunk of that jalopy of his and drive up to Miami with it, where he'd turn it over to a guy named Marshall. You probably never knew him, used to be a Chicago hood."

Gruver shook his head. "I never did. But as long as we're on the subject of knowing things, how'd you find out all this stuff you're telling me?"

"Buck worked on the case with the Miami narcotics squad," Jo answered for him. "He was assigned to watch Nappy at the Keys end. After the stuff passed, the Miami boys took over."

"The New York cops were involved too," Buckhart added. "They had the whole route staked out, waiting for the one big shipment that would make the bust worthwhile. See, the way it worked, after Marshall made his pickup, he'd fly to New York with the bundle. The stuff would be turned over to the big pushers up there; they'd check it out, grade it, and then pay Marshall whatever price had been set. By that time the freighter that the stuff had been dropped from would be docked in New York. Marshall would take his and Nappy's fee out and turn the rest of the money over to the guy on the freighter. That guy would eventually carry it back to the source of the stuff he was smuggling."

"You're still talking about dope," Gruver said firmly, "and I still don't want any part of it."

"Just let him finish, Harry, will you?" Jo said. "You'll see that it doesn't have anything to do with dope. Not as far as we're concerned anyway."

"Besides, when did you get to be so lily-white?" Buckhart asked sarcastically. "I don't see how dealing in dope is any worse than dealing in human beings, and that's what you were hauling out of Havana."

"What I was doing," Gruver said coldly, "was helping people."

"You got paid for it," Buckhart reminded him.

"So do doctors. I was still doing them some good."

"Well, now you've got a chance to do yourself some good," Jo said curtly. "A couple of hundred thousand dollars' worth of good, if you'll just shut up and listen." She looked at him pleadingly and her tone changed. "Please, Harry."

"Okay," he sighed heavily. There was a soft tickle in his stomach. He was remembering how she used to say that same thing ten years ago. How she had enticed him into buying her things she wanted. She had sure been something ten years ago, he thought, and he suddenly realized that he hated Buckhart. "Go on," he said thinly.

"Somehow," Buckhart continued, "Nappy got wise that he was under surveillance. He came to me and said he wanted to buy out. He said he was running one more load for Marshall—a big one—then he planned to take what he'd made and beat it; go to New Orleans or someplace else on the Gulf. He offered me ten grand to look the other way and let him take his last delivery through."

"What did you do?" asked Gruver, glancing at Jo.

"I took him up on it," Buckhart said. "I had to. My cost of living went up considerably when I got married."

"I can imagine," Gruver said wryly.

"Just get on with the story," Jo said crossly.

"Sure, baby, sure." Buckhart grinned at his wife, causing Gruver to hate him even more. "So," Buckhart went on, "I let Nappy make one last pickup, without reporting it to the Miami department. Nappy passed the stuff to Marshall; Marshall took it to New York and collected. As usual, he took out his and Nappy's shares and turned the rest over to the guy who had dropped the bundle off the freighter. That guy was taking the money back to the distributors—payment for the biggest load Nappy had ever picked up: six hundred thousand bucks—and he was sailing on a freighter

that was named the *Julietta.*"

Gruver frowned. "The *Julietta*?"

Buckhart grinned again. "I thought that would wake you up."

"The *Julietta* went down—"

"Ninety-eight miles off the coast of Georgia," Buckhart said. "The forward engine room boiler exploded and blew a hole forty feet wide across all four decks. She went down in a hundred and sixty feet of water and that's where she is today, lying on her damaged side."

"The crew?"

"All lost."

Gruver wet his lips. "What about salvagers?"

Buckhart shook his head. "Not worth it. The *Julietta* left New York harbor empty. The only salvage would be the ship herself."

"And if she's on her damaged side she can't be repaired, and she'd be too heavy to hoist out."

"She's forgotten," Buckhart said. "The insurance company paid for the loss of the ship and crew, and the matter is officially closed."

"Except with us," Jo said, "because we know that in the quarters of a first mate named Armand Brios there's a strongbox with six hundred thousand dollars cash in it." She leaned forward urgently. "We've let it lay three years, Harry. We've waited three years for you to get out so you could dive and get it for us—for *all* of us."

"Yeah," Buckhart said, "Jo figured that between the two of us maybe we owed you something. Personally, I don't see it that way; all I'm interested in is a diver."

Gruver got up and walked over to the rickety French doors. He stepped onto the little balcony. From one corner of it he could look down a straight cobblestoned street and see the docks and the Gulf waters beyond. He stared at the waters for a long, quiet moment, then he sighed and came back into the room. "You'd better get somebody else," he told them. "It's been too long since I've been down. I'm not in condition."

"We can wait until you *get* in condition," Jo said.

"Yeah," said Buckhart. He stood up and leaned against the wall, letting his coat fall open just enough for Gruver to see the .38 on his belt. "And we wouldn't even think of getting anybody else—especially since you know all about it now."

"You threatening me, Buckhart?" Gruver asked calmly.

"Of course not," Jo answered for her husband again. "Why would he threaten you when you're practically a partner with us in a fortune? But you've got to admit that it would be a little foolish of us to give you all the details and then not insist that you come in on it with us."

Gruver caught the ominous note in Jo's voice. He looked back at the gun on Buckhart's belt, then nodded resignedly. "Yeah, I guess it would be kind of foolish at that. When do we start?"

"Right now," said Buckhart. "We'll help you pack."

"I'd like to say good-bye to a friend," Gruver said, thinking of Martina.

"If it's that girl in the cafe, Harry, forget it," Jo said. "It'll be better all around if we just leave town quietly."

Buckhart had already taken Gruver's secondhand suitcase out of the closet and was opening it on the bed.

They drove north from Tampico in a car Buckhart had rented in Corpus Christi. Gruver did the driving, with Jo in front on the passenger side. Buckhart sprawled in the back seat, dozing.

"The way we've got it figured, Harry," Jo explained, "is that Buck will go back to the Keys and simply resign from the force. He's on vacation right now; we saved his two weeks until time for your release."

"That was nice of you."

"Don't be so sarcastic, Harry. It doesn't become you."

"Sorry," he said dryly.

"It'll look perfectly natural if he resigns as soon as he gets back. He'll say that while he was on vacation he met a man who offered him a good job in plant security in California. He'll say I went on out there to find us a place to live. Actually I'll be with you in Tampa shopping for a boat and diving equipment."

"That's going to take some money," Gruver said.

"How much do you figure?"

Gruver hunched forward over the steering wheel and pursed his lips. "It's hard to say. I subscribed to a boating magazine while I was in the joint; paid for it out of what I earned in the prison foundry. From the boat prices it listed, I'd say we're talking about fifteen to twenty grand."

Jo nodded. "That's what Buck and I figured: about twenty thousand. We've got four thousand now that we saved over the past two and a half years."

"Somehow I just can't picture you saving money," Gruver said.

"Well, I did. We scrimped and saved like misers once we'd made our plans to go after the big money."

"Four thousand is still a long way from twenty," Gruver said.

"We've got that figured, too," Jo said confidently. "Buck has been a cop for seventeen years; he's got around eleven thousand in the department's pension fund and credit union. Then we've got our furniture

and our own car, and I've got a few pieces of jewelry; we bought all that with the ten thousand Buck got from Nappy. We'll sell everything."

"In other words, shoot the works?"

"Yes, Harry," she said firmly. "Shoot the works."

Gruver nodded and drove in silence after that. They went through Matamoros and crossed the border at Brownsville. There was no problem getting back into the States; they all had tourist cards which they had obtained when they entered Mexico.

As they left the Mexican side, Gruver thought again of Martina. He had known her for only a week, but in that time a feeling, a fondness, had developed between them. They seemed to *understand* each other. He had met her his first morning in Tampico when he went into the cafe for breakfast and she waited on him. He saw her again that evening, when he was sitting in the park and she walked past. He spoke to her and walked with her for a while. The next morning at breakfast she waited on him again and he asked her to meet him after work. She said yes. They had seen each other every day and every night since then. Gruver had about reached the point where he was beginning to wonder how life would be, settled down with a girl like Martina, someone for whom to live.

Then Jo and Buckhart had shown up.

From Brownsville they continued up to Corpus Christi where Buckhart turned the car in to the U-drive agency at the airport. They bought plane tickets to Tampa, via Dallas and New Orleans.

It was while they were waiting in the airport restaurant, sitting at a table in an isolated corner, that Gruver began asking questions about Jo and Buckhart being the *only* ones who knew about the money. "What about the people this Armand Brios worked for?" he wanted to know. "They would have known their six hundred grand was on the *Julietta*. Why haven't they gone after it?"

"They haven't gone after it because Buck made them think it wasn't there," Jo said.

"Yeah," Buckhart confirmed. "On the morning that the *Julietta* went down, Nappy came running over to the house to tell me about it. I had already gone along with him and let him pick that one last package out of the water, but I hadn't known it was the *Julietta* that it came from. Nappy was all worked up about the money. He was ready to go after it right then, but I calmed him down and told him to keep his mouth shut about it until I figured something out.

"Then Jo and me, we got to talking about how many people knew about the money—and who they were—and we started figuring ways to narrow the field. The first thing I did was contact the Miami boys I had been working with and tell them that a big shipment of stuff had got to Marshall without coming through Nappy. I told them I had found out because Nappy was sore; this was the biggest shipment yet and Nappy hadn't been cut in on it. The Miami cops tipped the New York cops that the big package they had been waiting for had come in by another route. The way the story was set up, it made the New York boys think that Nappy had been a decoy for small stuff just so the big shipment could be sent in another way.

"The New York cops moved in and raided the drop Marshall had been using; they got every kilo of stuff in the shipment—the big city pushers hadn't even finished cutting and packaging it."

Buckhart leaned forward and folded his hands in satisfaction. "Now comes the good part. I suggested to the New York and Miami squads that we not touch Marshall or Nappy; that we make the raid in New York look like a local bust, and we leave the two delivery men open for future shipments. They think that's a good idea and agree to it. Then I say we'd better have a cover story to leak to the syndicate so they don't blame Marshall and Nappy for the raid and have them hit. They agree to that, too. Next I came up with the idea of blaming it on the payoff man. See, at that point I was the only one who knew that Marshall himself was the payoff man and that the money went back aboard the freighter—and I only knew because Nappy had told me. Everybody else on the case thought the payoff was made some other way, probably through someone we hadn't identified yet. So we agreed to pass on the story that the payoff man was under surveillance, that he had lammed with the money himself, and that when he was observed with a large amount of cash it tipped us that a big transaction had taken place and the raid was made. Then we'd say that we weren't quite quick enough and during the process the payoff man with the money still in his possession, had got away." Buckhart smiled. "Get the picture?"

Gruver nodded. "You were supposed to be protecting Marshall but you were actually setting him up."

"Exactly. When that story got around, there was only one conclusion the syndicate could draw: Marshall had taken the money for the big shipment, and instead of passing it on to the contact aboard

the freighter, he had skipped out with it." Buckhart smiled. "Marshall himself even made the story look good. He got scared when he heard about the New York raid and dropped out of sight—just like we'd said the payoff man had done."

"And it worked?"

"Like a charm," Buckhart boasted. "About a month after the raid a couple of syndicate men showed up down at the Keys and cornered Nappy. They pumped him for Marshall's whereabouts. I'd already clued Nappy in ahead of time so he knew just what to say. He told them he'd like to find Marshall himself because Marshall owed him money. They wanted to know what for, but Nappy pretended to clam up; he just said it was for some work he did for Marshall a month or so before, and that Marshall had split without paying him. Well, that cinched it as far as the mob was concerned—and that was all for Mr. Marshall."

"What happened to him?" Gruver asked.

"His body was found in a Birmingham alley about a week later. He'd been beaten to death. Apparently the guys who hit him tried pretty hard first to find out where he'd hidden the six hundred grand."

"He kept telling them the truth but they wouldn't believe him," Gruver said quietly. "So they pounded him to death. That's a rough way to go."

"Any way is a rough way to go," Buckhart said flatly.

The loudspeaker announced the flight to Dallas and the three of them rose to continue their journey.

At noon the next day they were walking along a Tampa pier looking at rows of docked boats for sale.

"See anything that looks good?" Buckhart asked.

"Couple of possibilities," Gruver said. "I'll want to run them on open water before we buy, though."

"Take your time and get a good one," Buckhart said. "I'll be down in the Keys four, maybe five days, but I want the boat all ready to go once I get back. Have the diving equipment and supplies aboard so all we have to do is pay the balance due on the boat and shove off."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Gruver said dryly. Buckhart gave him a dirty look but said nothing further.

They took a taxi back to the motel where they had rented adjoining rooms the previous night. Jo helped her husband get his things together for the bus trip down to the Keys, then they got another cab and went with him to the bus depot.

Before he left, Buckhart gave Gruver a final word of warning. "You remember that Jo's my wife now, pal. Don't go getting any

ideas while I'm away, see? If she tells me you got funny with her while I was gone, I'm liable to forget all about that dough and leave you like the mob left Marshall. You read me?"

"Loud and clear, copper," Gruver said.

Buckhart got on the bus and they watched it pull away from the terminal and move out into the Tampa traffic.

"I can't help liking him," Gruver said when the bus was out of sight. "He's all personality."

"Very funny," Jo said. "Come on, let's go start boat-shopping."

They returned to the boat yard and Gruver made spot inspections of several craft that were in the general category of what they needed. There was a Grand Banks with a one-twenty diesel engine that looked good, but it was only a thirty-two footer and Gruver decided he wanted one a little larger. A thirty-eight foot Bertram fit his needs perfectly, but it was too new and the owner had left too high a price with the broker. The only other one they found was a '63 Penbroke thirty-five that was priced at thirteen nine-fifty; but when Gruver got his head under the deck he found that the engine had been poorly cared for, and he vetoed that one also.

Finally they went back to the motel and had dinner in the coffee shop. When they finished and got back to their rooms, Jo herself had a word of caution for Gruver.

"I hope you won't get any smart ideas, Harry, like taking off in the middle of the night or anything," she said. "Buck wants that money pretty badly. He's gone to a lot of trouble to set this thing up. If you washed it out for him, he'd probably track you to the ends of the earth."

"Yeah, I'll bet he would," Gruver replied tonelessly, "and you'd be right there beside him."

Jo shrugged. "I want the money too."

Gruver nodded thoughtfully. "You sure have come a long way in ten years, honey. I remember when all you wanted was another forty-dollar swimsuit." He unlocked his door and stepped inside. "I'll be here in the morning," he said quietly. "Good night, Jo."

He closed the door, leaving her standing there.

The next day before noon Gruver found the boat he wanted. It was a thirty-six-foot Hatteras, steel-and-teak constructed, with a seven-fifty fuel capacity and a cruising speed of fifteen knots. A meticulous dock inspection by Gruver found the craft to be physically and mechanically sound. Accompanied by Jo and the boat broker, he then took it

out of the harbor, past the breakwater, and into the fringe of the open Gulf.

The boat handled trimly in cruising and changing course sharply, and Gruver was pleased with its performance.

"Steady as a boat twice the size, isn't she?" said the broker. "Retired coastguardsman owned her before he moved up to a Grand Banks."

"What are you asking for her?"

"Well, she's got a Fathometer so I'll have to get a little more than usual. Say fourteen-five."

"Let my wife and I talk it over while I take her back in," Gruver said.

"Sure. I'll get some sun."

The broker went out on deck as Gruver rolled the craft slightly to make his hundred-eighty degree turn.

"Fourteen-five is a little high, isn't it?" Jo said. "Do we need the Fathometer?"

"*We* don't, no," Gruver said, "because *we* aren't going into the water. But when *I* go over the side I want to know exactly how far down the bottom is."

"Buck already told you the wreck was in a hundred and sixty feet—"

"Sure, and I believe every word that Buck utters. I'll just use the Fathometer to double check his figure."

"Okay, Harry," she said coolly, "I get your meaning. I just hope we'll have enough money left for your diving gear. I'd hate to see Buck make you go down with only the air in your lungs."

Gruver smiled. "It's nice to know you still care."

Half an hour later he guided the Hatteras back into the slip and helped the broker secure its lines. He had Jo give the broker two thousand dollars for a down payment, the balance to be paid after three days of satisfactory trial runs and an underwater inspection of the hull by Gruver. The two men signed conditional sales papers and the broker filled out a preliminary form to transfer title to the boat to Gruver.

For the next three days Gruver and Jo took to the open sea early every morning and thoroughly checked out the boat's performance. In the afternoons they shopped for supplies, both for the trip and the dive. They put a thousand-dollar auxiliary air compressor with three hundred feet of hose in layaway until Buckhart returned with more money. Gruver had himself fitted for a custom wet suit to be made on a special rush basis at twenty percent additional cost, and shopped in three supply stores before finding a deep-diving helmet that felt right on his shoulders. He

bought fins and a scuba tank and face mask for preliminary diving practice, and used them for the first time when he spent thirty minutes just under the surface checking the hull. He found it to be in perfect condition.

During trips back and forth between the marina and the motel, Gruver shopped at leisure for the other articles he needed or wanted. He selected a library of sea charts that included the Gulf, Caribbean, and Eastern Seaboard. He bought a lead belt and lead ankle bands, all disposable, for his descent. He picked up a cork-handled knife and a high-tension harpoon gun in case the shark-repellent with which he intended to douse himself failed to work. At a hardware store he purchased a small crowbar and a claw hammer in case Armand Brios' strongbox turned out to be bolted to the deck of his cabin, or had become wedged in the mass of interior destruction that a sinking sometimes wreaks in a ship—and he bought a high-powered undersea lantern to light the murky depths to which he would descend.

He was thoroughly enjoying himself, prowling the marine stores like a kid in a toy department, buying whatever he pleased and having Jo pay for it. Then, abruptly, his shopping spree came to an end when they got back to the motel on the fourth day to find that Buckhart had returned.

They left Tampa two days later after paying the balance on the boat, getting the title and license, and putting on board enough supplies for the first leg of their voyage: an eight-hundred-odd-mile trip around the peninsula to Jacksonville.

On the trip south, as far as Ponce de Leon Bay, they cruised leisurely and made morning and afternoon stops for Gruver to swim and begin his diving practice. Gruver was surprised at how quickly he adapted to the water again; it was almost as if he had never been away from the ocean. Part of it was the fact that he was in excellent physical condition; working in the prison foundry and subsisting on a prison diet had seen to that. The rest of it, he supposed, was simply instinct—a lifetime of being on or around the water. He guessed that once a man had salt water in his makeup he never really lost it, no matter what.

He used the scuba tank, face mask, and fins for most of his shallow practice, down to around the sixty-foot level. Afterward, he put on his new wet suit for the first time and went down to ninety feet. He felt the beginning chill, the coldness, that was the deep sea he remembered from times past. The

darkness was there too, settling upward from the black void below. This was the top fringe of the clear, daylight world above; the last, shadowy area that hovered over what men of the sea referred to simply as the depths.

It was into those depths that Gruver knew he would soon dive. But instead of feeling afraid or even anxious about it, he found himself actually looking forward to the day, the hour, when he would once again lower himself into the ocean's deep embrace. It would be, he thought, like meeting an old friend again.

After they passed Ponce de Leon Bay, as they entered the boat traffic lanes around the upper Keys, they discontinued daily stopping and cruised steadily around the tip of the peninsula. They steered out of sight of the coastline, heading north until they were well past the Miami area; cruised landward again and followed the coast as far as Vero Beach; then set a course well out to sea to cut a wide berth around Cape Kennedy and its security tentacles. When they came in sight of land again it was comfortably north of Daytona, and they were able to stay in coastal waters for the remainder of the voyage.

They put into Jacksonville at mid-morning and decided to stay the night there. Jo went ashore to buy foodstuffs while Gruver and Buckhart stayed on board to get the Hatteras ready for its final lap. Gruver spent most of the day making minor mechanical adjustments and tightening the steering tolerance; Buckhart gave the boat decks a good hosing and double checked the winches and jams that would be used for the main dive. Late in the afternoon they took on fresh water and refueled for a predawn start the next day. That evening they all went ashore for a steak dinner.

It was after they dined and were preparing to leave the restaurant, while Gruver and Jo were waiting in the foyer for Buckhart to pay the check, that Gruver bought a late paper from a vending stand and found out that his old friend, Nappy Holmes, was dead.

The story was in a small box at the bottom of the front page. It said: *Still No Clues in Fisherman's Death*. Gruver saw the name Nappy Holmes in the lead paragraph. He frowned, glanced quickly at Jo, and proceeded to read the brief account. The story said that after a week of investigation no new evidence had been found in the brutal slaying of Gordon "Nappy" Holmes, a long-time Keys fisherman who had been beaten to death aboard his boat. Authorities were looking for a recently resigned Keys police detective who

had once used the victim as a smuggling informant, but they refused to name the ex-policeman or intimate that he was in any way connected with the slaying; they merely wanted to question him for possible leads. The most probable explanation of the killing, Keys police believed, was that the slayer was a former smuggling accomplice.

By the time Gruver finished reading, Buckhart had walked up and was standing by Jo. Gruver looked at him with unconcealed dislike. "I see you finally took care of the last one who knew about the *Julietta*," he said coldly.

"Don't meddle in things that aren't your business," Buckhart told him.

Gruver tossed the paper down. "How do you plan to get rid of me?" he said tightly.

"Harry, stop being a fool," Jo said. "Nappy had to be disposed of; he was a drinker, always shooting off his mouth." She put her hand on his arm. "You're different. You're our partner. We trust you."

Gruver snatched his arm away. "Well, I don't trust you, Mrs. Buckhart—*or* your husband. Get yourself a new partner."

"Harry, listen to me—"

"Forget it, baby," Buckhart cut in firmly. "Let's quit playing around with this punk." He looked at Gruver and his lips curled into a dangerous sneer. "I don't have a badge anymore, punk, but I do have a gun, and I can use it on you any time I want to and get away with it. You're an ex-con and you've already broken parole. I can say you were coming after me for revenge for sending you up and marrying your wife. I've got Jo to back up the story. So you're going to do exactly what you agreed to do, see? And if you don't, I'm going to shoot a hollow-nose thirty-eight right in your belly, and you're going to die hard, real hard. You understand me?"

Gruver looked at Jo, then back at Buckhart. "Yeah, I understand you," he said flatly.

"Good," Buckhart said. He bobbed his head toward the street. "You walk ahead of us back to the boat."

They left the restaurant foyer and in silence walked the few blocks back to the transient marina.

Back on board the boat, Buckhart removed his coat to let Gruver see the gun shoved under his belt. "You go below and get some sleep," the big ex-cop told him. "I'm moving us out of here tonight. Straight north to Jekyll Island off the coast of Georgia, then ninety-eight miles due east. By the time you wake up in the morning, we'll be in position for your dive. Pleasant dreams."

Gruver grunted softly and went through the hatch and down the aft ladder to the sleeping quarters. He heard Buckhart bolt and lock the hatch door behind him.

At dawn Jo came down and woke him.

"We're almost there," she said. She handed him a cup of coffee. "Buck wants you up on deck as soon as you eat. I'll get your breakfast in the galley whenever you're ready."

Gruver nodded and got up. He took the coffee into the head with him and sipped it periodically as he washed and shaved. Fifteen minutes later he brought the empty cup into the boat's narrow galley and sat down.

"What do you want to eat?" Jo asked.

"Something light. Are your scrambled eggs still light?"

"Sure they are. Two?"

"Yeah, fine." He reached over to one of the burners and got the coffeepot. He poured himself a fresh cup of coffee. "Is Buckhart going to kill me?" he asked with forced calmness.

"Why don't you ask him, Harry?" she replied curtly. "I can't read Buck's mind. All I know is what I told you back in Tampa—he wants that money badly; he won't stop at anything to get it."

"And you're still with him, aren't you? All the murdering way."

"Where do you want me to be?" she demanded. "Back with you? It's a little late for that, isn't it?"

"Maybe it is," Gruver admitted, "but I'd like to think you were with me at least enough to see that I got a square shake from Buckhart. I'd just as soon not end up like Nappy."

Jo broke two eggs and began beating them in a bowl with milk. When they were ready she put them on the griddle and expertly moved them about with a fork. They cooked quickly and she dished them yellow and fluffy onto a plate and put it in front of him. She sat opposite him while he ate.

"Look, Harry," she said patiently, "we're partners in this—you, me, and Buck. I'll admit Buck doesn't trust you; he was a cop for sixteen years—he's been trained *not* to trust people. But you've got no reason to think he's going to kill you."

"He killed Nappy."

"Nappy wasn't part of the plan. He wasn't reliable. Buck got rid of him as a precaution."

"And you don't think he'll do the same to me?"

"Not if you do the job for him. Why should he?"

Gruver shrugged and began eating. "For the money," he suggested, "and to make sure I'd never blow the whistle on him."

Jo shook her head emphatically. "Blow the whistle on Buck and you blow it on yourself, Harry. As for the money, we'll have two-thirds of it anyway—four hundred thousand dollars. We can get eleven percent interest on that in Argentina, Harry, as long as we don't take the income out of the country. That'll give us forty-four thousand a year even if we never touch the principal. That's nine hundred a week, Harry. A couple can live pretty well in Argentina on nine hundred a week." She reached over and took a sip of his coffee. "You ought to think about something like that for yourself, Harry. Maybe even plan to come along with us for a while; I'm sure I could talk Buck into it."

"Then you really don't think he's planning to kill me?"

Again she shook her head emphatically. "You've got my word on it, Harry. As long as you play it straight with Buck, he intends to let you go—*with* your share of the money."

Gruver looked into Jo's eyes, seeking something that would tell him whether to believe her. For a fleeting instant he thought he saw a hint of the sweetness and innocence that had been *his* Jo ten years earlier. But he wasn't sure if it was that he had seen, or if it was a cleverness, a cunning, that had replaced the other. Whichever it was, Gruver could not bring himself to completely discount a double cross from some source. It was entirely possible that Buckhart had Jo fooled and intended to get rid of them both. Or—and this thought came over him almost shockingly—Jo could be planning to do away with him *and* Buckhart. She could pull it off easily enough. After the box of money was safely on board, and while he, Gruver, was still coming up slowly from the dive, she could push Buckhart over the side and take off with the boat, leaving them both to tread water until their arms turned to concrete.

Is Jo capable of that? he wondered. He studied her thoughtfully as she took another sip of his coffee and passed the cup back to him. It had a faint trace of lipstick on one side of the rim. Jo saw him looking at it and smiled. She reached over and patted his arm.

"Come up on deck when you're finished," she said. "And don't worry. Everything's going to be all right."

After she had gone, Gruver decided that she *was* capable of leaving Buckhart and him in the ocean. He wasn't sure what made him finally decide that, unless it was the fact that his arm where she had touched it was cold, when it should have been warm.

Gruver sighed quietly. It would

be a relief, he thought, to get into the depths, where all he had to worry about were man-eating sharks. At least *their* intentions were clear.

Ninety minutes later, after he had properly digested his food and done some simple calisthenics to loosen his muscles, Gruver was sitting on a bin next to the rail, preparing for his dive. He had his wet suit on, liberally coated with shark repellent, and his fins. Around his waist was a hard rubber belt holding the knife, crowbar, and hammer. Over that was the canvas-covered lead belt to give him descent weight; similar belts were buckled around his legs just above the ankles. The underwater lantern was slung crossways over his chest. His harpoon gun was leaning against the rail next to the starboard ladder.

"How's the pump working?" he asked Buckhart.

"Like an electric clock," Buckhart answered. "Hasn't missed a beat since I kicked it on."

"The auxiliary system connected?"

"All set. Quit worrying, everything's okay. You ready for the helmet?"

"I guess," Gruver said without enthusiasm.

Buckhart lifted the globular aluminum helmet and slipped it over Gruver's head, resting it gently on his shoulders. He adjusted it slightly and opened the faceplate.

"How's it feel?"

"Good. Put the harness on and seal it in place."

Buckhart attached a rubber gasket to both the helmet liner and Gruver's wet suit. Then he strapped the helmet down snugly with belts that extended from front to rear under Gruver's arms.

"She's ready," Buckhart said.

"Okay, let's test the hoses."

Buckhart attached two hoses to the dome of the helmet; one to feed fresh air into the helmet, one to draw stale air out. As soon as they were in place, Gruver could feel them working. "Close the hatch," he said.

Buckhart bolted the faceplate closed and Gruver, with his head now in a vacuum, began breathing pumped air.

"Ready?" Buckhart asked.

"Ready," Gruver said. His voice sounded hollow and far away.

Buckhart helped him stand up and led him to the ladder. "Now remember, the officers' quarters were aft on the middle deck. Brios was a first mate, so he'd have quarters of his own. Look for a cabin with just one bunk—"

"Okay, okay. Give me the ropes."

Buckhart handed him the ends of

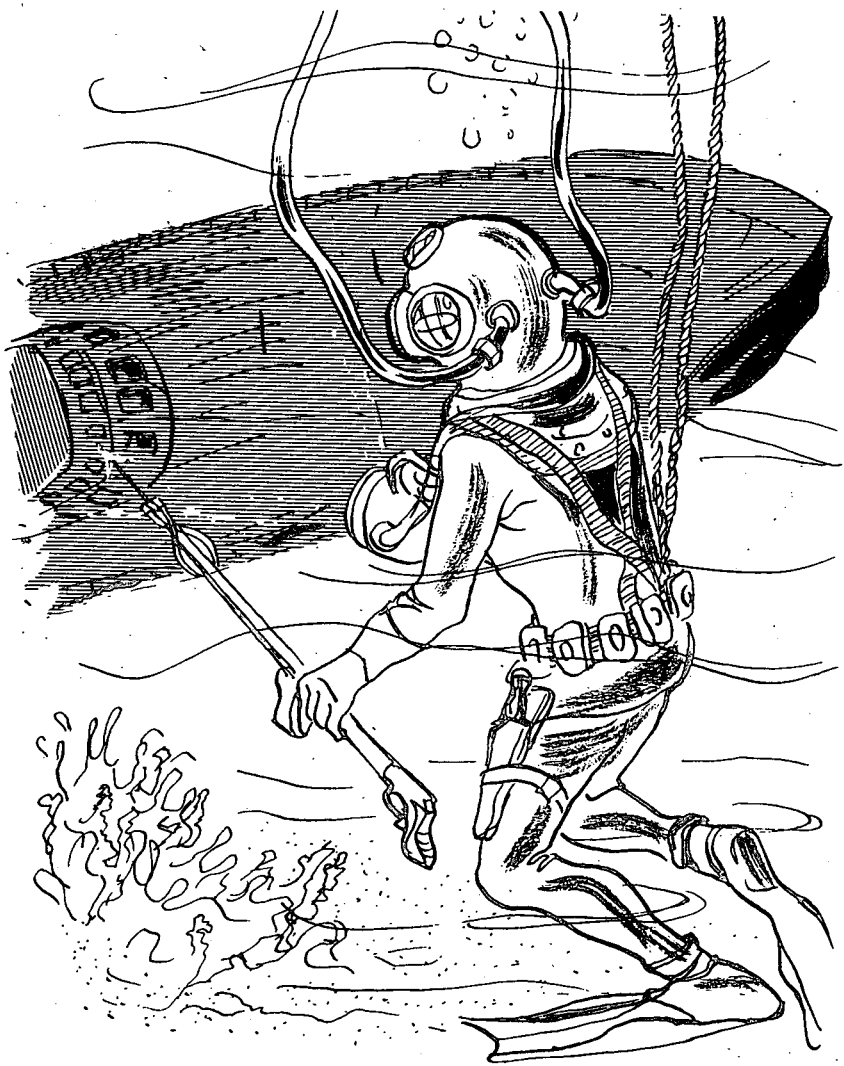
two nylon ropes that he would take to the bottom with him. Gruver turned and backed through the rail opening to the top rung of the ladder. He climbed halfway down and paused to take the harpoon gun Buckhart held down to him. As he did, he looked across the deck and saw Jo watching him. She had an odd expression on her face, an expression almost of finality, as if she were looking at him for the last time. Gruver felt a cold shiver dance along his spine. Wetting his lips, he continued down the ladder to the last rung, then stepped free into the water and submerged.

His descent was smooth, effortless. With the harpoon gun and the two rope ends in one hand, he was free to use the other hand to control the speed of his dive. When he felt that he was going too fast, and was unable to slow down with hand action, he pumped his legs and pushed the big fins against the water to decelerate himself. Several times he looked up and saw the hull of the Hatteras and the four wiggling lines—two hoses and two ropes—that were following him down; but soon he was unable to distinguish the surface any longer so he stopped looking. Presently the water began darkening and he knew that he had entered the fringe of the depths. He slowed his descent as much as he could and turned on the lantern. At once an eerie, unnatural light sliced open the darkness below.

The water around him grew colder to his hands and feet, and he began to feel the effect of pressure on his eardrums and lungs. His breath shortened and labored, but not enough to worry him. He kept the harpoon gun poised and moved the powerful light back and forth and up and down around him. He saw darting shapes of undersea life scurry out of his path or away from his presence, and the deeper he descended the more populous the ocean world became around him. And still he plunged onward, farther and farther and farther, until . . .

His heels hit the sandy bottom and dug in up to his ankles. He tumbled slowly backward, his feet coming out of the sand and raising up in front of him. He dropped to a sitting position, losing his grip on the harpoon gun as he did, but managing to hold onto the two ropes. Momentarily he recovered his balance and pulled forward to a kneeling position. He retrieved the harpoon gun and kept it at his side as he untangled the lantern strap and straightened the light to survey his surroundings. He swept the beam in a very slow arc.

The *Julietta* was just off to his right, top deck facing him, super-



structure slimy with undersea growth, looking like some great rusted junk-heap. Gruver got to his feet and pushed through the water toward her. When he got closer, he judged that about eight feet of her side—the side with the most explosion damage—was imbedded in the bottom. He hoped that Armand Brios' cabin had not been on that

side. It would be tricky at best.

He moved up next to the now vertical deck and pulled the two nylon ropes down far enough to lash them securely to a section of rail. He left an extra foot of line dangling from the knot and used it to tie down his harpoon gun; there was no need to take it inside the wreck because dangerous undersea-life never entered enclosures of any kind for fear of being trapped. When the gun was tied in place, Gruver released the lead belt and let it drop. He brought his feet up and took off the ankle weights. Then he was ready to go.

Using his fins, he pushed himself up the deck until his light flashed on a hatchway. He went over to it and found its door jammed shut. Removing the crowbar from his belt, he forced it past the latch and pried the door open. As he pulled it back, a gush of enclosed water displaced and settled. As it did, several parts of a human skeleton floated past Gruver's chest. *Probably plenty of those in the lower decks,* he thought, *where most of the crew would have been when she went down.* Sighing inside the helmet, he reached up and drew a dozen reserve loops of hose under one arm and cautiously made his way inside.

The hatch ladder ran sideways and Gruver used it only as a guide to find the lower decks. He worked his way slowly and carefully down—or rather, in—two levels, to the third, or middle deck, where the officers' quarters had been. As he twisted and turned with the course of the ladder, he gradually let out the reserve loops of hose behind him, making certain to avoid any sharp objects the ocean had cast in his path.

When he finally entered the middle deck, he estimated that he had enough reserve hose to take him about halfway along the passageway. If he did not find Brios' cabin before he used up the hose, he would have to return to the top deck, make his way farther aft, loop up more hose and enter from the hatch nearer amidships. And that, he thought, would have to be done tomorrow; his body was already beginning to ache from the pressure of the depths. If he stayed down an hour longer he would be unable to move his arms or legs.

As he readied to move along the passageway, he saw that his finned feet would be on doors in one bulkhead that opened down into cabins on the starboard side, while above his head would be doors that opened up into cabins on the port side. Gruver decided to try the lower cabins first, since they would be easier to enter. He advanced to the first one, turned the knob, and with the equalized pressure on both

sides was able to push the door in with almost no effort. Shining the light ahead of him, he dropped into the cabin. He held onto the door and looked around. The size of the cabin caused him to frown inside his he[illegible]; it was large, almost spacious by freighter standards. Could it possibly be . . .? He quickly flashed the lantern around until he found what he was looking for—a chart table built into one corner of the cabin. Gruver smiled. He was in the captain's quarters! That meant the first mate's cabin should be directly next to it.

Gruver hoisted himself into the passageway again and worked his way along to the next cabin. The door there was already open and he dropped inside without hesitation. This cabin was smaller than the first one, but it was definitely a first officer's quarters; the single bunk assured Gruver of that. Steadying himself on the bulkhead, he shined the light around the turned-over cabin. Above him, the doors to the built-in wardrobes were both hanging open, and metal clothes hangers, some with shreds of uniforms still clinging to them, were waving silently in the gentle underflow that coursed through the dead ship. Gruver, seeing at once that nothing more was in the wardrobes, switched the light to a wall bureau, its metal drawers still securely closed. Letting the lantern hang free across his chest, he took up the crowbar again and scraped away a layer of rust and pried open the top drawer. Rotten clothing drifted out into the cabin water. Gruver forced the second drawer; more fragments of personal belongings floated out. He tried the other three drawers and found more of the same.

Turning, Gruver pulled himself along the tilted deck of the cabin to where the recessed bunk was located. Beneath the bunk was a storage bin containing a metal footlocker. Gruver dragged the locker out sideways and let it sink to his feet. He knelt and examined it. With his knife he scraped a layer of ocean scum from a metal plate on the lid. The name underneath was: A. BRIOS. Gruver wet his lips and attacked the lock with crowbar and hammer. He pounded, pried, and forced the metal until its studs loosened and snapped, and the lock hinge sprung loose. With the tip of the crowbar he cracked away the seal of rust around the box and pulled up its lid.

As with the bureau drawers, the first thing Gruver saw was the shredded, soggy remains of whatever personal effects Brios had kept in the locker. But when that mass of rotted scum had burst out and disseminated around him, Gruver shined his lantern into the bay it

left and saw, setting squarely in the center of the locker's bottom, a metal strongbox about the size of a small portable television set.

Gruver swallowed dryly. He tossed aside the crowbar and hammer. The box had a handle on it; he lifted it out of its well and pulled the box up into the passageway. Following the reserve hoses he had brought in with him, he retraced his twisting, twining route back to the outside of the *Julietta's* corpse.

Once outside, it took Gruver only scant minutes to tie one of the nylon ropes securely around the strongbox. Three tugs of the rope now would be a signal for Buckhart to haul it up—but Gruver was not yet ready to give that signal. First he wanted to be close enough to the surface to make sure the Hatteras did not leave without him. While the strongbox could go directly to the top, Gruver could not; at least not without risking the bends.

Leaving one rope lashed to the rail, he took the harpoon gun and lantern and began a slow surface. Following the rope with one hand, he went up twenty feet at a time, then stopped and held himself there, resting. He kept his breathing as normal as possible and pushed the surplus hose behind him, keeping it down in the water so Buckhart would not know he was coming up.

After he had rested for several minutes at each stop, he continued toward the top. At one point he felt his ears unplug. Soon after that he passed from the darkness into a haze from above, and he knew he was coming out of the depths. His arms and legs felt very heavy now and he had to exert considerable effort to make them work for him. To reduce his weight and lessen the strain, he slipped the knife from his belt and cut the sling holding the lantern. He watched it drift back toward the darkness below.

After six intermittent stops Gruver had risen to within sight of the Hatteras' hull. He moved himself over to the rope that was tied to the strongbox and gave it three hefty tugs. A full minute passed and then he saw the rope moving slowly upward; Buckhart was pulling the strongbox to the surface.

Gruver left the two ropes and swam under the hull to the opposite side of the boat. He came up slowly, near the bow. When he was just below the surface, he removed his belt and made a sling to hold the harpoon gun in the crook of his arm. Then he used one hand and the fins on his feet to tread water, and with the other hand drew the knife from the belt-sling and sawed through his helmet straps. He felt the helmet wobble slightly. Feeling with his water-logged fingers, he

placed the point of the blade against the rubber gasket that sealed the helmet to the wet suit. Slowly and carefully he sliced through it, nicking his neck several times in the process. Momentarily, water began seeping into the helmet from all sides. Gruver let the knife go and grasped the helmet with both hands. Pulling his head down and pushing up with his hands at the same time, he ducked out of the helmet and was free.

Discarding his fins, Gruver reached up and gripped the ledge of a cabin ventilator shaft and pulled himself out of the water. He boarded the boat silently and moved along the port side toward the aft deck. He stopped just at the edge of the cabin and looked around its corner.

Buckhart was just turning the winch for the last time to haul the strongbox up even with the rail.

"Hurry, Buck," Jo said impatiently.

"Okay, okay." Buckhart secured the winch and swung the line aboard, lowering the box heavily to the deck.

Jo was on her knees next to it in an instant. "This is it, Buck!" she said excitedly. She dug her fingers into the slime that coated the rest of the box. "We've got it, Buck! We've got it—at last!"

"Yeah. At last." Buckhart turned back to the rail and busied himself.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"I'm going to bring Gruver up on the other line."

"No, Buck," Jo said coolly. "Disconnect the hoses and throw them over. We don't need Harry any longer."

Buckhart frowned. "But I thought you said we were going to play it straight with him; split the money and everything . . ."

"I've changed my mind. He could become a problem later on, you know. I mean, suppose he were to find out that you and I *planned* to get him sent to prison, that we had been seeing each other all along? He wouldn't like that very much, Buck."

"No," Buckhart said thoughtfully, "I guess he wouldn't."

Jo smiled sweetly. "Disconnect the hoses, hon."

"Yeah. Sure."

As Buckhart moved toward the pump, Gruver stepped around the corner of the cabin. "Don't waste your time, Buck," he said flatly.

Buckhart's mouth dropped open and he froze. Jo looked up with wide, frightened eyes. Her hands, half covered with slime from the depths, began to tremble.

"Buck, don't let him hurt me!" She leaped to her feet and ran to her husband.

"He's not going to hurt anybody,

baby," Buckhart said confidently. He reached for the .38 under his belt.

Gruver raised the harpoon gun and triggered it. Jo had just stepped behind Buckhart, putting them in perfect position. The harpoon plunged through both of them with an odd sucking sound, pinning them together.

Gruver watched dispassionately as they fell against the railing and plunged into the sea.

Later that day, after he had rested and had two good, stiff rum and colas, Gruver went back out on deck and pried open the strongbox. Inside he found the same thing he had found in the wardrobes and footlocker: mossy ocean scum. True, this particular scum was a different shade of green—a money-shade of green—but it was still just so much pulp. Armand Brios must never have considered the possibility of the *Julietta* going down, because he hadn't even bothered to use a waterproof strongbox.

Gruver threw the whole mess, box and all, over the side. Then he mixed another drink and leaned against the rail to take stock of himself. He wasn't in too bad shape when he came right down to it. There was about seventeen hundred dollars in Jo's purse in the cabin. The boat was all paid for and the title was in his name. It was a long trip back around Florida and across the Gulf to Tampico, but it would be worth it. Particularly with Martina waiting at the other end.

Gruver looked down at the water and thought about the depths. No, he wasn't bad off, he thought. Not as bad off as some.

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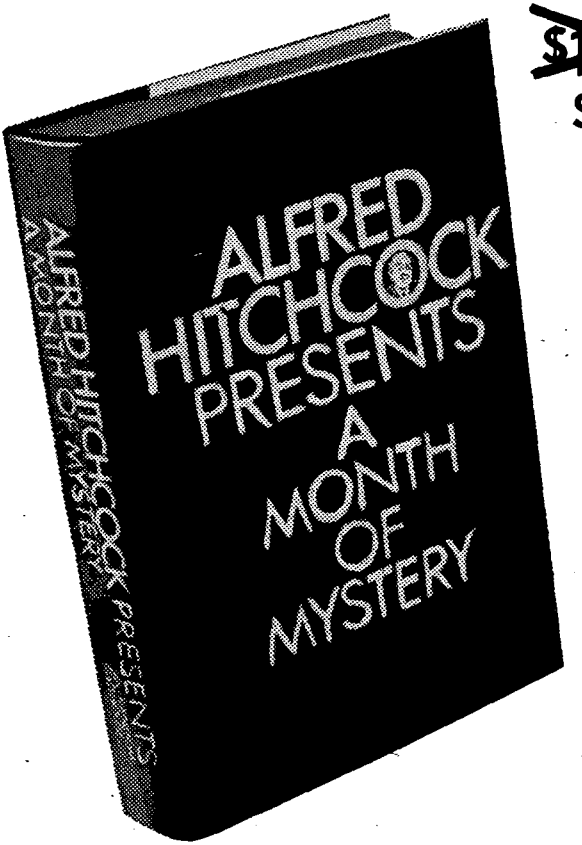

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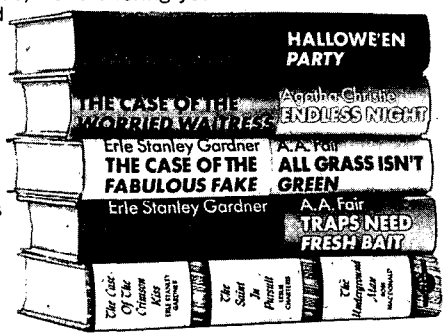

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