ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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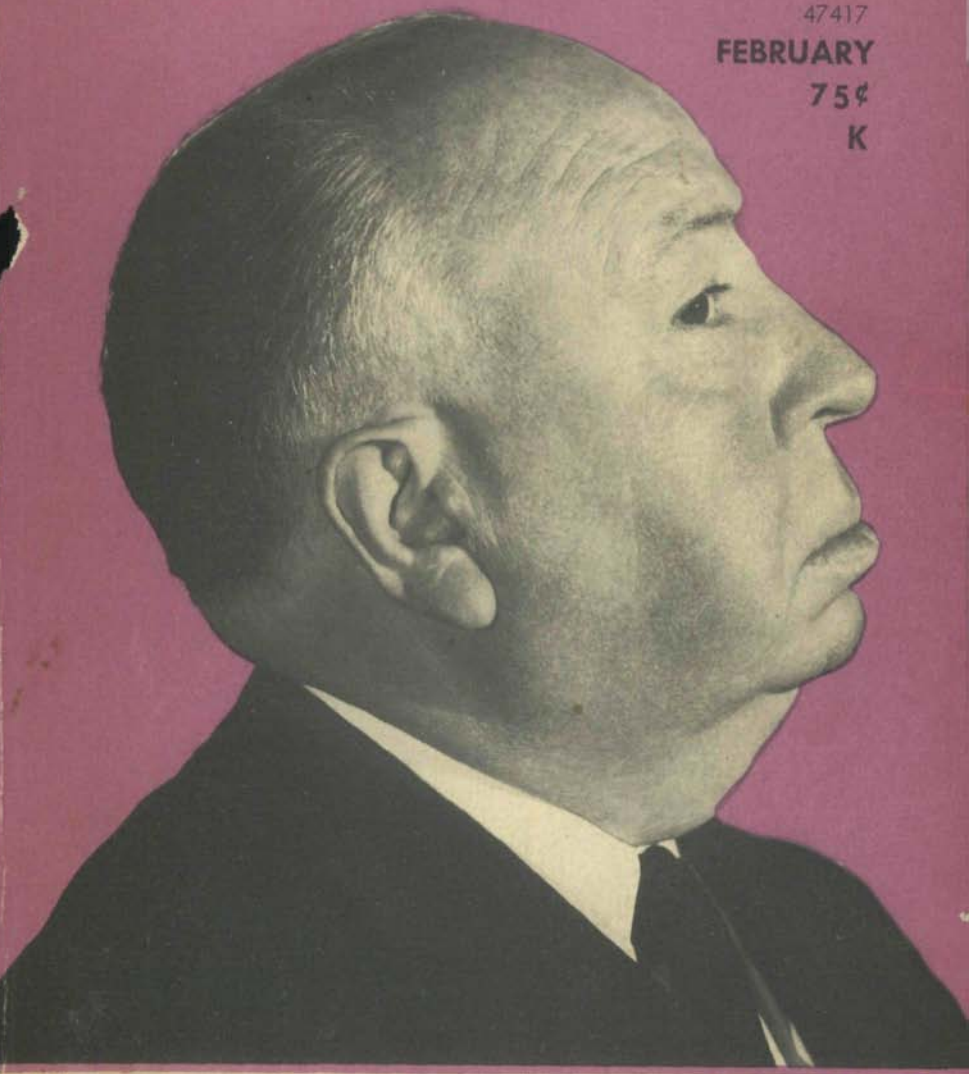

EW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

February 1972

Dear Reader:

This is as appropriate a time as any to remind you of my resolve to bring you the best of the new in the months ahead—the best of the myriad sinners who come to life on the printed page. That is a resolution which I deem sure to go unbroken. It does not alter one whit my long-time drive in that direction, and obviously there is considerable weight behind my push.

Proof of my continuing goal is presently at hand, from *Tavenaar* by Earle N. Lord to this month's novelette, *Protégé*, by Jerry Jacobson. An admirable list of your favorite authors and their new creations vie for your attention. Outdoor chills are forgotten as you turn to those within.

From beginning to end you should find sufficient cause to promise a thing or two for yourself. Barring the doors and windows at night is an excellent idea. So is a vow to return next month to see who—or what—lies in wait.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 17, NO. 2 FEBRUARY 1972

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 17, No. 2, Feb. 1972. 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. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of address should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Printed in the U.S.A.

Nothing is more successful in arousing one's indignation, apparently, than a certain element of credibility in a discreditable falsehood.

Earle N. Lord

THE SNOW BEGAN falling at three o'clock on a Saturday afternoon and at first everyone thought it was great. It began coming down at a rate of a foot an hour, so thick and fast that I had trouble finding my way in to the lodge from the upper slopes of the mountain.

I was up at Mammoth in the Sierras for a four-day weekend in February and, like everyone else, thought the storm meant more superb skiing in the morning; but the snow kept falling at that fantastic rate for twenty hours, and though I did get a little skiing in during the next morning, it was very poor.

Meanwhile, that late winter storm had given me a great big, fat problem. When the snowfall finally ended, my poor little immigrant car was buried with two hundred others under a small mountain of snow; interred, we were soberly informed by the rangers, until spring.

Monday, a holiday, dawned bright and clear, but I did not hit the slopes, attractive as they were. I had a teaching post to fill on Tuesday in a Los Angeles junior high school, and it was a long walk home.

The people at my lodge were

very nice. They promised to store my suitcase and my gear and skis until I could come back during the spring thaw. I put on my boots and heavy clothing and began the ten-mile hike down to the highway.

It was rough going at first, through heavy, hip-deep snow. I finally stumbled across a utility road where a snowplow had gotten a semblance of a track into the area, and followed it down the mountain to Highway 395. Even at the lower altitudes the snow was piled up in great banks twenty feet high on each side of the road, but as I mushed on toward Bishop, it began to taper off until the snowbanks were only about three feet beside the road. This would save my life.

During the entire trek down from the mountain, I saw and heard absolutely no traffic. It was completely calm and still, and I had the eerie sensation that I was alone in a white universe. Then I heard the welcome noise of a car approaching from behind me. Stepping to the side of the road, I held out an eager thumb and turned to see a bright yellow convertible with the top down and a blond-haired male driving, his long, shoulder-length tresses streaming back in the wind. When he saw me he swerved in toward me and, with a growl of his big engine, accelerated. It took me half a second to realize what was happening, then I frantically jumped backward over the snowbank behind me and tumbled into a rocky ditch paralleling the road. As I went over in a desperate backflip, a fender hit one of my boots and I felt a sharp pain stab me in an ankle. When I came down on my head and shoulders, my left arm twisted behind me and I felt it snap. The pain arrived a few moments later.

I tried to ignore it and concentrated on the ominous sound of a car skidding to a stop on that icy road. I twisted around to a half-sitting position against a large boulder and faced the roadway as I heard footsteps crunching through the ice and snow toward me. I got my first real look at him when he walked over the ridge. I had seen the long hair and flame-red parka, but they had flashed by me in a blur. Now I saw his handsome, boyish face in detail. When he flashed me a smile, I noticed the dimples in his cheeks and the little cleft in his chin, but I was not impressed. I was much more interested in the fact that he was carrying a tire iron and, although his mouth was smiling at me, his curious violet-blue eyes were not. They had a peculiar flickering quality to them that reminded me of something. It took just a second for the recall to come. I had once seen my fat old tomcat looking through our apartment window

at a house finch on the other side of the glass from him and marveled at how evil and malignant he had suddenly become. I reached down into my pocket with my good hand and hauled out a ring full of keys. On it was a small knife with a one-inch blade. I pulled it open with my teeth, keeping my eyes fixed on the newcomer. My heart began to pound in my throat and ears. The smile left his lips and his expression became flat and cold. He stepped cautiously toward me, then stopped suddenly and glanced back at the road, listening intently.

The beautiful, harmonious sound of a gasoline engine came to my ears again, followed by the even more euphonious sound of a car skidding to a halt. Once more I heard the crunch of boots in packed snow, and over the ridge strode the burly figures of two young student types, the short-haired variety. One of them was wearing an S.C. letterman's sweater. He made me a Trojan rooter for life.

The blond maniac with the tire iron spoke first. "I'm Joe Tavenaar. I just ran this poor guy off the road when I pulled in to pick him up. My foot slipped off the brake onto the gas pedal. I think he's broken his arm. Do either one of you know how to make a splint?" He held up the black piece of steel.

The one with the sweater grinned and said that a straight piece of wood would be much better, and he took charge. A few minutes later, after a trip back to the second car, my arm was neatly splinted and my ankle injury had been diagnosed as a simple sprain. One of the late arrivals, it seemed, had been an Army medic. They carried me back to their car. Tavenaar insisted on my going with him, saying that the accident had been his fault and that he wanted to take full responsibility for me. That made me insist even louder on going on to Bishop Hospital with the two S.C. boys. He followed us into town.

After my arm was set and placed in a cast, I was moved into a ward full of ski-accident victims and began to stew quietly about my predicament. The doctors gave me something to kill the pain, which made me a little groggy, and when Tavenaar came in with a highway patrolman to make the report, I was in a deep quandary. I knew my story would sound weak and I almost ducked telling it, but then I made the plunge.

"Officer," I said after a few routine questions, "that was no accident out there on the highway. That blond maniac standing next to you deliberately aimed his car at me. Then, when he barely missed, he hauled a tire iron out of his trunk and came after me to finish

the job." I awaited his reaction.

"Is that how you got the bump on your forehead?" he asked, still smiling at me.

I didn't know I had a bump on my forehead. I felt foolishly with my good hand and found it sticking out up there as big as life.

"Does your head ache at all?" Tavenaar inquired solicitously.

"I did not know I had been hit in the forehead," I said firmly. "My head is perfectly clear. It does not even ache, and that maniac still tried to kill me—twice."

The officer cleared his throat gently. He looked embarrassed. "I was warned by Mr. Tavenaar that you were going to make these charges, Brennan," he said, speaking slowly and carefully as if he were talking to a child. "I've checked with the other two men. They don't back you up at all. Tell you what—I'll come back tomorrow and we'll make out the report then. It's not fair to talk to you about it now. You're still groggy."

I looked at Tavenaar and he gazed right into my eyes and smiled sweetly. "Will you check this guy's record," I said, "and see if he has escaped from some funny farm, Officer?"

Tavenaar's smile became a wide grin. He was enjoying himself!

The officer said he would check on Tavenaar's record. Tavenaar stated firmly that he would cooperate in every way with the investigation, then the patrolman left, leaving me with the impression that he thought *I* was the prime candidate for a mental ward. Tavenaar stayed at my bedside.

He pulled up a chair while I picked up the little push-button gadget you use to call for help. He shot me a warm and friendly smile.

"Don't worry. I never attack cripples in bed," he said.

"Tell me what you want, chum. I need some rest right now."

"Don't be so suspicious. I really want to help you. I feel responsible for all this. Look, I can take some time off. I'm a graduate student at U.C.L.A. and I can work it out easily. I'll stay up here with you until you're ready to go, then drive you down to wherever you live."

I stared at him in amazement. "You don't see any reason why I would hesitate to get in a car with you? Man, aren't you forgetting something? I was up there on that road with you."

He frowned and his face took on a petulant, young expression. "That was an accident, Brennan. You have to believe me. I really want to help you."

I thought a while. "Listen, here's how you can help me. The phone lines are down between here and L.A. because of the storm and I

can't get through to my principal. You'll be a big help if you drive home and call him and tell him I'm going to be out for two or three weeks. His name is Edwards, Don Edwards, and you can reach him at Rogers Junior High School, or at this number at his home." I wrote the number on a memo pad.

That seemed to do the trick. After asking me again if he could get me anything to eat or read, he left, and I heaved a huge sigh of relief. He was friendly, kind, and considerate. He was charming and seemed to be sincere. Yet there was something lurking just behind that winsome boyish mask he wore for a face that scared the living hell out of me.

The doctors thought my injuries were much more serious than I did and refused to release me from the hospital for two more days. The highway patrolman returned with a friend this time, and reported that Tavenaar was a bona fide student at U.C.L.A. in the Psychology Department and not an escapee from Camarillo. He pointedly asked me how my head felt. I made my report to him and said that I still thought that Tavenaar had deliberately run me off the road but I did not prefer charges, being warned that I could be sued by Tavenaar if I did. The next day I was transported to an L.A. hospital by ambulance, all expenses paid by Tavenaar's insurance company. He had made all the arrangements.

This surprised me. I'd had the feeling that I would never see or hear from him again, but I had to admit that he did an excellent job of getting his company to help me. After another long day of multiple pokings, probings, and X-raying in a local hospital, I was trucked home to my Westchester singles apartment to mend and recuperate.

It was three dull, long weeks before I was permitted to return to work, during which my main pursuits were enviously watching the tennis players chasing balls in the park across the street and listening to the jetliners take off every two minutes from the L.A. Airport nearby. I nearly lost my mind.

So I was actually happy when I was finally permitted to report back to work on a sunny Monday morning in March. I was grinning from ear to ear as I strode down the crowded main hallway at Rogers, smiling from the good-natured razzing I was getting from the kids. They thought I was a victim of a giant pratfall on skis. I was about three paces past a conservatively dressed young man walking the other way before I reacted. I turned and yelled at him.

"Tavenaar! What are you doing here?"

He turned and directed that winsome, boyish smile at me again. The hippie look was gone. His hair was short and neat. He looked like every middle-class American mother's dream of a son-in-law.

"I am working here, Norm," he said in a familiar, bantering tone. "I'm certainly glad to see you fully recovered. I'm sorry I didn't get up to see you. I'm taking Mrs. Maxwell's place on a long-term sub assignment."

A tardy bell rang and broke off our conversation when we both had to dash for our classes. After teaching my two periods of Senior English, I finally got to one of my counseling periods and rushed in to see the principal about Joe Tavenaar.

There I found what a smooth operator the guy really was. He had not phoned in my message, but had come to the school in person after a trip to the barber. He not only informed the principal of my accident, again taking full blame for it, but offered to help out as a substitute teacher during my absence, saying he would drop his day graduate work at U.C.L.A. for the quarter. He impressed Mr. Edwards, normally a very shrewd man, enough to land himself a job. Not right away; you can't pick up a credential, not even for substitute teaching, in less than a week in California, but knowing that one of our history teachers was leaving for an operation, the principal had hired Tavenaar for her replacement and had gotten the red tape brushed aside in a few days. Mr. Joseph Tavenaar was now a bona fide member of our faculty!

Mr. Edwards then shot me an odd little glance which should have warned me what was coming, but I walked right into it anyway.

"Do you have any misgivings about Mr. Tavenaar teaching here at Rogers, Brennan?" he asked with a poker face.

"Yes, indeed, sir, I have some profound misgivings," I replied heatedly. "I think he is a homicidal maniac, and I speak from personal experience. That nut deliberately aimed a high-powered car at me on the highway. If he hadn't been interrupted, he would have brained me with a tire iron. Those are my misgivings, Mr. Edwards."

The principal arose and shut the doors separating his office from the main office next to it. I realized that I had been speaking quite loudly. He returned to his chair and smiled reassuringly at me.

"I'm deeply sorry to hear you say these things, Brennan. Tavenaar has already told me about the accident you had and mentioned the charges you have made against him. I checked with the police before I

hired him, and he *did* check out."

"And they said I had a head injury," I snapped.

"The police say you had a tremendous scare. They think you hit your head on a boulder when you tumbled into the gully. The school doctor downtown says you are now fully recovered."

"Okay," I said, "I get the picture. I certainly did have a scare up there on the highway. That's as close to getting killed as I've ever come. And I certainly was startled again to see him walking by me in the hallway."

"You're due for another surprise, Brennan," Edwards said with a wry little half-smile. "He seems to be very much interested in Jane Maslow."

I shrugged off that news to Mr. Edwards but not to myself. Actually I was annoyed that the principal was aware of my long-distance interest in Miss Maslow. She was a pretty, shapely and intelligent little science teacher that I decided I'd better stay away from if I wanted to remain single for very long. With the amount of graduate work I had ahead of me to finish my counseling credential and with some of the foreign travel and skiing I had planned for the next few years, I tried to keep my distance from girls like her.

I watched the two of them eat lunch together that day and again on the next. On the third day, I said the hell with not getting involved and joined them. The results were amusing. Jane was warm and friendly while Joe Tavenaar was surly and hostile. This went on for two days, then Tavenaar made the next move.

He met me in the parking lot after work. As a counselor, I normally leave school an hour or so after most of the other teachers, so he must have waited for me in his car. When I approached my rented car, he stepped up and tapped me lightly on the shoulder from behind.

"What gives?" I asked, studying him carefully. He was playing the friendly all-American-boy role this late afternoon. He smiled a bashful smile.

"Brennan, I'd like you to stop lunching with Jane and me. I've become quite serious about her and you're getting in the way."

"How do you suppose she feels about that?" I said.

He erased the smile and looked sincere, like a TV pitchman selling detergent. "Jane asked me to speak to you. She doesn't want to hurt your feelings."

"All right," I said with a tragic little shrug of my shoulders, "I shall leave you two lovebirds alone. You have excellent taste, my friend."

He grinned again, and this time I

think he meant it. We shook hands warmly, got into our respective cars, and drove away.

As soon as I arrived at my apartment, I phoned Jane and asked her out to dinner and a show. She was already booked up with Tavenaar for that particular evening, but readily enough agreed to go out the following night. I ate lunch with her without him the next day. Tavenaar did not come into the lunchroom. He had evidently heard about my date with the girl and was sulking in his classroom.

He was back in the parking lot that afternoon, however, and he was not smiling this time. That peculiar bird-watching expression was back on his handsome face again, and his eyes were flickering once more.

He got right to the point. "You made a sap out of me, chum," he said and, moving in, threw a clumsy right-hand lead at my jaw. Simultaneously, he tried to put a vicious knee lift up into my vital organs, and there was nothing amateurish about this effort. Having graduated from an East L.A. high school and having barely survived the standard U.S. Army dirty-fighting course, I managed to come out of it with nothing more than a severe bruise on my right thigh when I blocked his lethal effort. Meanwhile, I jabbed him once on the nose to get his attention, then hit him solidly in the stomach with a right that had my 180 pounds behind it. He was soft and out of shape, and that was all it took. He went down in a heap and the battle was over. When he staggered to his feet, he was crying real tears and said nothing as he stumbled away to his car in a half-crouching position.

That appeared to end the hostilities for a while. For the next few days the three of us ate together at lunch again as if nothing whatever had happened in the parking lot. I mentally wrote Tavenaar off as a simple con man and bully.

He was a bit more than that. The following morning Mr. Morrison, our Boys' Vice-Principal, sent Randy Balsam in to me for some counseling and guidance, and my interest in Tavenaar was rekindled. Randy was easily the biggest clown in the group of seniors with whom I worked as a grade counselor. I'd had him in class and knew precisely how he operated. "Operated" was the true word for it. Randy was bright, popular, witty, funny, and shrewd. He was what I liked to describe as a "tightrope walker". His specialty was finding out exactly where each teacher drew the line on classroom conduct, then Randy would try to tiptoe along that mark. He was disenchanted with the entire older generation and partic-

ularly with teachers who were putting in their time with minimum effort. His favorite target was the teacher who bluffed knowledge he really did not have. If Randy ever suspected that the teacher was committing this educational crime, then the boy did his homework, for a change, and made a point of embarrassing the teacher in class on the next day with a series of probing questions. He had caught me once in this manner, and I knew how teachers felt about this sort of thing. They bled.

Randy had been sent in this time as a result of an incident in one of Tavenaar's history classes. He had been charged with disrupting the class with witty remarks about the teacher's lack of preparation for teaching his subject and had been assigned after-school detention following a discussion of the matter with the vice-principal. Ordinarily, a grade counselor would not get involved in this type of incident. Randy had been sent on to me because he had made charges that Tavenaar was insane. I was asked to discuss the laws of libel and slander with the boy and also to find out what he really had on his mind.

Randy collapsed his big frame into the desk-side chair and shot me his normal mocking smile. "You are not going to brainwash me into getting along with that creep of a teacher," he said hotly. "That weirdo is out of his ever-loving mind."

As directed, I discussed the laws of libel and slander with Randy and impressed him not one bit. He was amused, instead.

When I finished, he plunged right on. "Suppose I am right and that ding-a-ling is really off his rocker, what will your laws say about that? Aren't there some laws to protect kids like me from screwballs like him?"

Wearily I asked Randy to relate why he had diagnosed Tavenaar as being mad. It was like opening a floodgate on a dam.

"I will give you just one for instance," he said triumphantly. "You know that black briefcase he carries with him wherever he goes?"

I knew about the briefcase. Tavenaar taught in two rooms and carried his notes and papers in it, a perfectly normal procedure.

"He keeps his roll book in it," Randy said when I nodded. "And he hides it in one of his closets, the big coat closet by the door. Last Tuesday, old Creepie-Eyes didn't get to class on time after nutrition. That's normal with him. He was probably making out with Miss Maslow behind your back. The whole class was standing outside the door, so Old Baldy let us in, and then went looking for him on those creepsoled

shoes of his. Then Margie, my number three girlfriend, went into a snit because she couldn't take the roll. She thinks that jerk, Tavenaar, is dreamy! She's a little off, too."

I listened to the boy with genuine admiration. He was an artist with words. In a few sentences, he had managed to zero in on Tavenaar's odd eye movements, the vice-principal's bald head and crepe-soled shoes, my interest in Jane Maslow, and how much the girls of Rogers Junior High School loved Randy Balsam. It was a masterful performance, well-designed to rattle any inexperienced counselor. I had been through several of these interviews before, however, and refused to be diverted from the main thrust of the discussion.

"Let me guess, Randy. You then took it upon yourself to go to the closet and take the roll book out of the briefcase so Margie could take roll," I said.

"Counselor, you are indeed clever! You see right through me with those beady eyes! That is what I did. I opened the damn thing up and took a good look inside while I had the chance." Randy leaned back in his chair and gazed triumphantly at me.

I felt manipulated but had to go along with the boy. "What did you see in the bag?" I asked dutifully.

"I thought you'd never ask," Randy said, and his smile disappeared and was replaced by a puzzled frown. "That is the weird thing. All he had in there was a Thermos bottle, a scrapbook with some newspaper clippings in it, the roll book, and a bunch of test papers. Maybe he was carrying martinis in the Thermos?"

"So what's the big deal?" I asked.

"The big deal came when that maniac got back to class. When he strolled in and saw Margie taking roll with that book, I thought he was going to have a stroke. He got a funny look on his face and asked Margie, in a choked-up voice, where she got it. He scared her, he really did, so I sounded off and told him I took the roll book out of his damned briefcase in the closet so the class could get started on time for a change. That got him off Margie's back. He stared at me for about five seconds, then asked me to step outside in the hall and wait for him.

"You know, that creep kept me waiting outside for ten minutes while he explained a homework assignment, then he walked out with that silly little smile on his face. He gave me no warning at all. He just looked up and down the hall, then grabbed me by the throat and slammed me up against the lockers. He held me tight until I started to pass out, then he let go and said

never to touch that briefcase again. He had the damnedest look in his eyes, Mr. Brennan. I'll swear they were wiggling back and forth real fast."

"Why on earth didn't you report what happened?"

"To who? You were gone. Who's going to believe a kid against a teacher, especially a kid with my record? Old Baldy would have thrown me out on my ear. Besides, that nut didn't really hurt me, so I didn't have any bruises to show anyone. He just scared me."

I told the boy that Tavenaar frightened me a little, too, and that I would look into the matter. I advised him to walk very softly with Mr. Tavenaar, and he promised that he would. Sending the boy back to class, I waited until halfway through the lunch period, then went to Tavenaar's room and let myself in with a master key. I opened the coat closet and took the scrapbook out of the briefcase. In it, I found a collection of news clippings about people dying in mysterious manners. An eighteen-year-old girl had jumped out of a high window of a U.C.L.A. dorm. An old lady of seventy had fallen down a flight of stairs in a swank apartment building in Westwood. A teen-age boy had been found strangled in a Santa Monica movie house and, finally, a hitchhiker had been killed by a hit-and-run auto on the road to Palm Springs. I put the scrapbook back in the briefcase and dashed out to find Mr. Edwards. As I rushed down the hall toward the lunch area where he usually stationed himself, I glanced back over my shoulder and saw Tavenaar walking down the hall toward his room and wondered if he had seen me leaving it.

Mr. Edwards was off campus at a Kiwanis meeting and I couldn't get in to see him until 1:30 that afternoon. When I found he was back on campus, I asked the vice-principal to join me, then took the matter in to the principal. He listened to my story with a sad expression on his weatherbeaten face. The problem now was his, and it was a beauty. Tavenaar had signed a contract with the L.A. City Schools, had joined the teacher's association, and though he was a substitute, still had all sorts of rights and privileges. Edwards sent the vice-principal out to substitute for Tavenaar, then brought him into the office and quickly dropped the whole mess in his lap.

I was curious to see how he would react to such an intense situation. He did just fine. Before he was finished, he had me looking like a psycho case, again.

"I don't know what to say to all of this, Mr. Edwards," he said, look-

ing crushed and bewildered by the enormity of the charges against him. "I think I can understand the motivation of the boy. Randy is a chronic troublemaker who is upset by a little firm discipline in the classroom. That incident in the hall is a figment of his very vivid imagination, as is the scrapbook. I have no such collection of newspaper clippings in my possession. You may search my briefcase, my classrooms, my car. If you like, you can come home with me and search my apartment." With this peroration, he dramatically reached down and picked up the case which he had brought in with him and opened it wide for inspection. I mentally read myself off as an idiot for putting the thing back in its place.

That was just act one. Act two followed immediately, when he turned and faced me and gazed directly into my baby-blue eyes and let me have it. "What I do not understand is the motivation of Mr. Brennan, here. I am deeply sorry about the accident up on the mountain. I have done everything I can to make up for it, but he simply will not drop the hallucination that I deliberately tried to kill him with my car. I think he came back much too soon after his head injuries." He swung around to face Edwards with that same clear-eyed, sincere, direct expression. "Has Norm told you about assaulting me in the parking lot? Has he mentioned the jealousy he has concerning my relationship with Miss Maslow?"

I had not mentioned the incident, so now I was left sitting there with a lot of egg on my face. When I saw the expression on Edwards' face, I knew it was all over. All he could do, when Tavenaar finished with his defense, was issue a general warning to him about never touching pupils for any reason and let him go. To me he issued a firm request to go back to the doctors for another checkup. Tavenaar left the office with a proud smirk on his handsome face. I left it in a blue funk.

As I turned to walk back down to my office and commit hara-kiri, I felt that gentle touch on my shoulder again. Whirling to face him, I observed those flickering eyes in action once again and prepared myself for another Sunday punch. He did not swing this time or try the knee lift, however. He just choked up and gagged a little, then spoke to me almost in a whisper.

"Thanks a lot for that, chump," he said, then turned and walked briskly down the hallway toward his room.

"Don't choke any more children, weirdo," I called after him, but he chose to ignore me.

I went back to a pile of paper work for a couple of hours, then

closed up the office and started walking down the darkened hall, almost missing the figure crouching at the foot of the stairway leading to the second floor. When I did see it out of the corner of my eye, I jumped, thinking it was Tavenaar again. I felt foolish when it turned out to be Randy Balsam, half-sitting on the bottom step and holding his head with both hands.

I rushed over to the boy and helped him stand. He was groggy and needed my support.

"What's wrong, kid?" I said.

"I was horsing around in the halls after detention and that psychoceramic sneaked up behind me and shoved me down the stairs."

"Did you see him?"

"No, I did not see him, but who else could it be? He really gave me a blast-off. I was ten feet in the air before I hit the first step."

I helped Randy walk down to the main office, where we found that everyone was gone, so I took him out to my car and drove him to an emergency hospital. They checked him over but, aside from some severe bruises, found no serious injury. I drove him home, talked to his parents, and made them promise not to contact anyone until morning. They fed Randy and put him to bed.

I then drove over to Jane's where I already had a dinner invitation. I described what had happened at school and asked for her help. She didn't seem to think I was suffering from any head injuries, so we went to work. When I told her what I had in mind, she managed to persuade me to involve Mr. Edwards in it, again. We drove over to his home in Mar Vista and rather wearily I brought him up to date. I expected him to turn me down flat and was quite surprised when he agreed with my plans for smoking out the elusive Mr. Tavenaar.

It was a delicate and involved plan which had about one chance in a thousand of working, but it was all I could come up with.

Step one was to put out the bait. With Edwards listening on an extension phone, I called Tavenaar at his Westwood apartment.

"Tavenaar here," he answered cheerily.

"This is your old buddy Brennan, weirdo," I said in my normal friendly tones. "I saw you push that boy. I was ten feet behind you when you shoved him."

"I don't know what you mean, Brennan," he said, his voice dropping about thirty degrees. "I'm getting very tired of you hounding me."

"I'm not hounding you, Tavenaar. I'm giving you a chance of clearing out before that body is found. I know you can probably

talk your way out of this mess, too, but it will be painful for you. The cops will crowd you. I want you out of Los Angeles and out of that school."

A long pause followed while I prayed he would take the bait.

"You're after the girl," he said.

"There will be lots of other girls. I want you to leave L.A. If you show up in the morning, I'll tell the police what I know," I said, and hung up.

Edwards came in from the other phone in his study with a puzzled frown on his face. Jane had one, too.

"I don't see what you accomplished there, Brennan. He admitted nothing."

"If he runs away, that will be a tacit admission of guilt. I don't think he will. I think he'll go back to the school and move the body. He will try to implicate me. I never said where the body was. If he does go down there, we'll have the first bit of solid evidence that can be used against him. And he's also going to get the surprise of his warped young life if he touches the corpse. It may rattle him enough to give us more evidence."

Jane's lovely eyes widened. "You're going to be the body?"

"I have Randy's jacket in the car. He's a big kid, and in the dark Tavenaar will never notice the difference until it's too late for him."

"How can you expect him to go down to that school?" Jane asked. "I don't see how he could even come back to it in the morning after what he has done."

"I'll give you odds he returns. He's still attending night classes at U.C.L.A. after pushing that girl out of a window. He aimed his car at me on Highway 395 after running down another hitchhiker in the desert. If he is as psychotic as I think he is, he probably doesn't think there is any chance of his ever getting caught."

Edwards didn't say anything. He simply walked over to a desk drawer, unlocked it, and brought out a short-barreled police special and handed it to me with a wry smile.

"I'm certain I have one lunatic on my faculty, Brennan. I'm betting here that it's Tavenaar and not you."

I slipped the gun into my jacket and Edwards drove me down to the school. He let me in with his master building key and we walked down the gloomy hallway, lit faintly by a few scattered security lights. I curled up on the cold concrete at the foot of the stairs at the spot where I had found Randy, wearing his flaming red jacket. Edwards went inside a nearby office and sat down by a partially opened door.

After a half hour of lying on the cold floor and feeling extremely foolish, I got up and walked over to Edwards and handed him back his weapon.

"Let's give it another hour," he said. "If he doesn't come by then, he's either left the city or he's going to try to brazen it out in the morning."

It must have been the better part of that hour before I heard anything, then I began hearing the strangest assortment of noises I had ever heard in my life. First, far in the distance, I heard the faint sound of glass breaking and tinkling to the floor. That I understood. Tavenaar was apparently coming in through a ground-floor window. Next, I heard one of the big main-floor double doors open. I did not hear it close. Then followed at least five solid minutes of dead silence. It was so quiet and I was straining so hard to hear that I began to hear the jets taking off at the airport six miles away!

Then I heard some sounds that I could not recognize, sounds which seemed to be coming from *above* me on the second floor. They were odd, clinking noises and even some strange gurgling noises that made no sense at all to me.

Another period of nerve-racking silence followed, then I froze. I heard the soft, wet squish of a footstep about six inches above my head on the stairway, then the sound of a metal cap being unscrewed. I felt the sudden cold splash of a liquid being poured on my inert body—and then I smelled the gasoline!

Every hair on the back of my neck rose straight up, and without any conscious control on my part I began to crawl away from him. Tavenaar was planning to set me on fire! He had fooled me again. I thought I would force him to move the body. Instead, he decided to hide it in the charred ruins of the school. I stood up in a crouch and faced him, so terrified my knees almost collapsed under me. There is nothing I fear more than the prospect of being burned alive.

My eyes were accustomed to the darkness now and I could see him faintly in the gloom. He was staring with astonishment at a corpse which had suddenly crawled away from him. His mouth was open and slack, and those damned eyes were flickering. He had a glass gallon-jug in his hands, half full of gasoline.

"Randy? Is that you, Randy?" he said in a hoarse whisper that made my flesh crawl.

"Randy is alive," I said. "He survived that flight you gave him down the stairs."

"Brennan! Why didn't you die on the road? I've never missed with anyone but you."

With that outburst, he threw the half-filled bottle down at my feet and it shattered, giving me another gasoline shower. Then he reached into his coat and pulled out a lighter.

I began backing up as I yelled. "Don't do it, you idiot. You're standing in the stuff you poured on me."

"Burn up!" he yelled, and flicked the lighter.

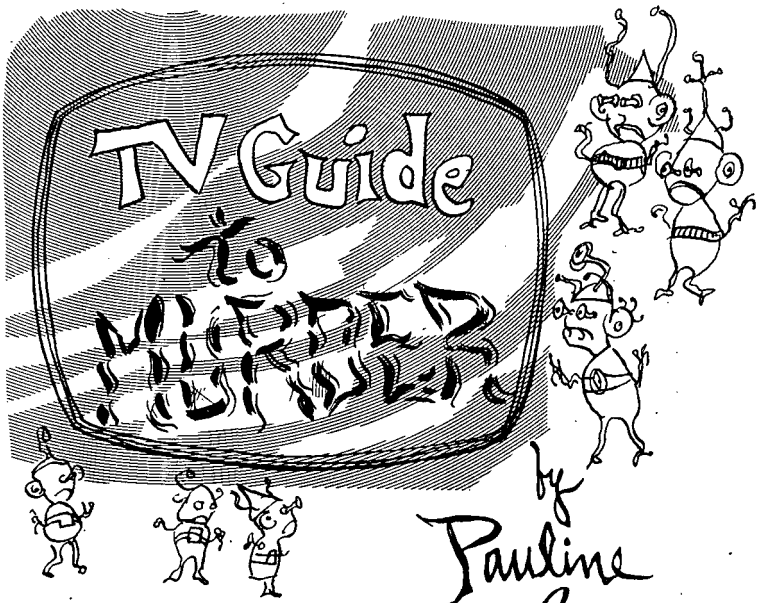
It didn't catch, and I turned and began running toward the main exit.

Edwards stepped out of the guidance office with his gun and yelled at Tavenaar to stop, but that didn't have any effect either. Tavenaar's next try with the lighter must have caught. I heard the tremendous whoosh as the gasoline ignited and the flames roared up the stairs to where he had apparently poured another bottle of gasoline in the hallway above. I felt the great flash of heat on my back and when I glanced back and saw myself being pursued by a ghostly flaming figure of a man ten feet tall, I accelerated sharply. I did not see him go down, only heard him scream my name one last time. Then there were only the sounds of the fire.

Jane was waiting for me outside. She said that she had become worried and had been unable to stay away. We were soon joined by Mr. Edwards, who escaped the blaze by climbing out one of the office windows. We watched the fire companies arrive and fight the fire. When they caught a whiff of me, they insisted on hosing me down thoroughly, as well. The police arrived a few minutes later. They found Tavenaar's car a half block away, with the scrapbook under a rear seat. This was a little thing after the night's events, but it made me feel much better.

When the fire was out and the police were through with us, Jane drove me home. I was so shaken by the evening's experiences, I forgot all about my skiing and travel plans and asked her to marry me. She was apparently so upset, she accepted. We've never spoken his name since that night, but there are times when he seems to be with us, nevertheless.

So, let the image-maker who foists his foibles on the public heed lest he be choked with retributive ambition.



AND WHAT, MR. WETZEL," questioned The King softly, "is a cripple picker in a pretzel factory?"

"Well," answered the guest through audience laughter, "I stand there, see? With this long pole that has a hook on the end." He made all the motions, and the producer backstage knew he had a winner. "Then when the pretzels come along on the conveyer belt, I hook the ones that aren't shaped right. They are the cripples and I pick 'em out." The camera closed in on an artless, melon-round, serious-eyed face gazing at his questioner in simple innocence.

"Sounds difficult," observed The King dryly.

The guest shrugged with modesty. "It's not so difficult. But a cripple picker can work only fifteen minutes at a time."

"Fifteen minutes?" The King alerted. "Why only fifteen minutes?"

"Well, with all those curled-up shapes laid out on the belt," explained the guest, drawing a rapid series of figure eights in the air, "you can work only fifteen minutes before you get dizzy."

The King pounced. "So dizzy you see little green men with purple antennae growing out of their heads?"

"They're not so little," bridled the guest with sudden belligerence.

The audience roared.

A red button-light beamed a station-break warning.

The King offered his usual contemptuous pause-for-a-message.

The sponsor took over the monitors, coming on strong with hard-sell aggression, and Hal Blalok, the producer of *Mark It and Strike It*, turned to enter his office, regretting this crazy profession of his where he must round up the kooks, the nuts, the schizzys, and lure them with token payments and the opportunity of publicizing their hang-ups, into the arena of Studio 5 to be chewed on by The King and laughed at by the audience.

He sank down in a chair, looked into the lovely face of Lydia, who stared back at him loyally from the silver frame on the desk, and regretted The King. Most of all, he regretted The King, that monarch of malice who threatened to take over more than the show.

He switched his office monitor into action, looked from Lydia in the frame to Mr. Wetzel on the screen. The pretzel factory's cripple picker was now describing his meeting with extraterrestrial beings, his moon-face ecstatic, lit with the glory of consecration. "This disc-shaped craft," he related in a voice filled with awe, "descended in a fluorescent glow into the field outside my house and the whole side opened up, letting them out."

"Letting who out?" The King asked silkily, the camera panning to his handsomely cruel face.

Hal Blalok turned off the sound, leaning back in the silence to remember and regret that he had only himself to blame for Mark Kingston's successful existence.

He had invented him, declaring back when he was running the show, "I want a wit who can top all comers with a keen brain and a sharp tongue. I want a scoffer who can slash with a word, and knife with a glance. I want a master of

maim and mutilation. I want controversy to curl the toes of the late viewers and give them something to read about the next day."

All Blalok's wants had come to pass with Mark Kingston.

"The King," he called him, immediately titling his new TV program *Mark It and Strike It*, knowing the bedtime audience out there in television land would not recognize the trade term, but might catch the parallel.

Blalok had been clever then, an independent producer who had devised a talk show to fit a dead spot, built up the format to polished perfection, planned it live in a canned world of taped runs, found the man to irritate, and named the package after a stagehand's directions: "Mark the position of the scenery and then remove it."

The camera had panned to a close-up of the guest's hands, his fingers interlocked, clasped in desperate devotion, twisting nervously, twined to knuckle whiteness. Blalok reached forth and turned on the sound.

"But I saw these beings," the guest's voice protested. "I saw them and heard them and touched them. They are real. They are my friends." The camera, having conveyed its message, offered the guest's face, drawn with the distress of his emotion, quartered with intensity, agitation, resolution and dedication. "I have been inside their craft, it's like nothing you've ever seen. They let down a ramp and I walked up into a hallway that circles the ship on the inside. All the rooms, engine and sleeping rooms are off that hallway. No doors, just openings. No eating rooms, they live on pills. They gave me one and it made me feel wonderful. Then they gave me a ride in their craft."

Sardonically, The King broke in. "So you took a pill and had a trip."

"I did. I did." The guest's face was ecstatic with the false supposition that The King finally believed him.

Blalok, in belated guilt, turned off the sound again, not wanting to hear The King's ego-smashing retort, wishing he had never seen or heard him that night less than a year ago when he had discovered Mark Kingston during a dull comedy routine in a scroungy topless joint. The routine was being heckled and the heckler was Kingston, caustically crude, diabolically disconcerting. Blalok had risen to his opportunistic feet in an instant, crossed the room from his table to Kingston's, thrust out a hand, declaring, "I am Blalok. You interest me."

From that night on, The King had been interesting late-viewing

television audiences, delighting and enlivening them, ruffling and provoking them, but holding them within the tight fist of their fascinated fury.

Hal Blalok leaned forth and switched on the sound to hear the guest's agonized rebuttal through the hysterical laughter of the audience. "I tell you I saw these beings," his words tumbling in their haste to be believed. "They are my friends. They picked me out—"

"Right off the belt," interrupted The King. "They found a crazy shape and reached out with their hook—" his insult drowned in audience laughter. The camera panned the laughing faces for the home viewers, causing Blalok to feel a deep sense of guilt for having picked the cripple from the pretzel factory to subject him to this public inquisition, his face showing the torture, twisting with it, big on the screen, big and round and frustrated as he tried to speak against the roar of laughter in an attempt to interrupt the flow of venom.

Hal Blalok pitied the guest, not that he usually pitied those he selected; but now he felt great pity that spilled over from himself onto the guest.

"Just how did you communicate?" The King baited the guest.

"Thought waves," cried the guest triumphantly. "I *guess* they were thought waves. I talked just like I talk now."

"You mean you made waves then, just as now, without any thought," suggested The King, and the guest said, with dignity, "I asked them what they were doing on my property, who they were and where they had come from." He bent with his intensity. "They answered, too. They answered every question. They had come because the vibrations were right, and approached me because they considered me a friend. They were people, they said, just like me, who had come—"

"From out of this world," pronounced The King, and took the opportunity of proving that he had done his homework with a rapid-fire scientific monologue: "Distances between galaxies are measured in hundreds of thousands, millions, even billions of light years. The nearest star to the sun in our own home galaxy is about 4.25 light years or 25.5 trillion miles away, so even if your mythical creatures came from a planet of the nearest star, it would take 4.25 years for a *radio signal* to travel from it to us, so how long do you think it would take these little monsters of yours to transport themselves physically from a star in a far galaxy?"

"They aren't so little and they aren't monsters," answered the

guest, with complete assurance. The audience screamed with laughter.

"Mr. Wetzel, you have simply worked too long and too dizzily as a cripple picker . . ."

Hal Blalok hated The King. He had hated him almost from the beginning, as soon as he took over with the crown of his newly-made reputation and the scepter of his sharp tongue.

Blalok felt trapped. He could dump the show but would lose everything, with the other metro-media stations frantically bidding for The King—not for the producer, but for The King. Hal Blalok was in the position of hanging in there to keep his job.

It was degrading; as degrading as was the position of the kooks, the dum-dums, all the nuts that he dredged up to make the program sting and stay.

"They are very advanced," the guest was declaring, stiffly outraged. "They are teaching me all that they know through thought waves. Oh, they speak all right, but what I catch are the thoughts—"

"Waving at you," suggested The King, and the audience, quickly camera-panned, waved into the screen as if rehearsed.

"Well . . . yes," agreed the guest, momentarily confused. Then, in explanation, he plunged on. "Their speech is an 'ah' sound. Like this, ah-ah-ah-ah."

"AH!" exaggerated The King.

And the audience, in delight, answered, "AH!"

Blalok, in an agony of sympathy, turned his eyes from the screen and onto Lydia in the frame.

"Well, for goodness sake," Lydia had said to him when he came home caved-in and wrung-out after a session with The King, "why don't you just fire him? After all, *you* are hiring *him*. He isn't hiring you."

That's what you think, thought Blalok, but what could Lydia know about the crazy business of television? She wasn't a part of it, which was one reason he had married her. She didn't even watch it. Lydia was lovely in an undramatic way, comforting after a day at the studio. She was his life apart and he had never discussed his business with her before—not until The King. Then he brought it home to their heavily-mortgaged Georgian house in Beverly Hills and discovered that he had made a terrible mistake, because she became interested in television, his program and The King—mostly The King.

"He's awful," she quivered with delighted horror. "Just awful. So cruel. My goodness!" with an undercurrent of excited curiosity that sent her to the television set to watch *Mark It and Strike It*, and fi-

nally to the studio, ". . . to meet him, Hal. After all, everybody is talking about the man!"

Everybody was; the columnists, the letter-writing viewers and the metromedia poobahs fearful of lawsuits.

So now he had to get rid of The King—some way, he had to get rid of him because he'd not only taken over his show but was taking over his wife.

Lydia, undramatically lovely, had joined the crowd of dramatic lovelies in The King's Court to become the favorite.

Hal Blalok dropped his head to his hands. There were only two things in life that he valued; one was his career, the other his wife.

"I tell you they were real!" cried the guest from the monitor. "They stood right there and talked to me with their 'ah' sounds and spoke to me through thought waves. They are teaching me all that they know, and preparing me to see and discover and pick out our earth wrongs . . ."

Blalok knew, in the dark of his hands and through the sounds of the monitor, that he would have to get rid of The King. He, an innovative man who had invented him, would have to now, a nonviolent man, destroy him.

"I am their Watcher on this planet!" he heard and raised his head from his hands to see the guest spring to his feet with the passion of his words. "I shall strike down their enemies!"

Hal Blalok leaned forth and, in an instant, his innovative mind had directed his nonviolent soul toward a plan to destroy The King.

He snapped off the monitor of picture and sound and waited.

The last commercial had blasted the airwaves. The audience, crowding from Studio 5, turned to one another, still laughing, to observe, "It was good tonight. Right? That King, he's a character."

"Who's a character? How about the cripple picker from the pretzel factory with his prattle about those purple people?" and they broke up, reminding each other to read the morning paper and the columnist's report on *Mark It and Strike It.*

Hal Blalok's office door stood wide open. He leaned back in his swivel chair to get a good view of backstage, and was able to see the guest the minute he fumbled his way through the curtains. He looked spent, his circular face oval with dejection as he jumped free of the grip men darting between the cables of the "mothers" and the "broads" being pushed out of the way.

"Mr. Wetzel!" called Blalok, leaping to his feet to spring through

the door and clamp the guest's shoulder with a friendly hand. "Mr. Wetzel."

The guest brightened at the familiarity of his name.

"In here," directed Blalok as he urged him into his office and bent him to a chair. "I want to compliment you on your performance out there. You were great, with a wonderful story to tell."

After the scoffing disinterest, the guest beamed under Blalok's words.

"Not only wonderful but powerful. I would like to hear more about your work with these beings," smiled Blalok, spreading warmth and good fellowship as he sat down in his office chair and proceeded to flatter the guest into a hired killing job. "They must have great trust in you."

"Oh, they have," agreed the guest, and leaned forward to explain with egomaniacal intensity the monumental trust his extraterrestrial friends had in him, nothing but an earthling cripple picker, but a smart one so they said with their "ah" sounds, and sensitive too, a born Watcher.

Blalok nodded to indicate his belief in every word as the guest described again the craft, the beings and meetings in his back yard, and finally their dependence on him to save the world.

Blalok's interest increased. "And your job is to watch?" he prompted with exaggerated eagerness.

"To watch, yes," said the guest, expounding and extrapolating. "To learn and observe, to watch and understand. To strike down the nonbelievers," and he sliced the air with his hand.

"How?" asked Blalok.

"How?" The guest looked confused.

"These nonbelievers. How do you strike them down?"

"Oh." The guest moved his head from side to side as if searching for the how. Suddenly, he cocked a finger at Blalok and clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

"A gun!" said Blalok, leaning back in his chair to ease his breath out. "A gun," and he smiled. Then he bent forward again. "Do you have one?"

The guest stiffened and looked outraged. "Of course," he said, "my friends gave me a gun. They said, with their 'ah' sounds, for me to find the nonbelievers and . . ." again he cocked a finger and clucked. "Oh, yes, I have a gun. But I haven't used it yet."

"Well, now . . ." and Blalok proceeded to tell him how to use it and on whom.

As he talked, the guest lived over again the humiliation he had felt onstage, again remembered the black cloud of The King's derision

and derogation, and felt a seething fury that boiled up in righteous revenge and simmered in decisive rage.

"If these beings you have been privileged to communicate with," insinuated Blalok, "want to make a perfect world and have designated you as a Watcher to strike down the nonbelievers," and Blalok's hand sliced the air in imitative destruction, "it is your duty, then, to strike down The King *now.*"

It certainly was, expressed the guest's melon-face.

The more Blalok talked, the more convinced the guest became that he, as designated savior, would do this act of annihilation.

"Can you use the gun?" asked Blalok, and the guest's answer was a scornful tip of the head. "You know when?" The guest smiled. "How to get in and where to stand?"

"Yes," said the guest with great dignity, and rose to leave the office.

Blalok spent days and nights of ambivalence. Each time he heard the words *Mark It and Strike It* ring out over the monitor, he wanted to hang onto what he had, but what he had was Mark Kingston who treated him like a serf and Lydia like a queen, and he immediately switched to look forward to The King's death so that he could be left with at least the shell of a show and a wife comfortingly at home.

Each time Blalok read a TV review wherein the critic had remembered to add those golden words, "Produced by Hal Blalok," he was ready to call the pretzel factory and call the whole thing off, but when, as was more usual, the critic named the show "The King's," without even a touch of credit for the producer, Blalok sliced the air with his hand, and could hardly wait.

He worried some about the killer, that fantastically fanciful little man who picked cripples by day and talked to phantoms by night, and rationalized the worry away, his conclusion being that the little guy was crazy anyway and what could be done with him just because he shot a hole through another man's head? Nothing at all except to toss him in a funny farm, and he'd probably be happier there anyway among his own kind.

Blalok watched his wife, misty in romance, and attended The King, demanding on his throne, and worried that he might lose everything should The King die, only to worry further that he already had lost everything with The King alive.

Blalok was ambivalent, but he soon talked himself into a more resolute ambivalence as he waited for the day, a Saturday when he and Mark Kingston had their weekly conference in the office of Studio 5.

Backstage was dark with morning and inaction. A lone bookkeeper worked in the finance department down the hall, sullen since Blalok had asked him to come in this Saturday—to do what? Nothing that couldn't wait until Monday, but his sullenness was now edged with anticipation because, with the double time promised, he could get that dishwasher for his wife's birthday to keep her quiet.

Blalok's office window slanted morning light on Mark Kingston at the desk, his back to the door—*A perfect target*, thought Blalok, who faced him across the desk and also faced the wide-open door. He heard the faint clicks of the calculator down the hall and knew that his stooge was in place, ready to leap out at the blast of a gunshot and witness a murder.

Blalok sneaked a glance at his watch. Five minutes to eleven. Five more minutes. Would he show? The palms of Blalok's hands turned damp and he rubbed them together.

The King was sounding off about the guests for the coming week. "This guy and his invention," he said, "a *sky vacuum*? To clean the air of smog?" and Blalok handed over science clippings gathered by the research department for The King to read and memorize in order more eruditely to put the guest down.

Blalok looked at his watch again. Three more minutes. *Maybe the little fanatic got lost! Or maybe he misplaced his pass to get inside the building! Maybe something or someone scared him off. Maybe he's sick . . .*

"What kind of stuff's this nut going to bring with him?" asked The King, and Blalok jumped.

"This sky-vacuum nut."

"Oh." Blalok wiped his brow. "He's got plans and graphs. Big ones so the number one camera can pick them up without any trouble."

Now The King looked at *his* watch.

He might get bored and take off any second. The meeting was to last until noon, but that wouldn't stop The King if he had something better to do, like lunch with Lydia. Of course, with Lydia; she had given a limp excuse about today . . .

Blalok's mouth felt dry. His watch now told him it was a minute before eleven, and The King was restless, ready to take off.

"This dame who wrote a book. I don't believe it! *My Other Life in a Brothel*?" The King looked blankly over the notes at Blalok. "What's she? A wishful thinker?"

Blalok, looking back at The King, raised his eyes to see his killer, exactly on time, as he stepped forth silently from the gloom of backstage and stood on spread and determined legs in the center of the doorway.

Looking like one of his own science fiction figments, thought Blalok, amazed, his killer's melon-head encased in a plastic space helmet.

"Ah, the hell with it. I'll look at the rest of this junk later." The King started to rise.

The killer whipped a gun from his hip.

Blalok ducked, peeking over the desk.

The King stood. As he rose, the gun tipped, keeping a perfect bead on the back of his head, and steadied.

Blalok saw the killer's trigger finger tighten. He snapped his eyes shut and shuddered.

Faintly, he heard the childish pop of the gun. His eyes flew open.

The King turned, facing the door, looked into the barrel of the gun and laughed. "Well, if it isn't the pretzel picker playing games," he said, striding to the door and shoving the little man aside.

Blalok straightened and turned limp. The perspiration dried coldly as he watched The King look down from his height of security and success at the little man whose mouth was working but whose words were a foggy mumble inside the space helmet until he reached up with his gun hand, opened up the helmet, and said clearly in startled disbelief, "You were supposed to disappear."

Then Blalok read the white-lettered words on the toy weapon that spelled out PLAY SPACE GUN.

"That's what you were supposed to do. Disappear. It's the way they said with their 'ah' sounds. I was supposed to shoot the gun and you were supposed to disappear . . ." His words were a whimpered discovery spoken through the open

visor of his helmet, drenched with the tears of his final inadequacy. "I thought it would work, being a Watcher and getting rid of all the nonbelievers by shooting the gun to make them disappear."

The King laughed again, pushed past him through the door, saying over his shoulder, "I'll look through the rest of those kooks later. Got a date I don't want to keep waiting."

The calculator still clicked in the finance department where the bookkeeper sulked through this unnecessary Saturday work and dreamed of spending his overtime on a dishwasher.

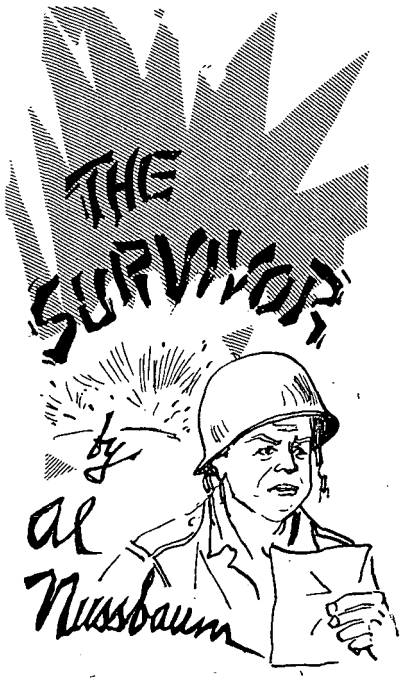
Mr. Wetzel, leaning dejectedly against the side of the door, stared through the open visor of his play space helmet at his play space gun and tried to remember—had there really been extraterrestrial beings who had sought him out and made him important by naming him their Watcher so that he could wipe out his enemies, all those nonbelievers who didn't believe in him, with the click of a trigger? Had there truly been those beings who showed him deference and consideration, and given him a significance he had never before had? Or was he left now with only pretzels riding along a belt and a hooked pole in his hand, with a decision to make as to which one was normal and which the cripple? He looked blankly through his open visor at Blalok, mutely asking an answer.

Blalok sat at his producer desk and thought of The King, whom he had produced, still alive and on his way to Lydia, his wife, no longer comfortingly and comfortably at home. *It's a crazy boob-tube world,* he thought, *with its successes that turn to failure, with its sadism and its masochism, with its kooks and nuts and schizzys . . .*

And out of this boob-tube world, he flagellated himself, he had to use a TV guide to murder, expecting a hired gun from a cripple picker in a pretzel factory.

He looked up and saw the question inside the visor of the play space helmet, and answered it. "Go back to your pretzels, you cripple," he sneered, and lowered his head to his hands.

One can never drown out the sound of his past.



SERGEANT TUCKER GETZ moved away from mail call with his head down. The last letter had been distributed and, as usual, there had been nothing for him. He was bare to the waist, and his muscular upper body glistened with sweat. His fatigue trousers had a wide band of perspiration extending several inches below his belt.

"What's the matter, Sarge?" a voice called. "No mail?"

Getz stopped and turned slowly. Pfc. Andy Oblanski was twenty feet away, sitting on a large wooden crate in front of one of the thatched supply huts. Oblanski was a large-nosed youth in his mid-twenties who always seemed to be smiling. He wore a fatigue shirt, despite the sweltering heat of the Vietnam afternoon, but it was unbuttoned and hung outside his pants. Getz shrugged elaborately and approached him.

The Pfc. slid sideways, making room for the sergeant beside him. "You don't get much mail, do you?" he asked.

Getz shrugged again and sat down. "I don't get *any* mail." By his tone he was saying he was regular army—it was the draftees who received the letters, not the professionals. He didn't need mail.

"I wouldn't trade my letters from home for a million," Oblanski said. "My wife writes and so does my mother. I get two or three letters every week."

There were a couple of splinters

along the edge of the crate. Getz snapped them off and let them fall to the ground. He licked his lips once. Oblanski was beginning to bug him a little.

"You read 'em if you want to," Oblanski said.

"What would I want to read your mail for?" Getz asked.

"I don't know. Just thought you might. They're pretty good letters—real newsy." Oblanski grinned boyishly, as though he'd just remembered something pleasant. "Here," he said, thrusting a letter into the sergeant's hands. "Take a look at this."

Getz removed the letter from its envelope and unfolded it. It was from Andy Oblanski's wife, Julie, and it was the craziest thing he'd ever read. She was telling about an arty Italian movie she had seen, and the letter was written in broken English with an Italian dialect. Before he had read very far, the sergeant was laughing so hard he nearly fell off the crate. "I thinka you wife izza craze," he said, imitating the style of the letter.

"No," Andy corrected, laughing with him, "not crazy, but she does have some imagination. She once spent a couple of weeks with me when I was stationed temporarily in Virginia. She went home to Buffalo with the sweetest Southern accent you ever heard. Want to see her picture?" he offered quickly.

He pulled out his wallet without waiting for an answer and fished a picture from one of the scratched plastic compartments. The small photo had been taken by a machine in a bus or train station. It showed the head and shoulders of a young woman with light-colored, shoulder-length hair. She was smiling, almost timidly, into the camera lens and, though one of her teeth was slightly crooked, it didn't detract from her smile. She had the wholesome appearance Getz associated with soft-drink advertisements. He thought she was beautiful.

"Like to read another letter?" Oblanski asked.

"Yes—yes, I would," the sergeant told the younger man.

From then on Sergeant Tucker Getz read all of Pfc. Andy Oblanski's mail. If two letters arrived at the same time, Oblanski would automatically hand one to Getz while he read the other; then they'd swap.

Oblanski's mother always printed her letters and told Andy how proud she was of him. They were the kind of letters Getz thought more of the men deserved. However, the letters from Andy's wife were the ones Sergeant Getz liked best. He began to look forward to them. He never knew what to expect when one of her neatly ad-

dressed envelopes was in his hands.

Sometimes she'd be completely serious and tell how she felt with Andy away, how she wanted and needed him. Getz knew she would have been embarrassed if she had known Andy had let someone else read the letter. Usually, however, her letters displayed humor and imagination that the sergeant found fantastic. In addition to her dialect letters (she wrote in British, French and German lingo, besides the one in mock-Italian Getz had read first), she sometimes pretended to have been writing two letters at the same time and to have mixed up the envelopes. She'd send her husband letters that were supposedly intended for the President, a movie star, or some other celebrity. Andy smiled at letters beginning: "Dear Zsa Zsa, I want to tell you about my wonderful husband . . ." and Sergeant Getz enjoyed them, too.

She often wrote long letters, containing the complete text of conversations she'd had with friends or claimed to have overhead. What might have been boring material in anyone else's hands, she managed to inject with excitement. She showed the volume of a person's voice by the size of the words she wrote: a whisper would be so tiny Getz could hardly read it; a shout might be an inch or more in height. For a while the two soldiers tried to compete with her by sending oddball letters of their own, but Julie was too quick-witted for them. No matter what they thought of, she came up with something more outrageous.

A long letter arrived the day of the attack, but it was never answered. Mail call was at four in the afternoon, and the first round of a mortar barrage struck the center of the village compound at four-thirty. From then on everyone was too busy digging trenches deeper, or huddling in them, listening to the whine of the incoming shells, to think about mail.

After dark the situation became worse. The Cong moved in close with automatic weapons and launched a pair of attacks that were nearly successful. It became clear that the defenders, hardly equal to two platoons in strength, were pitted against a full battalion. Each new casualty weakened their defense and made an enemy victory more certain.

Just before dawn the Cong stopped firing. "Get set!" the lieutenant yelled from somewhere to Sergeant Getz's right. "They're getting ready to try again!"

The defenders lit up the perimeter of the compound with aerial flares and waited. The sudden respite from battle gave Getz a chance to look around for the first time in

hours. He saw Andy fifteen feet away, sitting with his back against the trench wall, holding his abdomen with both hands. Oblanski's life was pouring from a shrapnel wound and rapidly leaking away between his fingers.

"My pictures . . . my letters . . ." Andy said, gasping for breath. "Burn 'em. I don't wanta give . . . souvenirs . . . to the Cong." They were the last words he ever spoke.

Sergeant Getz stripped Andy's pockets of letters and photographs and smashed his wristwatch on a rock. Then he crawled across the torn earth, removing personal effects from as many other bodies as he could find in his area. Many of the dead had arrived as replacements only a few hours before the battle had begun, and he neither knew their names nor recognized them when flares or rocket flashes illuminated their faces. He didn't bother to collect dog tags. He figured whoever collected his could pick up the rest of them, too.

Clutching the pictures and papers to his chest, Getz returned to the trench where Andy Oblanski lay dead. He went to the end of the trench and built a fire under Oblanski's helmet so that little light would show. Then, one piece at a time, he slowly fed Andy's pictures and letters to the fire. He hestitated momentarily over a 5 X 7 inch photo of Julie which Andy had received a few days before. It was inscribed: *To Andy with all my love, Julie.* Sadly, he watched it consumed by the flames, and followed it with more papers he had picked up from the other bodies.

His movements were mechanical. His mind was thousands of miles away, thinking of the pain Andy's death would bring to Julie. As each piece of paper burst into flame, turned black and then gray, he automatically added another to the small fire. Then he came to another 5 X 7 inch photo of Julie Oblanski, identical to Andy's, except the inscription on this one read: *To Johnny with love, Julie.*

Getz stared at the picture until the flames ate it away and reached his fingers. Then he swore briefly, dropped the flaming scraps and continued to feed papers into the fire. Now his thoughts were not only thousands of miles distant, they were years away as well; and his sorrow and shock had been replaced by a cold rage.

Sergeant Tucker Getz had joined the army in the fifties. He had been every bit as apprehensive and naive as a twenty-one-year-old orphan could be. Far from home for the first time in his life, loneliness had covered him like a shroud. He had worried about the future and felt a need to be close to people. When

he met a woman at a service-club dance, he was more attracted to her than he had been attracted to any woman before. They were married within two weeks, and then he had shipped out for Korea.

He had realized, of course, that he hadn't been the first man in her life, but he had thought he would be the last. As it turned out, he had been sandwiched somewhere in the middle. While he had been trudging from one desolate spot to another across the Korean landscape, she had continued to go to dances and collect husbands. By the time the army's computer caught up with her, she'd married five soldiers. She had already been paid one man's service insurance and was living quite well on the allotment checks the other four sent each month.

Tucker Getz learned about his "wife" while in an enemy prisoner-of-war camp north of the Yalu River. That was the only kind of news the Chinese communists passed along to prisoners. Her betrayal, coupled with the mental and physical hardship of the camp, had matured and hardened him and, paradoxically, helped him to survive. He had closed his mind to everything around him and thought, instead, of the day he would wrap his powerful hands around her throat.

She had eluded him, however. She had received a five-year sentence before he returned home and, because he hadn't taken into consideration time off for good behavior when he figured her release date, she had left the Federal Prison for Women in Virginia and disappeared months before he'd gone to get her.

Now the explosion of enemy mortar shells around him and the sound of automatic weapons tearing holes in the night brought Sergeant Getz back to the present. He felt again the pain of betrayal, but the long hours of training took control, as they always did, and he moved purposefully, operating whatever weapon he found at hand, until a head wound knocked him unconscious.

When the first pink glow of dawn appeared, it was quickly followed by a flight of choppers bringing reinforcements from the south. The Cong turned and fled into the jungle only moments away from complete victory. The American dead and the few survivors were flown out, and Sergeant Getz was already in a hospital in Hawaii when he regained consciousness.

He opened his eyes and blinked in an effort to focus them.

"Hi, Sarge," a voice called. "Glad t'see you're back among the livin'."

Getz turned his head and found that the adjoining bed was occupied by Corporal Peterson, one of the men from his platoon. Peterson, too, had been a friend of Oblanski, though not as close a friend as Getz.

Peterson slapped his blanket where it should have been covering a leg and spoke with forced cheerfulness. "We've been lucky. I don't think many of us made it out of there. Andy didn't make it, you know, and—"

"I don't want to talk," Getz said, turning away from him and closing his eyes to cut off the conversation.

Later, when Peterson was asleep and the nurse came by, Getz asked to be moved.

"I'm sorry, Sergeant, we can't move everyone who—"

Getz broke in, speaking through clenched teeth, "Move me the hell out of this ward, Lieutenant."

Sergeant Getz was moved to another ward.

He spent three months at the hospital in Hawaii. Then, because of a persistent infection, he was transferred to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. for further treatment. After six weeks there, he was judged fit for duty and given a thirty-day leave before he had to report to his next station.

By looking at a map, Getz reckoned it was approximately four hundred and fifty road-miles to Buffalo, New York. Air travel made it even shorter and faster, so he went by plane and checked into a small downtown hotel when he arrived.

Getz figured Julie couldn't have been lying all the time. Much of what she had written was most likely true. She had said that she often had dinner at a small restaurant near her apartment, and judging from the descriptions she had supplied of the other regular customers and the stories she had told about them, she probably did dine there fairly often.

He put on the tailored suit he'd had made during a three-day rest-and-recreation visit to Hong Kong and took a cab to the restaurant. It was a working people's eating place, furnished with stainless steel and chromium; but, as he might have suspected, the place was neither as clean as it might have been nor as picturesque as Julie had painted it. Although she had said she always had dinner at seven o'clock, it was fifteen minutes after seven before she appeared.

She went directly to one of the booths along the wall and sat down. Taller than he had guessed from her photos, she moved with an easy grace. She was wearing a black dress that accented her essential femininity. Even the old dishwasher, looking through the kitchen service

window, followed her appreciatively with his eyes.

From his seat at the counter, Getz watched her order. She was at least fifteen years younger than he was and obviously had no shortage of admirers, but he didn't think he'd have any trouble picking her up. She had a vacancy to fill—in fact, two of them.

He decided to employ the simple but effective tactic that he'd used in bars and dance halls in half a dozen countries. He would stare at her until he caught her eye, then smile. When she returned his smile he'd join her in the booth. What could be easier?

However, it didn't work that way. He stared and smiled, but she looked right through him and turned her attention back to her meal. What was wrong? That wasn't what he'd expected. He frowned, trying to puzzle it out, then smiled when it came to him. It was his civilian clothes! He should have worn his uniform.

The next evening he was back at the restaurant, wearing his uniform, the symbol of allotment checks and service insurance. He was so sure of himself that he didn't bother with the stare-and-smile routine again. He simply walked over and stood beside her booth, looking down at her.

"Can I speak to you?" he asked when she looked up. "Please?"

She gave him a hesitant, tentative smile—what he might expect from a nervous, puzzled woman who had been approached by a stranger, not the inviting leer of a bar girl. She knew her business; he had to give her that. But so had Bluebeard and Jack the Ripper.

"Can I speak to you?" he repeated.

She looked around the restaurant, as though seeking the answer to his question, and then back at him. "Y-yes, I suppose so . . ."

He sat across from her. "Why?" he asked. "Why did you decide to let me talk to you?"

"Because . . . because you look troubled about something," she answered with a straight face. She was good, all right.

Only Getz was better. It's no trick to make the correct bets when you know your opponent's hole card. He told her everything he knew she'd want to hear. He was unmarried, lonely, and due to leave for the Far East in two weeks. He confessed to being more than a little afraid, and she was sickeningly sympathetic. He wanted to vomit.

From there it was only a few steps, literally and figuratively, to the door of her apartment. When she had unlocked the door and turned to say good-bye with a vir-

ginal handshake, he stepped forward and crowded her through the opening, closing the door behind him.

She started to protest, but he lashed out with his right hand, turning the side of her face crimson and shocking her into silence with the blow. He caught the other side of her face with the back of his hand on the return swing, and she stumbled backwards, making a small mewing sound. He forced her into a corner where he could pin her erect with his shoulder while smashing her with his fists. When his arms tired, he let her crumple to the rug and kicked her still form. Finally, breathing through his mouth like a runner at the end of a long race, he dropped to his knees and choked off what life was left. She'd never make a fool of another man.

When he reached the airport and checked in at the reservation desk, he still had an hour to wait before his flight. He went to the coffee shop on the next level and sat at the counter, sipping coffee and watching arriving passengers move past the glass wall. His chest felt tight and his breathing was still a bit heavy, but he knew this would soon return to normal.

Getz saw the one-legged man with the crutches, but because of the man's civilian dress he didn't recognize him until he was almost directly in front of the spot where Getz was sitting. Getz ducked his head and swung around, putting his back to the window, but it was too late. Corporal Peterson came into the coffee shop and took the empty seat beside him.

"Hi, Sarge," Peterson said, slapping him on the back. "Can't tell you how happy I am to see you."

Getz choked on his drink and the coffee ran down his chin, making him look like a drooling idiot. He started to give Peterson a blank look, then thought better of it. "Why's that?" he asked, wiping his face with a napkin.

"I thought you was dead. When you disappeared from the ward, I thought you'd died. Whatcha doin' here in Buffalo—visitin' Andy's wife?"

"No, no—just waiting to change planes," Getz said.

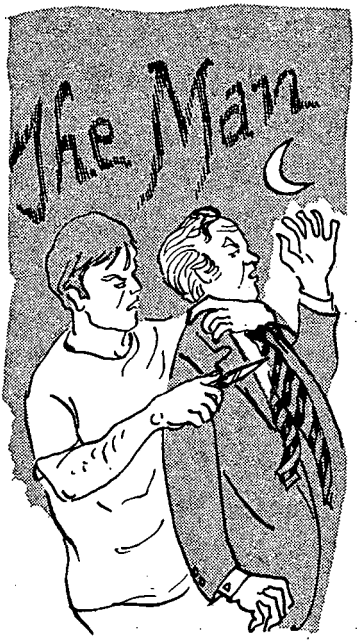
"I'm on my way to see Andy's widow. Tell her a few lies about what a hero he was. Try to make her feel better if I can. You know, she lost a lot in that battle. Her brother was one of the replacements that arrived just before the attack, and he got wasted, too."

Sergeant Getz put his hands over his ears and began to shout at the top of his voice. He didn't want to listen; he didn't want to hear.

It is not too difficult to reach the top man—it is all a matter of one's approach.

at the TOP

HARDY HADN'T PLANNED to kill the gray-haired man in the alley by the Seaman's Club. It was one of those crazy things that just happened—an event which, once started, seemed to take on a life of its own. It had been three long months since his last ship, and he needed money. He needed it for himself, and especially for Myra, who was waiting back at the hotel.



The guy had seemed elderly enough, and prosperous enough, to be an easy touch. Hardy had come up fast behind him, catching him around the throat with one arm while he flashed the knife; but the guy had wanted to fight and the knife had gone deep, almost by itself. And now Hardy was running.

There are few places to run after midnight in the dock area, especially without money, and soon he found himself back at the seedy little hotel where Myra was waiting. She was a prostitute he'd picked up one night three months ago, when he was flush with money from a voyage to Capetown. Now the money was gone, and there were no new jobs to be had, but

Myra had stayed on anyway, maybe because she'd begun to love him.

"What is it?" she asked when he came through the door. "Did you get the money?" She hadn't been sleeping, just sitting up in a chair by the window, smoking one of her endless cigarettes and watching the Bock Beer sign flash on and off down the street.

"There was no money," Hardy said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "Jeez, Myra, I think I killed a guy."

She stood up, very slowly, her face pale even in the neon glow that filtered through the curtains. "What happened?"

He told her about it, talking fast, confessing his sin as he had so many times in his youth to his father or mother, or the priest. When he had finished she simply looked away, without uttering the words of forgiveness he'd somehow expected.

"I have to get out of here," he said. "I have to get a ship out of here till it blows over. The cops will be checking all the unemployed seamen. Maybe they'll even be able to trace the knife somehow."

by Edward D. Hoch

"There's no way out," she said quietly. "You've been trying for months to sign on with a crew."

"Don't you know anybody that could help me? This is your town, Myra. Hell, you must know someone!"

She thought about that. Finally she said, "Sam Madrid is the man at the top, but nobody sees Sam Madrid. He talks to mayors and ship owners, not to bums like you."

"Do you know him?"

Her eyes seemed to cloud with memory. "I knew him once—one night after a convention uptown. He was a real gentleman, but tough."

"Would he remember your name?"

"Sure, he might." She lit another cigarette. "But I don't know how to find him. He's a strange guy. He trusts nobody."

"I'll find him," Hardy told her. "I'll find him and tell him I need a favor. I'll tell him Myra needs a favor."

"Hardy . . ."

"Yeah?" He paused at the door.

"Good luck."

The bartender at the Ports of Call screwed up his face in a frown. "Sam Madrid! You don't want much, do you? Hell, he never comes around here. What do you want with him?"

Hardy licked his lips. "I'm hot. I need a ship bad. Anything—oiler, stoker, mate. Anything to get me out of town."

"Sam Madrid's the one to see, all right. But I doubt if you'll get to him. He's at the top."

"So I hear." Hardy left the bar and headed down a side street, steering clear of the Seaman's Club. He was halfway along when he heard the distant siren, and he knew immediately that someone had found the body in the alley. His feet moved a bit faster over the damp pavement.

In the next bar he tried the same question. "Where can I find Sam Madrid?"

The bartender reached up to adjust the color television. "Nobody finds Sam Madrid. He finds them."

"Cut the games. It's important. I'm a friend of Myra's."

"I don't know any Myra," the bartender said, but he didn't walk away. After a moment he said, "Madrid's right-hand man is Doug Schaefer. He's the only one who could tell you where Madrid is."

"All right. How do I find Schaefer?"

"He has a supper club uptown, but this time of night he's more likely to be at the apartment. He runs midnight crap games for high rollers. Strictly big-time stuff." He wrote an address on a piece of paper. "Here, buddy, but I'll tell you, dressed like that you won't get through the door."

Hardy took a subway uptown to the address the bartender had given him. It was a luxury apartment building with flowers growing in the lobby and a burly doorman with a bulge beneath his uniform coat. "I came to see Doug Schaefer," Hardy told him.

The man ran his eyes down Hardy's soiled sweater and dungarees. "It's a little late for deliveries."

"No delivery. It's business."

The doorman picked up the house phone and dialed a number. "What's your name?" he asked Hardy.

"He won't know my name. Tell him it's about Sam Madrid."

The eyes above the telephone flickered with interest as he repeated the message. Then he hung up and ushered Hardy into the elevator. "You can go up," he said briskly, "once I frisk you." His hands traveled quickly over Hardy's body, missing nothing. Then he grunted and stepped out of the elevator. "No funny business," he warned, as the elevator doors slid shut.

The doors opened again at the top floor, and Hardy stepped out into a fashionable foyer where a man with a pistol was waiting.

"State your business," he said quietly. "You mentioned Sam Madrid. You got a message from him?"

"You don't need that gun," Hardy assured him, looking beyond to a sunken livingroom where a dozen men stood around a dice table.

"We take no chances on robberies here. The gun stays."

"Are you Schaefer?"

The dark-haired man nodded. He wore a striped business suit that seemed to belong in some cheap gangster film. Hardy had seen many of them in his youth, when life had been so simple. "I'm Schaefer. Who are you—one of Sam's sailor boys?"

"I'm a seaman. I have to get out of the country. I heard Sam Madrid could help me."

The man named Schaefer chuckled. "He'll help just fine. You got money?"

"I . . . no."

"No money?"

"I'm a friend of Myra. She said Madrid owed her a favor."

"Madrid owes nobody favors." Someone called to him from the dice table, and he yelled back, "Be there in a minute!"

"Just tell me where I can find Sam Madrid, that's all."

"Sam's probably gone to bed by now. Wait till morning."

"I can't wait till morning." Hardy licked his lips. "The cops are after me. I have to see him now!"

"Well, I can't help you. Nobody disturbs Sam Madrid in the middle of the night." He put the gun away and motioned toward the elevator. "Go on! Get lost!"

A gray-haired man in evening clothes left the crap game and hurried out to the elevator. "You cleaned me out, Doug," he grumbled. "I hope you're satisfied."

"Better luck next time, Mister Maxwell." He stood there, his eyes on Hardy, until the elevator door closed.

The man named Maxwell was still grumbling as they descended. "I wouldn't put it past him to sneak crooked dice into that game. My luck's never been as bad as tonight." His eyes shifted to Hardy, as if suddenly remembering his presence. "What was all that business with the gun, young man?"

"I came to see Sam Madrid, the man at the top."

Maxwell gave a low chuckle. "That's Sam, all right."

"You know him?"

"Everybody knows Sam Madrid."

"I need to get out of the country. I need a ship."

"Madrid'll get you out. He especially likes young fellows your age. Sam'll get you a ship and probably give you a hundred bucks besides."

"He can do that?"

"Sam Madrid can do anything."

"But where is he? I've been searching for hours!"

"Who knows? He never gives out his address."

"I have to find him."

"Maybe he's with his mistress."

"Who's that?"

"Girl named Stella Gold, at the Lux Apartments."

"You were hinting that he liked fellows."

Maxwell chuckled. "Sam Madrid likes everybody. That's why he's at the top."

The Lux Apartments did not have a doorman with a bulge beneath his coat. They were farther downtown, back toward the docks. Hardy felt he was being drawn to the old neighborhood, to the ships and the seamen and the foghorns in the night. That was where he belonged, and perhaps that was where he would finally find Sam Madrid.

"It's three in the morning!" the blonde girl screeched as she opened the door an inch on its protective chain. "Who in hell are you?"

"I came to see Sam Madrid."

"Well, he's not here! Get lost!"

"You're Stella?"

"I'm Stella, but he's still not here."

"It's very important. I have to find him."

"Look, buster—go, or I call the cops—and I'm not kidding you!"

"I won't hurt you. I just have to find Madrid. I need a favor."

"Sure, everybody needs favors." But she'd calmed down a bit. Perhaps she'd had visitors like him before. "Well, Sam was here earlier, but he's gone now. He left before midnight."

"Where would he go?"

She shrugged, allowing the door to open to the length of the chain. "Maybe home. He goes there once in a while."

"Where's home?"

"With his wife, Maria. A fat old pig."

"I mean the address."

"He doesn't like people to find him. He lives under another name. People are always bothering him."

Hardy had a sudden thought. "Maxwell?"

"No," she chuckled at the idea. "Not Maxwell. Did he send you here?"

"Yes."

She sighed. "All right, I'll tell you. Sam Madrid and his wife have a house down by the river. A brownstone facing Pier 17. You can't miss it. The name is Madden, but it's him."

"Thanks."

"Don't tell him I sent you."

He headed farther downtown, toward Pier 17, knowing he was near the end of his quest at last.

There were more police cars here, cruising the streets with slow precision. He knew they were searching for him, but he was no longer afraid. It was like his younger days, on the way to church, or to see his father. Sam Madrid would listen to him, and Sam Madrid would grant him the absolution he sought. By morning he'd be on a ship, far from the reach of these cops in their prowling cars.

He saw the house from a block away, because there were lights in it even at this hour. Sam Madrid would not be sleeping. He would be waiting, waiting for sinners like Hardy—just as the priest had always waited in the confessional for latecomers.

There was a man at the door of the brownstone, a guard with a gun under his gray sport coat. He frowned at Hardy as he opened the door, and Hardy said, "Madrid?"

"Who wants him?" the guard asked.

"It's important. I've been searching for him half the night."

The guard motioned with his hand. "End of the hall."

Then Hardy moved into the darkened hallway, seeing the light at the end, hearing the muffled voices. The light filtered out from behind beaded curtains, uncertain but strong enough to show the way. He went slowly toward it, and finally pushed through the curtains into the room. A fat old woman sat at a table, and two men stood nearby. They looked up as he entered, and waited for him to speak.

"I've come a long way," Hardy said. "I need help. You are Maria Madrid?"

The old woman nodded. "I am Maria."

"I need your husband. I need help from Sam Madrid. I was sent to him, because he's the man at the top." He looked at the other two, but they did not change expression.

"You want Sam Madrid?" the woman repeated.

"Yes." His mouth was dry and his legs were growing weak.

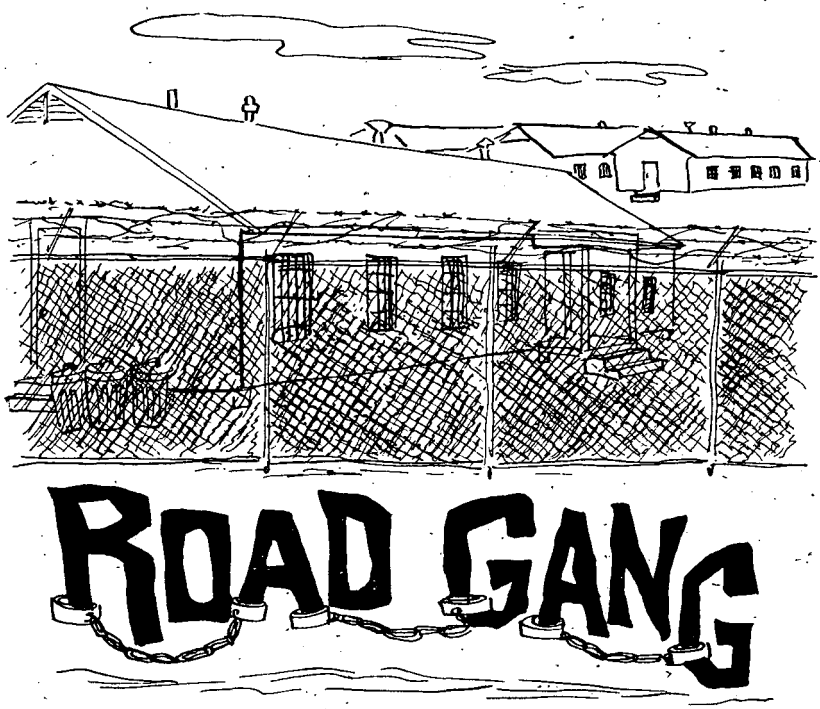
"But you are too late," the woman told him. "Sam Madrid is dead. Someone killed him with a knife tonight, in an alley by the Seaman's Club."

The miscalculation of only one figure may lead to the wrong conclusion.

THE TRUCK BROUGHT Claude Niles from the prison hospital to the Cass County road gang on a Monday morning. The shotgun guard handed the transfer papers to Beau Henry, the road-gang boss.

"He's supposed to have light duties for the first month," the guard said. "Been in the hospital with lung pneumonia or some such thing." The guard knelt and removed the leg irons from Niles' ankles.

Beau Henry tucked a lead-tipped



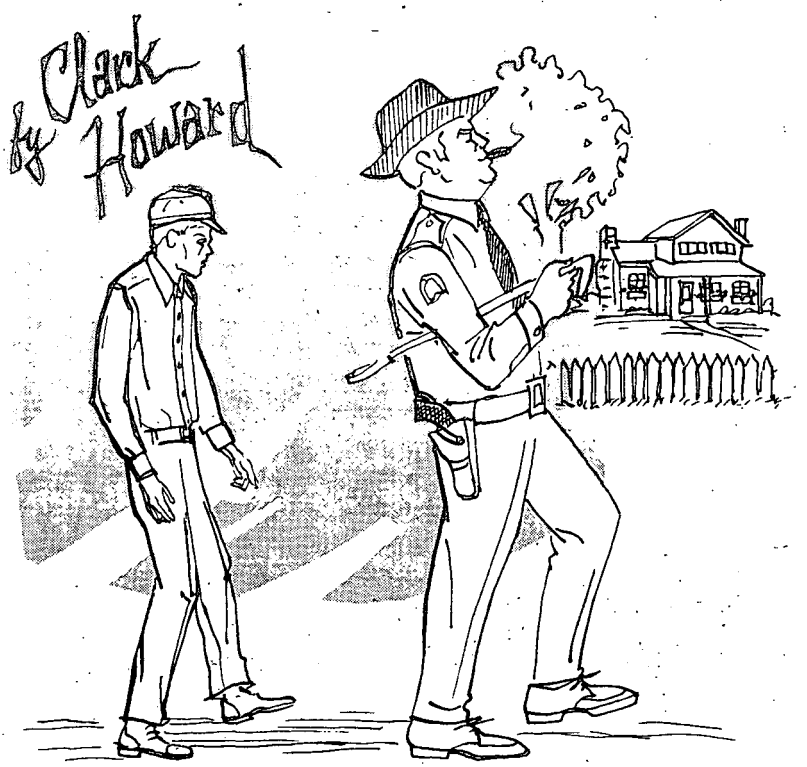
riding crop under one arm and examined the prisoner's commitment form.

"Four to six years for burglary. Broke into a diner and tried to pry the back off the jukebox. My, my, ain't you the big outlaw. I don't rightly know if our little old road-gang camp is equipped to handle anybody as bad as you. I reckon we'll have to try our best, is all." He looked Niles up and down with a critical eye. "You sure are pale and puny."

Boss Beau Henry signed for the prisoner. The shotgun guard got back in the truck and drove away.

"Follow me," Henry said.

Claude Niles walked along behind the road-gang boss across a bare dirt yard surrounded by barbed-wire fencing. On one side of



the yard was a long frame building through the open windows of which Niles could hear the rattle of cooking utensils and the chatter of kitchen help. Farther along there were several rows of barracks with heavy wooden doors and barred windows. Facing these across the yard was a cluster of frame cottages which were used for administration offices, camp supplies, and a dispensary.

Far to the end of the dirt area, beyond the back gate, Niles could see the edge of a thick green lawn fronted by a low picket fence. Two towering chestnut trees loomed like powerful sentries in each front corner. In the center of the yard, perhaps three hundred feet back from the fence, stood a neat two-story residence with flower boxes below the front windows and red brick chimneys rising above the peaked roof on both sides.

"In here," Beau Henry said when they reached the last cottage in the administration area. Niles followed him across the porch and through a screen door into a small office. Henry dropped his riding crop on the desk and sat down. Niles stood uneasily before him with his cap in his hands.

"Well, now," Beau Henry said thoughtfully. "Light duties. Let's see, what kind of light duties have we got open for a run-down individual like you." He opened a box on his desk and began fingering through a stack of file cards. "Rock quarry? No, you'd be a sunstroke case in an hour. Highway weeding? No, the mosquitoes would get what little blood you look like you've got left. Could put you in the kitchen, I reckon—no, here's something better—"

The road-gang boss turned in his swivel chair and picked up the phone. He dialed a three-digit number. Niles could hear the ringing at the other end, then the voice of someone answering.

"Morning, Captain," Beau Henry said. "Are you still looking for somebody to do chores around the house for your wife?" Henry's mouth divided into an artificial smile as he talked. "Yes, sir, I think I might have just the boy for Mrs. Reef. Burglar, just came in from the prison hospital; had some kind of pneumonia and supposed to be put on light work. What's that, sir? No sir, he ain't much to look at; skinny as a winter rabbit, and all washed-out looking." The road-gang boss' artificial smile widened. "Yes, sir, I'll send him over there soon as I can get him processed in."

Beau Henry hung up and leaned back in his swivel chair. He fingered a thin, brown cigarillo from a box in his shirt pocket and lighted it. Standing up, he exhaled a gush of

gray smoke directly into Niles' face.

"Boy," he said, "we're going to make a housemaid out of you. You are going to go to work for Mrs. Leona Reef, wife of Captain Aaron Reef, who is the head of this here finishing school for public enemies. Come on, let's get you booked in."

Niles followed the road-gang boss back outside. When they were out on the dirt street again, Beau Henry stopped and pointed down to the house with the flower boxes that Niles had noticed earlier.

"That's where you'll be working, boy. Right pretty house. Got a right choice woman in it, too. Not real pretty in the face by some standards, but she's got a figure like a college girl. That's why the captain asked me what you looked like; he don't want no good-looking con down there working around his wife. Some men are touchy that way."

Beau Henry led Niles to a cottage with a sign that read: Supply. "First thing we got to do is outfit you with some nice white shirts. The captain likes for his wife's maids to look clean and neat."

It was one o'clock that afternoon when Niles passed through the back gate and walked the long blacktop driveway that led to the captain's house. As he moved along, with the fierce midday sun already beginning to scorch his pale face, he was aware of two mounted guards patrolling the boundaries of the camp on saddle horses, and another guard on the catwalk of the water tower, high-powered binoculars hanging around his neck, and a long-range rifle with a telescopic sight slung over one shoulder. Between them and the barbed wire, the rough field country beyond, and the bounty the state paid farmers for helping to apprehend runaways, Niles didn't imagine many cons took it into their heads to escape.

When he got to the house, Niles went around to the back as he had been told. Crossing the porch, he looked through the screen door. A big, beefy man was eating at the kitchen table. *The captain,* Niles thought. He swallowed hard and knocked.

"What do you want, boy?" the big man said, twisting to see who it was.

"I'm Claude Niles, sir," he answered. "Boss Henry said for me to report to Mrs. Reef."

"Get on in here so's I can have a look at you," the captain ordered.

Niles entered and closed the door gently behind him. The captain took a long swallow from a bottle of beer, then scrutinized Niles from head to toe. As Niles was being inspected, a plain woman in her mid-thirties came into the room carrying an armful of freshly-cut flowers.

She was, as Boss Beau Henry had said, endowed with an extremely fine figure. Niles noticed that she was barefoot.

"This here's your new maid, Leona," the captain said. "Don't look like much, does he?"

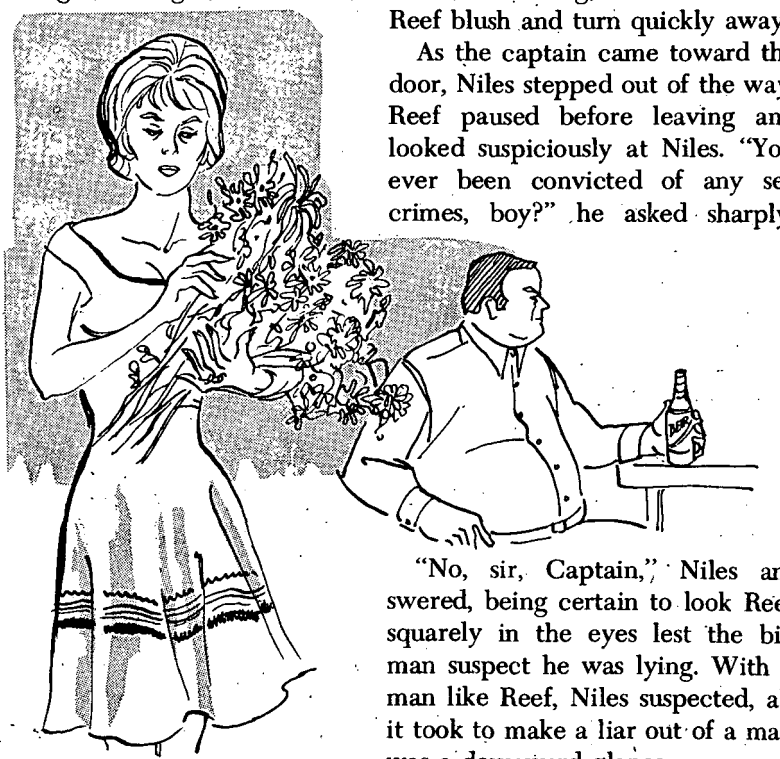
"Aaron, I don't want to rush you," his wife said, "but the lieutenant-governor's nephew is probably already in your office waiting to see about that guard's job you promised his uncle you'd give him—"

"All right, all right," Reef said, finishing his beer. He continued to look at Niles. "You're right puny-looking, boy. Pale as a dead man." He turned to his wife. "Hey, Leona, ain't this boy about the sorriest-looking specimen you ever saw?"

Leona Reef came over to the table and handed her husband a slip of paper. "We need flour and these other things, Aaron. Can you have them sent over this afternoon?"

"I reckon." Aaron Reef rose and kissed his wife wetly on the lips. Niles, watching, noticed Leona Reef blush and turn quickly away.

As the captain came toward the door, Niles stepped out of the way. Reef paused before leaving and looked suspiciously at Niles. "You ever been convicted of any sex crimes, boy?" he asked sharply.



"No, sir, Captain," Niles answered, being certain to look Reef squarely in the eyes lest the big man suspect he was lying. With a man like Reef, Niles suspected, all it took to make a liar out of a man was a downward glance.

"You stay on the straight and narrow, hear me?" Reef warned. He swung his head around. "Leona, you let me know if this boy don't toe the mark."

"Yes, Aaron," his wife answered dutifully.

The captain pushed through the screen door and let it slam behind him. A moment later Niles and the woman heard the sound of Aaron Reef's jeep as he drove away from the house.

When it was quiet again, Leona Reef sighed and looked over at Niles. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Niles, ma'am. Claude Niles."

She studied him for a moment. "You're very pale," she said. "Have you been ill?"

"Yes, ma'am. I just got out of the hospital over at Buford Prison. I had pneumonia."

"I see. Well, we'll have to let you work out in the sun a little bit to get some color back in your face." She pursed her lips in thought for a moment. "I usually tend to the flower beds myself, but I can let you do that for a few days." She walked toward the door. "Come on and I'll show you how to do the weeding."

Niles went with her to a toolshed where she gave him a pair of garden gloves and a small hand spade. Then she led him to a flower bed at the sunny side of the house.

"You have to be particularly careful how you do this, now," she cautioned. "If you dig the weed out too close, you can damage the flower root, and at this time of year they wouldn't be able to recover in time to bloom again."

Leona Reef lifted her skirt and knelt on the grass. As she did so, Niles had a glimpse of her exceptional thighs. He knelt beside her and watched studiously as she showed him how she wanted the work done. After a few moments she gave him the spade and let him try it. He did it exactly as she had shown him.

"My, you learn fast," she complimented.

"I do my best, ma'am," Niles replied. He showed her an engaging smile. "You sure do seem to know lots about flowers, ma'am."

Leona Reef sighed wistfully. "They're the only beautiful things around here," she said, looking over at the ugly, wire-surrounded prison camp. "If I didn't have my flowers to take care of and cheer me up, I swear I think I'd go out of my mind sometimes."

"I sure do appreciate your letting me do this for you, ma'am," Niles said. "Working out in the sun for a while is going to be a real pleasure after being cooped up in that prison hospital. And I'll treat your flowers

real careful, I promise I will."

Leona Reef smiled warmly at him before going back into the house.

For the next week Niles worked ambitiously for Leona Reef. He weeded the flower beds on both sides of the house, and without being told, also did the planter boxes in front. Then he cleaned out the toolshed, cleaned and oiled the lawn mower, sharpened Leona Reef's personal pruning shears, stretched her a new clothesline behind the house, rewired one of her livingroom lamps, waxed the captain's personal car, and cleaned out a clogged burner on the kitchen range.

Early Friday afternoon he was on the front porch painting the shutters when she stuck her head out the window. She was patting her face with a tissue. He could see beads of perspiration above the scooped neckline of her housedress.

"My, it's so *hot.* Claude, I'm going to sit down and have me a nice cold soda. Would you like to have one?"

"Why, yes, ma'am, I would. If you think it would be all right, I mean."

"Go on around to the back porch," she said. "I'll bring it out there."

Niles put down the paintbrush and went around to the back of the house. He sat on the porch steps and waited. Momentarily Leona Reef came out and handed him a cold bottle of cola. She sat in a rocker, holding her own bottle in both hands. As she sat, her dress stretched smoothly over slender thighs. She was barefoot again.

"I think you're beginning to get a little tanned, Claude," she commented.

"Yes, ma'am, I believe I am. I feel a lot better, too."

"How in the world did you catch pneumonia anyway?" she wanted to know.

Niles lowered his eyes and gazed down at the ground as if ashamed to speak of it. "I was down on my luck," he answered quietly. "Broke, out of work, hadn't had anything to eat for two days. I went down to the waterfront district one night and busted into one of the cafes down there. All I wanted was something to eat." He looked up at her and smiled sadly. "I have to be honest with you, though—I cleaned out the cash register while I was in there, too; all it had in it was a few dollars in change. I thought if I could get together enough money for a bus ticket home—" He shook his head resignedly. "Anyway, I was breaking open the jukebox to get the money out of it when the law came. I managed to get out a window and run down along the

docks. Seems like they was coming from every direction, though, and finally I climbed down a ladder and hid in the water under a pier. I stayed there nearly two hours, but they found me anyway."

"And you caught pneumonia from being in the water?"

"Yes, ma'am. That Gulf Coast water is cold at night, even in May."

Mrs. Reef sighed and nodded. "You said you were trying to get bus fare home. Where's home?"

"Out in Wyoming," Niles said. "I grew up on a ranch." He grunted softly. "I never should have left it." Looking back up at the woman, he smiled. "My folks are real nice people, Mrs. Reef. You'd like them."

"I'm sure I would, Claude."

In the distance they heard the sound of Aaron Reef's jeep.

"Oh lord, I forgot!" Leona Reef exclaimed. "Aaron and Beau Henry are going fishing this afternoon. That's them now, coming home for Aaron's tackle—"

Niles quickly swallowed the rest of his soda and handed the empty bottle to Leona. She hurried to put the bottles in the pantry as Niles went back around the house to resume his painting.

When the captain's jeep pulled up, Niles was conscientiously working again. The captain and Boss Beau Henry came up on the porch.

"Afternoon, Captain. Afternoon, Boss," Niles said respectfully.

Reef grunted and went inside, but Beau Henry paused at the door. "How you getting along, boy?" he asked casually.

"Fine, Boss," Niles replied.

"Looks like you're losing your hospital pallor," Henry observed. "Put on a couple of pounds too, I see. Pretty soon you'll be lookin' like a man again. Not bad-lookin', either." He smiled. "Pretty soon the captain will want somebody new down here to help Mrs. Reef. We'll get you for the rock quarry yet."

That's what you think, screw, Niles thought. His expression turned cold and hard as Boss Henry followed Reef into the house.

The two correctional officers left the house twenty minutes later. Leona Reef stood on the porch as they loaded fishing tackle into the bed of the jeep. "How late do you figure to be out, Aaron?" she asked.

"Well, if the catfish start biting at sundown like they're supposed to, we ought to be back by midnight." He bobbed his head at Niles. "Have that boy shave a tub of ice so's we can freeze them down good when we get back."

The two men got into the jeep, drove around the house, and went off down the back road that led to the river bottom.

On the porch, Leona brushed a strand of hair out of her face and sighed. "I hope they don't stop at the roadhouse on the way home and get falling-down drunk," she said, half to herself.

"Where's the roadhouse, ma'am?" Niles asked.

"'Bout four miles down the back road. It's at the junction of the main highway. From there they go south about twelve miles to the river."

That main highway also goes *north*, Niles thought. He bent and looked in the window. There was a clock on the livingroom mantel; it was two-twenty. If he could get to that main highway by three o'clock, he would have eight, maybe nine hours' head start.

"I guess you'd better let the rest of the painting go, Claude," Leona Reef said. "You'll only have a couple of hours to get that ice shaved before you have to go back for the evening count. Soon as you get the paint put away, come on in and I'll show you how to get to the cellar where the freezer is."

"Yes, ma'am."

Niles took the paint and brushes back to the toolshed and stuck them in a corner. He cleaned a few spots of paint off his hands with some thinner and rinsed it off with the garden hose. Drying his hands with his handkerchief, he walked over to Reef's personal car. He took a quick look at the tires. They had good tread—he was sure he could depend on them for a long haul at high speed.

Crossing the yard, he stepped up to the porch and went into the kitchen. Leona Reef was leaning against the refrigerator eating grapes. Her right hip jutted out seductively. On the counter next to her lay a four-prong ice shaver.

"That makes the job a lot easier," Leona said, bobbing her chin at the shaver. "It's like having four ice picks going at once."

Niles walked over and picked it up. He tested the tips of the four prongs with his thumb. They were honed to pinpoint sharpness.

"Very nice," Niles said. He smiled at the woman, then suddenly grabbed her by the upper arm and jerked her to him. She gasped and dropped the grapes. In an instant the four points of the instrument were against her cheek. "If it shaves ice so well," Niles said quietly, "can you just imagine what it would do to flesh?"

Leona Reef stared at him with wide, fixed eyes. She stayed absolutely still, the needle-like prongs touching her face. A button at the top of her dress had been ripped off when Niles grabbed her; one of her shoulder straps slipped slowly down her arm. Still she did not move.

"You're going to do exactly what

I tell you to do, understand me?" Niles said.

"Y-yes—" She managed to get the word out without moving her lips.

Niles took the ice shaver away from her face. Still holding her arm, he guided her into the livingroom and shoved her into a chair next to the telephone stand.

"Who runs the camp when your husband and Boss Henry are gone?"

"Luther Matlock is next in charge," she told him.

"Okay, you get on that phone and call Luther Matlock," he ordered. "You tell him that Captain Reef told you to call. You tell him that Captain Reef said it was all right for me to skip the evening count. Tell him the captain wants me to shave ice right after supper, and you're going to feed me something on the back porch so I won't have to waste time going all the way back there to eat." He held the ice shaver up menacingly. "Make it sound good now, hear? If you don't, if anything goes wrong, I'm going to mark you with this. Got that straight?"

Leona nodded. She reached for the phone but he stopped her hand.

"Just so you'll understand I'm not bluffing, I want you to know that story I told you about trying to get bus fare back to Wyoming was one of the best lies I ever made up. I've never been in Wyoming and I wasn't raised on a ranch; I was raised mostly in reform schools. And you really wouldn't have liked my folks—unless you're partial to worthless drunks and cheap sluts."

Leona Reef's lips tightened. "What you told me about your arrest, about being down on your luck—was that a lie too?"

"Just partly," Niles admitted. "My luck *was* running bad; that was the fourth place I'd busted into in a week without getting anything but small change." He smiled coldly. "One of the places was an apartment where some broad was in bed, though, so it wasn't a total loss. She wasn't too cooperative at first so I had to mess up her face a little. You get the message?"

Leona nodded. "I guess I know a threat when I hear one."

"Good." Niles let go of her wrist. "Make the call."

Leona dialed a three-digit number. Niles stood close to her and twisted the receiver out so that he could hear both ends of the conversation. While the number was ringing, Niles let his glance drop to the open neckline of the woman's dress, where the button had been torn off. Her breasts, what he could see of them, were freckled and lightly moist. Niles wet his lips and rested one hand lightly on her waist. Presently the phone at the other end was answered.

"Is that you, Luther?" Leona Reef said, keeping her voice casual. "How's Agnes and those boys of yours?"

"Why, fine, thank you, Miz Reef. How you gettin' along?"

"Well as I can in this heat, Luther. Listen, what I was calling you about, Aaron said he forgot to tell you that he was keeping our handyman, Claude Niles, out here at the house during evening count. He wants him to shave a couple of tubs of ice for all those catfish him and Beau think they're going to bring back. Will you just log him in and the captain will run him over in the jeep when he gets home."

"Be glad to, Miz Reef."

"Thank you, Luther. 'Bye now." Leona hung up.

Niles smiled again and squeezed her waist. "That was fine, just fine. Now then, where are the keys to that car out back?"

"Hanging on a nail in the pantry."

"Let's go get them."

They went back through the kitchen to the pantry and she showed him where the keys were hanging. Niles pocketed them.

"Where do you keep extra money in the house?" he asked. "And don't waste my time with any lies."

Leona sighed. "In there in the bookcase. There's a little box behind some books on the top shelf."

They went out to the bookcase and Niles got down the box. There was fifty-two dollars in it.

"How about your purse?" he said.

"On the bureau in the bedroom upstairs."

"Come on," he motioned toward the stairs with the ice shaver.

In the bedroom, Niles emptied her purse on the dresser and got another sixteen dollars and some change. Then he rummaged in the closet and got a pair of Aaron Reef's trousers and a white shirt. "These are going to be kind of baggy on me but nobody'll notice long as I don't get out of the car."

Niles put the clothes on a chair by the door. He looked at a clock on one of the night stands. It was two-forty. He could still make it to the main highway by three. He turned to the woman. She was standing near the window in a shaft of sunlight that outlined her legs under the thin cotton dress. Niles flicked his eyes up to where the button was missing. He decided it wouldn't make that much difference if he got to the main highway at three-thirty instead of three.

Tossing the ice shaver on the bundle of clothes, he moved toward the woman. "As long as we ended up in the bedroom anyway—"

A sharp click halted his words.

He swung around to face the door.

"Just freeze, boy." It was Beau Henry. He held a cocked revolver in one hand.

As soon as Leona saw him, she ran over to him.

"You okay?" Henry asked.

"Sure," Leona said. "Everything go all right?"

"Yeah," Henry smiled. "We got a mile down the road and I said the front tire on my side was going flat. Aaron pulled over to look at it and I let him have it with a tire iron. Then I turned the jeep around and just coasted back nice and quiet-like. I put Aaron in on the kitchen floor, like you said."

"Good," Leona smiled tightly. "Remember the story now. You two forgot something and came back unexpectedly. Aaron came into the house and caught Claude trying to attack me. He tried to pull his gun but Claude grabbed the poker from the kitchen fireplace and hit him in the head with it. Then you heard the noise and came running in. Claude made a try for Aaron's gun and you were forced to shoot him."

"Like this?" Beau Henry said. He squeezed the trigger once and shot Claude Niles squarely in the middle of the chest. The convict pitched backward and landed face up on the floor. For a moment he stared up at them incredulously, then he coughed once and closed his eyes. A spot of blood began to spread slowly under his shirt.

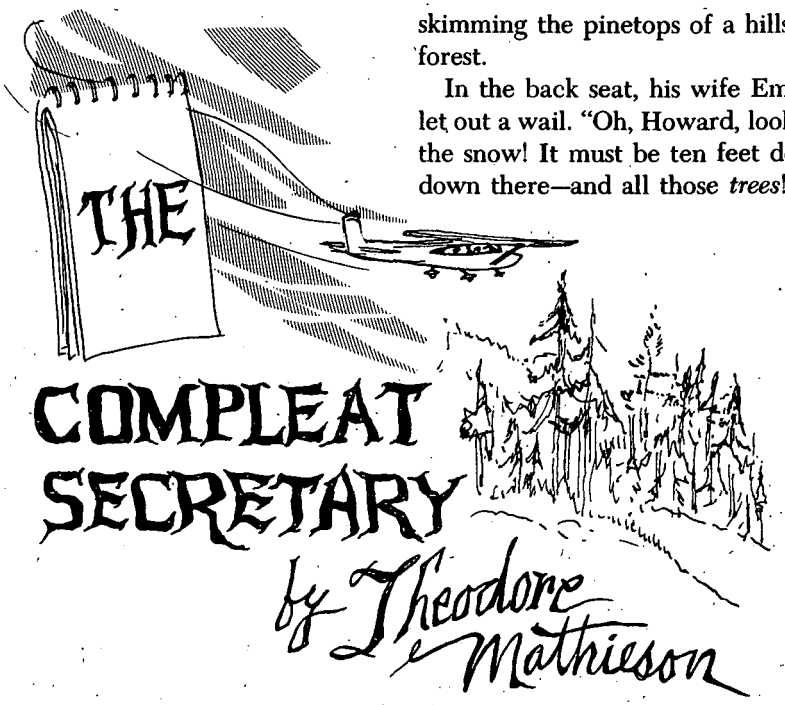
Beau Henry holstered his gun. He walked over and lifted the body in his arms to take it down to the kitchen. At the door he happened to glance back at Leona Reef—she was standing in that shaft of sunlight again.

"Sure is going to be a shame to have to dress up that figure of yours in black," he said.

"It won't be for long, honey," she answered with a wink. "Just till the insurance gets paid and the state promotes you into his job."

Beau Henry looked at the way that one hip of hers jutted out so enticingly. He smiled and left the room to take Claude Niles down to the kitchen to put him with Aaron Reef. He kept thinking about Leona's figure all the way downstairs.

There is always someone just a little more professional than you.



by Theodore Mathieson

THREE HUNDRED MILES south of Portland, Oregon, over the mountains, Dunbar's four-passenger plane ran into stormy weather, and his compass started acting erratically. Minutes later his engine misfired, then went dead, and as he dived below the clouds to find a landing spot, he found the plane skimming the pinetops of a hillside forest.

In the back seat, his wife Emma let out a wail. "Oh, Howard, look at the snow! It must be ten feet deep down there—and all those *trees*!"

"Do you think you can crash-land?" Hallie asked in a steady voice.

He glanced at his attractive secretary, and their eyes met and locked momentarily. "We're going to have to try."

"Oh, Howard, we could get hurt!" cried Emma.

"If you can think of any other way, let me know. Just check your belts and hold on."

Already the crowns were almost scraping the belly of the plane as Dunbar picked out a spot ahead where the trees seemed thinner and younger. Pulling up slightly on the stick, he began to pray.

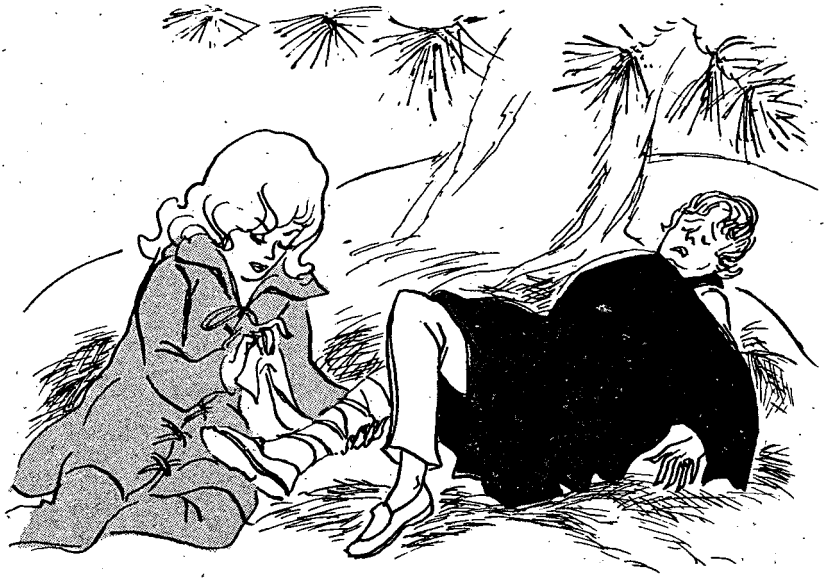
Dunbar's head struck an overhead brace just as the tearing and ripping began, and with splintering noises the plane settled into the young pines. In the rear he could hear his wife whimpering, but his first concern was for Hallie. She looked shaken, and held her hand to her face, but she still sat upright.

"I think Emma is hurt," she said practically.

As he started to move, pain shot through his wrenched body, but he decided no bones were broken. Managing to open the door of the plane, he stepped down the two or three feet to the ground. Snow lay all about, perhaps a foot deep, but the air was warmer than he'd expected and, under the larger pines, circular patches of needles lay high and dry.

"We'd better stretch Emma out in one of those dry spots," he said, and reached into the plane to unstrap his wife's seat belt.

He felt Hallie's hand upon his, and her voice sounded strange. "Don't you think you ought to be sure about her back before you move her?"



"I'll handle her all right," he said, more roughly than he'd intended. Lifting Emma in his arms, he carried her up the hill from the plane.

She was still moaning, her eyes closed, as he laid her down on the needles. She seemed to be scarcely conscious, but she was in one piece, and there was no bleeding. He went back to the plane to get a blanket.

"Well?" Hallie asked. She hadn't moved from her seat.

"You can't tell if there's anything really wrong with her yet. She'll have to come to, first."

Once again Hallie's hand touched him. "You better cover her," she whispered.

The enormity of the invitation at such a time set Dunbar's legs trembling as he carried the blanket up the hill and tucked it around Emma. He stood for a moment looking down at her.

Then he hurried back to the plane . . .

"We could be together all the time, Howard. Nobody would know."

Hallie's last whispered words kept running through Dunbar's head as the three of them sat under the pine tree and she bandaged Emma's broken ankle with a piece of lining torn from the plane's interior. Leave it to Hallie to do everything efficiently. Before becoming private secretary to Dunbar, president of Dunbar Electronics, Inc., she'd been a registered nurse, and had brought her meticulous skill to managing Dunbar's peripheral affairs. He'd never known her to make a mistake. Even on a business trip, interrupted now by the accident, he'd taken Hallie. She was indispensable as well as decorative, in spite of an eye that had been blackened by the crash. He'd only brought Emma along out of obligation.

His wife, conscious now, screwed up her pallid, middle-aged face and let out a yelp of pain.

"Catch hold of yourself, Emma," Hallie said firmly. "You're lucky the three of us are *alive*."

"I know," Emma said, sobbing. "It's just that I could never stand pain."

When she'd had Robbie, their only child who had died when he was three, Emma had screamed the hospital down. The only endurance she'd ever shown, Dunbar reflected, was in sticking to him long after even habit had palled.

Nobody would know.

Avoiding Hallie's eye, Dunbar moved back to the plane and looked at the sky, filled with low, dark clouds. It was close to dusk, and there was the feel of snow in the air.

The planes from Redding, where

he'd planned an overnight stop on their way to Las Vegas, would be out looking for them in a little while. Unfortunately, he'd put off installing a radar device in the plane, so they'd have a tough time spotting him in this wilderness, if indeed they could find him at all with the ceiling so low.

Still, he'd better start gathering some chaparral, soak it with gasoline, and keep the fire going all night. He walked over to a dead bush and then stopped.

Do I want them to find us so soon?

He glanced up the hill and saw that Hallie was watching him.

"There are plenty of blankets in the plane," she called down, as if she read his thoughts. "We could be quite comfortable for tonight. It's not very cold, and tomorrow you could go for help."

"Yes, I guess that would be the better idea." It was just as if he sat behind his desk in Portland, and she were advising him on the agenda.

Around midnight it began to snow lightly. Hallie sat in the seat next to Dunbar, while Emma lay stretched out in back. Her whimpering, which had gone on for hours, keeping them all awake, had subsided now and she snored deeply and regularly.

"Have you thought about it?" Hallie whispered, pressing his thigh with intimate urgency.

He looked at Hallie in the faint snowlight which filtered into the cabin. What a queen she would make for the king of Dunbar Electronics! Not only was Hallie knowledgeable in all his business affairs, but she had *style*—and passion, too, behind that efficient exterior.

"Yes, I've thought," he said finally.

"Well?"

"I could never do it, Hallie."

"Would you like for me to take care of it?"

"I . . . don't . . . know."

She did not reply, and they continued sitting in the half light, intensely aware of one another. Instead of becoming sleepy, Dunbar found himself keyed up, the way he was before a crucial board meeting. Then, as a faint light appeared in the east, he made his decision and felt better for it. Although he didn't say anything, Hallie seemed to sense the moment that he'd come to it . . .

After the three had breakfast of some chocolate bars, washed down with tepid tea from a Thermos, Dunbar got out of the plane and made a big pile of dead chaparral in a clearing on the hillside, soaking it with gasoline.

"Keep an ear out for the planes, Hallie," he said, "and if you hear

any, light up at once. I'll try to find a main road."

"May I have some of your matches?"

For the first time that morning their eyes met, and there was perfect understanding. He knew Hallie had matches in her purse with her cigarettes.

"Yes, of course," he said, giving her a folder. "Don't lose them, now."

"I won't."

"Now you be careful, Howard," Emma warned from inside the plane. She wriggled out on the seat so her skinny legs in their slacks hung over the fuselage. "And remember, we don't have much to eat back here."

"Well, I don't either. I'll do my best."

"We'll all do our best," Hallie said.

"Yes, I'm sure you will."

He looked at Hallie, the way he always did when a course of action had been decided on at the office, and gave her a curt nod. *The go-ahead.*

Then he turned and plodded off down the hill.

Dunbar was no stranger to the woods. As a boy he'd roamed the Sierra Nevadas, following the trails and exploring the twistings of remote creeks. He knew his first task was to find a logging road, if that were possible, preferably one that led upward, for the sooner he could get to a ridge and a wide view, the better. The slopes above the plane had been too steep and craggy to climb.

At first he was so busy plodding through the drifts that he had little time to think. But as he descended, the snow thinned and walking became easier, so that more and more his mind dwelt upon what lay behind him rather than what lay ahead.

Emma hadn't been a bad mate, she just had never been a *wife.* For twenty years he'd shelved any hope of freeing himself, able to submit to the status quo only by cultivating outside interests. Not until Hallie had come along last year, however, had the thought of breaking away been so strong, filling him with such a wild hope for freedom that he wondered how he could have stood his marital imprisonment.

When he suggested divorce to Emma, she had shrieking hysterics, then tried to commit suicide. She threatened, too, to tell things she knew about certain foreign deals, which would surely blacken his name in this country. So he'd given up, which satisfied Emma. If she knew about Hallie, she didn't show it. Sometimes Dunbar suspected Emma was a little feebleminded.

He heard the plane after he'd been walking for an hour or two. It was flying low, and he caught sight of it skimming above the trees. In an instant of thoughtlessness he almost ran into a nearby clearing and waved, but then he stood still, keeping his face down.

After a few seconds, he climbed up on an outcropping of rock and looked back the way he'd come. No sign of smoke was visible.

Hadn't Hallie taken care of the matter yet?

Meanwhile, the plane had droned away to the southwest without circling, so apparently the wreck had not been sighted.

Walking again, Dunbar began to worry. What if their failure to contact the rescue parties immediately resulted in their not being found? Main roads were pretty scarce in this region, and he could walk for days. All he had with him was a bar of chocolate and some water in a cola bottle, and Hallie didn't have much more.

On impulse he almost started back to warn her, so they might all get out alive, but then he remembered that since Hallie never procrastinated on the job, it was probably too late.

Around noontime he came upon the trace of an old logging road that led him for hours over open timberland until finally, as daylight began to fade, it petered out amid an open stand of ponderosas.

He stood now in the meadow, which was dry and free of snow, listening to the lonely thud of his own heart, feeling sure that Emma was going to have the last, hysterical laugh, and they would all die together.

Then he heard the engine of a car close by.

A few steps farther on, he saw the highway lying just below him at the bottom of a steep cut, and as he descended to the road the lights of a car appeared upon a distant curve.

By the time the car got close enough for him to see the two occupants in the front seat, he was standing on the shoulder, waving like mad.

Then an inner warning, out of nowhere it seemed, hit him like a thunderbolt.

Instantly he was running ahead of the car, beyond the cut, to where the hill curved down to a creek. He dived into the underbrush and cowered like a truant kid. The car stopped close by, he heard the door open and the murmur of voices, then the door slammed and the car went on.

Dunbar crouched for a long time at the bottom of the ravine, spent and shivering, realizing how near he'd come to bringing disaster upon himself and Hallie. He cursed him-

self for not thinking of it sooner. It was pure habit for him to leave details to Hallie's judgment, but this was one time he should have done more thinking himself, and his failure to do it might still cost them their lives!

It was early next morning when Dunbar staggered wearily back to the wreck. Hallie was sitting on a stump in her tailored overcoat, working on a fingernail with a file. There was no sign of Emma.

She ran to him and put her arms around him. "Couldn't you find a road? One plane flew over yesterday morning, and two in the afternoon . . . but I wasn't ready."

Dunbar took a ragged breath. "Did you do it?"

"Of course."

"Where is she?"

"Now, don't worry. Everything's under control."

"Look, I found the highway. It's about four or five hours' walk over that way, so we'll get out—but we'd better wait. Just as I was flagging down a car, I thought about—well, if she was supposed to be killed in the wreck day before yesterday, she'd be cold, or have rigor or something. Rescue guys could get here in a jeep in just a few minutes, and if they found her still warm—"

"I told you not to worry, dear," Hallie said, pointing to a long mound of snow up the hill a ways.

"You mean—"

"She's been in there since yesterday. I think we should take her out now."

"My God, Hallie . . ."

His secretary went up to the mound and began scooping away the snow.

"What took you so long, darling, if it's only a four-hour walk?" she asked.

"I lost my way coming back and had to spend the night around a camp fire." He turned away as he saw the pink blanket in which Emma was wrapped. "H-how did you do it?"

"I'd like to spare you the details."

"I'd like to know."

"The only feasible way. Her neck was broken in the crash, naturally."

"She didn't suffer?"

"Of course not. I put her out first with pressure on the carotid artery."

"That was merciful."

"You can carry her back to the plane now. This blanket isn't even wet."

He laid Emma out in the back seat, and then Hallie said, "I think we'd better light that bonfire. There'll be more planes, won't there? Oh, and one more thing. Those people who stopped are bound to be curious about why you

ducked out, and the story might get around."

"We'll say I was delirious with hunger and exhaustion, and was suddenly afraid they were going to run me down."

"Then you blacked out from that bump on your head," Hallie said thoughtfully, "lost the road, and ended up back here. It might do in a pinch, but maybe we'd better start the fire, and you can go back to the highway."

The sheriff and two deputies arrived just as Dunbar got the chaparral blazing.

"The people in that car were mighty puzzled," the sheriff said, when Dunbar had made his explanations, "but your blackout reaction is understandable under the circumstances, and it's lucky they reported it. You've been mighty fortunate, Mister Dunbar, and you, too, Miss. Sorry I can't say the same about Missus Dunbar."

The deputies carried Emma's body on a litter down the hill to a back road that Dunbar had missed, and loaded it onto a jeep. Then the sheriff drove Dunbar and Hallie in his car into town, where the executive and his secretary checked into a hotel.

"Telegraph a cancellation to the meeting in Las Vegas," Dunbar told Hallie over a lunch of filet mignon and Burgundy, "and I'll go make arrangements with the undertaker. We'll ship Emma back to Portland."

"When will we be married?" Hallie wanted to know.

"Five, six months."

"Are you pleased with me?"

"Perfectly, as always."

She gave him a professional little smile.

It was while Dunbar was at the mortuary late that afternoon, that the sheriff came in and asked him to go with him to the courthouse.

"Just a few routine questions, Mister Dunbar," the sheriff said respectfully.

But when the door had closed behind them, and Dunbar sat facing the sheriff across the desk, the latter's eye became anything but respectful.

"What I'd really like to know, Mister Dunbar," he said, "is which one of you killed your wife—you or your secretary?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do. That story about getting delirious doesn't work, when you think about it. We followed your tracks to where you built a camp fire; that took recollectedness, I figure, and then you didn't go back to the road for help. You say you were lost, but were you?"

"I don't have to answer your

questions," Dunbar countered.

"Also, I noticed that the blanket that was around Missus Dunbar was sopping wet. Guess that one of you didn't know much about snow, thought it was dry in the cold air. You evidently didn't realize that powdered snow can feel dry outside, and melt at a higher temperature, like inside the plane's cabin. We went back to the area of the wreck, you know, and found where she'd been buried."

"To keep the body cold, yes. We didn't know how long we'd be there."

"It's too late for subterfuge, Mister Dunbar. We've already got a complete confession from your secretary in which she admits being an accessory to the murder. She says *you* broke your wife's neck, trying to make it look like an accident, just before you went off for help—"

"Oh, no, you don't!" Dunbar cut in. "Hallie—Miss Cross, is not likely to confess things which neither of us did."

The sheriff pushed some typewritten sheets across to Dunbar. On the last page he recognized Hallie's signature, and when he scanned the typescript, he knew the sheriff wasn't bluffing.

"It's a lie!" he shouted. "*She* did it. She talked me into letting her do it! Then, when I was on the road, I became suddenly afraid that if you found us right away, you'd also find that her—my wife's—body was still warm, when she was supposed to have died the evening before."

"That's why you went back, as I figured," the sheriff said.

"But I might have known," Dunbar said bitterly. "Hallie never made mistakes. It was I who put Emma into the plane with the snow-covered blanket around her."

"If she really killed your wife, Mister Dunbar, she made one, too. As a matter of fact, I might have accepted the whole story as you told it except for *that* mistake."

"What was it?" Dunbar asked, in disbelief.

"If your wife had died in the crash with a broken neck, at the same time as she undoubtedly broke her ankle, would either of you have bothered to tape up the ankle with the torn lining from the plane's cabin? The bandage, Mister Dunbar, was still around her ankle."

Man, accredited as a reasoning animal, is frequently the victim of his own fatuity.

Motive

by Carroll Mayers

THEY CAME IN shortly after eight one night and I tabbed them for cops even before they reached the desk.

Likely they made an efficient pair, the older man slow-moving, obviously methodical, probing with a shrewdness acquired with years; his young associate alert, intelligent, anxious to absorb, contribute.

"Police officers," the older man confirmed, palming a badge for my benefit.

I put down a book I'd been reading. "Yes, sir," I said. "What's the trouble?"

"We're looking for a man," the senior cop said. He was stocky, broad-featured, gray dusting his temples. As he spoke, he slid a small black-and-white photo across the desk. "He look like any of your guests?"

I studied the photo. The man pictured was middle-aged, say the early fifties, light-haired, with prominent eyes, a somewhat weak chin.

"What's he done?" I asked.

"Attempted theft. Forty thousand dollars."

"Attempted?"

The older cop chose not to elabo-

rate, and merely waited for my reaction to the photo.

I shook my head. "He's not registered here."

"You're sure?". A lean individual with dark good looks, the young officer had been hanging back, surveying the shabby lobby with distaste. Now he moved forward. "Maybe if you pictured him with his hair dyed, or wearing glasses or a moustache?"

I said mildly, "I've already done that. Sorry. No dice."

The older cop drew a breath. "His name's Quick; Leonard Quick. We have reason to believe he may have come to this city. We're checking all hotels and rooming houses." He paused. "Your name?"

"Archer."

"Keep that photo copy, Mr. Archer. If you should spot any registrant with those essential features, we'd appreciate your calling headquarters."

I suggested, "He'd have to be pretty desperate to hole up in a place like this."

The older cop looked about the premises briefly. Unlike his young associate, his gaze reflected only neutral appraisal. "He's desperate, Mr. Archer," he told me. "He wouldn't be running, otherwise."

After the two cops had departed, I glanced at the identification photo again, then slipped it into my pocket, left the desk and trudged upstairs. I took my time; at fifty-nine, you don't rush.

Room 308 was at the end of the dingy hall. I knocked.

"Yes?"

"Desk clerk, Mr. Quinn."

Bed springs rasped, then the safety chain was released and the door opened. A slightly-built character in shirt sleeves, trousers and stocking feet regarded me. "What is it?"

I didn't answer him. Instead, not roughly but with purpose, I shoved into the room, closed the door and leaned against it while I studied the man before me. He wasn't very tall, say five-eight, nor was he too prepossessing. His eyes, a washed-out gray beneath sparse brows, were rather large but seemed weak. Despite a generous mouth and a broad upper lip, complemented by a somewhat unkempt black moustache, his chin also appeared irresolute. His hair was close-cropped and dark.

I envisaged the photo in my pocket. Some fugitives eschew disguise, others embrace it; if only that young cop could know how damned accurate, aside from the glasses, his intimation had been.

The small man blinked uncertainly. "What is it?" he repeated.

I said, "I thought you should know, Quick. The police have just

been here, asking and snooping."

My switch in his name hit him hard; his thin features twitched. Still, he tried to dissemble. "I . . . I don't understand. My name's Quinn."

"They told me this man's name is Quick," I said, drawing out the identification photo and tossing it onto the bed. Then, wanting to ease his distress, I added quietly, "Don't worry. I didn't tell them anything."

He didn't know how to play it. He stood transfixed, weak eyes turning from me to the photo, back to me. Finally, recognizing the futility of continued disavowal, he slumped mutely on the bed.

I said, "I think you should stop running, Quick. Give yourself up."

He stiffened. "I—I can't do that. I'd . . . go to prison."

I said, "Where are you now? What else can you call hiding out in a dump like this, dodging recognition when you go out on the streets, fear grabbing you every time somebody looks at you twice?"

He tongued his lips. "What difference does that make to you?"

I shrugged. "Personally, none. I'm only painting your own picture."

He said, "I—I'll get out to the coast. Just as soon as I get some money together."

"The odds are they'll still run you down," I countered.

He didn't answer, continued to slump on the bed. The knuckles of his clenched fists were white.

I said, "I've got to get back to the desk. Would it help any to tell me about it first?"

For a moment I thought he meant to ignore my suggestion. Then he swung about, faced me. "There's not much to tell. I was a fool."

I made no rejoinder.

"A fool," he repeated. "I'm fifty-two years old. I had a wife but no true marriage. We were merely living together. I had no real future in my job as head teller in a branch bank where advancement was favored from the personnel of the main office."

Quick paused, his gaze leaving mine to focus on the threadbare carpeting. "One morning—just like that—I decided to chuck it all, start over someplace new, where I'd be completely unknown. I took a briefcase to the bank with me, packed it with forty thousand dollars. I thought nobody had seen me; I meant to leave for lunch, never return—"

He broke off, his throat working. "But I *had* been seen. Another teller waited until I'd actually taken the money from the bank, then accosted me outside. We struggled over the briefcase. He won, but I managed to break free

and run." Quick stopped again, finished bitterly, "I've been running ever since."

I said, "You'll be running the rest of your life unless you give yourself up."

He got off the bed, crossed the room and doused his face in a chipped washbasin. "I can't face prison. I can't!"

"It might not come to that."

"I can't trust that it won't." Abruptly, an odd expression settled over his lean features. "Any more than I can now trust you," he ventured.

I returned his look. "Meaning there's probably a reward for information leading to your apprehension," I said, "and I could use a thousand or so."

"Meaning that. Don't tell me you don't want to get out of this place yourself."

I laughed without humor. "You say you're fifty-two, Quick. Well, I'm fifty-nine, with only a grade-school education and no special talents. Water seeks its own level. Even with that thousand or so, I'd still wind up in a place like this."

He continued to eye me with a speculative look. "So you say," he told me.

I nodded. Then I fished a matchbook from my pocket, plucked the identification photo from the bed and fired it, letting the ashes fall into a tray on the battered dresser. "So I say," I echoed as I left him.

Apparently Leonard Quick did decide to trust me at first, but subsequent thought must have made him uncertain since he stayed the night but decamped the following morning. When I went on duty at four, I found he'd checked out before noon.

The older cop showed up again about seven-thirty without his young partner. He was no less soft-sell, but I sensed that a burgeoning conviction had brought him back on his own.

I manufactured a small smile. "Anything more on your Mr. Quick?"

"I feel so," he said evenly. "The assignment's not primary, but I'm still showing that photo around." He studied me. "I showed it to a cabdriver twenty minutes ago, Mr. Archer. He pegged it right off. Swore he'd brought the man to this hotel three days ago."

I said, "He's mistaken."

"Possibly," the old cop said. "I would like to check the name angle, though." He reached for the registry book. "Odd thing about names. When they're on the run, assuming an alias, people often choose the same letter, even though they should know better. Q, now; that's not too common." He turned, scanned the registry pages. Then his

gaze lifted, locked with mine. "What about this L. Quinn?"

I brought my brief smile back. "He checked out this morning."

"You're sure?"

I thumbed through the room file, showed him the card for 308. "There's the day man's record."

He glanced at the card with cursory interest. "I could still check out every room you've got," he told me, his voice picking up a shred of intensity, "but I suspect I'd be wasting my time." He paused, gave me another direct look. "I also suspect your L. Quinn and my Leonard Quick are the same man, Mr. Archer. I think you lied yesterday, are lying now. I think you tipped off Quick."

I shrugged. "Why should I lie?"

The cop shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "People lie for all sorts of reasons. But for what it's worth to you, the law will pick up Quick sooner or later." He turned then, walked slowly out of the lobby.

I swallowed hard as I watched him go. He'd merely professed doubt when I posed the question of a motive for lying, but his shrewd eyes had added, *But maybe it would be interesting to find out.*

The veteran cop would check, I knew, because I'd irritated him. He'd review police records, flyers, the newspaper morgue. Eventually, he'd come up with the account and description of a fifty-eight-year-old custodian of an exclusive men's club half the country away, an employee named Andrews, who'd been caught stealing liquor by a member, who'd slugged the man against a locker in a moment of violence, cracking his skull, and who had then fled . . .

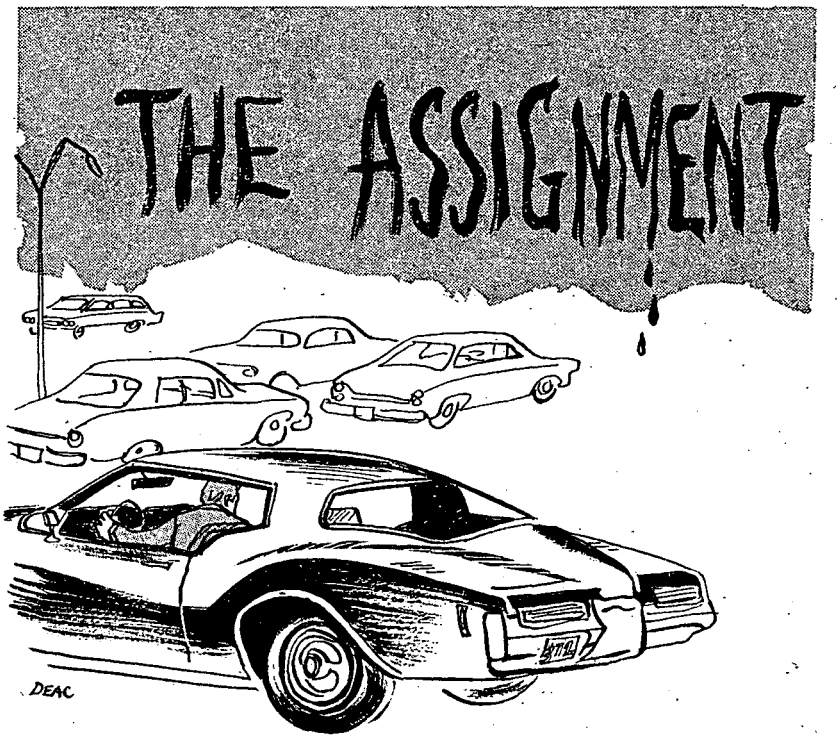
I was weary to death of running, sick of gut-grabbing fear, ceaseless tension. That was why I'd tried to dissuade the hapless Leonard Quick from the same tortuous treadmill, even though I myself lacked the courage to practice what I preached.

I packed in ten minutes. Eight months ago, when I'd landed the desk job in my grubby haven, I'd had little more than the clothes on my back. The bus terminal was only five blocks away. I walked fast.

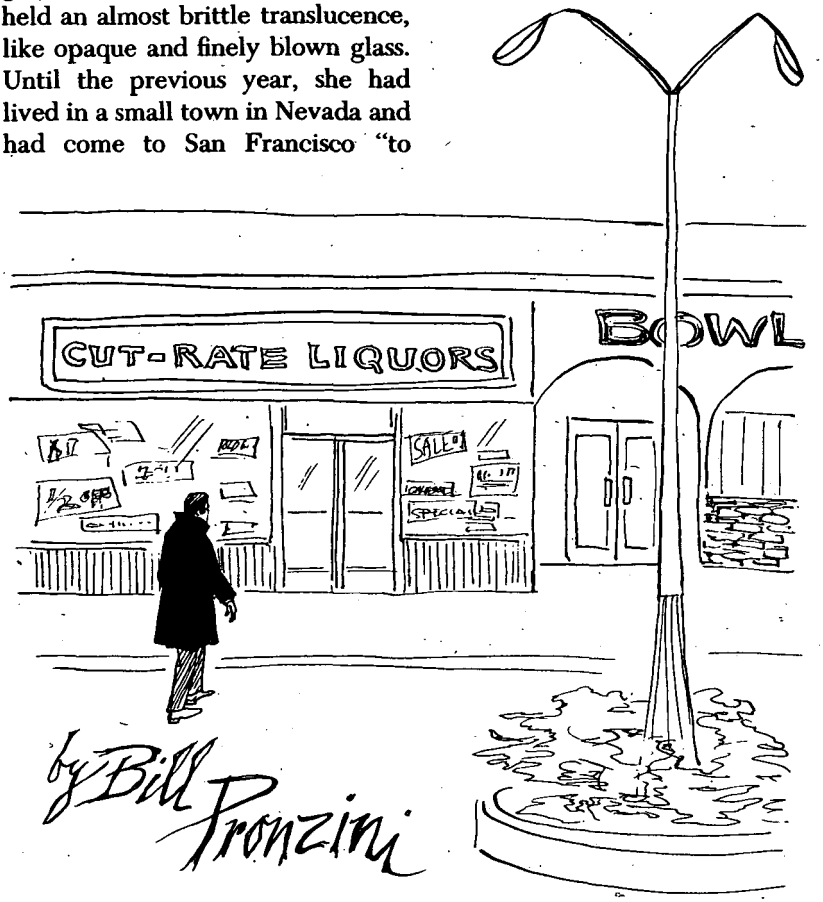
There are circumstances when one's suspicions are better left unconfirmed.

IT WAS ONE of those jobs you take on when things are very lean. You want to turn it down—it's an old story, a sordid one, and a sad one—but you know you can't afford to. So you look into tear-filmed gray eyes, and you sigh, and you say yes . . .

Her name was Judith Paige. She was in her late twenties and attractive in a quiet, shy sort of way. She had pale blonde hair to go with the



gray eyes, and clear white skin that held an almost brittle translucence, like opaque and finely blown glass. Until the previous year, she had lived in a small town in Nevada and had come to San Francisco "to



by Bill Pronzini

search for some meaning in life." This meant, of course, that she had come looking for a husband.

She had finally found one, a salesman named Walter Paige. They had been married six weeks now, and it was something far less than the idyllic union she had expected. It wasn't that Paige abused her in any way, or was a drinker or a gambler; it was just that, in the past month, he had taken to leaving her alone in the evenings. He told her it was business—he worked for some real estate firm—and when she pressed him for details he grew reti-

cent. He was working on a couple of large prospects, he said, that would set them up nicely in the future.

She figured he was working on another woman.

Like I said; an old story, and a sordid one, and a sad one.

She wanted me to follow him for a few days, either to confirm or deny her suspicions. That was all. You don't need to prove adultery, or much of anything else, to obtain a divorce in California these days, so I would not be required to testify in any civil proceedings. It was just that she had to know, one way or the other—the tears starting then—and if she were right, she wanted to dissolve the marriage and go back to Nevada. She had a little money saved and could pay my standard rates, and she had heard that I was honest and capable and that I wouldn't take advantage of her in any way.

I sat there behind my desk, feeling old and tired and cynical. It was a nice day outside, as days in San Francisco go, and I had the window open a little; the breeze off the Bay was cool and fresh on the back of my neck, but the air I was pulling into my lungs tasted sour somehow. I lit a cigarette and took one of the contract forms out of the bottom drawer and slid it over for her to examine.

When she had, I drew it back and filled it out accordingly. Her answers to my questions were simple and direct. I gave the contract over to her again for her signature, and then I said, "All right, Mrs. Paige. Can you tell me what time your husband comes home from work?"

"Usually about six o'clock."

"Does he use public transportation?"

"No, he drives."

"What kind of car?"

"A dark-blue VW."

"And what time does he leave again?"

"Right after supper," Mrs. Paige said. "Seven-thirty or so."

"He comes back at what time?"

"Around midnight."

"This happen every night?"

"Well, not *every* one, no. About four or five times a week, I guess."

"Any particular nights?"

"No, not really."

"Saturdays and Sundays?"

"Saturdays, sometimes. Not Sundays, though. He . . . he spends that day with me."

Never on Sunday, I thought sourly. I said, "Can you tell me the name of the real estate firm he works for?"

"I'm sorry," she answered. "Walter told me once, but I can't seem to recall it. He's very closemouthed about his job."

"Uh-huh." I released a slow, soft

breath. "Well, I'll get to work on it tonight, Mrs. Paige—assuming your husband goes out."

"You won't let him know you're following him, will you? I mean, if I'm wrong and he's . . . just working, I wouldn't want him to know what I've done."

"I'll be as careful as I can."

"Thank you," she said, and her lower lip trembled slightly. She cleared her throat. "Will you call me as soon as you . . . find out anything?"

"Right away."

"I'll give you a check. Will fifty dollars be all right?"

"Fine."

I looked away while she made out the check, staring through the window at the rising spans of the Bay Bridge in the distance. The Bay itself was calm and blue, dotted with the white billows of sails and with the sleek, colored hulls beneath them. It was a nice day, all right—for some people.

I put Mrs. Paige's check away without looking at it, made some hollow-sounding reassurances, and showed her out of the office. Then I went back to my desk and lit another cigarette and stared at the Bay some more. I felt, curiously, even more depressed than I had prior to Judith Paige's arrival . . .

At six o'clock I sat behind the wheel of my car, parked four buildings down and on the opposite side of the street from the stucco-fronted apartment house in which the Paiges lived. I had been there for twenty minutes, smoking, and reading a paperback novel.

This was a fairly well-to-do residential neighborhood in the Parkside district, and the street was alive with kids playing and husbands arriving home from work. Under the circumstances, it was the kind of domesticity that did nothing except add to my sense of melancholy.

Paige came home at ten minutes past six. He parked his small, dark-blue car on the street and stepped out into the fading sunlight. He was a tall, slender guy, wearing a blue suit, and he had one of those toothbrush mustaches that looked from a distance like a caterpillar humped on his upper lip. I watched him enter the apartment house, walking with quick, easy strides.

I sat there for another ten minutes, then I got out and walked down to the Sigmund Stern Recreation Grove, stretching my legs. If you're staking out an area like that, you don't want to arouse suspicion by sitting in a parked car for any length of time. If one of the neighbors takes notice, the first thing you know you've got a prowl unit in your lap asking questions. By taking periodic walks, and using little ploys like annoyed glances at your

watch from time to time, you hopefully arrest any suspicions that might arise. There's a minor risk involved in this, in that the subject you're staking out might decide to leave during one of your absences, but that's one of the gambles you take. In this instance, with Paige observing a fairly close schedule of departure, I wasn't particularly worried.

I came back at ten minutes before seven, and the compact was still parked there on the street. I ate one of the ready-wrapped sandwiches I had bought, and smoked a cigarette, and read some more of the paperback. The sun was gone completely now, and the long shadows of night were beginning to consume the last remnants of daylight.

At seven-thirty-five, Paige came out of the apartment house and got into his car. I put the book aside, kicked the starter over. We were both facing the same direction, and I let him have a block lead before I pulled away from the curb.

He drove without hurry, observing the speed limits. Wherever possible, I put another car between us—and on the four-lane streets like Ocean Avenue, I used the lane opposite to the one he was in. You pick up little tricks like that over the years, but if you're following a pro, or someone figuring on the possibility of a tail, there's not much you can do; a subject will spot you and shake you nine times out of ten.

Paige was not expecting a tail, though, and I had no trouble staying with him. We picked up the Southern Freeway near the foot of Ocean, and followed that to where it connects with the Bayshore southbound. Fifteen minutes later, we exited in South San Francisco and went up Grand Avenue, and finally Paige turned into the parking lot of a large suburban shopping center. He parked near one of those huge, cut-rate liquor stores. I put my car into a slot in the next row and watched him get out and walk into the liquor store. I stayed where I was. Five minutes later, Paige came out with a bottle of some kind in a small paper sack and reentered his car. He did not go anywhere—he just sat there.

I figured it this way: Paige was playing around, all right, and the woman he was playing around with was probably married as well, necessitating a neutral meeting ground. He was waiting for her now, and when she arrived, they would go to a motel or maybe to a little love nest they had set up somewhere—and that would be it as far as I was concerned. I would get the license number of the woman's car, if she had one, and then I would follow her and Paige to wherever it was they had their assignation. Then I

would call Mrs. Paige, confirm the infidelity, and listen to her cry; they always cry when you tell them, even though they expect the worst. Then I would go home and try to sleep. Fifty dollars for a couple of hours' work—easy money. Yeah.

So we sat there in the lot, Paige and I. It was fully dark now, and the shopping center was no longer as busy as it had been. Most of the stores had closed for the night, and there were only a few cars left in the lot. I thought if it became too deserted, I would have to find a different location; I didn't want Paige noticing me, and questioning the presence of another guy waiting alone as he was doing.

It got to be ten o'clock, and the woman hadn't shown up yet. Everything was closed in the center except the liquor store and a small bowling alley on the right. I had just about decided it was time for me to hunt up that other location when Paige abruptly got out of the compact and began walking toward the bowling alley. *He's going to call her,* I thought. *He wants to know why she stood him up tonight.*

I let him get inside, and then I stepped out and followed him. They had a woman's league occupying all of the twenty lanes in there, and the place was jammed with humanity and noise. I went down by the coffee shop, where there was a phone booth, but I did not see Paige anywhere. I came back and entered the bar, and he was there, in another booth, talking animatedly on the phone. I sat down at the bar, in a spot where I could see the booth in the back-bar mirror, and had a short beer.

Paige emerged ten minutes later, drank a neat bourbon, and went out. He did not seem to notice me at all. I gave him three minutes, paid for my beer, and moved after him.

He was just pulling out of the lot when I reached my car, and I swung out in plenty of time to pick him up; but it was pointless, really. He led me directly back to San Francisco and the Parkside district. From down the block, I watched him pull the compact into the three-car garage beneath his building and then emerge again to enter the apartment house. I sat there for another fifteen minutes, but he didn't come out again. I said to hell with it and went home to bed.

The next morning, just past ten, I called Judith Paige. She was alone, and I made my report. She tried to muffle the tears, but I could hear them anyway and the weeping grated at my nerves like fingernails across a blackboard.

There was an awkward silence. At length she said, "Then . . . then it's true, isn't it? Walter has another. . . .

has found himself another girl."

"I'll be blunt with you, Mrs. Paige," I said, even though I did not feel blunt at all. "The chances of it are very good. He wasn't working last night, and he was obviously waiting for someone in that parking lot."

"But there's still a chance that he was there for some other reason, isn't there?"

"Yes, there's a chance."

"Then I guess we'd better be sure, hadn't we?"

"If you say so, Mrs. Paige."

"I—I can't leave him on supposition," she said. "I have to know for certain. You understand, don't you?"

"Yeah," I said, "I understand."

"You'll be here tonight?"

"I'll be there," I told her. I did not add that the prospect of it made me just a little ill.

Paige did not leave that night until almost eight-thirty.

I was beginning to think that he wasn't going at all when he came out of the apartment house and drove off in the compact. Well, maybe he'd had to set the time up an hour for one reason or another; that could have been what he had talked to her about on the phone the night before.

As soon as Paige picked up Ocean Avenue, I decided that he was heading for the same shopping center in South San Francisco. I dropped back a little, giving him plenty of room, and he led me right there, parking in approximately the same location as on the previous evening. I took a slot farther back this time, and a little more to one side, in case we were in for another long wait past the closing time of the center's shops.

It developed into just that. Nine-thirty came, and then ten, and the parking area grew silent and nearly empty. It was dark where I was, and I had slumped low in the seat with the window down and my eyes on a level with the sill; I did not think Paige could see me from where he was, under any circumstances.

So we waited, and I was about ready to call it another bust. *Damn it, why doesn't she come?* This kind of job played on my nerves anyway, and the waiting was not helping matters any. If she was—

There was movement at the periphery of my vision, and I turned my head. A lone figure was moving quickly across the darkened parking lot from the direction of the bowling alley. I watched it walk in a straight line for Paige's car, glancing left and right, eyes flickering over my car but not lingering. When the shape reached the compact, it opened the door and slipped swiftly inside. In the brief

flash of the dome light, I had a quick but clear glimpse of a leather jacket, jeans, a crew cut.

Paige's visitor was a man, not a woman.

What the hell? I thought, and I kept on thinking it. Paige had not struck me as a limp-wrist, but I could not figure any other immediate explanation for this kind of meeting. I sat there confused and puzzled, and while I tried to think it through, the driver's door on the compact opened and Paige stepped out.

He was wearing a hat now, and a long overcoat that he must have put on while sitting there in the darkness. Dimly, I could see the other guy slide over under the wheel. Paige walked straight ahead, entering the liquor store; there was no other activity at this end of the lot, and the store was empty of customers.

I began to get it then, but by the time I put it all together it was too late for me to do anything about it. I saw the new guy start Paige's car and pull it out slowly in a diagonal toward the entrance to the lot a few doors down from the liquor store; he kept it out of the bright illumination cast by the shop's fluorescent lighting. I couldn't see what was happening inside, but by this time I knew pretty much what it was.

Two minutes after he had entered, Paige came running out with one hand jammed up under his coat and the other gripping a small sack of some kind. I could see then that he was wearing one of those false beards. He ran down to where the other guy had the compact rolling forward, jerked open the door, and jumped in; the car pitched ahead very quickly, without burning rubber, and swung east out of the lot, its headlights coming on then for the first time. There was no movement at all from inside the liquor store, and no one on the lot to see or wonder what had happened—no one but me.

I'd had the engine of my car going before Paige emerged from the shop, but I stayed where I was until the compact was out of the lot and moving away. Then I went after it, without lights, hanging back as far as I could without losing sight of them. The inside of my stomach was cold with surprise and anger and a little fear, and the palms of my hands were wet and hot on the steering wheel.

The other car was moving fast, but not recklessly; they figured they had pulled it off clean. I kept two blocks behind them and the streets were fairly dark; pools of pale amber from intermittent street lamps were the only real breaks in the blackness.

I wondered then if I was doing

the right thing. I could have gone into the liquor store to check on the clerk—I had not heard a gunshot, but since no one had come out right away it figured Paige had clubbed him down or locked him in a storeroom. I could have called the local police from there—simple enough to tell them Paige's name, and the license number of his car—but my immediate and instinctive reaction had been to give chase, to be able to pinpoint them exactly when I finally called in; and wise or not, I had made my choice and I had to stand by it now.

They were heading for Hillside Boulevard; I could tell that before we'd gone five blocks. That road runs along the foot of the San Bruno Mountains, connecting to the southeast with the Bayshore Freeway and to the northeast with Daly City. It was a toss-up as to which way they would turn when they got there.

They reached the intersection, and I hung well back to see how it would go. The compact turned left. Daly City, then, and on into San Francisco that way; or maybe they had another destination along the line. I pulled to the intersection, and I could see the red glow of their taillights well ahead on the deserted road; they had opened it up now. I made the turn, still without lights, and bore down a little to match their speed and keep up.

As I drove, I let one part of my mind add a few things together. Paige didn't have another woman at all—or if he did, it had nothing to do with these nocturnal outings of his. They were all explainable in the same way. There had been a string of these liquor store holdups the past month in the Bay Area, in a different city each time, and the police had it pegged as two men, one to pull the job and the other to drive the car. I hadn't thought of Paige in connection with the holdups; there was no reason I should have. I had been hired to confirm infidelity, not collusion to commit theft.

So, Paige and this other guy were the heisters; and that put an altogether different explanation on last night's events. Paige had not been waiting in that parking lot for anyone; he had been casing the liquor store—the same thing he had probably done on three or four nights previously and on all the other jobs they had pulled. He would have been checking on how much traffic went in and out of there around this time of night, how many clerks there were on a given evening, things along similar lines. After he had seen enough, Paige had gone to the bowling alley and called this partner of his to make a report. It had apparently looked

good to them, and they had set it up for tonight.

The only thing I couldn't figure at this point was why the other guy had come on foot, instead of meeting Paige somewhere earlier and driving with him to the shopping center. There was undoubtedly a reason for it, but one that did not matter much at this point.

The only other thing that did matter was what Judith Paige was going to say when she found out her husband was something far worse than unfaithful . . .

The dark-blue compact was in Colma now, a small community that had the dubious distinction of being the primary burial grounds for the Peninsula and San Francisco. There were a dozen different cemeteries in the area, and one golf course—Cypress Hills—sitting there incongruously in the middle of it all. Hillside Boulevard at this point was very dark, and there was no other traffic at the moment.

I wondered how much farther I would be able to follow them. If they were continuing on into Daly City, where the traffic was heavier and there were plenty of lights, I might have some trouble, especially since I was running dark now, and I would have to put on my own headlamps somewhere behind them without arousing their suspicion. I was worrying over that when the compact's brake lights came on ahead, and they made a sharp right-hand turn onto Cynthia Street.

That surprised me. Cynthia Street was a narrow lane that marked the boundary between the golf course on the right and Mt. Olivet Cemetery on the left. At its upper end, there were a couple of short dead-end streets and the looming black shapes that were the San Bruno Mountains. It did not figure that they would be putting up back there for any reason; for one thing, it boxed them in, with the only exit being Cynthia Street. But maybe the one guy lived there, and they were going to his place; or perhaps they were planning to stop and split the take from the liquor store.

I swung up after them, and the compact was maybe two hundred yards ahead. We traveled about a fifth of a mile; then, suddenly, the taillights went out, their headlights winked off and thick, heavy darkness folded in on the road. Instinctively, my foot went to the brake pedal and I slowed to a crawl. *What the hell—?*

Then the compact's back-up lights flared, and I heard a sharp whine and realized all at once what a damned slaphead I had been. They knew I was there, they had known it all along. Somehow they had spotted me tailing them

and they had maneuvered me here, into darkness and isolation. The compact was in reverse now, coming back at me and coming very fast, and it was obvious that they had the idea of ramming me, forcing me off the road. You did not need to do much calculating to determine what would happen then.

Sweat flowed like warm oil over my body, and I said a short vicious word and forced the gearshift lever into reverse. They were almost on top of me by then. I threw out the clutch and pushed the accelerator to the floor. The car leaped backward, yawing a little; the compact's rear end missed my front bumper by a foot or less, and then sluiced off toward the fence bordering the cemetery on the left. The guy behind the wheel had to fight it around, straightening out again, and that gave me a couple of extra seconds.

I was hunched around on the seat now, leaning over the back and trying to see though the rear window. Panic had welled up thickly in my throat. I wasn't armed—I had not carried a gun since I had been on the cops ten years ago—and these characters had at least one and probably two weapons. I had nowhere to go if I lost control of the car and they managed to get me off the road.

I got my left hand on the headlight switch and flicked it on, at the same time locating the beam button on the floor with my left foot. The twin cones came on, high and blinding, and the glare of them—and the wash from my back-up lights—pushed at the edges of the darkness enough so that I could see the road back there. It was straight enough, and I had a white-fisted grip on the wheel. I kept my eyes on the road, not looking to see where the compact was, even though the panic inside me demanded it. I knew that the second I took my eyes off that road, I would not be able to hold it. I knew also that they were very close, and I set myself for the impact if they got near enough to try ramming me again.

The intersection with Hillside Boulevard came up very quickly, less than a hundred yards away now. The sweat was a near-blinding astringent in my eyes, but I could see vaguely that there were headlights approaching from the direction of South San Francisco—two sets of them. Hope and relief dulled the edge of the panic. The nearest set of headlights was maybe a thousand yards off, and that gave me enough time, just enough time.

There was a sudden, sharp impact that almost wrenched the wheel out of my hand; they had rammed me, finally, but not hard enough to do the job for them. I

managed to keep the rear end straight as the intersection loomed up, and I held off using the brakes as long as I could. Then I touched them, gently, and laid my other hand on the horn ring and swung the wheel hard to the right. Rubber screamed against the pavement as I slid sideways, rocking, out onto Hillside, and then there was the stridency of another horn, and more screaming of rubber. The first car swung to the left, nosing off the road, to avoid a collision with me; the second braked hard, skidding around to the side of the first one, and without warning a red light started revolving on its roof, washing the area in an eerie red glow. I saw the markings then, and it was a county cruiser, a traffic unit that patrols Hillside for speeders at night.

Relief inundated me in flooding waves, and only then did I turn my head to see where the compact was. It was right in front of me. They had swung out in the same direction I had, but they had seen the red light on the cruiser and they were not worrying about me any longer. I saw the little car rock as the automatic transmission was shoved into Drive, and rubber howled again like souls in purgatory. They had been half turned around on the road, as I had been, and they tried to come out of it too fast, with too much power. The rear end fishtailed wildly and they started to slide one way, and then the other, and I could see that they were not going to make it.

The guy driving lost control before they had gone fifty yards. The compact spun around twice in the middle of the road, a toy car in the hands of a playful kid, and then it tilted and went over, rolling in a kind of slow motion like a piece of film run at half speed through a projector, and finally settled on its top in the culvert between the road and the cemetery fence. There was the sound of twisting metal and breaking glass, but it seemed to come to me from a long way off.

The county patrol car slid around mine and cut diagonally in front, blocking me off. One of the cops inside ran to where the compact lay in the culvert like a huge beetle on its back, wheels spinning lazily in the light-spattered darkness; the other cop came over to me with his service revolver drawn. He looked in through the open window. "What the hell's going on here?" he demanded sharply.

I told him—as much of it as he needed to know immediately. It took him a couple of minutes to believe me, but when I showed him a photostat of my license and told him what he would find in the wreckage he was finally convinced.

He left me alone, except for some curious motorists who had gathered nearby, gawking the way they do, and used his car radio to call in a report. The other cop was still at the wrecked compact, but he was yelling now for an ambulance and a tow truck; Paige and his partner were wedged inside, and he couldn't tell if they were dead or alive.

I sat there numbly, listening to and watching what was going on around me but not really seeing or hearing much of it. I wondered dimly how long it would be before I could stop shaking . . .

There isn't much more to it. The ambulance and the wrecker arrived and a couple of guys went to work on the compact with blowtorches. They removed Paige and the other one—whose name was Stryker, as it turned out—and they were both alive, but just barely. They were taken to one of the emergency hospitals in the area, and I went with the county boys to the police station in Daly City. I told my story again, and again, and one of the cops found a bottle of brandy somewhere and gave me three shots to straighten me up. I felt a little better after that, but I could not drive anymore that night. I had to have them take me home.

I learned the next day that Paige was an ex-con who had figured that his job as a real estate salesman wasn't paying off and wasn't likely to. A month before, he had reestablished contact with Stryker, a guy he had met in prison, and they had worked out the liquor store heists. Paige had quit his job about then, but he had not told his wife about it for obvious reasons.

The rest was about as I had figured it. Stryker, alert and strung out after the holdup, had spotted me coming out of the parking lot after them. They had known I wasn't a cop, because then I would have had a red light on and a siren going—but they had decided I was one of those heroic-citizen types who had somehow witnessed the holdup. They had debated opening up their car and trying to outrun me, but they had no idea how good a driver I was and the area was too residential, too well-patrolled, to risk a high-speed chase. So they had hit upon Cynthia Street—and although they refused to admit it to the police, they would have killed me without compunction if they'd succeeded in forcing me off the road.

Finally, I discovered the reason Stryker had been on foot for the meeting with Paige was because he had parked his car a couple of blocks from the shopping center, as per prior arrangement. What they would do, on all their jobs, was to

make the hit and then double back into the same neighborhood on the theory that it would be the least likely place the cops would look for them. Stryker would take the loot and the disguise Paige wore for the holdups into his car, and Paige—then clean—would meet him the next night for the split.

The tragically ironic aspect to the whole affair was that Paige had apparently been completely faithful to his wife. He had married her because he loved her, or had some kind of feeling for her. If she hadn't suspected him of playing around, and called me in to investigate, he and Stryker might have carried these liquor store thefts on indefinitely—though the law of averages if not the law itself would probably have caught up with them sooner or later.

The police were the ones to break the news to Judith Paige, and for this I was grateful. Yet I knew that I had to see her again, anyway; it was one of those things one simply has to do. So I drove out to the Parkside district the next day, after picking up my car in Daly City, and spent twenty minutes in the Paige apartment. I wish now that I had not gone. It was not easy and it was not good for either of us.

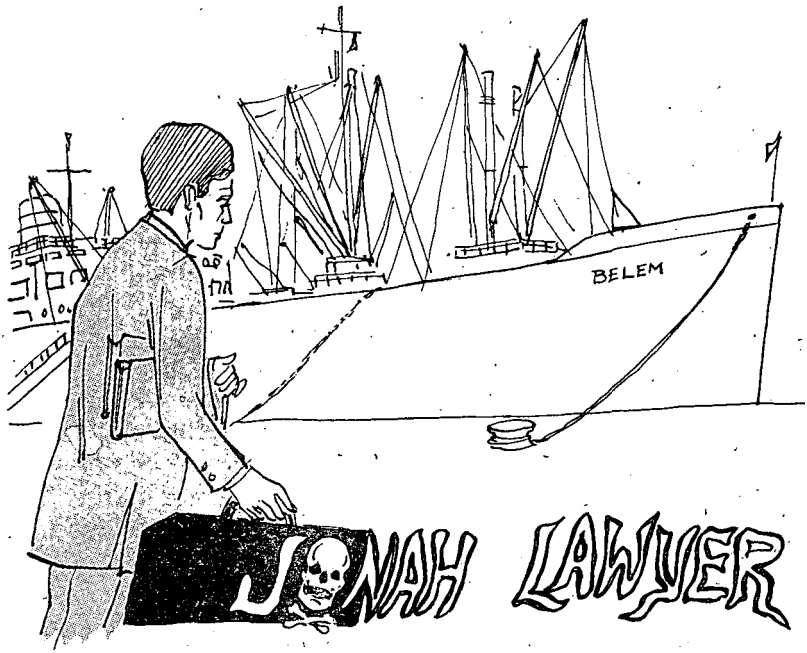
She did tell me that she was going home to Nevada. I think that's probably the wisest decision she could have made, She'll meet another guy there, and she'll get married again, and maybe this time she'll be happy. I hope so.

But there'll be another Judith Paige. There's always another Judith Paige. The papers gave me a pretty nice play as a result of my part in the capture of Paige and Stryker, and the publicity has doubled my business since then. People forget very quickly, though, and I suppose that one of these days I'll again be in a position where I'll have to take pretty much of anything—as long as it's lawful—that comes my way. Inevitably, that's when the new Judith Paige will show up.

That's when I'll hear the old story again—the old and sordid and sad story.

Only that next time, it will very probably be true. . . .

Heterodoxy, wrote the Bishop of Gloucester, is another man's doxy.



WHEN STEPHEN BEGG made his voyage in the *Belem*, the air services had begun crisscrossing the world, and already the mining engineers, rubber-plantation officials, diamond dealers, and others who generally booked her few cabins were taking to the skies. Consequently, Begg was the only passenger southbound. He had chosen the *Belem*, a medium-size freight ship in the South American trade, because her eight-to-ten-week schedule between United States and Brazilian ports fitted in neatly with his leave of absence. As one of the younger members of the District Attorney's staff, he had suffered a complete breakdown toward the end of the intensive drive against

the rackets, and his physician had suggested a quiet sea voyage aboard a cargo vessel.

The ship was no sooner steaming down the Chesapeake than Begg, unpacking his suitcases, learned that in the eyes of at least one man he was not welcome aboard. He looked around to find Lascaris, the chief steward, watching him from the cabin doorway. Lascaris came in, muttering something about making sure that Tommy had not overlooked providing the cabin with towels and soap and ice water, and then he faced the passenger.

"You are bad luck," he said gloomily.

"I am?" said Begg, raising his eyebrows.

The chief steward was thin and sallow, with pale nervous eyes, a gold chain around his short neck. "You are lawyer," he lamented, his odd English revealing his Mediterranean origins. "Lawyer all time bring bad luck to ship."

"This being my first sea voyage," said Begg amusedly, "I cannot speak from experience, but several of my colleagues have made sea voyages without dire consequences."

"Because if someone die or ship in trouble, no one knows it is brought by lawyer to the ship. I tell Cap'n Dyck we get lawyer passenger. He say, 'So what?' I tell him he will see."

Captain Dyck had his dinner served on the bridge that evening, while navigating the Chesapeake, and so Begg did not make his acquaintance until breakfast time in the saloon on the following morning. As Begg settled into his chair at the captain's table, between the chief mate and the chief engineer, he became uncomfortable under the captain's critical survey of his thin, run-down appearance.

The captain bluntly said, "I was told by the passenger department you're making the trip for your health. By the looks of it, you need to."

Begg managed a thin smile. Captain Dyck was broad-beamed and middle-aged, with a flat rubbery face and straggly hair, his blue uniform in need of pressing. "I'm not altogether a picture of health," Begg replied. "However, I'm hoping to improve it by a voyage aboard your ship. Although," he

added, smiling again, "I'm afraid my health will suffer if I'm thrown overboard as a Jonah."

The captain grunted. "That Lascaris has been at you, I can tell. If you listen to him, you'll be scared of turning out of your bunk every morning."

"Is a lawyer really considered to portend bad luck aboard ship?"

"Never heard of it till Lascaris said so yesterday. Women and clergymen—yes. Some say they bring bad luck. Rowan can tell you. He's well up on that stuff."

Begg introduced himself to Rowan later in the forenoon. Rowan was both radio officer and purser, with a combined radio room and purser's office next to the little lounge in the passenger quarters. After a few turns round the boat deck in the chilly wind, Begg went down to the warmth of the radio room, where Rowan was keeping one of his brief radio schedules. Rowan removed the headphones and switched on a loudspeaker with its muted chorus of dot-and-dash signals. Rowan was in his mid-twenties, tall like Begg, with friendly eyes behind rimless glasses. Begg accepted his invitation to pull up a chair.

"I understand you're an authority on superstition," he remarked conversationally.

Rowan shrugged. "I wouldn't say that. I've read up on the subject, that's all, and a while back I had a little article in a nautical magazine on legends and black magic."

"The chief steward told me that lawyers bring bad luck to a ship."

Rowan grinned. "He would! He's a bit of a nut that way. He's always checking with me whether so-and-so is unlucky. He digs up a lot of the old sailing-ship superstitions which have practically died out among modern merchant seamen, like whistling and sneezing. He actually wears a caul."

"A caul?" queried Begg, not sure he had heard correctly.

"That's right, a dried-up caul taken from around some baby's head at birth. He keeps it in a linen bag slung on that gold chain around his neck, like a religious medal."

Rowan paused to listen to the loudspeaker for a few seconds and jot down an entry for his radio log. "Let me tip you off about Lascaris," he resumed. "He snoops, listens outside doors and ports, so watch what you say when he's around. He tells the old man all that goes on. I learned the hard way a couple of voyages ago. After paying off all hands, I found I was fifty dollars short in my cash. I had a notion I'd put a fifty-dollar bill too many in the old man's envelope, and I mentioned it to the second mate, who happened to be in here

at the time. Lascaris went by the door, and the next thing I knew, the old man came tearing in saying I was accusing him of holding back a fifty-dollar bill."

"Did anyone return it?"

"No," said Rowan sourly. "Once or twice I've had a five or a ten-spot turned back. I guess the fifty was too big a temptation for someone."

Just then Captain Dyck came in and handed Rowan a weather report for transmission to the Weather Bureau in Washington. "See if you can get the lottery numbers tonight," he said, and with a nod at the passenger, he went out.

Rowan grinned. "Talk about the devil! He's hoping to hit the jackpot someday and quit the sea before he gets too decrepit really to enjoy life. He buys every sweepstake and lottery ticket he can get his maulers on. He plays the Brazilian lottery pretty heavily and wants the winning numbers after each draw as soon as I can get them from a Brazilian radio station."

Rowan glanced up at the radio-room clock with the sweep second hand, reaching for the headphones. "I must get this weather report off," he said. As Begg rose, he added, "It'll be pretty lonesome for you as the only passenger, so drop in any time you feel like it."

The southbound leg of the voyage passed with little to disturb Begg's peace of mind, and by the time the ship had arrived off the Brazilian coast, he had gained weight and his tattered nerves were mending. After discharging the last of her general cargo in Rio de Janeiro, the *Belem* moved down to Santos and loaded coffee, cacao, hides, and other Brazilian exports for the United States. She also took on a passenger for Baltimore. Begg was leaning over the rails when he came aboard, looking like an ambulatory cadaver in a wrinkled white linen suit and loose-fitting khaki sun helmet.

Captain Dyck and the chief mate were chatting a short distance away, and Begg overheard the captain mutter, "A medical missionary. It looks like we'll be sewing him up in canvas before the voyage is up."

That, mused Begg, is all the chief steward will need to confirm his belief in lawyers as harbingers of bad luck.

After the ship had sailed, Begg went into the new passenger's cabin and made himself known. The medical missionary was prone on the lower bunk, trying to stay cool in thin pajamas, fan humming at full speed, both portholes open. He started to rise, but Begg pressed him to remain resting. The missionary introduced himself as Dr. Howard, and told Begg that for the past several years he had conducted

a small clinic among the Indians in the hilly jungles of the diamond country to the north of Rio. Recurring bouts of fever had sapped his strength, and after two severe heart attacks, he had yielded to persuasion by the missionary society to return to the United States. There was really nothing for him to return to, he sighed, for he had never married, and his nearest living relative was a little niece in a California orphanage.

"I'm really going back to do something for her. Perhaps I should have traveled by the new airplane service; the journey by burro and train to Santos was most wearying. However, I'm sure the voyage by boat will afford me plenty of rest and time to recuperate."

"That makes a pair of us," said Begg, who then told the doctor something about himself. "You should have seen me when I came aboard, thin as a quill and a bundle of frayed nerves, and now look at me." Begg, noticing a Bible on the bunk-head tray beside a medicine bottle, said that he had several novels the doctor might care to borrow. "I'll be looking forward to enjoying your company on deck under the awnings, before the ship gets back into the wintry north."

When Begg left the doctor's cabin, he was accosted by the chief steward in the passageway, suspiciously close to the doctor's door.

"More bad luck," said Lascaris dismally, nodding at the missionary's cabin.

Begg smiled. "He's a doctor, not a lawyer."

"He is missionary, all same clergyman. Bad luck."

"I've brought none, and the voyage is coming to an end."

"Plenty time yet," replied Lascaris, a foreboding expression on his pallid face.

Begg went in to see the missionary doctor during the forenoon of the next day and invited him to sit up on deck with him for a while in the sun. The doctor, however, said he preferred to rest quietly in the seclusion of his cabin for a day or two.

"I still feel so wretchedly weak," he said.

"If there's anything I can do for you—"

Begg looked around as Tommy, the eager young room steward, knocked and came in. "Everything okay, Doc?" he asked cheerfully, glancing around. He crossed to the bunk-head tray and picked up the carafe. "I'll get you some fresh water," he said, and went out.

Dr. Howard smiled up at Begg. "Tommy is taking good care of me, you see. He all but comes to tuck me in every night before he goes off to bed."

During the southbound leg of the voyage, Begg had passed the early part of the evenings at poker in the lounge with Captain Dyck, the chief engineer, and any of the watch-keeping officers who happened to be off duty; he usually left the game around nine o'clock and went to his cabin to read himself to sleep in his bunk.

The poker sessions were resumed northbound. On the second night out of Santos, the chief steward appeared in the lounge doorway. "The missionary, he want you," he said to Begg.

The lawyer excused himself and followed Lascaris along the passageway, continuing on alone as the chief steward turned into his own cabin. The door was hooked ajar, and after entering, Begg put it back on the hook. Dr. Howard was lying in the bunk. He raised himself on one elbow.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Begg. I wish to ask a favor of you." The doctor pointed to a battered metal trunk stowed under the settee. "Please pull that out and open it. There's a black leather purse in one corner. If you'll kindly get it out for me . . ."

Begg found the purse, old and worn, and handed it to the doctor. Settling back on the pillows, the medical missionary slipped open the flap and took out what appeared to be a dirty fragment from a broken bottle. He held it up between thumb and finger.

"A blue-white diamond," he said awesomely. "Worth at least fifty thousand dollars in the rough."

He slid the stone back into the purse. "A lonely old Indian gave it to me. He used to spend his days searching the river beds for diamonds. This was his first big find. He'd been hoarding it for a certain traveling dealer to come into the area, a man whom he could trust to offer him a fair price. The old fellow came down with malaria. I ministered to him day and night, but in vain. His stamina was gone. Just before he died, he left the stone to me, told me where it was hidden. Like me, he was alone in the world."

The doctor paused, short of breath. "Normally," he resumed, "I'd have bequeathed it to the missions, but I too, like the old Indian, have a debt of gratitude to repay. The orphaned niece I mentioned—she's my sister's child. My sister denied herself to put me through college and medical school, even delayed marriage until late in life. I'm afraid I rather disappointed her by going into missionary work. She had great hopes of seeing me in a lucrative Park Avenue practice. I decided to make up for her sacrifice by providing for the support and

education of my little niece. I've written our family lawyer with a view to setting up a trust fund from the proceeds of the sale of the diamond."

The doctor turned his pale face momentarily toward an open porthole and the bright starry sky beyond. "I feel that my end is near," he said mournfully. "It may be a premonition, so I wish to set my immediate affairs in order. In the event of my death on board, would you kindly consent to act as my attorney and notify my family lawyer by radio? His card is in my trunk. Most of all, I wish you to take custody of this stone. No one else knows of it, and only someone familiar with diamonds in the rough would recognize its true worth. I'm apprehensive it may get tossed aside as valueless by whoever may have to gather up my effects on board."

"I'll be most happy indeed to act as your attorney," said Begg, "but I earnestly hope it won't be necessary. I'll take temporary charge of the diamond. I say 'temporary,'" he added, striking a cheerful note, "because in a day or two I'll be returning it to you after seeing you sprinting round the decks."

The missionary smiled weakly. "It may be God's will that I shall." He handed the purse to Begg. "Thank you, Mr. Begg. I feel so relieved now. I'd like you to keep the matter as quiet as possible. That stone will doubtless cause a stir in the diamond world. I don't seek that kind of publicity, even posthumously. With regard to your fees, my family lawyer—"

Begg stopped him. "Please . . ."

The doctor's eyes had closed, and Begg saw that the missionary was falling asleep. Slipping the purse into a pocket of his slacks, he switched off the overhead lights, leaving the bunk light on, and went out. As he passed the chief steward's cabin, he glanced in and saw Lascaris busy at his desk, with the next day's menus spread out before him. He imagined how Lascaris would greet him if the missionary died on board. Begg went into his own cabin, dropped the purse into a corner of the top drawer of the little chest of drawers, and then returned to the poker game in the lounge.

In response to a querying look from Captain Dyck, Begg said, "Dr. Howard wished to see me about acting as his attorney should he die on board."

The captain frowned. "I'm doing all he'll let me do for him, but he's doctoring himself and says he doesn't need anything from the medicine chest." He glanced across at Rowan, who was dealing. "If he takes a turn for the worse, I'll be ra-

dioing for medical advice, to keep myself in the clear."

The missionary doctor died sometime during that night. Tommy broke the news to Begg when he wakened him for breakfast. Tommy had taken a cup of coffee into the doctor's cabin around six-thirty and found his passenger dead. Tommy had no sooner gone out of Begg's cabin than, as Begg had anticipated, the chief steward came in, wearing a V-neck undershirt that barely covered the little linen bag suspended from the gold chain.

"Maybe you believe now," he said lugubriously.

Captain Dyck was late coming in for breakfast. He told Begg that Tommy had come running to the bridge to tell him that the missionary passenger was dead. "I went down right away, and sure enough, he had gone. It looked like a pretty painful heart attack, going by his face. That's how I've logged it."

"I feel very saddened by his death," said Begg. "I was hoping he'd pull through. I have a great admiration for men like him, devoting their lives unselfishly in the service of their fellowman. Dr. Howard denied himself the comforts and emoluments of private practice."

"Maybe so," said the captain, "but some of those missionaries seem to do all right for themselves on the side, if you ask me."

Begg treated the captain's cynicism with silence. The captain turned to the chief mate. "I've radioed the marine superintendent about the body. If it's to be buried at sea, the service will be sometime tomorrow. See about collecting anything of value among his belongings and put them in the purser's safe."

From the saloon Begg went straight to his cabin, uncertain what to do with the diamond now that he would not be returning it to the doctor as he had hoped. Since no one else on board knew of it or its value, he decided that he could safely keep it in his cabin, treat its custody as a private and confidential matter between a lawyer and a client who had wanted no publicity, and list it on his customs' declaration as the property of his client.

Begg opened the top drawer of the little bureau, curious again to see a large bl_e-white diamond in the rough. He stared blankly at the corner into which he had dropped the purse. It was no longer there.

He rummaged feverishly through the contents of the drawer, shoving aside shirts and socks and underwear until convinced that the purse was not anywhere in the drawer. Grimly he closed it to think.

The purse had been taken while he was in the saloon for breakfast; of that he could be positive, for he had seen the purse in the drawer when he had opened it to get a clean shirt after his morning shower. Whoever had stolen the purse had entered solely with that purpose in mind, since it had lain beside his wallet which had money in it, and which was still in the drawer untouched. Someone, obviously, had gained knowledge of the diamond.

Begg decided against immediately reporting the theft to the captain. The captain could only order a search of the cabins of any likely suspects, with fruitless results, for a small object like the rough diamond could be hidden in one of a thousand places in the ship and never found, the bulkier purse perhaps tossed overboard. Of first and the utmost importance was recovery of the diamond, with a minimum of publicity. This, Begg told himself, was a case in which he was primarily concerned with bringing about the return of stolen property and not with obtaining a conviction.

After pondering over his problem at length, Begg decided to seek the aid of Rowan. He had taken advantage of the radio officer's invitation to drop in any time he felt like it, which he had done perhaps two or three times daily, and although he had found Rowan a talkative young man, he felt that he could safely confide in him. Begg went along to the radio room. Rowan was alone, busy at the desk in the purser section. He leaned back in the chair and gave the passenger his full attention. His eyes burned with indignation after hearing Begg's account of the theft.

"It was that lousy snooper," he said. "After you went into the doctor's cabin, he sneaked down there and listened outside the door and beat it back to his own cabin when he heard you about to leave. He heard you go into your cabin and knew you'd left the diamond there."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, but it could have been someone else."

"Who else?" scoffed Rowan. "All the officers off watch were in the lounge with the captain. There was no one in that section at the time except Lascaris. He was the only man who could have heard you, learned about the diamond and swiped it."

"Tommy may have learned about it. He went into the doctor's cabin last thing each night. The doctor may have told him he might die on board and had given me custody of the diamond."

"You can forget about Tommy. That kid is okay. He wouldn't know

how to go about selling a rough diamond anyway."

"Fifty thousand dollars would be sufficient temptation to begin learning."

"I still say it was Lascaris."

"What puzzles me is that if he's the thief, why he didn't take the diamond last night after I'd gone back to the poker game, when he had the best opportunity. Tommy couldn't have taken it last night because by the time he could have learned about it, I was back in my cabin, reading. Tommy would have had to wait until I was at breakfast this morning for a chance to slip into my cabin."

"Lascaris probably didn't work up the guts to steal it until then."

"If he's the thief, he's vulnerable through his superstitiousness, so we'll start on him. Next time he comes in, casually start talking about the missionary doctor. Tell Lascaris he'd given you some interesting information about the customs of the Indians he worked among and say that one of them was that when an Indian makes a valuable gift, he puts a secret curse on it, so that if it's stolen, the thief will die a horrible death within twenty-four hours unless he repents and puts it back where he stole it from.

"Then, as though changing the subject, tell him on the q.t., as it were, that someone had stolen something very valuable belonging to Dr. Howard from my cabin, but I was keeping it quiet until detectives from my office can come aboard and investigate."

"Boy!" chuckled Rowan. "Will Lascaris really sweat!"

"But go about it in a subtle manner, so he won't have any suspicions about the curse. Then we'll sit back and wait, hoping that if Lascaris is the thief, his superstitious fear of death will overcome his greed."

"It'll work, all right," said Rowan enthusiastically. "I know how that guy scares from the way he looked after reading my black-magic piece. He'll be coming in here soon with his requisitions for me to type. I'll go to work on him right away."

Begg did not get to talk to Rowan alone again until they met outside the saloon on their way to lunch.

"Lascaris is your man," said Rowan in a lowered voice. "You should have seen his face when I was through with him. I really piled on the agony. I told him about a thief who hopped aboard a train and died a horrible death when the train jumped the tracks into a deep ravine and burst into flames."

Begg frowned. "That was hardly a subtle approach. He may think you were just fooling about the curse."

"You wouldn't think so if you'd seen him. He went out looking as though he expected the ship to blow up any minute. He's the thief, sure enough. If he isn't and doesn't know about the diamond, why should he be so scared? You'll find it in your cabin after lunch."

Begg went immediately to his cabin following lunch and looked into the top drawer. Neither purse nor diamond was in it. Begg then took a novel up to the boat deck and spent the afternoon reading in the shade. He returned to his cabin to wash for dinner and again opened the top drawer. The diamond was still missing. On the way to the saloon, Begg stepped into the radio room.

Before Begg could speak, Rowan said glumly, "I can tell by the look on your face it hasn't worked. Maybe it was Tommy, after all."

"If the chief steward is the thief, he would surely have returned the diamond by now—provided, of course, that he believed in the curse."

"Maybe I did overdo it," lamented Rowan.

While at dinner, Begg caught a glimpse of the chief steward through the serving-pantry window. His pallid face wore a pronounced worried look, and Begg reflected that if it were due to the curse, then the fear of it had not been powerful enough to frighten Lascaris into returning the diamond.

After dinner, Begg again looked into the top drawer, and again was disappointed. Later, he joined the poker game in the lounge. In a little while, the chief steward looked in for a few moments, still wearing the worried expression. The captain, with a heap of chips beside him and likely to stay in the game to the last, remarked on the chief steward's worried look.

"Something's been nagging him all day." He grinned. "Maybe he lost his caul."

Begg left the game as usual around nine o'clock, and as he started down the passageway, Rowan stepped from the radio room.

"I haven't given up on Lascaris yet," Rowan said. "Let's take a look."

He followed the lawyer along to his cabin. As Begg opened the door, he halted abruptly, his hand gripping the doorknob. On top of the chest of drawers lay the worn black leather purse.

Begg strode over to it and, picking it up, he pushed back the flap. Still inside was the fragment of what looked like dirty bottle glass.

"The curse worked," Rowan exulted over the lawyer's shoulder. "I knew it was that lousy snooper."

Begg did not seem to be listening. He was staring thoughtfully at the purse. Suddenly he glanced up at Rowan. "It wasn't Lascaris who stole it."

Rowan stared at him. "Then how—?"

"If you'd stolen the diamond and been frightened into returning it by fear of that curse, where would you have put it?"

"Why, right where I took it from, of course."

"Yet it was placed on top of the chest of drawers, not inside the one from which it was taken."

Rowan was silent as the significance of Begg's words sank in. Begg continued. "The chief steward didn't steal the diamond, but he suspected who did—the man he'd told about it. He knew the thief wouldn't be frightened by an Indian curse, so he stole it back, in fear of something terrible happening to the ship and all hands. He had to wait until this evening for an opportunity, and he looked in the lounge to make sure that the thief wasn't likely to quit the poker game and return unexpectedly to his cabin."

Rowan knit his brows, as if to recall who were the players. "One man," said Begg, "came in late to breakfast this morning, sufficiently late to have had time to slip into my cabin. That same man made a snide remark to the effect that some missionaries seem to do all right for themselves on the side, a remark that now would appear to have implied a knowledge of what seemed a specific instance."

"I overheard that remark at my table," growled Rowan, "and I didn't like it. Now I'm beginning to see where that fifty-dollar bill went."

"Oh, boy!" he suddenly burst out, in gleeful anticipation. "Is he going to be fit to be tied when he finds someone's swiped his jackpot and he daren't say a thing about it!"

"He won't know what became of it until he sees it noted on my customs declaration," said Begg. "With everyone keeping mum, he'll think there's some kind of conspiracy of silence against him, fear that I perhaps intend to prosecute him in due course."

Begg smiled. "He might even believe that lawyers are unlucky to have aboard after all."

It has been established that the more knowledge one has the better the odds—in most contests.

The Other Man's Game

by Gary Brandner

THE RAPPING on the door came in precise staccato bursts—one burst every ten seconds. John Hooker lay in the pull-down bed for a full minute, hoping the knocker would go away. Finally, with a sigh, he peeled back the sheet and blanket and padded across the room. He unbolted the door and opened it on a young man in the brown uniform of the San Salvador *policía.*

"Señor Hooker?" said the young man.

"That's me." Hooker yawned and

scrubbed at his thick brown hair as though to awaken his brain cells.

"Señor Delgado at the Palacio Federal has asked that you come to his office."

"What for?"

"He did not say. I only know it is considered urgent. I am to bring you there at once."

"Okay," Hooker said. "I hope there's time for me to put on some clothes."

The policeman nodded, then sat in one of Hooker's two chairs and began leafing through one of the U.S. magazines on the table.

Hooker stepped into the curtained *lavatorio* and splashed water on his face. He pulled on a fresh white shirt and a pair of khakis. The goodwill of the San Salvador government, as represented by Vincente Delgado, was essential to Hooker's continued stay in the capital as a "tourist guide." This was especially true since Hooker's clients wound up more often in an illegal card game than on a scenic tour. He buzzed an electric shaver over his face, then followed the policeman down a flight of stairs and out to the waiting white car.

They drove down the broad Avenida Cuscatlan to the sprawling government building where Hooker was hustled in by a side door.

Delgado's office was dark, businesslike, and gloomy, like the man himself. He dismissed the policeman with a nod and stared unhappily across his neat desk at Hooker.

"*Buenos dias*," the American said. "How's business?"

"We have trouble, Señor Hooker."

"When you say 'we' do you mean me?"

"No, no. We have had no complaints about you for a month. This is some trouble I hope you can help us out of."

Hooker stuck a thin black cigar in his mouth and used Delgado's silver desk lighter. "Tell me about it," he said.

"Have you heard of the Worldwide Cultural Aid Foundation?"

"No."

"It is a private organization with headquarters in the United States. Their aim is to encourage artists and craftsmen of other countries in their native art."

"Very commendable," Hooker observed.

"Yes. Although they are not an agency of the government, I understand much of their funding is done through the U.S. State Department."

"That sounds like trouble, all right," Hooker said, "but I don't see what I can do about it."

"If you will be patient, I am getting to the point. It seems that Señor Lloyd Creasey, the Foundation

representative in San Salvador, has been kidnapped."

"You're kidding."

"I never kid."

"I didn't know you had radicals like that in this country. I'm sure you don't have any political prisoners to release for them."

"I did not say there was anything political about it," Delgado said irritably. "It is a simple U.S.-style kidnapping for money. They are asking a ransom for the release of Señor Creasey."

"How much?"

"Forty thousand U.S. dollars."

"Sorry, Delgado, I'm a little short this week, otherwise I'd be glad to let you have it."

Delgado looked pained. "I will never understand," he said, "why *norteamericanos* must always joke. The reason you are here is that the kidnappers have refused to deal with anyone in our office, but have asked for you as intermediary."

"Why me?"

"Their messenger did not say, but I assume it is because of your wide acquaintance among the, er, criminal element. Their man will take you where they are holding Señor Creasey. All I ask you to do is learn what is the smallest sum they will settle for and report back to me. This is all unofficial, you understand."

"Sure. Why hasn't there been any news about this kidnapping?"

"We have taken pains to keep it unpublicized, at least until the hostage is released. The kidnapping of a foreign visitor is always embarrassing to the host country. It would be particularly so in our case, since we are expecting a delegation next week of officials from your State Department."

"And you want me to talk to the kidnappers and see how far I can knock their price down."

"Correct. Bearing in mind, of course, that the safety of Señor Creasey comes first."

"Of course. I guess this is the time to ask what's in it for me."

Delgado touched his moustache with a delicate forefinger. "Ah, yes. For you there is the assurance that I will not revoke your visa at its current expiration."

"You are too kind. When do I start?"

"As soon as you can be ready. The man the kidnappers sent will guide you, and you will have the use of a government jeep."

Hooker consulted his watch. It was almost twelve, and the noon heat would make sticky traveling, even in December. "Let's make it three o'clock," he said.

"As you wish. The man will be at your *apartamiento* with the jeep. You will, of course, be discreet."

"Sure." Hooker got up to leave,

but turned back when he heard Delgado clear his throat meaningfully.

"One more thing," Delgado said. "You will be taking another person with you—Señor Creasey's wife." Ignoring Hooker's sudden frown, he went on, "The señora has insisted she be taken along or she will go to the consulate and make the whole affair public."

"Delgado, I like women as well as the next man, in their place. But this is not a stroll in the *Parque Libertad.* Does this cultural-aid lady know what she is asking for?"

"Señora Creasey is most determined. It is already decided that she will accompany you. *Adios,* Señor Hooker. Good luck."

Hooker bit down hard on his cigar and marched out of the office. The policeman who had driven him down fell in step on the way back to the car.

At 2:30 the midday heat began to subside. Hooker lay on the couch preparing for his journey by staring at the cracked ceiling and taking occasional pulls from a bottle of *cerveza.*

In the past six years Hooker had seldom thought about his home country. Now he let his mind drift into the old dream of going back and clearing himself of the charge against him. The guns he had carried were, after all, to be used against a man who was the sworn enemy of the United States. As always, however, the facts got in the way of the dream. Free-lance gunrunning was a crime; the destination of the weapons was irrelevant; and to be honest, Hooker's motives were linked as much to profit as patriotism.

"The hell with it," he said aloud, and arced the empty beer bottle across the room to clatter into the metal wastebasket.

A tentative tapping at the door brought Hooker to his feet. He strode across the room to open the door. A well-proportioned blonde of about thirty gazed up at him from under the floppy brim of a white canvas hat. She wore a new-looking blue shirt and white whipcord trousers that clung smoothly to her rounded hips. She blinked her long lashes several times and wet her lips.

"Mrs. Creasey, I presume," Hooker said, looking her over carefully.

She moved self-consciously under his gaze. "Yes, I'm Elaine Creasey. You must be Mr. Hooker."

"That's me. Come in and have a beer. Our guide isn't here yet."

Elaine Creasey stepped carefully into the room, her eyes avoiding the bed, which was made but not pushed out of sight. "No, thank

you," she said. "I'll have a cup of coffee, though, if you have some."

"I don't," Hooker said. "Why do you want to come along on this trip, Elaine?"

The woman flinched at the use of her first name. "I feel I owe it to my husband," she said.

"Nuts."

"You're certainly a blunt man, Mr. Hooker. Perhaps I will have that beer. In a glass, please."

Hooker took two bottles from the small refrigerator, cracked them open, and poured one into a glass. "I quit playing word games when I quit being respectable, Elaine," he said. "An awful lot of time is wasted while people con each other before getting down to what they really want to say. The reason I want to know why you're coming along is that there is an outside chance somebody will get killed. The more I know about the people with me, the more I help the odds that the somebody won't be me."

Elaine Creasey took a cautious sip from her glass, held it up to the light, then sipped again. "I guess that's fair enough," she said. "I feel I owe it to my husband because I haven't been a very good wife to him. His position here with the Foundation requires him to attend many parties—diplomatic affairs, you understand. He also has to travel often to other Central American countries. I'm afraid I've disappointed him by refusing to go with him. To my mind, such things are not the reason the Foundation was set up. I prefer to work here with the schools and with the people of the poor sections."

"Good for you," Hooker said. "How were you getting along in bed?"

"I beg your pardon!" The woman stiffened.

Hooker made a face at her.

She said, "I don't have to listen to that kind of insolence."

"You do if you're going anywhere with me, lady," Hooker said.

Gradually the color crept back into Elaine's cheeks, and her mouth formed a smile. "You're trying to discourage me from going, aren't you? You hope I'll get mad enough at you to flounce out of here. I almost did, until I realized what you were doing. How were Lloyd and I in bed, you ask? Strangers, that's how. I had hoped being together in a foreign country might help bring us together, but it hasn't worked out that way. I meant it when I said I owed it to him to go to him now. I want him to know that I won't desert him when he's in trouble. Is there anything else you want to know, *Mister* Hooker?"

"Nope." Hooker found he couldn't keep his scowl in place, so he relaxed into a grin. Elaine smiled

back at him, and they both started at a thump on the door.

A pockmarked youth identified himself as Pepe, emissary from the kidnappers. He eyed the American couple with heavy contempt.

Moving deliberately for the boy's benefit, Hooker took a chamois bag from the top dresser drawer and withdrew a wicked-looking revolver, slid it into a holster and buckled the rig around his waist. "Let's go," he said, shrugging into a bush jacket on the way out.

Following Pepe's directions, Hooker drove the jeep north from the capital toward Sonsonate. The road, as usual, was crowded with the handsome brown people of the country. They wound through jungle rich with flowers and sped across broad meadows guarded by huge ceiba trees. As they neared the mountainous country dominated by the volcano Izalco, Pepe nudged Hooker and pointed at a badly rutted road branching off from the highway and climbing into the rocky foothills. They bounced along this for several miles until it became too narrow and strewn with boulders to go farther in the jeep.

"It looks like walking time," Hooker said to Elaine. "I'm glad to see you wore some outdoor shoes."

"Did you expect me to show up in ballet slippers?" she said.

Hooker laughed and jumped out of the jeep, making no effort to assist Elaine.

Pepe led the way climbing upward. The trail narrowed steadily among rugged formations of volcanic rock. The trio edged along the foot of a towering cliff for nearly a mile, then clambered up a chute-like lava flow to a plateau. Near the center of this, three army-style tents had been set up. Four or five men lounged about outside the tents, playing cards and talking. Pepe waved to them and led Hooker and Elaine into the camp.

Looking around him, Hooker saw familiar faces—faces from the illegal gambling clubs of San Salvador and the waterfront of La Libertad. The men didn't smile at him, but their dark eyes glowed with suppressed amusement.

Pepe led them into the nearest of the tents. Two bedrolls lay on opposite sides of the entrance. At the far end a big-bellied man with the shoulders of an ox sat in a folding canvas chair. As Hooker approached, the man smiled broadly, showing brown-stained teeth under his moustache.

"Buenas tardes, amigo," boomed the big man.

"Gomez, don't tell me you're part of this kidnapping," Hooker said.

"Not only part of it, I am *el jefe*, the boss."

"I thought I recognized some of your pals out there. Who's left in town to pick the pockets and roll the drunks?"

"Can you blame us for wanting to better ourselves?" Gomez smiled.

A thin shadow detached itself from a corner of the tent and moved into the light. The shadow became a man with oily black hair and the pinched, dangerous eyes of a snake. "Never mind the talk," he said. "Did you bring the money?"

Gomez sighed regretfully. "I'm afraid Morales here has a mind only for business. A man like myself needs such a one to remind me of our purpose."

Hooker stared hard at Morales. "Where did you get this, Gomez?" he said. "He doesn't look smart enough for a pickpocket or clean enough for a pimp."

Morales took a quick, menacing step toward Hooker. Gomez said quickly, "Don't underestimate Morales, my friend. He uses a knife as though it grew from his hand."

"I'll remember not to let him get behind me," Hooker said. "Now I want to see the prisoner before any talk about money."

Gomez led them out of the tent. Morales stayed where he was, his eyes on the tight white pants of Elaine Creasey.

The sun slipped behind Izalco to the west as they passed the second of the three tents. Inside this one Hooker could see a jumble of bedrolls and straw pallets. Before they reached the last tent their way was barred by a full-breasted girl with dark gypsy eyes. She watched Elaine with the tacit challenge of a female whose territory is threatened.

"Who's this, the bandit queen?" Hooker asked.

Gomez coughed nervously. "This is Felice. She's, ah, with me. You know how it is."

"I'm beginning to," Hooker said.

The girl turned her gaze on the tall man. "I have heard of you," she said. "The *norteamericano* who cannot go home. They say you are a gambler."

"Sometimes," Hooker said. "If I like the odds."

"Do you always win?"

"Not always. And I never play the other man's game."

The girl threw back her head and laughed. "You are wise, gambler." With a swirl of skirts she moved past them.

Hooker and Elaine followed Gomez to the entrance of the third tent where a sleepy guard sat outside with a rifle in his lap. Gomez nodded to the guard and held aside the tent flap for the other two. Inside, a pale man in his early forties sat stiffly on a wooden chair. A wide sleeping bag was folded behind

him. The man was dressed as though for a yacht club get-together in a navy blazer and light blue turtleneck. He looked past Hooker and spoke to Elaine.

"What are you doing here?"

She stopped and made no move to approach him. "I insisted on coming," she said. "I was worried about you."

"I'm all right," Creasey said brusquely. "You're Hooker?" he asked, turning to the tall American.

"That's right. They tell me I'm supposed to negotiate for your release."

"Sorry to be such a damned nuisance. Shall we start back tonight or wait until morning?"

"There's a slight hitch," Hooker said, rubbing his jaw. "I didn't bring any money."

"No money?" said Creasey and Gomez in unison.

Elaine stared at Hooker.

Hooker turned on his heel and headed out of the tent. To Gomez he said, "Now that I know the hostage is safe, you and I can talk about terms."

Gomez hurried along on his shorter legs to catch up. "What are these terms you speak of?" he asked. "The price is $40,000, U.S."

"*Demasiado*," Hooker said. "That's too much. Delgado might go for half of that."

The amiability slipped off Gomez' face, and a cold warning came through clearly. "Forty thousand dollars is the price," he repeated.

Hooker spread out his hands and grinned at the stocky man. "Okay," he said. "It was worth a try anyway. I'll start back in the morning and give Delgado your message."

Gomez' smile came back and he clapped the American on the shoulder. "Now you're talking, *amigo*. I'll go arrange someplace for you to sleep."

When the bandit had gone, Elaine let the words come out that she had been holding. "You certainly didn't try very hard to bring down the price."

"What for? I'm playing with house money. Don't you think your husband is worth $40,000?"

Elaine flushed and started to turn away, but caught herself and returned Hooker's gaze. "Can you be sure they'll let him go when the money is paid?"

"He'll be in no danger."

"Couldn't we try to get him out of here tonight? There doesn't seem to be many of the kidnappers."

Hooker took the blonde girl's face in his hands. "Lady, you have seen too many John Wayne movies. With a whole lot of luck I might find my own way out of here and back to the jeep in the dark, but trying to lead you and your husband out while people with guns

try to stop us, knocks the odds way out of line."

Elaine started to answer, but held her tongue as Gomez approached noisily from the other side of the camp.

"All fixed up, *amigo,*" he said. "I have a bedroll for you. You can sleep in the tent with me and Morales."

"If it's all the same, I'll stay out in the open. Tents make me nervous."

"Whatever you like. Señora, you will wish to be with your husband?"

Elaine looked around her in some confusion. "I . . . that is, of course."

"*Bien.* Then that's all settled."

Hooker selected a spot for his bedroll where he could look down on all three tents. He sat smoking and watching the activity of the camp as the night chill came with the darkness. The men, poorly dressed for a night in the mountains, retired early to their tent, where someone strummed a guitar. Felice, after a lively discussion in Spanish with Gomez, joined him and Morales in their tent.

Some time after nightfall Elaine still wandered around the camp, seemingly fascinated by hunks of rock which she picked up and examined in the moonlight. Eventually she approached the spot where Hooker sat smoking and joined him. She needed company.

"I don't feel a bit sleepy," she said.

"You don't want to spend the night in your husband's sleeping bag," Hooker commented.

"I don't think I could ever get used to your direct way of putting things—but you're right. I came along this far because I felt it was my duty. I see no need to carry it any further."

"Neither do I," Hooker grinned. "Take my bedroll. I'll see Gomez and make other arrangements."

"Thank you. You know, John Hooker, you are really a nice man underneath."

"Don't let it get around." Hooker mashed out the stub of his thin cigar and started down toward Gomez' tent. As an afterthought, he walked back and put his hands on Elaine's shoulders. He kissed her on the mouth—lightly, but not *too* lightly. "Good night, lady," he said. "We'll start back at dawn."

Hooker was dozing later, wrapped in the single blanket he had obtained from Gomez, when he heard the scream. Before the echo died he was on his feet and running toward the spot where he had left Elaine. He charged up the slope, drawing the revolver as he ran, to find Elaine kneeling, clutching a blanket to her breasts.

"What's the matter?" Hooker

yelled. "What's happened here?"

"He—he tried to . . ." The blonde girl put both hands to her mouth and shuddered on the edge of hysteria.

Hooker followed her eyes and saw the snake-thin Morales standing a few feet away. He was naked above the waist, and stood with thumbs hooked into his skintight jeans.

"Is that all?" Hooker said disgustedly, holstering his gun. "I thought it was something serious from the way you yelled." To Morales he said, "Buzz off, lover boy. The lady's not in the mood."

In the camp below, Gomez, the bandits, and Felice came out of their tents to watch the action. Creasey stayed inside, but his pale face could be seen looking out.

Morales bared his small teeth at Hooker and hissed, *"Bastardo!"*

"Who do you think you're dealing with, boy? You don't goad me into a fight by calling me names. Go prove your *machismo* somewhere else."

With a deliberate gesture of contempt, Hooker turned his back on the other man and started toward the tents. Then he heard the metallic click he was expecting. He spun and jumped to one side in a single motion, drawing the heavy revolver.

In an instant Elaine was in front of Hooker, clawing at the gun in his hand.

"Get out of the way!" he barked, but she continued to pull at the weapon. Over the top of the girl's head Hooker saw Morales move forward, the knife held low and ready. Roughly, the American released the gun and knocked Elaine aside. She fell to the ground, still clutching the barrel.

Morales darted forward. Hooker doubled his fist and started a roundhouse right. Morales raised his left arm to block the lumbering punch and lunged with the knife. In the split second that the other's eyes flicked up at the haymaker, Hooker chopped the hard edge of his left hand across Morales' forearm. While the thin man squealed in sudden pain, Hooker pivoted and kicked his heavy boot up between his legs with stunning force. Morales dropped like a puppet with cut strings and lay retching on the ground.

Hooker picked up the fallen knife, snapped the blade closed, and pocketed it. He stepped over to where Elaine crouched, biting at her knuckles. He said, "What the hell was the idea?"

"You were going to shoot him," she said in a small voice. "You would have killed him."

"You're damn right. He was coming at me with a knife."

"But you beat him, anyway. And you didn't need the gun."

"That was luck. The odds were all in his favor. He went for a sucker trick. It wouldn't happen again."

The bandits had walked up from the camp and formed a rough semicircle watching the fallen Morales. No one moved to help him. The gypsy-eyed Felice looked down at him and gave a short, sharp bark of laughter. Through the pain on Morales' face Hooker saw a flash of animal fury.

"I should have killed that one," Hooker said.

"There is too much violence and killing in the world," Elaine said. "You have no heart, John Hooker."

"I see I've been demoted. A few hours ago I was a nice man." He studied the smudge of gray in the east. "There's no use trying to sleep anymore tonight. Let's go make some coffee. And I'll take my gun back."

Elaine handed the revolver to him, shivering as she did so. She did not protest when Hooker peeled off his jacket and put it around her shoulders.

When there was light enough for them to start down the trail, Gomez hovered about like a fond uncle. "Are you sure you will not take one of my men with you?" he asked.

"No, thanks, Gomez," Hooker

answered. "I know the way."

"You will give the message to Señor Delgado, then, and there will be no trouble about the money?"

"I'll give him the message, and there will be no trouble."

"Bueno!" The big man rubbed his hands together as though he had the bills already stacked before him. "A safe journey to you, *amigo.*"

"Thanks. By the way, I don't see Morales around."

A cloud passed over Gomez' face. "He went away from the camp as soon as he could walk. I think you have made a bad enemy."

"If you see him before I do, tell him to stay out of my way. Next time there won't be a woman to stop me from killing him."

Gomez watched with anxious eyes as the tall American and the girl headed out of the camp.

Trouble came as they filed along the base of the cliff. Hooker's searching eyes caught the glint of sun on metal out on the canyon floor. He whirled and caught Elaine by the wrist. He threw her heavily to the ground and dropped beside her. Simultaneously, the crack of a rifle echoed through the canyon, and a spout of gravel exploded two feet in front of where they lay.

"Stay flat," Hooker ordered. He drew his revolver and aimed carefully at the spot where he had seen the shine of the rifle barrel. He pulled the trigger, and his muscles went rigid when the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Another shot from the rifle chipped the cliff behind them.

Hooker swore. "Woman, did you empty my gun?"

She answered with a strangled sob.

"There's a box of shells in my jacket pocket. Hand it up to me. Fast!"

Elaine's sobbing grew louder. "Oh, John, forgive me."

Hooker's blood froze. "You dumped my shells," he said in an almost matter-of-fact voice. The rifle crashed again and pellets of stone spattered his face. "Quit crying. We'll just have to think of something else."

Hooker scanned the face of the cliff behind them. Ten yards back the way they had come, wind or lightning had gouged a coffin-sized cavity. The entrance was cluttered with a jumble of broken rock. He said, "When I tell you to go, get up and run as fast and as low to the ground as you can, and dive into that hole back there."

Elaine opened her mouth to protest, but the rifle cracked again and Hooker snapped, "Go!" in her ear. The girl did as she was told, stumbling in behind the rocks as a bullet bit away a chunk of the cliff wall

only inches above the opening.

Hooker counted to five, then followed the girl. As he dived for the shallow pocket something socked into his right arm just below the shoulder. He tumbled into the small sheltered space beside Elaine and grabbed for his arm. His left hand came away red and wet.

"You're hit!" Elaine said.

"Hit, but not killed. I think it missed the bone."

"What are we going to do? We're in a trap here."

"Shut up and let me think."

From out on the floor of the canyon the voice of Morales came clearly to the huddled man and woman. "Hey, Mister Tough-Guy Hooker. Can you hear me? I think maybe I hit you that time, eh? How does it feel, big man?"

Two more rifle shots followed. One of the bullets found the entrance to the tiny cave and ricocheted back and forth, peppering the two inside with rock chips. Hooker put his mouth close to the girl's ear and said, "Next time he fires I want you to scream. Loud."

"I—I don't know if I can."

"You damn well better," Hooker growled.

When Morales fired again Hooker grabbed a handful of the firm flesh of Elaine's thigh and squeezed. She screamed, and Hooker immediately clamped a hand over her mouth. "That was just fine," he whispered as she glared at him.

"Hey, big man," Morales shouted. "What happened, did your girlfriend hurt herself? Come on out of there. Maybe I'll give you a chance to run."

"I can't come out, Morales. I'm hit." Hooker made his voice tight with pain. Elaine looked at him wide-eyed, and he motioned for her to be still. "The woman's hurt too."

"Then throw out your gun, big man. You're not so good with it out here, anyway."

Hooker twisted to look at the girl. "Open your blouse," he said.

"What?"

Reaching back, Hooker seized the soft blue shirt and hooked his fingers in the bra underneath. With a sudden yank he ripped away the material and exposed her firm white breasts.

"Now lie back there where he can see you when he walks in, and don't question me again." In a shout he said, "Okay, Morales. Here comes the gun." With his left hand he hurled the useless revolver out over the sheltering boulders and heard it thud on the sandy soil. He flattened himself against the side wall of their niche and waited. His good hand dipped into a pocket and closed around the handle of Morales' knife. He brought it out and

snapped open the four-inch blade, holding it pressed to his side.

"That's the way, big man," Morales taunted. "Now you just stay there and don't move nothing, and I'll come in and see what I'm going to do about you."

The seconds stretched interminably while the man and woman waited. By straining his ears Hooker could hear the cautious footsteps as Morales approached. He looked back at Elaine who lay as he had told her with her bared breasts moving gently, and nodded with approval.

A shadow fell across their hiding place and Hooker heard the sharp intake of Morales' breath as he saw Elaine. Hooker spun out from the wall and pumped his left hand in a short arc that drove the knife blade up under Morales' rib cage. With a thin cry Morales pitched forward on his rifle. His face smacked hard on the rock floor.

Hooker knelt and held his fingers to the fallen man's throat for several seconds, then he wiped the knife on Morales' shirt and returned it to his pocket. To Elaine he said, "You can button up now. Would you like to give me another lecture on violence before we head down the mountain?"

Elaine tied the tails of her ruined shirt together in front of her. "You'll get no more lectures from me, John Hooker," she said. "I promise."

Hooker grinned at her, and together they started down the trail. Overhead, vultures already spiraled in the sky.

Later—showered, shaved, and bandaged—Hooker sat in Delgado's somber office. A touch of color was provided by Elaine Creasey, who had changed to a light, flowered dress.

Delgado said, "I am sorry you had trouble, Señor Hooker, but I am glad to know you found Señor Creasey safe."

"Oh, he was safe, all right."

"Tell me, how much will the kidnappers settle for to release him?"

"You want to know the lowest figure you can get by with?"

Delgado looked quickly at Elaine. "As long as it does not jeopardize Señor Creasey's safety, of course."

"Then give them nothing," Hooker said.

"You mean the kidnappers are bluffing?" Delgado asked.

"I mean they're phony. I know that bunch, Delgado. They're small-time grifters, not kidnappers. They were acting their parts, and not very convincingly. I think when Creasey realizes nobody is going to pay to get him back, he'll fold up that comic opera and come home."

"Are you saying Señor Creasey arranged it himself?" Delgado asked.

Elaine sat forward on the couch, listening intently.

"That's what I'm saying," Hooker went on. "I will bet you that when the State Department people get here next week and have a look at the Foundation's books, they'll find thirty-some thousand dollars missing. That would have been covered by the ransom money, with enough left over to pay off Gomez and his traveling comedians."

Elaine spoke up, "But how could you know Lloyd wasn't really their prisoner?"

"That wasn't hard. He had his own tent, for one thing, while a bunch of the boys were crowded into another. And then there was Felice. That kind of goods is way beyond the price Gomez could pay. And Creasey didn't have that double sleeping bag in there because he was expecting his wife."

"Good old Hooker. You lay it right on the line, don't you?" Elaine said.

Hooker shrugged and said to Delgado, "If that's all, I think I'll take off. My arm hurts."

"You're sure Señor Creasey will be safe if we don't pay? Those people won't turn on him?"

"Don't worry about it. There was only one dangerous man in that bunch, and he won't trouble anybody again."

As he went down the steps of the Palacio Federal, Hooker turned at the click of heels behind him. He stopped and waited for Elaine Creasey to catch up with him.

"Are you going to take anything for your arm?" she said.

"I had whiskey in mind."

"Do you think that would help my injury too?"

"Your injury?"

"Don't you remember how you got me to scream?"

Hooker grinned down at her. "I think whiskey would be very good for that. Come on, I know a bartender who wants to be a doctor."

She slipped her hand into his good one, and they continued down the steps together.

While a regular course of procedure is rigorously prescribed by law, it is, of course, fallible man who must execute it.

REPEATED STORY

by Trevor Black

THEY BROUGHT him in. He was tough, defiant, not afraid; not-afraid of anything.

A thin kid, maybe nineteen or twenty, his black hair looked like it might have been trimmed at home and lay flat on his head, falling into his eyes in front. He had a habit of pushing the hair out of the way every twenty or thirty seconds. His clothes weren't new but they'd been taken care of—with pride.

The kid had a lot of pride.

Every human being has some physical characteristic that stands out. This boy was no different. His bright, sensitive brown eyes swept over me, paid little attention and went on, focusing on everything in the room, studying each corner, perhaps looking for windows; open windows. There weren't any.

Jarvis and Pauley came in behind the boy. Jarvis, always a heavy man, now seeding to fat, motioned to the single vacant chair in the room. No words were exchanged. The boy, head up, walked over and sat down.

It began. Like thousands of previous reenactments of the same rit-

ual, Jarvis and Pauley went through the motions. Jarvis sat on the edge of his desk, picked up some papers and pretended to read them. I knew he wasn't reading them because I'd done the same thing many times in the same room.

I sat back from my own desk, my report on the missing four-year-old girl forgotten. Still in the typewriter, it drooped down in front of me, reminding me I had work to do. I always have work to do, which is a common problem facing every police officer in this country. None of us ever get all of the work done, but we try. We do try.

Les Pauley, a cruel, hardened young man, twice suspended for acts of brutality, was now in the middle of his act. Slowly, leaning forward like a snake getting set to strike from the chair, Les reached for his cigarettes, tapped one out, carefully replaced the pack in his coat pocket and lit the cigarette in his mouth. All this time Les kept his eyes on the boy. It isn't as easy as it sounds.

The silent, waiting treatment is one of the most effective instruments in law enforcement. You bring in the suspect, tell him about his rights, take your time in filling out the routine reports and forms, stall on the phone call he's got coming and stall even longer before making any formal charges. If the suspect is guilty, he's often ready to tell you anything you want within minutes. He just wants to talk, to ease the silence. You can't blame him. No one wants to sit in an empty room with cracked walls, no air, and three policemen staring at you.

Jarvis suddenly lost interest in the papers he was holding; time to begin. He moved in his odd, stiff walk over to a wall and leaned against the plaster. He walks crookedly because three years ago a small hood with a big gun and very little sense threw three slugs into Jarvis' left leg. Jarvis fired back, killing the hood as he clutched the forty or fifty bucks from a liquor store heist.

Jarvis almost lost the leg. He used to pray every morning in his hospital bed, the sweat running down his heavy cheeks, making visitors, including myself, anxious to get out of the room. It could have been me in that bed. Jarvis, following complications and several bad nights, finally left the hospital with both legs, his prayers answered.

Jarvis opened his mouth. "What's your name again, son?" He knew the name, of course. He just wanted the boy to talk.

The kid wasn't having any. He just sat there, straight in the chair, his left hand pressed against the front of his blue shirt.

Les Pauley stirred. "You open up your mouth," he said deliberately, "or I'll come over there and do it for you."

It worked. Perhaps they can see the cruelty in Les' face. Someone once told me I have the same look. The boy said, "Robert. Robert Stevenson."

Jarvis shifted on his feet. He looked bored. He sounded bored. "How old are you again?"

"Twenty-one. Last month."

Which surprised me. He looked younger. The narrow face looked especially inexperienced, the bright eyes more than a little weak.

"Why were you running away from us, Robert?" Jarvis wanted to know.

"You scared me." The voice tried its best to sound mad. He didn't make it.

"Scared you? How did we scare you?"

"You just kept coming. You know. The headlights and all."

Les made a sound. His grin said he was real sorry the kid had been scared. I looked back at the boy. The man-boy. He was at his hair again, pushing it back from his eyes.

"We scared you, huh?" Les this time. His turn. "Have a reason to be scared? To run like that?"

"*No!*"

The answer came out too quickly. I wondered if they caught it; maybe Jarvis, but not Les. He was up and walking toward the boy.

No one said anything as he reached the boy in the chair. Les made a quick motion with his hand. I half rose from my own chair. Jarvis left his wall.

Robert, the suspect, almost crumbled. He flinched, sinking deeper into his chair. Les simply reached up, took the cigarette out of his mouth and grinned. "Little nervous, this one. I think he's lying."

Jarvis said, "I'll go on, Les."

Les shook his head. "No. He's mine!"

"Back off, Pauley." My voice was low but he could hear me. They all heard me.

Les turned. His smile was gone. "Butt out, Sam!" he warned me.

I got up. "No chance, Les," I said. "We need you around here too much. Lots of work. Tons of it. One more suspension and you're through. Finished."

"Who asked you?" Les was mad. He flicked the cigarette on the floor, scowling at me, wanting trouble.

"Do you need to beat someone up that bad, Les?"

I saw Jarvis move away from us. I couldn't blame him. He didn't want to get involved.

Les did, though. He wanted to

try me. Standing there, his fists clenched, I was reminded again of myself fifteen years ago, ready to take on anyone, any time.

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Les," I said, loud enough for him to hear but too soft for Jarvis to make out the words.

Reluctantly, Les backed up. He wasn't afraid of me. As a professional, he simply realized this wasn't the time or place. Looking at him, seeing the look he gave me, I understood that it wasn't finished, that someday he wouldn't give in. I'd have to fight him and beat him. I knew I could do it, which was the main difference between us. He just thought he could take me.

I *knew* I could take him.

My turn now. I got my own chair and dragged it over to the boy. This wouldn't take long. I could see that. When you know how to do it, when you've been doing this as long as I have, it's easy, really; too easy.

"Robert, I'm Lieutenant Morgan. I'd like to ask you some questions."

He met my eyes. *Odd. He's starting to sweat. Does the poor kid think I'm going to beat him up too?*

I told him I wasn't. "Just a few questions, Robert. All right?"

He nodded.

"Was there another reason you ran away from the police car? Don't lie to me, Robert."

What is it about him? Something's wrong! What is it, really?

"No. No other reason."

"You don't sound too sure about it."

I feel it! Something not right! Think. Function. Look at him. Not too hard; don't scare him. Keep the suspect talking.

"I'm sure."

Feet anxious. Shuffling. Normal. Just normal.

"Sir, I don't feel good. I . . . Could I—"

"In a minute. We'll be through in a minute, Robert."

Maybe we'll be through in a minute. Got to find whatever it is. He's sitting up straight enough. Face and head level with my own, eyes straight ahead, hand . . .

His hand! On the shirt. Clutching the shirt!

Hiding something!

"What's the matter with your hand, Robert?"

I had him. Just like that, one question and it was over. I felt nothing. I had him and it had been simple. Now to finish up.

"Take your hand off your shirt."

He looked quickly around the room. The eyes went wild and then he was talking rapidly, loudly. "No! You can't make me! *You can't! No!No!No!No!No!No!No!No!No!*"

I finally had to do it for him. I forced his hand down. Carefully, I unbuttoned the blue shirt, taking

my time. I pulled it back—and looked at the blood all over his T-shirt.

It wasn't his blood.

He'd picked the girl up at a drive-in. She'd been with someone else and she'd been bored. He talked her into leaving. When he suggested they take a drive she said no, but how about going to her place? Her father was gone. Her father was always gone.

They went to the house. She told him to take off his shirt and get comfortable. They watched television.

She became bored again. Mocked him, teased him, told him he didn't even know her real name. Said he was the creepiest thing *she'd* ever picked up at a drive-in. Insulted him, slapped him and told him to leave. He got mad (they'd had maybe three or four drinks) so he hit her—again and again and again.

When it was over, as she lay helpless, bleeding on her bedroom rug, he got his shirt back on and ran, away from the house, away from everything. He didn't know the address of the house and he didn't even know the girl's name.

She'd lied to him.

I listened to it all and felt nothing. I'd heard the same kind of story too many times and his face suddenly became a blur, mixing in with the other faces in the room.

Time to go away from this. Let the others try to find the girl, the house and the witnesses, if any. I checked out and drove home.

The house was dark. It was after two in the morning. I walked into the front room and frowned. Sarah, the best thing about a bad marriage and the only thing left from it, had left the television on again. I turned it off, reached to turn out the lights—and froze.

I saw the glasses; two glasses on the end table, and the bucket of watery ice.

I called out, "Sarah?"

No answer. I said it louder. Much louder. "*Sarah!*"

I stepped forward and pressed my hand against the partially opened door of my daughter's bedroom.

Trembling, I pushed the door all the way open.

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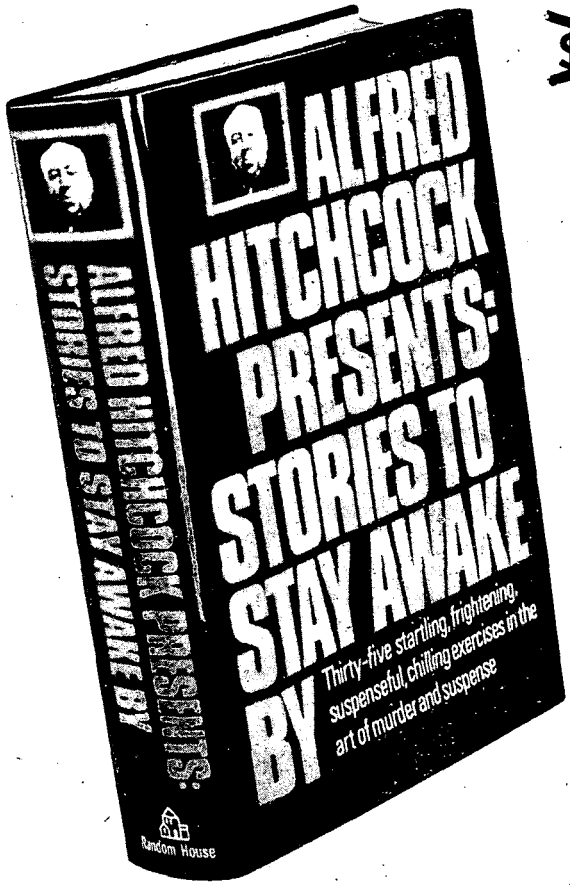

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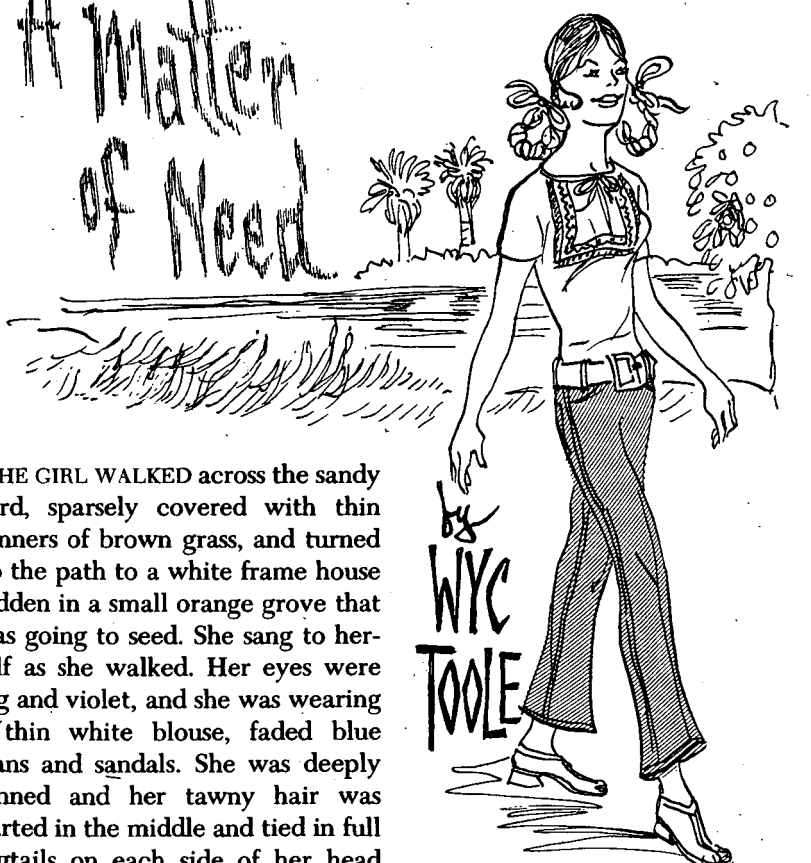


by WYC TOOLE

THE GIRL WALKED across the sandy yard, sparsely covered with thin runners of brown grass, and turned up the path to a white frame house hidden in a small orange grove that was going to seed. She sang to herself as she walked. Her eyes were big and violet, and she was wearing a thin white blouse, faded blue jeans and sandals. She was deeply tanned and her tawny hair was parted in the middle and tied in full pigtails on each side of her head

with pieces of bright yellow yarn. The morning sunlight that filtered through the tangled leaves of big oak trees made shifting patterns of light on her hair and face. It was still cool under the trees, but the sharp glare of the sun on the big lake behind her promised another blistering day.

The old man sitting barefooted in a rocker on the screened front porch of the white house watched the girl coming up the path and, for a moment, he smiled. Sometimes he found it hard to believe there was a girl so young and so happy and so beautiful that still came to see him. It was as if she belonged in another place and another time. Then thoughts of the real world crowded the smile off his face. He turned from her and watched a spider working its way carefully across a web after a trapped fly. He ignored the sound of her light step and the rusty squeal of the screen door as it opened and then slammed shut.

The girl stopped inside the door, hands on hips and her head tilted slightly to one side. A faint flicker of amusement played at the corners of her full mouth as she watched the old man deliberately acting as if only he and the spider existed in the world. Then, as she got a good look at him in the shadows of the porch, her smile faded and she pressed her lips together in anger. "Charlie Johnson! Just what do you think you're doing?"

The old man mumbled something unintelligible and returned her frown.

She stared back at him and snapped, "That's right! Sit there mumbling and barefooted like some old idiot cracker. See if I care! Darn you, Charlie, you haven't even put your teeth in this morning, let alone shave. I can hardly stand to look at you." She threw the last sentence at him as she stamped across the porch and into the house. In a moment, she returned carrying a glass half filled with water and the missing teeth. She thrust the glass at him and said, "Now you just fish those teeth right out of there and put 'em in your mouth. You hear me?"

The old man kept his eyes lowered as he stuck his fingers in the glass, pulled out the teeth and adjusted them in his mouth. Then he raised his head, looked directly into her eyes and said, "Hear ya! Hell, woman, they can hear ya all the way in town!"

"Don't you cuss at me, Charlie Johnson!" she said heatedly.

"I ain't cussing at you," the old man said sheepishly. "If I was, you'd have ya fingers stuck in ya ears by now." He glared.

"I know you're evil and mean. You don't have to convince me,"

she answered sharply. Then, as she looked anew at the old man in the chair, alone and defiant, her mood changed and she asked softly, "Have you eaten breakfast yet?"

"I don't want no breakfast!"

The girl smiled and walked behind his chair. She bent over and put her arms around his neck and rested her chin on his shoulder. Even sitting, the old man was so tall she only had to bend a little. She put her lips near his ear and whispered, "Well, you mean old man, I'm going to fix you some breakfast and you are going to eat it."

"Go ahead and waste time if ya want to, but I ain't gonna eat."

The girl rubbed her soft cheek against his rough white whiskers and said, "Ah, Charlie, you can't do this to yourself. What would Sarah say if she saw you sitting here like this?"

For a minute the old man's face softened. He sat very still, feeling the warmth of her cheek against his. Then he sniffed and rubbed his nose with a big calloused finger and said hoarsely, "Now, why you want to go and say a thing like that? Here I am, a sick ole man with not one damn thing to live for, and you come flouncing in all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, saying stuff to make me feel bad."

The girl tightened her arms around his neck. "That's not true and you know it. Talking about Sarah is a good thing and I promised her I'd watch after you and that's exactly what I intend to do, no matter what. So don't you talk that way anymore. You've got a lot to live for and you know it."

"No, I don't know it," he said quietly.

The girl squeezed his neck again and said firmly, "Well, you do. So just hush about it . . . and you ain't sick either." She smiled. "And when I get to heaven, I surely don't want Sarah fussing with me about you sitting down here barefooted, needing a shave, with no teeth in and not eating breakfast. So you come on." She straightened up quickly, patted him on the head and walked toward the kitchen.

The old man got up and followed her. He sat down at the small kitchen table and watched her poking about in the refrigerator. He had always wanted a daughter, but not even in his best dreams had he imagined one as fine as Jan. His eyes followed her moving about the kitchen, cooking and chatting away without caring if he were listening or not. She reminded him of Sarah, and he was almost content. Lately, it seemed to him that Jan and her husband, Sam, had always lived in the small house next door; the only neighbors for miles. He felt so close to them that it was hard to believe

they had moved in only a year before Sarah died . . . and she had been gone just six months.

His mind moved on, roving over things past, and he was lost in thought when Jan pushed an appetizing plate of eggs and bacon in front of him. The coffee smelled strong, pats of yellow butter melted on the hot toast, and his resolve not to eat faded completely away. As he tasted the good food, he decided that for a man who did not deserve much from life, he had been treated pretty well these past few years. Maybe God was telling him something . . . that he wasn't completely lost . . .

Jan noticed his smile and said, "You see? You get your teeth in and eat something solid and you feel—"

Charlie looked up. "Why don't you just hush, woman, and lemme eat. You are the talkin'est thing God ever made. I'm sure glad it's Sam you're married to."

Jan pretended to be angry, raised the big wooden spoon she was holding and shook it at him. "You better believe you're lucky, Charlie Johnson. I wouldn't put up with your foolishness for five minutes. You think you—"

"Jan, gal," he broke in laughing, "I believe you just naturally like to fight. If you wasn't so pretty, I'd throw you outa here so I could eat in peace."

Jan tilted her head and said seriously, "When you laugh like that, Charlie, you don't seem old at all. I bet you were a mighty good-looking young man."

"I had a couple of gals fancier than you who thought so."

"I'm being serious," Jan insisted.

"Me, too," Charlie grinned.

"You are not. You're trying to make me jealous and it won't work." She thrust her head forward and wrinkled her nose at him. "So there." Suddenly she asked, "What kind of person were you, Charlie? Sometimes your eyes get very cold and that hideous accent disappears. I don't believe you're from around here at all. Sam and I were talking the other night about how little we know about you. What kind of work did you do? Were you a good man? Would I have liked you?"

Charlie bent his head and attacked the eggs. For a while he didn't say anything and the room was still. Then he took a sip of coffee and replied thoughtfully, "I don't really know, Jan. You might have. I wasn't the best man in the world—might even have been the worst for a few years—but, right or wrong, you might have liked me. Sarah did, and she knew."

"Knew what?" Jan asked when he paused.

"Oh, I'll tell you someday when we got more time. I guess we do

things sometimes we wish later we hadn't, but they're already done and you can't change 'em. Seems to me the big problem is that all our choices about the kind of life we lead are made when we're teenagers. Then as we get older, we do the best we can with the road our youth and inexperience took us down. Just takes some of us longer to switch roads than others, that's all."

Jan turned back to the stove and said quietly, "I don't understand everything you say, but I think I know what you mean. Maybe someday I'll tell you about me. That might be the real question. Would *you* have liked *me*?" Her mood changed quickly and she laughed and said, "Too bad we'll never know. I suspect it would have been interesting."

Charlie wiped his plate with a piece of toast, put it in his mouth and mumbled, "All this serious talking done ruined my appetite, and I thought you was in such a big rush to get going this morning. That's all I heard about yesterday—taking care of that young one. Go on and get that baby over here. He's better company than you."

They continued abusing each other happily until Jan left and walked across the yard to her house. In a short while she came out again balancing a baby on her left hip and a large bundle on her right. Charlie watched her through the kitchen window and thought what a fine woman she was—built for carrying kids and having them; heart as big as the lake. She and Sam were going to have a fine life. A little hard on them now, but that didn't hurt at the beginning. He wasn't certain, but the way she was starting to poke out in front probably meant he would have two babies to watch over soon. That is, if he was still around. Seemed as though the place got lonelier every day since Sarah died. Deep inside, he knew that having Jan and Sam next door was all that had kept him from taking a long swim in the lake one night and not coming back. Even with them there, the water still looked very inviting sometimes when the nights went on forever.

Being alone was no good. That was how he had spent most of his life until, very late, he had found Sarah and they had moved out here. After that he understood what he had been missing. Being alone was a form of death itself, and with Sarah gone he wasn't sure the few years he might have left were worth all the pain that rose out of his present emptiness. It was something to think on.

He had made out a new will, leaving everything to Jan, the closest person to family he had. Just go

swimming one night and let the kids enjoy themselves. He could imagine her face when she found out he owned all the land around the lake and how much money was in that bank in Orlando. It was something to consider real seriously.

When he went out on the porch, Jan was busy laying out all the equipment needed to support the baby. "You gonna be gone for a week?" he growled.

Jan shook her head at all she had brought and agreed, "Sure does look like it. But you'll be glad I brought all this stuff by the time I get back this afternoon. He's starting to eat like a young alligator."

"Mean as one, too. Takes after his ma. Don't you?" he asked the baby, bending over and rubbing the little boy's head.

"You go put your shoes on," Jan said to the old man as she moved toward the porch door, "and behave yourself while I'm gone. Probably be better with him looking after you."

She stopped at the door and Charlie walked over and took her hands in his. She looked up at his thick white hair and seamed tanned face, noticing how completely his hands engulfed hers and how much he towered over her. His shoulders were stooped, but there were still signs of power in his forearms and his eyes were a pale blue. He must have been something when he was younger, she realized, and her heart was sad.

This would be the only thing he would miss if he took that swim, Charlie mused. Yet even she added to the pain, being as far away as the moon.

Charlie shook his mind free of the terrible loneliness and said, "You run along and have a good time with Sam. You two don't get enough hours together as it is." He grinned broadly, let go of her hands and patted her stomach. "Or maybe you get too much time together, huh?"

Jan blushed. "I thought a man's eyes got bad when he was a million years old."

"I'm only a hundred and fifty, and they won't ever get so bad I can't tell when a pretty girl's in trouble." He winked.

Jan stuck her tongue out at him, turned, bounced down the steps, ran across the yard and drove off in a battered blue station wagon. Charlie watched the cloud of dust that marked the direction of the car until the light breeze carried it into the brush and the road was empty. He went back into the house, put on his shoes, came back on the porch and sat down beside the baby. It was getting hot, and he could feel drops of perspiration

running down his body under the shirt. He spoke meaningless words to the baby and let the child play with one of his big fingers until the little boy fell asleep. Then he sat in his rocker and stared out at the smooth waters of the lake and thought.

He must have dozed, because he had a confused sense of the passage of time and he heard the car before he looked up and saw it parked in front of his house. It struck him as strange that as soon as his eyes focused on it he had an immediate reaction of wariness and distrust. Strange, because the car was vaguely familiar to him without any true feeling of recognition. It was a black sedan with a pronounced lack of chrome, and the sound of the engine was too big for the car itself. He rose from his chair and moved quietly toward the screen door, like an old fox that has led a long life by dodging hunters and traps. He stopped a few feet from the screen, knowing he could not be seen from the car. The light breeze blew hot on his face and for a moment he felt dizzy and the car blurred. He took a deep breath and the feeling passed and the car came back into focus.

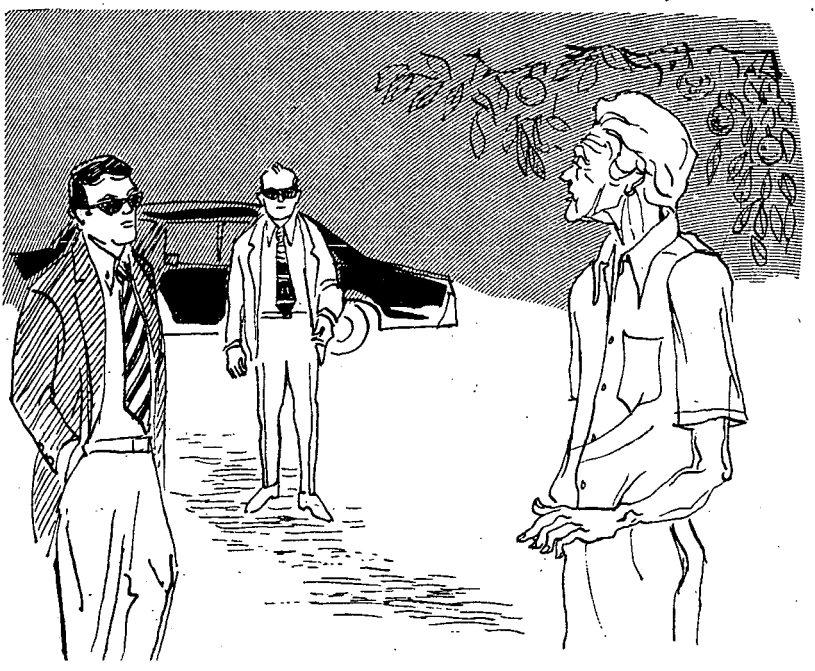
There were two men in it. They were discussing something heatedly, but he could not hear the words. Finally, the driver got out, looked around and started walking up the path. He was a man in his late twenties or early thirties; short, broad and solid, and even in this heat he wore a dark sport coat and gray slacks. He was hatless, and his hair was thick, black and cut very short. His face was hard to distinguish because he wore large sunglasses. Charlie did not recognize the man, but the walk and the way his coat was cut around the shoulders stirred a lot of old memories.

Charlie moved silently to the door, opened it carefully and stepped out into the bright sunlight. The heat fell on his shoulders like heavy hands. He eased the door closed so as not to wake the baby and started walking down the path to meet the man. As he walked, he stooped a bit more than usual and shuffled his feet unsteadily. The walk added another ten years to the large number he already carried.

"Morning," he said to the man. "Whatcha need?"

The man stopped a few feet from him and smiled without warmth. "Not a thing, dad. Just looking for somebody that lives around here."

Despite the heat, Charlie felt a cold spot growing in the small of his back. The three boats he could see on the lake were far away—too far away. He suddenly realized he should not have left the house with-



out a gun, but it was done now. He was careless and the heat was making him feel tired. "Not many folks live 'round here. Who you want?"

Charlie waited for the man to give him a name from out of an almost forgotten past, but to his surprise the man replied, "Mrs. Semmes—Jan Semmes. I was a friend of hers in Miami. She live here?"

The old man tried to see through the dark sunglasses, failed and made a decision. "Don't know any Semmes."

"That's strange," the man said evenly, "because down the road they said she lived up this way. A little girl, blonde, built real good, but maybe you don't notice things like that anymore, dad."

Charlie was beginning to dislike the man intensely.

"She's got to live in one of these two houses," the man said.

As Charlie was deciding what to say next, the car door opened and the second man got out. He moved slowly up the dirt path, his head to one side, looking intently at the old man's face. Charlie watched him

come. He recognized this one, but was unable to come up with a name. He silently cursed himself.

The man stopped in front of Charlie and said, "Dan Hedron! You're supposed to be dead! Hell, you must be a hundred years old!"

The old man started to speak, made another decision and said in a weak voice, "You got good eyes and a better memory. I don't do so well anymore. Help me out."

"You are getting old, Dan. You never forgot a face or a name. I'm Harry Worstam." The name registered and the hair moved on the back of the old man's neck. "You should remember me—New York and once in Chicago."

"Yeah, I remember you. It was a long time ago," the old man agreed.

"You know this old buzzard, Harry?" the short man asked.

Harry nodded his head in wonder. "Yeah, I know him, Tom. You're a little young, but right in front of you is what's left of the best in the business."

"You gotta be putting me on," Tom replied, looking the old man up and down with contempt.

"No, he's Dan Hedron. I only saw him three times, but I never forgot him. The best in the country in his day. Worked only high-priced jobs; on his own, a real loner. Had everybody scared of him. When nobody else could get to a man, he could. And those were rough times," he said admiringly. "One day in the early fifties, he disappeared. He was supposed to be about fifty then and the word was he just got old and slow and somebody took him. I was a kid almost, running errands for Bill Bondy. You remember Bill, don't you, Dan? Hell, you were my hero," Harry said, reaching out and patting the old man on the shoulder.

Charlie heard Worstam's words, but his mind was busy elsewhere. Jan was in trouble. These men were a cleanup detail. They hadn't come to warn or frighten, but to kill. He shook his head to clear away the waves of dizziness. He had no idea how long he had slept. Jan could be returning any time. He had to get the men into the house where he could maneuver. It had been a long time since his mind had worked on such problems, but he already knew what he had to do. The harsh sound of Tom's voice brought him back to the yard.

"Well, that's right exciting, Harry," the stocky man said impatiently. "And maybe when you finish playing old-home-week you can ask your hero about the Semmes dame so we can get done and bail out of here. This damn hot place doesn't show me much."

The old man grinned at Harry and said, "This your boss? I thought

you'd be doing better after all these years. I was gonna ask you in for a beer, but I see you got a real pistol twisting your tail. How high you supposed to jump when he hollers?"

He watched Harry stiffen with anger and say coldly to his partner, "Shut up, Tom. When I want you to talk I'll tell you. You just do what you're told." He turned back to Charlie and shrugged. "Cheap guns. All mouth. Let's go get a beer." He started toward the house, studiously ignoring the stocky man. Charlie limped along beside him. Tom hesitated and then took up the rear. "Where is that Semmes gal, anyway?" Harry continued.

Charlie pointed with his thumb. "Lives next door, but she's out for a while. You got plenty of time. What's she done to get you on her? Seems like a nice kid."

Harry shook his head and replied, "Not me, Dan. Saw her once or twice, but she's nothing to me. You remember George Hefer—used to call him Big George because he was so damn small?"

Charlie nodded.

"Well, he really is 'Big' George now. I work for him. He runs a lot of stuff around Miami and Lauderdale. Best I can gather, George saw her dancing in a show over on the beach and got all fired up. Took her out one night and somehow during the evening she saw something she shouldn't have. She was smart enough to get out and start running, but George is real careful about loose ends these days. Image thing, you know. So he put out a call on her. Been looking for almost two years now. He thinks it's that important. She really ran a crooked trail, but we got a lead in Tallahassee and here we are. Don't want to cause you any trouble, Dan, but that lake out there looks like a good place to handle it. A boat accident shouldn't stir up the police too much."

The three men went up the steps and onto the front porch. The sight of the sleeping baby brought Harry to a halt. "What in hell is this, Dan? You got a baby?" he asked.

"Not mine," Charlie replied. "Belongs to that Semmes gal. Just watching it for her."

Harry said, "That's too bad; really too bad she's got a kid."

"Pregnant too, Harry. You got a lot of killing to do."

Harry swore. "That damn stupid female should have known better. She knew George was after her."

"Person's got to hope and live," Charlie growled. He bent over and picked up the baby. "I'll put him back in the bedroom and get some beer."

The old man was gone for several minutes. When he shuffled back to the porch carrying three bottles, he

heard Tom laughing and saying, "You two sound like a couple of old ladies." Tom looked at Charlie and, taking the beer, asked, "You ever worry about kids when you were working?"

Charlie hesitated and his eyes seemed more pale and icy. "The ones I killed were too mean even to have mothers. I never went in for old men, girls and kids."

Tom grinned. "You're still pretty sharp, dad. I figured a nice boat accident with the three of you would solve a lot of problems. Seems like you got the same picture."

Harry glared at Tom and said sharply, "That's not very funny."

Tom glared back at him and snapped, "I didn't mean it to be funny. Your old buddy here got the picture quick enough and you say he was the best. How do you plan to handle him?"

"We don't have to worry about Dan. He knows there's nothing personal in this. You just take care of the girl. That's what we came for. He's no problem. Are you, Dan?"

The old man looked up at Harry and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Before he could answer, Tom broke in. "He's a problem, all right. You aren't using your eyes, Harry. Look at him. He likes that female. Don't you, dad?"

Harry asked, "Dan?"

The old man took a long swallow out of the bottle without taking his eyes off the men. Then he set the bottle on the table and stuck his hands in the side pockets of the old jacket he was wearing. He hunched his shoulders and leaned back in the chair.

"Harry," he said thoughtfully, "there was a time when nobody walked in my territory, and even though a lot of time has passed and they call me Charlie now, things haven't changed all that much. This is my place and you ain't gonna dirty it. Now, the best thing for you to do is finish your beer, get back in your car and go tell George I don't want anybody else messing around out here. That gal ain't gonna bother him, if he don't bother her. And I won't cause any trouble either, if he lets us be."

Tom exploded. "Do we have to sit here and listen to this old fool ramble on?" He jumped up and shouted, "Get realistic, you old idiot. You can hardly walk, let alone cause anybody trouble."

Charlie ignored the outburst and said to Harry, "And you be real persuasive with George, because if he don't believe you and he bothers Jan again—I'm gonna kill him and then you. Understand what I say?"

"I don't care who he was or what you say, Harry," Tom said. "I'm going to—"

Charlie shot him twice without

taking the gun from the right-hand pocket of his coat. For a moment, Tom's face showed that he did not believe what had happened. By the time he did, he was already dead.

In the bedroom, the baby began to cry. Harry's eyes were wide and frightened and he said in disbelief, "You killed him."

Charlie shifted his position slightly so the pocket with the smoking hole in it was pointed at Harry. He stuck out a big foot and prodded Tom's body, then nodded in agreement. "Sure did. Looks like one shot was enough, too. Always was cautious. Good to know I haven't changed in that way."

"You're crazy," Harry said. "You know that? You're crazy! Do you think you can get away with this?"

"Bet Tom thinks so." Charlie grinned without mirth. His eyes narrowed as he leaned forward in his chair. "Now, Harry, you listen good and don't miss my point. I killed that idiot because I wanted you to know I was serious. You weren't paying any attention before. Also, I didn't like him and his big mouth. Since I don't like you any better, you got any idea why I ain't killed you yet?"

Harry shook his head nervously, his hands flat on the arms of his chair. He was trying to speak, but his throat was too dry.

"The only reason I ain't shot you is because I want you to deliver my message to George, like I told you. And you better make him listen, because when I'm a hundred and five and only got one eye, you still don't have a man that can take me out here. So, anybody comes, they go back like Tom, here, and then I'll be after George. And he better hope Jan's the healthiest gal in Florida, because if she even dies of pneumonia I'll probably decide he had something to do with it. There won't be no place he can hide, because if I can't get there I'll put a price on him so high his brother would kill him to collect. You got all that straight?"

Harry nodded frantically.

"Then you take your garbage and get out of here," Charlie said evenly.

"What will I do with him?"

"I don't really care, Harry. You brought him. You take him. And of course I'd be mighty upset if the police ever came out this way. No telling what I might do to you. Don't let my age fool you none. I may have a few extra years to carry around, but they taught me enough to make up for a little speed. You convinced, or do I have to shoot you a little to get the idea through your head?"

Harry was already dragging Tom's body out the door. "I'll tell him, Dan. I'll tell him. But what if

George won't listen?" he asked.

"Just show him Tom and tell him I plan to live longer than he does."

The screen door slammed and Charlie went in to soothe the baby. The child stopped crying in time for Charlie to hear the car drive away. "Well, young man, been a full morning. Hope I got that settled. Just have to keep our eyes open and watch your mother real close for a while." The baby laughed and Charlie gave him a bottle to chew on.

It was late afternoon when the station wagon pulled into the drive next door. Charlie could hear Jan and Sam laughing as the car doors slammed and they started across the yard. He stood up stiffly from the bush he was clipping and pushed the big straw hat to the back of his head. "It sure is nice to have rich neighbors who run 'round having fun all day while some of us work," he yelled at them.

Jan ran ahead of Sam and threw her arms around Charlie. "We have a kind friend that takes care of us," she explained happily. "And we did have fun, Charlie. Thank you," she said, hugging him tighter.

"That's right, woman," Charlie said, loud enough for Sam to hear. "Keep on, till your husband gets mad enough to shoot me. I don't know what I ever did bad enough to get saddled with you."

Jan started to answer, and then looked down at the ground. "What in all manner of heaven are you doing here, Charlie?"

"Digging a flower bed, if it's any of your business. Lord knows, if a man has to live forever in this hot sandy place, he can at least have a few flowers."

"And you shaved!" Jan said happily, reaching up and rubbing her hand over his lined face. Her eyes became serious and she said softly, "It's good to have you back again, Charlie, because I sure need you."

"Yeah," Charlie said, rubbing his nose. "I guess you do at that, little girl."

It might be wise to remember that not all signs point in the right direction.

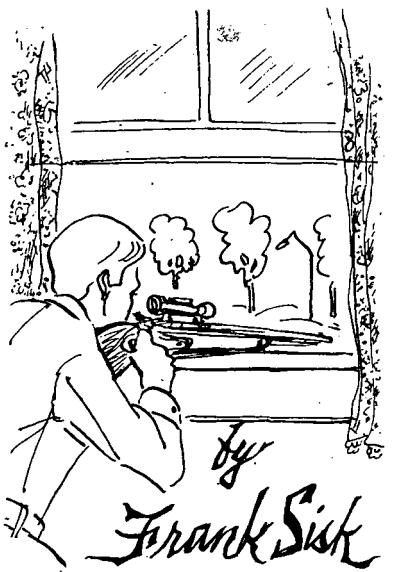
A Marksman in the Making

HE WAS SUSPECTED of strange things. He was continually under surveillance. His actions were therefore curtailed, his innate ability often aborted. An absurd situation. And yet . . .

He now had in his possession, unbeknown to anyone inside this house or outside it, a long-forgotten rifle rediscovered a week ago in the bottom of a steamer trunk, the Buffalo Bill Special. It was "an exact replica in every detail," stated the legend on the beat-up box it had been packed in, "of the weapon used before the turn of the century to bring down big game in the timber country of the Great Northwest." Moose. Elk. Caribou. And of course bison. It was equipped with a fair scope.

He would have preferred his fa-

ther's bolt-action Winchester with the recoil pad in the stock, but that lovely piece was rusting away in some obscure cabinet in the cellar, and he hadn't been allowed down there in weeks. Months? *Years?* His father had never objected to his



having free access to all parts of the house. It was his mother. His father had simply shrugged his thin shoulders and then gone away to a hospital that specialized in the treatment of mitral stenosis. Or was it mittelschmerz? His father had faded away, taking refuge in death. Later (a month? a semester?), his mother and Uncle Randolph had come for him at Amherst and driven him back home, with all the windows in the car rolled up, and there had begun a series of visits with Dr. Faircloth and colleagues. At this same time, through a series of imperceptible procedures, his area of movement was steadily narrowed until presently he was a virtual prisoner *here* in an upstairs wing of the house.

But there were compensations. Within himself a slow transformation occurred, and finally he ceased being George. Or, as his mother still persisted in calling him, Georgie. Now he was none other than G. Fulton Curry. Esquire or Mister, take your choice. Or, better still, GFC. Yes, the initials were rather nice and lent themselves to easy headline writing—fame's supreme accolade, really.

GFC, True Marksman, Kills New Governor

Standing at the second-story window, the rifle in the parade-rest position, GFC gazed down on the throng lining either side of the boulevard for a view of the inaugural procession. Fools, insects, tools of inconsequentiality.

In another moment the cry of the fifes and the rattle of the drums could be heard advancing from a near distance.

GFC opened his window wide and sat on a footstool.

He knew from assiduous newspaper reading that the Eagleville Fife and Drum Corps was to lead

the parade. It would be followed by a contingent of state police. Then would come two companies of the National Guard, a few troops of Boy Scouts, and a Red Cross unit with a bloodmobile. The famous Colonial Foot Guard would come next, immediately preceding the inaugural limousine, which would be open to the crowd's popeyed curiosity. Top-hatted and swallowtail-coated, the outgoing and incoming governors would be riding side by side in the back seat. Vultures of the same plumage, they would be flanked by a squad of cops on motorcycles.

GFC leaned the barrel of his rifle on the windowsill and waited—and watched. It was good to be the watcher for a change instead of the watched.

Pretty soon the Eagleville Fife and Drum Corps marched into view under the window. They were playing *Rifleman at Bennington* or something that sounded a good deal like it. A scattering of applause emanated from the birdbrain automatons.

As the state police, immaculate in gray sombrero-like hats and leather puttees, hove into view, GFC began to make preparations. With his right knee on the footstool, he moved the dull barrel of the Buffalo Bill Special to the corner of the windowsill. Then he looked through the scope sight at the special poplar tree trunk one hundred yards away across the boulevard. Dot, cross hair, post when aligned with the center of the tree trunk about four feet up from the pavement assured him, if his week-long calculations were right, of a good shot at the incoming governor's head as it passed the trajectory in a car traveling ten mph. For it was the *incoming*, not the *outgoing*, governor who was his target. He had little use for either. If time had permitted, he wouldn't mind killing both, but as things were, he had just about a second—and not a fraction more—to get off a shot that would strike the moving target in the vicinity of the right ear. Therefore, as a rational man, he had decided to shoot the incoming governor in order to stop future corruption, and to pass up the outgoing governor who would no longer be in a position to dirty the days ahead. Moreover, as GFC, the son of his dead father, now a grown man, he had a personal score to settle with this gubernatorial designate. As mayor of the capital city weeks (months, years) ago, the so-called incoming governor had failed to appoint his father to the Parks and Gardens Commission, even though accepting a large campaign contribution. Dad had taken it badly, very badly . . .

The Colonial Foot Guard was here at last, and here came the inaugural limousine with its uniformed outriders.

GFC applied his right cheek to the cold stock of the big-game gun and, holding it steady against the right angle of the windowsill, he sighted coolly through the 3x-magnification scope. Soon the great hood of the limousine loomed up at him, then came the flash of the windshield, instantly eclipsed by the gigantic head and shoulders of the driver. And now, right now . . .

The instant before he pulled the trigger a tiny misgiving ran swiftly over the back of his mind. It was not a misgiving about killing; it was a misgiving about not doing as good a job with this rifle as he might have done with his father's Winchester locked away in the cellar.

An hour later, when Mrs. Curry and her brother Randolph unlocked the door to take Georgie downstairs for lunch, they found him sitting on the footstool with a toy rifle in his lap. Huge sobs were racking his chest and tears were streaming down his unshaven face.

"Astonishing," Mrs. Curry said. "This is the first time he has cried since his father died."

"Well, that's a sign of something Faircloth has been looking for," Randolph said. "Where in the world did he find that silly toy?"

"In his closet probably," Mrs. Curry said. "You know, Randy, I really think we should give him a bit more freedom."

"I don't suppose it will do much harm to try it for a few days."

"Come on, Georgie," Mrs. Curry said. "Lunch is waiting."

Dear Fans:

It is always a pleasure to welcome new members into the ALFRED HITCHCOCK FAN CLUB, and it is very rewarding to hear from our enthusiastic and loyal present members.

Membership dues are one dollar. (Please do not send stamps.) Fan Club members will receive an autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news issued four times a year. All mail should be addressed to:

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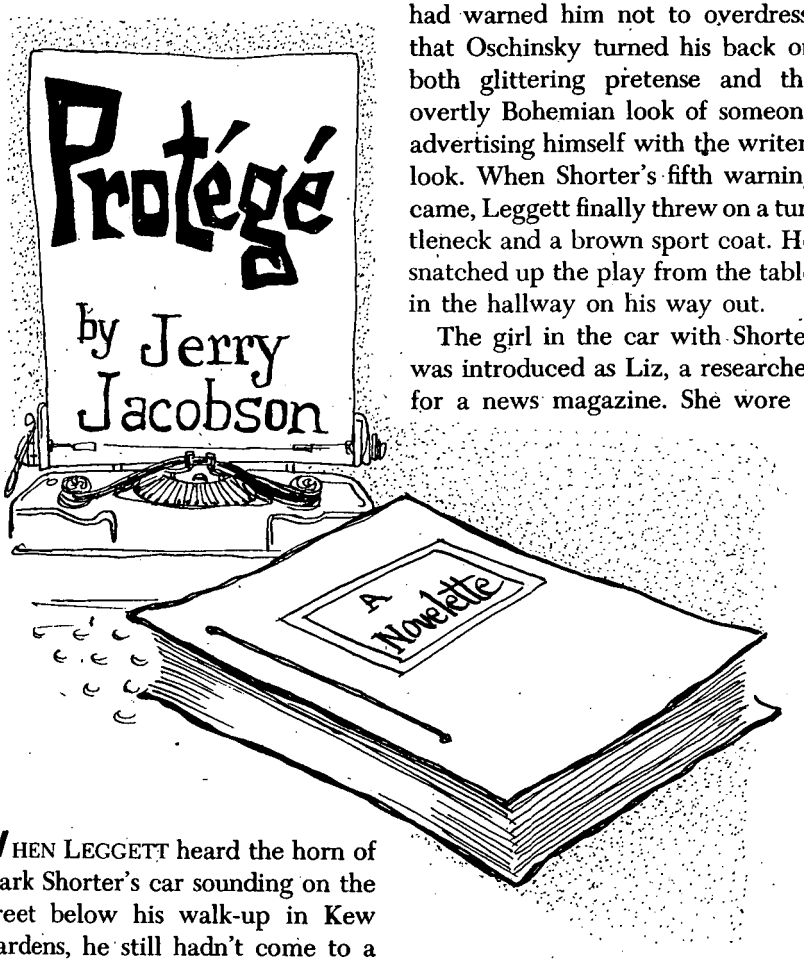
I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

The writer, that most jealous breed of man, must take risks and discount death if he would "play the game (of life) with imagination and verve."



WHEN LEGGETT heard the horn of Mark Shorter's car sounding on the street below his walk-up in Kew Gardens, he still hadn't come to a decision about what would best complement tweed slacks. Shorter had warned him not to overdress, that Oschinsky turned his back on both glittering pretense and the overtly Bohemian look of someone advertising himself with the writer-look. When Shorter's fifth warning came, Leggett finally threw on a turtleneck and a brown sport coat. He snatched up the play from the table in the hallway on his way out.

The girl in the car with Shorter was introduced as Liz, a researcher for a news magazine. She wore a

knit mini-dress and most of the neck beads in New York City and commented she felt comfortable around mystery writers because at Bennington she'd once written one herself about a classmate who'd thrown herself out of a sixth-floor dorm window. Subsequently, twelve editors rejected her novel because, they said, it lacked the ring of truth.

They were halfway into Manhattan before Shorter laid the ground rules. Shorter's own play had opened off-Broadway the previous week and looked as though it would survive for a healthy run. He was entitled.

"First, don't tear up to him advertising it like some vacuum-cleaner salesman from Medford, Oregon. Simply, it is a play and you'd like him to read it."

Leggett said he understood.

"And if he asks you what it's about, tell him in twenty-five words or less. The more you undersell it, the more curious he'll become."

"I'll remember."

Shorter swung them into Park Avenue. Leggett's heart always kicked itself up a few notches when he was in this part of the city. He could almost smell the celebrities and the diamonds and the champagne and the promise.

"Another thing. Don't walk around all night with the damned thing jammed under your arm like a copy of *The Times*. Give it to a maid. Put it under a couch cushion. Stash it in an umbrella stand. But don't be bush."

"Don't be bush. Got it. What if I just stood up on a table, cleared my throat and started to read?"

"And something else," Shorter said, ignoring Leggett's flippancy, "you've got a mystery play. Right now, they're out of cycle. We've got the war, and we've got nuts in all shapes and sizes hurling things with fuses into R.O.T.C. buildings. We've got a damn revolutionary on every street corner."

"In other words, the world is in its Grim Period," Leggett said, "and what the world needs now, is love, sweet love."

"Leggett, don't misunderstand me. It's a damn good play. I wouldn't be sticking my tender neck way out with Oschinsky if it weren't. All I'm saying is, the timing is rotten, but that you might not get another chance like this for a number of moons, possibly never again in your life. Just keep the pitch to him short, sweet, and mildly apologetic."

Leggett said, "Lots of self-abasement. Maybe I should have worn my sackcloth suit and ash-colored tie."

"Very wry," said Mark Shorter as he pulled them up to the curb in

front of Oschinsky's grand place.

The ninth floor apartment of Carl Oschinsky occupied a full half-floor. The foyer was a crush of guests, hinting that the livingroom would be just as crowded. Moving through them, clutching the valuable script, Leggett noted that few of them were Oschinsky's age, though at sixty it may have been just a case of outliving his contemporaries and cronies.

In the livingroom, the three of them decided to separate and circulate. Mark Shorter told Leggett to have a drink to get some of his nervous kinks untied and not to be afraid to introduce himself to Oschinsky. Shorter said he had already mentioned Leggett to him.

"Remember, the soft sell."

Oschinsky's guests were clustered in small, conversational knots, gatherings which every few minutes added new faces and voices, shedding those that were either filled with talk and gossip, or emptied of the same. Leggett picked his way around the edges, picking up fragments of conversation while he looked for his host.

"But, darling, you ought to know why she's in his film! At his place after work, they run lines. The kind you read in those jokes in men's magazines."

"When was the last time his company created a new market? All I smell is a tired industry, a tired stock and a full-fledged turkey. And now he wants me to put money into a play? Forget it."

"I *know* he's seeing her. The trick of it is to *catch the rat seeing her.*"

The more Leggett wandered these small circles, the more outside them he felt. He was developing a headache. Through the day's tense ordeal of getting his script into last-minute shape, he'd put off eating.

Then, at precisely the moment he was entertaining a thought to leave and mail the script to Oschinsky, a set of strong fingers alighted on his left shoulder. When Leggett turned, he found himself looking into the angular, ageless, legendary face itself. Carl Oschinsky was a big man, six-three, Leggett judged. He caught a whiff of cologne, an expensive smell that was applied too generously.

"Mark Shorter tells me you're a young man I ought to meet," Oschinsky said. "I'm Carl Oschinsky, the old softie who's plunged for this freeloader's free-for-all."

"I'm Leggett Wilson, Mr. Oschinsky." He still had the manuscript in his hand and tried to hide it behind him until the proper moment for its presentation. "It's kind of you to come through this crowd to see me."

"I try never to make unnecessary trips, Mr. Wilson, and the necessity


DEAC

of this one shouldn't be difficult for you to decipher. Your friend, Mark Shorter, seems to think you've written quite a good little drama for the stage."

"Well, I've written a play, sir," Leggett said awkwardly, "but its value is still unknown, at least by everyone but me."

"Don't eliminate Mr. Shorter. We must consider his professional opinion a bit more seriously now that he has a hit play himself. What's yours about?"

Twenty-five words or less, Leggett reminded himself. He tried to form a rough draft in his mind before he spoke. "It's a suspense drama in three acts, sir, about a small town of occultists and the powers they work on two new families who have moved in. It's called *The Disbelievers.*" Twenty-nine words, not counting two contractions. Shorter would have been proud of how close he had come to filling his promise of brevity.

"A suspense drama." Oschinsky's heavy black brows were wrinkling negatively. "Very bad time for heavy drama, Wilson. We find ourselves hitting these cycles every so often. They come and go like the tides."

"Yes, I know," Leggett said. "Perhaps I'd better just hang onto it, then, until the world brightens again and fright and horror are somewhat palatable once more."

"Don't look so defeated, Mr. Wilson. I said they were out of vogue, not banned for eternity." Oschinsky gestured at Leggett's side. "That it there?"

"Yes, sir. It is."

"Well, there's no need for it to draw dust while we're waiting for the tide to turn. With your permission, Mr. Wilson, I'll lock it up in my library. When I get a little free time, I'll take a run through it and then we can see just what you've got."

"That's very generous of you, sir."

"There is less generosity involved than selfishness on my part," Oschinsky said. "If this play of yours turns out to be as good as Mark Shorter says it is, then I'll get all the credit for discovering the work and its author. All causes are then advanced, Mr. Wilson—art's, yours and mine. You know, your friend Mr. Shorter rarely goes to these lengths to praise another writer. When you're young, with only one hit play under your belt, it's very difficult to show benevolence toward another writer. We're still the most jealous breed of man God has ever devised."

"Yes, sir."

"You have a solid friend there. I hope you appreciate him."

"If our positions were reversed,"

Leggett said in all honesty, "I'd do the same for him."

"Let's hope just a small portion of Mr. Shorter's praise is justified," Oschinsky said. "Now, why don't you avail yourself of the buffet while I put this in my library? You look lean and hungry, Mr. Wilson."

Leggett said, "Yes, I could use a little food."

Carl Oschinsky, Leggett's script in hand, turned to go away. Then he turned back.

"There was a young woman who came with Mr. Shorter," he said.

"Her name is Liz. I don't know her last name. Mark said she's a researcher for a news magazine."

"That explains a number of things, then."

"Sir?"

"She's in my library, copying down every title on my shelves, and noting every stick of furniture in the place."

"She's a bit inquisitive," Leggett said needlessly. "I'll bring her back to the party if you like, sir."

Oschinsky chuckled amusedly. "No, no. Don't do that. I wouldn't want to discourage my chances to be a subsequent cover story. But you might take her a plate of food. It looks as though our little mad researcher is going to be at it most of the night."

It took a superhuman effort on Leggett's part the next few weeks to keep from calling Oschinsky to find out about his play. On two occasions, he even tried the oblique approach by calling Mark Shorter in an attempt to field any lateral comments Oschinsky might have let slip, but Shorter's phone wasn't being answered. He and Liz had probably slipped out of town for a short vacation. After the hectic business of getting his play written, backed and produced—and then nursing and suffering through its first few critical weeks—Leggett couldn't really blame him for wanting to get away for a while to unwind, but Shorter's absence put Leggett high and dry about his play. Calling Oschinsky himself was presumptuously out.

November swept across New York, bringing unexpected icy winds from the Canadian border. Like children waiting for winter's first snow, Leggett grew increasingly restless over Oschinsky's continuing silence. He had almost reached the point of accepting the disheartening fact that his play had already been read by the master and put aside with a hundred other tepid efforts thrust upon him by other well-intentioned friends and relatives. There it would lie until Leggett drew up the nerve to claim the corpse.

It was a Saturday morning, and

to work off his frustrations Leggett left his apartment, intending to take the long walk into Manhattan. Along the way, he would reason it all out to himself and if he still felt frustration by the time he reached Park Avenue, protocol be damned; he would visit Oschinsky to learn the worst.

He was on Lexington Avenue, a scant six blocks from Shorter's apartment, which he shared with Liz, and immediately got the impulse to check in to see if Shorter were back; but the impulse was stifled when a black sedan pulled up alongside him. Its driver was Carl Oschinsky, bedecked in a black turtleneck sweater and black beret. He motioned Leggett over, as the window on the passenger side went electrically down.

"I was just on my way to your place, Wilson. I passed you once, recognized you and swung back. Get in."

Leggett opened the door and slid onto the plush, polished leather. Between them on the seat was a familiar-looking manila envelope.

"Your play," Oschinsky said as they rode off. "I was going to drop it off to you."

"You've read it?"

"Read and completely digested, Wilson."

"And?"

"Plenty of time to talk about it. Anything that has taken a long time to do shouldn't be critiqued hastily—and you needn't look so grim about it. You're not the first young man to take a fling at serious playwriting and you won't be the last. We'll have a little brandy at my place and discuss it together. That is, if you're up to it."

"Why shouldn't I be up to it?" Leggett found himself saying, a bit too testily for comfort. He tried to soften his tone. "When you've waited for something as many weeks as I have, there's no time like the present."

As he drove, Oschinsky shot him a censuring look, the kind of look one reserves for someone who rips the wings from flies.

Oschinsky's apartment showed all the signs that another party had taken place the previous evening. To get out of the debris, and out of the line of fire of a maid, Oschinsky took Leggett to his library, where he fixed them both a brandy against the cold weather.

"You were on your way to see me, Mr. Wilson—and I was on my way to see you. A lucky coincidence our paths happened to cross."

"Actually, I was on my way to Mark Shorter's place," Leggett said. "I was a little afraid of calling you directly, so I was going to check with Mark to see if he'd

heard anything from you about the play."

It might have been illusory, but for an instant Leggett thought he saw Oschinsky's face exhibit a spasm of pain.

The look had not been illusory.

"Then you don't know, Mr. Wilson? You haven't seen the morning papers?"

"No, I haven't. Don't know what?"

Oschinsky's face now was a portrait in genuine tragedy. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Wilson, believe me I am. Sorry for a number of reasons, but sorry most of all for the fact that I have to tell you that Mark Shorter died here last night. He either jumped or fell from the livingroom terrace."

Leggett put down his brandy. "Mark is dead? How did it happen? When?"

"About two this morning." Oschinsky's tone was lifeless as driftwood. "We suspect he fell. The balcony wall is very low and he'd taken a good deal to drink."

"You say you *suspect* he fell," Leggett said.

"Yes. No one was with him when it happened. There were some people down on the street, coming back from a party. Mark's body nearly hit one of them."

Leggett was silent.

"He could conceivably have taken his own life," Oschinsky said.

"For what possible reason? He had a hit play, a woman he was in love with and going to marry, and he was in perfect health."

Oschinsky took a sip of brandy. "No, his play was running into troubles at the box office, Mr. Wilson. He'd done some patching on it, but it was a terminal case and he knew it."

"But it was making money."

"Actually, it broke even. That's usually the way of these off-Broadway ventures. Then, too, there was Shorter's novel."

"Novel?" said Leggett. He was mildly surprised. "Mark never told me about a novel."

"He told no one," said Oschinsky. "I myself only suspect he was working on one, from bits of conversation I pieced together."

So that was the reason he hadn't been able to reach Mark on the telephone. Shorter had gone away somewhere with Liz, not for a vacation but to take a crack at a book.

"About three weeks ago," Oschinsky went on, "I dropped the hint that if he were thinking about a novel, it would be beneficial to him to get away awhile and work on it. He denied any such thoughts. He told me his play was the important thing. It was suffering and he didn't want to leave it dying."

Leggett could see a man cov-

ering up the fact that he was taking a run at a book, especially if he had doubts about its potential. What puzzled Leggett was this business of Shorter's heavy drinking and his possible suicide. Leggett had known Shorter a long time and neither of these acts was his style.

"I feel very dead inside myself," Oschinsky said now, very weakly. "I truly loved that young man and his talent. He was nearly a protégé. I suspect he was tormented about being on the very verge of success, and yet wasn't able to make that final jump. So he took the jump that was easier."

Leggett could say nothing now. The years of friendship and experiences with Mark Shorter were clogging his throat. He thought about Liz, wondering how she was taking it; probably not very well.

"I may have pushed him too hard, too soon," Oschinsky was eulogizing. "It's almost as though my hand was on his back when he jumped. I genuinely thought he was up to the challenge of genius. It appears I never knew him at all."

Leggett could add nothing to Oschinsky's summation of another man's life, except to add his name to the list of people who did not truly know Mark Shorter.

"Well," Oschinsky said now with tremendous difficulty, "if you feel up to it, we'll take a look at this play of yours now, Mr. Wilson."

Leggett respectfully declined Oschinsky's invitation. A human being very close to him had died. Giving even the slightest consideration to unreal people on paper seemed as irreverent as reading a newspaper at a funeral.

After the funeral, Liz Carpenter moved back into Shorter's apartment on Lexington. Its lease was paid through May and winter was not the best time of year to move, Leggett told her. Once or twice he thought to stop in to help her sort out Mark's things, but the idea was rejected. It was too early to barge in on a love affair that, even in the absence of one of the lovers, was still warmly alive.

Mark Shorter's play, like Mark Shorter the man, died the first week in December, quietly and with little notice of its passing. The two years Leggett had given himself to make his dent on the city were up and his money nearly gone. He took a job as a salesman for Hembert Brothers' Wines, his own play all but forgotten.

Carl Oschinsky, meanwhile, spent the weeks before Christmas enjoying publication of his latest suspense thriller, a tale of espionage surrounding the United Nations. To no one's surprise, the book was an

immediate best seller in the New York area, due primarily to Oschinsky's continuing genius and secondarily because of its presentation during the gift-giving season. Like many of his recent books, it contained all the ingredients for motion pictures and very probably would be snatched up immediately. The fact that none of these successes were being laid at Leggett's doorstep only further estranged him from the business of writing.

Yet Oschinsky wouldn't let the estrangement become final. Two days before Christmas, Leggett received a phone call from him and, after Leggett's congratulations were brushed nonchalantly aside, he asked Leggett about the play.

"I've decided to drop it and start on something fresh," Leggett told him. It was a bold-faced lie. He was through with this wacky, nerve-breaking business of writing.

"That's a pity, Wilson. You've got a damn good idea there, too good to be kicked into the trash heap without first exploring its possibilities from every angle. Why, for instance, have you forced it into play form, when it very well may need the room of a novel?"

"I've never for a minute considered the idea big enough for a book," Leggett told him. "Its strength—if it had any at all—resided in its dialogue potential, not its narrative weight. Anyway, I'm through with the whole idea of it now."

"Could it be that you're afraid you haven't the tools to turn it into a novel?" Oschinsky prodded.

"No fear on that score at all," Leggett answered. "I *don't* have the tools, and I don't know the first thing about writing a novel."

"Nonsense. Nothing to it. You have genuine talent. All you lack is the mastery of a few general precepts."

"Thousands of others have mastered those precepts," Leggett responded, "and all they've got to show for it are a few rooms psychedelically papered in rejection slips."

"I heard somewhere you'd taken a job. Doing what?"

"Selling wine for one of the local distributors. The Bronx and Harlem. I'll get a better territory, they say, if I last out the year without getting my head split open or worse."

"Well, you may survive a major physical disaster, Wilson," Oschinsky told him, "but what about the damage done to your spirit? Doing work not related to an artist's field can be permanently corrosive."

"You don't seem to understand, Mr. Oschinsky. I'm not a writer anymore."

"Nonsense. Putting it aside doesn't kill the deep desires in you. You're a writer, Wilson, and you'll always be one, even though you no longer want to practice the art."

"So I'm fatally bitten," Leggett said. "What do you suggest as an antidote?"

"There is only one and that's work. Tell me, have you got any money in the bank?"

"About $800," Leggett told him.

"All right, here's what you do. Take a leave of absence from this company you work for. A month, two if you can get it. Then, pack your things, put a lock on your door and get away from the city. The city is a gem of a place for a writer to celebrate his success, but a terrible environment in which to acquire it. Get up into the mountains, find yourself a year-round cabin someplace, settle in and go to work. Draw out half your money. If you find you need more, drop me a line and I'll send it to you. Call it a philanthropic investment in talent from a man who no longer has any worries financially. I've compiled some personal notes on the novel. I'll put them in the mail to you tonight."

"Why are you suddenly doing all this for an unknown?" Leggett asked Oschinsky. "There are probably hundreds of people hanging on your shoulder looking for a free handout. Who's kidding whom? All those young people don't come to your parties just to grab off a little free lunch or polish the master's shoes. And now you're willing to put your money on a horse with no track record? Why?"

"Let's just say that I see in you all the potential Mark Shorter couldn't put together," Oschinsky admitted. "Shorter's death was a needless waste, a waste I may have helped to promote. If my dreams for Mark's success can be realized in you, then his death will have counted for something. Well, Wilson? What do you say?"

For a long minute, Leggett said nothing. He was getting a sponsor just for the asking, and not just any sponsor. He would be getting the acknowledged master in a field already overcrowded with amateurish writers of Gothic horror and one-shot wives of college professors, and the endless ranks of the unpublished. Here, Oschinsky was handing everything to him. At the end, the door to every publisher in New York would be open to him.

"Well, Wilson?"

It was a tempting offer, but Leggett was nagged by the frightening possibility he was biting off too much. Once before, Oschinsky had put his time and confidence behind an aspiring writer and had received in return a corpse sprawled on the sidewalk in front of his apartment

building. Was that the way of it?

Now, as though Oschinsky were inside his mind, the master said, "You're thinking of Shorter, aren't you, Wilson? You're afraid this commitment will lead you in the same direction. Well, if you want this badly enough, you'll just have to take the risk. Don't let Mark Shorter die in vain, Wilson. If we could both hear him speak in death, that's what he would tell us."

Leggett couldn't extract a leave of absence from Hembert Brothers' Wines and so he quit. It was better this way. If he failed, he wouldn't have to endure the embarrassment of returning to Hembert.

On the next Tuesday morning, his old car loaded with gear, Leggett headed north. He made up his mind to inform only Liz and Carl Oschinsky of his destination once it had been reached. The fewer intrusions he had, the better were his chances of making good.

Most of the inns and motels hugging the city were either closed or filled for the holidays, but two miles beyond a small New York town he found a ramshackle ten-unit cabin court, its snow-covered grounds choked with pine trees and split by a slow-running stream. The owner was a Mrs. Elvira Hanford whose husband had died in a logging accident the season before. Leggett paid her a month's rent in advance—eighty dollars—for a cabin near the stream. For it, he received a cramped livingroom with a stone fireplace and a Murphy bed, a small kitchenette, and a porch stocked with a good supply of cedar and pine. For fringe benefits, there was a diner a mile down the highway, a mailbox whose contents were collected once daily, and most important, the isolation and solitude he sought.

Once he started to work, Leggett found Oschinsky had been right about *The Disbelievers'* potential as a novel. Slowly the dialogue began to transform itself into narrative; and paragraph by paragraph, page by page, Leggett began to feel the excitement. He *knew* he had something, something very good.

That first week he rarely slept, working painstakingly from his twelve-chapter outline. When the first six chapters had undergone a second draft, he mailed them off to Oschinsky. He also mailed a belated batch of Christmas cards without return addresses. He wasn't going to make the mistake of advertising where he was and what he might be doing. Mark Shorter had fallen into that mistake and when the finished product failed to live up to the advanced advertisement, its producer had been shamed into taking his own life.

Two weeks after New Year's, which Leggett did not celebrate, his first six chapters returned from Oschinsky. Many of his chapter endings were diluting the suspense and his paragraphing was inconsistent in many instances. Leggett followed Oschinsky's suggested changes and notations to the letter. He wasn't going to make the mistake of taking lightly the advice of a master who over the years had managed with surprising success so many different styles and themes. It was Oschinsky who was clearly guiding his work now, and Leggett took religiously to his guidance.

At the end of his notes, Oschinsky wrote an overall criticism of his work to date. His praise was high, so high in fact that he instructed Leggett not to waste precious time submitting his final six chapters for criticism. Instead, Oschinsky instructed him to make the necessary changes in the first six and then continue until the final chapters were completed in second draft. His deadline would be January 25th. Whatever his progress on that date, he was to close up shop and drive to Oschinsky's winter retreat in the Catskills, for which Oschinsky enclosed a detailed map. Together they would spend a day or two putting together a finished product. Then Oschinsky would send for his publisher and the three of them would toast success and the spring emergence of Leggett Wilson, *The Disbelievers*, and New York's newest hero. Oschinsky couldn't have been more enthusiastic. He was certain, he told Leggett, that he had the man and the book destined to be the best-selling successor to Carl Oschinsky and *Small Nations Have Big Spies*.

With the end now in sight, Leggett drove himself even harder than he had in the beginning. By the 20th, all that remained was the climax scene in the final chapter, five hundred vital words Leggett fussed over and polished like a jeweler with the world's most precious gem.

Ten rewrites later, he had close to the ending he wanted, a bang-up suspense finish that would keep even the most critical of thriller buffs breathless to the end. That evening he toasted his victory with a bottle of Scotch he'd been saving for the occasion.

He rose late the next morning and savored the last few hours in his little cabin. By three o'clock he was all packed. As he was making a last-minute check, Elvira Hanford visited him to deliver a letter. It was postmarked New York, with the return address: L. Carpenter, 3610 Lexington Avenue. Inside a Christmas card displaying pine cones and boughs and a large red ribbon was

Liz Carpenter's handwritten note: Dearest Leggett:

Your letter received and I'm glad to learn you're taking your writing seriously again. Mark would be pleased. As you've requested, I've kept your whereabouts a total secret.

I've been cleaning our place here on Lexington. Just Mark's things. If I'm going to stay on here through the winter I don't think I could bear having all those little reminders of him around.

I'm a little surprised that I haven't come across any evidence of the book Mark was writing. When he went away for a while, he refused to let me go along. I know he was writing a book but he never formally admitted it to me. Mark was always very careful about keeping his professional life very private.

However, I did come across a diary of his, recounting the last year of his life. Very philosophical stuff. Lots of personal impressions of our friends and his contemporaries.

The references to dates and facts are very few, but one entry has me puzzled. It's dated about a month before his death and reads: 'Had coffee with R.M. this afternoon. He is currently working on an anthropological study dealing with man's original efforts to maintain peace in primitive societies. He has been working long and hard on it and I hope he finds a publisher. We also talked at length about the tragedy of D.C., and the drug experience which led him to his personal disaster. We subsequently wished each other a death somewhat less painful and tragic.'

I went through our files at the magazine, Leggett, and D.C. may be one Demion Cole, a writer Mark knew before I met him. He wrote a mystery novel in 1961—very run-of-the-mill and very few sales. Carl Oschinsky has a copy of the book in his library (I wrote down all titles he has the night the three of us attended his party), but then he probably has a copy of every suspense novel ever written.

According to a news clipping from *The New York Times*, dated August 10, 1965, Demion Cole died of an overdose of heroin on top of sufficient amounts of alcohol to topple a good-sized horse.

I'm going mildly bananas trying to decipher what this all means in relationship to Mark. Could Mark have been on drugs, Leggett? Or had he just come off them? Or thinking of turning to them? I loved Mark like no other man I ever knew, but getting close to him was extremely difficult. I can't help but get the feeling there's something very black in all of this, though I have utterly no idea what that

blackness might be. Leggett, please take special care of yourself. The loss of two close loved ones in such a short period of time would be more than I could bear.

Love, Liz the Mad Researcher

The name of Demion Cole didn't ring even the faintest bell in Leggett's mind. If he had been a friend of Shorter's, Mark had never got around to introducing him. Still, it seemed odd that Shorter should know Demion Cole. The circles of straight writers and druggies were rarely concentric. The two worlds were separate and distinct and usually inviolate to an outsider—unless that outsider had decided to switch camps.

That brought new light on the problem. Had Mark Shorter, without anyone's knowledge, been a secret drug addict? On the night of Mark Shorter's death, had Carl Oschinsky mistaken Mark's drug addiction for simple drunkenness?

Things were happening a bit too quickly now for Leggett's own comfort and he needed time to make sure none of these incidents bore any relevance to his own situation. He reached Liz by telephone at work and told her to check deeper into Mark's relationship with Demion Cole. She was to telephone him back the following morning with anything she had learned. He informed Liz he would be leaving for Carl Oschinsky's Catskill retreat at eleven o'clock the next day, and gave her the address and instructions on how to reach it by car.

After his call to Liz, Leggett phoned Carl Oschinsky and told him he would be a day late. His old car needed some major repairs. Oschinsky voiced his disappointment, but told Leggett a day or two wouldn't make that much difference. He would bide his time making needed repairs around the house and begin work on a fresh idea he had for his next book.

By eleven o'clock the next morning, Liz still had not called. Leggett gave her an extra hour, saw her neck-deep in biographical sketches and news clippings. Finally he decided that the blackness she sensed surrounding Mark Shorter and Demion Cole was a woman's imagination gone wild. The most important thing now, Leggett told himself, was his book. Carl Oschinsky was going to a great deal of trouble to make Leggett famous, and he was flirting with the master's patience and benevolence. He had come a long way since that first meeting and Leggett wasn't going to throw away his accomplishments now, not when they were so close. By twelve-thirty, his bags were packed in the car and the car filled with gas. At twelve forty-five, he pulled

out of the small cabin court, wondering if the telephone in Elvira Hanford's office were ringing.

"Glad you were able to make your way up here without any trouble. How is the car running now?"

"Fine, just fine."

"As you may have noticed, I haven't a garage, so you'd better throw a blanket and tarp over the hood. And feed your radiator a little antifreeze. We're due for a big cold spell up here tonight. You can get to the carport through the kitchen. You'll find antifreeze and tarps on a shelf outside."

When Leggett returned from the carport, Oschinsky was at the kitchen sink thawing packages of lobster tails while strips of sirloin browned in a frying pan.

Leggett removed his topcoat and tossed it over the back of a chair as Oschinsky continued working at the sink.

"This isn't going to turn out as fancy as it looks," he told Leggett. "Just a little steak and lobster and a brandy fondue. I use this place only a couple of times a year and I'm afraid I don't keep much of a larder."

"Sounds good to me," Leggett told him.

For a minute or two, Leggett watched silently and then said, abruptly, "Mr. Oschinsky, what can you tell me about a man named Demion Cole?"

Oschinsky pondered. "Demion Cole," he said. "That's *really* an obscure name out of the past. Whatever made you bring it up, Wilson?"

"No particular reason," Leggett answered, trying to portray the matter as unimportant. "Someone mentioned his name to me a few months back. One of those druggie playwrights. He seemed to think I could steer him onto a heroin pusher. He must have thought I knew Demion Cole and his regular pusher."

"Demion Cole. Yes, a tragic case, that one. He died five or six years ago, as I remember. Alcohol and an overdose of heroin. I think I even have a copy of his first book in my library."

"Liz Carpenter tells me you're something of a collector of books of mystery and suspense."

Oschinsky let out a laugh. "The mad researcher. I remember. Did I say first book? Actually, it was Cole's only book. As I recall, he showed a great deal of promise until he began fooling with drugs. Believe me, Wilson, if there is one area where writing and drugs don't mix, it's the mystery-suspense field."

"Poe seemed to function all right

under their influence, however."

"Poe was neither a mystery writer nor a suspense writer," Oschinsky reminded Leggett. "He was a master of horror fiction. Alcohol merely tended to expand his horrific horizons, if you'll excuse that cumbersome alliteration. No, Mr. Wilson. To a writer of sheer mystery and suspense, drugs are pure poison. Our work involves too much calculation and analysis for one whose wits lie shattered at his feet from drug excess."

Leggett was disappointed. He had expected some kind of key revelation. Instead, he had received a very relaxed treatise on Poe and drugs.

"Wilson, why don't you go into the livingroom and make yourself a drink? While I'm finishing up here, you can be getting the rest of your manuscript in order. Throw a fresh log on the fire if you think it needs it. You'll find the bar in a cabinet beneath the stereo unit."

"Sounds like a good idea. By the way, when will your publisher be here?"

"Sidney La Dunnett? I've already called him, Wilson. He'll be here around six this evening, if the snow doesn't hold him up."

With that news, Leggett put aside all the nonassimilated thoughts whirring in his brain. Oschinsky hadn't wasted any time getting them off the ground with his book. He had to admire Oschinsky's professionalism and the way he kept his word.

In Oschinsky's livingroom Leggett made his Scotch to the low, background music of hard rock coming from the stereo. The music wasn't the only thing youthful in that livingroom. In fact, it was something of a miniaturized representation of Oschinsky's apartment in Manhattan. The furnishings were unmistakably by New York's young contemporaries, as were the original paintings which hung on all four walls. It presented a picture of an aging man who wanted desperately to stay young forever. This aura of youth, however implausible it seemed, managed miraculously to show in Oschinsky's youthful vigor and in the books he wrote. Leggett could only wish for the same young exuberance when he himself began to grow old. He knew that when a writer ceases to change, he begins to die.

Leggett took his drink out onto the cedar balcony which collared Oschinsky's livingroom on two sides. Snow was starting to fall in large, fat flakes, sticking to the planking beneath his feet. Oschinsky was right; they were in for a rough night.

He went back inside and threw a new log on a dying fire, then sat on

a circular divan, staring into the flames as they licked their fresh feast, and thought momentarily about Oschinsky's new book. He held New York in the palm of his hand. If his book never sold a single copy out of town, he would still have a million-seller. His insides warmed with the promise. If they prepared the campaign for Leggett's book properly, his would be a million-seller too.

Leggett was still dwelling on these subjects when a new thought began to struggle for birth in his mind. It seemed to him to have something to do with something he'd witnessed or heard in Manhattan recently, something to do with Mark Shorter. He was sure of it, but whatever it was, the idea was stubbornly staying outside the range of his consciousness.

Down a hallway, which probably led to guest rooms, Leggett spied a telephone. His curiosity about Demion Cole still haunted him and there was only one way to get it satisfied.

He set his drink down, walked down the hallway and dialed Liz' office in New York, giving the extension.

"Hello?"

"Liz, this is Leggett. I'm calling from Oschinsky's place in the Catskills."

"I called the cabin court at one o'clock," Liz told him, "but a Mrs. Hanford said you'd already checked out."

"Have you learned anything more about this Demion Cole?"

"No, nothing more about Cole. But something else has come up."

"What is it?"

"Maybe nothing, Leggett, but a few small pieces are trying to fit themselves together and I want to give them a chance."

"For instance," Leggett said.

"Well, about a month before Mark died, a girlfriend of mine called me and asked if I wanted to go to a session of the United Nations General Assembly. She was in thick with the feminist movements, political involvement, all of that. Anyway, they were having some key speeches on world disarmament and she said if I were ever going to break open a reporting career, I ought to begin getting my feet wet."

"Go on."

"Well, anyway, we went down there. While we were hunting for the staircase to the gallery, I ran into Mark in one of the corridors. He wouldn't tell me what he was doing there, but I suspected it had something to do with his writing. He had his briefcase and was wearing his hideous, green-tinted mod glasses. He never wears them unless he's working on a piece."

A jolt of recognition ripped through Leggett's mind like an earthquake. That was it! On two occasions, Leggett himself had seen Mark emerging from the U.N. Building.

Liz' voice, when it next came, shuddered across to him as though a large bird were bounding up and down on the telephone line through which her voice was being transmitted.

"Leggett, Oschinsky's current novel is an espionage tale about the U.N.!" she said. "I've read it, Leggett, and I *swear*, certain portions of it sound *perfectly* like Mark. His style, his phrasing, everything."

"Liz, are you trying to say Oschinsky *stole* Mark's property?"

"I'm saying more than that, Leggett. I'm also saying he may have killed Mark to keep his theft from discovery. Leggett, they were together for *weeks*. I think it was Oschinsky's idea to send me off to visit relatives, while he and Mark went off someplace to work on the book."

"Someplace," Leggett said. "Could that someplace be here?"

"What better place than the winter retreat of a reclusive writer?" Liz said. "It fits, Leggett. He encouraged Mark to finish his novel, while he carefully destroyed every scrap of evidence, even the original manuscript. When the book was finished, all he had to do was find a way to get rid of Mark and the trail of his deceit would be covered completely."

"But surely Mark must have known he had a solid property," Leggett said. "Why did he have to take Oschinsky into his confidence? Why didn't he seek out his own publisher?"

A pause fell across the line. It dripped with calculation.

"Leggett, *you're* working on a suspense novel, aren't you? And *you've* used another man's influence to make a little shortcut to success. And *you've* also isolated yourself, fallen under the influence of Oschinsky's guidance."

"And you think Oschinsky killed Mark that evening at the party."

"Lured him out onto that balcony and pushed him over that railing with no more regard for his life than for a dying geranium in a pot!"

Leggett was aware he was spending a dangerous length of time on the phone. He put down the receiver and checked the livingroom. Oschinsky was still in the kitchen.

"And just where does Demion Cole fit into all of this?" he asked Liz, coming back to the telephone.

"I think Demion Cole was also working on a suspense novel," Liz told him. "He was trying to come up with something big, just as you

and Mark have done. And just as I think Mark had some assistance going over the railing, I also think the alcohol and drugs Demion Cole took the evening he died weren't all self-administered. I even suspect Oschinsky's killings and manuscript thefts go back even before Demion Cole. All you need for proof of that, Leggett, is to search his house for some evidence."

"What kind of evidence?"

"Old manuscripts, papers, notes. Personal belongings. Oschinsky's last three books, for instance, before *Small Nations Have Big Spies*, were *Never Blackmail a Boston Lawyer, Deadfall*, and *Die Thursday*. Get out your fine-tooth comb, Leggett, and I'll be willing to bet you'll find evidence that Demion Cole wrote one of those books, and that Mark wrote *Small Nations Have Big Spies.*"

"I'll try, Liz. I've been on the phone too long. Try to get back to you."

He hung up the receiver and started back for the livingroom when he was struck with a wild hunch. At first it seemed preposterous, but the longer he dwelt on it, the more logical it became. He picked up the phone again. When the operator came on the line, Leggett quickly made his request, then broke the connection and dialed the number the operator had given him for New York.

After four rings a female voice said, "La Dunnett and Gordon, Publishers."

"This is Mr. Leggett Wilson," Leggett said. "I'm calling to confirm an evening appointment Mr. La Dunnett has with Carl Oschinsky at his Catskill home."

"There must be some mistake, Mr. Wilson. Mr. Oschinsky and Mr. La Dunnett have been in Samoa the past three weeks negotiating an investment in a plantation. We don't expect them back until sometime around the middle of February. You can cable them there if you like."

"No, thank you," Leggett told her. "I must have made a mistake in the dates. I'll contact him when he returns."

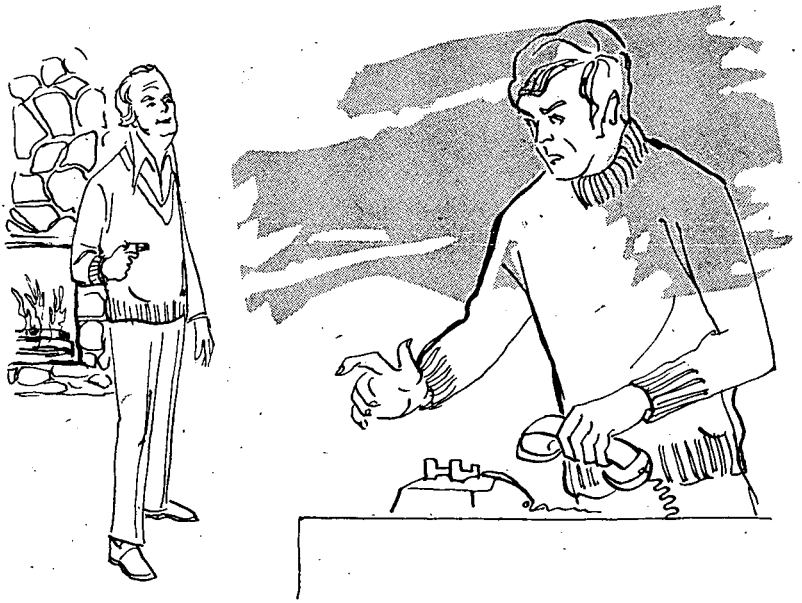
Quickly Leggett again broke the connection. There was just one more call to place now—a call to the police.

That was when he felt the presence of someone else in the hallway.

"Put up the phone, Mr. Wilson." In Oschinsky's hand was a small-caliber pistol.

Leggett did as he was told.

"Extension telephones have come quite a ways since the old days, don't you think so, Mr. Wilson? No more strange hums when someone else is on the line, no more audible clicks when someone breaks in on



your strange little conversation."

Leggett said nothing. His mind was too busy trying to figure a way out.

"I would have preferred your death to be something of a surprise, but then life is a series of small adjustments. Let's move back into the livingroom, Mr. Wilson."

The log Leggett had thrown on the fire had broken to embers, casting the room in ethereal light. Deftly, Oschinsky bent and fed the fireplace another log. As the flames began consuming it, images and shadows shuddered as in an earth tremor.

"Just for the record," Leggett said emptily, "how many were there before Mark Shorter and Demion Cole?"

"Wilson," hummed Oschinsky, pitiably, "isn't that a little like a condemned man asking if his coffin will be comfortable?"

"I'd like to know."

"Two others," Oschinsky told him, his face smiling and showing no remorse. "Both were Village acidheads, much like poor Demion Cole. One wrote his drug-induced novels on bathroom tissue and the other with soft-lead pencils on supermarket grocery bags. Both wrote incessantly, mostly trash. But both eventually came up with that one good idea every dedicated writer gets in a lifetime. Neither's

death created any big stir. The world expects drug addicts to die violent deaths. The world expects it and asks few questions."

"But the deaths are becoming more questionable now, aren't they, Oschinsky? Mark Shorter's still remains open as a police matter. And mine will only bring the dogs sniffing closer to your door."

"No, Mr. Wilson. Shorter's death will be ruled a suicide eventually. And yours will eliminate a nosy young writer snooping around to learn, finally, that Mark Shorter wasn't on drugs and was, in fact, stone-cold sober the night he died."

"And just how are you going to explain my presence out here?" Leggett asked.

"You were writing a play. Everyone's aware of that, though no one except myself knows its subject matter. You became despondent over its progress, and sought my advice. Of course, you couldn't have known I was in Samoa with Mr. La Dunnett when you arrived. You stayed here a while and then, after considering your failures to date and your prospects in the future, it all became too much to bear and you took your own life."

"Then La Dunnett is in this whole scheme with you," Leggett said.

"He provides me with alibis. I provide him with best sellers and dead men no one seems to care about."

Oschinsky was wagging the pistol for Leggett to back toward the double glass doors which led to the L-shaped balcony, now crested with an inch of snow. The heavy, fat flakes continued to fall.

"For my own curiosity," Leggett said, "when was the last time you wrote a book that was your own property? From your own mind?"

"To satisfy your curiosity, I lost whatever skills I had roughly ten years ago. But by that time I'd also acquired quite a following among the young fools who expected to depose me. They kept their knives at the ready in their pockets with one hand, while they ate my food and drank my wine with the other. I was merely fattening them for the kill. Their egos were so extravagantly huge, they suspected nothing until it was too late."

"You'll have to kill Liz, too, you know."

"Miss Carpenter will be taken care of, all in good time. Open the doors, Mr. Wilson."

Leggett's hand reluctantly reached for a handle. Pulling it would be like pulling a trapdoor at his own hanging. He knew what Oschinsky intended doing. He intended Leggett's body to fall from that balcony, two hundred feet to the rocky valley below, a fall he

might survive if the light crust of snow covering the jagged rock were two feet deep instead of the scant inch that had fallen in the last half hour.

"You'll eventually be caught at this little game of literary murder, you know. The more you kill, the heavier the odds will stack against you."

"I'm afraid you're entirely wrong, Wilson. Your death is the last of them. With another book and a subsequent film contract, I will be able to retire from twenty years of superlative successes."

"At the expense of others."

"Come off it, Wilson. Life's nothing but a foolish game we play as we wait to die. The real kick in it is to play the game with imagination and verve."

Oschinsky was lingering just inside the doorway with the pistol. If Leggett could bring him out onto the slippery planking of the balcony, he might stand a chance.

"You now are faced with the final choice of this life, Wilson," Oschinsky was stating. "You can either go over that railing and hope for the best, or you can stand your ground and be shot. Which will it be?"

The snow was falling harder now, the wind whipping the flakes like tiny knives caught in an electric blender. "If you shoot me, I expect that will be the very end of it," Leggett said. "And the odds aren't much better going over the railing."

"Well, Wilson? I wish you'd hurry. It's getting cold out here, and the dinner I've planned for one will be ready soon."

It wasn't a pleasant choice, but Leggett knew he had to make it. Slowly, he turned on his heels and faced the valley. It yawned before his eyes like the Grand Canyon in miniature relief, or the biggest coffin on the face of the earth.

"I think I'll take my chances with the great outdoors," Leggett said. "But I couldn't do it myself. You're going to have to push me."

"Push you? You jump on your own, Wilson, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what? Put a bullet in my back? That would be pretty hard to explain away as a suicide when they uncover my body next spring."

"Jump, Wilson!"

"Sorry, Oschinsky. If I make it through this last, long step alive, I want to be able to come after you with an attempted murder charge."

In the contemplative silence the wind howled, almost as though it were begging from the valley floor for Leggett's sacrifice. Leggett perked his ears and waited for what seemed like an interminable time for the sound his ears sought.

Then it came—the sound of Oschinsky's footsteps crunching on fresh-fallen snow. Instantly, Leggett dropped to his hands and knees. A pistol shot ripped through the night and the wind ripped through Leggett's right side. Pain seering into his flesh, he rolled his body toward the glass door. His hands searched frantically for Oschinsky's legs, found them, and then he and Oschinsky were a tangle of limbs and shouts. Leggett had fear in his throat until he saw the pistol slide from the balcony and into dark oblivion. Then both of them rolled toward that same oblivion, Leggett's eyes open and staring into the twisted, agonized face of his personal executioner. Leggett's hand found a railing post and his fingers went around it in a death grip, but Oschinsky's face slid down and away as the night was shocked by a final, blood-boiling scream.

Leggett pulled himself back onto the balcony. His body shook out of control and it was a full five minutes before he felt confident enough to get to his feet on the slippery platform.

When he did he went directly back into the livingroom. He felt no desire to look down into the depths which had taken Oschinsky's life, because it seemed to him now that Oschinsky was never alive and was never real. He was, instead, a Satanic mutation the world had never known and could now do very well without.

Leggett called Liz Carpenter first, to explain the events of the last few hours and to tell her he was all right; and then he notified the police.

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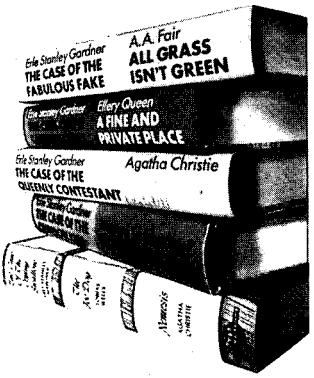

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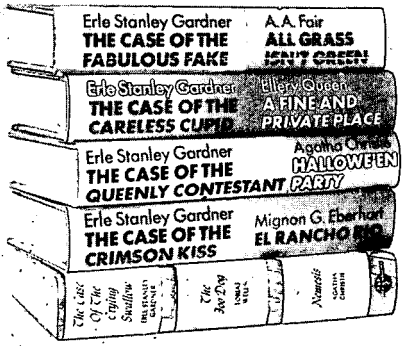

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