ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW stories
presented by
the MASTER of SUSPENSE

June 1972

Dear Reader:

If it is your habit to titter at the sound of tin cans affixed to the rear of matrimonial getaway cars, let me remind you that marriages may be 100 percent successful—especially when they are blends of bizarre mystery and macabre suspense—and as clearly indicated among the new stories that follow, divorces are seldom a problem when innumerable other methods of dissolution exist in lieu of the courts.

Your feeling as you read should not be unlike that of being swept off your feet—with a jolt—as so many popular authors treat you to gems of fancy and fantasy, from *Pattern of Behavior* by Stephen Wasylyk to the gripping novelette *The Vanishing Point* by Pauline C. Smith. From this day forward you should be happy that to the contemplated procurement of this issue you replied, "I will."

May I propose that you return next month?

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 17, NO. 6 JUNE 1972

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 17, No. 6, June 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.

For the experienced, to judge the whole piece by the pattern is virtually inevitable.

STARING BLINDLY at the flickering, late-night movie on television, Harry Wella hovered between sleep and wakefulness until the ringing phone brought him back to a hard reality.

"You asleep, Harry?" George Carr sounded as if he expected Wella to snap at him.

"No," said Wella, thinking that he might never sleep again; dream, perhaps, but not sleep.

"I wouldn't want to disturb Dee," said Carr.

"You didn't. She isn't here. She left this afternoon. I found a note saying this was the end of it."

The phone made small buzzing sounds in the silence.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but—"

"But what?"

"We just got a call from the Strong house. James W. Strong committed suicide about an hour ago. Since he was such a big man in the county and you're chief of detectives, the commissioner wants you to handle it. But maybe now. . ."

Now, Wella decided, doesn't make any difference. At least it will be better than sitting here. "Pick me up," he said.

He slipped into his shoulder hol-

ster, coat and raincoat, and waited, thinking of James W. Strong, one of the old-line political leaders in the county; not only successful in politics but in business, holding a directorship in several corporations in addition to heading his own manufacturing concern; trustee for several charitable organizations and for the nearby university. His death would cause headlines and the people concerned would have to be handled delicately.

When he heard the purr of Carr's engine, Wella stepped out into the cool night, pausing for a moment to lift his face to the cleansing soft spring rain.

Carr opened the door for him, neither saying a word as Wella squeezed his bulk inside and Carr put the car in gear. The silence was broken only by the metronomic beat of the windshield wipers.

Wella knew Carr was avoiding the subject of Wella's wife. Carr finally cleared his throat. "Lousy weather, isn't it?"

It was the closest Carr would come to an expression of sympathy. "I like the rain," Wella said.

Carr chuckled softly. "You were born with rain in your soul, Harry."

Maybe I was, reflected Wella. *Maybe that was why Dee left me, even though she said it was the irregular hours and the money.* Even as chief of detectives of the county, his take-home pay wasn't much to shout about and Dee was the kind of woman who needed money to be happy. "There are ways for a man in your position," she had said. "People will pay for favors . . ."

"Tell me about Strong," he said to Carr.

"A guy named Blackwood called at midnight. All he said was that he had found Strong dead. That's why the commissioner wanted you on it. He wants you to handle the story for the newsmen. Just a nice, clean, simple announcement with all the loose ends tied up so that nobody has any questions."

by Stephen Wasylyk

"What makes him think there may be questions?"

Carr waited for several seconds before answering. "He was a personal friend of Strong's. He said to tell you Strong wasn't the suicide type, so keep your eyes open."

Wella grunted. "You ever hear of this Blackwood?"

"He's a friend of the family. Teaches psychology at the univer-

sity. Heard some talk that he and Mrs. Strong are more than friends. It will be something to keep in mind when we get there."

"Yeah," said Wella. "There will be a lot to keep in mind when we get there."

Carr braked and swung into a driveway. The Strong house was huge, two wings extending from an ornate entrance that seemed to frown down on several cars and an ambulance. A uniformed man told them that Mrs. Strong was upstairs with the family doctor, Blackwood was in the library, and the body was in the study. They found the county coroner, Dr. Gifford, waiting for them impatiently.

"I could have had him in the morgue and been home in bed by this time," he said testily. "What kept you, Harry?"

Wella ignored him, glancing around the room. The study was pleasant, with high ceilings and long windows. A desk was placed at one end, several deep leather chairs at the other. There was an enormous fireplace along one wall opposite the two big doors that opened from the hall. Strong's body was sprawled before the fireplace, a short-barreled revolver still in his hand. He had been a small man, wearing a worn smoking jacket, a little on the heavy side and bald-headed, the skin of his scalp dead-white and shining like a beacon.

"Anything to tell me?" Wella asked Gifford.

"Nothing. I'll spare you the technical details. The man simply shot himself in the head and died immediately. Can we move him now?"

Wella nodded and stepped to the hearth, out of the way. Gifford removed the gun from Strong's hand and handed it to Wella. It was a S&W .32 with a two-inch barrel, not an unusual gun for a man like Strong to have. Wella flicked open the cylinder. One shot had been fired. He slipped the gun into his raincoat pocket as the attendants lifted Strong's body to the stretcher, covered him and started to wheel him out. Wella leaned on the mantel, staring into the fireplace, wishing James W. Strong had selected another time, another place and another method to die.

There was a fire laid in the fireplace, logs and kindling set, waiting to be touched off, and Wella wondered why Strong hadn't bothered with it on such a cold, wet night. A fresh finger-length gash on the smooth bark of the bottom log pointed at the center of the pile. Wella dropped to his knees curiously. Metal gleamed between two of the logs. Wella reached out and fingered it loose. It was a .32 slug, still perfectly formed, having


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expended most of its force glancing off the first log, then freakishly caught between two of the others. Wella examined it thoughtfully, wondering why, if he had fired it, Strong had replaced it when he had five more shells left in the gun; and if Strong hadn't fired it, who had?

"Find something?" asked Carr.

Wella dropped the bullet into his pocket. For the moment there was no need for Carr to know.

"Nothing," he said. "Let's talk to this Blackwood."

"Castle, the family attorney, is waiting to see you. He says it is important."

"Let him wait until we're through with Blackwood. He found the body and we should get his story before we get involved with anything else."

Blackwood was as big as Wella, with a full beard and black hair that hung over his collar and curled over his ears. He was wearing oversized, horn-rimmed spectacles and Wella had the feeling he was looking at a dark mask through which only enormous, glassy eyes gleamed. The eyes pinned Wella, making him uncomfortable.

"Mr. Blackwood—" he began.

"*Doctor* Blackwood. I have had my doctorate for a good many years now." His tone indicated that only Wella's stupidity could have prevented him from knowing.

"Congratulations," said Wella drily. "I realize it is late and you are tired, so I will not keep you long. However, you will have to stop by the office at your convenience to dictate and sign a statement. Now, suppose you tell us how you found Mr. Strong."

Blackwood nodded slightly, as if he forgave Wella. "The Folsoms, Mrs. Strong and I—"

"The Folsoms?" interrupted Wella.

Blackwood's voice was patronizing. "Mr. and Mrs. Folsom were with us. They were quite shaken so I sent them home. You can talk to them during the day." He saw the look on Wella's face. "I gather you don't approve but I assure you I'm quite qualified to determine that they could contribute nothing to your investigation in the state they were in." His eyes challenged Wella.

Not now, thought Wella. *We will tangle another time.* He lifted a hand. "Go ahead."

"We arrived from the theatre about twelve. I parked in the driveway and as we approached the house, we heard a report. We ran to the study to find the door locked. I called Strong with no result so I broke the door open. We saw the body on the floor. Mrs. Strong fainted so we carried her into the library. I left the Folsoms with her

and returned to the study, determined Strong was dead, and called the police. I also called Dr. Martin. He is with Mrs. Strong."

"The door was locked?"

"I said I had to force it open. You can see for yourself."

Wella examined the big doors. One fastened top and bottom with sliding catches; the other, with a hammered brass bolt that now dangled, held by one screw.

"Would you have any idea why Strong would want to kill himself?"

"That is not within my province. I've told you all I know, and now if you will excuse me . . ."

Wella felt that he had been examined, weighed and found wanting. He nodded and watched Blackwood go. "Send in Castle," he said to Carr.

Castle was middle-aged, well-dressed and imposing, with carefully trimmed dark hair sprinkled with gray.

"Something I can do for you?" Wella asked.

"The commissioner called me. He knew I handled all of Strong's legal affairs but that's not why I'm here. I have something important to tell you."

Wella fingered the slug he had found in the fireplace. "Go ahead."

"James W. Strong would never have killed himself."

Wella toured the room, examining the windows. They were all locked. He turned to Castle. "He was found in a locked room. The door had to be forced open. Why do you find it so impossible to believe?"

"It's a story not generally known, but many years ago when Strong first went into business he had a partner. Things were going badly and it looked as though they might fail. Strong's partner killed himself, leaving Strong with all the responsibility and all the debts. Ever since, Strong abhorred suicides. He considered them a sign of weakness."

"I require more than that if you are saying that Strong was murdered."

"I'll never believe anything else."

"Just who do you think killed him?"

"Perhaps there was someone hidden in the room."

"Then how did he get out?"

"I'm an attorney, not a detective."

Wella wondered what Castle would say about the slug he'd found in the fireplace. Castle could be right, more right than he knew, but at the moment Wella couldn't see how.

"Did you find a note?" Castle demanded.

"Not yet, but it doesn't necessarily have to be found in the room. He could have left none, or he

could have left it somewhere else."

"You won't find one. He had no reason to kill himself. His personal affairs were in perfect order."

Wella tried a probe. "Is that why his wife goes to the theatre with Dr. Blackwood?"

Castle's eyes narrowed. "You have heard rumors?"

"I have heard," Wella said. "Are they true?"

Castle sighed, "Unfortunately yes, but Strong wouldn't have shot himself over it. Mrs. Strong is his second wife and some years younger. His marriage had been deteriorating for some time, to the point where her activities no longer concerned him so long as she was discreet."

"Wouldn't it have been easier to get a divorce?"

"It wasn't that simple. Mrs. Strong demanded certain financial arrangements to which Strong would not agree."

"*He* could have divorced *her*," Wella pointed out.

"She was very careful to give him no real evidence." Castle shook his head. "It was what you could call a standoff and, as I said, it suited Strong."

"Perhaps it didn't suit Mrs. Strong and Blackwood."

"I don't imagine it did. Do you suppose . . ."

"No," said Wella shortly. "They were with another couple and the four of them found the body."

"Nevertheless, you won't accept this as a suicide without a thorough investigation?"

"Strong being the man he was, we can do nothing else."

After Castle had gone, Wella toured the room again. There was no question that the only way the door and the windows could be locked was from the inside. Why had Strong bothered? He had been alone in the house.

Footsteps rattling down the big staircase in the center hall brought him to the study door in time to catch up with a short man in a dark suit carrying a doctor's bag. Wella intercepted him at the door. "You're Dr. Martin?"

The short man glared at him. "Who are you?"

Wella explained. "How is Mrs. Strong?"

"Under a sedative. She's sleeping it off."

Wella's irritation showed in his voice. "I was hoping to talk to her."

"You can talk to her when she is in better condition. She had quite a shock, you know."

"I can imagine," said Wella drily. He would have liked to see for himself just how shocked she was, but the doctor had taken it out of his hands, just as Blackwood had removed the Folsoms. Wella felt frus-

trated. He should have cleaned up the suicide in an hour and gone back to worrying about how he was going to find his wife and persuade her to come back. Not that he thought he could do it. The money situation would be the same and Wella could see no windfall for himself in the immediate future.

"Maybe you can give me a reason for Strong to commit suicide."

"Not me. He was a healthy specimen, mentally and physically. You'll have to look for your reason somewhere else, perhaps among his business affairs. When I heard about it, I was almost as shocked as Mrs. Strong. He just never impressed me as the type to do something like that."

"When did you last see him?"

"Only a few weeks ago. I would think there might be some sort of mental depression preceding something like this but there was certainly no sign of it." He shifted his bag in his hand. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get some sleep."

Wella nodded. It seemed everyone was going to get some sleep except Harry Wella. He found Carr stretched out on one of the easy chairs in the study, eyes half-closed.

"Time to go," he said.

Carr heaved himself to his feet. "We call it a night?"

"You can. I have a few odds and ends to take care of. I'll drop you off and take the car along with me."

Carr shook his head. "The commissioner wouldn't like that. He told me to stick with you until this thing was done. You have to admit that when it comes to issuing reports you're not exactly public-relations minded."

In the car, Carr asked. "Where are you going at this hour of the night?"

Wella's fingers found the slug in his pocket again. "I want to see Doc Gifford. He may still be at the morgue."

"I doubt it. There's no hurry about an autopsy."

Carr was wrong. A cold-eyed, angry Gifford was scrubbing up. "This autopsy could have waited until morning but somebody called the commissioner and insisted that it be done immediately."

"Not me," snapped Wella. "It was probably Castle, but if he hadn't, I would have. I need the bullet that killed Strong."

When Gifford brought it to him, it was slightly deformed but in relatively good shape. Wella took his pocketknife and nicked the base slightly.

Carr looked at him curiously. "Why bother?"

"We mark slugs for identification all the time," said Wella. "Now, I think it's time for you to go back to the office and draft a statement for

the newsmen. The commissioner is going to be asking for one soon."

"He's going to want to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to him."

"You're acting very strangely, Harry."

"Yeah, well," said Wella, "my wife left me and I'm upset. Go draft that statement. I'll be back later."

It took Wella more than an hour to track down the technician who handled ballistics, get him out of bed and bring him to the lab. It took another hour before he could say positively that the bullet that had killed Strong hadn't come from Strong's gun and that the one in the fireplace had.

Wella slipped the gun and the slugs into his pocket. "Forget about tonight unless I tell you otherwise," he told the technician. "If anyone asks, you did a routine check."

"I don't want any trouble, Wella."

"You can't get into trouble if you know nothing," Wella said. "And you don't. All you did was compare some slugs. You don't know where I got them and why I asked."

The darkness wasn't quite as black when Wella found an all-night diner and ordered breakfast. He ran a hand over his stubby chin, thinking that the commissioner didn't like unshaven policemen. Not that Wella intended to see him this morning. That ballistics check proved Strong had been murdered and the commissioner was going to want answers that Wella couldn't give him because he didn't have the slightest idea of how someone could have killed Strong and left him in a locked room.

Wella had the feeling that whoever had done it was a lot smarter than he was. If he hadn't been lucky enough to find the slug in the fireplace, he would have had no reason to run the ballistics check, and that was the only thing that indicated Strong had been killed.

He dawdled in the diner until the cold gray morning became as bright as it was going to be that day, and then sat in the car, wondering where his wife was and what she was doing and how he was going to get her back. Finally, he sighed and started the engine.

Carr was waiting for him. He indicated a sheet of paper on Wella's desk. "There's the statement. The commissioner has already approved it because I said you wrote it, so I released it to the newsmen."

Wella glanced over the statement. The media would expand on it, and whoever had killed Strong would have to believe he was in the clear. "Good job," he said. He drew Strong's gun from his pocket. "Run a check on this. See if it was registered."

"You think it may not be his?"

"I don't think anything," snarled Wella. "Get moving."

Wella found the electric razor in his drawer and ran it over his face. A small stack of reports on his desk demanded attention and for a time he forgot about Strong until Carr came back.

"Strong had it registered," said Carr. "The gun was his."

"I would have bet on it," said Wella, standing up and reaching for his raincoat.

"Where are we going?" asked Carr.

"I am going out," said Wella. "You are staying here."

"The commissioner—"

"Forget the commissioner. He told you to stay with me until the Strong statement was issued. You did. If I need you, I'll call."

He drove slowly to the Strong house, hoping that Mrs. Strong was awake and receiving visitors. He sent the maid upstairs to tell Mrs. Strong he wanted to see her and in a few minutes she came down the long curving staircase.

She was a tall woman, extremely well-built, with long chestnut hair brushed back from her forehead and falling to her shoulders in carefully arranged waves. The eyes were shadowed and of an indeterminate color but Wella would have bet they were green, to complement the smartly-cut pants suit she was wearing. If she mourned Strong, she wasn't expressing it by wearing black.

Up close, Wella revised her age upward a few years. The face showed the beginnings of a few hard wrinkles around the mouth and eyes and the thought popped into his head that he would not want to make this woman angry at him.

"I see no purpose in this," she said.

"Routine," said Wella. "We are merely trying to establish a reason."

"It is done. Reasons are not important."

"Would you have any idea why your husband would take his life?"

A lip curled slightly. "He seldom talked to me about anything important."

Could you tell me what happened last night?"

"I thought it was understood that I fainted."

She didn't look like the fainting type to Wella. "I meant earlier in the evening. Before you went out."

"Nothing unusual. We had dinner together, not speaking, as usual. My husband always seemed to have something on his mind. Dr. Blackwood and the Folsoms picked me up at nine. You know what happened when we returned."

Wella wished he could get her to

be more specific, but her expression said his questions irritated her. She was far from the grieving widow, probably concerned with nothing more complex than when did she get the money, and she was ready to cause trouble for anyone who interfered.

Wella thanked her, retreated and headed for the Folsom house.

It was a scaled-down version of the Strong mansion, just as Mrs. Folsom was a slightly older, less spectacular edition of Mrs. Strong. They both had that same hairdresser, same dressmaker, same finishing-school look.

"It was a terrible thing to be part of," she said.

"I can understand that," said Wella. "Perhaps I ought to talk to your husband."

"He's not here. Nothing keeps him from going to the office."

"Suppose we start with your first visit to the Strong house," he said. "You went there to pick up Mrs. Strong . . ."

She nodded. "We arrived about eight-thirty. Lucille wasn't ready yet. Strong let us in. There were no servants."

"You talked to him?"

"Not really. Dr. Blackwood did. Strong invited us into the study for a drink. Only Blackwood went."

Blackwood hadn't mentioned that, Wella recalled. "Why didn't you go along with Dr. Blackwood?"

"It would have been awkward. My husband and Mr. Strong weren't the best of friends. They were polite to each other, but that's all. They had some words a few months ago about some investments Ken was handling for Strong. Strong blamed Ken for giving him bad advice."

"How long did you wait for Mrs. Strong?"

She frowned. "I don't know. Twenty minutes. A half hour."

He cleared his throat and said, "Then Mrs. Strong came downstairs?"

She nodded. "We called Dr. Blackwood. He closed the doors of the study and we left. Strong called out that he would see us later."

Which meant that Strong was alive when they left.

"We have heard that Strong had no objections to his wife going out with Blackwood. How did you see that?"

Her lip curled. "Object? Hardly. He was very friendly at parties. Strong loved to beat Blackwood at games."

"I don't quite understand about the games."

"Party games," she said impatiently. "Strong loved them because he always won. I suppose it satisfied that ego of his to dominate everyone. He probably loved games

as much as those stupid practical jokes of his."

Wella blinked. This woman was painting an entirely new picture of Strong, the picture he wished he'd had last night.

"Strong liked practical jokes?"

"I think he liked to make people look foolish. Except once. Blackwood made him look ridiculous."

"Tell me about that."

"Someone prevailed on Blackwood to demonstrate his hobby."

Wella sighed, wondering what was coming next. "His hobby?"

"Hypnotism. Strong insisted he couldn't be hypnotized but I must admit he cooperated with Blackwood, which made it easy for him. It didn't take Blackwood long. Blackwood told him that everything was part of a game so Strong did a lot of foolish things. It was all very amusing."

She started on a description of the games they played and the practical jokes in which Strong had delighted. The games struck Wella as essentially juvenile; the jokes often cruel and unthinking. Wella half-listened, trying to tie in all she had told him with what he knew of Strong, realizing that Strong's personal life had been carefully kept apart from his public image.

"Any idea of what Blackwood and Strong talked about in the study?" Wella asked.

"Do you think I would eavesdrop?" she snapped.

Wella wished she had. It would be interesting to know what had been said during Strong's last conversation. He felt Mrs. Folsom had told him something he could use, even if he didn't know what it was at the moment. He thanked her and moved out.

The rain had stopped, the day was gray and the trees and shrubbery dripping. Wella glanced at his watch, wondering if he should call home on the remote possibility his wife had changed her mind and returned, then decided there wasn't much point to thinking like that.

He really ought to give up, Wella decided. All he knew was that Strong was murdered but just how and who did it, he hadn't the faintest idea. Blackwood, Mrs. Strong and the Folsoms had heard the shot while they were outside the house. Yet there could have been no one with Strong because of that locked room. He'd talked to all the people involved and was no closer to an answer than he was when he first found the bullet in the fireplace.

Blackwood had been the last to see Strong and talk to him. Maybe he should see him once again. There might be something in that last conversation that would give him a lead, that would open that

locked room for closer scrutiny.

The woman in the university administration office said she believed Blackwood had a class and gave him directions to the building. If he wasn't there, she said, he would probably be home. Wella wrote down the address.

The room was an amphitheatre, the seats stacked and rising steeply from the rostrum down front. They were about half-filled, the students leaning forward and concentrating on what Blackwood was saying.

Wella found a seat high in the back.

A student, a young woman with long, straight black hair, was standing rigidly in the center of the platform, staring straight ahead. Blackwood stood to one side, his hands clasped behind his back.

"You are an interpretative dancer," Blackwood said. "You are a tree bending in the wind."

The young woman stretched her hands above her head and began to sway.

It took Wella several seconds to realize the young woman had been hypnotized. He wondered what the connection was with teaching psychology.

"Fine," said Blackwood. He turned to the class. "You see, she will willingly do anything within reason, particularly something in which she is interested or that she has done before. The pattern of behavior is established and all we are doing is following it. Now, watch." He turned back to the young woman. "Sing," he said.

She began to sing tunelessly, reluctantly.

Blackwood addressed his audience. "You must first implant the idea, precondition the subject if at all possible, utilizing the subject's own patterns of learning and response." He held up a hand before the young woman. "You are a singer, a popular singer. People call you a superstar. Millions buy your records and demand your personal appearance. Show us why these people admire you. Sing."

The young woman went into a half-crouch, began beating her hands on her thighs and singing one of the pop songs that every radio station seemed to be playing.

"Excellent," said Blackwood. He whispered something into the young woman's ear, stepped back and snapped his fingers.

She blinked, smiled and looked around. The students applauded.

"Thank you," said Blackwood. "You may resume your seat."

The young woman started up the aisle when Blackwood suddenly clapped his hands. The young woman immediately went into her act once more, until Blackwood again snapped his fingers. The am-

phitheatre exploded with laughter and applause.

"This demonstration merely emphasizes the points I wish you to remember," said Blackwood. "First, in behavioral science you can take advantage of inherited and environmental tendencies and you can condition the behavior through suggestion and reinforcement. In this instance, reinforcement wasn't needed but in actual practice you will find it a necessity."

A student raised his hand. "What happened afterward? When you clapped your hands?"

"Actually, posthypnotic suggestion to illustrate my second point. Once you implant a suggestion, you require some sort of trigger to set off the reaction you desire." He raised a hand. "We shall resume tomorrow with a more serious discussion of the points I have made."

Wella watched the amphitheatre empty slowly. He didn't know which branch of psychology Blackwood was teaching, but using hypnotism to emphasize his points made him very impressive.

On the platform below, Blackwood pushed some papers into his briefcase and snapped it closed. Wella started down the aisle, intending to catch him before he left. The young woman who had been hypnotized and several of her friends coming up the aisle forced him to step aside for a moment.

"He could have made me do almost anything," she said, giggling. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkling, as if she had just finished playing an exciting game.

Something flickered in the back of Wella's mind.

Below him, Blackwood stepped through a side door and disappeared, and somehow he was no longer important. Wella sat down, eyes closed, trying to dredge up the errant thought that had disturbed him. He sat there for a long time until a janitor arrived and looked at him curiously. Wella stood up. "Where's the library?" he asked.

The janitor told him.

Wella stepped out into the cold rain, which had resumed, walking slowly, not noticing.

The early dark and more rain greeted him when he left the library hours later. He stood on the steps and stretched, having acquired a slight headache from too much reading, a pleasant hunger from missing his lunch, and a confirmation of what had only been the glimmering of an idea. He glanced at his watch. He still had time to catch Blackwood at his home. He turned his coat collar up and walked across the campus to the new apartment house at the far end that was reserved for some members of the faculty.

Blackwood's name was over a mailbox in the lobby, his apartment on the fourth floor. Wella found the apartment and rang the bell.

Blackwood opened the door a few inches and started to close it again after seeing Wella.

Wella slammed a foot against it. "You have objections to talking to me?"

"Many," said Blackwood. "I do not like being followed and harassed. I saw you in my class this afternoon."

Wella pushed the door open and slid past him. "I thought you and I would have one last conversation, something to establish us on a common level."

"Not very likely."

"Why not? Communication should be one of your strong points. I enjoyed your little demonstration this afternoon."

"That follows. It was nothing more than a parlor trick to impress the freshman mind, although I would not place you in that high a category."

The livingroom was well-furnished, one wall lined with books. It was the kind of room Wella wished he could afford. He found a seat on a stool at a small bar in one corner.

"You could offer me a drink," he said.

"I thought policemen didn't drink on duty."

"This is strictly a social call."

Blackwood moved toward the bar. "If it will help get rid of you . . ."

Wella slipped off the stool and moved to the window overlooking the campus. Some of the buildings were dark, others brightly lit; night classes, people trying to get ahead; ambitious people taking advantage of opportunity.

Blackwood came up behind him. "I hope Scotch will do."

"Nicely," said Wella. He rolled the cold Scotch on his tongue appreciatively, before finishing the drink and placing the glass on a nearby table. "Now, I think we had better sit down."

"I'll stand," said Blackwood. "I don't expect you to be here long."

Wella found a chair and slid into it gratefully, the alcohol suddenly sapping his strength. He'd been awake now for almost thirty hours and the drink wasn't going to help him stay awake. He regretted asking for it.

"Suppose you tell me why you're here," Blackwood said.

"I'm here for ten thousand dollars," Wella said. "The first installment for keeping my mouth shut."

"Shut about what?"

"The fact that you, along with Mrs. Strong, killed her husband."

Blackwood chuckled. "The man

committed suicide in a locked room. He killed himself while we were still outside. I had to break the door down and there are two witnesses to testify to that. I suggest you get out now, before I call the commissioner."

"Do that," said Wella. "You'll see the whole thing go down the drain. No Mrs. Strong and her inherited money to marry, no more faculty appointments even if you're not convicted, because the publicity will hurt your career. If you want that, go ahead and use the phone."

He waited. Blackwood stood staring at him.

Wella's eyes felt heavy as the alcohol joined forces with his lack of sleep. "Suppose I spell it out for you the way I see it," he said. "I may be wrong on a few minor details but I think I have the essential points right. All Strong did when you drove up was to lock himself in the room, fire his gun into the fireplace and lie down on the floor."

Blackwood gulped down his drink. "What would make the man do something so stupid?"

"Because he was acting on a posthypnotic suggestion you planted when you saw him earlier that evening. You probably triggered it by blowing your horn when you drove up. I'm sure the Folsoms will remember, if reminded."

"Nonsense," said Blackwood. "You know nothing of hypnotism, obviously."

"I learned," said Wella. "Something like that was typical of Strong and his practical jokes and love for games. It was the kind of thing he would have done on his own, if he had thought of it. From what Mrs. Folsom told me, pretending he was dead, just to see the expression on his wife's face, wasn't beyond him. Having him do it in a trance was no problem at all and anyone who knows anything about hypnosis will agree. When you broke down that door, what the Folsoms saw was a man lying on the floor, still alive. They were in no position to see a wound. Mrs. Strong pulled her fainting act to make sure they didn't. When you went back, supposedly to check on him, you shot him in the head. My guess is that you used a silenced gun you had thoughtfully selected to match the one he had, again with Mrs. Strong's cooperation."

"A fantastic story," said Blackwood. "Just how did you determine all this? You can have no proof whatsoever. You are speculating."

"Theorizing," said Wella. "The proof can come later, if it is necessary. If no one could have killed Strong *before* the door was forced open, then he had to be killed *afterward*. You were the only one with

the opportunity. The one thing that had me stopped was how you could make him get down on that floor and stay there—until I saw your lecture this afternoon; until I spent a couple of hours in the library doing research on hypnotism. I have a pretty good idea of what can be done and what can't be done, how hypnotism is used in various fields such as your own and in medicine, for instance."

"If I had that much control of the man, I could have had him kill himself."

Wella shook his head. "It won't work that way and you know it. You can't get a person to do that even if he is strongly predisposed to it, and Strong certainly wasn't. But you had enough control to make him helpless, to make him do anything else you wanted him to do. And don't tell me the report of the gun or the sounds of breaking down the door would have snapped the trance. You had conditioned him to ignore them and he did. That can be documented, too. I can cite specific authorities on the subject."

He pulled a small notebook from his pocket and waved it gently. "The one thing I haven't puzzled out is just how you managed to hypnotize Strong when you saw him in the study. You would need some measure of cooperation to place him in a trance and he wasn't stupid enough to go along with you for no reason."

"That is exactly where your theory falls apart," said Blackwood.

Wella leaned his head back and closed his eyes for a moment. "Maybe, but if you are thinking that we might have difficulty proving you killed Strong, I suggest you consider what the testimony of other experts will do to you, especially since there would be no doubt of your capabilities. One of those books I read was written by you. Also consider that Mrs. Strong will be brought to trial with you, which means the estate will be tied up. Now, do I get the money?"

"You are fooling no one. You are asking for the money because you really have no case. You are running a bluff, Wella."

"I haven't taken the time to build a case," said Wella. "I can prove that Strong's gun did not kill him. Another gun did and I'm betting we can find out where you bought it and the silencer with it. Those things aren't readily available. Then I doubt if you could have disposed of it as yet. A search warrant will turn it up. Also we have the Folsoms, whose memories can be improved. Follow that with testimony of people like the commissioner, Castle, Dr. Martin and a few others that Strong would never commit suicide and was not the type, and

that he left no note. Finish with a convincing courtroom demonstration of hypnosis, perhaps someone doing exactly what Strong did while in a trance, and we can make things really uncomfortable for you and Mrs. Strong. No, I'm asking for the money because it is an opportunity I can't afford to pass up."

Wella felt a heavy regret. Until today, even the thought of suppressing evidence had never occurred to him, but it was the only way he could think of to get the money that would bring his wife home. By firing that shot, Blackwood had solved the marital problems of two people, Mrs. Strong and Wella. He was convinced Blackwood couldn't afford to turn him down, not when Wella was the only one who could prove Strong was murdered.

Blackwood surprised him. "There will be no money," he said shortly. He had come close and was towering over Wella, his face set.

Wella hadn't seen him move much so the short-barreled, silencer-equipped revolver now pointed at his head must have been under Blackwood's coat. It was hard to believe he intended to carry it with him constantly. It was more likely he was on his way to dispose of it when Wella walked in, which would account for his irritability.

"You're not going to solve your problem with *that*," Wella said. "It didn't work too well the first time. It won't work at all now."

Blackwood waved the gun gently before Wella's eyes, the light in the room running and flashing on the gleaming metal. Wella found his eyes fixed on it, difficult to tear away.

"Did your research tell you that alcohol was a hypnotic drug, Wella?" asked Blackwood. "I gave you a rather generous portion. You're tired, half under already, and I haven't even begun. You will do what I want you to do, go where I want you to go. You'll give me no trouble. You are sleepy, Wella, your eyes are beginning to close."

Wella tried to push himself out of the chair only to find he had little strength left. Blackwood pushed him back roughly. Wella felt a touch of panic and with it came the realization of how Blackwood had hypnotized Strong. *The drink*, he thought. *He must have put some sort of hypnotic in Strong's drink, something that would act fast and wear off quickly.* Now, Blackwood had him in the same position. Had he fixed the drink he had given him, not taking the chance that alcohol alone was enough? Wella dimly recalled reading something about a chloral derivative but the words were beyond him now.

"I did a little research of my own

since we met last night, Wella, because I believe in knowing my enemy. I had the feeling you were a man with a problem. I do not think it too impossible that a man whose wife has left him would become the victim of a fatal accident. As a psychologist, I would have to say it was highly likely. Look at the gun, Wella . . ."

Wella dragged up willpower he didn't know he had, trying to tear his eyes away from the gleaming metal, feeling himself losing, his only thought that he was tired, tired . . .

Someone rapped sharply at the door.

The sound broke the spell for a moment. The gun moved away from before Wella's eyes as Blackwood turned. It was enough. Wella reached out and swept the light from the table and the room went black. The bulb gave with a loud popping sound as Wella dove for the floor, trying to get something between himself and the gun in Blackwood's hand. He bumped into something big and soft and rolled behind it. He felt extremely tired, but alert, his heart pounding.

There was a silence in the room.

It had worked out in the worst possible way for Blackwood. He could have explained away many things but not this. Wella wondered who was at the door.

Carr's voice was concerned. "Blackwood! What's going on in there?"

Wella couldn't call him in, not in the face of Blackwood's gun. "Carr! Stay where you are. He has a gun!"

The pounding on the door stopped. Something would have to happen fast. Wella tentatively fingered his holstered gun. One thing he didn't want was a shoot-out with Blackwood.

"Blackwood," he called softly, "you have nowhere to go now." He held his breath.

"I guess you win, Wella," said Blackwood finally.

"Put the lights on and stand up with your hands empty."

"Not that way," said Blackwood. "There will be no trial." Wella heard him take a long, slow breath. "That blackmail offer was a trick, wasn't it? If I thought you were serious, I would have given you the money, but I was sure that wouldn't work."

If he wanted to think that, let him, thought Wella. But if he had offered the bribe, Wella would have taken it. Regretted it, but taken it because of what it could have done for him and because he knew he wouldn't have been caught. Only Wella and the ballistics man had seen the bullet from the fireplace and the ballistics man didn't know what he had been look-

ing at. "Yeah," he said. "It was just a trick."

"I thought so. I wouldn't like to believe I was wrong. You just aren't the type for something like that." There was the soft sound of the silenced gun and something falling heavily.

Wella pushed himself to his feet slowly and felt his way to the door, letting Carr in. Carr flicked on the light.

Blackwood was a dark, crumpled shape on the floor.

Carr indicated the body, his eyes questioning Wella.

"He killed Strong," Wella said. "Mrs. Strong was involved but the commissioner will have to decide what to do about her. I've had enough for one day."

Carr stared at him. "Strong was no suicide?"

"The only suicide is Blackwood's," said Wella. "What brought you here?"

"I've been following you all day. Commissioner's orders. I told him about your wife and that you were acting strangely and he was worried about you." He looked at Wella closely. "Are you all right?"

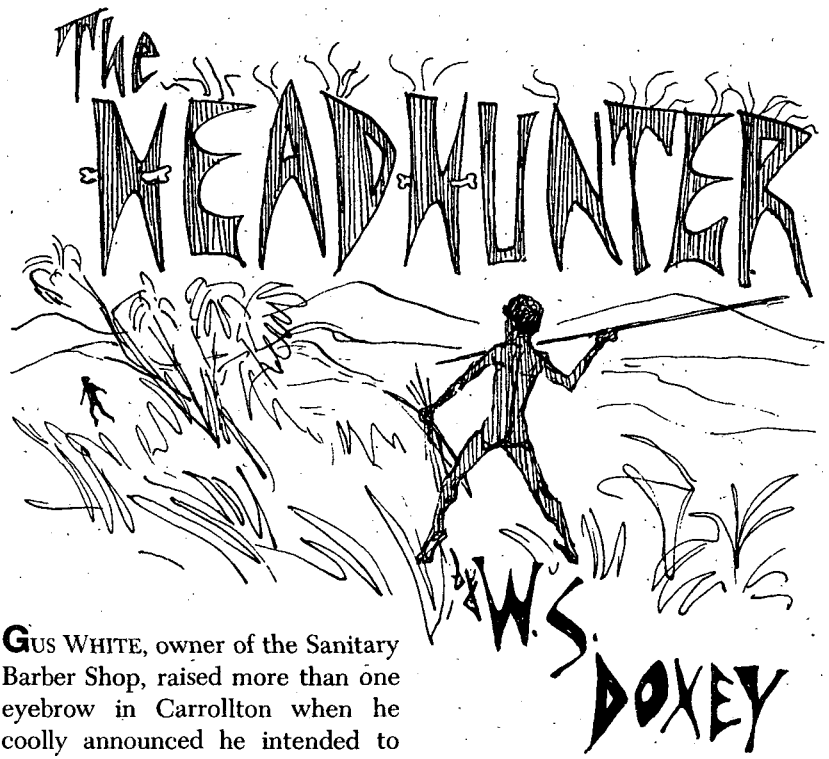
"Yeah," said Wella. Blackwood hadn't drugged his drink after all. "I will probably wake up with a hangover but I'm all right." He thought of how close he had been to giving everything up. Maybe Blackwood had been right. As a psychologist, maybe he knew more about Wella than Wella knew himself.

So my wife is gone, Wella summarized. *Let her go. Let her go with my blessing and my understanding because I see now there is no way to work it out. We all live by patterns of behavior that are difficult to change and there is little point in fighting it.* Patterns of behavior; he had one, his wife had one, everybody had one. Blackwood had taken Strong's and used it to kill him, had looked at Wella's and decided Wella couldn't be bought, so he had killed himself.

Wella smiled to himself. Some things do change. Rain in his soul, Carr had said. He'd have to tell Carr it might just be a little cloudy there, but the rain had stopped, maybe permanently.

And of the Cannibals that each other eat,
The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders.

Othello, Act I, Sc. 3



GUS WHITE, owner of the Sanitary Barber Shop, raised more than one eyebrow in Carrollton when he coolly announced he intended to calculate the number of hairs in town. He was trimming Mayor Bird's semibald pate at the time, and the mayor got a good laugh from the barber shop crowd when he said to put him in for seven. In the weeks that followed, people dropped in to ask how he was coming along, and Gus always smiled and said fine, till one day Ralph Pruitt, who manned the other chair, raised the knotty question whether those living outside the city limits

but worked in town should be included?

"And what about people passing through?" he added. "I mean, at one time of day the highway's got more traffic than another. Maybe you need a resident requirement, like voting."

"Changes with the seasons, too," Dex Richards said. Ralph was sham-

pooing his hair. "I know for a fact in summer my grocery business falls way off 'cause everybody who can goes to the beach or mountains."

"I tried the mountains last year," said Ralph. "I'm never going back. It was hotter than a A-rab."

"Man or woman A-rab?" laughed Dex.

While Ralph and Dex matched Arabian jokes, Gus went outside and leaned on a parking meter. Counting hairs! It was all he could do to keep from laughing himself sick. What fools! Some people'd fall for anything. He wished he had a truckload of goldbricks. Sell them two for twenty and make a million in no time at all.

As he considered a slogan for this new enterprise, Police Sergeant Sikes stepped from the newspaper office door down the block and waved. Gus nodded and the old man ambled over. "How's the hair count coming, Gus?" he asked.

"Reached a billion and seventeen last night. Say, you know where I can get a load of bricks cheap?"

The old policeman stuck a cigarette in his holder, scratched a light and blew a satisfied cloud of smoke from his nostrils in the general direction of his shiny ankle boots. "New ones or used?"

"Gold," said Gus.

"Old ones is hard to come by these days," said Sikes. "Folks in Sunset Hills'll pay most any price. Use them for remodeling. They like old things. Me, I go for the new, myself."

He winked knowingly and Gus smiled that he understood. Old Sikes had been seen more than once in the charming company of Naomi, a waitress at the Moose Hall, who was pushing forty, had bleached hair, and wore napkin-flowers on her apron top.

"Keep my ear to the ground, though," said Sikes.

"Thanks," Gus replied, thinking, a man with his ear to the ground will get kicked in the face.

The old policeman winked again, flipped a casual salute, and wobbled off on his rounds. Gus watched him as far as the specialty shop on the corner. Law and order—what was the world coming to? Not that Sikes wasn't a good man. He and Gus' father, now dead, had been good friends; and he had more than one notch in the handle of that ancient .38 on his hip. But good grief! Gus shook his head sadly.

A voice behind him said, "Hope that don't mean you're through for today."

Gus knew who it was without turning. Judge Sidney Green of the Superior Court, come for his weekly trim and sprinkle of bay rum. Once over light, son, and leave a little on the back for my

wife. Ho-ho! Talked like a professor in court and a hick on the street—but he had to stand for office every four years.

"Just figuring the best way to rob the People's Bank," Gus said.

The judge laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "I got a plan that can't miss."

Gus followed the portly middle-aged man into the shop. While he found a magazine and got settled in the first chair, Gus took a fresh red-striped sheet from the cabinet by the washstand and dropped his scissors and comb into the sterilizer on the counter under his barbering license. The apparatus was so lousy it wouldn't even boil hot dogs, but the judge believed the world was ruled by law.

"The way I see it," said the judge, after Gus secured the sheet about his thick neck, "main problem is the getaway. Traffic downtown's so congested you'd be apprehended in three blocks. Why, old Sikes could run you down on foot!"

The judge laughed and Gus pulled back the scissors for safety's sake and waited for the tremors to cease. Ralph Pruitt grinned and suggested a motorcycle, but Gus had a different idea.

"Thing to do," he said, "is get the money before it's in the vault. Now I'd—"

"Hold on!" Judge Green declared, bringing his hand down on the armrest like a gavel on a judicial bench. "Let me resolve the traffic problem first." He nodded to Ralph. "Motorcycle's a step in the right direction, but it don't go far enough."

"Like Gus' hair counting," laughed Dex.

"Precisely. A motorcycle's more flexible than a car, but basically it has to follow the same laws. Now—" he thrust his finger in the air and Gus had to stop clipping again, "what we need is something like the motorcycle that can move in and out of traffic rapidly, but has the extra feature of added mobility." The judge grinned happily, first at Gus, then at Ralph and Dex, and then at the newspaper editor, Manley Parkson, who had come in for a soft drink out of Gus' machine.

He probably means a horse, thought Gus. A shoot-out at the People's Bank movied through his mind. After a moment of respectful waiting, he gave the judge his cue, saying, "What'll provide all those features and not cost a million to be custom-made?"

"Why, son, don't you see? A horse!"

"A horse?" said Ralph.

Manley Parkson snorted. "How about a mule?"

"Gee whiz, your Honor, that's a hell of an idea," said Gus.

"Damn right," agreed the judge. He chuckled and got out of the chair and went to the window. "You ride straight up Bankhead Highway here to the square, pull the job, and take off down Maple. Past the railroad station you go left, and then you turn that horse loose and take off cross-country. Only road that way is Hays Mill. Why, in ten minutes you're so far into the woods it's like you jumped in a time machine and pushed 1910!" He beamed and sat down again.

Helicopters would bring you back to now plenty fast, thought Gus as he again tried to trim the judge's hair. *There was a smarter way.*

"Sid, you conspiring to commit a felony?" Manley Parkson asked.

"Dammit, Manley, it's a game we play and you know it! Why don't you go peck out an editorial about the traffic problem and leave us philosophers be?"

Manley smiled and asked Gus how the hair project was progressing.

"I'm moving at a fast clip," Gus replied, snapping the scissors above the judge's head. "Why?"

"Thought I might run a picture of you counting. Human interest angle. Say, whatever came of your plan for piping sunlight into dark places?"

Ralph laughed. "Fellow he sold on that moved to Columbus."

"Lots of sun down there," said Gus. "Closer to the equator, and you know what that means."

Manley dropped the empty bottle into the rack and headed out. At the door he paused and said, "It means you're all a bunch of nuts." He pointed at the judge. "And it means you ought to be indicted for inciting lunacy."

"Why, Manley," said Judge Green, "they're as sane as you."

Everyone, including the editor, howled at that. Dex paid Ralph and went back to his grocery store, where, he said, business was so slow he was thinking of hiring another check-out girl. *Ho-ho,* thought Gus. Dex was one of his contemporaries. They graduated from high school the same year, but he never had cut his hair—and what's more, he told himself as Ralph rang up the money, he did not give a damn if he never did.

Now the judge settled back and read a magazine story on headhunting. Gus clipped his hair and read over his shoulder. Couple of adventurers "find" themselves in New Guinea, where else, and for lack of something better, take what little money they have—five, six thousand—get outfitted and convince a noble but down-and-out Aussie crocodile hunter named Fred to guide them beyond the stinking, steaming jungles to the

misty, mysterious mountains, wherein lurk Stone-Age savages with bones through their flat noses and rancid pig-fat on their black hides, who collect heads as a hobby.

The judge was a slow reader. Gus reached the continued-on at the bottom of the page, scrutinized the blurred photos of skulls and saggy-breasted "maidens", and used the extra time to shape the shaggy gray hair at the judge's temples. He had a fine head, all things considered—Not that he'd like it on his watch chain, decided Gus. The brow was a bit prominent, but that denoted wisdom, which the judge seemed to possess, even if he read slowly and moved his lips. He was a pretty good old boy, too. Not a hanging judge, though he sent his share to the electric chair at Reedsville. He had traveled, to Europe four or five times and was planning a South American tour.

Gus finished as the judge was fumbling for the correct page in the back of the magazine. He removed the sheet with a flourish, spun the chair around, and held a mirror behind the judge's head so he could inspect the job himself.

"Hmmm, looks good," he said. "Oh-oh, there's a stray hair."

Gus nipped it neatly and patted bay rum on the back of his neck. The judge smiled at himself in the mirror. Gus turned the chair to the front, jacked it down, and the judge disembarked with as much dignity as a Roman senator stepping from a chariot onto the steps of the forum.

As he ran the whisk broom over his blue suit, Gus mentioned the bank job again. "I got to admit, your Honor, that horse idea is interesting. But don't you think it might be easier if—"

"I was raised around horses," the judge said. "Know them well as I know my profession, which may not sound like much but really is one hell of a lot, since there is no more unpredictable, cantankerous, mean and ornery creature on God's green earth than the horse. At one moment he's all sweetness and light, a joy to behold, a dream to ride. But in an instant he's transformed into a four-legged Frankenstein, hell-bent for the senseless destruction of life, limb, and personal property. More happy homes have been saddened by the depredations of horses than by demon rum and unbridled sex combined. You might say he's part of the communist conspiracy, if he didn't antedate it some millions of years. In his origins lie his character, for he is cunningly constructed to range the desolate, Godforsaken regions of the world where man may go afoot only at great peril. And now," he pulled his thin gold watch from his pants pocket and, scowling as

though discovering the works stolen, announced, "three forty-five. I got an appointment with solicitor Roy Lewis about that Bodine murder." He paid and left.

"Heaven and all the ships at sea," said Ralph. "What was that about anyhow?"

Gus rang up the dollar seventy-five. What the judge was up to was plain. The magazine had gone back to the courthouse with him. Oh well, the subscriptions were a deductible business expense—and the judge could stand a little excitement.

"And I can stand a shave," mumbled Gus. He slapped a hot towel on his face till it cooled, lathered and, after stropping his favorite straight razor, went to work. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the shops across the street. The new girl at the cosmetics shop was watching him. He had watched her, and turnabout was fair play. Give her a couple days more to build suspense and I'll ask her out, he decided.

Tommy Adamson came in and took Ralph's chair. He was a high school boy, and he and Ralph talked about how the football team was doing. "We can win the subregion," Tommy said, "if we get past Bowdon."

Gus evened his sideburns, wiped the razor on a piece of tissue paper, and patted his face with another hot towel. A pair of teen-age girls passed the window and giggled at the boy in Ralph's chair. Sweaters and skirts. Ponytails. Cute little shapes. Tommy's face went pink, then red.

"Them your honeys?" Ralph asked, winking at Gus.

"Naw. Just a couple of broads I know."

Ralph laughed and egged him on, asking if they were easy or did he have to date them more than once? Gus sprinkled a few drops of Lilac Vegetal in his palms and, rubbing his hands together, went out on the sidewalk again. It was cooler now. A wind whistled from the square, pushing dust and paper and a few brown leaves that had strayed from the park; football season and pretty soon it would be Halloween. After that, Thanksgiving. Then Christmas. Have to get something nice for Mom. New Year's. January was next and his birthday. Number thirty.

Gus crooked his elbow on a parking meter reading "violation." Thirty wasn't old. Tommy Adamson was what, fourteen, fifteen? Kid didn't know beans, not even girls. Barbers did okay in that department. Always kept themselves neat and good-smelling. For a lot of women those were qualifications enough. The NASTIES who sat in his chair! Some had lice. Most all were endowed richly with dandruff,

bad breath, and B.O. It was like being a dentist, only you didn't have to go inside to see the decay, and you didn't make the big dough.

A truck passed. Out of state tag. The driver waved. Gus nodded at the alien face. Silly nut. Everybody was trying to make contact. Nothing wrong with that, nor with being almost thirty. And it wasn't that he spent his whole life in Carrollton. He was two years with the Quartermasters in Germany. Barber's school was in Atlanta. A yellow sports car driven by a girl from the college parked in front of the dress shop next door. The girl was very nice in a sloppy way: tight sweat shirt with Greek letters, trim bellbottoms. Hair fell to her shoulders and no makeup. Gus smiled. She was just a kid, not even twenty-one. What could she know? How?

If you don't like the town why don't you move? he asked himself. I like it, I like it, I like it! he answered. I fought the battle of ha-ha Munich for it. But nothing happens. Take the hair counting. Hell of it was, they believed me!

Old Sikes turned the corner and called out, "Think I found them bricks."

"Yeah?" Gus replied. "Are they gold?"

"Plenty old. At Andy Morrow's farm. Mr. Wallace at the high school thinks Injuns made them."

"Great," said Gus. He went back into the shop. Sometimes it got so bad he seriously considered reenlisting. Lots of guys did for the same reason. What was war anyhow but cowboys and Indians? Or New Guinea and headhunters.

Ralph finished the boy and rang the money on the register. "It's after four," Gus said. "Call it a day. I'll close."

"Guess I will," Ralph replied. "The wife told me to buy some hamburger. Hey, eat with us. I got a six-pack."

Gus thanked him and said no. Emmy, Ralph's wife, was a sweet little trick, one year out of school, who worked at the phone company and was a gold mine of juicy gossip. But being single presented its problems, one of which was other men's wives. They all had unmarried girlfriends.

After Ralph had changed into his jacket and combed his hair and left, Gus pulled the blinds, slipped off his shoes, and relaxed in his chair. He wished he could finish the headhunter tale in that magazine. Judge Green surely must've moved his lips through it by now. A man of his age and education reading such trash! You'd think all the murders, rapes, and who-knows-whats he passed judgment on would satisfy him. But no, there's always something else.

A knock on the window brought

Gus out of his thoughts. He parted the blind and peered through the streaked glass into a square, quizzical face set with pale-blue eyes. It was Bobby-Bob, the town idiot. Gus opened the door.

"Hi, G-Gus," said Bobby-Bob. "G-got any b-bottles today?"

Gus started to tell him no, like he usually did when the little man stopped at his shop for empties, which he cashed in at the supermarket. But what the hell. "Take five and only five," he said.

Gus sat in the chair and watched him load the bottles into his stubby arms. He managed to pick up eight. The ninth broke on the floor. "I'll sw-sweep it up," he said.

"Don't bother, Bobby-Bob. You go on now and I'll see you later, okay?"

"Y-yeah, sure, G-Gus. Th-thanks."

Gus shut the door and watched him move down the sidewalk. Poor little guy was past forty. Once he was as normal as anyone, so the story went, but his brothers dropped him on his head. From time to time there was talk he should be sent to the state hospital at Milledgeville. But he was harmless. Bobby-Bob broke one bottle in front of the dress shop, another when he darted across the street in the path of a pickup. Brakes, but no horn; guy must've recognized him.

What was happening anyhow? "Only God knows," Gus sighed, "and he ain't telling." He glanced toward the square. There was the red brick front of the People's Bank. He fancied Judge Green in black hat and chaps galloping up to the drive-in window. *Fill up this saddlebag, ma'am, or I'll drill you twixt the legs.* A cloud of asphalt and a hearty Hi-Yo!

For a judge he's certainly stupid, decided Gus. Only a fool would risk his life for something obtainable with no risk at all. Of course, he was just a man like any other. Had his hangups. Man on horseback. Power was the thing. In the language of high school lit, he was an Achilles figure, not an Odysseus. Trojan horses didn't figure.

Gus locked up for the day and walked toward the lot beyond the square where he parked his car. As he passed the bank he thought how simple it would be for a man with imagination and daring to rob it without a hitch. This was Thursday. Friday afternoon would be the right time. He needed only a few props, which he could easily make with some lumber and the tools he had at home. It would be better than the hair scheme, or the goldbricks, and it put the sunlight deal in the shade. I'll do it, he decided.

The sudden realization that he'd committed himself to a bank rob-

bery brought him to a stop in front of McRae's Bakery. Roger McRae waved a flour-white hand. "I'm really going to do it," Gus told himself. He gave Roger a big grin and the baker came to the door with a fresh cookie.

"Try this for size," he said. "Made it from a new recipe I thought up."

Gus popped the cookie into his mouth and, smiling, walked away. Roger tugged his apron and laughed, then went inside and told his wife Lucille that Gus approved, so make ten dozen for tomorrow.

It was a good cookie. Roger had real talent when it came to baking. *Not unlike mine when it comes to banking,* thought Gus. He drove home to the neat frame house he rented on Lovorn Road, and after a beer and a quick supper of beans, bacon and eggs, he changed into work clothes, went out to the garage, and got down to business. By midnight he was finished. While the paint dried he napped, and at four in the morning he parked on the square and set up the sawhorse barricades and signs warning of construction. The large box painted green he placed against the bank wall, its sign hidden inside. During the day he would put it into position.

The sirens began screaming at 9:28 Saturday morning while Gus was shaving Andy Morrow, who had come into town to talk to him about the bricks. Gus was so excited he almost nicked the old farmer's leathery hide, but he steadied his hand and methodically scraped away the red and gray whiskers. Ralph went to the window and looked up the street.

"Something's happening at the bank," he said.

Manley Parkson rushed by, stopped, and stuck his head in the door to say, "Been a robbery! Fred Warren at People's just called!"

"I haven't seen any horses," said Gus.

But Manley was running toward the square and Ralph followed. Andy Morrow pushed the razor aside, gathered up the sheet and, his face half-white with lather, went after Ralph. Gus stood in the doorway and observed the growing crowd. It was better than a bloody four-car wreck. It was all he could do to keep from crying with laughter.

Ralph and Andy were back in ten minutes with all the facts. "It's a real mystery," Ralph declared.

"They don't know who done it," said Andy.

"Did they see them?" asked Gus, spreading fresh lather on Andy's face.

"Wasn't nothing to see."

"Oh? Then how do they know there was a robbery?"

"Money's gone, how else?" Andy said.

Gus drew the razor across the tough hairs on Andy's throat to silence him and said, "Sounds like somebody's been seeing a lot of nothing. Did they hear hoofbeats?"

Sgt. Sikes trotted in before Ralph or Andy could answer. The old man's eyes were sparkling. His cigarette was clenched in his yellow teeth, but the cigarette was stone dead.

"Any eyewitnesses here?" he asked. "Gus, you can see the square from here. See what happened?"

"Hell, I don't know what happened yet!"

"Bank's been robbed. Cleaned out the night depository. Made off with quite a bundle. Don't know exactly how much yet. You see anybody strange out your window?"

"No more strange than ordinary for a Saturday. How'd they do it?"

The old man took off his cap and scratched the back of his head. "It was real slick. They put out some signs making people think construction was going on. And then they set up a dummy deposit box and hung a sign on the real one saying 'Temporarily Out of Order. Use Other Box.' "

"What!" cried Gus, smiling. "You mean to tell me people fell for that and left their deposits?"

Sgt. Sikes replaced his hat and pulled the bill a little closer over his eyes than usual. "I'm afraid so. Why, something funny?"

Gus was laughing out loud now. "Damn sure is! And stupid! Anybody who's that big a sucker deserves it!"

"Suckers?" said the old man. He drew a breath and held it for a long moment. "Maybe they are suckers. But they're friends, too, and they lost a lot they worked hard for. If that's funny then I'm a ring-tailed monkey."

"And so am I!" said Andy Morrow. He flung the sheet on the floor and climbed from the chair, his cheeks bushy with lather.

"Hey, I'm not through with you," said Gus.

"Oh, yes, you are!"

Gus laughed. "If that's the case, there's more than one ringtail in town. Guess I'll start stocking bananas as well as magazines."

"It's too nice a day to fight," said Ralph.

"You keep on like you're going," said Andy, "and you'll have plenty of spare time for counting hairs."

"Oh?" said Gus. "Well I'm leaving yours out of the total."

"Skip mine, too," said Sikes.

"Trouble with you is, you're too damned big for your britches," Andy said. "Everybody goes along

with your harebrained schemes 'cause they feel sorry for you."

"Sorry? *They* feel sorry for *me*?"

"I'm not gonna listen to any fight," said Ralph. He went out and stood on the sidewalk.

Gus shook his head and laughed. "They're all too stupid to feel anything. And you two old goats should be in Milledgeville."

"Nobody calls me a goat!" cried Andy, brandishing a rusty fist.

"Goat, goat, goat!" said Gus.

Sikes grabbed Andy's arm. "Leave him. He ain't worth that. Come on, there's other barber shops in town."

As the two men walked out, Gus called after them, "Bye, boys, and don't take no wooden nickels!"

Two college boys passed them on the way in. Ralph took one, Gus the other. While he styled the boy's long hair with deft flicks of a razor, Gus thought about Sikes and Andy.

They were right, of course. All the way down the line. So right they were wrong, dead wrong. It was a riot! Simpletons! He'd seen some of them drop their money in and he'd picked it up about three Saturday morning. There was over ten thousand in cash and checks. He thought of Bobby-Bob. A hell of a lot of bottles. He'd planned to give it back. But now?

"Hey, man," said the college boy. "What's to do 'round here? Me and my buddy are from Atlanta, you know? This town is plaguey."

"Well, now, I'll tell you," said Gus, winking at Ralph. "Things are slow right now, but they'll start jumping soon as snipe season begins."

"Snipe?" said the boy.

"Snipe," said Gus. "Snipe hunting is one hell of an adventure. You never heard of it? Why, there was a *Playboy* article last summer."

The boy frowned, then, "Oh, *that* snipe hunting. Sure."

"Tell you what," said Gus. "Right after the first frost we'll get up a party and go, okay?"

The boy thought it was a cool idea. Smiling, Gus worked on in silence. The human head, he decided, was a marvelous invention—for growing hair.

"Siriusly" speaking, this dog is his own star.

Dogbane

I AM NOT a loquacious dog. I do not bay at the moon nor bark at my own shadow. I do not pursue vehicles in motion, yapping witlessly and gnashing my teeth at tires. I am, as dogs go, a fair cut above the average. My young friend Jeffrey, if called upon, will attest to this.

Some of the AKC snobs look down their muzzles at me because I cannot accurately place my forebears. My dam, as I recall, was a fetching mixture of Airedale and Dalmatian, and she seems to have hinted at least once that my sire was a well-to-do Irish water spaniel. But who knows what goes with these bitches?

I was hardly weaned when, one fine day, I left home for a bit of a prowl and then could not find my way back again. Ever since, I've been my own dog.

At first I found the going tough. Many a night I bedded down in an alley with an empty belly, but as I grew older and larger and wiser, I learned to provide for myself: another dog's bone here, a cat's dish of milk there, often a can of quality garbage, occasionally stuff strictly for the birds. And shelter? Well, all sorts of places—an abandoned car, a disused shed, an overturned crate.

Oh, I've wandered. Let's admit it, I'm a tramp.

Nowadays, though, I've more or less settled in the suburbs. I like it here for two reasons: dogbane is available and so is my young friend Jeffrey.

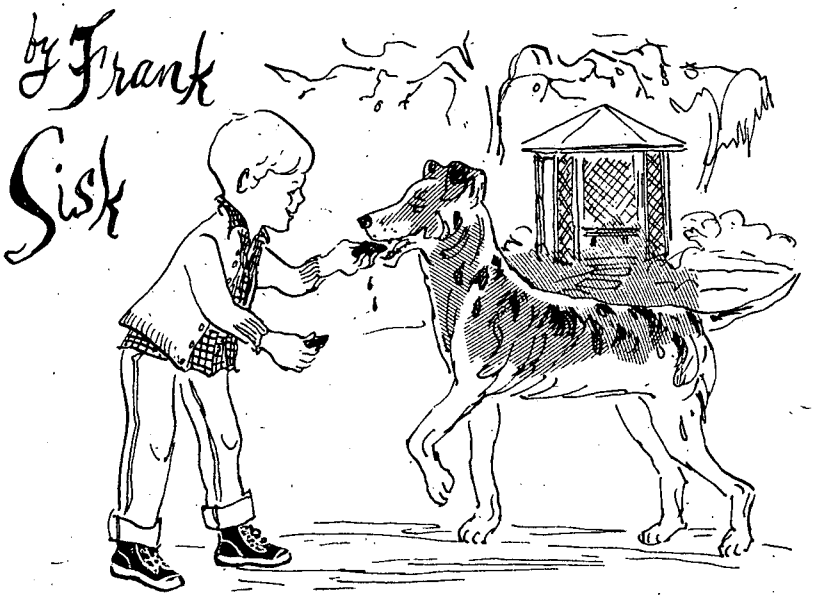
Let me tell you about Jeffrey first. He is a two-legger about my age, which is five summers, but like all two-leggers he is a mighty long time growing up. He is not yet half the size of his sire and dam. On his head he has a yellowish fur, but nowhere else; in his jaws he has very small teeth. His hands on my back

are the gentlest I've ever known.

Jeffrey does not like certain foods, such as beef liver and oyster stew. As a result, I frequently enjoy these delicacies surreptitiously when the servant named Maude is not looking. It is this sort of deal

never had an official name, like many of my species, but sometimes I have thought of myself as Ambrose. Don't ask me why.

Well, anyway, here I am with Jeffrey's companionship, interesting delicacies smuggled from his plate,



that actually brought Jeffrey and me together in the first place.

I do not belong to him, of course. As I've already said, I'm my own dog—but I began hanging around here a few months ago. I sleep in what the two-leggers call a gazebo. Nobody bothers me. I come and go as I please.

Jeffrey calls me Big Dog. His sire calls me Mutt—he seems to regard me as a good-natured joke. I've

and the shady comfort of the gazebo. Also, down at the far edge of the garden is a cluster of pink-flowering shrubs which Jeffrey's dam calls wild ipecac and honeybloom, but plain and simple dogbane is what it is. Whenever I feel depressed I chew a few of its pods and am almost immediately enveloped in a sense of euphoria. I become more perceptive. I am much better able to understand the complexities

of the two-legger's jargon. In short, dogbane fixes me up much as a spot of alcohol uplifts the spirit of Jeffrey's sire.

So it is obvious I am now better off than ever before. I was basking in this thought just the other morning when Jeffrey emerged from the back door. He called to me and I came trotting. He took me around the corner of the house, where Maude could not see us, and took three breakfast sausages from his pants pocket. They were delicious.

After that we did what we often do—took a walk along the quiet street past the other large houses set far back behind white wrought-iron fences or solid walls of clay-colored brick. We walked as far as the corner, perhaps two thousand paces away, and then turned around to go back in accordance with the constantly repeated instructions of Jeffrey's dam: *Never cross the road.*

Just then an old station wagon pulled up to the curb and came to a stop beside us. A two-legger leaned across the front seat and spoke through the rolled-down window: "Hello, kid. Remember me?"

"Yes," Jeffrey said.

"Who am I?"

"You're Carl," Jeffrey said. "You used to drive Daddy's Rolls."

I recognized Carl, too. When I first arrived at the gazebo, Carl had been the family chauffeur, driving the big car only. A few weeks later, he dropped out of sight and a small brown two-legger took his place.

"Right you are, champ," Carl was saying. "Hop in and I'll give you a lift home."

"I'm walking with Big Dog," Jeffrey said.

"Forget Big Dog," Carl said in a tone I didn't like. "Hop aboard and I'll buy you some candy."

"I'm not supposed to do that," Jeffrey said.

"The hell you say," Carl said, opening the door suddenly and grabbing Jeffrey by the arm.

I leaped forward with a show of my teeth, which aren't bad for my age, and received from Carl a painful boot in the ribs. Before I could recover, the station-wagon door was slammed shut and then the evil-smelling thing roared away with my young companion. I chased it. By all that's canicular, I chased it—but I don't have the stamina of old, and shortly the thing vanished beyond reach of my eyes and nose.

As soon as I regained my wind, I rambled back to the gazebo and took a nap. I was wakened by Maude's voice calling for Jeffrey. Trotting down to the dogbane spread, I helped myself to a few pods. Right away I began to feel stronger and smarter.

Then Jeffrey's dam joined Maude in calling his name. At noon the sire entered the driveway in a squat little car and, with his mate, started a thorough search of the grounds.

Following at their heels, I barked Carl's name six or seven times.

"I think old Mutt is trying to tell us something," the sire said. "I've never heard him bark like this before."

"Carl's the culprit," I barked.

"Too bad he can't speak," the dam said.

"I am speaking," I yipped.

"I better notify the police," the sire said.

"Yes," the dam said, and they went into the house.

That's the difference between two-leggers and four-leggers. We understand them but they don't understand us. It makes life complicated for both sides.

At any rate, I now did what I often do—prowled around the house until I came to a room in which I heard conversation and thereupon placed my forelegs on the windowsill and listened through the screen. Two-leggers call this eavesdropping, for some reason.

The sire was saying, "Do you happen to know the police number, my dear?"

"I don't. Just ask the operator and I think she'll connect you."

At that moment the phone rang.

"Yes," the sire said. "Speaking."

"Just who is this I'm talking to?" he asked.

"Now wait a minute," he said.

"Fifty thousand!" he said.

"In ten dollar bills," he said. "Yes, I understand."

"Unmarked," he said. "Now repeat those directions once again."

"You have my word for it. The police won't be notified," he said. "Now about Jeffrey. May I speak with him?"

"Oh, God, no," the dam kept saying over and over again in a tearful voice.

"Promise me then that you won't harm him," the sire said. A clicking sound followed. "Our son has been kidnapped." He spoke in a sad, flat tone. "I've got to get to the bank before it closes."

"Oh, our poor darling," the dam cried. "Who could do such an awful thing?"

"The voice was muffled," the sire said, "but somehow it sounded familiar."

"It's Carl," I barked. "The dirty dog-kicker."

They ignored me.

"I better get started," the sire said.

"I'll go with you," the dam said.

"I think you better remain here, in case there's another call. And don't breathe a word of this to Maude or anyone else. I'll be back

with the money in about an hour."

"When will we get our baby back, dear?"

"I'm supposed to leave the money in a phone booth near Exit Seventy on the Connecticut Turnpike at exactly six o'clock tonight. We should have Jeff home for dinner."

A minute later the sire sped away in the squat car.

Depressed, I wandered back to the dogbane. Normally I don't touch the milky sap, but this was not a normal occasion. I bit into a stem and chewed it to a sweet mushy pulp and swallowed. *Wow,* as they say.

Almost instantly my memory produced the powerful odor of sand flats. I could smell the wet kelp and the empty clam shells and the dead fish so sharply that when I looked around I was quite surprised not to see a wide expanse of salt water.

For a spell the sand-flat remembrance meant nothing to me. Then, as often happens among us canines on dogbane, a vision of the time and place came abruptly to mind. The time: this morning; the place: down at the end of the street. *I had smelled the sand flats on the tires of Carl's station wagon.*

In the name of Fido, I thought, here's a clue, a real honest-to-goodness clue. So, by Rover, let's act on it.

Without further ado I left the neighborhood and made for the sea. Within an hour I was getting a faint whiff of salt water. Ten minutes later I was standing on a sand dune and listening to the screeches of gliding gulls.

It's one whale of a lot of shoreline, I thought, so I'd better not waste any precious time.

I'd spent one entire summer of my life following the tides and feeding richly on fish, crabs and oysters. The area was not unfamiliar to me. I turned away from the sun and started my search. Behind me were fancy yacht clubs and private beaches. Ahead, as I recalled, were many empty expanses of marshland crisscrossed by tiny inlets, with an occasional marina to break the monotony and now and then a weather-beaten house standing shakily on a foundation of stilts. This was the type of geography I'd sniffed on the station-wagon wheels.

It was a long, hot afternoon. What little water I found to drink was brackish. I took a few swims to cool off but always I kept heading due east. I could tell by the slant of light that it was well past midafternoon and still I hadn't sniffed out my quarry. I did raise a brace of dreamy ducks while plunging through a canebrake, and a filthy white cat, its arched back bristling,

hissed at me from the shards of an old skiff—but not one of my own kind appeared at all.

Not in a long while have I spent such a fatiguing afternoon. Only my abiding affection for Jeffrey kept me going. Then, when I was nearly tempted to curl up for a nap on a cool clump, I was rewarded. I dug up, as we say, the big bone.

It happened as I was trudging up a sandy slope to obtain a wider view of my immediate surroundings. The sound of a motor starting up cut through the heated stillness. I gazed northward, listening, nostrils alert. I soon discerned the top half of a station wagon moving slowly behind a dune. I dropped low on my belly and watched from between my forelegs. Where the dune flattened out, the wagon emerged. Carl, the booter of dogs, was at the wheel. He was making slow and bumpy progress over a narrow, deeply pitted road not much wider than a sidewalk, and Jeffrey was not with him—he was not visible to me, at least. In a few minutes the wagon disappeared behind another dune in quest, obviously, of a better highway.

I promptly began to reconnoiter the grounds. Within moments I caught Jeffrey's scent and followed it rapidly to a clapboard boathouse bleached white by the wind and the sun and listing leeward as if ready to collapse from the infirmities of old age. Two-thirds of the boathouse rested on the beach, while the other third extended out over the water on piers of rock. I tackled it from the dry side. A fairly new duckwalk ran from the pitted road to a ramp of rotten wood. The ramp sagged up to an unpainted double door, which was secured by a shiny new padlock.

I explored the easterly side of the building. The walls were composed of decaying planks held together, it seemed, by the moods of the offshore breeze. There were apertures in some places as wide as my muzzle. I poked my nose into one of these. Jeffrey was there all right, but the interior gloom made him invisible.

Finally I barked—twice: "Jeff . . . ree."

"Big Dog," his small voice said, far off, from some remote corner of the place.

"Yes," I answered.

"I'm hungry," he said, a catch in his voice. "I want my mommy."

"Don't worry," I said, feeling no confidence. "I'll get her in a moment."

He began to cry then.

I scurried around to the western side of the building. There were no apertures there at all, just knotholes. Wading into the water, I swam out about a dozen feet and

looked up. The seaward side of the boathouse presented a warped ramp raised to a crumbling roof. Functionally it was meant to be lowered into the water at high tide to make it easy to slide out a boat. Even if I could have leaped that high. . .

The tide was coming in, I noticed, as I paddled back to the spongy shore.

Well, there was only one thing left to do. I'd have to gnaw away at one of the apertures until it was large enough to let me crawl through.

Have you ever tasted desiccated wood on which sea worms have been feeding for decades? Probably not—and don't ever. Anyway, I gnawed for what seemed hours, slowly making headway, until I heard the station wagon approaching from the distance. Instantly I sought concealment behind a nearby clump of seaweed. The station wagon appeared a few moments later and came to a stop beside the duckwalk. Carl opened the door and got out. Before he closed the door again, I saw on the seat an attaché case and guessed that it contained the sire's money.

Carl walked to the padlocked door, taking a key from his pocket. Jeffrey was not crying now—maybe he'd fallen asleep. It was so quiet I could hear my own heart beat. The click of the padlock opening was like a clap of thunder.

Carl swung the doors open—they sagged on their rusty hinges. He entered. I crept toward the ramp.

Inside it was still the color of dusk, but after a time I was able to see Carl's shadow moving through slats of light that leaked from the splits in the planking. And I saw Jeffrey too. He was a small bundle lying in a dark corner.

I inched inside the place and crawled silently toward a protective shadow. Jeffrey was crying softly again. I wanted to tell him I was close, but of course I couldn't.

Carl was operating some sort of squeaky device at the far end of the place—a pulley, as was soon proved—for suddenly the boat ramp separated from its juncture with the roof and began a creaking descent toward the water. Light poured in. I saw Jeffrey clearly now and he saw me. His hands and feet were bound together with rope. For a two-legger, he was pretty smart—smart enough not to say a word. As a result, Carl did not know I was there. His back was toward us and he was working away at a winch.

At that moment I was visited by a flash of insight. Carl was going to toss my small companion into the water and let him drown. With this conviction I got to my feet, all one hundred and twenty pounds of me.

Jeffrey didn't call me Big Dog for nothing.

The ramp hit the water with a resounding splash. Carl began to turn just as I leaped forward. He saw me coming a second before I launched myself like a missile into the air but it was too late for him to do anything about it. I struck him hard in the chest. He let out a gulping gasp and went over and out the opening. I went with him, riding him like a surfboard. We hit the lowered ramp first and then slid swiftly down into the water. The tide was running high now and Carl went under headfirst. I got off and swam to the shore.

I stood there, shaking the water off my hide, and waited for Carl to bob up. I waited quite a while. He didn't appear. Satisfied at last, I ran back into the boathouse and gnawed the ropes off Jeffrey's hands and helped him with those around his ankles. He was a tired and hungry boy, I tell you, but he followed me out of there and up the pitted road between the sand dunes and out onto the main highway.

Almost right away we got a ride in a car driven by a young female two-legger with a very kind voice. She asked Jeffrey his name and wanted to know what he was doing alone out on this road with night coming on.

"I'm not alone," he told her. "I got Big Dog with me." Then he tried to tell her what had happened, but he wasn't very good at it and she didn't seem to understand any of it. All she really got out of him was his name and address—then she drove us home.

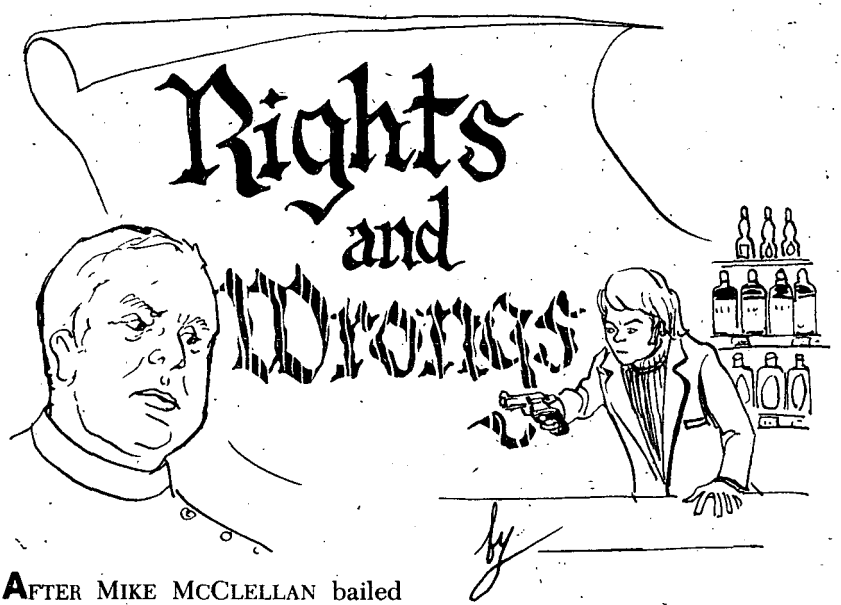
Later that night Jeffrey tried to tell the story to his sire and dam, but they didn't believe much of it, particularly the part I played in it. They remained skeptical until the next morning when the police came to report that they had found the station wagon, the ransom money and Carl's body.

For lunch I had a sirloin steak all to myself. After that I walked around the garden with Jeffrey.

His sire and dam watched us from the gazebo.

"Mutt and Jeff," the sire said to the dam, and they laughed. They laughed a lot.

It is wise to remember the mistakes of others in a key situation.



by Jack Ritchie

AFTER MIKE MCCLELLAN bailed out his kid brother Andy, he brought him to me. "This is your lawyer now," he told him. "He works for the organization and he's a specialist when it comes to stupid trouble like yours."

"What seems to be the problem?" I asked.

Mike indicated his brother. "He got himself caught trying to hold up a drugstore."

Andy was about nineteen, thin, and well-dressed. He looked out of the window.

Mike shook his head sadly. "Don't I give the kid everything? Money? Just ask. The Ferrari; the Karmann Ghia convertible; clothes;

the best female companionship. And still he's got to rob a drugstore."

"Maybe he was looking for drugs?"

"No," Mike said firmly. "I check his arms every day—and other places. I don't allow dope in the family."

I turned to Andy. "Why?" I asked. "Why?"

Andy shrugged. "I don't know. I had a couple of drinks. Just seemed like a good idea at the time. I mean for the excitement—like in the old days that Mike always talks about."

Mike looked worried. "You don't think it's in the genes, do you?"

I got out a pad and paper. "Tell me what happened, Andy."

Andy sighed. "Well, I waited until nobody was in this store but me and the owner. I was in the back where the patent medicines are, and finally the druggist comes over and asks what he can do for me. I make sure that nobody sees me from the street, then I pull the gun and tell him it's a stickup."

Andy rubbed at a red spot on his neck. "The druggist is a big guy, and quick. The next thing I know, he's got the gun and he's sitting on my chest with his hands around my throat."

I made a note of that. "Ever been arrested before? Got a record?"

"No. Nothing until this."

"Is the gun yours? Is it registered in your name?"

"No. It was just a thing I picked up from a guy for thirty bucks." Andy cleared his throat and winced at the operation. "Well, anyway, the general commotion and the shot attracted attention. Four people from the haberdashery next door came rushing in."

"There was a shot?"

"Yes, when he grabbed the gun away from me. Nobody was hurt though; the bullet went into the ceiling."

"Four people rushed into the store?"

"Right. Then this druggist—Morgan is his name—pulls me to my feet and says, 'This is a citizen's arrest. You are my prisoner.' "

Mike looked at me. "Could he do that? Not be a cop and still arrest Andy?"

I nodded. "He was grandstanding for his audience, but it's legal. A citizen has the right to arrest anyone he witnesses in the act of committing a felony."

Andy shifted uneasily. "Well, it looked to me like Morgan was going to resume the grip around my throat. At a time like that you don't think about tomorrow. You think about the next breath and I wasn't so sure he was going to let me have it. So I said it. In front of the witnesses."

"You said what?" I asked him.

"I said, 'All right, all right. So I tried to hold up your crummy store and it didn't work. That's no reason to kill me.'"

We were all silent for a while. Then I sighed. "What happened next?"

"One of the people called the cops and they got there in three minutes. I was glad to see them."

"What did you tell the police?"

"Nothing. I clammed up. They weren't about to choke me."

We drove to the courthouse and left Andy in the car while Mike and I went to the D.A.'s office to see if things were as bad as they looked. I was directed to Assistant District Attorney Chesson.

Chesson and I had met a number of times in court and he was not exactly one of my admirers. However, he smiled. "Look, we don't want to go hard on the kid. He's a first offender—he just made a mistake. Have him plead guilty and I'll ask the court to go easy. He'll get probation. You have my word for that."

I knew one thing. Chesson's word was good.

I knew another. Chesson didn't much like the organization or anybody named McClellan. Why was he doing this favor?

"We'll sleep on it," I said. "I'll let you know tomorrow."

Outside, Mike McClellan frowned. "I don't want to tell you your business, but the offer sounded good to me."

I nodded. "If keeping Andy out of jail is all that you want. But if he pleads guilty, he'll still have a record. Do you want that?"

Mike thought about it. "No. Not if I can help it."

When I got back to my office, I phoned the Wilson Detective Agency and asked for a quick check on Morgan, the druggist.

At four that afternoon, Wilson phoned in his report.

I listened to what he had to say and only one thing made any impression. Morgan had been arrested twice for assault and battery when he was still in his teens.

I drove to the Northfield Shopping Center, parked my car, and strolled the perimeter of the parking lot until I found Morgan's drugstore. Inside, I wandered back to the patent medicine section and waited until Morgan came to me.

"Is this where it happened?" I asked. "The holdup? I read about it in the papers."

Morgan nodded, pleased with the recognition. "Right on this spot. He pulled a gun on me and I took it away from him." He indicated a hole in the ceiling. "The cops dug a bullet out of there."

"You made a citizen's arrest?"

"Sure. It's the common-law right of *any* citizen."

"Of course. So you arrested this man whom you allege had been trying to rob you?"

Morgan frowned at my use of the word *allege*. "Who are you?"

"I'm the defendant's lawyer."

He turned cold. "I don't have to talk to you."

"Perhaps not. At least not here. However, I thought that we might as well clear up a few things now to save you embarrassment later in court. Unless, of course, you're afraid to answer questions?"

He reacted in the typical big-man way. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"Good," I said. "When this alleged holdup occurred there were only the two of you in the store?"

"That's right. Just me and the defendant."

"Then it is just your word against his that this incident ever occurred in the way that you claim it did?"

Morgan smiled confidently. "Four people besides me heard him admit that he tried to rob the store."

"But did they *see* him point the gun at you?"

"Well . . . no."

I nodded pleasantly. "This gun you speak about. Perhaps you could tell me more about it?"

"Me? What would I know about his gun? Why don't you ask him?"

I blinked. "*His* gun? According to my client, he never saw it before until this incident. He maintains that it dropped from your pocket and discharged during the struggle." I frowned thoughtfully. "I suppose the police have the gun now?"

"Sure. They took it along."

"And *your* fingerprints are on the gun?"

"Well . . . yes. I grabbed it away from him. My fingerprints would be on the gun, but so would *his*."

I pondered on that. "Rather a cold day yesterday. Below freezing. I wonder if my client wore gloves? I'll have to ask him." I smiled again. "My client claims that the entire incident seemed to occur because he tried to return a bottle of Father John's cough medicine for a refund. The two of you quarreled and suddenly you grasped him by the throat and hurled him to the floor—at which time the so-called witnesses entered the picture."

Morgan seemed about to explode.

"Mr. Morgan," I said, "isn't it true that you have a very short temper?"

"No, damn it. Not particularly."

"Weren't you arrested twice for participating in barroom brawls?"

"But that was over thirty years ago!"

"Of course," I said. "Did you know that the defendant has absolutely no criminal record of any kind?"

"There's always a first time."

"Did you know that the defendant is quite generously provided for by his brother? He is given all the money he wants. Why would he want to rob your drugstore?"

"Maybe he was after drugs."

"I am ready to submit my client to a medical examination. He is not a dope addict."

Morgan played his trump card again. "He confessed before me and four other witnesses."

"Ah, yes," I said. "After you had arrested the defendant. Just what did you say that enabled you to make the arrest?"

"I said, 'This is a citizen's arrest. You are my prisoner.' "

"Just those words? Nothing more?"

"Just those words. They're enough. Then I had somebody call the cops."

I rubbed my jaw. "Not another word?"

"None. I didn't *need* any more than that."

So that was it, I thought. *The little flaw in the case, and the reason that the assistant D.A. had been so willing to accept a guilty plea.*

I tried to look shocked. "You mean to say that after you arrested the defendant you did not inform him of his rights? His *right* to remain silent? His *right* to an attorney?"

His mouth dropped slightly. "I never thought . . . I mean, this was a *citizen's* arrest and I don't think you *need* to . . ." He seemed to be sweating. "Besides, when the police got here, *they* informed him of his rights. I heard them myself."

"Yes, but that was *after* this alleged confession, wasn't it?" I clicked my tongue. "Surely you must be aware of the Miranda Decision? A confession obtained before an arrested person is informed of his rights is not admissible in court. The Supreme Court justices made no distinction between the arrests made by the regular authorities and those made by private citizens, now did they?"

There was a silence while he glared.

I smiled. "It would be extremely embarrassing for you if I brought up this point in court—before all of your friends and neighbors—the world, so to speak. Instead of a hero, you would be a . . . what?"

Morgan looked a little ill.

"A fool? In front of all those people?" I shook my head sadly. "So what do we really have here? The word of a young man who has no motive whatsoever for robbery against that of a man with a short

temper and a record for assault. We have an *alleged* holdup, but no actual witnesses to prove that it occurred."

I allowed another silence.

I smiled again. "Now isn't it better to forget and forgive? Suppose we phone the D.A.'s office and explain that the whole thing was just a misunderstanding and that the defendant will not press charges."

"Press charges?"

"Yes," I said. "For assault and battery."

He sighed and reached for the phone.

When I left Morgan, I walked on to a restaurant several doors down the square.

I took a table next to the window and waited for the waitress. I glanced outside.

I watched this kid in the black leather jacket wandering slowly among the cars in the parking lot, his eyes interested.

I had an idea what he was looking for. Ignition keys still in the cars.

When would people learn to—

He stopped at my car, hesitated only a second or two, and then slid inside. A wisp of smoke from the exhaust told me that he had started the engine.

I jumped from my chair, raced out of the restaurant and into the parking area.

He was just about to pull out when I reached through the open window, turned off the ignition, and pulled out the key.

"Hey," the kid said. "What the hell . . ."

Half a dozen interested spectators moved in to see what was happening. Obviously I was the center of attention.

I rose to the occasion. "This is a citizen's arrest. You are my prisoner."

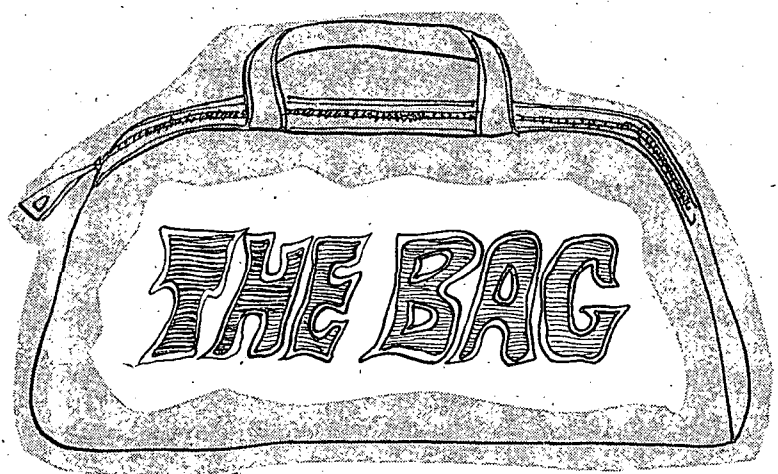
His mouth opened and there was no telling what he might say—possibly even confess.

I quickly held up my hand. "You have the right to remain silent. If you do not choose to remain silent, you may be represented by an attorney of . . ."

I recited the entire warning.

After all, I didn't want the punk to get away with trying to steal my car just because of some lousy technicality.

On land or sea, it is far easier to excavate than to extricate.



by Patrick O'Keeffe

UNLIKE DIOGENES, Captain Meed didn't go looking for an honest man, but, to his bitter sorrow, he found one, and not with a lantern but with a bag.

It was a small, zippered bag of brown leather and, packed with the usual duty-free bottle of whiskey and the Atlantida brand of cigarettes his wife liked, it lay then on the settee as the captain dogged down his cabin ports before leaving for home. As soon as the chief mate came up from the messroom to report that the paying-off of the crew was finished, he'd be on his way.

The captain looked around as footsteps sounded in the passage. He expected to see the chief mate,

but it was a clean-shaven, dark man of forty or so who appeared in the open doorway, smartly dressed in a cream-colored summer suit with broad yellow tie.

"Remember me, Captain—Al Wycka?"

He came in with an aggressive step, a brown straw hat in one hand, the other extended. The captain took the hand limply, trying to hide his annoyance; he was a broad-beamed, dour-looking man of fifty, with a purple-streaked, fleshy face and double chin. Wycka had come north from the Caribbean isle of Atlantida on the *Conte's* previous voyage, and apparently had dropped aboard for a social call.

"You just caught me in time. I'm about to leave for home," said the captain, hoping his former passenger would take the hint.

Wycka shot a glance at the bag and the tweed hat waiting beside it. "I made a special trip over to see you, Captain. I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a few minutes." He paused. "What I have to say may be well worth your time to listen to."

Captain Meed frowned. It was midafternoon, and he was tired and anxious to go home and rest. It had been a long, hot day, starting with the moment he was called at four o'clock for the Ambrose pilot, docking the ship throughout the breakfast hour, spending the forenoon around the steamship line's Manhattan offices and at the customhouse, entering the ship. Wycka's urgent tone and manner, however, stirred up enough curiosity to counter weariness. "Sit down."

Wycka looked significantly at the door. The captain stepped over and closed it, and then sat down in his desk chair. Wycka eased himself onto the settee, beside the bag, and came straight to the point.

"Captain, would you be interested in making five thousand dollars in cold cash?"

The captain stared. "In what way?"

"By taking fifty thousand dollars in gold bars aboard your ship to Atlantida."

"You mean unmanifested?"

Wycka nodded. "Hence the five thousand."

Captain Meed's eyes narrowed. "Why did you come to me?"

"For one thing, yours is one of the few ships calling regularly at Atlantida. Another is that during the few days I was aboard, you told me a little about yourself—family obligations, big drop in salary. I wanted to give you first chance to pick up some needed cash."

Captain Meed recalled having told Wycka during a spell of depression that his salary was little more than half of what it would be

aboard an American ship. His first command had been with an American company formed during the wartime demand for ships, but the firm had gone under in postwar commercial competition with older and more experienced lines. He'd been glad to get command of the Liberian-registered banana boat *Conte* as the alternative to sailing as third mate of some American-flag vessel.

"You figured I was an easy mark for a bribe," he said sourly.

Wycka grimaced. "A commission, Captain. I'd be willing to ship the gold in the normal manner, pay freight and insurance, but the gold was obtained from unlicensed sources, so asking for a government permit to export it is out of the question. And then there are the restrictions on importing gold into Atlantida. So I'm offering you a good commission to waive the formalities."

"For breaking the law, is the way I see it."

Wycka smiled deprecatingly. "If that's what troubles you, Captain, allow me to point out that all kinds of people are breaking the laws in these times—clergymen, newspapers, university professors—all claiming the right to disobey laws they're opposed to. Some monetary experts don't hold with the gold restrictions. If you side with them and ignore the law, you'll be in good company."

Captain Meed fell silent. Wycka continued persuasively. "You'll simply be using your position as captain for your own advantage, and you'll be in more good company. Public officials, judges, union officials—all use their office to benefit themselves. You read about them almost daily in the newspapers when someone oversteps himself. Men play it smart nowadays and take whatever comes their way. I'm putting something your way, Captain. Why not play it smart too?"

Captain Meed wavered. He'd never yet used his position as captain for his own gain, but then he'd never before been so desperately in need of ready cash. He could use that five thousand. He'd borrowed to the limit on his life insurance. The mortgage was due on the new house he'd bought before he lost his old command, stocked with new refrigerator and freezer, washing and drying machines, a raft of appliances and every gadget his wife could think of, color TV console, all on monthly payments. College fees for his two sons were to go up, his daughter to be outfitted for her freshman year, his wife spending money as wildly as though he were still on the old salary. That five thousand could give him a breathing spell.

The captain turned to his desk. Picking up a pencil, he started figuring on a note pad. "Fifty thousand at around forty dollars an ounce—"

"That's the market rate," interrupted Wycka. "It has to be worked out at the official United States rate of thirty-eight dollars a troy ounce."

Captain Meed made hurried calculations. Turning back to Wycka, he said, "It comes to around 110 pounds. I could hardly stow that under my mattress."

"Surely there must be some way."

The captain hesitated. "What's the gold to be used for? Explosives for the terrorists, buying dope, or what?"

"Captain, to ease your mind on that score, I'll tell you, though if you repeat to others what I'm about to say, I'll deny ever having said it. During my voyage north, I told you I represented a commercial syndicate seeking a certain concession. It was for gambling rights, to open casinos throughout the island. To get the concession, the syndicate must pay fifty thousand dollars to a certain party. He won't take paper money because of a fear he's got about exchange-rate fluctuations, devaluation, the government calling in the old currency and issuing new. He wants the gold in American grade of fineness and in bars of not more than fifty ounces each. I saw you had Atlantida lottery tickets, so I know you've got nothing against gambling."

"I take it you'd have the gold put aboard under wraps, but what about down in Atlantida?"

"Nothing to worry about. That's all been arranged by the party it's going to. It's all ready for shipping aboard, according to whatever instructions you give. If—"

He broke off as someone knocked on the door. It was opened by the chief mate, a thickset, middle-aged man wearing an officer's khaki-topped cap.

"Payoff's all finished, Cap'n. No beefs to be settled." Smiling at the captain's visitor, he said, "Hi, Mr. Wycka. Nice to see you again."

"Nice to see you too, Mr. Moar. I was passing, and thought I'd drop aboard to say hello to Captain Meed."

The chief mate lingered, but the captain didn't invite him in. He withdrew, closing the door.

"You don't seem very friendly toward Mr. Moar," remarked Wycka. "I noticed it during my trip."

"He was chief mate here when old Captain Lund died at sea. He expected to stay in command. He'd sell his soul to get something on me."

"Would he be much of a problem?"

"Enough to make me want more time to think it over."

"How much?"

"Tomorrow morning. Maybe tonight."

Wycka drew a notebook from the inside pocket of his cream-colored jacket and scribbled a number. Tearing off the leaf, he handed it to the captain. "Phone me any time after seven, or before nine in the morning."

Captain Meed slipped the paper inside his wallet and rose. He reached for the bag and his hat lying on the settee. Wycka stood up.

"My car's outside, Captain. Could I give you a lift?"

"Up to the bus stop. My wife usually drives down for me, but while I was away on the last voyage, the car didn't pass inspection."

Wycka smiled confidently. "She'll be driving you home in a brand-new one next time you come in."

At the pier gate, the uniformed customs guard walked over when he saw the bag, but stepped aside after glancing at the captain's declaration slip, saying, "Okay, Cap'n." The bus stop was at the top of the truck-scarred road that wound from the Jersey-side pier across the freight-train tracks and up to the highway. Wycka stopped alongside the curb, letting the captain off and handing the bag out to him, and then headed for the Lincoln Tunnel.

Captain Meed walked along to the adjacent telephone booth to let his wife know he was on the way home, but turned back when the bus suddenly hove into sight. As it sped him toward his new home in rural New Jersey, he became so enwrapped in weighing the ins and outs of Wycka's tempting offer that he was almost at his stop before he became aware of the fact. He started for the door without the bag; a woman called him back, but she was an honest woman, not the honest man.

As the captain let himself into the red-brick house, his curly-wigged wife came to greet him, wearing a new dress and looking as if she'd just come back from adding to the beauty-parlor bill.

"We really must get a *new* car and then I can come for you," she said. "And it's such a nuisance shopping at the supermarket and having to carry things home." She relieved him of the bag.

Would she never get it into her extravagant head that with his present salary and bills they'd be lucky if they could afford a *used* car? he asked himself irritably. If he picked up that five thousand, it would never do to let her know, apart

from being unable to reveal how he came by it. She'd run through it in a week. Nor would it do to bank it either, in this small, gossipy neighborhood. It should go into a safe-deposit box, to be drawn on as the need arose.

With his thoughts already inclining toward acceptance of Wycka's offer, Captain Meed came to his decision while pretending to read the evening newspaper as his wife prepared dinner. Later in the evening, when his wife was listening to the news broadcast on the color console, he slipped out to the hall telephone and dialed the number on Wycka's slip. Wycka answered after the first ring.

"I'll take the shipment," said the captain.

"Fine!" Wycka sounded immensely gratified.

"Put it into two suitcases, no labels, and locked. That'll make it easy for one man to handle if necessary—me, if I have to. Sailing time is four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Have them delivered about an hour before then. That's important."

"Will do. And as soon as you've sailed, I'll cable the interested party to be prepared at his end."

"About the commission—"

"I'll bring it aboard as soon as the suitcases are safely on the ship. I'll be parked outside the pier gate, watching."

"What I was going to say is that I want it in small bills—tens, fifties, hundreds, like I get in my pay envelope; nothing larger. Big bills might start talk about shipboard rackets if banked or cashed in my neighborhood."

"That can be arranged."

Toward nine o'clock next morning, Captain Meed returned aboard with the bag, now containing a couple of new khaki uniform shirts and black socks, and odds and ends such as toothpaste and razor blades. He left it on the settee for unpacking later and went over to Manhattan to clear the ship at the customhouse and call on the marine superintendent and other of the line's department heads.

He got back to the ship after the lunch hour. Close to three o'clock he stood at an open porthole of his cabin, which overlooked the foredeck and the gangway. The six passengers booked for Atlantida were aboard, the longshoremen had finished loading general cargo and steamed ashore, and the sailors were topping up the derricks, sweating under the fierce sun. The chief mate was giving some instructions to the carpenter about battening down.

Presently an unmarked van drove down the pier and stopped at the foot of the gangway. The driver jumped off, clutching a delivery

sheet. The chief mate intercepted him as he reached the top of the gangway.

"Two suitcases for the *Conte*," the captain heard the driver say.

The chief mate glanced at the delivery sheet and then asked, "Who are they for?"

The driver shook his head. "All I know is, the delivery service I work for told me to run two suitcases over to the *Conte*."

The whine of a winch hauling up a derrick drowned out the chief mate's reply. He beckoned to two sailors and sent them down to the van. Each returned with a large-sized suitcase of black leather and set it down on the deck. The chief mate glanced over them, looking puzzled.

"Wait here," he said to the driver.

The chief mate started toward the ladder to the bridge deck. Captain Meed promptly turned away from the porthole and appeared to be busy at his desk when the chief mate knocked and came in.

"A van just brought a couple of suitcases for us. No names or labels on them. Nor anything on the delivery sheet showing who they're for."

Captain Meed made a gesture as of impatience with himself. "I forgot to tell you. They're for Atlantida. To be treated as over-carried baggage but not manifested. Someone down there will see to landing them."

"Monkey business," grunted the chief mate.

The captain shrugged. "It looks like it. But I do what I'm told by the office and ask no questions. The line has to play ball now and then with some official down in Atlantida wanting a favor done."

"Or else," said the chief mate sardonically. "Where do you want 'em stowed?"

Captain Meed appeared to think. "Maybe you'd better stow them in the spare cabin, so they won't get mixed up with the regular baggage and maybe cause a foul-up."

The chief mate went out. Captain Meed returned to the porthole and saw him sign the delivery sheet and heard him tell the sailors to take the two suitcases up to the deck officers' quarters. The spare cabin was two doors along from the captain's, and was used for storing officers' trunks and bags and an occasional piece of special cargo. Captain Meed kept to his cabin while the sailors were bringing up the suitcases and stowing them, and he barely looked around as he acknowledged the chief mate's announcement from the doorway that the job was done.

Captain Meed felt confident that his feigned forgetfulness and indifference to the suitcases would keep

the chief mate from suspecting that he had a personal interest in them and trying to find out more about them.

Wycka came aboard about ten minutes later, carrying a brown attaché case, wearing the cream-colored suit but with a pink tie. He laid the attaché case on the settee, moving the captain's bag aside, and opened it while the captain closed the cabin door. Wycka took out a bundle of currency bound with rubber bands.

"Mostly tens, twenties, fifties, with a few hundreds," he said, handing the bundle to the captain.

"Thanks," said the captain

avidly. He slipped the money into a desk drawer, his dour face brightening. He turned toward the liquor cabinet. "Feel like a snorter?"

"Thanks, but I must be on my way." Wycka then closed the attaché case and held out four brass keys. "For the suitcases, in case the interested party would like to unlock them instead of breaking them open." Wycka then thrust out a hand. "Good luck, Captain. If your ship's in Atlantida when the first casino is opened, you'll be the special guest of the syndicate."

As Captain Meed opened the door to let out his visitor, the chief mate was passing. He stopped on seeing Wycka, looking surprised.

"Going south with us?" he asked.

Wycka smiled. "No such luck. I happened to be passing this way again. I didn't realize it was so close to sailing time."

The chief mate walked along the passageway with Wycka, while Captain Meed hooked back the door, biting his lip. This was the second time the chief mate had found Wycka inside his cabin with the door closed—and right after the two suitcases had come aboard. Wycka's remark had made it appear that he'd come aboard by chance again and not by design, but if the chief mate put two and two together, there was no telling what he might make them add up to.

The captain turned to the bag resting on the settee. He unpacked it and stowed it on the floor of his clothes locker. He hoped that when he went home again with it, his worries would be over.

Three weeks later, when the *Conte* arrived back at her Jersey-side pier, there was a plain envelope in the captain's mail, and inside were ten one-hundred-dollar bills, with a note saying that the shipment had reached the interested party, and that the enclosed was a special bonus for a job well done. The captain tore up the note.

He was not only grateful but relieved. The chief mate seemed to have been not overly curious when two porters, undoubtedly specially assigned, had come for the suitcases in Atlantida and mixed them in with the passenger baggage, obviously to be removed before reaching the customs shed. But sometimes American consuls get wind of things and drop a word in the right quarter. This had evidently not happened. His worries were at an end.

That afternoon, however, as Captain Meed was preparing to leave for home, he underwent a few moments of apprehension. The chief mate had reported the crew payoff finished, and the bag, packed with the usual bottle of whiskey and cigarettes, lay on the settee beside

his hat. Closing the cabin door, he took the bundle of currency from his safe and dropped it into the bag, together with the envelope containing the extra thousand and letters he had received in the mail that morning.

As he zipped up the bag, it struck him that, with so many robberies and muggings, it was a lot of cash to be carrying around. Recently, more than one crew member leaving or returning to the ship late at night had been held up on the road leading to the pier, and one had been mugged near the bus stop. A purse snatcher might go for his bag.

Captain Meed brushed aside his fears. Those holdups and the mugging had happened at night, not in broad daylight with trucks and cars going in both directions on the pier road. Besides, he might get a ride up to the bus stop.

At the pier gate, the customs guard waved him on after glancing at his declaration slip, but no car was heading up the road and so he started out on foot. Next time, he mused in happy anticipation, his wife would meet him, in a *new* car. The first down payment was right there in the bag, with plenty more besides.

When Captain Meed reached the bus stop, he entered the telephone booth and called his wife. She had just come in from the supermarket, but before she could complain again about the inconvenience of shopping without a car, he told her he'd had a little luck with the Atlantida lottery, and they'd be able to afford a *new* car.

"Goodie goodie!" she said, and then asked how the voyage was. While he was telling her, he saw the bus coming, and hung up and pulled open the folding door.

A man wearing coveralls alighted from the bus. Captain Meed was the only one boarding it. It was only half filled, and he chose a seat to himself toward the middle. It wasn't until he was settled and had been gazing happily through the window for a little while that a sudden thought dismayed him.

His bag!

He glanced around wildly—on the seat beside him, at his feet, in the aisle. He scrambled to his feet and stumbled along to the driver.

"Stop—please let me off!"

The bus had just passed a stop, the second beyond the one at which he had got on. The driver kept his gaze fixed on the road ahead. "Next stop," he growled.

"Now—please now! I left my bag in the telephone booth. There's—there's money in it."

"Next stop," the driver said adamantly.

Captain Meed eyed him in helpless desperation. The other passen-

gers were staring in his direction. His forehead broke into a sweat not induced by the midafternoon heat. He raged at himself. This was the second time he'd forgotten the bag, being so used to dropping it into the back seat of the car and not carrying it.

Three women were waiting at the next stop. Captain Meed startled them by leaping past them from the bus steps and heading down the side of the road. There were only a few pedestrians strung along it. He didn't come in sight of the telephone booth until he rounded a bend in the road, and as he drew nearer to it, he was able to see that it wasn't occupied. He slowed down, out of breath.

A man carrying a briefcase and two young women were at the bus stop. Captain Meed hurried past them to the booth and pushed open the door. The bag was gone.

He walked back to the stop. "Did any of you see anyone use the telephone while you were waiting?" he panted miserably. "I left my bag in the booth."

The man shook his head. One of the young women said, "Not while I've been waiting."

"Much in it?" asked the man sympathetically.

"Quite a bit of money."

"If the bag's got your name and address in it, whoever found it may get in touch with you," said the other young woman.

"I wouldn't count on it," said the man. "I did the same thing once, and I never did hear anything. Nothing in it worth keeping, either."

Captain Meed followed them into the next bus. All the way home he sat staring bleakly through the window. He remembered the workman in coveralls who had got off the last bus. He might have been the one who found the bag. There was plenty of identification in the bag—his name and address inside, along with the letters from that morning's mail at the ship. But what workman would pass up an easy six thousand dollars?

Captain Meed rode past his stop and had to walk back. When his wife met him inside the doorway, she asked, "Was the bus delayed?" and then, noticing his empty hands, "Where's your bag?"

"I left it in the telephone booth," he moaned. "I got off and went back, but it was gone."

"It's got your name and address inside, so it may be returned to you. It wouldn't be much of a loss anyway. So don't be upset, dear."

"My lottery winnings are in it," he groaned, "and people play it smart nowadays."

"Oh, dear!" she cried.

During dinner, the telephone in

the hallway rang. Captain Meed went out and answered it.

"Captain Meed?" inquired an unfamiliar voice.

"Speaking."

"Captain of the banana boat *Conte*?"

"That's right."

"You left a bag in the telephone booth up by the bus stop?"

"Yes," cried the captain, excited. "This afternoon. You found it?"

"It's right here." There was a pause. "That's quite a bundle you've got in it, Cap." There was an insinuating note in the voice. Captain Meed wondered if it was the workman at the other end.

"Yes. I—I never expected to see it again."

"The guy who found it didn't like risking having all that money lying around till he got in touch with you, so he turned it in to us."

"The police?"

"Waterfront Precinct station house, close by your ship."

The captain's throat went dry. "I'll—I'll send my wife over to pick it up."

"We'd like you to come yourself and identify the bag and the contents, Cap. Any time it's convenient for you."

Captain Meed hung up, shaken. The police wanted to question him. It was to be expected they'd view all that money found in the bag of a man leaving his ship on arrival day as suspiciously like a payoff of some kind. He'd never get away with saying it was lottery winnings, or anything else. They'd tip off the Coast Guard Intelligence or the FBI to investigate. It wouldn't take long, once they'd talked to the chief mate with his knowledge of the two unmanifested suitcases and the two closed-door meetings with Wycka. Even if they didn't find out what was in them, those two unmanifested suitcases would cost him his captaincy with the line.

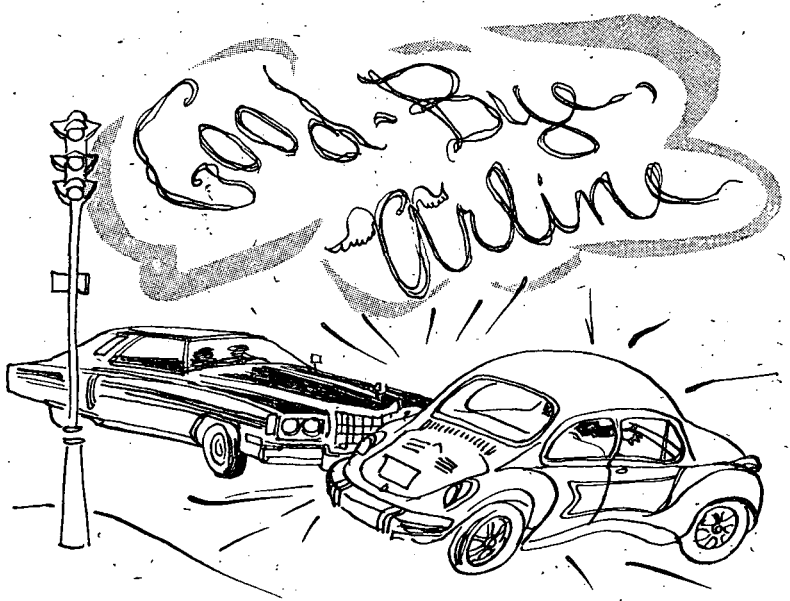
He pulled himself together and went back to the table.

"Who was it?" his wife asked.

He swallowed. "The police. The bag was turned in to them."

"You see, dear, you didn't have to worry." She sighed thankfully. "It's so nice to know there are still honest men in the world."

If one wishes to rectify a wrong, he may have to take matters into his own hands.



AFTER THE TRIAL, Gordon Keefer discovered that Spencer and Candace Farrow had fled to their house at Silverwood Lake. Gordon knew they had gone up to the lake two months ahead of the summer season, leaving behind the luxury and convenience of the big house in Glenview Estates, only to escape the questions of reporters and friends.

Certainly it could not be their intention to hide out from him, for he had made no threats, public or private. He had in all ways conducted himself in the passive manner of a law-abiding citizen who accepts the verdict of the jury as sound and just. Nor had he shown any signs of dismay because the jury had acted largely on the testimony of an "impartial" witness who had declared

that Gordon's wife, Arline, not Spencer Farrow, had caused the auto accident in which Arline had died.

Though he could furnish no solid evidence, Gordon had nosed around below the surface until he was convinced that the witness had been bought.

The charge of involuntary manslaughter against Farrow had seemed much too mild to Gordon. The collision had happened late at night. While Gordon, an assistant buyer of sporting goods for a chain store, had worked overtime, Arline had gone to a double-feature with her sister. She was on her way home alone, driving through a sleeping suburb, when the brutal finish of

by Robert Colby

her life came at the ripe old age of twenty-six.

Farrow and his wife, Candace, were returning from a party where Farrow had been drinking. "Just a couple of social drinks," he hedged on the stand, though he had refused to take a sobriety test. Gordon knew damn well Farrow was drunk when he ran a red light, smashing broadside into Arline's tiny Volkswagen with his ten-grand, two-ton Cadillac.

Wilbur Noland, an appliance salesman who had been walking his dog, was the key witness. Noland had accused Spencer Farrow of storming through the intersection against a red light. But during the trial, steered by Farrow's eloquently wily lawyer, he "admitted" that his earlier statement to the police was hasty and confused. Searching his memory, he had to say in good conscience that the light was not red against Farrow, but merely changing to red when he looked up at the sound of the two cars colliding.

Indeed, according to Mrs. Candace Farrow, this was exactly the case. Seated beside her husband, she had observed that just as they came upon the intersection, the signal flashed yellow. It was the VW which jumped the red light, she insisted.

Candace Farrow appeared to be in her late twenties. She was long-haired and very blonde, with widely candid gray-blue eyes, high cheekbones, a generous mouth which seemed always on the brink of smiling, and a regal chin. Her figure was sensually fleshy and she carried it with a kind of loose elegance.

Gordon had studied her at the trial and was awed by her in a clini-

cal, detached sort of way. But she was of another world, and if only because she belonged to Spencer Farrow and sided with him, she was an enemy. In any case, while her voluptuous construction dazzled the male members of the jury, she had backed Noland's testimony with a convincing pose of sincerity.

Not guilty was the verdict—and Spencer Farrow went free, followed from the courtroom by his smugly smiling coterie.

When Gordon went to have a talk with Wilbur Noland concerning his sudden inclination to alter his testimony, the manager of his scrubby apartment building reported that the Nolands had hastily embarked on an extended tour of Europe. Yet only a short while back, Wilbur was nearly evicted when he couldn't come up with the rent.

Gordon then began to ask a few discreet questions of the neighbors in the building, such as Wanda Hendricks, a widow who lived across the hall from the Nolands. Gordon was not only young, but also had fine looks and a certain artless charm. So with a soft gleam in her eye, Wanda invited him in for coffee, served with confidential tidbits of information.

Wanda told Gordon that she had seen Wilbur Noland driving off in a "dreamy" white Cadillac with a distinguished money-type gentleman and a blonde young lady of considerable class. When Gordon produced a newspaper clipping of the Farrows, the widow smiled, or smirked, and nodded rapidly. No doubt about it, they were the very couple in the lovely white sedan.

However, Gordon knew that Farrow could not be tried again on the same charge, and Wilbur Noland was obviously being paid to keep himself well out of reach.

Wanda was no prize and Gordon was not interested in fun and games, but she *was* expedient to his purpose. After some two weeks in which he formulated a precise plan of vengeance, Gordon took Wanda out for a night on the town, urging her to join him as he drowned his sorrow in liquid solace. Behind his sloppy facade, Gordon was icy sober, while Wanda was quite drunk when they stopped by his house for a nightcap about three a.m.

They had one for the road, then two more. In Wanda's last drink he dissolved a couple of sleeping pills. When he carried her into the bedroom she was unconscious and not about to come out of it without the most violent prodding. He laid her gently on the bed, removed her shoes and covered her with a blanket. Drawing heavy drapes across the windows, he turned off the light and stole away, closing the door be-

hind him and leaving the house.

Then, with little more than an hour left before dawn, he drove up to the lake to kill Spencer Farrow.

It was a fifty-minute ride over mostly excellent roads. During a continued leave of absence from his job following the trial, he had secretly made the trip several times to learn the terrain and the daily routine of the Farrows. To avoid notice, he always arrived at the lake before daybreak, departing after dark.

Now, as on other occasions when he came only to spy, he turned off the lake road and followed a gravel drive to the ruins of a fire-gutted cabin he had stumbled upon. As usual, he parked his car on the pocked cement floor of the sagging garage behind the cabin. He climbed out, hugging a cloth case in which he carried the two sections of the telescope-sighted rifle, bought secondhand in the pawnshop of a distant city.

From a plastic bag in the trunk he removed coveralls, boots and gloves. He pulled the coveralls over slacks and sweater, exchanged his shoes for the boots, and put on the gloves. Closing the warped, plywood doors of the garage, he hiked off into the darkness.

The lake was rimmed with low hills, deeply wooded, alive with birds and deer and other animals, all forbidden game to hunters. Though the larger houses of the lake were widely separated and mostly vacant at this time of year, Gordon moved in practiced silence to his place of concealment. It was a tree-shrouded spot about two hundred yards above the rustic sprawl of the Farrow house with its neat, narrow dock, augmented by a shed containing a trim speedboat.

Behind a great rock with a flat space to support the rifle, Gordon settled himself to wait for dawn. It was a Wednesday, and unless Spencer Farrow deviated from his weekday routine, he would appear on the dock close to half an hour after sunrise. Dressed in slacks and a safari jacket, smoking a pipe, he would sometimes fish inattentively from the dock for a brief interval, his concentration inward.

Other times he would climb into his speedboat and rocket around the lake on wings of spray. He was seldom gone over twenty minutes.

At eight sharp, expensively but sedately attired in a business suit, he would leave for his office, driving that long white sedan, the very sight of which nearly caused Gordon to retch.

Farrow was in plastic supplies. It sounded like a dull business to Gordon, but in these times when you could hardly find anything made by man that did not have some plastic

component, the Farrow Plastic Supply Company turned the sale of plastics into riches beyond Gordon's comprehension.

When the first pale light defined the borders of the lake and the architecture of the Farrow house, Gordon opened the case and assembled the two sections of the rifle. He fixed the scope in place, wiped the glass surfaces with a handkerchief. Then he loaded and cocked the rifle, set the safety and placed the gun in position across the flat surface of the rock.

Except for bird sounds, the silence was absolute; the silver-hued face of the water unblemished; the whole beautiful, tranquil scene a denial of violence and mortality.

A gust of loneliness swept him, and resisting a temptation to weep, he thought about Arline.

They had been married just under three years. In an era when about one out of every three couples were parting in divorce and most of the remainder simply endured, theirs had been an exceptional relationship—not only one of lovers, but also of great friends. They had rarely argued; their communication had been nearly total.

They had enjoyed the same tastes and beliefs, laughed like crazy together, and sometimes cried. They had not downgraded one another with slashing sarcasm in the presence of guests or in private contests; they had been mutually thoughtful and affectionate.

It had been, in fact, thought Gordon, just a bit too good to be true, too exquisite to survive. In such a place as heaven, yes; on earth, never. For when anything on earth approached perfection, man would find a way to destroy it.

To her death there was a final note of tragedy. They had postponed having a baby, but when Arline was killed, she was five months pregnant.

The sun now cast the first hint of warmth and the stage below was set in unshadowed detail for the execution. Still the condemned man did not appear. Gordon was wondering nervously if this would be a day in which he failed to follow his routine, when suddenly Farrow stepped from the house and sauntered out to the dock. For a moment he stood stretching and gazing across the lake, his pipe unlighted in his fist.

Gordon steadied the rifle barrel, released the safety, pinned the crosshairs of the scope to Farrow's back—then, finding the shot aesthetically distasteful, he hesitated.

As if nudged by the instinct of danger, Farrow turned, scanning the hills. But no, there was nothing in his face of alarm. He seemed

only to be enjoying the morning scene in all its aspects, his sharp, thrusting features composed, pale-green eyes undisturbed. He had not yet shaved and his face was lightly shadowed by a dark stubble. There was a mole on his left cheek, and a narrow, zigzag scar descended from the right corner of his mouth.

Gordon adjusted his aim slightly, and squeezed the trigger.

The sound was not big or booming as he had feared, but sharp and hollow, the echo whispering back to him from the hills. The bullet slammed through Farrow's head just above the right eye, splashing his face with a small shower of crimson. As if abruptly shoved off balance, he staggered backward to the edge of the dock and fell awkwardly into the lake, the pipe still clutched in his fist.

Dead before he hit the water, Gordon figured, as he swiftly separated the two sections of the gun and stowed them in the case. For another few seconds he stood there, watching the house, but apparently the sound had not aroused either Candace Farrow or the two servants who slept above the garage.

He dropped the empty shell casing into a pocket, smoothed the earth at his feet to erase the impression of himself, and covered the spot with leaves. Then he moved off quietly.

In the woods behind the garage of the gutted cabin, he buried the rifle and the cartridge shell in a small trench already prepared. Hurrying back to his car, he peeled off the coveralls and exchanged the boots for clean shoes.

When he reached the city limits, he tossed the plastic bag containing boots and coveralls, bearing particles of soil and other matter which could be traced to the lake region, into the waste bin of a supermarket not yet open for business.

It was twelve minutes before eight when Gordon entered his house. He was relieved to find Wanda still fast asleep on his bed. Mussing his hair, he undressed, removing all but his shorts and hanging his slacks and sweater in the closet. The clothes he had worn on his date with Wanda he spilled in disorder over a chair.

He fixed the electric alarm clock to ring at eight and climbed under the blanket beside Wanda, turning his back to her. When the alarm did not awaken her, he gave her a series of sharp little kicks and poked her with his elbow. At last she stirred, and as he lay motionless, pretending heavy slumber, he heard her fumbling with the clock, shutting it off. There was a moment of silence in which she was obviously trying to orient herself, sifting the foggy details of the night past.

Suddenly she began to shake him—timidly at first, then with vigorous determination. He turned on his back and played out the charade for her: a confused man returning from the depths of alcoholic sleep.

"What time is it?" he said thickly, sitting up and squeezing his temples between palms with a pained expression.

"It's eight in the morning!" she told him. "Listen, I never intended to stay all night and I don't even remember quite how I—"

He grinned. "You fell asleep on the sofa and when I couldn't get you up, I carried you in here. After that I went down for the long count myself. It was all absurdly innocent."

"Oh," she said, and looked almost disappointed. "Well, I must've had a lot more to drink than I remember—and I remember quite a few."

He got out of bed, pulled on his robe, and eased his bare feet into slippers as she stood smoothing her wrinkled dress. "How long have we been knocked out?" she asked him.

"Not long enough. The sun was just coming up when you folded on the couch. I'll have to work all day on two hours of sleep."

She nodded absently. "I feel rotten," she groaned. "You got any aspirin?" Hair awry, her features drawn and haggard, she was an uninviting specimen.

"Aspirin's in the bathroom," he said. "Medicine cabinet. Could use some myself."

She was back in a minute with the bottle and a glass of water. They washed down the pills and he said, "I gotta take a quick shower and blast off to work."

"You want me to fix some breakfast?"

"Think you can find your way around the kitchen?"

"Mmm. I suppose."

"A couple of scrambled eggs, bacon and coffee, then—huh?"

"Yes, sir!" she quipped. "Two scrambled with bacon and coffee, coming right up, sir."

En route to work, he dropped her off. "Next time I won't fall asleep," she promised with a sly wink.

"Call you tomorrow," he said, winking back, squeezing her hand.

The story broke in the afternoon papers. Surprisingly, there was some speculation that perhaps Farrow's death was an accident. Though hunting was forbidden at the lake, some hunters had been glimpsed in the area recently and there was the possibility that a stray bullet intended for a deer . . . and so on. But in the course of events, a man of wealth and power just naturally made enemies, the account continued, and a thorough investigation was under way. A casual last paragraph recalled Farrow's in-

volvement in the accident, his subsequent trial and acquittal.

On his way home from work Gordon paused to run his car through a car wash. You never could tell what they might do with even a little road dirt if they caught his scent.

That evening a couple of detectives, Sergeant Hamblin and Detective Agustine, arrived at his house with the information that they were investigating the death of Spencer Farrow.

"Just routine," Hamblin explained when they were seated.

"I thought Farrow was killed in a hunting accident," Gordon said.

"If we could prove that, we wouldn't be here," replied Agustine.

"I don't imagine you broke down and cried when you heard the news," Hamblin remarked.

"On the contrary," Gordon answered frankly. "I was delighted. If he were killed in an accident, I think it would be a great piece of ironic justice."

"Perhaps he was murdered," the sergeant said easily.

"Well, either way, I can't honestly say that I'm sorry. Regardless of who was at fault, I don't think you'd expect me to forgive him for killing my wife—not to mention our child. She was pregnant, you know."

"You have my sympathy," Hamblin said sincerely. "All the same, we have a job to do." He lit a cigarette.

"Do you own a gun?" asked Agustine. "A rifle?"

"No. I don't hunt and I have no special interest in guns."

Agustine nodded.

"Mind if we have a look around the house?" Hamblin raised his eyebrows slightly.

"I don't mind," Gordon said. "Help yourself."

The sergeant inclined his head toward Agustine, who then got up and went off down the hall.

"Mr. Keefer," Hamblin asked, "where were you last night and early this morning?"

"Last night I went out for a few drinks with a friend."

"And what time did you come home?"

"Pretty close to three a.m., I'd say."

"And then you went to bed?"

"No, we had a couple for the road, and *then* I went to bed—near dawn. It was just getting light. We'd had a few too many and my friend slept here until I went to work—about eight-thirty."

"Could you give me the name of this friend?"

"Not without some embarrassment. The friend is a lady, you see."

Once again, Hamblin hiked his

eyebrows in unmistakable inquiry.

"Would you believe that she fell asleep with her clothes on? No matter, I'll give you her name and address if I must." He wrote the information on the torn flap of an envelope and passed it to Hamblin.

Agustine reappeared, glanced in the livingroom closet, checked the kitchen and said, "Okay, Sarge, I'm satisfied."

Hamblin stood. "One more thing, Mr. Keefer, may we have a look at your car?"

Gordon produced the keys and sent them out to the garage. While they were gone, he made himself a drink, though he was not really frightened or nervous.

"You keep a nice clean car, Mr. Keefer," Hamblin said as he handed over the keys.

"Hardly a speck of dust on it," Agustine added.

"I don't drive much since I lost my wife," Gordon explained.

Hamblin pursed his lips. "Keep yourself available for a few days, please, sir. We might want to talk with you again."

They went off.

Immediately he phoned Wanda to prepare her. "Sorry," he concluded, "but I was forced to tell them I was with you. Otherwise, they might hound me indefinitely, might even use me as their scapegoat."

"Why should they do that, honey? Don't they know a man like you could never kill anyone?"

"Cops believe facts and little else, Wanda."

"But you did put me in a good light?"

"The best, baby—the very best. I simply told the truth."

A few days passed without incident after Wanda reported to him that it had gone well with the detectives. When he wasn't working, he remained home, unable to put aside his grief. Then one night when again his door chime sounded, he went to answer, certain it was the police.

The young lady had long blonde hair, candid gray-blue eyes, a regal chin and a richly sensual figure.

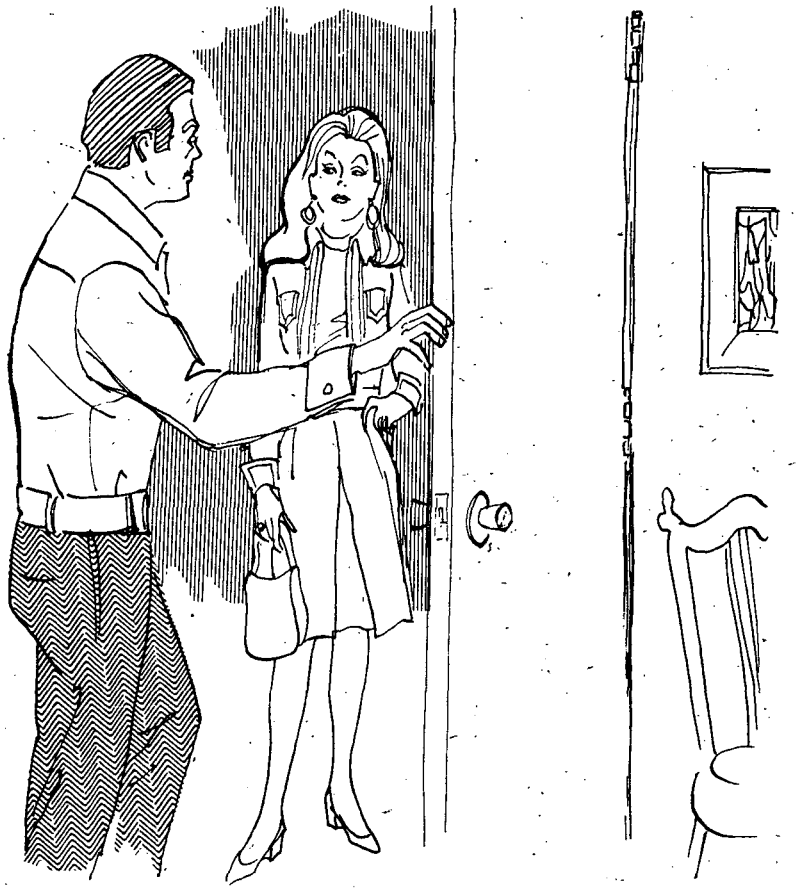
"Hello, Mr. Keefer," she said in a soft, timid voice, though she seemed on the verge of smiling. "I'm Candace Farrow."

He stared at her coolly. "I know who you are. What do you want?"

"Now don't be angry," she replied. "I'm on your side and always was, as you'll soon understand if you'll let me come in for a minute."

He stepped aside and she went past him into the livingroom, gazing about her curiously. Then she sank into a chair and started toying with her purse. He turned a chair to face her and sat down and waited.

"You heard the news, didn't



you?" she asked him abruptly. "About my husband, that is?"

"Yes, I heard."

"I suppose you were glad."

"He got what he deserved."

"Well—" she flashed him a quick smile, "I rather agree."

"You do?" His surprise was genuine.

She bent toward him. "In most ways he was a dreadful man. Selfish and cruel. He rode roughshod over everyone—including me."

"Is that so? He also rode roughshod over my wife—to put it mildly."

"Yes, and that's exactly why I'm here, Mr. Keefer." She flamed a cigarette with a tiny, jeweled lighter. "Naturally," she continued,

"I couldn't tell the truth about the accident while he was alive. Especially since he had forced me to lie publicly in his behalf."

"He *forced* you?"

"In a sense. I was afraid of him. He was vicious and vindictive, and he would have found some horrible way to get even with me."

"No doubt. Are you trying to tell me now that the accident was his fault?"

"Yes. He was plain drunk. Oh, he sobered up quickly when he saw what he had done—the shock was an ice-cold bath. But he was drunk just the same, driving too fast, right through a red light."

"I see." Gordon nodded, his face clenched and bitter. "Then, of course, he bribed Wilbur Noland to change his story."

"Of course. He always greased his way through life with money and why should a little accident which caused the death of another human being pose any more of a problem than rigging his tax structure?"

"There were *two* human beings: my wife and the baby she was carrying."

"Yes, yes. That's terribly true, and how easily people dismiss an unborn baby just because it isn't yet visibly alive."

"So he did bribe Noland, then?"

"Absolutely. Spence had his lawyer arrange a meeting with us. We drove Noland to the house one evening and got him a bit stoned and pliable. Spence handed him ten thousand in cash and told him there would be fifteen more if he'd agree to revise his testimony, then pack off to Europe in a hurry with the wife and kid, plane tickets provided as a bonus. Noland was living half a jump ahead of poverty and he wasn't hard to convince."

Gordon thought about it. "Why do you tell me this now? What's in it for you?"

"Nothing tangible. I inherited most of his money and I'm disgustingly rich, but I do have a conscience and I'd like to do something to help you." She squashed her cigarette in a tray and gazed at him steadily. "I understand," she said, "that the insurance company is going to fight a settlement on the grounds that your wife caused the accident and her own death."

"Maybe if you tell the truth—"

"No, I can't do that—not without admitting perjury." She opened her purse. "So I want to give you something—just a token of my shame and regret for what Spence Farrow did to you."

She passed him a check. It was made out to him for the sum of fifty thousand dollars.

He glanced at her, then looked away, for he was close to being

choked up. "I really don't know what to say, Mrs. Farrow. No amount of money could pay me for so much as Arline's little finger. But I won't deny that I could use the money, if only to buy some time to search for what's left in my life—and I do appreciate the kind of person you must be in order to do a generous thing like this."

Candace Farrow shrugged. "It's easy to part with a bit of money when you have so much of it. It was far more difficult for me to confess the truth—that I didn't have the guts to stand up against Spence and tell it the way it really happened."

"Never mind," said Gordon, who was feeling the pinch of guilt himself. "It's over and done with, and I think you're a very nice person."

She sighed. "Well, thank you, and now I guess I should be going along."

"Won't you at least stay for a drink? After all, there's a certain parallel: I've lost my wife and you've lost your husband."

"Yes, but I can see that you loved your wife, while I had very little use for Spence once I really got to know him. However, I will take that drink with you anyway. Scotch and just a drop of water, if you don't mind."

"I haven't been able to afford Scotch—until now," he added cheerfully. "But I do have some pretty good bourbon if that will do."

"Bourbon will do nicely," she said sweetly.

One drink became several, after which she seemed in no hurry to leave. "Please call me Candy," she insisted.

"You Candy, me Gordy," he replied gaily, his spirits soaring for the first time since the death of Arline.

Her moods shifted rapidly. She was, in a subtle way, flirtatious; she was also bitingly witty, sometimes serious. Once, after a silence, she said, "Of course we can't avoid the subject entirely, so I won't pretend that before I met you, I hadn't wondered fleetingly if perhaps you had killed Spence, though I wouldn't have blamed you in the least. Isn't that ridiculous!"

He chuckled. "I'm hardly the criminal type."

"Criminal types are not born, Gordy, they're made by circumstances with which they have no ability to cope."

"Mmm . . . perhaps. What do the police think?"

"They haven't a clue, just groping in the dark."

"Anyway," he said, "it's depressing to talk about death. I'd rather hear more about you."

At the door, her dignity still intact, though slightly askew, she said to him, "You're an interesting man,

Gordy, and very nice-looking. During that time in court I often glanced at you secretly. I was deeply sorry for you, but at the same time I was drawn to you—magnetized. You understand?"

"I'm flattered," he said truthfully.

"Why don't you take some time off and come up to the lake. We'll go boating, play some tennis."

"I'm afraid I've lost the spirit of fun," he answered. "I'm burned out. There's no room in me for play."

"Well, it would do you good to make some changes in your life and forget. That goes for me, too. Think it over and give me a ring."

In the morning he did not go to work. Instead, he called at the bank on which the check was drawn. For some reason he could not quite believe that the check would be honored. As a test, he opened a savings account, depositing forty-seven thousand and requesting the remainder in cash and traveler's checks.

Ten minutes later he left the bank with cash and checks in pocket, plus his passbook recording the amount of forty-seven thousand deposited in savings.

Elated, he made an impulsive call to Candy Farrow at the lake.

"Think you can find the way?" she asked him.

"Well, I could get a map, but it would save time if you gave me directions," he composed innocently.

Expecting to stay only a few hours, Gordon remained at the lake for three days, sleeping in a guest room of the house. Then, at Candy's urging, he returned home just long enough to resign his job and pack enough belongings to keep him going another week.

"You're a long way from being ready to go back to work," she told him. "When you are, we'll know it, and I'll get you something much more stimulating and rewarding in Farrow Plastics. Since I have a controlling interest in the company, you can practically pick your spot."

As it turned out, Candy was perfectly correct when she said he would begin to forget with a change of environment. The outdoor living, the exercise, the meeting of new people in her world, restored some of his spirit. He did not dwell so much with his morbid grief, his useless and destructive longing for Arline.

Candy herself was the best therapy of his new life. He had never met anyone like her. While Arline was rather plain and uncomplicated, Candy was beautiful and complex, utterly sophisticated. He was hard put to beat her at any sport, and she had a driving energy and a talent for organization. In a short time, even before he was aware of it, she had practically

taken over most of his decision-making.

And now, despite a loathsome feeling of guilt that he was in a sense betraying Arline, he was no longer sleeping in the guest bedroom.

From the very beginning, however, he knew what Candy could not know—that she was only a brilliant, temporary distraction. For all her brittle charm and lusty attraction, she could never replace Arline, with whom he had shared what was perhaps a once-in-a-lifetime miracle of understanding and devotion. Yet, against his better judgment, Candy always overpowered him with her determination to have him hang on another week, and then another . . .

Until the day came when it was over for him. It ended suddenly one evening after a gradual awakening in which he began to examine Candy with a much more objective eye. She seemed not nearly so beautiful when he got to know her, for she was vain and shallow and determinedly selfish. All her acts, even those cunningly fashioned to appear noble or generous, were merely designed to move the world in her direction. Though now and then she made grand and selfless gestures, they were only the taxes she paid for occasional feelings of guilt. She was quietly but hopelessly spoiled and nearly amoral.

They were supposed to go across the lake that evening to a dinner party given by one of her friends, most of whom he felt merely tolerated him for her sake.

"I've decided not to go," he said to her as she was searching irritably through a closet of some fifty dresses and not finding one to please her.

"Why not?" she asked him absently without bothering to turn toward him.

"Because," he informed her back, "I don't have anything in common with the Franklins. Like most of your friends, they're rude and condescending."

"Nonsense—just your imagination."

"Anyway, I'm leaving in the morning."

Now she did turn very quickly to face him. "Leaving? What do you mean? Leaving for where?"

"I'd like to go home for a while. Just to be by myself, sort things out."

"Why, darling, *this* is your home, and there's nothing left to sort out. We've done it together."

"This is not my home, it's yours. And you've done the sorting, not I. I just stand around nodding my head."

She sat on a corner of the bed

and peered up at him narrowly. "I know that tone of voice, Gordy. You've made up your mind. So when are you coming back?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not know when you're coming back, darling?" She smiled self-assuredly.

"Well, I can see it's not possible to be a little vague for the sake of kindness, so I'll tell you right out, Candy. I don't expect to come back at all."

Her face drooped. "I thought we had something going together. I thought we had an agreement."

"What agreement?"

"For one thing, we agreed that I would arrange a fine position for you in plastics."

"That was your idea, remember? Plastics would bore me silly."

"Well, how about our personal plans?"

"I didn't know there were any."

"Oh, then it's only a misunderstanding, darling. It's all been kind of tacit between us and I've been waiting for you to put it into words."

"You're much better with words than I am," he evaded.

"Maybe you just think we should go on like this forever—keeping it loose and casual."

"Not at all. That's why I'm leaving."

She crossed to a table and came back with a cigarette, pausing to light it en route with a tremulous hand. She sat down again. "I realize," she went on, "that in this careless age, people just live together and call it a marriage. But I prefer the whole crazy bit—papers and all."

Abruptly he was embarrassed and somewhat ashamed. "I'm sorry, baby," he said. "It all began as a change of pace for us both and I kept staying on because—well, you twisted my arm and I was easily maneuvered in the fractured state of mind I was in."

"Maneuvered, huh?" she snorted contemptuously.

"But I never gave marriage a serious thought. Did I ever say that I loved you?"

"Not in so many words."

"Yeah. Well, the only woman I ever loved was Arline, and Spence Farrow wrote the end of that love story the night he killed her."

Her face cooled and hardened. "So then you came up here with a rifle and shot him dead—right?"

He said nothing.

"I'll take your silence as a confession, Gordy."

"No, you won't."

"There was a time when I didn't think you were capable of such a thing, but now I see that you are. At first I was curious about you—you were an experiment—a kick.

But then I fell in love with you, and that was a big mistake. You have a certain crude animal attraction for me, but in all other respects you're like a country boy who just came up from the farm to the big city. That's why my friends patronize you. They see that you have no background, no culture or breeding. I'd have to remake you to fit in with my set—smooth out all the rough edges and give you some polish. It would be a monumental task—and you're not worth it, Gordy-boy."

"Sure. Well, don't bother, sweetheart. It's impossible to make the real thing into a phony like you and the rest of the impersonators of human beings you travel with."

"But you did kill Spence, didn't you? C'mon now, leave me with that much."

He stared at her for a long moment. Then he sent her a crafty wink—and grinned.

"Thanks," she said.

"For what? I never opened my mouth."

"You told me just the same, and I feel a lot better. Would you like to know why?"

"Not particularly."

"It has to do with something which happened the night your little wife got killed," she pushed on, blowing him an insolent jet of smoke. "We had been to this crazy party, Spence and I. He was flying pretty high all right, but he could hold his drinks and keep his cool. On the other hand, I was loaded; and when he got too cozy with somebody's tramp of a wife, I whacked him across the face. Then I ran out and climbed into the car, ready to drive home in a huff. Just then Spence caught up with me and we raced off together, arguing all the way. When we came to that red light, I was stoned out of my mind and didn't see it, and anyway I was going too fast to—"

"Now wait a minute!" Gordon snapped, aiming a finger at her. "*You* were driving? Is that what you're saying?"

"Of course! *I* was driving, not Spence. I was the one who zoom-zoomed through the light and smashed that little VW like a kid's toy wagon, killing your Arline."

"Is that right, now?" Gordon said in a dark, soft voice, lips compressed, eyes slitted. "Zoom-zoomed through the light and killed Arline."

"Yes, yes—and oh, I do wish you could see your face, darling!"

"I'm spellbound," he answered with a terrible smile, "I can't wait to hear the rest of it. Spence took the rap for you, did he?"

She nodded happily. "Not because he was so gallant, you understand. No, he got sucked in. You see, when we came to a stop, our

big car was barely dented. So Spence yanked me aside like a rag doll and climbed right over me behind the wheel. 'You're dead drunk and you've probably killed that woman,' he snarled at me. 'They'd crucify you and I'd get smeared in the bargain,' he said.

"The motor had stalled but he got it going and was preparing to back away from the wreck and vanish around a corner before the cops descended. But then that rube, Wilbur Noland, came panting up behind us with his dog on a leash. He'd been some distance away and in the dark he didn't spot the switch we'd made, fast as it was, but he warned Spence that he had our tag number and ordered him to stay put until the police arrived.

"That was the end of the ball game for Spence. It worked out pretty well for me, don't you think? Of course, for a while I had this awful guilt and I had to give you fifty thousand to be rid of it. But Gordy-boy, has it seeped into your dull brain—the delicious irony of it! Have you got the picture, dear heart? I killed *your* wife, and you killed *my* husband. What a pair we would have made!"

"A beautiful couple," he said with a crooked grin.

"How you must've worked at your little plan, Gordy-baby. All that scheming to get your vengeance, then carefully covering your traces in fear and trembling—only to find that you had murdered a perfectly innocent man. How simply marvelous. How dreadfully funny!"

"Yes," he agreed with a low chuckle, "to think that I could have made such a deadly mistake does kind of tickle me. It brings out my most perverse sense of humor."

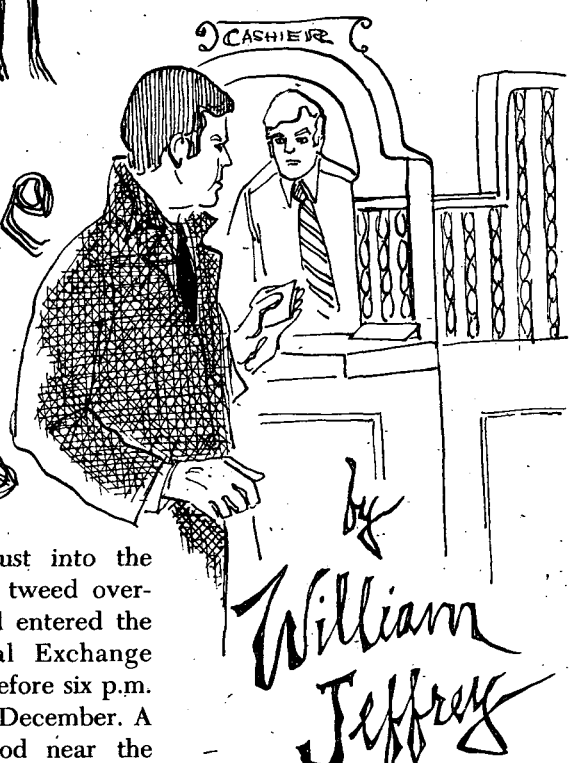
"I'll always think of you laughing maniacally, alone in some grubby hovel," she sneered.

"However," he continued as if she had not spoken, "we all make mistakes. While some are hopeless, others can be speedily corrected."

At first, even as he began to move toward her, she didn't seem to get the point. But then, with his hands locked around her throat, those bulging gray-blue eyes told him that she did truly understand.

There are tricks in every trade, of course, but some are obvious.

Shell Game



by William Jeffrey

GLOVED HANDS thrust into the pockets of his heavy tweed overcoat, Steve Blanchard entered the Midwestern National Exchange Bank a few minutes before six p.m. of a snowy Friday in December. A uniformed guard stood near the main entrance doors with a ring of keys in his hand, his eyes cast up-

ward to the clock on a side wall, and Blanchard's steps echoed hollowly as he crossed the nearly-deserted lobby to the teller at window 4, the only one open at this late hour. He waited until a stout, gray-haired man had finished his transaction, and then moved up to the window.

A small bronze plaque positioned to the right indicated that the teller's name was James Cox. He was a thin, relaxed young man with dark eyes and sand-colored hair. He smiled at Blanchard, said, "Yes, sir, may I help you?"

Blanchard took the folded piece of paper from his coat pocket and slid it across the marble counter. The second hand on the wall clock made two full sweeps, half of a third, and then Blanchard turned and strode quickly away without looking back.

He had just passed through the entrance doors, was letting them swing closed behind him, when Cox shouted, "Stop that man! He just robbed me, Sam. Stop him!"

Blanchard halted on the snow-covered sidewalk outside and turned, his angular face a mask of surprise. The guard, a fat, florid man with mild blue eyes, remained motionless for a moment; then, like an activated robot, he pulled the doors open, stepped out, and grasped Blanchard by the coat with his left hand, his right fumbling the service revolver off his hip.

"What the hell's going on?" Blanchard asked.

The guard drew him roughly inside the bank, holding the revolver pressed tightly against Blanchard's ribs. The near-funereal silence of three o'clock closing had dissolved now into excited murmurings, the scrape of chairs, and the slap of shoes on the marble flooring as the bank's employees surged away from their desks. Cox ran out from behind his teller's window, and the president of the Midwestern National Exchange Bank, Allard Hoffman, was at his heels. The teller held a piece of paper clenched in the fingers of his right hand, and his eyes were wide and excited; Hoffman looked angrily officious.

"He held me up," Cox said breathlessly as they reached Blanchard and the guard. "Every bill I had over a five."

Blanchard gave his head a small, numb shake. "I don't believe this," he said. He stared at Cox. "What's the matter with you? You know I didn't try to hold you up."

"Look in his overcoat pockets, Sam," Cox said. "That's where he put the money."

"You're crazy," Blanchard said incredulously.

"Go ahead, Sam, look in his pockets," Hoffman said.

The guard instructed Blanchard to turn around, and to keep his hands upraised. His eyes still wide with amazement, Blanchard obeyed. The guard patted his pockets, frowned, and then made a thorough, one-handed search. A moment later he stepped back, his forehead corrugated with bewilderment akin to that of Blanchard's; in his hand he held a thin pigskin wallet and seven rolls of pennies, nickels and dimes.

"This is all he's got on him," he said.

"What?" Cox exploded. "Listen, Sam, I *saw* him put that money into his overcoat pockets."

"Well, it's not there now."

"Of course it's not there," Blanchard said. He turned slightly, keeping his hands up, but his face was flushed with anger. "I told you I didn't commit any robbery."

Cox opened the folded piece of paper he held. "This is the note he gave me, Mr. Hoffman. Read it for yourself."

Hoffman took the note. It had been fashioned of letters cut from a newspaper and glued to a sheet of plain white paper, and it said: *Give me all your big bills. I have a gun. If you try any heroics I'll kill you. I'm not kidding.* The bank president put voice to the message as he read it.

"He's not carrying any weapon, either," Sam said positively.

"I believed the note about that," Cox said, "but I made up my mind to shout nonetheless. I just couldn't stand by and watch him get away with the bank's money."

"I don't know where you got that note," Blanchard said to Cox, "but I didn't give it to you. I handed you a slip of paper, that's true enough, but it was just a list of those rolls of coins and you know it."

"You claim Cox gave them to you?" Hoffman asked him.

"Certainly he did. In exchange for twenty-eight dollars, mostly in singles."

"I did not give him any coin rolls," Cox said with mounting exasperation. "I did exactly what it says in that note. I gave him every large bill I had in the cash drawer. The vault cart happened to be behind me too, since my cage was the only one open, and he told me to give him what was on that as well. He must have gotten twenty-five or thirty thousand altogether."

"You're a liar," Blanchard snapped.

"*You're* the one who's lying!"

"I don't have your damned money. You've searched me and I don't have it. All I've got is about twenty-four dollars in my wallet."

"Well," Hoffman said darkly, "*somebody* has it."

At that moment two plainclothes

detectives entered the bank, summoned by a hurried telephone call from one of the other Midwestern officials. They introduced themselves without preamble; one was named Malzberg, a lumbering and disheveled man with small, bright eyes; the other, named Flynn, was gray-mustached, the owner of a prominent veined nose.

Malzberg appeared to be the one in charge. He instructed the guard to lock the bank doors, and in a dog-eared notebook wrote Hoffman's and Cox's names, and Blanchard's, taken from the driver's license in the pigskin wallet. He took the holdup note from Cox, balancing it gingerly on the palm of his hand, then put it into an envelope which appeared from, and disappeared again into, an inside pocket of his rumpled suit.

He looked very surprised when Hoffman told him that Blanchard had been searched, and that the money had not been found on him. He said, "All right, let's hear what happened."

Cox related his version of the affair. Malzberg, writing laboriously in his notebook, didn't interrupt. When the teller had finished, Malzberg turned to Blanchard. "Now, what's your story?"

Blanchard told him about the rolls of coins. "I wanted them for a poker game some friends of mine and I set up for tonight." He made a wry mouth. "I'm supposed to be the banker."

"He also claims to have given Mr. Cox a list of what he wanted in the way of coins," Hoffman said.

"The only note he gave me was that holdup note," Cox said with thinly controlled anger. "He must have gotten those coins elsewhere, had them in his pocket when he came in here."

Blanchard's anger was just as thinly contained. He said to Malzberg, "Listen, why don't you check his cage? That list of mine has got to be around here somewhere." He glared at Cox. "Maybe you'll even find your damned missing money. I've heard stories of embezzling tellers trying to frame an innocent—"

"Are you suggesting that *I* stole the bank's money?" Cox shouted.

Hoffman looked astonished. "Mr. Cox has been a trusted, valued employee of Midwestern National for almost four years."

"Well, I've been a trusted, valued employee of Curtis Tool and Die for a hell of a lot longer," Blanchard snapped. "What does any of that prove?"

"All right, all right." Malzberg tapped his teeth with his pen, speculatively. After a moment he said, "Flynn, question the other employees; maybe one of them saw or

heard something. Mr. Hoffman, I'd appreciate it if you'd detail someone to find out exactly how much money is missing, and whether or not this list Blanchard claims to have given can be found. You might as well have Mr. Cox's cage and possessions gone through, too."

Cox was disbelieving. "You mean you're taking this thief's word over mine?"

"I'm not taking anybody's word, Mr. Cox," Malzberg said calmly. "I'm just trying to find out what happened here today." He paused. "Would you mind emptying all your pockets for me?"

Purplish splotches appeared on Cox's cheeks, but his voice was icily controlled when he said, "No, I do not mind. I have nothing to hide."

It appeared that he hadn't, as far as his person went. He did not have either the list of coins or any appreciable amount of money.

Malzberg sighed. "Okay," he said, "let's go over it again . . ."

Some time later, Hoffman and Flynn rejoined the group. A check of receipts and records had revealed that a total of $35,100 was missing. No list of coins had been found in or about Cox's cage, and a careful audit of the rest of the bank's funds had failed to show an unexplained overage in another teller's cash supply. None of the employees Flynn had questioned had been able to shed any light on the matter; no one had been near Cox's cage at the time Blanchard had been there, and no one had had any idea that things were amiss until Cox shouted to the guard to stop Blanchard.

Malzberg looked pointedly at Blanchard. "Well, Mr. Cox doesn't seem to have the money, and it doesn't seem to be here in the bank. This alleged note of yours isn't here, either. How can you explain that?"

"I can't," Blanchard said. "I can only tell you what happened. I didn't steal that money!"

Malzberg turned to the guard, Sam. "How far outside did he get before you collared him?"

"No more than a couple of steps."

"Did he have time to pass the money to an accomplice?"

"I doubt it. But I wasn't paying any attention to him until Mr. Cox yelled."

"I don't know much about big money," Blanchard said coldly, "but thirty-five thousand must be a lot of bills. I couldn't have passed that much to somebody in the couple of seconds I was outside the bank."

"He's got a point," Sam admitted.

"Why don't you search the guard?" Blanchard asked in a voice

heavy with vitriol. "Maybe I passed the money to him."

"I was expecting this," Sam said. He stepped over to Flynn, raising his arms. "Shake me down and we'll get the idea I had anything to do with this out of everybody's mind."

Flynn searched him expertly and, not surprisingly, the guard was clean.

"What are we going to do?" Hoffman asked. "That money has to be somewhere, and this man Blanchard obviously knows where."

"Maybe," Malzberg said carefully. "Anyway, it looks like we'll have to take him downtown and see what we can do there about shaking his story."

"Go ahead, then," Blanchard snapped, "but I want a lawyer present while I'm questioned. And if charges are pressed against me, I'll sue you and the bank for false arrest."

They took him down to police headquarters and placed him in a small room, leaving him alone until a public defender could be summoned. Then he was subjected to an unending stream of questions, and through long hours he told the exact same story he had in the bank, vehemently proclaiming his innocence.

Shortly after eleven he was taken to Malzberg's office. The detective looked tired and grim as he explained that the three men with whom Blanchard was to have played poker that night had confirmed the game and the fact that he was to have been banker; that an investigation had borne out that Blanchard did not have a criminal record, had in fact never been arrested; that he was well-liked and respected by his neighbors and his co-workers at Curtis Tool and Die; that the holdup note had had only Cox's and Hoffman's fingerprints on it; that a search of Blanchard's apartment had revealed no evidence that he had manufactured the note; and, finally, that another search of the bank had been undertaken—Cox and the guard and the other employees again questioned extensively—without anything new having been learned or the whereabouts of the missing money discovered.

Malzberg rotated his pen between his fingers, leaning back in his chair. He watched Blanchard for a moment, and then he said, "All right, you're free to go."

"You mean you finally believe I'm telling the truth?"

"No," Malzberg said, "I don't. I'm inclined to believe Cox, if you want the truth. We checked him out, too, as a matter of routine, and his background is even more spotless than yours. But it's his word against yours—two respectable citi-

zens—and without the money we've simply got nothing to hold you on." He swung his body forward suddenly, his eyes cold and brightly hard. "But I'll tell you one thing, Blanchard: we'll be watching you—watching you very carefully."

"Watch all you like," Blanchard said exhaustedly. "I'm innocent."

On a night three weeks later, Blanchard knocked on the door of unit 9, the Beaverwood Motel, in a city sixteen miles distant. As soon as he had identified himself, the door opened and he was admitted. He took off his coat and grinned at the sandy-haired man who had let him in. "Hello, Cox," he said.

"Blanchard," the bank teller acknowledged. He moistened his lips. "You made sure you weren't followed here, didn't you?"

"Of course."

"But the police *are* still watching you?"

"Yes, but not nearly as closely as they were in the beginning." Blanchard cuffed him lightly on the shoulder. "Stop worrying, will you? The whole thing worked beautifully—better than we ever hoped."

"Yes, it did, didn't it?"

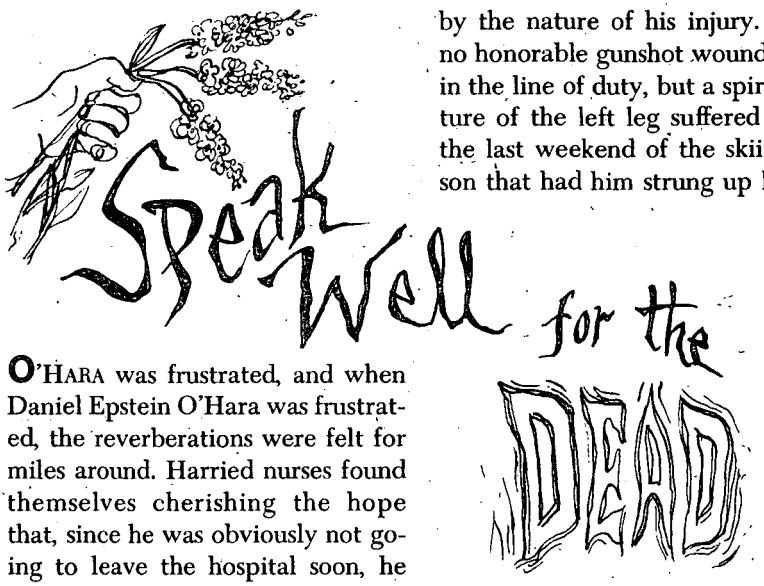
"Sure," Blanchard said. "Malzberg still thinks I passed the money to an accomplice somehow, but he can't prove it. Like he told me, it's your word against mine—and they're taking yours, just as we expected. They don't have any idea that it was actually *you* who passed the money, much less how it was done."

The room's third occupant—the stout, gray-haired man who had been at Cox's window when Blanchard entered the bank that evening—looked up from where he was pouring drinks at a sideboard. "Or that the money was already out of the bank, safely tucked into the inside pockets of my coat, when the two of you went into your little act."

Blanchard took one of the drinks from the gray-haired man and raised the glass high. "Well, here's to crime," he said. "*Perfect* crime, that is."

They laughed and drank, and then they sat down to split the $35,100 into three equal shares . . .

Fortunately, a way has not yet been found to put the imagination in traction.



O'HARA was frustrated, and when Daniel Epstein O'Hara was frustrated, the reverberations were felt for miles around. Harried nurses found themselves cherishing the hope that, since he was obviously not going to leave the hospital soon, he might die inexplicably. Or, desperately, they even weighed the possibility of arranging his untimely demise themselves. At times they considered that their subsequent punishment could never outweigh the relief they would obtain.

Not only was O'Hara confined to a hospital bed, but O'Hara was in traction—and O'Hara in traction was not to be taken lightly.

Aside from his actual detention in hospital, O'Hara was frustrated by the nature of his injury. It was no honorable gunshot wound, taken in the line of duty, but a spiral fracture of the left leg suffered during the last weekend of the skiing season that had him strung up like, he thought privately, a Christmas goose.

The morning bath and its concomitant insults now over, O'Hara, or most of his lean length, lay in a rat's-nest of bed sheets surrounded by sections of the two morning papers. His torso rocked dangerously toward the edge of the bed as he tried to reach for part of the *Clarion-Register* which had slid to the floor, and for a moment it seemed as if he would be suspended from

the cast-encased leg strung up to the overhead pulley.

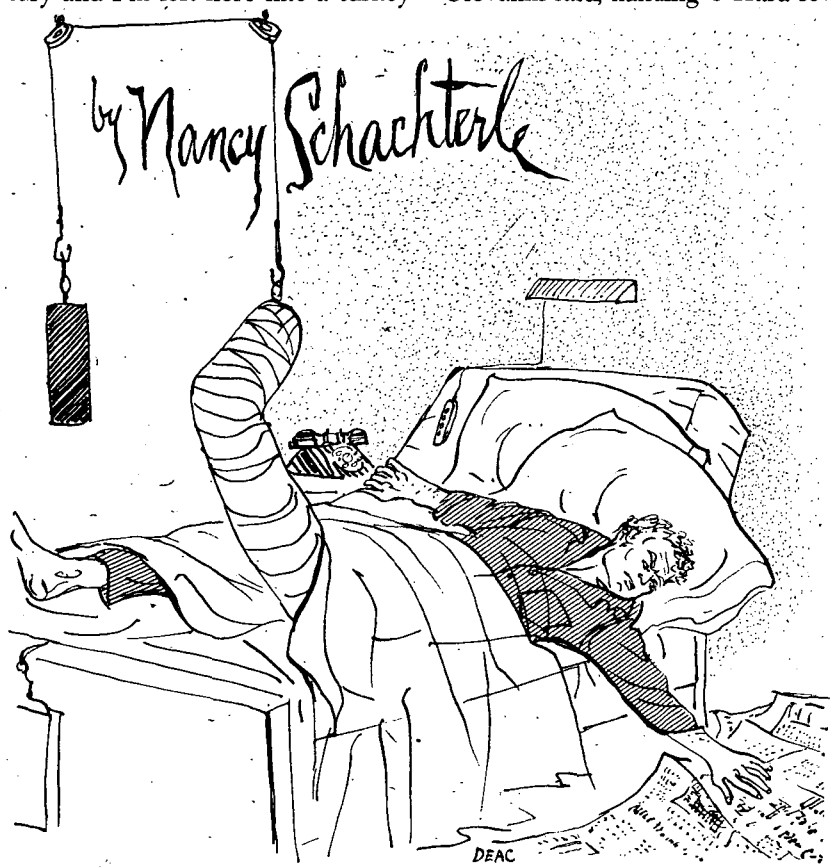
"I'll get it!" Sgt. Giovanni arrived opportunely and dived for the paper before O'Hara could tumble to disaster.

"It's about time," O'Hara growled, over the pronouncements of a newscaster on a television set on the wall opposite him. "The most important murder of the century and I'm left here like a turkey on a spit, trying to scrounge a few facts from the daily papers like any man in the street."

"You're on sick leave," Giovanni reminded him.

"I'll go crazy in this place if I don't have something to keep me busy. My body may be out of action, but my mind isn't."

"I was just supposed to bring some mail that was on your desk," Giovanni said, handing O'Hara sev-



eral envelopes banded together.

The sufferer barely glanced at them, and shoved them into the drawer of his bedside table. Then he settled back against the pillows, arms firmly folded, his wiry copper-with-gray hair thrust upright by rampaging fingers. "Come on, Giovanni, clue me in."

"Well," Giovanni said, gesturing at the newspapers, "it's pretty much all there."

"Don't give me that, me boyo. There's nothing there. Probyn's dead. That's all that's there. Start at the beginning. How am I to help solve this case if I don't get the facts?"

"Well . . ." Giovanni was hesitant, casting a look at the door. "I guess a few minutes won't make much difference. Deceased was Gerald Probyn," he began, as if reading from a notebook.

"I know that!" O'Hara interjected. "Every schoolchild knows Gerald Probyn. He owns the mines, he owns the mill, and he owns the state senator, if the truth were known. He lives, or used to, at Highgates, an aptly named estate eight miles east of town that is just a little harder to get into than Fort Knox, and somebody bumped him off. Now, are you going to give me the facts, or do I have to hobble down to headquarters and get them myself?"

Giovanni blushed. He was a mild man, short and solid, still a little overwhelmed by O'Hara, but after six months' association becoming almost used to him. He stood at a respectful distance by the window.

"We don't know what time Probyn was shot. It seems he spent most of his spare time in his greenhouse, had been out there since early afternoon. He had a great German shepherd named Vulcan, who prowled the place on his own—more of a pet than a watchdog. A little before five o'clock—she's not quite sure of the exact time—the cook heard Vulcan howling, a real mournful sound, she said, and sent one of the maids off in a hurry to see what was wrong. The maid found Probyn just outside the greenhouse, dead, with the dog howling over him."

O'Hara was leaning forward, listening intently. He threw a murderous glance at the television set, now dripping a fatuous soap opera. "Turn that idiot box off!"

Giovanni studied the set above his head. "You've got the controls," he pointed out reasonably.

O'Hara thrashed among the bed sheets and came up with the remote control. Snowy dead channels flashed intermittently with ancient westerns and cheery game shows as he fumbled the buttons, then finally the set subsided into a black stare.

"That's better. And you could come a little closer so I don't have to holler. I'm not infectious, you know."

Giovanni moved to the side of the bed.

"How long had he been dead?" O'Hara asked.

"Well, it was an abdominal wound, and the doc said he could have lasted anywhere from ten minutes to half an hour. He'd dragged himself around—you could follow the trail in the dirt floor—and he'd bled most of the way. I couldn't see much sense in it, the way he went. You see, he was standing at the far end, away from the entrance, when he was shot. My guess is the dog scared off the murderer, or he'd have finished the old man off. Looked like he'd lain there, bleeding, for a little while, then he started off dragging himself. There are three aisles to the place, like this—" Giovanni leaned over the bed, drawing a crude sketch on a corner of the nearest paper with a dull pencil stub. "One aisle leads straight from the door down the center. Probyn was at the back end of that. Now, if he were going for help you'd think he'd head straight to the door, but his tracks are clear as can be, and he swung around the end like this—" A swift jab of the pencil drove through the paper to the bedding. "Then he went halfway down the outside aisle, if that's what they call it. There was a big spread of blood where he'd lain for a minute, then some stains along the upright of the . . . the whatchamacallit—"

"Bench," O'Hara threw in.

"Yeah. Whatever, there was blood on it where he'd reached up, trying to drag himself upright. There was a big bunch of flowers torn out—he still had them in his hand when the maid found him. I guess he fell down, couldn't get up again, so he dragged himself on out the door. But the funny thing—I suppose he must have been pretty much out of his head by then—he didn't go toward the house. He turned the other way, and the maid found him stretched out by a water butt—"

"A what?"

"A water butt. Sort of a cistern affair, but above ground, to catch rainwater. The granddaughter said old Probyn claimed rainwater was best for the plants, more natural nutrients than tap water, or something. Anyway, he was stretched out there, as if he'd been trying to hang onto it. And that's as far as he got." Giovanni's voice dropped with dramatic finality.

"What kind of flowers were they?"

Giovanni shrugged. "The ones in his hand? I dunno. I don't know one from another."

The leg in traction swayed dangerously as O'Hara's torso surged forward. "Well, find out, dammit!"

"Yes, sir!"

The door opened with a muffled swoosh and a heavily built, busty nurse in her middle years bore down on O'Hara.

"Can't you see we're busy?" O'Hara growled.

"Come now, Mr. O'Hara, we mustn't be like that." She slipped a thermometer under his tongue as he opened his mouth to protest, and placed firm fingers along his wrist, her head bent to her watch.

The patient made an urgent *Get on with it!* gesture at Giovanni with his free hand. The latter eyed the pair nervously, cleared his throat, and got on with it.

"The maid found him around five. Probyn'd had a session of intestinal flu most of the day before and all that day, so he wasn't eating regular meals. Hot tea and crackers off and on, whenever he felt up to it, so there was no way of knowing by the stomach contents exactly when he died. The dog, Vulcan, was lying across him, which probably kept him from cooling down normally. Figure how long he lived, and how long till he was found, the doc said he could've been shot anywhere from half an hour to two hours before that."

The nurse drew the thermometer from between O'Hara's lips and held it up to read with a professional turn of the wrist. "Well, Mr. O'Hara," she remarked wryly, "I don't know about poor old Mr. Probyn, but at least *you're* cooling down normally." She made an entry on her records.

O'Hara snapped with a pained air, "Looks like everybody's a comedian around here!"

The nurse bustled out the door, casting a satisfied smile behind as it closed.

"They don't give you any peace in this place," O'Hara said. "But I've got to admit that The Bride of Baal's handy to have around in the wee hours of the morning when the pain's gettin' just a bit too much for a body." He shifted self-consciously among the tangled bedding as if afraid he'd exposed a soft spot, and glowered at Giovanni. "Okay, let's hear the rest. Who've you got for suspects?"

"Nobody firm, yet. First of all, there's the household. Besides Probyn himself, there's his sister-in-law, who seems to be some kind of a poor relation, and a granddaughter, Marla . . . Marla . . ."

"Wyman," O'Hara supplied. "I've seen her around town. A darlin' of a colleen, about twenty." O'Hara's one-sixteenth Irish blood was inclined to go to his tongue. "Long black hair, worthy of the

sweet Deirdre, and eyes as blue as the River Shannon."

Giovanni wondered privately just how blue the River Shannon might be. "That's her," he went on. "Then there's a butler; a cook, who's his wife; two maids; a chauffeur-handyman type; the old fellow who minds the gate; and his wife. I tell you, O'Hara, nobody gets into that place without old Probyn wants him to."

"Didn't I tell you the place is like Fort Knox? That wall must be eight feet high, solid stone around the whole place, miles of it, and the only gate that isn't locked is guarded day and night."

"Right," Giovanni agreed. "The gatekeeper's wife swears he wasn't gone from his post all day. Unless we can find somebody to swear differently, we can rule him out. And only three people came in after the last time Probyn turned up in the kitchen looking for some tea."

Wrinkles on O'Hara's florid brow tangled as he concentrated his thoughts. "You're sure it was intestinal flu he had, and not a little arsenic or something that somebody slipped into his supper a couple of nights before? The shooting could have been the second try, y'know."

Giovanni perked up like a schoolboy who'd gotten an unexpected A. "That's the first thing I thought of. Doc says he'll be looking out for it when he does the P.M. We'll soon have his report."

"Who's on the case besides us?"

Giovanni hesitated. One of the first things he'd heard on his transfer was: "With O'Hara you never know which way the cat'll jump." Confinement to a hospital bed wouldn't have lessened his sensitive ego.

"Lindstrom and I did the initial investigation."

O'Hara nodded, with a wry twist to his mouth. "He's coming along well. Did a good job on the Masterson case." Giovanni felt a twinge of surprise. O'Hara's previous reference to Lindstrom had labeled him as "a clod in thick boots."

"But remember," O'Hara continued, "I'll be working with you all the way. There's no need to worry. I won't let you down." He wore a gentle smile, as if in contemplation of the comfort this would bring to his colleagues. "Who were the three you said got into Fort Knox?"

Giovanni consulted his notes. "Rupert Kendall clocked in precisely at three o'clock. I've been talking to Probyn's secretary at the plant, and Kendall would be a good man to put your money on. He's been storming around the past couple of weeks claiming the old man stole some milling process he invented."

"Developed."

"Whatever." Giovanni shrugged.

"It's supposed to save millions, or thousands anyway, and he's been raising quite a stink. Hawkins, the chauffeur type, was washing one of the cars outside the garage—a four-car affair—which is about fifty yards from the greenhouse. He said the two of them were going at it hot and heavy, from what he could hear. Said Kendall called the old man every name he could lay his tongue to."

"Kendall . . ." O'Hara mused. "Seems to me I should know him."

"Early forties, tall and slim, dark, getting a little bald in front. Real intense eyes, look as if they could see right through you."

O'Hara nodded in satisfaction. "I know him. Hawk nose, and a sensitive mouth. Looks like a cross between a poet and a pirate. What does he have to say for himself?"

"He admitted they'd had words," Giovanni said, "but he swore up and down that Probyn was alive when he left."

"Wouldn't you?"

"I suppose so. Anyway, the gatekeeper clocked him out at 3:20. Ten minutes later a fellow called John Locke turned up."

O'Hara nodded. "Him I know. Medium height, in his early fifties? A sarcastic type, used to be married to Probyn's daughter. Not Marla's mother, the other one. She's dead now, and he works for the old man—or did the last I heard."

"That's the guy. An accountant. He went up to the house, the butler told him Probyn was down at the greenhouse, and he headed that way. But he says he changed his mind and decided not to disturb the old man. He didn't check out till 3:45, though. I asked him what took so long, and he said he'd noticed Marla's Ferrari in the garage, poked around it for a while, checking out the features and wondering if he might ever be able to afford one."

"Wasn't the chauffeur there?"

Giovanni shook his head. "He finished washing the car about the time Kendall left, then came on into town on an errand for the cook. The gatekeeper says he drove out not long after Kendall, and he was seen at the market."

O'Hara leaned across to his bedside table, pulled out one of his letters, and began to make notes on the back of the envelope.

"Locke left at 3:45?"

Giovanni nodded. "We've got two witnesses to that. Just as he was leaving, the granddaughter's boyfriend, Loren Renaldi, drove up. There's an unsavory type, if you ask me. About twenty-three, I'd guess. He's tall, with a good build, but he's got one of those homely faces, you can't tell if he's a budding genius or verging on moronic. Long, straight

hair, down over his collar, and probably none too clean—and his clothes are something else. Of course, old Probyn himself looked as if he'd ridden the rods, in baggy old pants and a jacket that could have been dragged through a stovepipe."

"Millionaires can afford to look like bums," O'Hara remarked. "Did the boyfriend go out to the greenhouse?"

"He says not. Miss Wyman and her aunt both confirm that he spent about twenty minutes with them, and then he took off to hunt the old man out. Renaldi was supposed to be trying to talk Probyn into letting him marry the granddaughter. But he claims he lost his nerve, wandered around the place trying to get it back again, and finally headed out the gate, figuring he could find a better time to tackle the old man than when he was suffering from what Renaldi called 'the gripes'."

"If the boy married Marla with the old man dead, he'd be married to a nice piece of money. It might seem smarter to marry her first, though, and then knock off the old man, if he's the one who did it." O'Hara cocked his head to one side; bright, birdlike eyes seeming to assess abstracts in the air before him. "It might be even smarter, though, to knock the old man off first. Marla'd get the money either way, and the old man wouldn't be around to object." He swung his gaze back to Giovanni. "How's the pie going to be sliced, now that Probyn's dead?"

"The biggest chunk goes into a foundation, medical research, new library for the city, things like that, with a board controlling it. Marla gets three million outright, in trust till she's twenty-one, and shares in the mill. The aunt, or great-aunt—she's a brother's widow—gets a pension, $20,000 a year if she lives at Highgates, or $35,000 if for any reason she wants to move. The staff all come in for a nice chunk, except one maid who's fairly new—anywhere from $5,000 to $15,000 apiece, depending on how long they've been at Highgates. There are a few minor beneficiaries, but nobody who's involved."

O'Hara whistled. "Three million! Nurses and governesses when she was little, the best schools here and in England, a year at the Sorbonne, and now all that money. The luck of some people. But I don't think my little colleen'd do a thing like that, especially when she had it so good already. Is she covered?"

"Pretty much. Either her aunt or one or the other of the staff can testify to her whereabouts except for one period of about twenty minutes just after the boyfriend left the house. She says she was in the li-

brary making some notes for a report she's working on—she's a junior at the university—but nobody saw her during that time. Theoretically, she could have slipped out and shot him, but I'm with you, I don't think she's the type. She seems pretty much broken up about the old man's death."

"How about the others?"

"All accounted for. The aunt was in the kitchen with the cook, going over some new gourmet recipes, while Marla was in the library. The maids were both upstairs. The way they were working, they cover each other pretty thoroughly, so they're in the clear, unless they're in it together."

"How about the butler?"

"He was feeling wonky all day, probably the same bug Probyn had. After Renaldi left, Marla made him go to his quarters and lie down. One of the maids saw him go up, and she was working in that area most of the afternoon, said she'd have seen him if he'd come down."

O'Hara scribbled on the envelope. "So much for the people. Now, what do we have by way of physical evidence?"

"Not much. He was shot with a .38. There are several guns around the house, but only one pistol, a .22 in the old man's desk. It hadn't been fired since the last time it'd been cleaned. Wasn't even loaded."

"Any pertinent fingerprints?"

"The team's working on it, but so far nothing of any use."

"Footprints?"

Giovanni nodded. "One. The greenhouse floor is dirt, pretty hard-packed, but the chauffeur—he's nurseryman, too—knocked over a watering can near the doorway a couple of days ago. It had pretty much dried up, but we've got one partial that looks promising. Hawkins, the chauffeur, said the old man wouldn't let Vulcan in the greenhouse anymore. He was always knocking something over with his tail. But our partial has one of Vulcan's paw prints over it, pointing toward the door. That suggests it was made after the dog interrupted the murderer. Not one of the outsiders had been on the grounds since the water was spilled, except that afternoon. The print's real smooth, but there's a sort of scar as if the wearer picked up a rock that got ground into the sole, and then dropped out. A good clear impression of the hole."

O'Hara's cheeks creased in a wide smile. "Good! We can use something concrete like that. If it is the murderer's, and he doesn't know we've got it, we might match shoes before he gets rid of them."

Giovanni looked at his watch with dismay. "Look, O'Hara, I know you want to hear everything,

but I was only supposed to bring your mail and get on with the job. Lindstrom'll be waiting."

"OK, OK," O'Hara grumbled, "get on your way. But you keep me posted, hear? And don't forget to find out what kind of flowers the old man had in his hand."

Giovanni turned toward the door. "I'll try, and I'll come back tonight, or tomorrow morning at least, and bring you up to date."

"Tonight!" O'Hara called imperiously as the sergeant disappeared. He glowered at the closed door for a moment, then settled back to think.

Out of his frustration, rather than by intention, O'Hara made the second floor staff miserable for the rest of the day. When the shift changed in the afternoon, the most important word passed was not about Mrs. Hurley's violent reaction to the new medication, or Dr. MacCallum's orders to screen Mr. Janeway's visitors for contraband liquor. Rather, the watchword was: "Look out for O'Hara!"

The head nurse at the station drew something like a breath of relief when shortly after supper she saw Sgt. Giovanni ambling down the hall toward 204. Perhaps things would get better soon.

"Well," O'Hara growled when Sgt. Giovanni peered around his door. "You certainly took long enough! Where have you been?"

"I had a lot of work to catch up on, spending so much time here this morning," Giovanni replied, with less of an apologetic air than he would have had a few months earlier. "I found out quite a bit, though."

"Like?"

"For one thing, there was no sign of poison, not even in the small amount that might have made it look like an intestinal upset. No fingerprints in the greenhouse that aren't accounted for in the ordinary way. We've got a nice cast of the one footprint, showing the scar in the sole, and Miss Wyman told me it was gillyflowers the old man had in his hand."

"Gillyflowers?"

"That's what she said. I don't know a thing about flowers."

"Well, what color were they, what did they look like?"

"The old man just caught a handful as he fell. What does it matter?" Giovanni asked with a daring degree of heat.

"Matter! I'll give you *matter,* me boy. You got a look at them, didn't you?"

"The ones in his hand were so wilted by the time we got there you couldn't tell what they were, but the ones on the bench, where he'd grabbed for a hold, were all sorts of colors." He screwed up his eyes and

his brow knit in concentration, as he cast his mind's eye back to the greenhouse. "There were some pink ones, and white, and yellow, and some sort of purplish ones—and there were some red ones, too, real pretty. Tall, sort of clustery, real flowery, if you know what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean, if you really want to know," O'Hara complained, "but it's a poor workman that blames his tools."

Giovanni was silent in the face of this apparent *non sequitur.*

"Anything else? Have you found the shoes to fit your cast yet?"

Giovanni shook his head. "Judge Clayton won't issue search warrants for the suspects' houses as things stand. He said if we could come up with something to point to one person, that'd do the trick, but right now there isn't enough evidence to back up a warrant."

"And in the meantime somebody does some figuring and decides it'd be the wise thing to get rid of those shoes. That'd be just our luck. Damn, I wish I were out of this place! I'd find the right shoes, regulations or no."

Giovanni backed a few paces away from the bed. "Well, if you don't need me for anything else I'll . . ."

O'Hara waved him away absently, studying his back-of-the-envelope notes on the case. "Go on. Go on. I'll work with what I've got."

The staff at the nurses' station shared apprehensive glances as Giovanni left the floor. The respite had been so brief.

The evening, however, was comparatively quiet. After visiting hours, peace reigned for an unexpected length of time. Charts were brought up to date, shelves were cleaned, nails were polished, and bits of gossip exchanged in hushed voices. Then the sword fell. O'Hara's light went on.

"Not me!" several nurses declared in unison.

"I'll go myself," the senior nurse offered, and moved briskly and silently down the hall.

"What is it, Mr. O'Hara? Do you need a sleeping pill?"

The room was suitably dark for the sleeping hours, except for the soft glow from a lamp behind the bed. It showed O'Hara teetering on the edge of the bed, his traction equipment straining, one hand braced on the bedside table. The other hand groped ineffectually for the telephone, just out of reach.

"Sleeping pill! I've got to catch a murderer. I don't need a sleeping pill, I need an outside line!"

"Mr. O'Hara, please! You'll wake the other patients. Don't you realize it's after two o'clock?"

"Get me an outside line, or I'll

not only wake the other patients, I'll wake the dead," he threatened, but in a slightly subdued voice.

"Mr. O'Hara . . ."

"Please?"

This approach was so unexpected that the nurse found herself with the receiver in her hand before she realized what she was doing. "What number do you want?"

O'Hara told her. After a moment she passed him the handset.

"This is O'Hara. Let me talk to Giovanni."

There was a short wait, then a drowsy voice came through the receiver.

"Giovanni, I've got the pointer you need. Roust up Lindstrom, then see if Judge Clayton'll issue a warrant. Get him out of bed, if you have to. Find those shoes, before it's too late."

A crackle of protests and questions from the receiver sounded through the still room. In a series of succinct sentences O'Hara told his sergeant exactly what he'd come up with, and who it pointed to. The nurse standing by, listening eagerly, gave a startled gasp.

"Now get going, and report to me in the morning." O'Hara handed the phone back to the nurse.

"And now, me pretty, I'd be obliged if you'd take yourself out of here. Don't they teach you nowadays that hospital patients are supposed to have plenty of rest?" O'Hara snuggled against the pillow and wormed himself into as comfortable a position as was possible in the circumstances. He directed one long, outrageous wink at the nurse, then closed both eyes and settled himself to sleep.

Orderlies were trundling cartloads of breakfast trays down the hall when Giovanni next entered Room 204. O'Hara greeted him with a smug grin, an effect slightly marred by a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

"Find 'em?"

Giovanni nodded. "Judge Clayton said he'd take a chance on your reasoning, and gave us a search warrant. They were at the bottom of a Goodwill collection sack. The pit mark on the sole is clear, and the shoe fits the cast perfectly. And we found a bonus, too." He waited, glowing with pleasure, for O'Hara's reaction. Raised eyebrows and an expectant silence prompted him to go on. "The gun. It'd been cleaned, but we roused the ballistics men, and it was the one that did the job, all right."

O'Hara beamed with satisfaction. "Good work. I figured I'd got the answer before the evidence was gone. Now I'd guess you want to know how I solved the case."

Giovanni hesitated. Had O'Hara

forgotten the telephone conversation at two in the morning? Well, he was entitled to his kicks. "I didn't quite catch it all this morning. Your line of reasoning, I mean," he answered finally. "Sounded like a stroke of luck."

O'Hara slapped a triangle of toast back down on the tray. "Stroke of luck! Hardly. It's knowledge of the ways of the world that gave me the answer. That's where those of us who've seen more of life have it over you young fellows. Oh, don't worry, you're bound to catch up, given time and a little more experience. You see, old Probyn's behavior after he was shot was the clue to the whole thing. You spotted it yourself, but didn't follow it up. Why did he drag himself the long way around to the door, and then away from the house? *Away,* mind you, not toward it, where you'd expect him to go for help."

"I can see it now," Giovanni replied. "Before, I thought he was just irrational from pain."

"I've had more time to think than you did," O'Hara admitted. "Probyn didn't grab those flowers while he was falling. No, he deliberately dragged himself up to that bench to *get* those flowers, 'cause he was afraid there wasn't a snowball's chance of him living with a wound like that. Then, with his very lifeblood marking the trail for us, he forced himself to make it to the door and beyond, to seal his killer's death warrant."

"A gutsy old man," Giovanni murmured respectfully.

"Identifying them as gillyflowers almost cancelled out that dying effort, you know."

Giovanni bridled. "I told you I didn't know one flower from the other. Miss Wyman, she's the one said they were gillyflowers. Weren't they?"

"In a manner of speaking." O'Hara paused for effect, while Giovanni shuffled uncomfortably by by the bedside. "But you've got to remember, our little Marla had nurses when she was little—English nannies—nothing being too good for the old man to give her. And she went to boarding school in England. So what is it that the English call a gillyflower? What do we call the flower that fits your rather inadequate description? Tall, clusters of flowers, pink, white, yellow, purple? I finally got it. Stock! That's what it is. Stock."

"Never heard of it. But then, I don't know much about flowers."

"Probyn did. He grabbed a handful of stock, then headed out the door, to the water butt, you said."

"That's right."

"Sort of a cistern, you said. Why in the name of all that's good and holy didn't you say, "Sort of a bar-

rel'?" O'Hara asked peremptorily.

"Anybody knows what a water butt is."

"Not everybody," O'Hara admitted. "But once I thought about it, the whole thing fell into place. All I had to do was ask myself what—or, in this case, who—goes with 'stock' and 'barrel'?"

"Even dragged out of my warm bed, I followed you there," Giovanni remarked. "Locke. And now, if you'll excuse the expression, we've got him under lock and key. When we found the shoes, and showed him the cast of the footprint in the greenhouse he claimed he'd never been in, he hemmed and hawed around, finally admitted he'd gone to see the old man, but swore up and down he'd left him alive. Then we hit him with the dying man's accusation, and he broke down completely.

"It was the old story. He was a darn sharp accountant, and started doctoring the books. He'd salted away a tidy little sum on the side, but the old man was just a little bit smarter. He found out about it, even though a couple of audits had missed it. I suppose Locke thought that being family, even by marriage, old Probyn wouldn't see him go to jail. But he wasn't much of a judge of millionaires. Out in the greenhouse Probyn told Locke he was going to prosecute, and he'd end up in the pen, so Locke shot him. He had the gun with him, so there won't be any question about lack of premeditation. And now that we have the gun, the case is wrapped up neater than a Christmas present."

"Thanks to old man Probyn," O'Hara declared. "A real present it was, too—handed to you on a silver tray, like the head of the sainted John the Baptist by Salome."

"Yeah," Giovanni said.

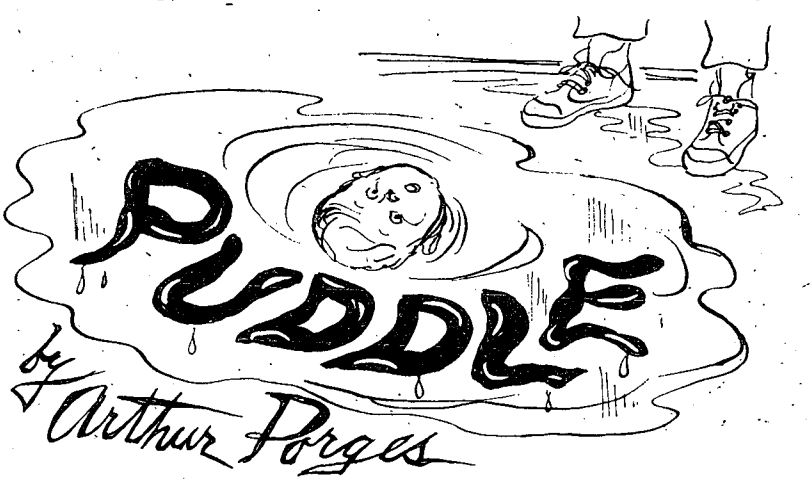
"So now," said O'Hara, stroking jam onto a toast triangle, "you can get on with your other work."

"Well, thanks for the help," Giovanni told him, sidling toward the door. "And it was 'to' Salome, not 'by'," he muttered—but not until the door had shut silently behind him.

Herein is proffered further manifestation that fear and fascination may, indeed, frequent the same haunts.

A GREAT POET promised to show us fear in a handful of dust. If ever I doubted that such a thing were possible, I know better now. In the past few weeks a vague, terrible memory of my childhood suddenly came into sharp focus after staying tantalizingly just beyond the edge of recall for decades. Perhaps the high fever from a recent virus attack opened some blocked pathways in my brain, but whatever the explanation, I have come to understand for the first time why I see fear not in dust, but water.

It must seem quite absurd: fear in a shallow puddle made by rain; but think about it for a moment. Haven't you ever, as a child, gazed down at such a little pool on the street, seen the reflected sky, and experienced the illusion, very strongly, so that it brought a shudder, of endless depth a mere step away—a chasm extending downward somehow to the heavens? A single stride to the center of the glassy puddle, and you would fall right through. Down? Up? The direction was indefinable, a weird blend of both. There were clouds beneath your feet, and nothing but



that shining surface between. Did you dare to take that critical step and shatter the illusion? Not I. Now that memory has returned, I recall being far too scared of the consequences. I carefully skirted such wet patches, no matter how casually my playmates splashed through.

Most of my acquaintances tolerated this weakness in me. After all, I was a sturdy, active child, and held my own in the games we played. It was only after Joe Carma appeared in town that my own little hell materialized, and I lost status.

He was three years older than I, and much stronger; thickset, muscular, dark—and perpetually surly. He was never known to smile in any joyous way, but only to laugh with a kind of *schadenfreude,* the German word for mirth provoked by another's misfortunes. Few could stand up to him when he hunched his blocky frame and bored in with big fists flailing, and I wasn't one of the elect; he terrified me as much by his demeanor as his physical power.

Looking back now, I discern something grim and evil about the boy, fatherless, with a weak and querulous mother. What he did was not the thoughtless, basically merry mischief of the other kids, but full of malice and cruelty. Where Shorty Dugan would cheerfully snowball a tomcat, or let the air out of old man Gruber's tires, Carma preferred to torture a kitten—rumor said he'd been seen burning one alive—or take a hammer to a car's headlights.

Somehow Joe Carma learned of my phobia about puddles, and my torment began. On several occasions he meant to go so far as to collar me, hold my writhing body over one of the bigger pools, and pretend to drop me through—into that terribly distant sky beyond the sidewalk.

Each time I was saved at the last moment, nearly hysterical with fright, by Larry Dumont, who was taller than the bully, at least as strong, and thought to be more agile. They were bound to clash eventually, but so far Carma had sheered off, hoping, perhaps, to find and exploit some weakness in his opponent that would give him an edge. Not that he was a coward but just coldly careful; one who always played the odds.

As for Larry, he was good-natured, and not likely to fight at all unless pushed into it. By grabbing Carma with his lean, wiry fingers that could bend thick nails, and half-jokingly arguing with him, Dumont would bring about my release without forcing a showdown. Then they might scuffle a bit, with Larry

smiling and Joe darkly sullen as ever, only to separate, newly respectful of each other's strength.

One day, after a heavy rain, Carma caught me near a giant puddle—almost a pond—that had appeared behind the Johnson barn at the north end of town. It was a lonely spot, the hour was rather early, and ordinarily Joe would not have been about, as he liked to sleep late on weekends. If I had suspected he might be around, that was the last place in the world I'd have picked to visit alone.

Fear and fascination often go together. I stood by the huge puddle, but well away from the edge, peering down at the blue sky, quite cloudless and so far beneath the ground where it should not have been at all; and for the thousandth time tried to gather enough nerve to step in. I *knew* there had to be solid land below—jabs with a stick had proved this much before in similar cases—yet I simply could not make my feet move.

At that instant brawny arms seized me, lifted my body into the air, and tilted it so that my contorted face was parallel to the pool and right over the glittering surface.

"Gonna count to ten, and then drop you right through!" a rasping voice taunted me. "You been right all along: it's a long way down. You're gonna fall and fall, with the wind whistling past your ears; turning, tumbling, faster and faster. You'll be gone for good, kid, just sailing down forever. You're gonna scream like crazy all the way, and it'll get fainter and fainter. Here we go: one! two! three!—"

I tried to scream but my throat was sealed. I just made husky noises while squirming desperately, but Carma held me fast. I could feel the heavy muscles in his arms all knotted with the effort.

"—four! five! Won't be long now. Six! seven!—"

A thin, whimpering sound broke from my lips, and he laughed. My vision was blurring; I was going into shock, it seems to me now, years later.

Then help came, swift and effective. Carma was jerked back, away from the water, and I fell free. Larry Dumont stood there, white with fury.

"You're a dirty skunk, Joe!" he gritted angrily. "You need a lesson, your own kind."

Then he did an amazing thing. Although Carma was heavier than he, if shorter, Larry whipped those lean arms around the bully, snatched him clear of the ground, and with a single magnificent heave threw him fully six feet into the middle of the water.

Now I wonder about my

memory; I have to. Did I actually see what I now recall so clearly? It's quite impossible, but the vision persists. Carma fell full-length, face-down, in the puddle, and surely the water could not have been more than a few inches deep. But he went on through! I saw his body twisting, turning, and shrinking in size as it dropped away into that cloudless sky. He screamed, and it was exactly as he had described it to me moments earlier. The terrible, shrill cries grew fainter, as if dying away in the distance; the flailing figure became first a tiny doll, and then a mere dot; an unforgettable thing, surely, yet only a dream-memory for so long.

I looked at Larry; he was gaping, his face drained of all blood. His long fingers were still hooked and tense from that mighty toss.

That's how I remember it. Perhaps we probed the puddle; I'm not sure, but if we did, surely it was inches deep.

On recovering from my illness three weeks ago, I hired a good private detective to make a check. The files of the local paper are unfortunately not complete, but one item for August 20, 1937, when I was eight, begins:

NO CLUES ON
DISAPPEARANCE
OF CARMA BOY

After ten days of police investigation, no trace has been found of Joe Carma, who vanished completely on the ninth of this month. It is not even known how he left town, if he did, since there is no evidence that he went by either bus or train. Martin's Pond, the only deep water within many miles, was dragged, but without any result.

The detective assures me that Joe Carma never returned to town, and that the name is unlisted in Army records, with the FBI or, indeed, any national roster from 1937 to date.

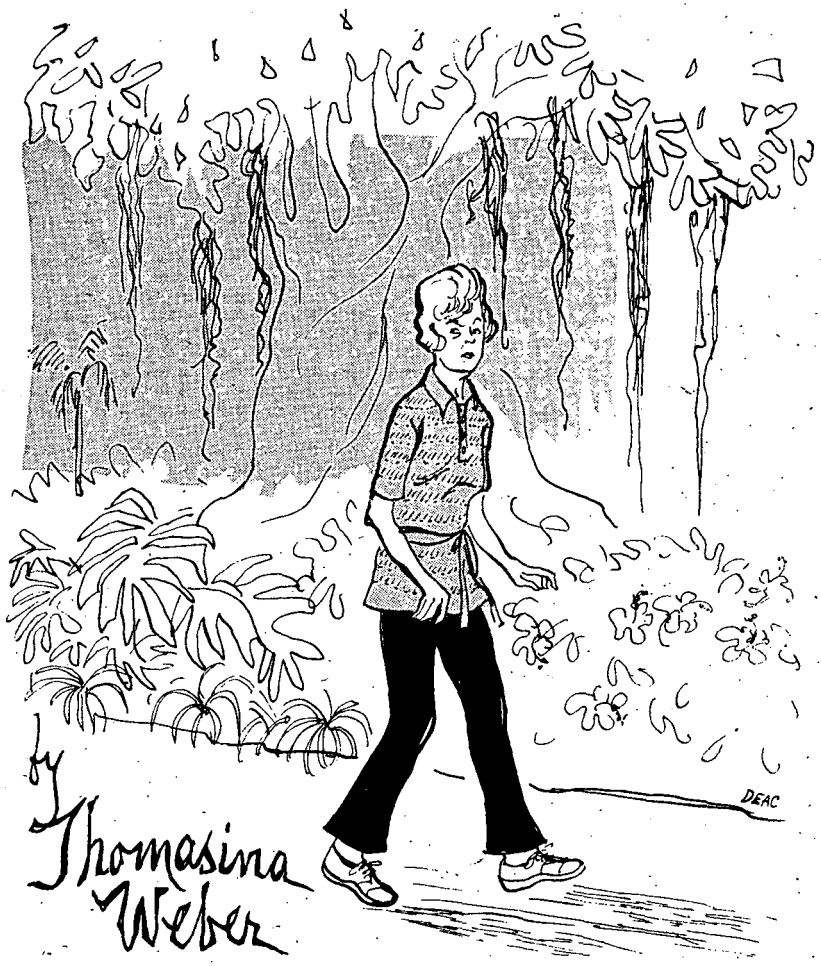
These days, I skin dive, sail my own little sloop, and have even shot some of the worst Colorado River rapids in a rubber boat. Yet it still takes almost more courage than I have to slosh through a shallow puddle that mirrors the sky.

One must concede, regrettably, that it is the wheel with the loudest squeak which invariably gets the grease.

Nothing to Fear

AMANDA BURKE knew she was being followed as she marched down Hibiscus Road. She did not care for jogging, so she walked rapidly, which she believed to be just as beneficial and more comfortable. He had his nerve, following her every night. He probably thought she was fair game—a woman alone, no longer young, but definitely attractive.

She turned into Allamanda Lane and ducked behind a bush to wait. He rounded the corner seconds later and stopped, as if surprised to find her nowhere in sight. The German shepherd at his side stopped also and sat.



She stepped out of her hiding place and confronted him. "I would like an explanation, Mr. Snead," she said. "Ever since you moved next door to me you have been following me at night."

"I could say I was walking Bruno," he replied. "I hope I didn't frighten you." His heavy gray brows drew together in concern.

"Hah! That would be the day."

"You seem to be a very capable woman, Miss Burke, but with this crime wave we're having, it isn't safe for a woman to be out alone at night."

"I don't know where you're from, Mr. Snead, but this is Florida, and except for a few cities I could name, a woman can still go out after dark here."

"The most recent mugging was right in town, and break-ins are occurring here in this neighborhood."

"I am not afraid of your burglars and muggers and assorted criminals."

"Fear has nothing to do with it, Miss Burke. Unafraid or not, you are still a woman and you just are no match, physically, for a man."

"I'll be the judge of that, if you don't mind. And I'll thank you to mind your own business." Her glance dropped to the dog waiting patiently by his master's side. "I don't need a watchdog, canine or human." Brushing past them, she walked briskly toward home.

The next morning Amanda went to the supermarket as she did every Thursday. Something made her look up and she abruptly dropped the tomato she had been squeezing and swung her grocery cart to the middle of the aisle, cutting off a woman who was heading for the lettuce display. The woman frowned at her, but Amanda didn't notice, for she was charging toward the end of the aisle, exuding energy from every atom of her slight, wiry figure. She had been trying unsuccessfully for two weeks to catch Mr. Redmon at home and now there he was, disappearing into detergents.

A small child darted in front of Amanda as she rounded the bend, nearly causing her to ram into a tower of bleach bottles. She did not know which she hated more, unrestrained children or idiot stockboys who stacked lethal displays on aisle ends to trap innocent women.

"Mr. Redmon!" she called loudly, since he was the full length of the aisle away by now. His body stiffened at the sound of her voice, although he did not turn around.

"Mr. Redmon," Amanda said, cutting off his retreat with her grocery cart, "are you aware that I have been phoning you for two weeks?"

"Really?" His eyebrows rose above pale blue eyes and his slender body seemed to brace itself against her verbal onslaught. "Is anything wrong?"

"I should say there is something wrong!" A shopper turned toward Amanda's loud voice. "You rented the other side of my duplex without consulting me."

"Miss Burke, you know my realtor handles tenant problems for me."

"I don't care to speak to your whipping boy. You own the house and it is your problem."

Mr. Redmon tried to ease himself away from her. "I have no problem,

Miss Burke. Mr. Snead is a retired salesman. He provided excellent references. If he is annoying you in some way, please call my realtor—"

Amanda reached out and grasped the front of her landlord's shirt. "For one thing," she said, "he follows me at night. I have no privacy at all. And then there's that dog of his."

"Bruno hasn't *bitten* you!"

"Not yet," she said pointedly.

"I didn't think so," said Mr. Redmon, obviously relieved. "Bruno is a good-natured shepherd."

"You wouldn't say that if you saw the way he looks at Skippy. One of these days that brute is going to kill my dog."

"Please, Miss Burke, my ice cream is melting."

"I don't give a damn about your ice cream. I want that man evicted."

"I've got to go," he said, a look of desperation on his face. He scurried into the next aisle, and when Amanda followed, she found his loaded grocery cart there, abandoned.

As usual, Bruno barked when Amanda pulled into her driveway. Weighing close to a hundred pounds, he had a black saddle and tan flanks and legs. His face also was tan, with the exception of a black muzzle, black rings around the eyes and a black band running across his head and dipping to a point between his eyes. He returned her stare imperturbably. At least he had the sense to stay on his own side of the duplex.

Amanda got out of the car and reached inside for a bag. Bruno began to bark again. Then he looked toward the house. A moment later Mr. Snead came out.

"Bruno," he said softly, "quiet." Bruno quieted. "Like a hand with your groceries, Miss Burke?"

"No, thank you," she said.

Like Bruno, Mr. Snead was dark and burly. Amanda had often noticed that some dogs resembled their owners, or vice versa, perhaps. Sometimes their personalities matched too, she thought wryly.

Managing finally to get the key into the lock, Amanda opened the door and a small, reddish-gold terrier dashed out into the yard and over to the German shepherd, where he took up his stance beneath the dark muzzle and proceeded to snarl and snap at the large dog. Bruno merely tilted his head out of reach and gazed up at his owner.

"Skippy, come here," said Amanda sharply. Skippy ignored her. "Come here, I said!"

The terrier continued to badger Bruno. Bruno emitted a low growl and Amanda saw his lips curl away from his teeth.

"Stop him!" she shrieked, dropping the bag and running toward the two dogs, neither of whom had moved. Then she looked up and saw Mr. Snead's lips curling, too—in a smile.

"Well," she said, "if you are going to encourage that—that monster, there is no sense in talking to you."

"Bruno is well-trained," said Mr. Snead. "He wouldn't bite another dog."

"What do you mean? Just look at him! That's a murderous look if I ever saw one!"

Mr. Snead burst out laughing. "He's annoyed, that's all. You know, Skippy isn't the sweetest-tempered dog I ever met. I can see why he was born without a tail; the good Lord knew he'd never need one."

"Mr. Snead, I regard this entire conversation as a personal insult. Skippy and I were happy before you moved in with your—animal."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but don't worry, I won't bother you. I'm not the neighborly kind."

"Then why did you come popping out the minute I drove in?"

"Because I thought you'd like to know your boyfriend was here while you were out this morning."

"If you mean Mr. Lockley, he is a gentleman friend, *not* a boyfriend."

"Oh, excuse me." Mr. Snead was still smiling and Skippy had simmered down to an occasional growl and an intense stare. "Your, uh, gentleman friend said to tell you he'll be about an hour late tonight. He has to get a haircut."

"I see. It was hardly necessary for you to act as my secretary, however."

Mr. Snead shrugged. "I was working with Bruno and he came over to watch. Incidentally, I'd be glad to train Skippy for you if you like."

"Skippy does not need to be trained. He and I get along very well."

Mr. Snead looked down at Skippy, who was still glaring at Bruno. "He's wearing his brat look."

"I don't know why I'm standing here arguing with you. I have more to do with my time." She turned to go, then stopped. "I'm sure you realize, Mr. Snead, that this house isn't big enough for the four of us."

"You don't bother me, Miss Burke. Of course, I can't speak for Bruno."

Amanda's hands balled into fists. "You are insufferable, Mr. Snead. And as for Bruno, well, the less said about him the better."

"You should be glad we're here, Miss Burke. You couldn't ask for better protection than Bruno. You probably have some valuable things

inside your house, I'm sure, and—"

"What makes you think that?"

"Observation. You're a handsome woman for your age. You dress well, you drive a nice car. It figures that you would have valuables in your house."

"You seem to know a lot for a man who isn't the neighborly type."

He inclined his head and smiled. "Call me if you need me."

Furious, Amanda finished unloading her groceries and Skippy joined her in the kitchen on the chance that there might be a tidbit for him in one of the bags.

Calvin Lockley arrived at nine that evening. If she hadn't heard him squeal his sports car to a stop in front of her house, Amanda would have learned of his arrival from Bruno. Skippy was waiting to greet him when Amanda opened the door.

"For a little fella with no tail, you sure do a good job of wagging," said Calvin, patting Skippy's head. The area where the tail should have been was quivering in an up-and-down motion.

"Good evening, Calvin," said Amanda.

Wearing an expensive stretch shirt and double-knit slacks, immaculate as usual, Calvin was only a few inches taller than Amanda's five foot height.

"You look sharp tonight, Amanda," said Calvin, snapping his chewing gum and moving his feet. Calvin was constantly in motion, either his hands or his feet or his chin were moving. When all systems were operating at once, it gave Amanda a touch of vertigo. "Red's a good color on you," he added.

"Thank you. I saw Mr. Redmon this morning and he refuses to evict Mr. Snead."

"I agree with him."

Amanda, who had been about to offer him a cup of coffee, changed her mind. "Oh?"

"That's right. Bruno's a good dog to have around. He'd scare off any prowlers."

"He also barks at you and at me, every time I go in or out. I don't think it necessary for the whole neighborhood to know what hours I keep or how often I have guests and what time they leave."

"You and Snead *are* the whole neighborhood," said Calvin, cracking his knuckles.

"I still don't think what I do is anyone's business."

"A lot of people would like a setup like yours—the only house on the block, a woman alone and no dog."

"No dog? What do you call Skippy?"

"I don't think he'd give anybody the shakes."

"Humph!" Amanda swiped a dish

towel across a spotless counter. "If you came here to insult me, you can leave right now."

"Okay, okay! Get your glad rags on. I made a profit on some stocks today and we're going out to celebrate." He was snapping his fingers and tapping one foot on the floor in counterpoint.

Amanda, not yet ready to be cajoled into a good humor, picked up a light sweater for the evening coolness. "I'll be back soon, Skippy," she said, giving him a biscuit. "Be a good boy."

The next morning Amanda was watering her hibiscus when Mr. Snead came out, followed by Bruno. Amanda decided to ignore them both.

"Good morning, Miss Burke." When Amanda did not answer, he went on. "I heard on the news that there was another mugging last night." He waited again, then said, "I thought I heard someone prowling around out here, but if there was anyone, Bruno scared him away when I let him out."

Amanda could not resist replying. "If you expect me to be grateful, you are going to be disappointed, Mr. Snead. I can take care of myself."

"Your house could be broken into while you're gone, you know."

"If I worried about everything that *could* happen, I'd be a nervous wreck, which I don't intend to be."

"Well, you're anything but that," he said, smiling.

"Mr. Snead, I do not appreciate people who stick their noses into my business. And that goes for your dog, too," she added.

Snead went into his house then, without another word, and Amanda smiled to herself. Now, if he still didn't get the message, she would have to try stronger measures.

The next morning Amanda overslept. It was eight o'clock when she jerked awake and leaped out of bed. She had only an hour to eat, dress and get to the hairdresser's for her standing appointment. She pulled down the wall ironing board and pressed a dress while she gulped a cup of scalding coffee, berating herself for her carelessness. She enjoyed Saturdays, considering them her "Be Nice to Amanda Days," and she felt cheated to have to rush like this. Locking Skippy in the house as usual and giving him a biscuit, she was finally on her way.

She had an hour and a half to calm down as she gave herself over to the skilled hands of the hairdresser. As a result, she was in a fairly good mood by the time she left.

After a leisurely lunch at The Sweet Shoppe, Amanda drove home, braced for Bruno's barking. It didn't come. Bruno was nowhere

in sight. That was strange, since Mr. Snead never went anywhere in the daytime.

Then she heard the growl. It sounded like Skippy, but it couldn't be. She had left Skippy in the house. Then Bruno growled and the other dog barked. It *was* Skippy. They must be on the far side of the house.

She hurried toward the sounds and that was when she saw the broken window in her kitchen. Was that how Skippy had got out?

"Say, Miss Burke, I'm sorry about your window."

She turned to see Mr. Snead approaching. He called to Bruno and the shepherd came to his side, trailed by Skippy who was wearing, Amanda had to admit, his brat look.

"What do you know about my window?" she asked.

"I'm the one who broke it."

"*You* broke my window?"

"I was working with Bruno and I happened to glance through your window—"

"You *happened*? You mean you were snooping through my window!"

"Skippy was barking like mad," Mr. Snead said quietly. "I thought something might be wrong."

"Of course you did."

"Apparently you forgot to unplug your iron and it was burning through your ironing board cover. I broke the window so that I could get inside."

Wordlessly, Amanda entered her kitchen. It was true; the ironing board cover was ruined.

"Skippy knew something was wrong," said Mr. Snead from the doorway behind her.

Amanda surveyed the broken glass on the floor. "Couldn't you have picked the lock instead of making such a mess?"

Mr. Snead looked at her for a moment, then turned and walked away. As she watched Bruno walking beside him, she felt as if she had been snubbed. If Mr. Snead thought she was going to lavish him with praise and maudlin gratitude for unplugging her iron and freeing Skippy, he was wrong. It was entirely possible that she had forgotten to disconnect the iron when she rushed out this morning, but it was also possible that Mr. Snead had plugged it in himself, after he broke into her house to inventory her valuables, as he called them.

Her eyes returned to the broken window, an idea starting to take shape. As it grew in substance, so did her enthusiasm. It was the perfect way to get rid of Mr. Snead. What would happen to Bruno when they locked Mr. Snead up in jail, she did not know, but neither did she care.

Hurrying to her bedroom, she

opened her jewelry box and took out a diamond ring, the only valuable piece in there, and put it in a hosiery bag. Then to the livingroom where, bit by bit, she added to the collection—an ivory figurine, a gold table lighter, two small silver picture frames—until the bag was full.

She stood uncertainly in the middle of the room. How she wished she could plant the evidence in his house, but that was impossible with Bruno the Mouth there. She would have to settle for hiding it in her own house in case the police decided to help her search for her "stolen items." That would be a remote possibility, however, especially when they saw the broken glass on her kitchen floor and found Mr. Snead's fingerprints on the window. Hiding the bag in a roasting pan in the rear of a bottom cupboard, Amanda picked up the phone.

It was a satisfying afternoon. The police arrived and took over. After listening to her story, two of them went next door and Amanda tried to look unconcerned when she heard Bruno announcing them. Before long they returned with Mr. Snead between them.

Mr. Snead looked stunned. "They say you have accused me of breaking into your house and stealing," he said.

"I certainly did," replied Amanda. "I suggested they check the window for your fingerprints."

"They don't have to go to that trouble. I told them I broke the window. I also told them why."

"Hah!"

"Come along, Mr. Snead," said the officer on his left.

"Are you taking him to the station?" asked Amanda.

"Yes, ma'am."

Amanda smiled triumphantly. "I hope you have room in his cell for Bruno."

"Mr. Snead is not under arrest, Miss Burke. We're only going to question him."

"Don't you believe what I told you?" asked Amanda, bristling.

"We have to check everything," the officer replied.

At last she was alone. It would be nice to celebrate with dinner in town and a movie, but Amanda wanted to savor the solitude of her domain. Skippy, who had sulked all afternoon because of the lack of attention paid him, condescended to settle himself at her feet in the livingroom when she sat down with a new mystery novel, but it was hard to concentrate; it was so quiet outside.

The police must have arrested Mr. Snead, or he would have been home before this. Amanda glanced at her watch. It was too early to leave yet. Restless, Amanda got up

and went outside, calling Skippy to follow.

The house next door was pleasingly dark and the yard pleasingly quiet. It was a good thing she had thought to bring her flashlight. Automatically, she tried the front door. It was locked. Shining the light through a window, she had the odd sensation of looking at her own apartment in a mirror. The duplex had been furnished by Mr. Redmon, who had evidently been to a two-for-one sale.

She worked her way around the house where she found a note tacked onto the kitchen door. Curious, Amanda began to read:

"Dear Miss Burke: I am sorry we couldn't be friends. I had no idea how much you disliked me until you accused me earlier today. They brought me home just before dark. They believed my story rather than yours. I thought you might like to know that Bruno and I have gone to spend the night in a motel. In the morning we will look for a new place to live. I don't want you to think that you drove us away, because you didn't. I have a high regard for my dog, and I feel it is not good for Bruno to have to put up with a canine delinquent such as Skippy. I hope you and Skippy will be happy in your solitude. (Signed) McAlister Snead."

McAlister! she thought hysterically. Of all the incongruous names! It took a moment for the mirth to subside and the indignation to rise. She had never been so insulted. It wasn't bad enough that he had downgraded Skippy, but he had sneaked home so that she would not hear him, and leaving of his own accord, he had robbed her of the satisfaction of driving him off.

As she crossed the lawn to her own home, she thought about the high-handedness of the police, classifying her as a liar and not having the decency to inform her of the outcome. They had simply discounted the whole thing.

A cup of strong coffee restored her good mood. What difference did it make if he left of his own accord? The important thing was that he was gone and she and Skippy had the place to themselves again. She looked down at the terrier twitching in his sleep, dreaming of wagging the tail he never had. He might not be a watchdog like Bruno, but Amanda didn't need a watchdog. She had nothing to fear.

She looked at her watch. It was ten o'clock, time for her nightly walk. She began to lay out her clothes. As she reached for her navy blue slacks, her red dress fell off the hanger.

"Red's a good color on you," Calvin had said. Leave it to Calvin to

like flashy colors. He was all show and noise. If she didn't need him, she would tell him to get lost.

Dressed at last, she went into the kitchen. Skippy waited expectantly for his biscuit. "Be a good boy, Skippy," she told him. "I'll be back soon." Locking the door behind her, she went out into the night.

How pleasant it was to stride along the dark streets without Mr. Snead and Bruno following her. Even the air smelled sweeter. She pulled it appreciatively into her lungs as she walked. It felt wonderful to be alone again with no one spying on her. A woman was entitled to her privacy, after all. If she had wanted a protector, she would have married long ago—if she could have found anyone worthy of her, that is.

She smiled in the darkness. That idiot Calvin seemed to think she had more than a business interest in him. What a dreamer! As if any woman could take him seriously.

Amanda turned into Redbird Drive. Bougainvillea burdened invisible fences along the sidewalk, guarding the luxurious homes behind them. Redbird Drive housed the well-to-do families in the neighborhood. Amanda felt no envy. She was satisfied with her own modest duplex and her dog for company. Maybe she could do without Calvin anyway, which would make life pleasanter and also more profitable.

Amanda stopped before a darkened house. Standing still, she could hear all the night sounds—crickets singing, an occasional bird chirping itself awake, a twig snapping as a rabbit or some other creature scampered across it. Amanda felt as if she were the only person in the world.

Taking her flashlight from her jacket pocket, she started up the driveway toward the silent house. The more she thought about it, the more she realized she would have to dump Calvin. He was getting too greedy. That was Calvin, though—pure profit and no risks. Amanda crept around to a rear window, pulling on her gloves. She had been at this business long enough to act as her own fence.

Gracefully, she swung herself over the sill.

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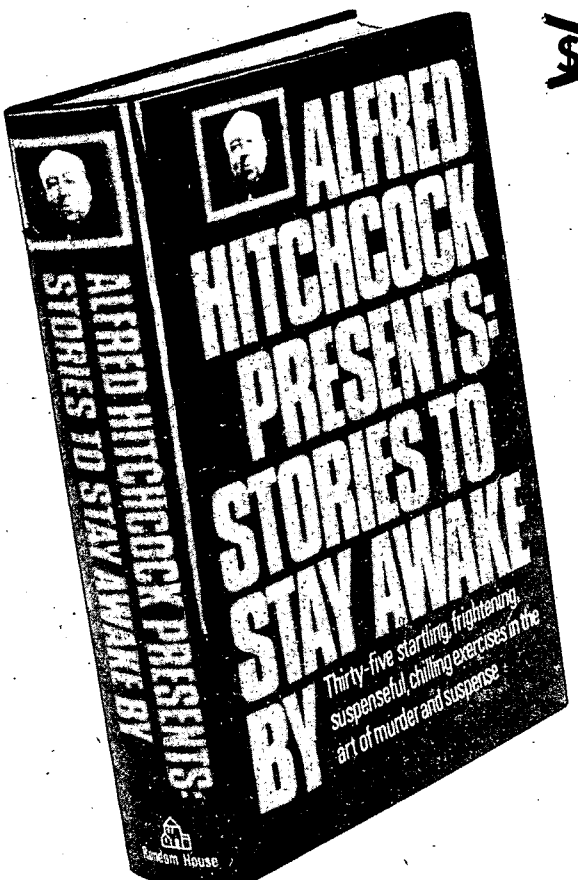

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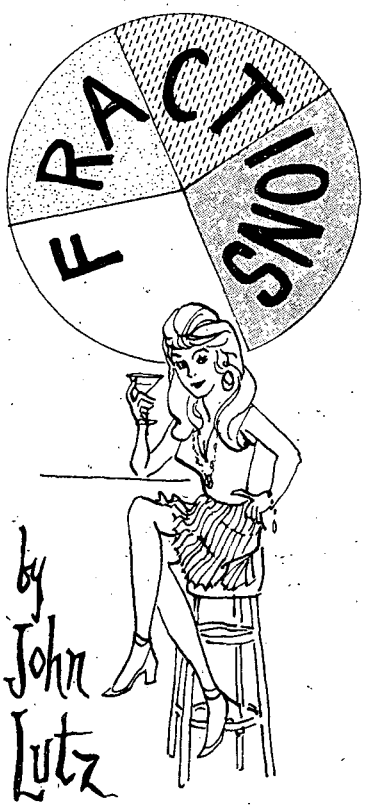


SONDRA rolled over. "You know I love you," she said to Judson Avery. "I could get someone to pay *all* my rent."

Judson raised his hawk-nosed but handsome face from where it was buried in the clean white pillow. He looked around him at Sondra's small but very plush apartment. Through the open door to the livingroom he could see the thick carpeting, the stone fireplace (genuine), and a corner of the widescreen color TV. He could be paying all of her rent, easily—Sondra knew that—but how could he explain to Margaret where that much more money was going?

"I don't understand," Judson said. "Why are you this way all of a sudden? Restless."

"All girls reach a point, Judson." Sondra fluffed her pillow and scooted backward on the mattress to sit up halfway. Long blonde hair fell to cover her well-rounded breasts. "I'm tired of waiting."

"So what do you want me to do?" Judson asked. "Kill her?"

"What do you think I *am*, Judson!"

"Only joking, honey." Judson maneuvered his lean frame so he was leaning back beside Sondra against the headboard. He looked from the corner of his eye at her

sexily pout-lipped profile. "But Margaret won't consent to a divorce under any circumstances. She's made herself clear on that."

"Murder isn't necessary," Sondra said. They both knew that half of Margaret's money would be sufficient. Not a fortune, but enough to support Judson and the new Mrs. Avery in high style for a long time. Half was better than the electric chair.

"There is one circumstance that would make her consent to a divorce," Sondra said.

Judson snorted. "I've certainly given her all the grounds she needs. If you can think of anything else, let me know. Even if it doesn't work it should be fun."

"How about adultery?"

Judson, in the process of lighting a cigarette, started to laugh so suddenly that he choked on the smoke. "Oh, hell," he said as Sondra clapped him on the back, "she's even caught me with her half-sister."

"You don't understand," Sondra said as she stopped pounding and began a gentle massaging action at the base of Judson's neck. "I don't mean *you*."

Now Judson did laugh. "You can't mean Margaret! Staid and steady Margaret! Why, she's as passionate as crushed ice!"

"Ice melts," Sondra said, and Judson was shocked to see that she was serious. He also knew that Sondra was no fool.

Suddenly serious himself, Judson arched an eyebrow and asked interestedly, "What do you have in mind?"

"I don't know exactly, but a girlfriend of mine told me she heard about a company that . . . arranges things."

"Arranges things how?"

"I don't know," Sondra said. "I don't even know if such a company really exists, but I did find the name in the phone book. I called six times, but there was no answer."

"So you want me to look into it," Judson said thoughtfully.

"You could go to the address and see what's there," Sondra said. She let herself slide down in the bed until her blonde hair was spread over the pillow. "Why not?"

"Why not?" Judson agreed, smiling down at her. He'd been asking himself that question all his life.

The next afternoon found Judson riding a slow and spastic elevator to the top floor of one of the older office buildings in a decaying, downtown section of the city. He stepped up off the elevator and explored the corridor. When he'd almost decided he'd come there for nothing he saw the door at the end of the hall. It was a narrow, dark-stained door, more like the en-

trance to a broom closet than an office, and the plain black letters were almost unreadable against the dark wood: THE ASUNDER CO.

Inexplicably hesitant, Judson finally drew a deep breath and entered. He was in a small anteroom, very plain, with cheap plastic chairs lined evenly against opposing walls.

"Come in, please," a voice called from behind the frosted glass door to the main office. Judson obeyed.

The office, like the reception room, was plain. There were no pictures on the pale green walls, no artificial potted plants; there were only two chairs, a desk, a battered filing cabinet and an ancient floor fan that turned its blades slowly and noisily. The wide desk was bare except for a nameplate which read: Mr. Polygus. The owner of that name, a dark, smiling middle-aged man with luxuriant black hair, stood and extended his hand to Judson.

"A good afternoon to you, Mr. . . . ?"

"Avery. Judson Avery."

Mr. Polygus motioned to the chair before the desk and sat down himself. "What exactly is it you wish, Mr. Avery?"

"To know what the services of your company are," Judson said, sitting down uncomfortably.

"Ah, but you must have some idea, or you wouldn't have come here." Even white teeth shone against dark skin.

"I have some idea," Judson said, "but not enough."

Mr. Polygus looked at him through friendly, careful dark eyes. "The service of our company," he said, "is the termination of marriages."

Judson felt his senses quicken. "And how is that brought about?"

"We arrange for the unwanted partner of our client to commit adultery," Mr. Polygus said, his smile broadening. "And of course we arrange to have proof of this adultery."

"But what if the unwanted partner . . . doesn't want to commit adultery?"

"Oh, no worry of that," Mr. Polygus said reassuringly. He reached into a desk drawer and removed some blank forms. "If you'll just carefully fill these in with all the personal information about the Unwanted One, we should anticipate no problem."

"You don't know Margaret," Judson said, taking the forms.

"That information will be fed into a computer," Mr. Polygus said. His smile fairly beamed. "We have in our employ the man for every job."

"I see," Judson said slowly.

"In the most difficult cases," Mr.

Polygus said, "there are even mild drugs—harmless, but effective."

"But what about divorce proceedings?" Judson asked. "Won't this appear . . . contrived? Margaret's not stupid, only ugly."

Mr. Polygus raised a friendly palm, as if to catch Judson's question gently in mid-air. "We are, ah, affiliated with a detective agency. Usually our divorces are uncontested. However, when proof is obtained, a detective will testify in court, if necessary, that you had long suspected your wife and came to him and hired him to secure your peace of mind."

"Masterful," Judson said. "There are no loose ends."

Mr. Polygus acknowledged the compliment with a nod.

"And the price?" Judson asked.

"Merely five thousand dollars," Mr. Polygus said. "Actually no more expensive than a first-class funeral if your poor wife should pass away."

"Put that way," Judson said, "it sounds more than reasonable." He began to fill in the forms.

The Asunder Company must have worked subtly, ever so subtly. Judson watched Margaret closely for the next month, but there was no noticeable change in her. She would be a demanding job for someone, Judson realized. Though looked at bit by bit Margaret was not unattractive, there was about her bearing and personality that which was just the opposite of animal magnetism.

Then one day the package was delivered to Sondra's apartment, proof in glaring eight-by-ten glossy photographs of Margaret's infidelity.

"Good grief!" Judson said as he and Sondra thumbed through the photographs. "I would never have believed it of her. Great shots! Really great!"

Of course, when confronted with the photographs, Margaret agreed not to contest the divorce. It was, Judson was sure, her only indiscretion, and he almost felt a bit sorry for her.

As he'd promised, Judson married Sondra. They traveled, they lived, they loved. For six months it was freedom and bliss, and then one day Judson found that he was growing tired of Sondra. As his wife she was not nearly as appealing as she had been as his mistress.

It wasn't that Sondra would ever be *un*appealing; she was nothing like Margaret. It was just that Judson was getting back his old urge to explore. The same thing that had driven Hillary up Mount Everest, he often told himself. So, though married life with Sondra would always be better than bearable, Judson decided to roam.

It was about this time that he noticed the withdrawals from his and Sondra's joint bank account, and it was about this time that the unbelievably buxom redhead moved into the apartment above them. The redhead was adjusting her stockings one day while waiting for the elevator, and Judson was smiling and walking toward her to strike up a conversation, when the terrible suspicion hit him.

He went immediately to see Mr. Polygus.

"What I want to ask," Judson said to Mr. Polygus, as he sat before the bare desk, "is whether your company accepts woman clients."

Mr. Polygus smiled handsomely. "Of course, Mr. Avery. There are as many women who want to be rid of husbands under favorable circumstances as vice versa."

"Then you employ women to do . . . what was done to Margaret?"

"Certainly."

Judson leaned forward, earnest desperation in his voice. "Mr. Polygus, do you ever reveal your clients' names?"

Mr. Polygus looked appropriately shocked.

"My wife, Sondra . . . ?" Judson placed an imploring hand on the edge of the desk.

"But that would be unethical, Mr. Avery."

"Would money make it more ethical?"

"A bribe?"

Judson nodded.

Mr. Polygus shook his head. "I *am* sorry. We have our reputation to consider. We can be hired, but we cannot be bought."

Judson stood angrily. "Now see here, Polygus!"

Mr. Polygus merely shrugged and smiled politely.

As Judson stalked out of the office he slammed the door behind him with shattering force.

Judson went to a lounge he frequented and sat alone at the bar, drinking morosely. He hardly noticed the heavily made up, attractive blonde four stools down until she smiled alluringly at him in the back-bar mirror. She was wearing a low-cut pink dress, and her skirt was hiked up to show a wide expanse of pale thigh where her legs were crossed.

Judson forced himself to turn away from her, his fingers tightening about his glass. Keeping his eyes averted, he finished his drink as quickly as possible. It was, Judson was discovering anew, twice as tempting when it was forbidden.

There often comes a time when random knowledge may be put to a test.

THE DAY AFTER Nick Austino was buried, the deputy police commissioner sent for Al Cameron. It took Cameron only five minutes to get from Homicide, which was on the third floor, to the Police Executive Offices at the top of the building on ten. When he entered the office, he found Captain Lamar, the chief of detectives, with the deputy commissioner.

"I'll get right to the point, Al," the deputy commissioner said. "We're transferring you out of Homicide."

Cameron looked at Captain Lamar, then back at the deputy commissioner. "I'd think this was some kind of joke if Nick's grave wasn't so fresh," he said.

"It's no joke," Captain Lamar confirmed. "You and Nick were friends for fifteen years. You're the godfather to his two little girls. It was you his widow turned to at the funeral yesterday. You're as close to the family as if you were his brother."

"So?" Cameron challenged.

"So we've talked it over and decided it wouldn't be wise to let you stay in Homicide where the case is being handled," the deputy commissioner said. "You're a good cop, Al, one of the best. But you're also one of the toughest. There have been times in the past when you've been—well, overzealous about your work."

"You're afraid when we find out who did it, I'll go after him myself first, is that it?"

The deputy commissioner shrugged. "You'll have to admit that we have good reason for being cautious, Al. You've already got three formal reprimands in your

service file. Just a few months ago you slapped some hood in the mouth with your handcuffs and broke out three of his teeth—"

"He resisted me," Cameron said mechanically.

"And two years ago when you accidentally came across that guy the Sex Squad was looking for, you worked him over with a blackjack—"

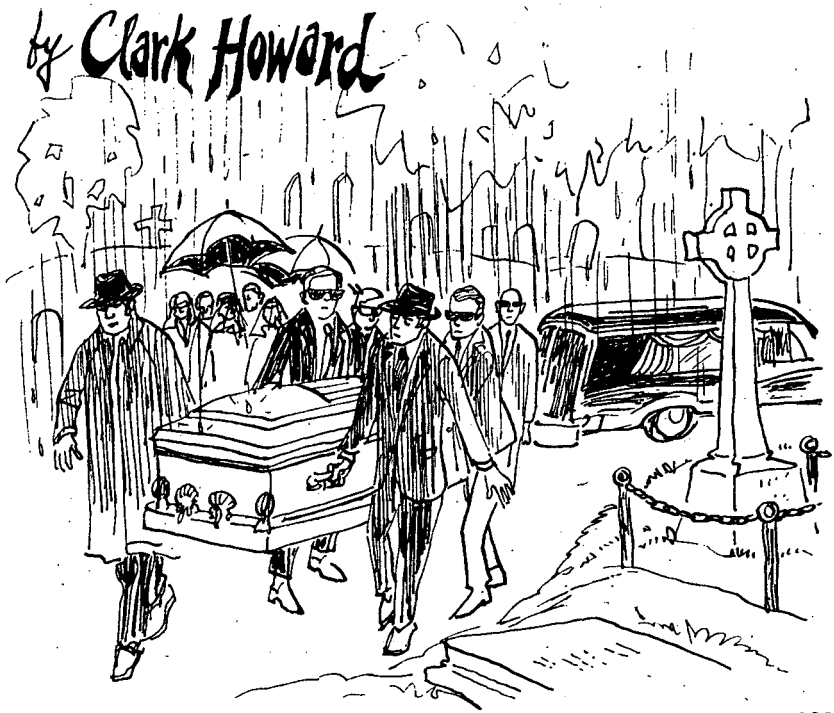
"The guy raped and beat up six women. He had it coming."

"Maybe so, but your conduct almost cost the D.A. a conviction. That's something the department doesn't intend to risk where the killing of an officer is concerned. When we find out who's responsible for Nick's killing—"

"You already know who's responsible," Cameron said coldly. "Logan Dirk. He's responsible for everything rotten in this part of town."

"If that's true, then we have all the more reason for wanting to nail him properly. If we can find the hood that actually pulled the trigger, and pressure him into fingering Logan Dirk as the one who let the contract on Nick, we may be able

by Clark Howard



to fix Dirk for good this time."

"You'd better let me stay in Homicide, then," Cameron told them. "I already know who pulled the trigger on Nick."

The deputy commissioner and Captain Lamar stared at Al Cameron for a moment.

"Who?" Lamar asked.

Cameron's jaw tightened. "Am I still in Homicide?" he challenged.

"Don't you play games with me!" Lamar stormed. "I'll have that tough hide of yours back in a blue suit riding a prowl car! Now answer my question! Who?"

Cameron muttered a silent curse, but he knew there was no bluffing Lamar. It was either back down or he *would* be wearing a uniform again.

"Come on, give," Lamar demanded.

"Jake Stein or Vito Roddi," Cameron said. "Either or both."

"What makes you think so?"

"Nick was trying to connect Logan Dirk's kid brother Glen to that go-go dancer they found in an alley over on the west side a couple of months ago. Nick had some information that Glen had been keeping her and had caught her cheating on him. Word got back to Logan Dirk that Nick was out to get Glen. Dirk put Jake Stein and Vito Roddi on Nick's tail. Nick caught them at it and threw down on them in an alley. He told them if he found them on his back again he'd pistol-whip them both. The next day Nick was hit."

"Where'd you get your information?" Lamar asked.

"From Nick. We were like brothers, remember?"

"You're trying my patience," Lamar warned. "When did Austino tell you all that?"

"The night before they hit him."

Lamar sighed heavily. "Well, it might be good information, it might not. Put it in report form and give it to Boles. Give him your current cases, too; he'll finish them up for you."

Cameron muttered an obscenity.

"You watch your mouth," said Lamar.

"Where am I going to work?" Cameron wanted to know.

"The Bomb Squad."

"The *Bomb* Squad!"

"I'm glad you hear well," Lamar said. "Get going."

Cameron slammed the door behind him when he left the office.

That evening he went to see Angela. Her face was still tear-stained when she let him in.

Nick's younger daughter, who was seven, was watching television. The older girl, ten, had already gone to bed.

"I put her to bed early," Angela said. "She seems to be taking it

harder now than the little one."

"She knew him better," Cameron said. He went over and kissed the little girl in front of the TV set and gave her a bag of jelly beans he had picked up at the corner candy store. Then he and Angela went into the kitchen.

"There's coffee," Angela said.

"Fine."

She put out cups and brought the coffee. Cameron got a bottle of Scotch from one of the cupboards and poured a shot into each cup.

"I shouldn't, Al. The girls—"

"Never mind. The girls will sleep without it; you won't."

She took a sip and then the tears came.

"What am I going to do, Al?" she asked in a broken, pathetic voice.

"Just go on living, honey," he said quietly. "For yourself and your girls. That's all you *can* do."

"I thought it would be better after the funeral. It wasn't. Last night was the worst of all. I kept reaching for him."

"Tonight will be easier," Cameron told her. "You'll see."

"Do they know yet who did it?"

"Not yet." He knew Nick had not told her about the two hoods tailing him; Nick never brought the job's dirt into his home.

They finished their coffee and Cameron looked at his watch. "I've got to be going."

"Come back tomorrow night," Angela said. "Eat dinner with the girls and me."

"Sure."

Cameron kissed her on the cheek and left.

The next morning Cameron went to work for the Bomb Squad.

"Here's a file on a guy named Winston," the watch commander told him. "We're holding him on an open charge as a suspect in those city bus bombings. Go over to the jail and interview him. See if you can come up with something. We have to charge him or let him go by three o'clock."

Cameron walked across the street and took an elevator up to six. He checked in at the police desk and filled out a form to have Winston brought to an interrogation room.

While he waited for the suspect in the interrogation room, Cameron opened the file and looked over its contents. The arrest report indicated that Winston had been taken into custody by two patrolmen after he had purchased three small, cheap alarm clocks of the type recently used to detonate small packets of explosives left in the rear of empty city buses. A drugstore owner had read in the newspaper about the Bomb Squad determining that small, inexpensive alarm clocks had been used as the timing device. When Winston came

in and bought three of them, the proprietor detained him on the pretense of getting change from the pharmacy register. He quickly called the police emergency number and reported Winston. A prowl car picked him up a block away.

When the jail guard brought Winston, Cameron had him sit opposite him at the small interrogation table. Winston was a thin, balding man in his early thirties. His eyes were deeply set, intense. Cameron began the interview with a lie.

"I'm Detective Cameron, Mr. Winston," he said. "We're going to let you go this afternoon and I have to prepare your release form. Let me just check and see if the information in this file is correct. Your full name is Harold Paul Winston?"

"Uh, yes," Winston said warily. "You say you're letting me go?"

"That's right," Cameron said, smiling briefly. "Insufficient evidence. You live at 212 N. Hamlin?"

"Yes. Uh, will I get my personal belongings back?"

"Certainly. They didn't put down your place of employment, Mr. Winston. Where do you work?"

"Why, I—I'm unemployed at present."

"I see." Cameron stood up and turned to the door. "I'm going to have the corridor trusty get me a cup of coffee. Would you like one?"

"Uh, yes, that would be nice."

"Cream? Sugar?"

"Both, please."

Cameron opened the door and beckoned to a white-shirted trusty seated at the end of the hall. He gave him a quarter and sent him to the coffee machine. While they waited, Cameron sat back down.

"You know, Mr. Winston," he said confidentially, "I'm kind of glad you're *not* the bus bomber. I wouldn't want this to get around, understand, but I admire the guy."

"Oh?" Winston's eyebrows went up.

"I mean it," Cameron said. "Look, the guy is trying to attract attention for some reason, right? That has to be it, because he's very careful not to hurt anybody. If he was a killer or something like that, he wouldn't go to such lengths to see that nobody got hurt. Why, he even plants his bombs so far in the back of the buses that the driver doesn't even get hurt. Plus he stays away from the gas tank, have you noticed? Smart fellow; most people don't even know where the gas tank is *at* on a bus. Anyway, like I said, the guy doesn't seem to me to be a real criminal. He must be doing it for the attention, just to make a point of some kind. Lord only knows what it is, though."

There was a knock at the door and Cameron let the trusty in with

the coffee. He handed one of the paper cups to Winston. After the trusty left, Cameron sat down again.

"Let's see now, where was I? Oh, yeah, place of business." He began writing. "Un-em-ployed," he said in syllables as he filled in the blank.

"Did the thought of air pollution ever occur to you?" Winston asked.

"How's that again?" Cameron frowned.

"Air pollution," Winston repeated. "Did it ever occur to you that the bomber might be trying to disable the buses because they contribute so heavily to the city's air pollution problem?"

"I never thought of that," Cameron admitted. Winston leaned forward, his lips stretched tight.

"Every bus in this city emits excess exhaust fumes every time it stops and starts. And they run around the clock. Buses are one of the biggest polluters we've got!"

"Now that I think about it, I believe you're right," the detective said. "How's the coffee?"

"Good, thanks." Winston took a sip.

"Listen," Cameron said, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully, "you've got a pretty good theory there. There are so many people concerned about air pollution today, there's bound to be someone among them who works on a construction job or someplace where they would have access to explosives—"

"He wouldn't have to have access to explosives," Winston said. "He could make his own."

"You mean if he were a chemist or something like that?"

"No, no," the suspect said impatiently. "Look, do you have a pencil and paper?"

Cameron gave him a pocket notebook and a ball-point. Winston quickly drew a chemical sketch.

"See, to make dynamite, all you need is some kind of porous material stuffed into a small plastic sandwich bag. You soak—well, it's simple. Any good college chemistry book has detailed instructions on how to do it."

"Yeah, but how do you set it off?" Cameron asked.

"That's easy too. Take an ordinary cheap alarm clock, some copper wire, and a battery. Wire it so it acts on the alarm bell. Then you just adjust the clock and set the alarm, and put it in the plastic bag with the explosive. When the alarm goes off, the two pieces of copper wire pull juice from the battery, the wires heat up, and—bang!"

"Isn't that clever?" Cameron said. He reached across the table and snatched the slip of paper out of Winston's hand.

"Give that back to me!" Winston snapped. He started to stand up and

Cameron shoved him roughly back into the chair.

"I'll give it back to you—in court. Tell me, Winston, how long ago did you work for the bus company?" Cameron watched the color drain from Winston's face. "I thought so," he said.

With Winston's chemical diagram safely in his pocket, Cameron stepped into the hall and summoned a jailor.

"Put him back in the tank. I'll have charge papers on him right after lunch."

He left the jail to go over to Homicide to see if anything had developed on Nick's killer.

That evening Cameron had dinner with Angela Austino and her two daughters. Angela had made lasagna. They ate in the kitchen instead of the dining room.

"Do you mind?" she asked. "The girls like it better in here."

"I don't mind. I like it better too."

Angela put a bottle of Nick's wine on the table and served the meal.

"Jennifer didn't take her singing lesson today," said Teresa, the youngest, about her big sister.

"She didn't feel well again today," their mother told Cameron. "I called Sister Claire and told her I was keeping them both out of school for the rest of the week."

"That's a good idea," Cameron said. He patted the older girl's hand. "And it won't hurt Jenny to miss a lesson or two; she already sings like an angel." As soon as Cameron spoke the words, he regretted them.

"My daddy's with the angels," Teresa said innocently. Cameron saw tears fill Jenny's eyes at once.

"I know, Tessy," he said quietly. He patted her hand too. "Eat your dinner now . . ."

But it was too late. Jenny burst into hysterical crying and ran around the table to Cameron. He gathered her into his arms, feeling her warm tears of grief on his neck. Holding the child, he stood up from the table.

"I'll put her to bed and sit with her for a while," he told Angela. He carried the crying little girl upstairs.

It was over an hour before he came back down again.

"Is she asleep?" Angela asked.

Cameron nodded. "I had to lie on the bed with her until she went to sleep."

"She likes that when she's sick or things aren't right with her," Angela said.

Teresa came over and curled an arm around Cameron's leg. "Will you rock me in the rocker?" she said sleepily.

"Sure," Cameron said. He let her

take his hand and lead him into the livingroom. Angela followed and sat on the couch while her little one snuggled contentedly against Cameron's chest.

"I finished all those jelly beans yesterday," the child said, and promptly fell asleep. A few minutes later, Cameron carried her upstairs and Angela put her to bed next to her sister.

When they got back downstairs, Angela collapsed in a chair as if exhausted. "The hours of the day are so long, Al," she said. "And the nights—sometimes I think they won't pass at all."

"It'll take time, Angie," he told her.

"I'm worried about Jenny."

"She'll be all right," Cameron assured her.

"Do they know yet who did it?" she asked, the same question again.

"Not yet."

When it was time for him to go, she walked to the door with him. "I don't know what I would do without you, Al."

"I'll always be around," he promised, "whenever you need me."

This time it was she who kissed him good night, very lightly, on the lips. He turned and left silently.

Lying in bed that night, Cameron was unable to sleep. His mind was a beehive of buzzing thoughts: Nick's face as he lay in his coffin; the face of Logan Dirk, the rackets ruler of the West Side; the fresh memory of little Jennifer Austino's tears wet on his neck; the men in Homicide telling him that morning that they hadn't been able to connect Dirk's two hoods to Nick's shooting; Captain Lamar taking him off Homicide because Lamar probably already suspected that the investigation was going to hit a dead end and he didn't want Cameron turning it into a personal vendetta; Tessy Austino curled against his chest, slyly hinting for more jelly beans; Stein and Roddi, the two hoods Nick had caught following him; and through it all, fading in and out among the myriad images, thoughts of Angela: dark hair and dark eyes, full lips, a full, fleshy body that he had liked to look at even when Nick had been alive.

He sat up on the side of the bed, his temples throbbing. *Rotten,* he thought. Rotten, filthy—when scum like Logan Dirk could send slime like Jake Stein and Vito Roddi to slash open the life and existence of Angela Austino by destroying her husband; and crush the spirit of little ten-year-old Jennifer Austino by putting a void where once there had been a loving father.

Animals, Cameron thought. He felt his way into the bathroom and took four aspirin for his headache.

Back in the bedroom, he raised the blinds and looked out at the black-gray street. It was drizzling rain, the fine drops streaking the pane. They're out there somewhere, he mused. Dirk and Stein and Roddi. Out there alive and free and not caring that Jennifer Austino would cry herself to sleep for many nights to come.

Staring out at the rain, an idea began to seep into his conscious. The Dirk mob had given the Austinos a funeral; now maybe the Austinos, through a cop named Cameron, would give the Dirk mob one in return.

Cameron began searching his brain for a name. He found one, rejected it; found another, rejected it; then found a third and held it in his mind. Fred Scarp, the former head of the rackets territory that Logan Dirk now controlled. Scarp had been retired for about ten years. He lived in a big house on the northern edge of the city. In the hierarchy of mob government, Scarp was looked upon as an elder statesman.

He would be perfect, Cameron decided. Stepping over to the night stand, he looked at the luminous dial of his watch. It was twenty past two. No time like the present, he decided grimly.

Cameron dressed quickly. He slipped quietly down the back stairs of his apartment building to his car, which was parked just down the block. He did not turn on the headlights until he was around the corner.

The drive to Northwood, the suburb where Fred Scarp lived, took forty minutes. The house was a large one, set well back on a wide expanse of manicured lawn behind a wrought iron fence. Cameron drove past once, then cut his lights and doubled back to park nearby.

He pulled on a pair of suede gloves and got out of the car. The double gate in the fence was closed but not locked; no reason for it to be, Cameron supposed, since Scarp had been out of the rackets for a decade. Entering, he walked up the drive to the house. All the windows were dark. Cameron pushed the door button and heard chimes sound inside.

He waited. Scarp had no family, but Cameron knew there was a live-in bodyguard-handyman, an ex-heavyweight named Gabe something. Cameron had seen him accompanying Scarp several years back. He remembered that Gabe was big, with shoulders like the hood of a car. Thinking about him, Cameron slipped his blackjack out of his back pocket.

He pushed the button again. Momentarily a voice sounded through an intercom next to the door.

"Yeah, who is it? What do you

want?" he demanded cursorily.

"Western Union," Cameron said. "Telegram for a Mr. F. Scarp."

"Put it in the mailbox."

"Sorry, sir, it has to be signed for."

The voice swore and Cameron heard the intercom click off. A light went on beyond the door. Cameron flattened himself beside the door and readied the blackjack. A second later the door opened and big Gabe loomed in the doorway. Cameron pivoted on one foot and swung the sap. It smashed against Gabe's right cheek, shattering the bone and dropping the former fighter like a sack of grain.

Cameron dragged him out of the way of the door and closed it. As he stepped into the foyer, he heard a voice from upstairs.

"Gabe! Who is it? Who's at the door?"

Cameron found the foyer light switch and flipped it on. To his left was a wide staircase leading to the second floor. A stooped old man in a satin robe was starting down the stairs, squinting against the light.

"Gabe?"

Cameron walked up the stairs and met Scarp halfway.

"Who—who are you?" the old gangster said.

"Nobody," Cameron said. "Just a cop."

His gloved right hand shot up and gripped Scarp's throat. He flexed his forearm and compressed his fingers like a vise. The old man's face went white. Scarp flailed at Cameron's arm with both fists, but all his effort was in vain; the detective's strength was too much for him. Cameron squeezed harder and Scarp's face went whiter. Finally Scarp's eyes bulged and his arms dropped. Cameron continued to apply pressure.

When he was certain that Scarp was dead, Cameron released his grip and let him fall. Scarp's body dropped like deadweight and tumbled grotesquely down the stairs.

Cameron walked back into the foyer, turned off the lights, and quietly left the house.

The next morning, Cameron testified at the preliminary hearing of Harold Paul Winston, the bus bomber. The evidence he gave the court consisted of what Winston had said to him in the interrogation room, as well as the drawing Winston had made at that time. Other testimony was given by the drugstore owner, who identified Winston as the purchaser of the alarm clocks; three bus drivers whose buses had been bombed; a crime lab man who described the type of bomb being used and the manner of detonation; a bus company official who testified that Winston had been discharged from his job as a

bus driver for incompetence; and the officers who made the arrest. The deputy public defender made a motion to dismiss without presenting witnesses; the judge denied the motion and ordered Winston to stand trial in Superior Court. Bail was set at five thousand dollars. Cameron did not wait to see whether Winston was able to post bail; he left the courtroom to hurry over to Homicide.

The big story at Homicide was Fred Scarp's murder. A rumor was already circulating that bookies were laying odds that Logan Dirk's men would get the killer before the police did. Newspaper reporters were having a field day. A coroner's inquest would be held that afternoon, and the funeral was planned for two days later.

When he left Homicide, Cameron went back to the Bomb Squad, took a couple of follow-up files, and checked out for the day. He drove over to the south side to a small coffee shop called Reggie's. When he went in and sat in a rear booth, Reggie, the owner, came over with a pot of coffee and two cups to join him.

"Sorry to hear about Nick," Reggie said. He was a slight man with delicate hands. "You and him—"

"I know," Cameron said. "Thanks." He took a sip of coffee. "I need a favor, Reg. There's a door I need to get into. How about it?"

"I ain't sure I still got the touch, Al," the little man replied. "It's been a long time."

"It won't be complicated," Cameron said. "Just an ordinary rear business door. And you wouldn't be doing it for me; it'd be for Nick."

"I been straight for a lot of years, Al. Ever since you and Nick loaned me the money to start this place. To tell you the truth, I like the straight life. But if you say it's for Nick, I'll be crooked again. I owe him that."

"Okay," Cameron said. "Stay home tomorrow night. I'll call you."

He drank his coffee and left.

The following night, Cameron visited Angela and the girls again. He was pleased to see that Jennifer was calmer and less emotional than she had been previously. Not only did she refrain from crying, but she even sat with Cameron and laughed quietly once or twice at a TV program. Angela herself looked better, too; her face was less drawn, her expression not as taut. Her eyes had a hint of their old sparkle and Cameron noticed that her hands were steadier. Tessy, of course, was her same old self; she spent most of the evening sorting out by color the new bag of jelly beans Cameron had brought her.

After the girls were in bed, Angela and Cameron had a drink to-

gether in the livingroom. "You're so good for them, Al," she said. "Nick would be so glad to know you're taking care of his girls."

"How would he feel about me taking care of his wife?" Cameron asked. Angela took a swallow of her drink and sighed wistfully.

"I think he'd be glad of that, too," she said thoughtfully. "I'm not a woman to sleep alone, Al. Nick knew that better than anyone. I don't think he'd want me to wait too long. Especially with you."

Cameron nodded. "All right, then. We'll just wait until you feel right about it."

At the door when they said good night, they held each other and kissed briefly.

After leaving Angela's house, Cameron went to a phone booth and called Reggie. "I'll pick you up in front of your place at two o'clock," he told him. Reggie said he would be ready. Cameron left the booth and drove to his apartment to make final preparations.

At two a.m. Cameron pulled to the curb in front of the coffee shop. Reggie hurried from the doorway and got in the car.

"Put these on," Cameron said, handing him a pair of wraparound sunglasses with the lenses painted black. "I don't want you to know where you're going."

"Okay by me," Reggie said. He put the glasses on and slumped down in the seat.

Cameron headed for the west side. He got on and off the expressway twice and deliberately turned down diagonal streets to confuse his rider. A couple of times he doubled back and twice he made U-turns at deserted intersections, then went immediately into quick right or left turns before continuing on. After a few minutes of this, Reggie admitted that he did not know where they were or in which direction they were traveling. Only then did Cameron make for their destination by the most direct route.

It was a quarter of three when they finally parked in a dark alley and Cameron helped Reggie from the car. He led him across the alley, stood him in front of a large metal fire door, and removed the glasses from his eyes.

"Okay, go to work."

Reggie examined the lock in the needle beam of a penlight. He grunted softly and removed a suede case from his inside coat pocket. Unzipping it, he selected a lock pick and went to work. It took him exactly one minute, eleven seconds to open the door.

"Lost your touch, huh?" Cameron said sarcastically. He covered his hand with a handkerchief and fixed the door so it would not lock; then he quietly closed it. He

handed Reggie the blackened glasses again. "Let's go."

On the return trip, Cameron took the same meticulous driving pains to prevent Reggie from realizing, even unintentionally, where in the city he had been. At three-thirty he let the little ex-burglar out where he had picked him up.

"You've been in bed all night," Cameron reminded him.

Reggie made a circle of his thumb and forefinger. "Check."

Cameron nodded his silent thanks and drove off.

Twenty minutes later, his car parked a block away, Cameron was in the same alley again. This time he wore gloves and carried a small suitcase. He moved quietly to the door Reggie had unlocked. Silently turning the knob, he opened the door just enough to slip inside. Once inside, he closed and locked the door securely.

Behind him, in the dark, still alley, misty rain began to fall again.

At eleven o'clock the next morning, Cameron sat in his car on the shoulder of an expressway south of the city. He held binoculars to his eyes and looked down at a line of cars as they moved along a wide, circular drive at the bottom of a sloping hill below the expressway. Presently the line of cars stopped and people began getting out. Cameron took the binoculars from his eyes and looked at his watch. The hand moved to one minute past eleven. Cameron wet his lips and raised the binoculars again. He began to pick out faces. Logan Dirk, of course, was prominent. So was his younger brother, Glen. Jake Stein and Vito Roddi were there; and Gabe, the bodyguard, with his jaw wired where Cameron had blackjacked him. There was also a sixth man in their group, whom Cameron recognized from newspaper photos as Louis Scarp, the dead man's brother. Louis Scarp, Cameron knew, was a hoodlum in Miami.

So I'll do Miami a favor too, Cameron thought.

His palms grew moist as he watched the men congregate at the rear of the hearse and slide Fred Scarp's casket out. His mouth compressed into a tight, hard line as they carried the long, ornate box across the lawn toward the grave site.

This is for you, Nick. I'll take care of Angela and the girls. But this is just for you.

Cameron did not even blink when Fred Scarp's casket blew up.

When faced with a delicate dilemma, one should watch his step.

Billy Dan

by Virginia Long

IT WAS EXACTLY a year after Billy Dan dropped from sight that he came back to me.

I was lying in bed, but I couldn't get to sleep. I was thinking hard about Billy Dan. Even if it had been only a year, sometimes I couldn't picture his face. I could remember his eyes looking at me and how his nose was shaped, even the way one of his ears stuck out just a little farther than the other one, and I could feel with my hand the crisp way his hair curled up over the top of his head. But I just couldn't put it all together and get Billy Dan, you know?

So I was lying there almost ready to cry from the frustration of it, when I heard a sort of scrabbling noise at the window. I got up very quietly so Mama wouldn't hear, and sneaked over to the window. There he stood right outside, just as plain as could be, and I couldn't imagine how I could have forgotten how he looked. We whispered and talked for a while, but then I told him he'd

have to go away before Mama saw him. She hates Billy Dan, even more than she did just after he went off and left me, and if she knew he had come back she'd do something awful to him.

Almost every night when it's quiet and the lights are out, he comes to my window and we talk. Now he says all the beautiful things to me that I used to sort of dream he would someday. Loving him as I did, you'd think it would be hard only to talk through the window, and not touch him or kiss him or anything, but I'm so glad to have him back again that it doesn't matter. I don't think too much about how terrible I felt when he suddenly disappeared a year ago. I do think about it some, though.

Everyone around town liked Billy Dan, but none of the parents wanted their daughters to go out with him. I suppose he was pretty wild, but I was crazy about him. I'd watch him in the drugstore and at the swimming pool, but he never noticed me much until I was seventeen. I'm what Mama calls a late-bloomer, and I did grow up pretty suddenly that summer. I'd see Billy Dan looking at me out of the corner of his eyes sometimes, and he started pushing me in the pool when the kids were horsing around. He was four years older, and I think it embarrassed him a little to like a seventeen-year-old kid. So when we started meeting each other, he didn't want us to tell people or go where anyone would see us. I was so happy that he wanted to see me at all, I didn't care. Anything he wanted was all right with me.

It was as if we had a little secret, just the two of us. It was kind of a game, seeing him around a bunch of people and just saying "hi" like he was anyone else, with our eyes running to meet each other while our faces stood still.

The little secret turned into a big wonderful one for me toward the end of the summer. I could hardly wait to see him and tell him. While I was waiting for a chance, I thought about how beautiful it was all going to be. Me and Billy Dan in a little house somewhere, and the baby kicking and cooing in its bed. I wanted one of those little beds like a white basket with pink ruffles around it, until the baby was big enough to be in a regular crib.

So one Friday night when Mama and Daddy had gone to a movie, he knocked at the back porch door. I went out and we sat on the rickety porch steps. They led down onto a cement platform where the old cistern was, and it was a lovely place to sit on a summer evening. The trees were rustling all around and the frogs were chirping, and the stars seemed so close and bright I

kept expecting Billy Dan to reach up and get one for me.

For a while I just let him kiss me and hold me, all the time I was hugging my secret. Then I couldn't stand it any longer, and I burst out and told him. His arms seemed to get stiff, and he didn't even feel like he was breathing for a minute. Then he stood up and pushed me away from him, hard. He said I was just a dumb kid, but he'd thought I had sense enough to know what to do. Then he laughed, but it wasn't a happy laugh—it sounded ugly—and he said, "I was just having fun with you. Why'd you have to go and take it serious?"

It was all the wrong things to say and do at a time like that, so I hit him. I didn't just slap him like girls are supposed to—I doubled up my fist and hit his face as hard as I could. I don't suppose I hurt him as much as I surprised him. Maybe he didn't even know I could get mad, I'd always been so sweet and loving to him.

He backed away from me and just like that, without another word, he was gone. I won't ever in my life forget the terrible, shocked look on his face.

The next day I was moping around and crying, and Mama was in a state trying to figure out what was wrong with me. She never could stand for me to be unhappy, my Mama couldn't. I know most girls by the time they're my age call their mothers Mother, but Mama just fitted her. She was so little and sweet and pretty, and she always wore full-skirted, flowered dresses that made her look like someone's garden that had got up and was running around—and she always, always smelled like roses.

I hated to worry Mama, so I told her I was crying because they were tearing off the old back porch. Mama and Daddy had planned it for a long time. It was almost falling apart, and they wanted to put down a brick patio there. But that day, when men were really knocking the boards and screens down, it seemed awfully sad. It wasn't hard to convince Mama, and really that *was* partly why I felt so bad. I've always been sentimental. Once I cried for three days when my favorite tree in the side yard blew down in a storm.

Anyway, we listened to all the hammering and banging, and talked about all the things we used to do out there. On hot summer nights, Daddy would put a block of ice in a bag, break it up with a baseball bat, and sit there freezing ice cream in an old hand-crank freezer. Or he'd tie up a watermelon in a gunnysack and lower it way down into the cistern to chill. When it was cold, we'd sit there on the steps, eating it

and spitting the seeds out onto the grass. Thinking about it while we talked, it seemed to me that most of the important things in my life had happened right out there by the back steps.

That was the worst day, and even though they kept tearing things down, breaking up cement, pushing dirt and stuff into the old cistern and putting down the bricks, it seemed as if we'd done our mourning over it, and it didn't bother me so much after that.

I was still real quiet and didn't eat much. Mama fretted and worried over me, and by then the town was fretting and worrying over Billy Dan. He didn't have any family to keep him around, and he never kept a steady job, but everyone was wondering why he'd just light out without telling anyone. I could have told them he had a good reason, but why would a girl tell a whole town that a man would rather run off than marry her?

I kept my secret from Mama as long as I could, but after a few months there wasn't any need to tell her *what*—all she needed to know was *who*. I didn't want to tell on Billy Dan, but there just wasn't any way to get around it. Pretty soon everyone in town knew about it, and they clucked their tongues and said, "So that's what put a burr under Billy Dan's saddle! He never was worth shooting or hanging!"

Actually, everyone was nice to me. Mama cried and lectured me and called Billy Dan terrible names, but she took good care of me and loved me, too. When the baby was born, they told me it was a little boy, but I never did get to see it. I didn't really care. I was so sad inside about it all that I didn't care about anything. I always wanted only what Billy Dan wanted, and he sure didn't want a baby.

I don't remember much about spring this year. It seems almost like I didn't have one. It was all just a blur of Mama crying off in another room, and Daddy patting my hand and looking worried. He never talked much to me any time, but now all he ever did was pat my hand and look worried. I remember some stiff-faced men I didn't know, talking to me a lot and asking all kinds of questions. Most anything I said, they'd write down in a notebook.

After we moved here, I didn't think about Billy Dan for a long while, maybe because there's nothing here to remind me of him. Mama never mentions him anymore, but I know she still hates him. I think maybe she hates me now, too, or at least doesn't love me like she did. That's why she wears those stiff white dresses instead of the soft flowered ones I used to like,

and I think she got taller and changed her hair just to punish me. She doesn't even smell like roses anymore. That's what I miss most, the way she smelled when she would come in to kiss me good night. Now she just shines a light on me to make sure I'm in bed.

Just the other night when I was at the window talking to Billy Dan, she heard me and came in with that flashlight. I was scared she'd see him and not let him come back anymore, but she just led me away from the window and made me get back in bed. He must have changed into something else real quick, a bird or something. I was watching her, so I didn't notice, but I've seen him do that before.

Even here, the men with the faces that would break into pieces if they smiled, come and ask me questions. I beg Mama not to let them in, but she just pats my shoulder and unlocks the door when she sees them get out of the elevator and start walking down the hall.

I don't talk to them at all. I don't answer their silly questions about how I feel and what I'm thinking about and what day it is. I don't ask any questions either, and finally they shrug their shoulders and go away.

But there is one thing I keep thinking and wondering about lately. It's in my mind all the time, rolling around and around like a ball of lint, and tonight when Billy Dan comes, before we start talking about anything else at all, I'm going to ask him.

"Billy Dan," I'm going to say. "Billy Dan, however in the world did you get out of that cistern?"

There comes a time when only the anticipation of even half a loaf is infinitely preferable to none.

The Vanishing Point

A NOVELETTE

by Pauline C. Smith

HAZEL LOOKED AWAY from the diminished stage and closed her ears to the amplified music. She turned from trying to see over all the heads and around the shoulders down the many shadowed balconies at the pool of light below.

"I'm going to the powder room," she said close to Bill's ear. He nodded. "Be back in a few minutes."

She smiled at Mrs. Atherton, who with her husband had pushed their table up close, making a party of it. Picking up the velvet evening bag, Hazel left her lace handkerchief. She rose and groped her way along the narrow aisle between tables.

Once on the stairs, twin floor lights dimly pointed up the carpeted treads. She slid her feet along the three steps up, across level space and another three steps until she reached the blazing light of the foyer.

She looked back. The music had softened, the audience applauded and the curtains lowered between acts. Hundreds of candles, one on each table, flickered against the clapping hands.

Hazel thought, *You could get our whole town in this place.*

She felt strange and uncertain as she walked through the big, oval foyer, past cigarette girls in their hip-length ruffles, and past the bored young doorman whose arms were folded across his glittering uniform.

She didn't want to ask anyone, so she looked quickly around until she saw the sensitively subdued sign over the stairway and followed the arrow up to the powder room.

As the little attendant watched while she fussed with her lipstick, Hazel wondered if it called for a tip, just having her stand there. Small worries like these had nagged her ever since she and Bill had stepped off the plane in Los Angeles. They didn't bother Bill, though; he seemed to know exactly what to do and how to act and it made her wonder.

"Are you enjoying the show?" asked the attendant.

"Oh yes, very much." But she wasn't. She'd seen better shows on television. The place was too big where it should have been intimate. Too dark where it was dark and too bright in the bright spots. Too packed with people. And Bill was too assured.

"It's a lovely show," Hazel added. For the girl's friendly interest, Hazel wasn't sure whether she deserved a quarter or a half dollar. She rummaged in the little homemade bag and handed out thirty-five cents.

Half across the foyer again, she heard the applause. So another act must have come and gone while she was away. There were three entrances from the foyer into the club proper. She looked at them, selecting the center one.

It seemed right.

As gloom closed her in, she kept her eyes on the inadequate floor lights that plucked at the pattern of the carpet, sliding her feet along the level spaces, working them down each trio of steps.

Their table was two balconies down—of that, she was sure.

The hands were clapping again in the frail lights of the candles. Hazel hurried, stumbling a little, wanting only to get back, feeling lost in the darkness with the laugh-

ter and the noise and the comedian so far below in his dime-sized spotlight.

She turned and felt her way past the tables on the too-narrow balcony, her eyes wide and half blind, her hands groping in the shadows.

Then she was there. She was sure of that, too. But the candlelight fluttered only on the white tablecloth. No hands. No hands at all. She looked blankly at the empty table littered with half-filled glasses.

I've gotten into the wrong aisle, she thought with alarm. *I've gone through the wrong door or entered the wrong balcony.*

Someone behind the railing above began to make impatient sounds. He craned his neck and sighed with extravagance. Hazel was in the way and everyone was laughing and he couldn't see what they were laughing at. She looked up, embarrassed, then back at the table with the glasses and guttering candle. Her lace handkerchief lay there like a drift of snow, so she had made no mistake.

"Look, lady . . ." pleaded the man on the balcony, leaning over. "Please. Would you sit down?"

She dropped to her chair and picked up the handkerchief. *He has only stepped out for a moment. Gone to the men's room,* she assured herself. Then she remembered the Athertons, those people from the South who had moved over and doubled up with them, vacationers like themselves. Where were they?

Blindly, she looked down upon the lighted stage.

Maybe they're in the bar. But of course not, for here were the drinks right here on the table, half used.

Perhaps to get cigarettes. But one still smoked in the ash tray, cork tip, Bill's brand, left here, not even smashed as he usually smashed them, its long ash round and gray and undisturbed. He must have lit it and left it burning. How long did it take to burn from tip to cork end?

She discovered her lace handkerchief, wound tight around her fingers, and the beat of her heart tight in her chest.

Abruptly, the candle on the table blacked out and she stifled a gasp. How foolish, she told herself. It was only the man above, his vision unobstructed now, leaning over the railing, his clapping hands creating a breeze.

With shaking fingers, Hazel opened a matchbook which had been lying on the table, tore out a match and scratched it alive. The quivering flame died just as it reached the candle. It seemed of great importance to light that candle. She used match after match before the wick caught. Then she saw that the cigarette had burned into its cork tip and gone out at

last. It was an ash now, lying cold in the tray.

People moved at the nearby tables and laughed together. The orchestra played an ear-pounding interlude. The stage lay empty. Hazel stood and tapped the man above her on the arm. Abashed, she was reluctant to talk to strangers. They always seemed startled, never quite knowing what you were saying at first so that you had to repeat. The light from the candle shone up into his face.

"Pardon me," she said.

He looked down, squinting. "Yeah?"

"Pardon me, but did you see the people at my table leave a little while ago?"

"What people?"

The woman at his side half stood and bent over to stare down suspiciously. "What's she want, Bert? What's she askin' you?"

"I dunno, baby. Snag that waiter and order a couple more."

Hazel grabbed his sleeve to keep him from getting away from her and preventing her from asking her very vital question.

He looked down again. "What people, lady?"

She felt a rising panic—her voice thinned with it. "At the table with me. A man and another couple. They were here. Right here. I came back and they were gone. Did you see them leave? Please, did you?"

The woman stood, lengthened with candlelight, wobbling a little. "What'd she do, Bert?"

"I dunno, baby," he said.

"The people . . ." Hazel's voice was a thread, a cobweb of silk, liable to break at any instant. "The people who were here. A man and another couple." It sounded so silly. "Did you see them leave?"

"She lose her man, Bert?" asked the woman.

"Guess so, baby."

Desperately, Hazel tried again. She unclutched her fingers from his sleeve and smoothed it contritely. She held her hands close to herself. She would explain, carefully and sensibly, and make this man understand. "I went to the powder room," she said slowly and with control. "Just to the powder room. When I came back, they were gone."

"You shouldn'ta left him," advised the woman with triumphant hindsight. "Here, Bert. Here's the drinks."

Immediately, Hazel was forgotten.

The orchestra trumpeted a fanfare and the shrunken stage below blazed with light. This was the finale. Even Hazel, who was not accustomed to nightclubs, any nightclub, and certainly not this arena big enough to toss Christians, knew

that this was the finale. People would soon begin to bustle and crowd the aisles and spread out into the foyer. *Then* where would Bill be?

She felt cold perspiration sprout upon her shoulders like dew and run together to trickle down her back. She jerked her head and spied a busboy at the inner end of the balcony, stacking dishes. Now *there* was someone in authority. He knew the labyrinths of this catacomb. She hurried past knees, gouged herself on tables. She hoped to God he wouldn't disappear before she reached him.

"Pardon me," she yelled, knowing he couldn't possibly hear her, for she could not hear the clatter of his dishes. She caught his arm, leaned close and pointed back the way she had come. "My table's over there and—"

"What's that? What'd you say, lady?" He bent to pick up a spoon. "No more service now until the next supper hour."

"I'm trying to *find* someone," she cried.

"Not much chance of finding anybody, lady. We don't have the tables numbered."

She wanted to strike him. She wanted to beat the bland, waiting blankness off his face.

"I was in a party of four," she yelled into his ear. The music rose and the drums rolled. "Right over there. I left the table for a few minutes and when I came back they were gone."

"Maybe they're in the foyer," said the boy. Anything to get rid of her. "Maybe they wanted to beat the crowd out." He turned back to his dishes.

After one last glance at her empty table, Hazel thought, *Maybe they are in the foyer!* It was a wonderful thought, an anticipatory thought. She'd go now, and there they would be—waiting for her.

She could easily have missed them if they went up one set of steps while she descended another. She scampered up toward the exit on this side. Three steps, a level space . . . Another flight . . . Almost falling.

Wait till she told Bill: *I was scared to death, all alone in that place,* laughing with relief, and he would say—but Hazel never got to what he would say.

She stopped dead. The perspiration dried on her skin so that it felt puckered, shriveled, old and frightened.

There was no one at all in the foyer except the cigarette girls brightening its emptiness and the glamorous young doorman in his blatant uniform, whose hand rested upon the heavy gold cord, ready to swing it aside.

"Look," Hazel approached a cigarette girl, "did you see two men and a woman out here?"

The girl, beautiful as a paper doll with her static smile, drew her brows together to simulate thought. "When?" she asked in sudden inspiration.

Hazel's shoulders were rigid, tight against frenzy. "Right after the dancers and just before the comedian." Now *there* was a good sharp explanation, definite and to the point. *What'll you do with that explanation?* she silently asked the girl.

The girl did nothing with it except to fuzz it up. "I think I did see some people. Sometime, anyway." She turned away then, intent upon the exits as they began their first trickle of life. "Cigarettes, sir?" With her slick paper mind on the exit and her pulp paper mind on Hazel, she added, "A coupla men and a coupla women or something? They left."

"Left?" Hazel reached out to grab the girl, but she had nothing to hold onto except skin. She snatched back her hand. "What do you mean, left? Left the building, the foyer, the club? Left what?"

The trickle turned into a stream. Hazel was pushed aside.

"Cigarettes, sir?"

"Did they leave the building?" Hazel shouted through the stream, and *that* planted an answer in the girl's smiling mouth.

"The building. Yes, lady."

The stream became a torrent, carrying Hazel toward the doorman. His hand clutched the rope, waiting for the big moment, the moment to yank the rope aside and let the flood through.

The moment arrived. "Now you can go, lady." Magnificently, he swung the rope. Hazel was swept into the cool air along with everybody else. She leaped free and stood at the edge of the marquee, the velvet of her bag wet in her hand, her handkerchief sodden. Dazed, she watched the outpouring—groups together, couples, parties of four . . .

A line had already begun to form for the next show.

Two guitar players and a singer strolled alongside it, entertaining their captive audience. Horns sounded. A woman slipped on the curbing and laughed foolishly. A row of cabs edged into the street.

Hazel rushed the now empty entrance.

"No, lady," refused the doorman, holding his rope as a barrier.

"Don't you 'no lady' me," she choked, clawing the rope. "I've lost my husband."

Quickly, his glance darted as if it were a crime to lose a husband and he didn't want the other patrons to hear of it. He eased her in as if that,

too, were a crime, but a less serious one.

"Now, what's your trouble, lady?" he asked sternly. "You want to see the manager? You got a complaint?"

She held herself tightly, clutching the bag as a lifeline. She talked slowly, almost coherently, describing in detail her brief absence from the table and what she had found upon her return. "And there it was, just a burning cigarette," she finished, waiting childishly for him to offer a solution.

He snapped the rope in place and motioned for his relief. He walked her across the foyer to the manager's door, apologetically rapped, opened it and ushered her through. "This lady seems to have lost her husband," he explained remotely. "That's what she says, anyway," he qualified and backed out, washing his hands of the whole affair.

The manager was solicitous, offering her a chair and a smile. At the same time, he implied how ridiculously impossible it was to lose a husband in the dark pit of his supper club. He sent someone to check the rest rooms and someone else to search the lounge.

"I've been thinking about those people," said Hazel, leaning forward, rolling her bag back and forth across her knee. "Those Athertons who doubled up with us at our table. All we know about them is that they're from the South and they're strangers here, like us. Don't you think . . . ?"

He waved aside her cloak-and-dagger supposition and indicated that he, at least, had his feet firmly on the ground by smoothly suggesting that Bill probably had one too many and gone out for a breath of air; or left on a matter of his own, intending to return before the finish of the show; or that he went for a walk, remembered a telephone call. The manager was anxious to place him outside the club.

"No, no," cried Hazel, jumping up from the chair.

"Listen, lady . . ." Now he was becoming impatient. "We're doing all we can." He wiped his brow and looked up hopefully as the doorman returned.

"Nobody in the lounge," announced the doorman, "and no one in the rest rooms. But I just remembered . . ." Hazel stepped toward him. Memory, that's what she needed. Someone with a memory who could apply simple association rules and create a total recall. She held her breath. ". . . there was a guy. I *think* it was tonight. Left in a hurry while the show was still on. Another couple followed him out, talking a mile a minute."

The manager smiled. There, they were outside the club, just where he

wanted them, away from the club.

"Where did they go?" cried Hazel. She reached out and hung onto the tinsel of his uniform. "Where did they go after they left?"

The doorman was disdainful. "How should I know?" and Hazel dropped her hand.

Again, the manager had charge of the situation. "Once they leave my club, lady, it's out of my jurisdiction. I think you'll find your husband at your hotel when you get there. Now," he said with brisk finality, "I'll send a car around for you."

She looked from one to the other of them, convinced that they were in league against her. There was something sinister about this place, a gulping hunger that swallowed whole bodies and buried them with bromides. She turned her back upon the manager and pushed by the doorman.

Once more she raced into the foyer.

Maids were busy picking up the small litter left by departing guests, making it neat for the new influx. Hazel stopped in surprise at one of the doors leading from the foyer into the stepped-down club room. It dazzled with a harsh, betraying light and bustled with frenetic cleaning. Sordid now, the tables marched in assembly-line precision, chairs not matching, a few candles still pallidly flickering in the bright overhead lights.

Now the steps were easy to follow, three at a time, down two balconies. She turned and shoved a waiter out of the way.

"You lose something, lady?"

There was the table, looking like all the rest, the candle still lighted (once she lit them, they stayed lit). Or was it?

She looked about, confused. A faint discoloration on the cloth decided her. It had been a coffee stain, she remembered, and the cloth was now turned. The tables were separated, theirs and the Athertons', arranged in a two-party line as they should have been.

She tried to keep herself from doing it, but she did it anyway—lifted the cloth and looked underneath. A cellophane top with its red ribbon edge lay crumpled on the floor from Bill's cigarette pack.

That was all.

Blindly, she pushed aside the questioning waiter who couldn't imagine why a patron should be in here with the lights up and the props not yet in place.

She stumbled up the stairs and into the foyer. The manager and doorman sprang apart. The doorman unsnapped the rope.

There were still a couple of cabs at the curb. A driver leaped out of one and opened the door. "Cab,

lady?" he called, and she nodded.

Strangely, their hotel was small and exclusive, sedately out-of-the-way and little known. Hazel wondered how Bill happened to select it since he never before had been in Los Angeles, or so he said. He had named it as soon as they stepped from the plane that morning.

She raced across the deserted lobby and startled the night clerk from his contented drowse. Conscious at last, he turned, plucked out a key and handed it to her.

Which doesn't mean a thing, thought Hazel. She folded her hand around the key and made for the elevator. This could be the second key, Bill having picked up the first, and waiting for her inside their room. "Darling," he would say, "what took you so long? I left word with that clown on the balcony above—that I was sick, that I felt faint and left."

Of course, that was it.

Hazel was shaking so with rage that the key rattled around the keyhole. *That man on the balcony above, he and the floozie with him! They knew all the time! But forgot!* Hazel had been sure something was wrong when she was talking to him. She knew he was holding something back.

The key slipped into the keyhole at last. Hazel drew in a deep and gasping breath. She turned the key. She pushed open the door.

She was met by a dim and pervading silence.

The open bags lying on benches, Bill's and her own, marked it as their room. Otherwise, it was empty. She banged through to the bathroom, knowing this had been her hope all along—that he would miraculously be here with an explanation—any explanation, no matter how absurd. But he was not in the bathroom, nor in the closet, nor behind the window drapery. Neither was he under the bed.

The sound of traffic whispered up from the street three stories below. The hotel itself seemed to be sleeping, or still out. It was almost twelve o'clock. She should do something, she told herself, not just stand here and suppose. Suppose one of the Athertons had fallen ill and he had helped them get to a hospital. Suppose he was in a hospital, or hurt in an alley, lured from the club on a pretext, slugged and robbed by an Atherton.

Then Hazel thought of the money and hurried across the room where she lifted a corner of the rug. The bills lay there, neatly stacked and untouched—ten, twenty, thirty on up to five hundred. She slipped them back to their hiding place.

Now it was twelve and he had been gone an hour. She threw open the door and ran for the elevator.

It was like a slow-moving cage, inching its way down. She would be calm and explain the situation, get the wheels moving in an orderly way. She simply would not be hysterical and fling herself upon help.

She stumbled across the lobby and flung herself against the desk. "I have lost my husband," she cried,

propping herself up by her arms and staring into the clerk's stunned eyes. "We were out at a supper club," allowing herself a moment of shuddering memory, "and he vanished." She reached across the desk to clutch the clerk, but he moved back warily, and her hand grasped the register instead, sliding across the page wetly with a squeak of sound. "You've got to *do* something!" Hazel's voice too was squeaking sound.

The clerk made an almost imperceptible finger motion and she felt someone behind her. She whirled and knew that this was a house detective, for he looked like all the house detectives she had read about.

Almost before she knew it, she had been led away and halted behind a column. "Now, what is it?" he asked in a professionally sympathetic voice, but one that allowed no nonsense.

She told him. The story running from her mouth like cloudy water from a city tap, fast, with useless air bubbles. ". . . when I got back, he just wasn't there," she ended her recital limply just as her hands were held limply in front of her, with the limpness of dependence. *Now that I have told you, find him. Now that you have the facts, be a detective.*

Pulling a notebook from his pocket, the detective wrote down important items, like the date and the hour. "You got enough to pay your hotel room?" he asked.

Hazel stiffened. So that's what he thought—that this was a gimmick to jump their bill. She looked at him with contempt and told him about the five hundred up in the room, but not where it came from, for she didn't know that.

"Husband ever been in any trouble?"

"Of course not." At least, she thought, he had seemed untroubled the day he stepped from a car in front of her motel. Hitchhiking, he explained, but he was different from most of them, better dressed and he talked well. He told her he was from here and there and had done this and that, but from now on, he had said two months ago, they would do things together.

"Absolutely not," she repeated with emphasis.

"Okay. What's his name?" The detective started a new line.

"William Johnson."

"Business?"

When he had walked into the motel office, he said he was looking for a job.

"Doing what?" she had asked, for in a small town there are few opportunities.

He had shrugged.

She worked at it, the business of getting him a job and keeping

him there, for along with lack of opportunity, there was a lack of eligible males and Hazel was thirty-four.

"He's a surveyor with a construction company," she told the detective.

The job had turned out well. After only a short time on the labor gang, the foreman discovered how much Bill knew about terrain calculation and how talented he was on the slide rule. "He has a steady job," she informed the detective proudly, "but work slackens during cold weather and we took this little vacation."

The detective was still suspicious about money. "He makes enough then, for you to take a vacation like this?"

Hazel refused to recognize the implication. She remembered again how strange it had been for Bill to discover the five hundred dollars in the lining of his suit coat, the only suit he had, the one he had worn into town. He had been going to send it to the cleaners and was checking the pockets. "There's something in here," and used her embroidery scissors to cut the threads.

"How in the world . . . ?" Hazel had exclaimed.

"Who cares?" he had laughed. "It's found money. Let's take a trip to Los Angeles. I've always wanted to see that place," and the hazy look had come into his eyes, as it did now and then, as it had just tonight.

Hazel explained to the detective that, aside from Bill's salary, she owned and ran a small motel. "Yes, we had some money." It was calming her, this answering of questions and sidestepping explanations. "The Athertons," and here was the part that really worried her, "they were strangers. Maybe they've done something to him."

He paid little attention to that. "Have you two been getting along?"

"Mister!" and here she was on safe ground. "I love him. He loves me. We've been married only two months."

"Know much about him before that?"

She was silent.

"You don't, do you?"

"I know Bill," she said.

"Well," he said wearily, "give me a description."

"He's tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired and has hazel eyes." She thought about the dazed look.

"Age?"

"Thirty-six." Just right for her. It had been a miracle when he stepped from the road into her motel—out of nowhere.

"Birthmark? Scars? Anything to

help us identify him positively?"

She shook her head, knowing her description would fit many men. It told nothing of how his arms felt around her, or even how he held a cigarette and hunched his shoulders over a joke.

"Got a picture of him?"

Her fingers fumbled in the bag. She was surprised that she still carried it. She opened the wallet and showed the snapshot.

Taking it out from under its plastic cover, the detective looked at it briefly. "It isn't much good," he said, and she supposed it wasn't—such a small picture, with the face blurred.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, anxious when he rose and the interview was over.

"We'll have to notify Missing Persons."

"What do you think has happened?"

"Don't know, lady. Just don't know. Maybe nothing at all."

Clutching his sleeve, she grabbed the only thing that fit. "He's suffering from loss of memory."

The detective looked at her sadly. "Wives always think that. Then, when they're found, husbands *say* it was loss of memory."

The detective escorted her up to her room, less sympathetic gallantry, thought Hazel cynically, than a desire to stick her off in a corner so she wouldn't be troublesome. He took a quick look around the room as if he might pick up a visual clue.

"I'll send up a doctor," he said. "He'll give you a sedative, something to calm your nerves and make you sleep."

She looked at him, dazed, as he started out. She followed him with quick and tottering footsteps, afraid of losing this last link with Bill, afraid that the minute he was out of sight, he would forget Bill completely.

"I don't want to sleep," she whimpered. "I want to help."

"Now, how could you help?" the detective asked.

"By calling the hospitals," she said. "By calling the police stations."

"I'll do that," said the detective. "I'll make all the calls."

"Will you?" She felt eternally grateful. Here was a man, a nice, nice man, who would really do something.

"Of course," said the detective, as he opened the door and went out into the hall.

Hazel watched him as he stepped into the elevator. She bet he wouldn't. She bet he'd go downstairs and say something to the night clerk like, "What a kook! Thought I'd never get away from her . . ." then go eat an apple or

chew some gum and maybe read a detective magazine.

Hazel slammed the door, cast herself on the bed and began to cry. She knew this would happen some day. She knew it—that Bill would vanish as suddenly as he had appeared in her life. She knew it, she must have, and that was the reason she clung, not wanting him out of her sight, not from the first moment she laid eyes on him.

The next morning, a knock at the door roused Hazel from a drug-logged sleep. She sat up and cluched her throat. *Bill?* No, not Bill; she would not again be led down that lying primrose path, thinking that Bill was coming to her, that he was waiting for her.

"Just a minute," she called, slipped on her robe, splashed her face with cold water and opened the door. She knew it was the hotel manager even before he told her. He was as she would imagine a manager of a dustily exclusive, somewhat decadent hotel—thin and conservatively dressed, with high eyebrows, a knifelike mouth and nervous fingers that clutched each other for solace.

"Mrs. Johnson." He bowed and lifted a nostril as if there were a faintly indecent aroma about her, for she had lost her husband under strange circumstances while a guest (God forbid!) in his respectable hotel. "Mrs. Johnson. The police. A man, I believe, from Missing Persons." The manager's fingers of his right hand reached out and found the fingers of his left. They indulged in a small incestuous love affair while Hazel turned to the detective, a plainclothesman, and looked at him deeply as if she could learn whether he might help, or was he a paper man, gathering statistics to file and close up in an impersonal steel case. She couldn't be sure. He was too professionally police. And when professionalism took over, who could tell about what?

She tightened her face and tightened her robe and said, "Yes?"

He closed the manager into the hall and went over the facts, reducing them to their barest essentials—*and the essentials are bare,* thought Hazel bleakly. The supper club, he said, he would check it out later. "During the first show? Toward the end of it." Their table, two balconies down . . . yes, yes, he knew about the Athertons. No, no, he had not located them yet.

He asked all the questions she had already answered. He looked over the room, but he didn't find Bill. He said the usual. They would do what they could. She would probably have reporters. Was she willing to talk to reporters? Publicity might help—was sure to help.

The reporters appeared. Two of

them, at different times. There are only two major newspapers in Los Angeles, and both newspapers were represented by minor reporters, for this was a minor news item for each.

To one, the melting young man who was filled with the empathy of his trade, Hazel spilled over. "He is sick, I know he is, and he can't get to me." She remembered Bill's entrance into the motel office just three months ago, like a homing pigeon even if he didn't know it was home yet—so now, if he could get to her, he would, she knew. She clasped her hands. "He is somewhere that he can't get out. Those Athertons . . ."

And the plea went forth daily, on the front page of the empathetic newspaper.

Since she could not stay inside the hotel twenty-four hours a day, Hazel sometimes stepped out to the street and walked past the flower shop, the medical building, the lawyer's office, and the engineering company. Down at the corner, when she reached the gold-leaf sign on the plate-glass door that said *Hanover and Hanover, Consulting Engineers*, she turned and walked back.

No farther than that would she go, for Bill might show up any instant.

She was apt to pretend that he had left for but a moment on a trivial and commonplace errand and she was only waiting this little while for him. During her play-acting then, she studied the men who went in and out of the small business houses along the block, some tall like Bill, some with his swinging walk, but none with the combination. She would know him out of a hundred, a thousand men, all with their backs to her. She would know Bill.

So she told the police and reporters, especially when they grew dubious about his very existence, and certainly suspicious that there had never been any Athertons—then, she repeated her story of that night and the other couple, and how she would know Bill in a thousand.

Walking back to the hotel, after she left the *Hanover and Hanover* sign, she felt as if she were stepping from one scatter rug to another, for even the hotel people, although they accepted her week's rent in advance, gave her to understand that they considered her not quite nice for losing a husband while she was their guest—that is, if he *had* been her husband, and he was really lost.

Hazel walked back inside the hotel, where a reporter, the one with all the empathy, waited for her in

the lobby. Quickly, he took her by the arm and moved her through the door again. "Look, we found 'em," he said urgently, "those Athertons."

Hazel held back and stared into his face.

"The ones you and your husband sat next to that night." He propelled her down the steps and into his car, peering back over his shoulder, as if he expected a spy from the rival paper. "They finally caught our item on the front page and phoned us."

She nodded without any real comprehension.

As they rolled along the strange city streets, she pushed her back against the seat and her feet hard upon the floorboards.

"A lucky break," enthused the reporter, confusing Hazel's thoughts by his words. "Plenty lucky. They were getting ready to leave town." He looked at her with new respect now that the Athertons had been proved and his paper held the exclusive. She wished he would stop talking and the buildings they passed would stop running along at such a rate. She doubted the fact that he was taking her to see the Athertons at all, for she suddenly doubted the Athertons.

"They're Southern people, just like you said. Out here on vacation. Haven't looked at a paper for days."

They parked in front of an impressive hotel and Hazel walked beside the reporter through the lobby, stood with him as he talked to the desk clerk, and followed him into the elevator.

When he tapped on a closed door, she leaned against it, sure she was fainting. She tried to remember the Athertons and the supper club, but that night seemed a million miles away and a million years ago, so she was sure she would be unable to recognize these people.

She straightened.

The woman looked familiar in the light of the open doorway, as did the man—even without the music and the candlelight. They were pleasant and friendly, and slightly embarrassed, as they murmured a form of condolence.

"Well, now," said the reporter, anxious to get at the heart of the matter, busy with his tongue and busy with his pencil, "we thought maybe you folks might be able to give us a clue. Maybe Johnson said something. Even if he only dropped a hint before he left. Just to disappear like that . . . it's a funny thing."

Hazel shuddered as the night returned from its distance to wrap her up and strangle her.

Watching, with a prying curiosity, Mrs. Atherton moved close to her husband as if to hold him by her

side. He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, you know, there *was* somethin' peculiar . . ." Hazel did not wish to hear it. "Just after you left for the ladies' room," he said, jerking his head toward Hazel without looking at her, "Mr. Johnson asked what the name of the tune was they were playin'. Now that don't seem like anythin' important. It's just that he *made* it important. Acted like he simply had to know. Couldn't rest until he did, if you get what I mean. It was a song, I think, came out a while ago—got played to death and then forgotten. Anyway, neither of us could come up with the name. Then, all of a sudden, Johnson gave it up, as if it wasn't important anymore, but somethin' else was. He hopped up and yelled he had to go home to his wife, and lit out."

Hazel clutched the back of a chair. She didn't believe a word he said with his soft, sneaky voice. He was lying. She stared at him coldly.

The reporter's pencil stopped on the pad. "Go *home* to his wife? You mean go *get* his wife, don't you?"

Mr. Atherton shook his head. "No, suh," he said. "Then we kind of followed him out to the street, not knowin' exactly what was the matter. He was runnin'."

Hazel moved toward the door.

"We didn't want to get mixed up in anythin', so we decided not to go back in to our table, y'know."

Mr. Atherton stepped between Hazel and the door. "Beggin' youah pahdon, ma'am, we just supposed he was out with a girlfriend and had a sudden attack of conscience. Beggin' youah pahdon, we didn't think you looked like that kind, but it was a bit peculiar, so we thought we'd just stay out of it."

Hazel walked through the door and waited for the reporter in the hall.

"Well!" He watched her out of the corner of his eyes as they left the hotel and got into the car. "Well, what do you know about that!"

Hazel felt the sting of her eyeballs against her eyelids. She wasn't crying, though—for what was there to cry about? Things were exactly as they had been. It was the smog. That was it. The prickly gray smog. She had read about it out here and now she was seeing it and feeling it. New things. New places. There was nothing like travel. It broadened one. It made one broad enough to stand up to trouble . . . all kinds of trouble . . . lying-people trouble . . .

"You sure you were married to that guy for real?" the reporter was asking.

. . . And nosy reporters.

Travel tired one, too. She felt so tired she could hardly step from the

car when it slid up to the curbing in front of her hotel. She gathered her weakening strength and slammed the door viciously, for she wanted to be alone to wait for Bill.

No more help from anybody. Not from that reporter, certainly. Not from those lying Athertons with their trumped-up stories. Abruptly, she dismissed them; erased them from her world. They had never been.

She pretended that Bill stood by her side, and gave an upward, sideways smile . . .

And there he was!

She jerked and stared, took one faltering step, then another. She would know him out of a thousand, so she knew him now.

There was no man who was so tall, had such straight shoulders. No man with his flair and style—only one man in a class with Bill. That was Bill himself.

So this was Bill!

He had stopped on the sidewalk, between a parked car and that *Hanover and Hanover* place, waiting for a man who had just stepped from the lawyer's office.

Hazel passed the flower shop as if she were in a slow-moving dream.

The two of them talked a moment. Bill held open the door of the *Hanover and Hanover* office.

Passing the medical building, Hazel's legs were working better now. She reached the lawyer's office just as the gold-leaf *Hanover and Hanover, Consulting Engineers* sign swung back into place.

She pushed the door open. "Bill!" she cried.

The two men, the short one and Bill, turned.

Her hands flew up. Not toward him, but to hide from her eyes the blank look on his face.

"Bill?"

He said something confusing about the wrong place and the wrong man. Then, pleasantly, he asked who it was she was *really* looking for.

His voice sounded just the same. Then it became mingled and blurred and finally overlapped by the voice of the receptionist there in the office, who was saying, unaccountably, over the phone, "Yes, Mrs. Hanover. No, Mrs. Hanover," brightly telephonic, smiling up at Bill as if he were a part of it!

The receptionist cradled the phone on her shoulder. "Your wife," she informed Bill.

So out of them all, only the receptionist knew. Hazel stepped forward and halted.

"Okay, I'll talk to her." Bill's glance passed over Hazel as if he had never seen her and did not see her now, and went to the man. "Af-

ter I get through on the phone, Roger, I'll talk over those contracts," and he was gone behind one of the inner office doors.

Hazel felt as if she were standing on air, with a solid mass over her, pressing her down. Could it be that she had suddenly turned upside down, with the receptionist politely ignoring her position as she asked her what she wanted?

Hazel wanted only one thing.

It was a simple thing she asked for. She sorted the thing and replaced it, for every time she told anyone what it was she wanted, her request boomeranged. *This* time she would be definite. She would leave no loophole. This time, she would tell and not ask.

"That," she said precisely, indicating the closed office door with a pointing finger, "was my husband, Bill Johnson."

Yes, it was just as she suspected. She was upside down with no solid footing.

The small man—Roger, his name was—took her by the arm and ushered her from the building, even though she held back, not wanting to go and leave Bill.

He moved her firmly through the *Hanover and Hanover* sign out into the smoggy sunlight, past the lawyer's office—he was probably a lawyer himself, thought Hazel, the thought a bright light in the fog of her mind—for he had come out of that lawyer's office and Bill had mentioned contracts to him. She felt a nice sense of completion, figuring it out so neatly.

He moved her past the medical building and the flower shop. *Policemen,* she thought, *reporters, lawyers and herself. Four corners make a square—a box—and within the box they were hiding Bill.*

She jerked, trying to pull away, but the lawyer moved her on into the hotel and with all that air under her feet, she went, however unwillingly, with him.

He led her to the elevator, called out her floor as if he had known about it all along, and about her too, and her troubles. He waited in front of her door while she looked for her key.

She sat down in the room.

Because it had become familiar to her now, the heavy mass over her head went away and she felt the floor under her feet. She tightened her fists and sat on the edge of the bed because, any minute now, she would leave and get Bill out of that *Hanover and Hanover* place.

She watched Roger, the lawyer, and listened to his slick voice. She had listened to too many slick voices today—one of Southern silk and this with its legal floss, both running through the sharp needle of her mind.

She interrupted the stories he was stitching. "The thing is," she said with exactness, "my husband, Bill Johnson, and I came here on a vacation. Well, he just lost his memory." She shrugged and attempted a smile. She spread her hands helplessly as if such a thing happened every day. "Now I must go back there to that ridiculous office and get him."

She started to rise and was gently pressed back.

"In a way, you are right." The lawyer's words were neatly indexed, as if he spoke from a brief. "In a way, it *was* loss of memory. Not now, but when you met and married the man you call Bill Johnson. For he was then in fugue."

Hazel listened politely. That word, probably a legal term. Lawyers used words no one understood, purposely, to confuse the issue.

So that she wouldn't be termed a fanatic and so she wouldn't be looked upon again with an unbelieving eye, Hazel spoke softly and clearly, "Only loss of memory. Why, sometimes I lose bits of my memory too. You probably do also." *That would put him on the defensive!*

But it did not. "You see," said Roger, the lawyer, leaning forward as if she were on the witness stand and had answered a question incorrectly and he was tidily pointing out the path of verity, "Gilbert Hanover is an epileptic . . ."

"Tch, tch," sympathized Hazel, for that was too bad.

As if to prove his point of identity, the lawyer plucked a business card from his pocket and held it up for Hazel to see. She moved no closer, nor did she reach out her hand to take it, but she read the card, for she couldn't do anything else. *Hanover and Hanover, Consulting Engineers,* it spoke to her; *Gilbert Hanover,* and in Bill's precise type of lettering—slanting print, engineering style—words in ink had been added: "Roger, see me about contracts. Gilbert."

Hazel watched the card fold back into the lawyer's hand and become concealed once more in his pocket. She looked at this stranger, the lawyer, and listened to him talk of the stranger, Gilbert Hanover.

"His grand mals are periodic, sometimes followed by fugue. That is, complete loss of memory." The lawyer turned away. "Unfortunately, his last attack occurred early. Generally, they are prepared for—that is, we watch him, and he always carries five hundred dollars sewn into the linings of his suit coats . . ."

There the room wheeled. Not Hazel, but the room—over and over and over. The lawyer turned toward her again. She tried not to

listen, but his words beat against her brain, setting the historical records straight—those records with the gaps she had purposely left unfilled.

"He was on a business trip. We traced him. Then lost him . . ."

To her, Hazel thought. They lost him to her. She stared up at the stranger, the lawyer. She didn't see him. She saw nothing. Nothing in the present, nothing in the future; and now, nothing in the past, either.

He misinterpreted her lack of expression and proceeded to define the illness that had brought her love. "Fugue really is a psychological and geographic flight and, in some cases, happens with regularity. The person in fugue forgets who he is and where he is from. He assumes a new personality and leaves his usual environment, just as Gilbert did. Bill to you." The lawyer hunched his shoulders in his endeavor to explain gently, yet with firmness. "Gilbert recovered in the supper club that night and now he has no recollection of anything that has happened in these last three months."

See? Hazel said to herself, staring into all this emptiness. *See? Your past is gone because his is too.*

The lawyer was still explaining.

Explain what I'm going to do about love, Hazel asked him silently. *Explain what I can do with my life.*

"So your Bill Johnson was Gilbert Hanover in fugue. Now I must warn you that people at such times are not legally responsible for their acts. So should you bring it to court . . ." and he spread his hands to show how hopeless would be her case, "you would get nowhere. Hanover is happily married and the father of two fine sons. He has simply come back to his family."

Hazel pressed her hands down deep in the mattress of the bed. The room stopped wheeling, but still rocked.

"I repeat," repeated the lawyer, "Gilbert Hanover is not legally responsible for anything that has happened between you, but because I know he would want to do the right thing by you, I would be glad to offer a settlement." To show that he was serious, the lawyer's hand hovered over his breast pocket as if he would write an immediate check.

Violently, Hazel shook her head. She wanted Bill. Not Gilbert Hanover's money.

She stood and walked automatically to the door. She opened it.

The lawyer hesitated. "I am sorry," he said.

There was something Hazel had to ask before he stepped into the hall and dissolved into the emptiness, something she needed to

know. She clung to the door and asked it. "When do you expect this next . . ." her mind groped for the word and missed it. "This next period . . . ?"

Looking down at her kindly now that the matter was settled, the lawyer said, "Three months. Every six months they occur. It was just three months ago . . ." He stepped into the hall.

That was all she wanted. Hazel started to close the door.

The lawyer held it with his foot. "By the way, we did everything to find him, of course. Where did he go? Where is it you live?"

Furiously, Hazel kicked his leg and slammed the door tight.

Did he honestly think she would tell him?

She twisted the key and whirled, running her fingers through her hair, trying to think clearly, concisely, methodically. She had much to think about.

First, she must pack; her clothes and Bill's. Then she would fly home.

She had three months to put bars on the windows, padlocks on the doors. If Bill ever returned to her in fugue, he would never become Gilbert Hanover again. She would see to that.

She thought, her mind darting, her hands fluttering, of the possibilities. Somewhere in his fugue, the name of "Hazel" and the little town with its motel would spill over, and he would follow the name and the place back to the life that was his and hers together.

Hazel had to believe this.

It was her only salvation.

Then she packed Bill's clothes, like a widow packs a dead husband's effects, with mourning and hopelessness.

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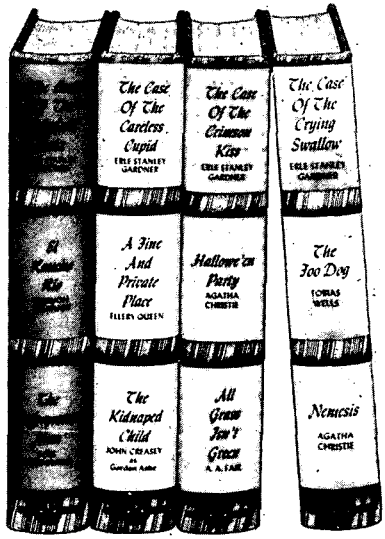

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