ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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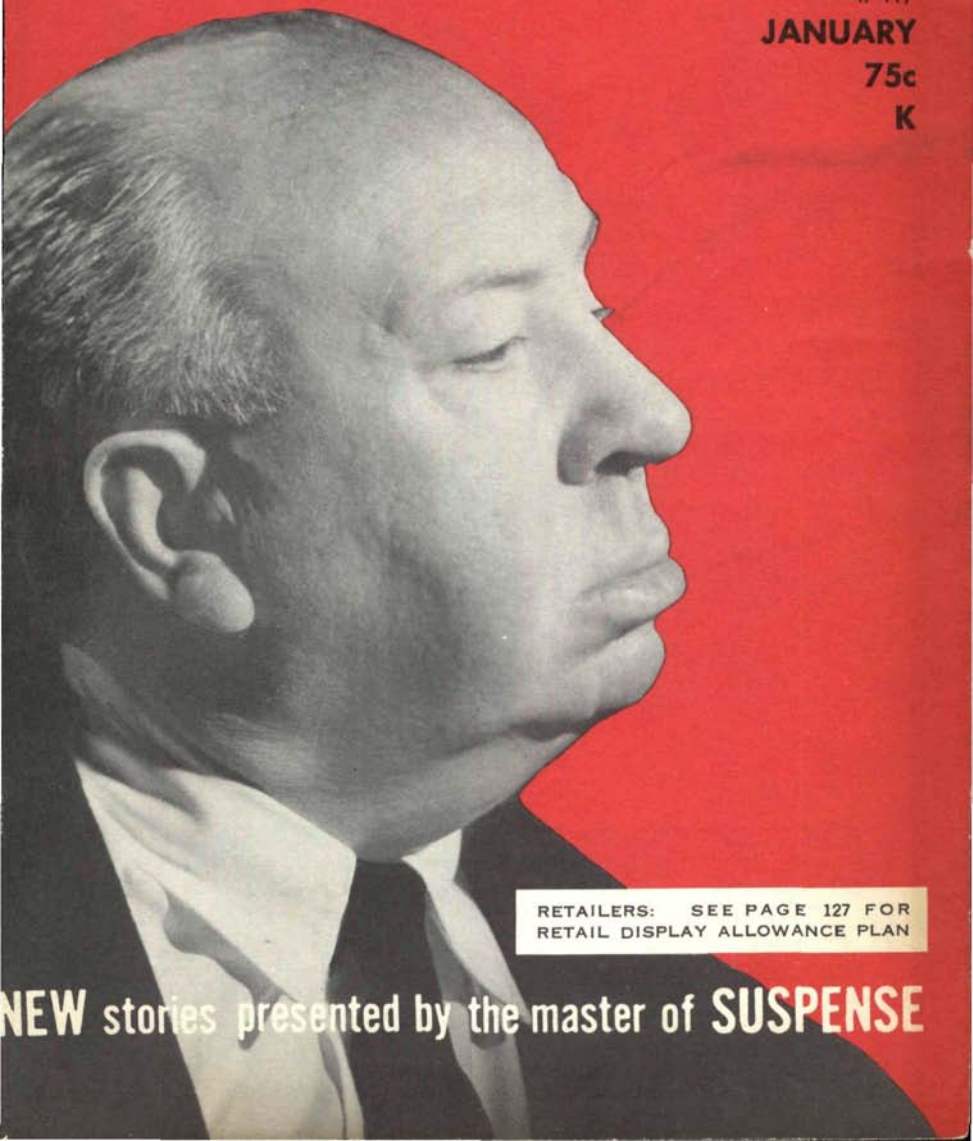
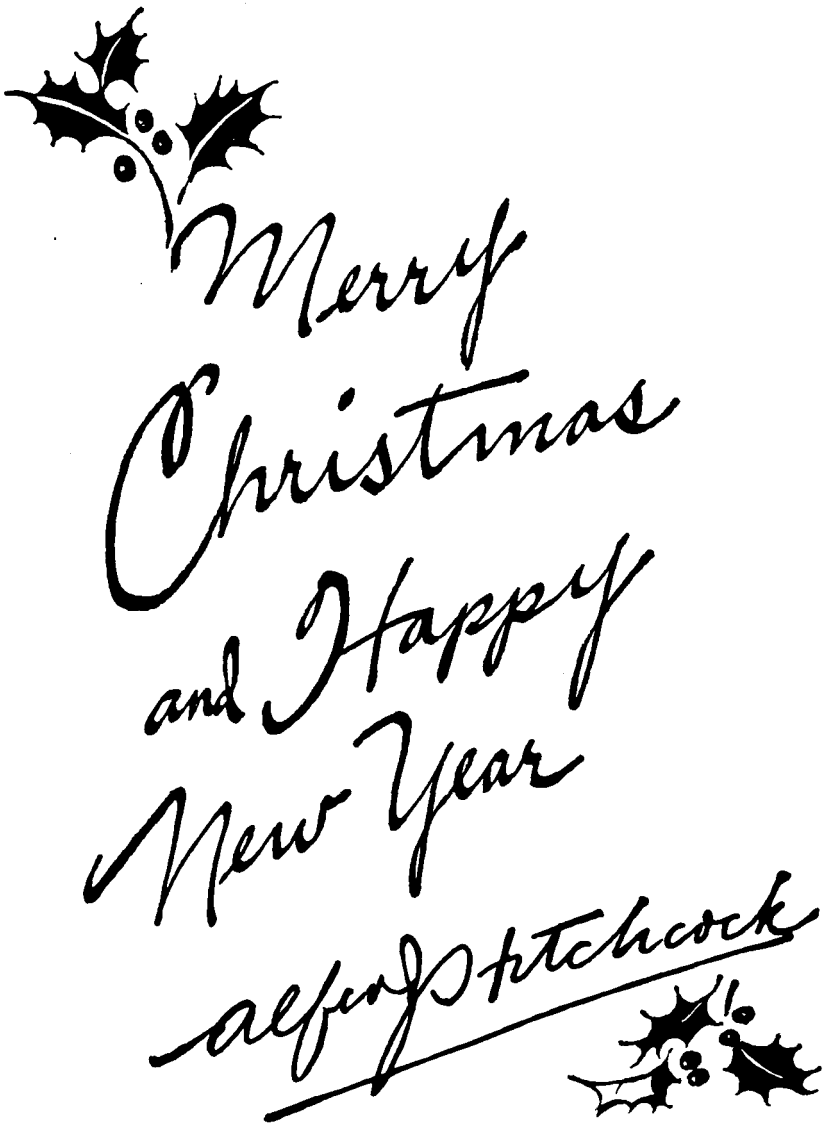


RETAILERS: SEE PAGE 127 FOR RETAIL DISPLAY ALLOWANCE PLAN

NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE



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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 18, No. 1, Jan. 1973. 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., 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408.

Ah, yes, and many a tangled web hath enmeshed an unwary victim.

THE HOUSE was located in one of Vienna's quieter residential neighborhoods. Stark beech trees, like gray bones stripped of flesh by the chill winter wind, lined the dark street on both sides; a huge willow grew wearily in the yard fronting the house, just beyond the gate affixed with the numerals 629. The dwelling itself was small, peak-roofed, with a wood-studded facade.

Carmody pushed open the gate and followed a leaf-strewn path to the front door. He lifted the knocker and let it drop, then stood with his shoulders hunched inside the heavy wool topcoat he wore, listening to the wind—a taut, hungry-looking man with green eyes, skin like leather, and a mane of graying-black hair. In his right hand he carried a large attaché case; his Beretta was in its usual place, in the belt half-holster at his left side.

In Vienna for less than four hours, he expected to remain there only until the following morning. He had other business to be handled elsewhere. Vienna's reputation as a city of intrigue and mystery—due to its close proximity to Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and due to Harry Lime, *The Third Man*—was purely a fictional one; it was in reality a quiet, picturesque city steeped in historical tradition and the arts. A man in Carmody's line of work would have found himself starving

if he had centered his operations in Vienna.

There were footsteps inside the house, the door opened and a Nordic-looking type smiled out at him. Anton Varndal; Bruckner had described him clearly enough: sharp blue eyes, brushed blond hair, squared chin with a cleft.

Carmody asked, "Are you Varndal?"

"I am." Good English, carefully enunciated. "Herr Carmody?"

"That's right. Invite me in, Varndal; it's damned cold out here."

"But of course."

Varndal stood aside and Carmody went into a short hallway, transferred the attaché case to his left hand, and unbuttoned both his topcoat and his suit jacket with his right, so that he would have easy access to the Beretta if he needed it; he was a cautious man. Varndal shut the door and led him down the hall and through a doorway into a parlor filled with heavy furniture and an antique rug on the floor.

Turning, Varndal asked, "Have you brought the transmitter?"

"I brought it."

"Show it to me, please."

"You still owe me eight thousand."

"But of course. As soon as I examine the transmitter."

"All right, then." Carmody handed him the attaché case, letting his right hand hover near his belt, but Varndal's eyes, bright with expectancy, were fixed on the case. He took it to a table near the window, opened it, and lifted its contents out circumspectly.

The radio transmitter was small, portable, and battery-operated. It was also delicately constructed to put out a certain signal of ultra-high frequency and strength, with variation of no more than a plus or minus .03. A transmitter of that type was not easy to obtain, especially when you didn't want its origin traced—and when you had a use for it that was at best extralegal. So you went to a man like Carmody, who had connections in every country in Europe and most of those in the free world, and could supply anything if the price were right and the item could conceivably be located or manufactured.

He was also a free-lance bodyguard; a man who could arrange safe passage from one country to another; a go-between for deals involving almost everything except drugs and white slavery. Most importantly, perhaps, he was com-

by Bill Pronzini

pletely trustworthy, completely reliable, possessing a reputation which was unequaled and which brought him a considerable amount of business in one capacity or another.

The business that Anton Varndal had brought him, through Carmody's Viennese contact, Josef Bruckner, was the radio transmitter. Varndal had wanted it by tomorrow's date. Carmody had no real interest in why Varndal wanted the transmitter; he was only interested in how much Varndal would pay for it. He'd quoted ten thousand through Bruckner, Varndal had agreed, and once Varndal had paid two thousand faith money and supplied the specifications for the transmitter, Carmody had gotten it for him—for slightly less than two thousand. His profit would seem to be four hundred percent, but there was Bruckner's cut to come out of that, and expenses, and time consumption. Ten thousand was, in actuality, a fair black market price.

Carmody said, "Satisfied, Varndal?"

"Most satisfied. This is of excellent quality."

"What did you expect?"

"Precisely what you have delivered."

"Yes? Then you can pay me now."

"Ah, certainly, Herr Carmody."

Varndal put the transmitter back in the case, left the case on the table, and came over to where Carmody stood watching him. "You will come with me to the study?"

"Is that where you've got the money?"

"Yes."

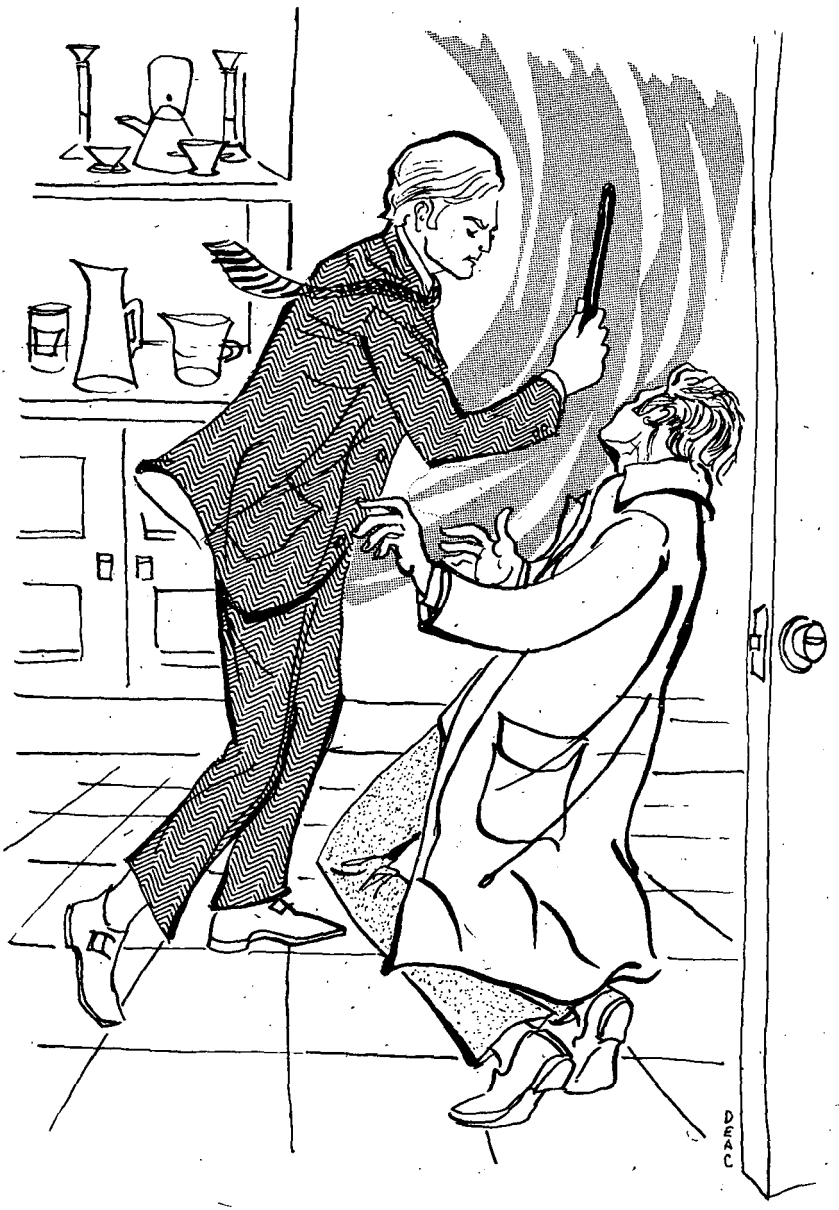
"Go ahead, then."

Varndal smiled, crossed to the parlor door and went through it into the hall. Carmody followed him down the hall to another door at the far end. Opening it, Varndal stood aside; but Carmody said, "You first."

Shrugging, Varndal crossed the threshold and touched a wall switch. Light flooded the room, and Carmody, following, saw that it was a storage pantry, cluttered with odds and ends. He pulled up short, his hand clutching at the butt of the Beretta, but Varndal whirled with almost feline agility and hit him just above the left ear with a twelve-inch metal bar he'd had concealed under his sports jacket.

Blinding fragments of pain; sudden impact with the floor; humming in Carmody's ears like the sound of a high-speed drill; the door slammed—then nothing.

Carmody came out of it, rolled over, and sat up with his head hanging between his knees. The butt of the Beretta, still tucked into the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belt holster, dug sharply into his side. His stomach felt queasy, and there were two jagged lines of pain, like parallel lightning arcs, running upward from his neck to the top of his skull. He wondered if he had a concussion.

He gingerly touched the place where Varndal had hit him, and found a pulpy area beneath the mat of hair which grew thickly over his ears; the hair had cushioned the blow. There was no blood. He got onto his knees, then onto his feet, and leaned against the wall until the nausea in his stomach went away. Then he reached for the door, found the knob, and went out into the hallway. There was light there, and he could see the dial of his wristwatch: eight-twenty. He had been unconscious a little more than an hour.

The lines of pain inside his head glowed hotly as he moved down the hallway, pulling open other doors, looking inside, finding nothing that told him anything; all the other downstairs rooms were empty. Carmody climbed the stairs to the second floor and looked into the first two rooms at the top of the landing. Heavy white dust covers lay like shrouds over the furnishings.

He went back downstairs and out of the house, leaving the front door standing wide. The night wind was colder, sharper. He got into his rented car and burned rubber pulling away from the curb, his body hunched forward with tautly-controlled fury and his big, corded hands like white claws on the steering wheel.

It took him the better part of a half hour to get to the village of Grinzing, just outside the city limits of Vienna. The village was well known for its wine inns which featured locally grown whites and reds, and had an old-world atmosphere that attracted the tourists in droves.

Carmody parked and went up to the grape-arbored building, and entered. It was too early in the evening for much of a crowd, but better than a third of the high-backed wooden booths were filled. Two heavyset, smiling men, dressed in native costumes, were playing gypsy music on an accordion and a violin. Ordinarily, even a man like Carmody, who possessed no real appreciation of music, could enjoy the verve and relish of the gypsy instrumentals, but he didn't even hear it now. The pain lines were still sharp and hot inside his skull.

Bruckner was sitting with a blonde who looked like something out of a Wagnerian opera, in a corner booth at the rear of the room. They were drinking wine and toasting one another with their glasses and their eyes.

Carmody went to their booth and said to Bruckner, "Get rid of the woman. We've got talking to do."

Bruckner, thin and bony, with wildly unruly brown hair and a thick, incongruous moustache, said, "Something is the matter, Herr Carmody?"

"Yeah. Get rid of her, Bruckner."

"As you wish." Bruckner patted the blonde's thick arm and said something in German that Carmody did not understand. The blonde blushed like a maiden, gave Carmody a hostile look, got ponderously out of the booth and wobbled away across the room.

Carmody sat down. "Your boy Varndal gave me a hunk of metal behind the ear instead of the rest of the money," he said. "I don't like to be double-crossed, Bruckner. I don't like it one damned bit."

Bruckner looked shocked. "But—but why? Why would he do such a thing?"

"You tell me," Carmody said. "According to you, he was all right."

"So it seemed to me, Herr Carmody. I spoke at length with him three times before I agreed to call you. He was most willing to cooperate."

"Sure he was. Did he tell you what he wanted the transmitter for?"

"He offered no information."

"Any ideas?" Carmody asked.

"No, none."

"Where does Varndal live?"

"The house where you went to meet him—?"

"Vacant," Carmody said. "Nobody lives there now. There are cloth coverings over everything on the upper floor. He must have taken the coverings off downstairs to make it look like he was living there."

"Then whose house is it?"

"Good question. Varndal had keys to it, that's plain enough. Listen, if you don't know where he lives, how did you get in touch with him?"

"I left messages with Anya Berg," Bruckner said. "Varndal always spoke with me here."

"Who would Anya Berg be?"

"The proprietress of a certain shop near the Danube, where one can buy information as well as curios."

"Yes? And just where does she fit into this?"

"It was she who gave Varndal my name—and yours."

"Did you check her out on Varndal?"

"Yes," Bruckner said. "She said he had been referred to her by a friend."

"What friend?"

"I saw no reason to ask her," Bruckner said defensively. "She is a

personal acquaintance of long standing—"

"You're thorough, aren't you, Bruckner?"

"Herr Carmody, I—"

"Do you know how to get in touch with Anya Berg this time of night?"

"Yes."

"Go and call her then. Will she answer the phone herself if she's home?"

"Yes. She lives alone."

"If she answers, don't say anything to her. Just hang up. All I want to know is whether or not she's home."

Bruckner met Carmody's eyes, but what he saw there made him drop his gaze immediately. He slid out of the booth and hurried across a corridor to the public telephone. Carmody lit a thin, short, black cigar as he waited. He had to find Anton Varndal. If he didn't find Varndal, if he didn't get the rest of his money, word would leak out eventually about the way Carmody had been knocked over—and others would try it. In order to operate with minimum pressure, Carmody had to maintain his reputation; and in order to maintain his reputation, he *had* to find Varndal.

Bruckner came back and sat down, mopping sweat from his forehead with a silk handkerchief. "She is home," he said.

"What's the house address?"

Bruckner told him. "What will you do when you see her?"

"Ask her some questions."

"She is not responsible for Varndal."

"Let's hope not," Carmody said. "You, Bruckner, go to your apartment. I might need you again tonight, and I want to know where to find you."

"As you wish, Herr Carmody."

Carmody went out, got into the car and consulted the city map in the glove compartment. He left the map open on the seat beside him and put the car in gear.

Carmody said, "Anya Berg?"

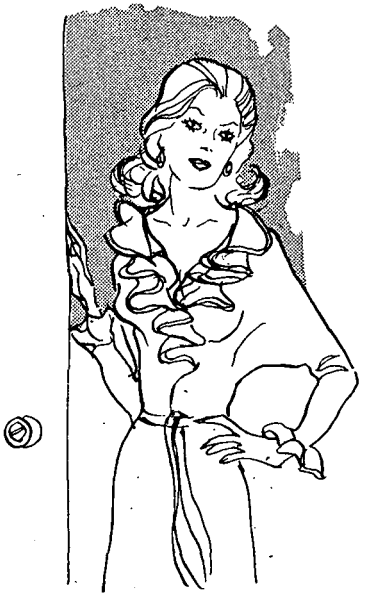
The woman standing in the doorway of the house was in her thirties. She had very fine, brownish-gold hair and the firmly ripe body of a teen-ager. A short purple dress, with a ruffled collar and sleeves, gave her a soft, innocent look that her mouth and eyes belied. She said, "Yes?"

"I'm Carmody. Shall we talk inside?"

Anya studied him for a moment, shrugged, and led him into a small sitting room.

"Would you be the one who telephoned twenty minutes ago and hung up without speaking?" she asked.

"That was Bruckner."



"Poor Josef," she said. "His head is filled with fat women and wine. Why are you interested in me, Herr Carmody?"

"Bruckner tells me you sent him Anton Varndal. Tell me about Varndal."

"What do you want to know?"

"Where he lives, to start with."

"I have no idea."

"How do you know him, then?"

"I don't, actually. He was sent to me by a mutual friend."

"So Bruckner tells me. What's this friend's name?"

"Why do you wish the information?"

"Varndal owes me some money," Carmody said. "I intend to collect it. Who's the friend?"

She heard and correctly interpreted the anger and tension in his voice. "Very well. His name is Dietrich, Viktor Dietrich."

"What's his connection with Varndal?"

"Viktor once handled a transaction for him."

"What kind of transaction?"

"The sale of some small property."

"Yes?" Carmody said. "This Dietrich wouldn't be a realty agent, would he?"

"He would, yes."

"Fine. Where do I find him?"

"I like Viktor," Anya said. "You intend him no harm, do you?"

"Not if he's cooperative."

She gave him the street and number.

Carmody said, "You won't call him after I leave, will you? I wouldn't like it very much if I have trouble finding him."

Anya smiled. "I have the feeling you trust no one."

"I've got good cause," Carmody said.

"I won't call him."

A sleek black sedan was just pulling into Viktor Dietrich's driveway from the opposite direction when Carmody drove past. He parked four doors down from the Swiss-style house, got out, and ran across the street, into the shadows cast by

a thick-branched willow growing on a neighboring lawn. His head ached malignantly as he jumped over a small boundary fence, the Beretta in his hand now, and stepped into the darkness of Dietrich's garage.

The driver had just shut the car door when Carmody appeared. The man stopped, and said in German, "Who is it? Who's there?"

"Viktor Dietrich?"

"Yes. What is it?"

Carmody moved deeper into the garage, until he was a few steps from Dietrich; he kept his face in shadow. "I'm looking for Anton Varndal. I understand you're a friend of his."

"I know him, yes," Dietrich said, in English now. "Who are you?"

"Also a friend of Varndal's," Carmody told him. "I'm trying to find him."

"Have you tried his home?"

"I don't know the address. Where does he live?"

"Are you sure you are a friend of Varndal's? Let's go out into the light—"

"Let's stay right here," Carmody said. He moved forward again and let Dietrich see the gun.

Dietrich went as rigid as stone. There was fear in his voice when he said, "What do you want with me? What are you going to do?"

"Nothing, if you answer my questions," Carmody said. "Just be cooperative. That's all you have to do."

"I—I'll do whatever you say."

"Fine. When was the last time you saw Varndal?"

"Last evening. Around nine."

"Where?"

"Here. He came to see me."

"Why?"

"He wanted me to do him a favor."

"What kind of favor? Loan him the keys to a vacant house, maybe?"

Surprise replaced the fear in Dietrich's voice. "Yes. How did you know?"

"I'm the reason he wanted the vacant house," Carmody said thinly. "Did Varndal tell you about that?"

"No, he told me nothing."

"How come you let him have the house, then?"

"I . . . we are friends."

"Sure you are," Carmody said. "How much did he give you?"

Dietrich hesitated, and then he seemed to remember the gun in Carmody's hand. "A thousand schillings," he said.

"Did Varndal tell you why he wanted to see Anya Berg?"

"Anya Berg? Do you know Anya?"

"Not yet. Answer my question."

"I didn't even know Varndal had

seen her until she told me about it," Dietrich said. "I gave him her name, yes, but I did not introduce him to her. He used my name without my permission."

"I'll bet you were upset about that," Carmody said. "Any idea as to why Varndal would want a portable radio transmitter of special strength and frequency?"

"Radio transmitter? No. No, I have no idea."

"I hope you're not lying to me, Dietrich."

"I'm not lying. Why would I lie?"

"I don't know at this point. All right, where does Varndal live?"

"On Kürzgasse, in Volksprater. Number twenty."

"Private house?"

"Yes. It is a mixed neighborhood."

"Mixed?"

"Business establishments and private residences."

"If Varndal isn't there, where would I look for him?"

"I don't know."

"I thought you were friends."

"Not exactly. Not socially."

"You don't know any of *his* friends, then? Or where he hangs out?"

"No. No, I do not."

"Like I say, Dietrich, I hope you're not lying to me." Carmody backed away, and as he slipped out of the garage he could hear Dietrich breathing noisily in the darkness. He jumped the boundary fence, crossed under the willow, and slid into the car again.

Carmody rang the bell four times with one of his gloved fingers and listened to chimes echo emptily through the darkened, flaking brick house at number twenty Kürzgasse. Then he picked the flimsy lock, stepped inside, shut the door behind him, and took the pencil flashlight from the pocket of his topcoat.

He followed the beam through the dwelling's five rooms, opening drawers and closets and cabinets. The quick but thorough search told him Varndal had packed all his important belongings and taken them away with him. Carmody wondered if he were following an ice-cold trail. Varndal had had more than enough time to make plane or train connections out of Vienna, but Carmody had to continue gambling that the use to which Varndal intended to put the radio transmitter was one centered in the Vienna area. It was likely then, since Varndal had cleared out of his house, that he intended to use the transmitter tonight—and then to leave as soon as he'd accomplished whatever purpose he had in mind. Carmody's only chance was to find

him before he was able to leave Vienna, leave Austria altogether.

Carmody located a door at one end of the kitchen, opened it; the flash revealed a set of stairs leading downward. He fumbled along the wall inside, encountered a light switch, and flicked it on, closing the door behind him as he started down the stairs.

The cellar was small and cramped, and smelled of dampness and mold . . . and something else that he could not immediately define, something sour and malodorous. The floor was earthen, muddy and trenched along the bases of the stone walls from water seepage and erosion during the heavy winter rains. Carmody prowled among cartons of miscellany, examined the tools and bottles and jars on a narrow workbench attached to the wall. He found nothing.

He turned then, took a few steps toward the rear wall, and the odd, sour odor seemed stronger and more pervasive. Carmody took a deep breath of it, and the hair on the back of his neck prickled; he knew what it was now. He moved toward the area where it was strongest, and shone his flash carefully along the muddied depressions at the base of the wall. The light picked up something, and he stepped closer.

The something was a human, shoe-encased foot.

Carmody went to the workbench, caught up the small hand trowel he had seen there, and took it to where he had found the foot. He knelt on a bundle of newspapers and began digging. It took him only a few minutes to uncover the body in the soft earth, to determine in the flash beam that it had once been a man. The state of decomposition, and the fact that part of the grave had been uncovered by erosion, explained the noxious smell in the cellar's confines.

Distastefully, Carmody searched the corpse and came up with a sodden, decaying wallet. He opened it, put the light on the contents. Most of the papers inside had dissolved, but some of the cards were protected by celluloid wrappers; he could see that one was an identification card, one a union card, and he knew enough German to be able to translate the information contained in them.

The dead man's name was Karl Heinz. He was an electrician, and his business address was listed as 22 Kürzgasse, the building next door to Varndal's house.

Carmody stood up. He remembered seeing the building, a dark, plaster-over-brick structure, when he'd arrived; but he had paid little attention to it at that time. Things

were beginning to make a certain degree of sense now, but he still needed the motive for Heinz' death—the definite lead to Varndal.

Quickly, Carmody went up the stairs, shut off the cellar light, and crossed through the kitchen to the rear door of the house. Several stunted fir trees grew in the back yard, and the blackness was thick and wet with heavy winter mist. He went to where a mesh-type fence separated the cluttered and circumscribed rear grounds of the electrical shop belonging to Karl Heinz. There were strands of barbed wire across the top of the fence, but it looked scalable.

Carmody glanced along the side of the house and saw that Kürzgasse was deserted. Then he climbed the fence effortlessly, used his gloved hands to bunch and depress the strands of barbed wire so that he could get his legs over, and dropped down on the other side. As soon as his feet touched the asphalt paving, he was moving through the pockets of darkness to the rear door of the electrical shop.

It took Carmody less than two minutes to pick the old-fashioned lock. He slipped inside, closed the door carefully behind him, and got out the pencil flash. The finger of light probed the interior long enough for him to determine that this was the workshop—spools of various-gauge wire, lengths of conduit, a multitude of tools and other electrical necessities— and to point out two closed doors. The one in the facing wall would open on the showroom and customer entrance; the one in the right-hand wall would probably open on a private office. It was the office Carmody wanted.

He crossed the stone floor of the workshop and tried the knob. It turned under his fingers. An office, all right; small, too neat, as if it had been straightened recently—probably by relatives of Karl Heinz in the weeks since the electrician's obviously mysterious disappearance. Three sets of filing cabinets huddled opposite a functional metal desk; apparently Heinz had done a fairly brisk business.

Carmody put the light on the cabinets and saw that they were arranged according to date rather than alphabetically. That would make checking considerably easier. He found the most recent file, dated the month of Heinz' disappearance, and went through the papers methodically. There was nothing for him to find. *If there were anything important in here,* he thought, *Varndal would have destroyed it after he killed Heinz.*

He slid the file closed, and then went to the desk. There were papers arranged in two wire baskets

on its top. He went through one, found nothing, and started on the second. A three-page statement, with a typed letter signed by someone named Gunter Amerling stapled to it, caught and held his attention. The first paragraph of the letter, under a printed letterhead, said that Amerling was enclosing a check in payment of the statement.

Carmody read the remainder of the letter and glanced through the statement, and there it was—the answer. The letter and the check would have been received here *after* Heinz' murder, by whoever was handling Heinz' affairs; Varndal hadn't known about it, which explained why he hadn't destroyed it as he had the other records dealing with the Amerling job.

Carmody looked at his watch: ten minutes to eleven. There might still be time; Varndal wouldn't put the transmitter to use until well into the evening, because even if Amerling and Amerling's family were not at home there might be servants or neighbors.

Leaving the office, Carmody entered the showroom at the front of the store and peered cautiously through drawn venetian blinds. Kürzgasse was still deserted. He worked on the lock, got the door open, eased out, and hurried to where he had left the car. By the light of his flash, he read the city map and found the street address he had memorized from Amerling's letter; it was a semiprivate road on the outskirts of Vienna, to the northwest.

As he drove, his foot heavy on the accelerator and his head aching more with tension now than pain from Varndal's blow, Carmody arranged in his mind the facts as he thought them to be. The job Karl Heinz had done for Gunter Amerling was the installation of a large, thick-steel safe, the type which had no combination dial, which in fact was nothing more than a steel box with no visible means of entrance. The safe was opened by a crystal-controlled radio transmitter of ultrahigh and very strong and steady frequency—manufactured by Heinz—which activated an unlocking device built into the steel door; if someone tried to open it with an easily-obtained variable-frequency transmitter, or tried to blow it or torch it open, alarms would be set off immediately both inside the house and at the local police station. It was all very modern and very foolproof—but it did not, could not, take into consideration the unforeseen factor.

Anton Varndal was that unforeseen factor.

Living next door to Heinz' electrical shop, perhaps a drinking companion if not a friend of Heinz',

Varndal had somehow found out about the job the electrician had done for Gunter Amerling; and with that knowledge, he had devised a scheme to steal whatever it was that Amerling had inside his safe—something undoubtedly of great value. The plan was simplicity itself; all that was necessary was the acquisition of a small, portable transmitter of the same frequency and strength as the unit which operated Amerling's safe—putting out a signal without a variation of more than plus or minus .03 so as not to set off the alarms.

Varndal must have approached Heinz with his idea, since he needed someone to manufacture the portable transmitter; he would have had no access to one himself, except that one which belonged to Amerling. He could have braced Amerling, but that would have meant revealing himself and thus running the risk of possible complications; also, he couldn't be sure he could force Amerling to reveal the transmitter's whereabouts. The other way was so much simpler—or so Varndal thought.

Heinz had balked at Varndal's suggestion, perhaps had threatened to go to the police or to Gunter Amerling; Varndal had killed him to keep him quiet, burying the body in his own cellar. It was, actually, the perfect place to dispose of the remains; the police investigating Heinz' disappearance would have no reason to suspect that Heinz had been murdered by his neighbor, that Heinz' body was in the cellar of the house next door.

Then Varndal had found out from Dietrich about Anya Berg, and from Anya about Josef Bruckner and Carmody. Since he lived in a low-rent area such as this one, he would likely have had very little money; but he had scratched together the two thousand down payment so that Carmody would get the transmitter for him—and get it by the specified date. The time element, to Carmody, meant that Amerling was probably out of town, that his house was relatively unguarded—Amerling having faith in his "foolproof" safe. Amerling's absence would make the robbery that much simpler for Varndal.

When Carmody delivered the transmitter, Varndal had clubbed him for the simple reason that he did not have the balance of eight thousand dollars. It was something of a desperate move on Varndal's part; he might have tried to talk Carmody into waiting a few days or weeks for his money, but he had taken the amateur's way out; all or nothing, with no thought to repercussions or careful execution of his plan.

It was eleven-thirty when Car-

mody reached the semiprivate road along which Gunter Amerling lived. The area was a moneyed one, with high-walled estates at staggered intervals along the twisting, birch-lined lane. The famed Vienna Woods stretched upward into floating gray mist directly ahead, and the road climbed gradually toward the deciduous and pine forests. The pines were higher up, along the crests of the hills; at this level, birch and beech and oak, branches stripped bare, rose in ghostly clusters, their tops obscured by the eddying fog.

Carmody found the number he wanted on one of two stone cairns which loomed taller than the high stone wall stretching away parallel to the road; between the cairns was an iron filigree gate, undoubtedly remote-controlled. He drove past the gate several hundred yards, parked well off the road, and made his way on foot to the base of the stone wall. It was high and smooth-sided, but Carmody had little difficulty in climbing it. Less than a minute later, he was moving through dense birch toward where he thought the Amerling house would be, the wet carpet of leaves beneath his shoes cushioning and dulling the sound of his steps.

He came out of the trees finally and could see the house a hundred yards away—a neoclassic structure with a newly renovated exterior. It was shrouded in mist, completely dark as far as he was able to tell. To his left, Carmody saw the private access lane which led from the front gate to the house; halfway along it, set back into the trees on that side, was a bungalow which undoubtedly belonged to the caretaker or watchman. A light burned in its front window, dimly. Everything seemed quiet, normal.

The chance was good that Varndal had already come and gone, but Carmody's only choice was to check it through until he was certain. Keeping to shadow, he moved toward the house at an angle until he reached the side wall. He eased along it toward the rear. The windows on both levels were shuttered on that side, the shutters locked securely.

Carmody crossed through a side garden, onto a stone-floored rear patio. A set of French doors opening onto the patio were locked. Carmody went around to the other side of the house and found a high, short wing—the servants' or kitchen entrance. Upstairs there, a light shone behind a curtained window; there were live-in servants, then, to watch over things while Amerling was away. That would not make any difference to Varndal's plan, other than that it might have delayed his coming here; the theft

would be essentially noiseless.

As Carmody moved forward, the light in the wing went out and darkness there was complete. He went beyond the wing and along the side wall toward the front of the house. Something short and worm-thin skittered toward him across the earth, undulating in the wind. Carmody bent, caught it, and held it up to his eyes. It was a length of black wire, a foot long, cut out of an electrical line somewhere nearby. He thought: *There has to be some kind of standard alarm system on the doors and windows, as well as the radio-controlled safe. Varndal would have known the location of the wiring, either from Heinz' records or from Heinz himself—would have known where to make the cut to disable the system so that he could get inside. Varndal's already been here, then—or he's still here . . .*

Carmody's lips were thin, pulled hard against his teeth. He started forward again, and the shutters on the window ahead of him slapped softly against the stone siding of the house. They had been opened and refastened from within, but not securely. He edged up to the window. He could not see through the shutters, at least not well enough to determine what, if anything, was happening within. Then light flickered, went out, flickered again—unmistakably a flashlight beam. Varndal was still here, caught right in the middle of a web of his own making.

Carmody backed away to the wing and crouched in the shadows there, the Beretta in his hand. The wind blew chill fog against his cheeks, swirled leaves and twigs around his shoes; but his eyes were intent on the window, watching, waiting for Varndal to come out.

It was ten minutes before the shutters spread cautiously wide and the dark, cloth-capped figure emerged from inside. In his right hand he carried a large satchel; in his left the portable radio transmitter. He set both of these on the ground, reached up, and closed the shutters again. Then he looked both ways along the house, failed to see Carmody, picked up the satchel and transmitter, and started into the woods which grew close to that side of the house.

Carmody followed immediately, moving laterally in the shadows at first to get directly behind Varndal; then he set off in the same direction, staying just close enough to keep him in sight through the trees and mist. Varndal moved at a labored trot, slowed by the combined weight of the satchel and the transmitter. Carmody's own motion was a weaving one, slipping in and out of the cover of the trees in the

event that Varndal looked over his shoulder; but Varndal appeared to have only one thought, and that was to get to the estate wall, to get away as quickly as possible with whatever was contained in the satchel.

The stone wall loomed ahead through the trees, and Varndal struggled on at a faster pace. He was breathing stertorously when he reached the base of the wall, and the sound of his panting was audible to Carmody. Varndal lowered the satchel and the transmitter to the leafy ground and leaned against the wall to catch his breath momentarily. Carmody was less than thirty yards away and still coming—and Varndal heard him now.

He spun away from the wall, crouching, his hand tugging at something in his belt. The something came free, came up in his hand, and Carmody shot him twice with the Beretta. Varndal made a gasping sound, sagged to his knees; he stared up at Carmody, his eyes wide with recognition, his face white and shining with pain. Carmody ran up to him, holding the Beretta ready, but there was no fight left in Varndal; there was only disbelief, pure awe that it was Carmody who had shot him, Carmody who had found him. His lips worked, tried to form words, but he could not put voice to them. Finally, he toppled forward, dropping his gun, his cap falling off; the wind tugged carelessly at his blond hair, and he lay motionless.

Carmody put the Beretta away, caught up the satchel and the transmitter, and moved away along the wall—toward the front entrance gate. If the caretaker had heard the shots, and decided to investigate, he would come straight through the trees and it would take him a while to locate Varndal's body, to get back to his bungalow to put out an alarm.

Carmody reached the gate without incident, crossed the access lane, and hurried through the trees on the other side. When he judged that he was approximately at the spot at which he had entered the estate grounds, he slung the satchel and the transmitter to the top of the wall and followed them up. He lay there for a moment, looking both ways along the semiprivate road; it was void of lights, of movement. He dropped down with his double burden, and crossed the road to where he had left the car.

Both the satchel and the transmitter went into the trunk. He started the car, swung it onto the road in a U-turn, and drove on without lights. When he passed the gate, he looked through it but saw no movement on the grounds of the Amerling estate. Five minutes later,

he was on a main Vienna artery, on his way to Grinzing.

Bruckner said, "Gold coins! Commemorative European gold coins—a complete set of them. So that is what Varndal was after in Amerling's safe."

Carmody nodded. He had found Bruckner in his large Grinzing apartment, and had told him the whole story. "Amerling is apparently one of these collectors you hear about, rich enough to indulge his hobby."

"What a fine price these will bring on the market!" Bruckner said. "Fifty thousand American dollars, at the minimum."

"They won't bring a cent," Carmody said, "because they're not going out on the market."

Bruckner stared at him. "But I do not understand."

"The coins go back to Amerling in the morning, in a package mailed somewhere here in Vienna. There was about thirty thousand schillings in Amerling's safe—petty cash, probably—and Varndal took that with him in the satchel. It doesn't amount to the eight thousand dollars Varndal owed me for the transmitter, but it's close enough; and I don't think Amerling would mind if I kept it as a reward for my time and trouble."

"I still do not understand, Herr Carmody," Bruckner said. "Fifty thousand American dollars . . ."

"It wouldn't make any difference if it were two hundred and fifty thousand," Carmody told him. "I'm not a thief. I play games with the law, but I'm not a common thief."

Bruckner knew better than to argue with him. He sighed. "I will arrange the return of the coins in the morning, then."

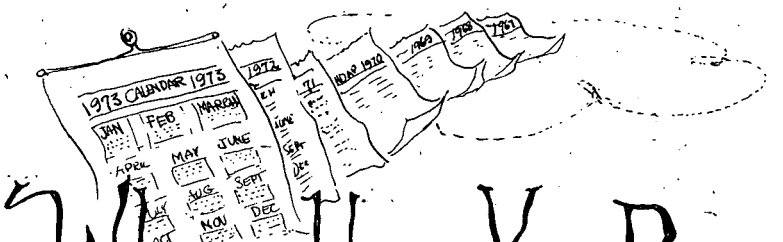
"See that you do."

Bruckner smiled wryly. "I will not disobey you, Herr Carmody. I am not that foolish."

Carmody's watch said that it was almost two a.m. "I think I'd better be going now, Bruckner," he said. "Next time you send me some business, make sure you've cleared the client. I don't want a repeat of the Varndal affair."

"I will be most careful," Bruckner promised.

Working late at the office is an explanation that sometimes satisfies no one.



Where Have You Been, Ross Ivy?

ROSS IVY, on his way home as usual after a day's work at the office, swung his car into the driveway and noticed, with vague surprise, the size of the tree that overhung his garage. Funny; he guessed he must not have really looked at that tree for a long, long time. He switched off the ignition, separated his house key from the others on the ring, picked up his briefcase from the seat and loped across the wide lawn to his front door.

It was deep twilight of a late summer day, the broad street quiet, soft light shining from the windows of the homes. His own picture windows were shadowed sheets of plate glass.

He rammed the key into the lock. It stuck. He pushed on it, bent over to squint at it in the purple dusk. He worked it out of the keyhole, felt its familiar shape and size. It was the front door key, all right. He started it into the keyhole again, carefully, twisting it slightly. It entered just so far and jammed. "Crazy," he said, yanking the key out of the keyhole. He leaned on the bell button.

He could hear the triple-noted chime from within. He stepped to the edge of the porch and leaned

over the wrought-iron banister to peer through the window and see Gwen emerging into light that spilled from the master bedroom into the hallway. She was tying the belt of her dressing gown, hurrying. She must be dressing for something. Were they invited out tonight and had he forgotten?

"Damn!" he exclaimed under his breath, wanting only a drink and the opportunity to relax.

"Darling," he heard through the door as Gwen fumbled with the

by Pauline C. Smith

lock. The porch light startled him. "Darling." She threw open the door. "You're so early. . . ." she began, and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Early?" Yes, perhaps this was early for him, he'd been working late hours for so long, working like a dog . . . Incidentally, where *was* the dog? He should be barking up a storm, beginning back at the moment Ross drove the car into the driveway, and now he should be leaping wildly, shrieking in loyal hysteria.

Ross closed the door and asked his wife, "Where is Fritz?"

She backed off, the hand still covering her mouth, her eyes wide and staring.

"My key didn't work. Funny thing." He dropped his briefcase to a hall table and looked at his house key, still separated from the others on the ring. "Can't understand it. Maybe I put it in upside down." He tucked the keys into his pocket, turned, and switched on the lights as he entered the livingroom.

He was momentarily chilled by the cold formality of cool satin and silver. What did he expect? A sudden thought startled him: he had expected warmth and the glow of color. The bewildering expectation faded abruptly to leave him petulant.

"Well, where *is* Fritz?" He strode across the length of the room to the bar alcove beyond, stepped behind the bar, and ran his hand over the deep-grained, polished wood. It felt good and warmly welcome. He looked across the bar from the alcove, out along the length of the room and into the hall where Gwen still stood, spread-eagled now against the wall like some dramatic diva.

"Are we going somewhere? Did I forget about it?"

He reached under the bar for his familiar bottle of bourbon in its accustomed place and came up with Scotch. He stooped then, to search with his eyes, knowing that he was the only one who drank bourbon. Gwen, as well as their friends, drank everything from Scotch to vodka; he alone preferred the good, rich, colorful flavor of bourbon, and his bottle always stood in that one place. Now there was no bourbon there, none at all. Yet it was here only yesterday. And so was the dog, frisking about his legs, the long body stretching an exclamation mark of sheer joy at having him home.

"Where is the dog?" Ross shouted suddenly, wanting to weep.

Gwen, the impaled impresario, pushed herself away from the wall at last, and whispered, "Ross?" incredulously, as if she could not believe it was he standing there be-

hind his own bar, in his own home, but without his own drink and without his dog so that he felt excluded, disoriented, canceled out of the world in which he stood.

It was then that he had the vision and the impression of warmth and laughter; a vision not upon the retina of his eye, an impression not upon the nerve endings of his touch, but somewhere deep between memory and prognostication, that the woman moving toward him now was not Gwen, beautifully perfect, but another who was perfectly beautiful.

She became Gwen again, cold and stiffly silken, approaching him slowly as if she were a toy drawn on a string—his string, pulled by his unwilling hand. Then he said, "Hell," and poured himself the drink of Scotch he hated and asked once more, "Where is Fritz?"

"He's dead," she said, her eyes big and scared.

Ross thumped the bottle to the bar and his hand trembled on the glass.

"He died almost seven years ago," she whimpered.

Ross shook his head with the impact of the absurdity and stared at her, his wife, who seemed to be playing tricks with her face as she was attempting to do with her tongue. She was Gwen and someone else . . . a montage, a superimposed someone, someone he loved dearly and should phone. Yes, he had promised to place a phone call the minute he arrived—but arrived from where? And a call to what other place? "You're lying," he declared flatly, and tipped the glass to let the liquid fall down his throat and thump and splash in his stomach.

"Ross?" Why did she always speak his name with a question mark? Gwen, or this woman who was not Gwen, held up her hand as if she were refuting him or blocking him off.

Ross clicked his mind into logical action and came up with a grabber. "He couldn't have died almost seven years ago. He wasn't even seven years old," and analyzed his analysis to find it lacking in any kind of reason. "I mean," he said and groped reluctantly, "I mean, he was here yesterday so how could he have died almost seven years ago?" *There* was the grabber, a real clincher. He had this woman hanging on the ropes. Then Ross felt faint. He downed his drink and swayed. Something was wrong here. Where in hell was he and to whom was he talking?

"He died after you left," she said, "and *you* have been gone seven years."

The words were thrust from her as if she had a slingshot somewhere

inside her voice box that plucked forth these meaningless pebbles of crazy sound. The dog flew gracefully from Ross' memory, on wings he had never possessed, big feet spread . . . and Ross felt lost.

"We thought you were dead," Gwen said, her arms folded tight across her breast as if in protection. "Ross?" with that rising inflection.

"Who's we?" he asked abruptly, just before the impact of her statement struck him. "Dead?"

She bent, with her arms clasped about her as if she were in pain, or as if, it seemed to Ross, the pain of *him* had suddenly assailed her. His mind gathered fuzzy facts, backing up to her first words begun before she had opened the door to see him and clapped a hand over her mouth, shutting out the "darlings" and the "early" routine. He leaned against the bar, allowing it to support him.

"Why was I early?" he asked softly, itemizing her words. "Early for what? And was it *I* who was early?"

Almost crouched, she held herself tight in her own private agony while he reached out with his mind in an effort to tabulate the hints, clues she had so sparsely indicated.

"You thought I was someone else," he said slowly, "someone too early. Who was that someone?"

"We were sure you were dead," she repeated, stooped and frightened. "There was no body, but we were so sure. Seven years!"

He shook his head with bewilderment, seven years being a long time from yesterday! Then he remembered again that he was to call someone before he had stopped for the night. Call whom? Stop where? And after what? He was bone-tired—his exhaustion caused by long-distance driving, he realized now, recognizing the shoulder pain, the leg ache—so he must have been at it all day, going from somewhere to somewhere else.

He leaned heavily against the bar and reached for the bottle of Scotch again and splashed a drink into the glass. "Where is my bourbon?" he asked petulantly. "Where is my dog?"

Gwen straightened. "You don't know. You don't remember. You come back, after all these years, to this house . . ."

He thought of the key and snatched the ring from his pocket, separating from the others the key that could not unlock the door of this house.

"Where have you been if you haven't been dead?" she cried.

He streaked across the long livingroom and into the hall, opened the front door and, holding it wedged with his knee, tried the key that did not belong there. He shut

the door, catching a fleeting glimpse again of warmth, laughter and color—another house, another place, and a phone call to be made.

"Ross," said Gwen, stiffly straight now and becoming sure of herself. "Ross," the name no longer a question but a declaration on her lips. "You don't remember?"

He moved cautiously back into the livingroom from the hallway, with a strange feeling that they were jockeying for a position of knowledge and that she had the upper hand. He felt like an animal circling her, never taking his eyes off her. Now it was he who questioned the name, this place and time. "What am I supposed to remember?" he asked warily.

"Well—you disappeared . . ." She eyed him as if to test his reactions and her voice became stronger. "You disappeared and now you're back, asking for your dog as if it were yesterday instead of seven years ago."

It was not a direct answer, and Ross said, "So you thought I was dead."

"Naturally we thought you were dead."

"Who's we?"

"Well, Arthur, of course . . ." The name caught in her throat, causing her to swallow as if she would erase it. So was Arthur the "darling" at the front door? Ross wondered. She attempted a desperate depersonalization. "We all thought you were dead, our friends, your business associates . . . everybody," waving her arms as if to include the entire population of Gannet Falls.

Of course, Gannet Falls. He knew now why he had broken his journey from someplace he could not now remember to someplace else he had forgotten about when he saw the sign, "Gannet Falls, the Superb Suburb," and turned off the main drag to drive to this house like a homing pigeon.

He caught his head in his hands and pressed his temples with his fingers as if he would rechannel his mind, gathering up the bits and tag-ends of memory along the way to fit them into all the empty spaces. He wanted to question her, this Gwen who was familiar yet was not, and cry out for help—*Help me to remember*—but he studied her, distant and secretive, and knew that he could not, for that would give her the advantage of knowing what he did not know and of telling or not telling it to him, and she was danger, he was sure of that.

Ross walked to the bar and moved behind it, feeling the need of good solid substance between himself and this wife he did, yet did not, know. He surveyed her across the bar, a pretty woman, her eyes

enlarged, enhanced and upturned through sheer artistry, her cheekbones fashionably high and prominent, her lips seductively curved—but fierce.

He recoiled from the fierceness . . . here was a woman who knew what she wanted and got it—someway, any way—and she did not want him. He knew this with chilling certainty.

The lips smiled and moved and spoke of shock. "Of course it was a shock to see you here tonight . . ." Smiling, she was, rocking back from the shock. Retreating, building her fences? "After all these years of loss and grief," she added, with her eyes cold, the mouth softly fierce. "Ross, you are home . . ." she advanced, arms extended, not in a gesture of loving welcome, but as if she would strangle him, it seemed.

He splashed some of the Scotch into the glass and downed it, coughed, almost choked, and felt as if he were drowning. He looked at Gwen over his hand covering his mouth and felt himself borne down, sucked under water, and thought of the river as her arms fell and her hands, palms down, caressed the bar. The falls from which the suburban town had derived its name . . . the falls, an affectation only, caused by a minor drop in the riverbed so that the water tumbled over the rocky ledge. He stood rigid, his hand still over his mouth, beginning to remember at least the falls that were not falls but only a name, when Gwen interrupted, causing the falls to drip away just as the dog had flown.

"You don't remember?" she asked, leaning against the bar now, not reaching out to touch him as he looked at her blankly, dropping his hand and flattening his face with purpose. "You don't remember anything. Of course not."

"I remember the cabin," he said, so startling himself with the abrupt, fragmentary recollection that he failed to notice Gwen's look of alarm. "A cabin somewhere by a lake—no, a river . . ." The memory was elusive, untrustworthy. "Do we still have the cabin?" he asked her directly, and caught the look of terror in the beautiful, staring eyes. "The cabin," he repeated, probing, wanting to know, the cabin becoming less clear with the roar of the river and the falls beyond sounding deafeningly in his ears.

Gwen's softly fierce mouth became thinly fierce as she said, without expression, "What cabin?"

Ross knew then that there was a cabin by a river's edge, and if he could remember the cabin and that river clearly enough, he would know why it was he stood here in this faintly familiar house with a faintly familiar wife, and who

awaited his phone call. "Then there is no cabin I should remember?" he baited her.

Gwen's face relaxed with relief. She fluttered her hands and positioned her mouth into gentle sympathy. "Not that I know of," she said. Then placatingly, "Perhaps it's a later memory." Her eyes became decisive and her lips more fiercely demanding. "You must have lived *somewhere* after you disappeared—had some kind of life. Do you remember that? Where did you come from, Ross? And where have you been for the last seven years?"

Becoming the inquisitor, she put him on the defensive. His mind was a blank. He felt a screaming need for identity.

She leaned against the bar, her hands clenching its edge. "Does anyone know you are here?" she asked softly, and he thought of the phone call he was to make without knowing to whom he was to make it. "No, you don't remember. You don't remember anything, do you, Ross? So no one remembers you. Well, you're home again and I remember you." She changed, like quicksilver, to smiling welcome. "You're home again and that's all that matters."

It wasn't all that mattered. It was only a little that mattered. What mattered was the big gap in his life with these fleeting tag ends of memory—the frisking, happy dog, the bourbon in its place, a cabin on the river . . . the cabin on the river, the rocky falls . . . a rock . . . he felt pain explode in his head—a rock! Water closing him in, cold water that took his breath and gave it back to him . . .

"You drove here?" asked Gwen. "Well, of course you did," and she stepped to the side window to locate the shadow of a car in the driveway.

"My car," said Ross. "Where did you find my car?"

She turned, her face empty.

"I must have been in a car," he said impatiently, "seven years ago when I disappeared. So, what about the car? Where did you find it?" Now, he had the upper hand. He leaned on the bar and watched her face wrestle with the question, and remembered a long green car, his, parked next to the cabin, and another parked alongside it. He heard the falls. The falls drowned out the memory and also Gwen's trumped-up explanation—it had to be trumped-up since she denied the river and the cabin.

"All that is over," he heard her finale, "and now it is enough that you are here." She had made up her mind about something. He could see the decision in her eyes, the fierce resolution on her lips. "You are alive," she said, "and that is

enough, at least for the present."

Enough for what? Ross wondered, watching her eyes, studying her lips, feeling the quick and powerful recall of warm eyes and loving lips to overwhelm him for an instant before both were gone to leave only the chill of this woman.

He shuddered and began to remember . . . or was it *this* woman he was remembering from *that* life, who spoke lies with decision in her eyes and resolution on her carefully smiling lips? As she was doing now in a falsely welcoming speech, her words rambling, her hands fluttering a distraction that allowed her brain to plan furiously.

She was edging away from the bar with a nervous laugh, saying that she must dress—my goodness! At his question, yes, she had planned on going out, but now she wouldn't leave—my goodness, no! They would, instead, celebrate his return to life.

That was an interesting choice of words. He widened his eyes and stared at Gwen without seeing, without hearing her, involved only with the certain knowledge that he had indeed returned to that past life, for he was beginning to remember his murder. He felt again the impact of a rock against his skull—stunning him this time as it had the other so that the room turned black and he clung to the edge of the bar to keep from slipping, as he had long ago, into the water to sink and rise and flounder, searching for a handhold, to find it on the rocky ledge of the diminutive falls . . .

Who had done that to him?

"Gwen!" She had started from the room. She halted and turned, her eyes guarded, her face impassive. She would tell him nothing but lies. He would have to remember it for himself. "Gwen! What was I like?"

"What were you like?" Her face was expressionless.

"When you knew me. Seven years ago." He clutched at the desperate hope that could he learn what kind of man he had been, he would also learn the reason for someone wanting him out of the way. "What was my business? What did I do for a living?"

"What is your business now?" she asked.

He did not know! Just as he didn't know who he was to phone once he reached some unknown destination for some unknown reason. He did not know the name he used, where he lived, or what friends he had, what family.

The floor rocked under his feet as the boat had rocked seven years before, and his head ached as if it had been dealt a crushing blow. *Gannet Falls is mine,* he heard from the

boat and the past, *and so is Gwen.* Ross swayed and caught hold of the edge of the bar, these bits of past knowledge paining him as if they were being forced into his brain, jagged piece by jagged piece.

Gannet Falls had been his, a tract of houses set in a hilly nowhere because of the river and the river site he owned. So he must have been a builder, broker or promoter—something in real estate—with a business and a wife that someone else wanted. He felt like laughing because he certainly didn't want the business nor did he want the wife.

He looked at her, dazed.

"Well, never mind," she said, "you don't have to remember. Everything will be all right. Really it will."

He watched her leave the room, hips moving smoothly under the silk of her dressing gown, her step confident. "Where are you going?" he called after her childishly, afraid of losing, even for a moment, this only link he had with an identity.

"Just to get dressed," she smiled. "That's all. I'll be back and then we'll talk. I will help you remember." The last words sounded ominous. *How* would she help him to remember when she had hindered him thus far? "Darling," she added as she left the livingroom and started down the hall.

He wasn't her *darling,* someone else was, someone she had thought to be early, someone who wasn't there when she clapped a hand over her mouth and fell back in shock, someone she must notify . . . Of course, just as he must phone someone that he had arrived and was safe, so must she phone someone that he had arrived and she was not safe.

Ross grabbed the edge of the bar and swung around it, raced across the livingroom, looking for a phone—a second phone, or a third one. Hell, he'd built this house, lived in it—where were the phones?

His eyes swept the hall—no phone—no light either from the master bedroom beyond, so the door was closed and she was probably on the bedroom phone. He crossed the hall, reached around the doorway and switched on the lights of a kitchen. He remembered it. He was beginning to remember now, to move in familiar surroundings, and there was the wall phone.

He strode across the kitchen tile, placed a careful forefinger on the edge of the cradle, raised the instrument, let his finger lift gently, and heard Gwen say, in a frantic whisper, "Arthur . . ." There it was, *Arthur* again—so Arthur was her darling. "Arthur, he's here . . ." and the answering voice. Ross recognized it, not knowing to whom it belonged. He recognized

the voice, by its timbre and intensity, to be one that could say, *Gannet Falls is mine, and so is Gwen.*

The voice was light now, questioning, almost playful, feeling good—and the reason it was feeling good, Ross knew, was that he had been dead for seven years now and the voice could claim Gannet Falls and Gwen. That is why, he concluded with sudden inspiration, the late date—a celebration . . . He felt sick and swallowed, holding his hand over the mouthpiece, sure that the sound was audible and filled with anguish.

She had come through to Arthur-the-voice at last. He was protesting, "I don't believe it." He repeated his protest over and over, not believing he had killed without killing.

Gwen was feeling the strain and the danger. "Dammit," she cried in a shrill whisper. "I tell you, he's here. He's in the bar, drinking the Scotch and complaining about it. He doesn't know anything. Doesn't remember anything. Get over here, Arthur, and do the job right!"

Arthur whimpered audibly, and Ross Ivy, no longer Ross Ivy but a dead man inexpertly killed, whimpered inaudibly.

"I don't *care* how you do it," whispered Gwen fiercely, "just do it. He's got a car here. You can put him in his car and leave it out on a road somewhere. Don't you *understand*? He's someone else now. Get over here, Arthur. I can't *talk* any longer."

Ross heard a click, and replaced the phone.

He stood there in the brightly lighted kitchen, swallowing his sickness, then walked across the tile and switched the room to darkness.

His footsteps were muffled down the hall and he made no sound as he opened the door to the master bedroom.

She stood with her back to him, the dressing gown a circle of silk around her feet. She was reaching up into the open wardrobe for something off a hanger, her breath heavy in her throat, almost sobbing.

On the bedside table, at what had once been his side of the bed, he saw the photograph in an easel frame—a photograph of Arthur Gordon. He had never thought of him as Arthur, always Gordon, partner, associate, whatever—press agent with a personality, the one who had added the Falls to Gannet and coined the Superb Suburb bit.

As if he were going down for the third time, Ross saw his past life with these two, Gwen his wife, and Gordon her darling, like rapidly flipped pictures on the retina of his mind. He remembered his suspicions, buried like an iceberg in his work, just as all his worth was

buried in the opening of this small, select tract called Gannet Falls.

The pictures flipped at a breathtaking pace, showing him the cabin, the river, the boat and Gordon's surprise visit . . . Ross pressed his fingers hard against his temples to slow down the pace—but the pictures, as if they had been held in the darkroom of his brain too long, raced by, filling him with forgotten memory.

Just as the blackout pain of the final blow struck him again, the long-buried, seven-year-old sound track gave him once more Gordon's words, *Gannet Falls is mine and so is Gwen.*

"My God!" he breathed aloud and Gwen whirled in the circle of her dressing gown, one hand clutching the dress she had selected, the other raised and spread as if to ward off disaster.

As they stared at each other, she whimpered, "You don't know. You don't remember," her voice rising to a shrill note. "Ross, you *said* you didn't know . . ."

"My God," he repeated, stunned by the agony of knowing too much and remembering it all.

"That's what you said," she cried. "You said you didn't know. Didn't remember . . ."

"And now I do," he answered her.

She dropped the dress and started toward him, arms outstretched. Stumbling within the circle of the dressing gown, she tripped at its edge and pitched forward.

He reached and caught her before she fell.

Holding her upright, his hands firmly but gently grasping her bare shoulders, he remembered what she had once been to him: his love and his life. Then he remembered how she had taken from him her love and his life, and his grasp tightened, embedding his fingers in the warm and wicked flesh.

He let her go so abruptly that she swayed.

He stepped away, drew back his arm and swung, striking her with the flat of his hand that sent her in a spin and sprawled her on the bed.

She lay there, wide-eyed, making small plaintive sounds, one cheek brightly crimson, the other paper-pale. Ross stared down at her, hating her with a violence he didn't know he was capable of—yet how could he know the capabilities of the man that was left once Ross Ivy was dead?

He wanted to weep and cringe, as she wept and cringed on the bed. Instead, he leaned over her and slapped the other cheek scarlet.

This man who had been Ross Ivy was appalled and joyful. He was going to kill her, slowly and with ven-

geance, and with great happiness.

She must have seen the compulsion in his eyes when she cried out, and she must have known what it meant when she made the attempt to roll free of him. She was awkward and not fast enough. He yanked her back, straddled her, both knees on the bed, and placed his hands around her neck.

She tried to speak, to plead. Each time her throat moved, he pressed his thumbs against the movement and pushed back the sound.

With his hands on her throat, he thought of the beauty of his crime, its perfection—the dead killing the killer to bring ultimate justice to the guilty.

He pressed gently. Gwen gagged. When he loosened his hold, she struggled weakly, forcing him to press less gently, and relish his act a little more hurriedly. Once she was gone, all he had to do was call the police from the phone that Gwen had used to order his second death, walk out of the house, step into his car and drive away, leaving Gordon to arrive and explain.

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Gwen was making strange sounds under his fingers and her face was darkening. He lessened the pressure, reminding himself not to forget his briefcase—the briefcase that would give him away.

The briefcase! That would tell him who he was! And who it was he was supposed to phone!

He jerked his hands from the now bruised throat, swung his leg over the body onto the floor and leaned close, looking at her, still hating her, but not wanting her to die, not by his hands. He held them, trembling, out before him, aghast.

Her lashes fluttered, and he sighed in relief.

Time was growing short now. He didn't know where Gordon was coming from or how long it would take him to get here. He leaned over, a hand pressing the mattress on each side of her, caging her in. "Look," he said, "can you hear me and do you understand?"

She held her head very still and snapped her eyes tight.

"I know about myself now. And I know about you and Gordon. Listen to me and remember this, now that I can remember." He allowed himself a small smile of triumph. "If you declare me dead, I shall rise up and call you a murderer. Understand?"

She understood and she would remember; he could tell by the way her eyes flew open and how they clouded.

He straightened. "That's all," he said.

That was indeed all. Out of fear, she could never declare him dead, and since she could not declare him

dead, Gannet Falls did not belong to Gordon, nor did Gwen.

He walked down the hall of the house he now remembered clearly and without nostalgia. He picked up his briefcase, stepped through the door his key would not open, crossed the lawn, looked at the tree that was seven years taller than he remembered, stepped into his car, leaving the door ajar so that he could see by the dome light, opened his briefcase, discovered his name to be Robert Jones—what imagination!—and that he was a hardware sales representative.

He sat there, laughing.

Holding the car door open a moment, he looked back at the house he once lived in and at the life he once lived, said, "The hell with *that*," slammed the door, turned the ignition key and backed into the broad street. He rounded the corner just as headlights slowed, parked in front of the house and blacked out.

That would be Gordon, and those two, instead of celebrating the end of his seven-year death tonight, would be holding a wake over his live body—a comforting thought.

He drove into the city and parked in front of a drugstore. He broke a bill at the counter and took the change to a phone booth at the rear. He fed the coins into the box, dialed his code area, the prefix and number. "Vicki . . ."

With the sound of her voice, his world rocked back into position, filled with warmth and laughter. "How are the twins?" he asked, and listened.

"Vicki, I miss you. Know what? Think I'll bed down in a motel here and head on back home first thing in the morning. I've got something to tell you."

He hung up and pushed through the doors, smiling.

Did he plan to tell Vicki who he really was and what they had tried to do to him?

Never.

What he planned to tell Vicki was that the Company could shove this territory—he didn't like the atmosphere and he didn't like the people. He wanted his old territory back.

There is a gift that does not need to be purchased or wrapped, and is even returnable under certain conditions.

IT WAS THE DAY before Christmas and in spite of the holly decorating the hotel lobby and the piped carols coming over the speakers, it just didn't feel like Christmas.

Maybe it was because I was alone, with a lonely Christmas Eve and a solitary Christmas dinner in prospect. Maybe it was because the temperature outside was over eighty and the sun bright, and to me Christmas meant cold and snow.

I sighed and turned into the hotel bar to while away a few hours just sipping beer and watching the world go by, because there was absolutely nothing for me to do—no one to buy gifts for, no preparations to make, no celebration to anticipate.

I'd passed a half dozen parties in the hallways of the hotel, envying the participants, but had received no open-hearted invitation to join them. Christmas didn't seem to be what it used to be.

I settled on a stool at the bar and signaled the bartender. He brought me a frosty bottle of beer. I poured it slowly, taking as much time as possible.

Someone tapped my shoulder.

I turned slowly, wondering which of the local gendarmerie had taken it upon himself to spoil my Christmas further.

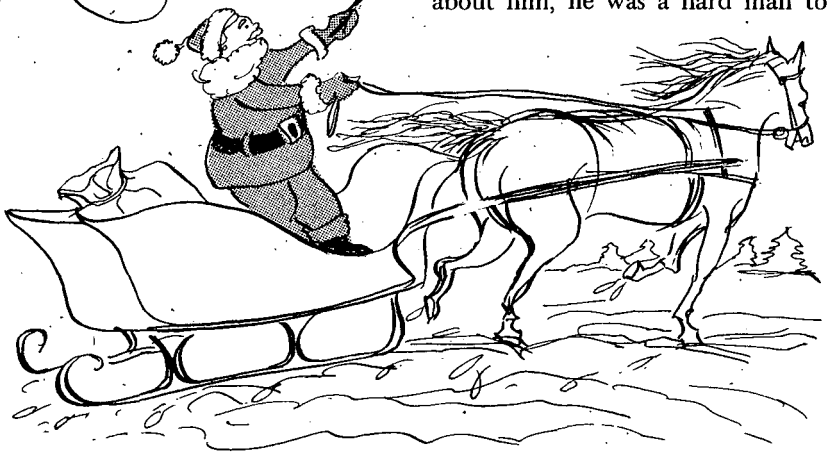
Orkie Calhoun stood there with a tentative smile, as if he were unsure of a welcome.

"Orkie," I said. "A pleasure to see you. What brings you to Miami?"

Orkie slid onto a stool. "Working the Southern circuit, just like you. You have anything going, or are you resting?"

Orkie and I were brothers under the skin, part of the fringe element

by Stephen Wasylyk



that gets by without working; members of that great society of con artists who live off the foibles and the greed of their fellowmen. Orkie and I never worked at legitimate jobs, not when there were so many fools anxious to part with their money in some scheme that would supposedly net them a large and enormous profit. Orkie and I were happy to oblige them and leave them poorer and wiser, operating under the theory that experience costs money. There was one big difference between us, however. Orkie was nearing the end of a long and inglorious career while I was at the peak of mine.

"Not a thing," I said. "Came here for the holidays. How about you?"

Orkie, a small pleasant-faced man with gray temples, shrugged. With nothing unusual or distinctive about him, he was a hard man to describe, which in our business was a distinct advantage. It had kept Orkie out of prison more than once.

"I don't have anything going, either," he said.

Orkie looked like he hadn't had anything going for him for a long time. His face was a little haggard, his tie had seen better days and his shirt collar was frayed. It was against the rules: even broke, a con man has to look successful. It was a sure bet that one way or the other, Orkie would try to extract money from me, in spite of the old adage, *Never try to con a con man.*

I signaled the bartender again. "Then you have nothing better to do than sit here and drink beer with me, Orkie. I was just thinking that it doesn't feel like the day before Christmas."

"No," Orkie said. "It sure doesn't."

"Maybe we should be up north. I hear they have plenty of snow up there."

Orkie made a face and gulped at his beer. "Not me. I've had enough snow to last a lifetime."

"You have something against snow, Orkie?"

"Only that if I never see another flake again, that would be too soon."

"I have the feeling that you have a story about snow, Orkie." I peeled off a twenty and laid it on the bar. "I have plenty of time and money."

I said it to let Orkie know I was flush, that he need have no hesitation in asking for a loan, and to gain a little companionship.

Orkie glanced at his watch as if he had somewhere to go, but I knew the gesture was automatic. *Never let the mark think you are anxious,* I thought.

"You ever been in New England in the winter?" he asked.

"No. I understand it is quite enjoyable."

Orkie twirled his glass between his fingers, watching the beer foam. "That depends on how you look at it. I was there quite a few years ago. A small town—exactly where doesn't matter. It was early December and I was just about out of money, so I sat in on a poker game."

Poker had always been a quick way for Orkie to pick up a little money. No one who knew him ever played cards with him. He must have been born with a deck in his hand because Orkie handled cards better than any man I ever knew. He was so good that he could tell you what he was going to do, you could sit and watch his hands, and you still couldn't see him manipulate the deck. With talent like that, Orkie simply never lost when he played poker, and he was careful to play poker with people who would never suspect he was rigging the deck.

His clever hands also made him an excellent pickpocket, but I imagined the years had slowed him down a little. He couldn't possibly be as good as he used to be. The frayed collar said that.

"You won, naturally," I said.

"I won. I won pretty big from a chubby, red-cheeked guy named Harry Dunaway. I won so much I took his marker, which I never do, because it didn't matter if he paid off or not. After the game, this

Dunaway asked if I was interested in a deal to make good the marker. I asked what kind of deal. He said I looked like a man who would be interested in some easy money. I said I was, depending on how easy. He said very easy—one hour was all it would take and I'd have a real bundle. I told him I wasn't interested because that sounded like a caper that could be dangerous. When the stakes are high, someone can get hurt."

Orkie downed half his beer.

"He said he'd spell it all out for me and I could make my own decision, but it would have to be fast because he had to get someone soon. He was running out of time. I had nothing to lose so I said I'd listen."

I finished my second beer, wondering how much Orkie would consider the story worth.

"He was quite a character, this Harry Dunaway," Orkie said. "He'd always been a small-timer, an odd-job man. That's how he stumbled onto the setup, and was looking for someone to come in with him because it was more than he could handle alone."

"What was the caper?" I asked.

"He wanted to take a jewelry store."

"And you agreed? That's not your line at all."

"This was just too good to pass up. What do you think this Dunaway was doing for a living?"

"I don't have the faintest idea."

"I told you he was a chubby, red-cheeked guy, and at this time of the year there's only one kind of job for someone like that."

I thought for a moment. "You have to be kidding."

He shook his head. "You guessed it. He was playing Santa Claus."

"Santa Claus was planning a heist?"

"Not only that, but it would work no other way."

"More beer," I said to the bartender. The story was shaping up so well I knew Orkie could touch me for at least a C note with no trouble. "Paint the whole picture," I said.

"I'll start with the store," Orkie continued. "It was one of those old-line, conservative, family-owned places where the people in town went to buy their wedding rings or the ceremony wasn't really official. The last member of the family died and the store was sold to a young promoter named Whitney. Whitney shook the place up, redecorated and started advertising. He wanted to build business for Christmas, so he had this brilliant idea. He put in a Santa Claus to hand out free gifts to the kids if their parents brought them in, figuring that once the parents were in the store, they

would buy. He was right. The store was wall-to-wall with people, all spending money."

"How did Dunaway get the job? They usually check these things carefully."

"He was broke, so he went to this employment agency. They took one look at him and sent him to Whitney. Never bothered to check his references, which were phony anyway. Dunaway saw what was going on in the store and started figuring angles on how to get some of it for himself, but it didn't take him long to realize he would need help."

"What did he have in mind?"

"He found out that Whitney was going to give a little party for the employees after the store closed on Christmas Eve. That meant the store would be locked but the alarm wouldn't be on. All of the employees would be gathered in one convenient place, and the store's receipts would be there in the safe because all of the banks would be closed. All Dunaway had to do was open the door for me, we would hold the place up and take off with the cash and as many jewels as we could carry. It looked foolproof."

"What about the cops?"

"No problem there. The town had a chief and six or eight patrolmen; a sheriff and some deputies took care of the county, and the state police filled in from there. The way I figured it, on Christmas Eve, no one would be close enough to give us any trouble."

"It sounds good," I said.

"That's what I thought," Orkie said. "That's why I agreed to go along with it. I couldn't see how it could miss. Who would suspect that Santa Claus would be planning a heist?"

"It's a good angle," I admitted. "As the inside man, he was perfect. What happened?"

The bartender silently brought refills, reducing the change from the twenty still further.

"We worked it all out," Orkie went on. "Very professional. Timing down pat. I was supposed to drive up to the back entrance, which was on a narrow little street, at exactly six o'clock. Dunaway would open the door for me, I'd step in with a stocking mask over my face. The party was being held on the main floor of the store. I'd hold all of the employees right there while Dunaway cleaned out the safe. Then he'd throw his bag over his shoulder, we'd back out, hop in the car and take off."

"Ah," I said. "And be picked up at the first roadblock."

Orkie grinned. "We weren't that dumb. We planned to switch cars."

"You were going to steal a car for the job?"

Half of Orkie's beer disappeared.

"Me steal a car? I wouldn't know how to begin. It is also dangerous to steal a car in a small town because it is too easily identified. No, I took a bus to Boston and picked up a used junker which we would use in the heist itself, from a friend to whom stealing cars was a business. My own car would be parked at the edge of town. We'd switch and hide out for a few days in a lakeside cabin I had rented for the holiday season, supposedly being on vacation. When the heat died, we'd leave quietly. Of course, I'd been careful to let people know I was established in the cabin so they would expect me to be there. If anyone came around, Dunaway could hide. I didn't think we'd have any trouble at all."

I didn't know Orkie's capacity for beer, but he had finished his fourth bottle. I signaled the bartender. "A heist like that should have fixed you up for quite a while," I said. "I gather something went wrong."

"You know that nothing is ever a sure thing." Orkie went to work on his fifth beer.

"At the rate you're going, this place will run out of beer before you finish the story," I said.

"Ah, well." Orkie shrugged. "Like I said, nothing is ever a sure thing. The day before Christmas was cold and windy and it started to snow about nine o'clock in the morning. I wasn't particularly worried. I had snow tires and chains on my car, and they do a good job of clearing roads up there. Snow is a fact of life in that territory. But this didn't turn out to be the usual type of snowstorm. By the middle of the afternoon it had turned into a healthy blizzard, and I debated calling the whole thing off. The point was, if I did, there would be no second chance. It was then or never. So I decided that if we would have trouble getting around, so would the police.

"I drove into town and picked up the junker I had brought from Boston, but I was really getting worried about the storm. The snow was beginning to drift and some of the streets were almost blocked. I arrived at the back door of the store about five minutes to six and stood there freezing, wishing that I had bought a jeep with four-wheel drive, when the door opened and Dunaway motioned me inside. One thing we didn't have to worry about, there was no one on the streets. I pulled my stocking mask over my face and pulled out my unloaded gun and went in."

"An unloaded gun?"

"Why would I need bullets? I didn't intend to shoot nobody. Inside the store they were all singing Christmas carols and really having

a good time. Made me feel a little bad to break up their party. There were only eight or ten employees there, the others having left early because of the storm. I will say this, it didn't matter about the empty gun. Everybody just sort of froze when they saw me and there was no trouble. When they realized what was going on, they were very cooperative; even Whitney, the guy who owned the store. Dunaway took the sack I'd brought and began filling it. He didn't bother with coins, just paper money and the unmounted jewels that were in the safe."

"You have any idea of how much was there?"

"I heard later. There was almost sixty thousand in cash and there must have been that much in jewels. For a small-town heist, it was a good haul. We backed out of the door after pulling the phone wires loose and disconnecting the alarm."

"Sounds like you had it made," I said.

"We thought so too, but we changed our minds real quick. The snow had piled up in that small street and we had to bull the car through. Turning onto the main street, we skidded and ended up in a big drift. There was no way to get that car out. I thought we were finished. Dunaway got real excited and began yelling. You ever see Santa Claus yell?"

"Not to my knowledge, Orkie."

"It is quite a sight, especially when Santa Claus uses the words that Dunaway did. Just about that time, a horse dragging a sleigh comes trotting up the street. They have plenty of them up there, you know. I pulled Dunaway out of the car and we stopped the sleigh. I waved my empty gun at the kid driving it and he dived into a snowbank. Dunaway and I took the sleigh and started galloping out of town, Dunaway standing up and waving the whip at the poor horse. He was so happy we were getting away that he kept yelling, 'On Donder, on Blitzen . . .' "

"You're putting me on," I said. I suspected Orkie of having thrown that in for laughs. Maybe the beer was getting to him.

"So help me, I'm not. I told you Dunaway was a character. As for me, I was sitting there laughing. Imagine an all-points bulletin on Christmas Eve to pick up a white-bearded man wearing a red suit, carrying a sack and driving a sleigh. Who would believe it?"

"No one," I said. "Every police department would think it was a gag."

"That's what I figured. Anyway, there was no sense in stopping for my car. You couldn't drive in that storm, so we kept the sleigh and the horse. The farther we went, the

worse it got, until pretty soon even the horse was having trouble. We hit a big drift, and the sleigh almost tipped over. I hopped out and began to push. We just got the sleigh through the drift when it happened."

The bartender, noticing our glasses were empty, served up two more bottles without being told. "What happened?" I asked, wondering what was coming next.

"That Dunaway handed me the best Christmas present I ever got. There I was, floundering through the snow after the sleigh, when he pulled away and left me."

"You call that a gift?"

"You don't know how fine it was although, to tell the truth, I naturally didn't think so at the time. He had left me in the middle of nowhere, with that confounded storm howling around my ears. I didn't have much choice—I ditched the gun and the mask and started walking. I stumbled along and would have frozen to death if I hadn't found a farmhouse. I told the people I'd been driving and my car got stuck. They believed me, and took me in."

"I don't know why that was so wonderful. Dunaway got away with all the loot."

Orkie grinned. "That's what Dunaway had in mind, but there was one thing he hadn't counted on. That horse was smarter than he was. He knew he had to get out of the storm, so he headed for home and the barn—and where do you think he lived?"

"I don't have the faintest idea."

"The kid we threw out of the sleigh happened to be the son of the county sheriff. That horse took Dunaway right into the sheriff's barn, and Dunaway had no explanation for that bag of goodies he was carrying. Money and jewels weren't the kind of things Santa was noted for dispensing in that section. I guess the sheriff thought there should have been a few more normal things in the sack, so he just held onto Dunaway until the storm was over. Then he took him back to town; money, jewels and all. That sort of finished Dunaway."

"Didn't they come looking for you?"

"They found me, but they couldn't prove I was the man with the gun, and Dunaway never told them. I guess he figured he owed me that much for leaving me in that storm. They had to let me go. I suppose they really didn't care too much since they had Dunaway and the loot. That was the last time I was north for Christmas. I have steered clear of two things since then."

I watched Orkie finish his beer before asking, "What two things?"

"Santa Claus and snow." Orkie stood up and placed a friendly arm over my shoulders. "It was real nice running into you. If you don't mind, I'll be leaving now. Thanks for the beer."

I waved a hand. "Whatever happened to Dunaway?"

"He drew ten to twenty. The judge was very put out that Dunaway had made a thief out of Santa Claus and destroyed so many childhood illusions."

I watched him cross the room and push through the door that led to the street. I didn't know whether I believed him or not. Orkie had always been good at telling stories.

I smiled. It had cost me a half dozen beers, but for a little while the loneliness was gone.

A blonde, just about my age, came into the bar and sat at a table. She looked a little lost. It probably had taken all her nerve to enter the bar without an escort. I was willing to bet that she was far from home.

There, I thought, *is my companion for Christmas dinner.*

The bartender came over. "Listen," he said, "I could be wrong but do you still have your wallet?"

I reached into my inside breast pocket. It was empty. "No," I said. "It looks like it is gone."

"I thought I saw the old man lift it," he said, "but I wasn't sure and I didn't want to cause trouble. He was pretty clumsy. I guess he lost his touch."

"Yeah," I said, remembering just how Orkie had fumbled for the wallet when he put his arm over my shoulders. "I think he has."

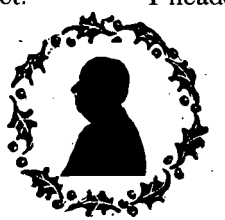
"You want to call the police?"

I smiled. "No police." I should have known that Orkie would be too proud to ask for money. Lifting the wallet was the only thing he could think of, and if that was the way he wanted it, it was all right with me. The empty wallet would appear at the hotel desk in the morning and the clerk would tell me it had been found in the lobby. Orkie had his own code of honor.

In the meantime, I had plenty of money in the belt around my middle. In my business, I don't have time for banks. I carry my assets with me.

"No police," I said. "Not on Christmas Eve."

I headed for the blonde's table.



According to O. Henry, life sometimes appears as a reversible coat—seamy on both sides.

IT WAS A trifling matter, and yet Ben floundered in the throes of indecision. The penetrating, half-smiling gaze of the clerk heightened the embarrassment he felt for his vacillation. He had noticed this particular package store many times but had never stopped before. It was on his usual route to and from work and there was something about the unusual decor of the front of the store that had always intrigued him.

Now, inside the shop, he was sorry he had stopped as he felt suddenly aware of his old reluctance to spend money for whiskey. He tried not to fidget. He feigned an academic interest in the matter, pulling bottles off the shelves, examining the labels studiously, returning bottles to the shelves. There were some fifteen advertised name brands within a price spread of fifty cents, several that were more expensive, and several unfamiliar brands that were a good bit less.

He glanced in the direction of the clerk, caught his watchful eye for an instant and looked away. He had to act, so he grabbed a bottle of one of the cheap off-brands and walked over to the counter. "This stuff drinkable?"

by Stanley I. Cohen

The clerk studied him a moment before answering. "Oh, can't be too bad. Bottled in Scotland." The clerk was perched like a Buddha on a high stool. He was small, balding, bespectacled.

"Well, isn't it true that quite often these off-brands are good surplus stock being unloaded by the big-name distilleries under different labels? Some of them are real sleepers."

"I guess that's true, sometimes," the clerk answered.

"But you're not familiar with this one."

"No."

"What about some of the other less expensive ones?"

The clerk shook his head again.

"Hell, I can't tell one from another. And I don't believe any of my friends can. Sometimes I pour this cheap stuff into a good bottle and then everybody's happy."

The clerk maintained his omniscient gaze without commenting.

"What I need is a bottle without a bottom in it," Ben said. "Hell, you invite a couple of people in for drinks and it seems before you turn around you're out another six bucks' worth of booze."

"What would you pay for such a bottle?" the clerk asked.

"Why?" Ben chuckled. "Are you going to try and sell me one?" Ben's eye was suddenly arrested by the clerk's gilt tie-clasp, a bizarre arrangement of stars, serpents, and sheaves of grain.

"Would you like to buy one?" the clerk asked.

"Sure."

"You needn't smirk. I can deliver."

"A bottomless bottle of booze?" Ben gave the odd little man a silly smile. "Come on now, friend. What's the gag?"

"There's no gag, young man, no gag at all. And I don't think you should make light of the proposition I'm able to offer. You stand to gain too much from it. I've seen so many like you come in here and wring yourselves out over the money you spend for booze. You've gotten yourself into a situation, a status perhaps, where you've got to drink it and serve it, and you curse the system because it seems such a waste.

"You buy cheap, off-brand stuff, and when you invite people in, you mix it in the kitchen. You measure with a light hand and a small jigger and you fill up with mixer. You ask who'll have another and you flinch at every yes you get."

"I must admit," Ben said, "you're making me feel undressed, you read me so well."

"I know my work. Do you know what one of these bottomless bottles will do for you? It's all twelve-

year-old stuff, name brands. You bring the bottle out and put it on your cocktail table. You pour it with a heavy hand. You're a sport, a bon vivant, a charming and carefree host. You'll acquire a casual confidence you didn't know you had. You'll literally be a different person with this bottle."

"I wish I could buy your story, friend," said Ben. "It's the kind of thing I'd like to believe is possible."

"You empty one of my bottles and bring it back. I'll give you your money back. I'll give you an affidavit." He reached into a drawer and pulled out a sheet of rich, white paper inscribed in exquisite black script. A gilt reproduction of the clerk's queer, serpentine tie-clasp insignia appeared in startling brilliance at the top of the sheet.

"Let's see one of the bottles," Ben said.

"Back here." They went back into the dusty rear of the store. The clerk led Ben to a shelf where there were four or five cases of different brands of twelve-year-old Scotch. Each case had the serpentine gold insignia imprinted on it.

"Let me see the Chivas," Ben said.

The clerk reached into one of the cases, pulled out a bottle and handed it to Ben. The label looked routine except that it had the gold insignia in the lower right-hand corner—unnoticeable at a glance.

"OK, I'll bite," said Ben. "How much?"

"Two hundred."

"Two hundred?"

"Don't you think that's a fair price for a lifetime supply of twelve-year-old Scotch?"

"Lifetime? Not eternal? Sounds like a threat."

"It's not meant to be. The bottles come without curses. It's just that the bottle will be yours and you must keep its nature in strictest confidence. Otherwise, I'm afraid the affidavit will be invalidated." The clerk's eyes conveyed complete authority.

"How can I put out two hundred dollars without bringing my wife into my confidence? We have a joint checking account. Hell, that's more than my mortgage payment."

The clerk's smile penetrated Ben. "That's your problem, but somehow I think you can."

Ben clutched his breast pocket. He wondered how the clerk could have known. He had just gotten a dividend check for two hundred and some odd dollars. Sally paid no attention to such matters. There would be no problem. It was so pat it was eerie.

"Let me ask you something," said Ben. "Aren't people going to notice that the bottle doesn't use up? I mean, you say, 'put it out on the

table.' Won't people notice?"

"They won't notice. However, if you find you're concerned, walk out of the room with it and then back in. They'll think it's another one." The clerk smiled.

"Won't my wife notice?" Ben asked.

"Will she?" The clerk's confidence was supreme.

"No, I suppose not," Ben admitted thoughtfully. "She's happy to leave me supreme commander of the bar. Let me ask another question. Isn't a man with such a bottle prone to alcoholism?"

"I can't be responsible for abuses of this kind. It's your problem. However, I've received no information of such developments." His statement crackled with certainty.

"What if I drop the bottle?"

"It's a glass bottle. But tell me this. How many bottles of Scotch have you ever dropped? Any other questions?"

"You sound as though you think I'm buying."

"Aren't you?"

"I must admit I'm intrigued to call your bluff. It makes such a story."

"But one you can't tell," the clerk said quickly.

"You'll back up your . . . your affidavit?"

"As long as you adhere to all its terms."

"I must be out of my mind but, what the hell, this isn't budget money. I've got to see how this thing ends." Ben took out the dividend check and endorsed it.

The clerk examined it and put it in the register. He paid out the difference and handed Ben the bottle in a bag and the affidavit. "Good health," he said, ascending his stool.

"Same to you." Ben felt a momentary flush of insecurity as he turned and walked out.

When Ben arrived home, he put the bottle down in the kitchen. Then he went to his desk, took out an envelope, slipped the folded affidavit into the envelope, and sealed it. He thought a moment, smiled, and marked the envelope, "Dividend Certificate." He put the envelope in the bottom drawer of the desk beneath a stack of miscellaneous papers and bundles of canceled checks.

"I see you bought another bottle of Scotch," came Sally's voice from the kitchen.

Ben walked into the kitchen. "Yeah," he said, smiling. "Let's have a drink."

"Sure," said Sally, a little surprised at Ben's sudden extravagance. "What are we celebrating?"

"Let's toast the mysteries of life," Ben answered. He took out some ice, carefully opened the bottle and poured two drinks. He replaced the

cork and set the bottle on the counter. They went into the livingroom and sat down.

They sipped their drinks and made small talk about the day's activities but Ben carefully avoided any discussion of the whisky purchase. He noted the unquestionable superiority of the whisky over the off-brand stuff he usually bought.

He finished his drink and went back to the kitchen for another. He held up the dark bottle to note the level of its contents and then poured a stiff drink. He held up the bottle again. He couldn't detect a change in the level of the whisky, but then, it was a short, stubby bottle. He wondered what would be the operating level, so to speak, of the bottle. He wondered if the liquid level would go down and come back up. He thought about challenging the bottle by pouring off into other bottles. He could fill a bunch of empty booze bottles! Milk bottles! Gallon jugs! No. How could he explain it to Sally? Too, there was the affidavit in the sealed envelope. He'd play it straight. He put the bottle down and returned to the livingroom.

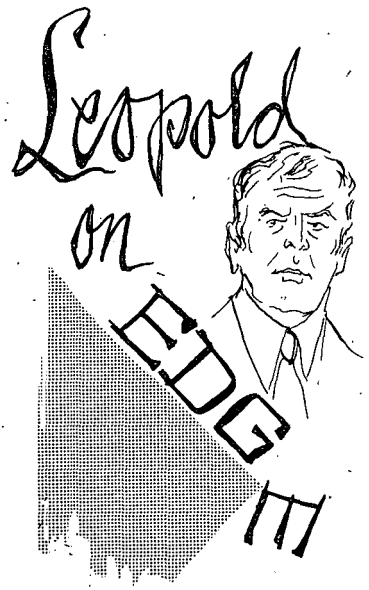
The next day Ben had a few of his office mates in for drinks as they were all en route from work to an organizational dinner meeting. When he arrived with his friends, he brought the bottle out and poured with a heavy hand. The clerk's prediction was materializing. Ben was a new and different kind of host. His casualness seemed to engender camaraderie. They were coming up to their third round and it was a great little spontaneous party. Ben had gone into the kitchen for more ice when he heard the sickening shattering of glass on the tile floor. Ben ran back into the livingroom.

"Oh hell, I'm sorry, Ben. That was damn fine booze, too. I don't suppose there was much left in it, though, the way we were hitting it."

Ben felt queasy and had difficulty holding himself together for a moment. "It's okay," he said, finally. "Don't give it a thought, Alex. We've all had enough. Let me get a mop." Noting that he was visibly shaking, he added, "I guess the noise startled me."

Andy Langham reached down and picked up the fragment of glass and label that had the gilt insignia. He ran his thumb over the insignia and looked up at Ben. Their glances met. "Funny," said Andy, smiling quietly. "Mine got broken too."

"Gather ye rosebuds while ye may"—and just mayhap a thorn will prick the surface.



"WHAT IS IT?" Leopold asked when he saw the expression on Fletcher's face.

"A big one, Captain. Somebody just shot Ray Nartez."

Leopold's eyes narrowed for an instant, considering the ramifications of the news. A decade earlier it might have signaled the start of an all-out gang war, but these were different days, with much more immediate social pressures than control of gambling and prostitution on the city's south side. "How bad is he?" Leopold asked.

"Alive, but just barely. One bullet grazed his skull, and another lodged near his heart."

Leopold reached for his overcoat. "Let's go. You can fill me in on the way."

The south side of the city was an area of middle-class homes and recent high-rise apartments. Touching as it did on Long Island Sound, it had become in recent years a mixture of marinas and bars, with a feel of summer about it that seemed to linger even now, on a January afternoon. Ray Nartez had known the area and lived in it most of his life. He'd built a little fish market into a pair of seafood restaurants, and from there he'd gone on to control much of the gambling and vice in the area. The police, for the most part, looked the other way. Nartez was likable, and there was always the possibility that his successor might be much worse.

One possible successor had appeared on the scene two years earlier, when hard drugs first became a

major problem in Leopold's city. The small independent pushers and college kids suddenly found themselves being outbid and outmaneuvered by a highly professional operation apparently run by a wealthy yachtsman named Bernard Collin. Collin's organization had moved into hard drugs and seized control of the most profitable outlets within six months. Then they turned their attention to the lesser rackets under Ray Nartez' control. A feud had developed between Nartez and Collin, one that many of the south-side bookies said

could only end in complete surrender or death.

"What about Bernard Collin?" Leopold asked as Fletcher headed the unmarked car through the snow-banked streets toward Nartez' luxury apartment.

"We'll have to check him. Think he'd do it himself, or hire it done?"

"If it was planned in advance, he'd hire it done. Where did Nartez get it?"

"Lobby of his apartment building. Here we are now." Lieutenant Fletcher pulled up behind a squad car with its red light turning slowly in the dusk of late afternoon. Inside, grouped around the little lobby, were the familiar faces they always saw at homicides: the photographers and fingerprint men, the squad-car cops and the man from the D.A.'s office. The only ones missing were the corpse and the medical examiner.

"What's the latest word on Nartez?" Leopold asked the senior detective in charge.

"We rushed him to Southside Hospital, but he's in a bad way."

"Conscious?"

"No. Just like dead, only his heart's still beating."

Leopold glanced around at the bare, sterile lobby. There were two elevators on one wall, and a stairway door on another. The entrance was of frosted glass, and here he saw two spidery bullet holes. He studied them, and then looked back toward the elevators where an irregular stain of blood soiled the carpeting. "How—" he started to ask, and the detective interrupted.

"Nartez fired twice at his assailant, Captain. This is the gun." He handed over a plastic bag containing a .38.

Leopold leaned over in the doorway to study something on the rug. "Might have hit him, too. This could be a drop of blood."

"Maybe."

"Cut it out of the rug and have it analyzed." He straightened up and turned to Fletcher. "Looks as if Nartez was leaving the elevator and the gunman was either waiting for him or just coming in the door. They both started shooting, and Nartez got the worst of it."

"How do we know Nartez was leaving the elevator?"

Leopold hefted the plastic bag with the .38 inside. "Two shots fired from here, and two bullet holes in the glass. You said Nartez was hit twice, too. One bullet lodged near the heart and the other one grazed his skull. Well, look around; do we see any other bullet holes?"

"No," Fletcher admitted.

"Then where did the slug go after it grazed his skull?" Leopold pressed the elevator button and

they waited. When the doors slid open he checked it and then shook his head. "Other one." This time he was right. As soon as they stepped into the second elevator they saw the splintered wood panel where the bullet had struck.

"You're right, Captain," Fletcher sighed.

"Sure I am." He turned and stepped back out. "Fancy elevator, carpeting. Expensive place."

"Ray Nartez could afford it," Fletcher said.

"I guess so." Leopold stepped back while the police photographer got a shot of the open elevator. An officer held the door to keep it from closing. "Look, Fletcher, you stay around here, talk to the other tenants, especially the one who called the police. Find out if anybody saw anything. I'm going to take the car and pay a call on the eminent yachtsman and heroin dealer, Mr. Bernard Collin."

The Yacht Club was closed and battened against the winds of winter, with drifted snow dotting the deserted beach. Leopold parked down the street from it, in front of a low, rambling house that was Bernard Collin's waterfront home and year-round retreat. As he approached the front door he saw something glisten in the melting snow and bent to retrieve a single gold earring. He dropped it into his pocket and promptly forgot about it.

"Mr. Collin, please," he told the casual young blonde girl who answered his ring.

"He can't see anyone."

"He'll see me." Leopold flashed his badge.

Her face clouded for an instant. Then, well-trained, she asked, "Narcotics? You need a search warrant."

"Not narcotics, violent crimes. Homicide, to be exact. Let me in."

She stepped back as he leaned gently on the door. Barefoot and long-haired, she might have been something from a sultan's harem. "Follow me," she agreed reluctantly.

They found Collin at the back of the house, lounging on a sun porch that overlooked the water. "Who is it, Molly?" he asked. Then, recognizing Leopold, he added, "You shouldn't let peddlers in."

"He said—"

"I'm sure he did. What is it, Captain? Two tickets to the policemen's ball?"

Leopold lowered himself into a wicker chair opposite the man. Slim and sun-bronzed and still with the vigor of a man in his late thirties, Bernard Collin lounged in the fading afternoon light and seemed completely in control of the situation.

"No tickets this time, Collin." Leopold's eyes went to the bandage around the man's upper left arm. "Hurt yourself?"

"A foolish accident this morning. I was working on my dock and I slipped on a spot of ice. Fell against a stanchion that sliced a groove in my arm."

"A doctor should see it."

Collin's forehead wrinkled. "You came out here to see about my arm?"

"I came out here because somebody shot Ray Nartez a couple of hours ago."

Outlined against the dusky seascape, Collin's expression didn't seem to change. "I knew he'd get it someday."

"Did you do it, Collin?"

"Me?" He tried to laugh. "Tell him, Molly. Tell him I've been here all day, just the two of us alone."

"That's right," she agreed. "He never left the house."

"I'm sure."

"You're not pinning this on me, Leopold."

"I'd like to pin something on you. Nartez shot his assailant, maybe in the left arm."

Bernard Collin touched the bandage lightly. "I told you how it happened."

"I know you did. And your friend here told me you never left the house. So how could you hurt yourself on your nice dock out there?"

The girl named Molly sucked in her breath. "I meant he didn't go away anywhere. Sure, he was out by the dock."

"A cold day to be working on it."

"Never too cold for a man's hobby," Collin replied.

"When's the last time you saw Nartez?"

Collin shrugged. "Perhaps a month ago. Certainly before Christmas. I dined in his restaurant with a group of friends, and Molly here."

"Was there bad blood between you?"

"Only what people like you dream up, Captain. Since I have no involvement in the rackets—narcotics or otherwise—I have no desire to take over Nartez' share of them."

"Then the stories are all false?"

"I have been indicted for no crime, Captain. Until such time as I am, I beg you to leave me at peace."

"Maybe." Leopold rose from the wicker chair. "I'll want a doctor to look at your arm. He'll be out to see you."

"Really? Will that prove anything?"

"Nartez is still alive," Leopold said, moving toward the door. "Or did I forget to tell you that?"

The blood drained from Collin's face. "Did he say I shot him?"

"He will," Leopold said with as-

surance. "He will. You bet on it."

In the morning, over coffee, Leopold asked Fletcher what he'd learned at Nartez' apartment house.

"Not much, Captain. Woman upstairs called the police. She heard the shots, all together. She couldn't swear how many there were, but probably four. She looked out her window to see a man running toward his car, but she didn't see his face—only a dark overcoat and hat. That's when she called us."

"The car?"

"Dark. Her eyesight's not very good, Captain."

"Did she see any sign of his being wounded?"

"No, I asked her that."

"All right." Leopold got up and gazed out the window at the parking lot, where a pile of dirty snow still remained unmelted. "The doc check Collin's arm yet?"

"First thing this morning."

"Bullet wound?"

"Bad cut. The doc stitched it up. Didn't look like a bullet wound to him, but he admits Collin could have disguised it if it was just a flesh wound. Do you think anybody'd do that, Captain? Cut up a wound and make it worse, just to disguise its true nature?"

"You'd do a lot of things, Fletcher, if you were facing a murder charge."

"Then you really think Collin shot him personally?"

"I'm sure of it."

"What about the girl?"

"She'd lie for him, but she's not very good at it."

"We need evidence, Captain."

"Yeah." Leopold turned from the window. "What about Nartez? Is he conscious yet?"

Fletcher shook his head. "He may never be. The bullet cut a groove along the side of his head. By the time he comes out of it, the bullet in his chest may have killed him."

"Damn it, Fletcher, he has to talk! He has to put the finger on Collin, or we've got no case!"

"Easy, Captain. Sometimes we lose them."

"I'm not losing this one, Fletcher. I want Bernard Collin, and I'm going to get him."

The day dragged on, and Leopold spent much of his time avoiding the reporters who pressed in upon him. He was unprepared for the publicity a case like this brought, and he could only hope it would be over before too long.

"You're all on edge, Captain," Fletcher remarked once, after Leopold had barked at a detective sergeant about an error on a report. "Take it easy!"

"This thing is getting me down," Leopold admitted. "I know Collin

shot him, but I'm afraid Nartez will die before he can confirm it."

In the morning, when there was no change in Nartez' condition, Leopold phoned Bernard Collin and told him to come in for further questioning. The slim yachtsman arrived at eleven o'clock, accompanied by his lawyer and wearing his left arm in a black silk sling.

"You have more questions for me, Captain? I thought Mr. Thomas here should be present. Surely you know Matt Thomas, of Harder and Thomas."

Leopold acknowledged the introduction. Thomas was a leading criminal lawyer, who'd defended more than one of Collin's pushers.

"I'll get right to the point, Collin. I want a statement from you as to your movements on Tuesday afternoon, and you might include in it an account of how you claim you injured your arm Tuesday morning."

Matt Thomas cleared his throat. "Is my client a suspect in the shooting of Ray Nartez?"

"Damn right he is! The number-one suspect. We have a witness who may have seen him running from the scene."

Collin and his lawyer exchanged glances, and the slim man said, "You're bluffing, Leopold. You haven't a thing on me except a lot of guesswork."

"We'll see about that, Collin."

The telephone at his elbow buzzed and Leopold answered. It was Fletcher in the outer office. "I thought you'd want to know, Captain. The hospital just phoned. Nartez is partly conscious and may be able to speak. They said if we want to talk to him we'd better hurry, though. He's sinking fast."

"Let's go." He hung up the telephone and grabbed for his coat. "Nartez is conscious," he told Collin. "He's going to tell us who shot him."

"Mind if we come along?" the lawyer asked.

"You can come to the hospital, but you're not getting anywhere near Nartez."

Outside, the day had turned cold and there were flurries of snow against the dark sky.

The doctor, young and brash and not overly fond of police, would allow only Leopold into the room. "One man only. I have a patient near death in there."

Leopold nodded. "Fletcher, you wait down the hall with Collin and his lawyer." He entered the intensive care unit and followed the nurse to the screened-off bed where Ray Nartez clung to life. The man had a tube up his nose and another in his arm, and his head was bandaged. His breathing seemed ir-

regular and his eyes were closed.

"Nartez," Leopold said.

The eyelids fluttered and almost came open. The nurse standing behind Leopold said, "He may not be able to hear you."

Leopold bent and spoke directly into the man's unbandaged ear. "Nartez, this is Captain Leopold. Who shot you?"

The eyelids came open then, just a bit. "Leopold . . ." The voice was barely a whisper, hardly carrying to Leopold's ears.

"Nartez, you're dying. Who shot you?"

". . . no difference now."

"Nartez, was it Bernard Collin who shot you?"

The eyes cleared for just an instant, and Ray Nartez whispered, "Forget it. I shoulda been a better shot . . ."

"Nartez!"

The eyes closed, and the head slumped to one side. The nurse moved around Leopold to feel for a pulse, but it was too late. Ray Nartez was dead.

Leopold stood up, shaken, and the nurse rang for the doctor. "Did he tell you who killed him?" she asked.

He stared at her for just an instant, realizing that she hadn't heard, and said, "Yes. He told me."

Then he went out into the hall, passing the doctor on the way, and started down the long corridor toward the solarium where he could see Fletcher and Collin and the lawyer waiting. They turned, three anxious faces, as he approached.

"Well?" Bernard Collin asked.

"He lived just long enough to make a statement. He said you killed him, Collin."

The man's face went ashen. "I can't believe that."

"I'm booking you on a murder charge, Collin. Let's go back downtown."

It was after seven that night when Fletcher poked his head into Leopold's office. "Staying late, Captain?"

"Yeah. What about Collin?"

"His lawyer wants him arraigned tonight so he can ask for bail. I told him it would have to wait till morning."

Leopold stared glumly at his desk. After a moment he said, "Come in and close the door, will you, Fletcher? Do you have a few minutes, or is Carol holding dinner for you?"

"No, Captain, I've got time. What's the trouble?"

"There won't be any arraignment tomorrow. I'm releasing Bernard Collin."

"What?"

"Ray Nartez didn't tell me a

damned thing before he died. I was bluffing and it didn't work."

"Captain, Collin'll have you for false arrest!"

"I suppose so." Leopold ran a hand through his thinning hairline. "I was just so damned certain he did it! I've never been so sure of anything in my life."

"Are you that certain, Captain? Really? Or is it just this narcotics business that makes you think he must be guilty?"

"I don't know, Fletcher. I don't know anymore. Maybe I'm getting too old for the job when I try to pull a trick like this."

"You've just been on edge, Captain. Settle down! Maybe you need a week in Florida. This winter weather gets anybody down."

"I'll have plenty of time for rest after tomorrow. Matt Thomas will have that false arrest suit filed before I have time to catch my breath."

Fletcher sighed and shook his head. "So what do we do?"

"You're not in it, Fletcher. Just me."

"I'm in it, Captain. Hell, do you think I'd stay on here without you?"

The telephone rang and Leopold answered. "This is the lab, Captain. I thought you'd be home by now."

"No, I'm still here, Benny. What is it?"

"We ran a test on that bloodstain from Nartez' carpet. Type B, the same as Bernard Collin's type."

"Oh?" Leopold straightened up in his chair. "What was Nartez' type?"

"Let's see . . . Type O, so it's not his. I guess you were right about the killer getting wounded."

"Yeah. Thanks, Benny." He hung up and told Fletcher about it.

"Too bad it's not evidence for a courtroom, Captain. All it proves is that Collin could be the killer, not that he *is* the killer."

"It's enough for me, Fletcher. What time is that arraignment tomorrow morning?"

"Ten o'clock."

"Then I've got till ten o'clock to come up with some real evidence against Collin."

"You're not releasing him?"

Leopold shook his head. "I'm not releasing him. By this time tomorrow, either Collin will be charged with murder or I'll be out of this office."

"What kind of evidence is there, Captain? Our eyewitness can't identify him."

"There's the girl, Molly."

"So you get her to change her story and admit that he left the house. That still doesn't place him at Nartez' apartment with a gun."

"It's circumstantial, I know."

"Damn right, it's circumstantial!

Captain, a smart lawyer like Matt Thomas would demolish it in a minute. Without Nartez' dying statement, you've got nothing."

"There was no dying statement, Fletcher. He only said he should have been a better shot."

"There was a dying statement when you walked out of that hospital room this noon."

Leopold's eyebrows raised. "You want me to stick with that? To perjure myself?"

"I guess not, Captain. But I don't want to see you crucified over a no-good narcotics dealer like Bernard Collin. You had a reason for what you did at the hospital today. If the reason was good enough then, maybe it's still good enough."

"It was never good enough, Fletcher. There was a crazy moment at the hospital when I thought I could play God. Now I'm back to just playing detective."

"Looking for that nonexistent piece of evidence?"

Leopold took a deep breath. "We know the killer was wearing a topcoat. Our witness mentioned a dark coat, and it was a cold day besides. So if Collin is the killer and the bullet grazed his arm, it had to pass through a topcoat, a shirt, and maybe even a suit coat. Those garments exist somewhere, with bullet holes and bloodstains."

"Sure, you think Collin is saving them? You think he's so poor he has to get a reweaving job on some bullet holes because he can't afford a new coat?"

"No," Leopold answered honestly. "But I think it's the only chance I've got."

The girl named Molly answered his persistent ringing, looking half awake and wearing a baggy red bathrobe. "What is this, anyway? What time is it? It's barely daylight!"

"Ten minutes to eight. Sorry to get you out of bed, but I have a few more questions to ask."

"You're that detective, the one who was here the other day!"

"Captain Leopold, yes."

"Where's Bernie? Do you still have him in jail?"

"He'll be in court at ten o'clock. The judge will decide whether to set bail pending the grand jury indictment."

"Well, what do you want with me?"

"Questions, only questions and answers. If you let me in, I won't take long."

"All right," she mumbled. "But I've gotta have some coffee."

"Perhaps I can join you in some."

She looked him over and then stepped back to let him in. He followed her to the sprawling kitchen where she motioned him to a chair.

"So Nartez said Bernie shot him?"

Leopold grunted. "We've been taking another look at the evidence. I think I might have misunderstood Ray Nartez' dying statement."

She plugged in the coffeepot and waited for more. When it wasn't forthcoming, she asked, "You mean now you don't think he did it?"

"We're considering other possibilities."

She tossed her head, shaking the long blonde hair from her eyes. "Matt Thomas is a smart lawyer. He'll get Bernie off, no matter what happens."

"Would he be as good at getting you off, Molly?"

"Huh?"

"We think Collin's innocent because we think you killed Ray Nartez."

Her hand jumped, upsetting the waiting coffee cup. "Are you crazy or something?"

"Not at all. Suppose you sit down and listen."

She dropped into the chair, her eyes wide with disbelief, and Leopold hurried on. "Ray Nartez was shot by someone he knew and immediately recognized. As soon as that elevator door opened, he pulled his gun and started shooting. Even confronted by a stranger with a drawn gun, he might ordinarily have thought it to be a robbery attempt. But Nartez knew it was murder, and that he was fighting for his life."

"How do you know it happened like that?" she challenged.

"Because the bullet that grazed Nartez' skull went into the elevator behind him, and those doors stay open for only a few seconds. There was no time for conversation. When they saw each other, they started shooting. Nartez implied as much to me before he died."

"Go on," she said, her face white with fear.

"Now, Nartez knew you, and knew your connection with Collin, because the two of you dined in one of his restaurants last month. If he saw you with a gun in your hand, he'd immediately know your intention."

"This is madness! Why should I want to kill him?"

"For a devious, but very feminine, reason. You wanted to frame Collin for the killing."

"What?"

"Consider that there were a few drops of blood on the scene, evidence that the killer had been wounded. I called on Bernard Collin and found that he'd injured his arm, an injury that could have been caused by a bullet. The coincidence of Collin injuring his arm on the same day Nartez wounded his killer is just too much to swallow. There were only two possible ex-

planations: either Collin was the killer, or someone used the arm injury to set up a careful frame for Collin. Remember, he said the accident happened in the morning, but Nartez wasn't shot till afternoon. Plenty of time for someone to use the knowledge of the arm injury to kill him and make it look like the killer was wounded."

"How does that make it me?"

"Collin didn't call a doctor for his injury, and didn't leave the house, remember? And nobody came to visit. Only you, Molly, knew of Collin's injury, knew that it could be used to frame him for the murder of Ray Nartez."

"That's no kind of evidence," she said.

"No? Well, maybe this is." He opened his hand and showed her the little earring he'd picked up on his previous visit. "We found this at the scene of the shooting."

"I lost it days ago. I. . . I. . ."

"Yes, Molly?"

"Hell, I'm not taking the rap for this! Bernie shot him, and got nicked in the arm, just like you figured. He didn't go there to kill him, just to scare him a little. But when Nartez saw him in the lobby he went for his gun, and Bernie killed him. Then he came back here and made up the story about his arm injury!"

"Why should I believe you now, when I couldn't before?"

"Because I'm telling you the truth now, damn it!"

"Can you prove it? Otherwise it's just your word against his." Leopold leaned toward her. "What about the clothes he was wearing when he was shot?"

"We burned the shirt in the fireplace because it was all bloodstained. But I wouldn't let him burn the coat. I hid it, and told him I'd get it fixed later."

"Where is it?"

She returned in a moment carrying the big dark overcoat with the little holes in the left arm and dark stains around them. "I wanted to keep it because it has his name inside, and the Yacht Club crest. See?"

"Yes, I see," Leopold said. He glanced at his watch and saw that he still had over an hour before the arraignment. "Let's go downtown, Molly. We'll take the coat with us."

Wherein one man exhibits weakness, could it not also be his strength?

Weak in the Head

I WAS READING the sports page in the evening newspaper when Billy called. It was four-thirty in the afternoon. I was sitting close to the open window in my undershirt, trying to get a breath of air. Outside, the temperature was close to ninety.

"Shipment just left," Billy said in the slow, uncertain way he had. "Shipment, Frankel. You get it?"

"I get it," I said as calmly as I could through the excitement that jumped into my throat. I knew I couldn't hurry Billy. It took him a long time to think things through. Billy was weak in the head.

At least that's what everybody thought. I did, myself, when they put Billy in the cell with me at state prison. That's why I sort of took the kid under my wing, you know what I mean? I felt sorry for him. He needed somebody to look out for him in that crummy place, he was

so . . . not weak in the head, exactly, but . . . slow and dumb and trusting. I was glad now that I'd looked out for him inside, for weak-minded Billy was putting me onto the best thing I'd ever had.

"What we been waiting for, Frankel," Billy said. "Understand?"

"Yeah," I said. "I understand. When did it leave?"

After a long pause for consideration, Billy said, "Twenty minutes after four."

"Ten minutes ago, fine. How was it shipped?"

"Two wooden crates with wire straps around. Just like I told you, Frankel."

"I mean, you're sure they're what we want? Did they go in an armored car?"

"Sure."

"Good," I said. My excitement grew. "And they were being sent out of the country, Billy? You know, the way I explained to you?"

I could hear paper rustling. Billy had evidently written it down. "It said West Germany on the crates, Frankel. Some crazy bank in West Germany."

I wanted to be sure. I said, "Where in West Germany? What city did it say?"

"Frankfurt," said Billy and chuckled suddenly. "That's like a hot dog, Frankel."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it? Now then, Billy, this is the important part. Did you find out where the armored car was taking them?"

Billy chuckled again. "Sure, Frankel. I heard the boss tell the driver."

I wiped the sweat off my upper lip and said, "Good boy, Billy! I knew you wouldn't let old Frankel down. Where did the boss tell the driver to take the crates?"

Paper rustled again. "Pier 62," Billy said proudly, "21st Street and Hudson River."

In a rush of relief, I said, "Billy, you're a real buddy!"

"That's all I ever wanted to be," Billy said. "Your buddy, Frankel. You was so nice to me when we was in . . . you know . . ."

"You're the best buddy a guy ever had," I said. "Now, listen. I'm going to call for you tonight at your boardinghouse. At one o'clock. You be all packed and ready to go when I get there. Okay?"

"I'll write it down," Billy said, and repeated aloud as he wrote down in that beautiful script of his, "Frankel comes for me at one o'clock. Be ready."

"That's one o'clock tomorrow

by JAMES HOLDING

morning," I said. "One hour after midnight. Okay?"

Billy wrote it down. I sometimes thought he wrote things down more to enjoy his penmanship than to help him remember things. "I'll be ready," he said then. "What we gonna do, Frankel?"

"You know. I already told you. We're going to take a crack at those crates on Pier 62, then we're going to disappear into thin air. That's what we're going to do, Billy. You with me?"

Billy didn't hesitate for a second. "Sure, Frankel. I'm with you. You oughta know that. All the way." He paused for thought. "But . . ."

"But what?"

"I don't want nobody to get hurt," Billy said earnestly. "We won't have to hurt nobody, will we, Frankel?"

"Not a chance. I told you about that, too. Nobody'll get hurt the way I've got the job lined out. I promise. You be ready at one o'clock when I come for you, Billy."

"Okay, Frankel."

I hung up. I checked over the stocking masks, the suitcases, the tranquilizer gun and darts, the picture wire, tin snips, pry bar, hatchet and sash weights one final time. I packed up the few personal things I had in that bare hotel room.

Then I sat down beside the open window again. It was a little cooler now.

The heist went off as slick as grease.

It was no trouble getting onto the pier. We waited till we had the movements of the night man clocked, then went out on the pier toward the high security area, sticking to the shadows and wearing our stocking masks. Billy could move pretty quietly for a big man, and I'm no slouch myself in that regard. Billy and I look a lot alike. With the masks on, we looked like twins.

There were floodlights all around the valuable cargo crib. One of the security guards was patrolling the perimeter of the fenced-in enclosure. The other two were sitting inside, playing gin rummy on an upturned box.

I nudged Billy. "Are those the crates?" I whispered. We could see two wooden crates with steel strapping around them in the corner nearest the door of the cargo crib.

Billy started to say something. Then he remembered that I'd told him to keep quiet and he nodded his head.

I could see that the padlock on the crib gate was hanging loose from the hasp. It wasn't even locked. That was cooperation for sure. With three armed guards on the job, who needed a little padlock

on the crib gate? This was going to be a breeze. I was sure of it now.

When the patrolling guard walked as close to us as his route would bring him, I raised my gun and let him have a dart in the small of the back. There wasn't any more noise to it than a regular handgun with a silencer might make.

The guard spun around in a circle, dropped his shotgun and grabbed for his back with both hands, a funny look on his Irish face. "Hey!" he said, more surprised than scared, "I've been shot!"

He was already falling when he said it. That strong solution worked fast. When the guard hit the ground, he was already tranquilized out of his skull.

The gin-rummy players in the cage heard their buddy say he'd been shot. They jumped up and looked wildly out through the wire mesh of their cage. They saw him collapse on the cement dock. With cards flying every which way, one of them started for the crib gate, clawing in his holster for his gun. I let him get one step outside the gate before I gave him a dart just over his heart. He couldn't see us, being blinded by the floodlights, but he felt the needle syringe go in and yelled in a panic, "Get the lights, Joe!" before he collapsed.

Joe tried his best, I'll give him that. He leaped for a switch on the far wall that must have controlled the lights but before he could reach it, I was through the crib gate and let him have his little dose of peace and quiet right between the shoulder blades. The dart went in with a thump. Joe was sucking in his breath to yell for help when Billy slipped past me into the cage and clapped a hand over Joe's open mouth so that all that came out of it was a muffled grunt.

That was about it. We tied up the three guards where they fell. The tranquilizer ought to give us an hour, I figured, and the tying-up another couple of hours before the crates could be reported missing. By that time, Billy and I would be long gone.

We didn't take anything out of the valuable cargo crib except the two crates bound for Frankfurt, West Germany. It hurt some to pass up all that interesting-looking stuff, I can tell you, but I knew I'd be nuts to complicate things.

So Billy and I each grabbed one of the wooden crates and carried it out of the floodlit cage into the relative darkness of the pier. There, behind the same pillar I'd shot the first two guards from, we set down our crates, took off our masks, and I put away my tranquilizer gun in its special case inside my jacket.

That's when I noticed that the

first guard I'd tranquilized—the one who had been patrolling—was beginning to come out of it. He was lying about ten feet away from us, and in the floodlight reflection, I saw him move his arm. Then I heard him groan.

I quick-stepped over to him. My dart had been slightly deflected by his leather belt and gone into him at an angle. He hadn't got the full dose. As I leaned over him, his eyelids began to flutter. I didn't have my mask on now, and I didn't want him to open those eyes and get a look at me in the floodlights. So I acted automatically. I snatched out my tranquilizer gun, reversed it in my hand, and gave the guard a solid smash with the butt of it on the back of his head.

When I straightened up, Billy was right behind me. He was looking down at the guard, his face twisted. "You h-hit him, Frankel!" he stuttered. "You hit him! You promised we wouldn't hurt nobody . . . and you h-hit him!"

Between my teeth, I hissed, "Shut up! I had to hit him, Billy."

"But Frankel," his voice went into a wail, "you pro-promised we wouldn't hurt nobody!"

See, Billy has this screwy feeling about not wanting to hurt anybody, ever since his uncle, who raised him, used to punish him when he was a little kid by holding his bare feet against the hot kitchen stove. Billy told me about it in prison.

"Shut up, Billy!" I told him again. "I'm sorry I had to hit him. Now, pick up that crate and let's get the hell out of here."

Billy didn't say another word. He picked up his crate and I picked up mine, and we got out of there. All the way back to where I'd parked my car, though, off 21st Street, Billy kept his head turned to one side so I wouldn't see he had tears in his eyes; just the way he used to do in prison when anybody got hurt.

That was at 2:30 in the morning. By 3:30, we were out of the city and heading north on the New York Thruway at sixty-five miles an hour. The two crates were in the trunk of the car.

Billy was quiet. Sitting in the passenger seat beside me, he closed his eyes and pretended to doze. A little while after we crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge, he opened his eyes and looked out of the window. Then he said, "Where we going now, Frankel?"

"Buffalo," I said. "I got something lined up there that will give me cash for what's in those crates back there."

"Oh," said Billy and lapsed into silence again.

An hour later, I pulled off the Thruway and went a mile or so

along a feeder road through deserted hilly country. Finally I pulled in under a tree in a little roadside picnic park and turned off my headlights and engine.

It wasn't smart to stop yet. I knew that. We were still too close to New York and Pier 62, but I was so anxious to see what I'd got that I couldn't hold out any longer.

"What we stopping here for?" Billy asked.

"I want to open the crates and see what I got."

"Oh," said Billy. He climbed out of the car. I went around and unlocked the trunk and hauled out one of the crates. "Hold it, Billy," I said, "while I cut the steel straps and pry up the lid."

Billy held the crate steady on the edge of the trunk. I used the tin snips to cut the steel strapping. I worked the pry-bar blade under the nailed wooden lid and heaved.

The lid came loose with a squeal of nails. I pulled it up, and there they were, looking back at me in the dim glow of the trunk light. The sheaves of paper were packed in solid. I put that crate on the ground and opened up the second one. Same thing; packed to the brim with thick pads of paper.

I got the two empty suitcases out of the trunk and began to count into them. I didn't count accurately, just approximate stacks of maybe a hundred each. I couldn't believe my luck: 21,000 pieces of printed paper, and all in ten and twenty dollar denominations. I did a rough estimate in my head and whistled.

Three hundred thousand dollars' worth of Columbia Express Traveler's Checks! Give or take twenty-five thousand. As good as gold anywhere in the world.

"Billy," I said, "I'm rich!" I had trouble controlling my voice.

"That's good," said Billy. "Did I do it right, what you told me to, Frankel?"

"You did perfect, old buddy! From now on, it's nothing but racetracks, beautiful women and world cruises for me!"

Billy's eyes went blank. He nodded. "You said *'I'm* rich,' Frankel! You said 'beautiful women and world cruises for *me*'! You ain't gonna leave me come with you, are you, Frankel? You're going alone! I ain't really your buddy, am I, Frankel?" His voice got the lost note in it that would end in a wail.

I kicked myself. I said, "Now, Billy! You damn well *are* my buddy! How many times I got to tell you? I meant that *both* of us are loaded. We're *both* going to live high off the hog from now on in."

As though he hadn't heard me, Billy muttered, "And you hit the guard, Frankel, after you prom-

ised you wouldn't hurt anyone."

I said, "I told you about that! I had to hit him, Billy. He might have spoiled our caper. Now stop worrying, will you? And get those suitcases closed and into the trunk, okay? While I get rid of these empty crates."

I broke up the wooden crates into kindling with the hatchet, and burned them into charred sticks in one of the picnic fireplaces. I buried the twisted steel strapping under a big pine tree and scraped needles over the spot.

In fifteen minutes, we were back on the Thruway.

Billy didn't say a word for ten miles or so. Then, to get him talking, I said, "What did you tell your boss at Columbia Express, Billy?"

He answered slowly, with a sidelong look at me. "I told him my buddy was coming to visit me from out of town. I said I wouldn't come to work for a while. I was going to take my vacation. I told him that."

"Good," I said. "That was exactly right. Nobody'll miss you at work."

"I guess not," said Billy.

"What'll happen when they find out the checks are stolen?" I said.

Billy shrugged. "I told you already, Frankel."

"Tell me again."

"They feed the numbers of the checks into one of those machines."

"Yeah," I said. "A computer." The thought made me faintly uneasy.

"And when somebody cashes one of the checks," Billy said, "the-the machine tells them about it. Then the Columbia Express cops get on the trail." He said it like it was a game of cops and robbers from his childhood.

Trying to cheer him up, I said, "Ain't any old computer going to outsmart Frankel and his buddy, Billy, is there? We'll get the best of the machine, Billy, believe me."

Billy said without much interest, "How, Frankel?"

"We'll let somebody else worry about the computer. We'll take cash and be out from under."

"I did everything right you told me," Billy said.

"Everything. Every damn thing, Billy."

He nodded solemnly to himself.

Past Albany, I stopped for gas. The tank was dangerously low, and the all-night station was the last we'd pass for quite a few miles. While the attendant was filling the tank, Billy said, "I'm hungry, Frankel."

I said, "That lunchroom over there's open. Why don't you get us a couple of hot dogs and coffees to go?"

"Okay," Billy said. He climbed out and went into the lunchroom. I stayed in the shadows of the car, so

my face wouldn't be too noticeable.

When Billy came out of the lunchroom, I'd finished paying for the gas, and I'd got the dart loaded and hidden under my right thigh on the car seat. Billy got in the passenger seat with the hot dogs and two cartons of coffee and we took off again.

I drove at a steady sixty-five for a few miles. By then, we'd finished the hot dogs and coffee and were close enough to the spot I'd picked out. I pulled over onto the shoulder and stopped. There was no other car in sight.

"What we stopping here for?" asked Billy.

"I'm pooped," I said, stretching my shoulders back to ease my muscles. "How about you driving for a while, Billy?"

"Sure, Frankel," said Billy, who loved to drive.

"Okay," I said. "Get out and come around."

Billy reached for the door handle on his side. I got the dart out from under my thigh and jabbed it into his backside as he started to slide out of his door.

Billy froze, with one leg out of the car, one in. His head swiveled toward me like a striking snake. The funny thing was, I could see by the dashboard lights that he didn't look surprised, and he didn't yell "Ouch!" or swear, or anything like you'd expect him to. All he did was say in that slow way of his, "You stuck me, Frankel!"

"It's been a long night, Billy," I said. "Maybe you ought to get a little sleep."

"I *knew* you wasn't really my buddy," Billy murmured.

He didn't take his eyes off my face. I said, "Billy, I didn't hurt you. Remember that. I didn't hurt you, buddy." It was the best I could do in the way of apology.

He mumbled, "Frankel . . ." before he went completely under. Then he fell back against the seat and his head sagged toward me. I reached across and pulled his leg back into the car, closed his door, and straightened him up in the seat as well as I could.

I drove another mile up the Thruway to the exit I wanted and turned into the ramp and came out on a narrow asphalt road leading off into the countryside. I was in familiar country here. Before my old man turned into a drunk, he used to bring me here over weekends in his old farm pickup to go fishing. I could still remember the ripe smell of the grapes and cherries he used to haul to market in that old pickup truck.

Two miles from the Thruway, I turned left into a dirt road that wandered northeast through woods and farm fields. Pretty soon I came

to the river we used to fish in, my old man and me; thirty feet deep and fifty yards across where the bridge carried the road over it.

I pulled up in the middle of the bridge and killed my engine and lights. It was cool and quiet here. I couldn't hear anything except the sound of the water sliding past the bridge pilings below, and I couldn't see anything at all. It was dark as pitch, just before dawn.

I went around and opened the car trunk and took out the picture wire and the sash weights from where I'd hidden them behind the spare tire rack. I took out the hatchet and the tin snips, too, while I was at it, and the little pack of Billy's clothes he'd brought with him.

Billy was deep under now from the tranquilizer. I hoisted him up onto the bridge rail and balanced him there while I wired the sash weights and the hatchet and the tin snips and his pack to him. At the last minute, I wired my dart gun and holster to him, too. Then I shoved him over. He'd drown in his sleep and nobody would ever find him there in a million years.

I listened for the splash and when it came up to me, I got into the car, backed off the bridge, turned around, and started back to the Thruway.

I felt bad about Billy, but it wasn't safe to let the kid run loose after a caper like this. All anybody would have to do would be to mention my name to him and he'd spill the whole thing, out of pride in being my buddy.

The first streak of daylight showed in the sky when I made it back to the Thruway and started north again. For a while, it felt sort of lonesome, driving along by myself without Billy beside me.

In Buffalo, I found a public phone booth and used it to call an unlisted number. A man answered. "Yeah?" One of Jake's bodyguards, I guessed.

"This is Frankel," I said.

In a minute, Jake came on. "Yeah, Frankel?"

"I got it," I said.

"Good. What's it amount to?"

"Over three hundred thousand, Jake. I haven't counted it right yet."

Jake whistled at the size of the score. "What denominations?"

"Tens and twenties," I said. "Very handy."

"Great." Jake was quiet for a second. Then he said, "I didn't think you'd make it, Frankel."

"Why not?"

"With that dummy you told me about? The crazy you were counting on to finger the shipment for you?"

"The dummy did fine," I said.

"Weak in the head or not, he did just fine."

"Evidently," Jake said. "Where is he now?"

"How should I know?"

"I just want to be sure he won't talk."

"He won't talk. I guarantee it."

"Okay, Frankel. Where'll you be for the next week or two? Till we're sure the Feds or the state police aren't camping on your trail?"

"My farm outside Fredonia," I said. "That's where I'm heading.

And you can forget anyone being on my tail. This one was clean, Jake."

"You own a farm?" Jake couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

"My old lady left it to me in her will when she died. I was in jail at the time."

"You got a phone there?"

"Sure. Listed in the phone book. Under my own name for a change." I gave Jake the phone number and address of my farm.

"Okay. We'll be in touch, Frankel."

I said, "Bring enough dough when you come. The deal was fifty percent of the face amount in cash for me. Right? And I'm sure there's more than three hundred thousand."

"Let me worry about that," Jake said, and hung up.

I drove on west, feeling very good about things. Jake would wait until he was sure there were no leads to the theft of the traveler's checks. Then he'd send one of his boys to my farm to pick up the checks in exchange for my cash. I wasn't afraid Jake would cross me. He'd been anxious for the deal the minute I propositioned him—as a long-term investment, he'd said. With his organization, he could spread the checks all over the world and, equally important, he could afford to wait for years, if necessary, for the heat to die down, before he allowed any of the stolen checks to be cashed. He figured that even a computer would begin to get tired of waiting, after two or three years went by without a single stolen check showing up. After I had my cash, I was going to do just what I'd told Billy—live high off the hog. I had a passport already faked, ready to take me out of the country for good. Any way you looked at it, I was home free.

Home; a lousy five acres bordering the narrow road that leads from Fredonia out to the lake at Van Buren Point. Weeds and wild growth had taken over the grapevines and cherry trees from which my folks used to make a bare living. The farmhouse was still weathertight but the paint was flaking off in six-inch patches. The shed where my old man used to keep his pickup truck and farm tools was sagging at one corner. Some home!

All the same, I was glad I hadn't sold the place when I got out of prison, for it was exactly the hole I needed to crawl into now: no near neighbors; the shed to hide my car in; a bed; a telephone; enough food for a couple of weeks and ditto bourbon whiskey, which I'd laid in before I left for New York three weeks ago.

I ran my car into the shed and locked the doors. I took the two

suitcases full of traveler's checks into the house and counted them carefully, this time, using the numbers, which were all in sequence on the tens and twenties. Three hundred and ten thousand dollars. My rough count had been close.

I stashed the suitcases in our old root cellar where we used to store apples and potatoes for the winter before there was any such thing as refrigeration. Then I took a stiff belt of bourbon and hit the sack. I was pretty well worn out.

That was Saturday. On the following Friday, the phone rang. I reached for it with relief. I was tired of listening to the radio, reading old paperbacks and sleeping. *Jake is shortening my waiting time,* I thought. And why not? The radio had reported for a week that there were no clues to the theft of the traveler's checks off Pier 62.

I said, "Hello," into the phone.

"Is this Eldon P. Frankel?" It wasn't Jake's voice.

"Who's calling?" I asked.

"This is a telephone survey, sir. We're asking a sampling of county residents whether they've seen the TV spots on the County Commission's program—"

"I haven't got a TV set," I said and hung up.

Not more than half an hour later, a dusty sedan turned into my farm and stopped in the turnaround by the shed. Two fellows got out and came to the house and rapped on the kitchen screen door.

I was sitting in the kitchen, eating cold baked beans for lunch. After a long minute, during which I decided they could see me through the screen door, I went to it and said, "Yes?" without opening it. The guy who had rapped was short and chunky. The other one must have been six-three.

"Hi, Mr. Frankel," the short one said. "Glad we found you in." His eyes were going over me as he said it.

"Who are you?" I asked.

The tall one spoke up. "We'd like a word with you, Mr. Frankel." He had a cast in his left eye.

"What about? I'm busy."

The short one said cheerfully, "About those traveler's checks you stole from Pier 62 in New York last week."

I felt the shock clear down to my toes. I thought maybe the baked beans that I'd just eaten were going to come up again. All I could say was, "What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Why don't you ask us in?" the tall one said. He brought his hand out from behind the short one's back. It held a .38 revolver that looked at me over Shorty's shoulder. Shorty himself flashed a gold badge at me. "Cory, FBI," he said.

"And my friend with the artillery is Fred Tibbett, New York City police." He pulled the screen door open and they backed me into the kitchen.

"Sorry to interrupt your lunch, Frankel," Tibbett said, taking in the half-finished plate of baked beans on the table.

I stood facing them, fighting down panic. I couldn't seem to catch up with what was happening, somehow. I said, "Is this a gag?"

"No gag," Tibbett said. "You're under arrest, Frankel." He got out a set of handcuffs with his free hand. The gun didn't waver as he passed them to Cory. Cory clicked them onto my wrists.

I couldn't believe it. "What goes?" I said. "You're arresting me?"

"Sure," Tibbett said. "You've been arrested before, so why make such a big deal of it? Spent three years in state prison, didn't you? That's how we found out you live here, through the prison records."

I stared at him. "What's the charge?"

" 'Possession of stolen goods' will do for the moment," Cory said comfortably. "Although I imagine we'll add to that later."

"What stolen goods?" I tried to act puzzled.

"Specifically, one Columbia Express traveler's check, number 7774569877, in the amount of ten dollars, cashed by a man answering your description at Harry's Thruway Lunchroom in the small hours of last Saturday morning."

Billy! When he got the hot dogs and coffee! The stupid, dumb crazy!

"That particular traveler's check, Frankel, was deposited at an Albany bank on Monday, and when it was cleared, the Columbia Express computer immediately identified it by its number as one of the checks stolen Saturday morning from Pier 62 in New York." Cory paused. "Why the hell did you cash it, Frankel?" he asked with real interest. "On the very night you stole it? Were you weak in the head?"

"I didn't cash it. I'm telling you the truth."

Tibbett said, "The check has your signature on it in two places. Eldon P. Frankel, signature and countersignature, big as life."

"Not my signatures," I said. "Somebody's trying to frame me. To make it look like I stole your lousy checks. The signatures aren't mine, that's all."

"They sure as hell match your signature from the prison records," Cory said, "according to handwriting experts. See for yourself." He pulled a photocopy of a traveler's check from his pocket and held it up for me to see.

If I hadn't known different, I'd

have sworn that the signature and countersignature on that check were mine. But they weren't. If I could *prove* in court that they weren't my signatures, and with Billy gone, it would be tough to tie me in with the robbery in *any* way.

Tibbett said, "Come on, Frankel. Where are the checks?"

"What checks?" I said.

Tibbett got out a paper and waved it at me. "Search warrant," he said. Then, to Cory, "Take a look around, Jack, will you? They've got to be here. I'll read this character the Miranda bit while you're looking."

I gave up then, for I knew they'd find those two suitcases inside of ten minutes, with the checks all present and accounted for except that one single check which had been cashed the very night of the robbery by my buddy, Billy, using *my* signature. What jury would believe I hadn't cashed that check when all the others were found in my possession? Especially when a handwriting expert testified that the signatures were mine?

Why had Billy done it? That's what I kept wondering. Because he was too dumb to know better? Weak in the head? Or had he done it on purpose?

Tibbett read me his Miranda card, but I didn't even listen.

I was remembering, with a feeling of despair, a lot of little things that came together in my mind to explain the handcuffs on my wrists:

How Billy wailed when I hit the guard. How his eyes went blank when I let it slip that I was figuring to live the life of Riley without him. How he'd had a chance at the checks while I was burning the crates, but had taken only one of them when there were 21,000 of them available. And how he hadn't looked the least bit surprised when I stuck him with the dart, as though he'd known all along I was going to ditch him.

Cory came back into the kitchen carrying the two suitcases. "In an old-fashioned root cellar," he said to Tibbett. "Would you believe it?"

Tibbett nodded in satisfaction. "That's it, then," he said. "Let's go."

As they herded me out to their car, I remembered one more thing, what Billy had been sent to jail for in the first place: forgery.

The satisfaction of getting in the last word can have a most assuaging effect.

An Easy Score

by Al Nussbaum

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE to say exactly why the two men chose old Mrs. Hartman for their victim. Perhaps it was her obvious age and frailty. Perhaps it was the fact that she had come out of the bank only minutes before. Perhaps they had been attracted by the oversized shoulder bag she clutched protectively, or the fact that she walked only a block before leaving the busy thoroughfare and strolling along a quiet and deserted side street.

Any combination, or all of these factors, may have influenced them. In any case, they had seen her and marked her an easy score. They had come up behind her and then separated, one going to either side. The one on her left had tripped her and, at the same instant, the other man cut the strap on her shoulder bag and tried to take it away from her. Instead of throwing her hands out to block her fall, as they had expected her to do, the gray-haired old woman grabbed the bag with both hands and gripped it tightly. She fell to the pavement, and there

was the sound of an old bone snapping, but she didn't give up her hold on the bag.

One man wrapped the dangling end of the shoulder strap around his hand and tried to wrench the bag free, while the other man kicked the old woman with his square-toed boots. There were no cries for help, no screams. The only sounds were the shuffle of feet and the men's heavy breathing as they tried to force Mrs. Hartman to release her bag. The men were determined to have the bag. Every tug on the strap was accompanied by several kicks to loosen her hold; but her tightly clamped jaws and frantic grip were evidence that she was just as determined not to have it taken from her.

Unfortunately, the woman wasn't a match for even one man, let alone two. It was only seconds before she had been thrust into unconsciousness by pain and exhaustion. They tore the bag from her limp fingers and ran away, leaving her sprawled across the sidewalk.

No one saw the attack and robbery. It was almost fifteen minutes before Mrs. Hartman was discovered by another pedestrian. The police and an ambulance arrived simultaneously, but by then the two men were miles away.

She regained consciousness for a few moments as she was being carried to the ambulance on a stretcher. She turned her pain-filled eyes toward a uniformed policeman who was standing nearby, looking down at her. "My money," she said in a tone so weak he almost missed it. "They stole my purse, and it had all my money in it."

"How much was taken, ma'am?" the officer asked.

She paused a moment, then managed to reply, "Thirty-three thousand dollars," before losing consciousness again.

She hadn't been able to say much, but it was enough to raise the mugging from the level of a relatively minor offense, as such things go, and give it the stature of a major crime. Four detectives were dispatched to the hospital emergency ward to be on hand when she could speak again; and an equal number of newspaper reporters and television newsmen converged upon the hospital, too.

When she was wheeled from the treatment room, Mrs. Hartman looked like a mummy. Both of her arms and one leg were in heavy casts and her head was swathed in bandages. She was awake, though, and able to answer a few more questions. Detective Sergeant Kendris, a burly man in his forties, did all the talking. The people from the news media had to make do with what they were able to overhear

and the photos they could take.

"Mrs. Hartman, can you hear me all right?" Kendris asked.

"Yes," the woman replied weakly.

"You told the officer where you were found that you had been robbed of thirty-three thousand dollars. Is that right?"

"Yes . . ."

"How did you happen to have so much cash with you?"

Mrs. Hartman hesitated, as though seeking the right words. Then she confessed, "I'm . . . I'm a foolish old woman. I don't always show good sense. Once every year, and sometimes twice, I draw all my savings from the bank. I keep the money at home for a few days, to look at it and touch it, then put it back in the bank. This time . . ." her voice trailed off weakly ". . . I lost it all."

"Did you recognize the thief?"

"There were two of them, but I'd never seen them before. And I'm not sure I'd know them if I saw them again. It all happened so very fast . . ."

At that point the sedative the doctor had administered took hold and she went to sleep.

"If you have any more questions, Sergeant Kendris," the nurse said, "you'll have to come back tomorrow."

The next afternoon, Kendris stormed into the hospital, looking like an angry bear, but he didn't get to speak to Mrs. Hartman. She slept all day, and the doctor refused to allow Kendris to awaken her.

The following day, Kendris returned again. He had calmed somewhat, but he was still visibly angry. Mrs. Hartman was propped up in bed and a high-school-age hospital volunteer was reading to her from the newspaper. Kendris asked the girl to wait outside while he talked to Mrs. Hartman.

"All right," he demanded once they were alone, "what was the idea of lying to me?"

"I . . . I don't know what you mean," she answered.

"Come off it! You know what I'm talking about—your imaginary thirty-three thousand dollars. The robbery was all over the newspapers and television, but when I went to the bank to see if they had a record of the serial numbers on the money, I learned you've never had an account there. The only time they see you is when, like the day before yesterday, you stop in to cash your Social Security check. Why did you lie?"

The injured woman's hands opened and closed and opened again in a gesture of helplessness. "I didn't want the thieves to get away with it. I . . . I wanted them to pay for what they did to me."

"But you *didn't* have to lie," Kendris persisted. "Don't you know we'd have worked just as hard, made exactly the same effort, to recover your Social Security pension as we did for the larger amount?"

When she didn't reply immediately, Kendris had time to examine what he'd just said and to see how ridiculous it was. As long as it had been believed that thirty-three thousand dollars had been stolen, there had been four detectives assigned to the case, and reporters to record their every move; but now he was the only one officially assigned, and that would last only until he returned to the office and put his report in the Unsolved File. At least he had the grace to be embarrassed.

"Oh, that isn't what I meant! I'm sure the police do their best regardless of the amount lost," Mrs. Hartman said, but to Kendris' ears the words had a hollow ring. It made him all the more ashamed to have this beaten-up old woman show more concern for his feelings than he'd shown for hers.

"Look," he said, cutting the interview short, "let's just forget the whole thing." He began moving toward the door. "If anything turns up, you'll be notified," he said, and then he was gone from the room.

The young hospital volunteer returned. She picked up the newspaper she'd set aside when Kendris arrived, and sat beside the bed. "Would you like me to read some more?" she asked.

"Yes, please," Mrs. Hartman answered. "Read the part about the murders again."

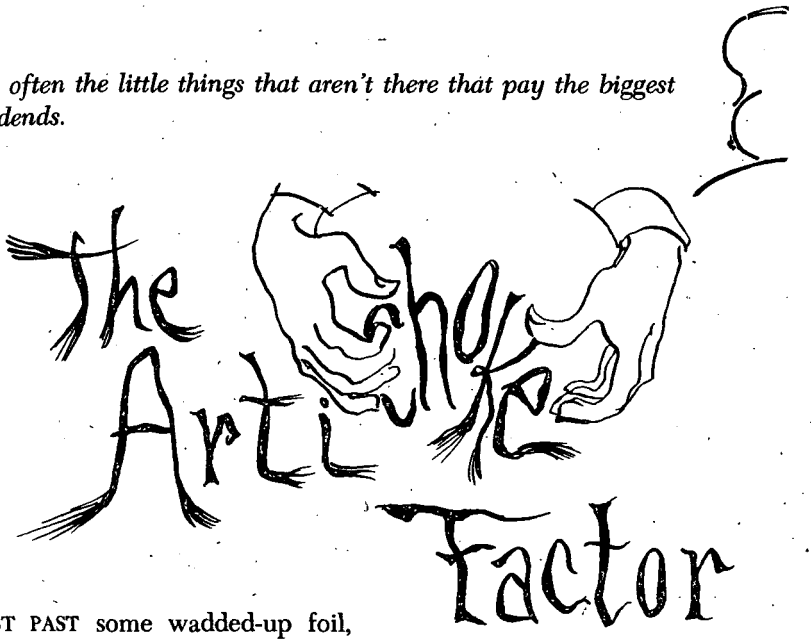
"But I've already read it four times," the girl protested.

"I know, but please read it again."

The girl cleared her throat and then began. "Police investigated a disturbance in an apartment at 895 Seventh Avenue at about 10 last night and found two men, William White and Jesse Bolt, who shared the apartment, dead on the livingroom floor, the result of a knife fight. Neighbors said the men had been arguing and fighting most of the day, each accusing the other of cheating him out of an undisclosed amount of money. The knife fight in which they killed one another was the climax of the day-long confrontation. Both men had long arrest records. Police are continuing their investigation."

Mrs. Hartman smiled behind her bruised lips. "Please, read it again," she said softly.

It is often the little things that aren't there that pay the biggest dividends.



JUST PAST some wadded-up foil, paper napkins and a couple of bones, I spotted a slim green wine bottle toward the bottom of the waste can. I called the fingerprint man over.

He eyed it hopefully. "Hey, there ought to be something on this, for sure! Moselle—is that any good?"

"Real fine stuff," I answered as I prowled around the kitchen. "You through over here by the sink?"

"Yeah. Clean as a whistle. It's weird—there's not a print anywhere, not even on the drawer pulls or the corners of the cabinet doors where there ought to be a hundred."

I found a fork and probed around in the garbage disposal. Sounds like a silly thing to do, but you do silly things when you run out of sensible things to try. I poked with distaste through a wad of stringy, greenish stuff that came up on the fork. Disgusted, I pushed it back down the hole and tossed the fork in the other side of the sink.

I turned and looked at as much of the apartment as I could see from the kitchen—a small dining area and a livingroom. The dining table was bare except for a pot of artificial flowers dead center on it and the dusting of powder that had failed to raise a single fingerprint on

either. The four chairs were lined up like soldiers at attention around the table, all of them clean too.

In the livingroom, which had a minimum of furnishings, ash trays gleamed on an end table and a coffee table just as pristine. Television knobs, no prints; door handles, ditto. The whole place had been

polished to a fare-thee-well. Doors and locks were intact—no forced entry.

I stood looking down at the rough white outline someone had chalked around one Marge Brookover after they'd finished all the photographs and carted her off. Female Caucasian, twenty-two years old, five-foot-five, one hundred and twenty pounds, probably a looker but it was hard to tell when we got her. I couldn't get that purple, mottled face out of my mind, and I knew it would hang right there in front of me until we found the man whose hands had left those marks on her throat. You'd think in my job, especially after so many years, I'd get used to these things. But if I ever do, I'll quit. There's no place on my force for a cop without feelings.

"Chief?" I turned. "Would you believe someone even polished the *garbage*?"

The fingerprint man tossed the wine bottle back into the can, and his face creased with pleasure as he heard it shatter. I knew the feeling. Frustration can make you sort of petty sometimes.

"Phone?" I asked.

"In the bedroom. I'm finished in there—plenty of prints, all hers."

I walked around the chalk marks and into the bedroom. The telephone sat in a pool of bobby pins and hair curlers on a night stand by the bed. The bed had been made up, but carelessly from the looks of it—bedspread pulled tight over wrinkles in the blanket, pillows not quite straight. I shoved a pile of magazines from the one chair and pulled it over closer to the telephone. I sat down and dialed, and

while I listened to the ringing I studied the dresser near me. Tubes with caps left off, face powder spilled haphazardly around its box, three sticks of chewing gum lying in the lid of a cold-cream jar. I could see into the bathroom, where towels were tossed over the side of the tub and a pile of underwear lay back under the lavatory.

"Benson?" I gave my attention to my assistant. "Get much from the girl, what's-her-name?"

"Cindy Wilder." Benson's voice held a note of cautious triumph. "She's a gold mine."

Cindy Wilder, a friend of the dead girl, had found the body a couple of hours earlier when she'd stopped by to give her a ride to work. I'd had Benson take her on downtown to get her statement.

"Well?" I prompted.

"She's positive the Brookover girl had been dating only three men recently. Seems the two girls told each other everything, and if Marge had met anyone new, she'd know. She saw her at lunch yesterday and knew she had a date last night."

"Does she know who with?" That would be too easy, but it would be nice to have an easy one for a change.

"Well, she's sure it was one of the three. Thinks Marge might have said, but since it doesn't—uh, didn't ever seem to matter much to Marge which one it was, Cindy Wilder didn't bother to remember."

"Gold mine, maybe. But we still have to do the digging."

"Yeah, but she gave me all three names. I've done a rundown on them, and none of them has a record. Fairly solid citizens, from the sound of it. Vaughn Carlson, free-lance writer who does pretty well even if no one ever heard of him. Richard Pennybaker, accountant with a local wholesale grocery firm. James Beckham, marine insurance. Maybe you've seen the billboards, 'Keel to Deck, You're Covered with Beck.' Want me to get started on them?"

I brushed my hand across my eyes, but the purple face kept swimming around in front of me. "I'll pick you up in ten minutes."

When I swung to the curb in front of the station, Benson was waiting. As he climbed in, he asked, "Get a time of death from the M.E.?"

"Between six and ten is as close as he'll say so far. He'll have his report for us this afternoon."

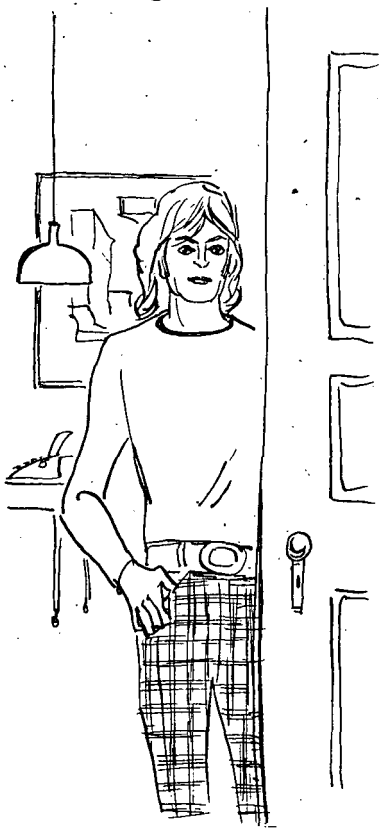
"The other tenants see or hear anything?"

"Zero. The adjoining apartment is vacant, and no one else could tell us a thing. No prints anywhere but bedroom and bath, and they all belong to the girl."

Benson whistled. "Too bad he

didn't use a knife. We could at least look for bloodstains." He glanced down at his notebook. "Carlson lives pretty close. Want to talk to him first?"

I grunted and swung out into traffic, heading for the address he gave me. Five minutes later we parked in front of a small apartment building, a little run-down but in a respectable neighborhood. When we rang the bell of 2C, we



listened while the staccato sound of a typewriter paused, then resumed for a full minute. I was reaching for the button again when the clatter stopped and we heard footsteps.

When the door opened, I studied the man; tall, wide shoulders, hair curling down to his collar, bright blue eyes that were indicating a mild curiosity. I showed him my badge. "Police. Could we talk to you a minute?"

Carlson hesitated, looked back at his typewriter with an expression of reluctance, then shrugged and motioned us in. "Sure. What can I do for you?"

He started to clear off a pair of chairs for us, but we indicated we'd rather stand.

"You know a girl named Marge Brookover?"

He spun around, stared at me and then laughed abruptly. "Police, huh? What'd she do—slap a charge of attempted assault on me?"

I looked at Benson, and he raised his eyebrows. To Carlson I said, "Not that I know of. Did you try to assault her?"

"Hell, no! But the way she acted, you'd think I did."

"You'd better tell us about it."

"Why should I? If she hasn't yelled cop, it's between me and her." He looked confused.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Last time is right. It was Tuesday night—three nights ago. What the devil's all this about?"

"Can you tell us where you were last night?" I ignored his question, and he was worried now.

"Right here, working. I've got a deadline on this story, and all this conversation isn't helping, either!"

"Can you prove it?" Benson put in mildly.

Carlson swung the blue eyes to Benson and back to me. "I was alone, so how could I prove it? The people in the next apartment probably heard my typewriter. I was pounding away from about six-thirty till almost eleven."

My eyes moved around the room and settled on the cluttered desk. "That a tape recorder?"

He glanced at the compact machine next to his typewriter. "Yes. I tape my ideas first and then type it all up. Look, why are you asking about Marge?"

"She was killed last night, sometime between six and ten." I watched his reaction, and whatever I'd expected, he surprised me.

He laughed uproariously. "When you get the guy that did it, I want to shake his hand!"

Remembering what that hand did to her neck, I went cold with rage and almost grabbed Carlson; but he sobered suddenly, and his expression slowly changed.

"You mean she's *dead*? She's actually *dead*?" He groped behind him for a chair and sat down.

I sent Benson to interview tenants in the other apartments, while I continued to question Carlson. He dragged his feet a little, but finally explained the crack about attempted assault.

"We'd been out to dinner and a show. When I took her home, she asked me in for a nightcap. We had two or three and things seemed pretty cozy. Well, I'd dated her several times and she sure *seemed* friendly enough. Anyway, she'd asked me in and I just assumed . . . she was a tease, you know what I mean? Everything she'd said and done led me to think . . . Oh, hell, if I was ever going to kill her, I'd have done it that night!"

"And you haven't seen her since?"

"No. And never planned to see her again."

"Okay." I got up. "Don't leave town. We'll want to talk to you again."

In the car, Benson and I compared notes. Two people in neighboring apartments had heard the typewriter going all evening, except for a few five- or ten-minute breaks.

"The tape recorder—" I started to say.

Benson anticipated me. "Yeah.

He could have taped an hour or so of that racket, and let it run while he was gone. But if he was putting on an act, it was a pretty good one."

"He's a writer," I said. "A writer's a little like an actor. He can make up scenes and action and speeches, and put them over very convincingly."

and found Pennybaker hunched over a big ledger, running a tape as long as his arm out the top of a sputtering adding machine.

When we showed him our identification folders, he took them, examined them closely, looked at us through the upper part of his bifocals and then back down to compare faces with photos. Finally he

"And he *was* really mad at her. Could have happened last night, her having to fight him off, and he switched the action to Tuesday night and gave it a different ending." Benson looked at his list. "Well, now how about Richard Pennybaker?"

I glanced at my watch and saw that we'd just about have time to see him before lunch. We drove out to the sprawling office-warehouse complex of the grocery company on the south edge of town. We were directed down a long hallway

handed them back, hit the total key on the machine, folded the long tape in neat accordian style and paper-clipped it to the ledger page. He closed the ledger, took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands carefully. Then he refolded the handkerchief in a neat square and tucked it into his pocket. Benson and I exchanged a look of amused exasperation.

"Now, how may I help you?"

"We understand you know a girl named Marge Brookover."

He blinked and drew his head

back slightly, bringing a hint of double chin into evidence. "Yes, of course. She is the woman I am going to marry."

It was my turn to blink. I remembered the Wilder girl's statement that Marge Brookover hadn't seemed to care which of the three men she had a date with on any particular night.

"Then we have some bad news for you," I said. "Miss Brookover was murdered last night."

All color left his face and with it all expression. His lips moved spasmodically, but no sound came from them. He was motionless for a moment, then he leaned forward and reached for a carafe of water on a nearby stand. He poured a glass, spilling a little as he did so. With an apparently unconscious movement, he brought out his handkerchief, wiped up the drops of water and then restored it, less carefully folded this time, to his pocket.

"This is—excuse me—it's just so difficult to take in. Why would anyone kill a fine, young . . . Have you found the killer?" He brought out his handkerchief again and held it to his mouth.

"Not yet. Can you account for your movements last night?"

He looked at me with horror. "But surely you're not suggesting . . . Oh, of course, a matter of routine." He thought, visibly. "I worked late here at my office, until about seven or seven-thirty. This is our busy time of year, you know. There wasn't anyone else here, although the night watchman might confirm it. Then I drove out to see my mother. She's alone, and I try to see her several times a week. Would you like her address?" He scribbled it on a small note pad without waiting for an answer.

"I sat and chatted with her for perhaps an hour, from about eight till nine or a little later. Then I went back to my apartment. The doorman saw me come in about nine-thirty. Would you like his name?"

He started to scribble again, but I got up. "That's okay. We'll be checking around there."

"Please. Please, where is Marge now? I really must . . ." He stopped, and we saw tears running down his cheeks. I told him we'd let him know when the body was released, and that her family had been notified and was arriving later in the day. We left, uncomfortable before the silent tears.

"Hmmm." Benson looked back over his shoulder as we pulled out of the parking lot. "Seems pretty broken up."

"Or pretends to be. If he really thought they were engaged, and then found out she was dating Carlson and Beckham, he might have

been angry enough to kill her."

Benson nodded. "And even if his story about working late and seeing his mother checks out, it leaves forty-five minutes of prime time. Wouldn't have taken more than a couple of minutes to choke the girl, and maybe ten more to get rid of all the fingerprints."

"Well, let's see what James Beckham has to say."

"Lunch first, Chief? Could we, huh? That call came in before I could get any breakfast this morning."

I noticed a gnawing sensation in my own midsection, so we found a drive-in. Over double-decker hamburgers and shakes we discussed what we had so far.

"Nothing really, or maybe too much. Carlson and Pennybaker both have possible motives and holes in their alibis you could drive a truck through." Benson took a big bite of his hamburger and chewed thoughtfully.

"Maybe the medical report will be of some help," I said as I paid the check and scattered some coins on the tray. "It should be on my desk by three."

We found a parking slot not too far from the building in which Beckham had his office. On the sixth floor, the door marked *Beckham Marine Insurance* was a little ajar, and we heard him before we saw him. He was reading the riot act to his secretary, and a couple of the kinder adjectives he was using were "incompetent" and "lame-brained."

When we pushed open the door and walked in, he paused long enough to look us over and decide we weren't customers, then he finished his harangue in a lower voice.

The young secretary was fighting tears, and her face was as red as her dress. She said, "Yes, Mr. Beckham, I'll retype it right away. I'm sorry, Mr. Beckham."

He snorted and turned to us with an irritated look on his face. He was a big man, pushing thirty maybe, and I couldn't tell if his unpleasant expression was chronic or assumed for the occasion.

When I showed him my badge, he froze, then swallowed visibly and waved us into an inner office. He followed us and pulled the door shut carefully behind him. As he saw Benson light up a cigarette, he nudged an overloaded ash tray in his direction.

"Well?"

"It's about Marge Brookover."

"Oh, no, I knew it!" He dropped his face to cupped hands and was a study in despair for a minute. Then he looked up again, and his eyes were like a dog's begging for a bone.

"You can keep my name out of it,

can't you? It would ruin me. My wife doesn't know I've been seeing her . . ."

Benson and I exchanged surprised looks. If he were getting ready to confess, how did he think we could keep his name out of it, for Pete's sake?

He saw our surprise. "It was on the news just now. On the radio. Oh, poor Marge! Who could have done such a thing? *Strangled,* they said! Oh, boy, if my wife finds out—"

"Wait a minute, Mr. Beckham," I interrupted. "Did you kill her?"

"Kill Marge? Oh, heavens, no. I *liked* her. She was a lot of fun. My wife, well, she's rather prim and dignified. Why, Marge and I were friends, that's all. You know?"

I didn't know, and he was a pretty scared man. I asked him how he'd spent the previous evening.

"Let me see. I had two meetings. One was the Chamber of Commerce dinner at the Mayer Hotel at six. I left there about eight, before the business meeting was over, because I was due at this Regional Insurance Men's Seminar at the Civic Center. You can check. Probably fifty people can tell you I got there just after nine and was there for almost two hours."

"It doesn't take over half an hour to drive from the Mayer to the Civic Center." I figured it as fifteen minutes at the most.

"I had trouble finding a parking spot. I was late and almost everyone else was already there. I drove around for a long time before I found one." He looked at me, pleading with me to believe him.

I frowned, knowing it would be impossible to check on that fifteen or twenty minutes. As Benson has observed, it's about all the killer needed, and Marge Brookover's

apartment was almost directly on the way from the Mayer Hotel to the Civic Center.

We questioned him a little longer, told him we couldn't promise anything about keeping his name out of it, and left.

"Same song, third verse. Strongest motive yet, though," Benson mused. "If the Brookover chick threatened to go to his wife, he'd have been in a blind panic."

"Uh huh." I was threading my way through the downtown traffic near the station. "Three good suspects, all with motive, all with opportunity. And talk about means—did you notice that all three of those men have big, strong hands?"

"Yeah, I noticed that." Benson shuddered slightly.

"The trouble is, I *know* which one did it!" I saw Benson throw me a surprised look, and added quickly, "But I haven't got a lick of proof."

"Care to tell me who it is?"

"Nope," I said, and he let it go.

When I walked into my office, the medical examiner's report was on my desk, almost an hour earlier than promised. Grateful for small favors, I sat down to read it.

Death by asphyxiation due to strangulation, time narrowed to between seven and nine last night. Victim had eaten a meal of steak, potatoes, artichokes and wine immediately before death. No sex, forced or otherwise—in fact, the girl was a virgin. I felt a wrench of pity. Why do you suppose we always feel sorrier for the virgins?

I leaned back in my swivel chair and tried to sort things out, tried to picture in my mind the sequence of the evening's events. Suddenly I had a wild idea. My chair squealed in protest as I slammed forward to reread part of the M.E.'s report. It seemed like one word was typed in caps, the way it jumped out at me.

"Benson!" I yelled.

He came running in, and I told him to get in touch with Carlson, Pennybaker and Beckham and have them all in my office at three o'clock sharp. He looked pretty unhappy that I didn't say why, but went obediently off to start making phone calls.

I got busy on the props for the meeting. I had typing paper in my desk drawer, but had to scrounge some carbon from one of the boys in the squad room. I arranged three straight chairs in a semicircle before my desk, and borrowed a used lunch bag from a girl on the switchboard. I stuffed some wastepaper into it, folded the top down and set it on my desk, a little to one side.

I was ready, but still had about twenty minutes to wait. It was a long twenty minutes, but I passed it by planning just what I'd say when they got here.

Finally three o'clock came and with it, almost on the dot, the three men. Vaughn Carlson was looking a little indignant but curious, Richard Pennybaker was polishing his glasses with irritated little swipes, and James Beckham seemed just plain scared. I waved them to the chairs, while Benson came in and stood a little behind me and to one side where he could watch and listen.

I stood behind the desk and fussed a little with various items on it, moving the paper bag slightly. "I know how busy you all are, and I appreciate your coming down on such short notice. This shouldn't take long at all."

I picked up three pieces of paper, each folded to about the size of a match book and each with one of the suspects' names printed on it, and passed them out. Benson was standing quietly, his arms folded and a look of casual interest on his face. I grinned at him—I knew he was all balled up with curiosity inside.

"Now." I stood again at the desk, and looked at the three. "What we're after here is—toothprints."

They all stared at me blankly, and then Carlson said in a hushed, horrified voice, "*Toothprints?* But the radio said she was strangled."

"She was," I said and let them think about it for a minute. Then I picked up the last slip from my desk. "This paper has a small sheet of carbon folded inside which will transfer the pattern of your bite to an inside sheet. Place it as far back between your teeth as possible, bite down firmly and pull it forward, like so." I pulled mine out with a sharp, zipping sound.

They exchanged bewildered glances, but raised the papers to their mouths and started to follow my directions.

Watching them closely, I added, "Just pretend you're eating an artichoke."

Carlson shrugged, bit and pulled, then peered curiously in at one side of his paper.

Beckham snorted, "This is ridiculous!" but quickly followed suit and tossed the paper on the corner of the desk.

Pennybaker had gone as white as the paper which was still poised between his teeth. His eyes were wide behind the shining lenses of his glasses and fixed on the paper bag on my desk. For a long moment he didn't even blink. Then he threw the folded paper to the floor, lurched out of his chair and bolted for the door.

Benson beat him there, and braced him against the wall with one shoulder while he reached for his handcuffs. Pennybaker started crying again, this time in great,

shuddering sobs between garbled words.

"She'd fixed dinner for us—occasion seemed just right—I asked her to marry me. She laughed! She *laughed* at me! Had to make her stop—didn't mean to kill her, just wanted to make her stop laughing—"

I couldn't stand it. I looked away, just as I heard Benson say, "Well, you sure stopped her."

After Benson had advised Pennybaker of his rights and turned him over to a stenographer for a statement, he came back to my office. He leaned against the doorframe. "He the one you were so sure of?"

"Yep," I said, and I'll admit I said it a little smugly.

"I'd have bet my pension on Beckham. He got so mad at his secretary for typing a letter wrong, I figured him for a real rage when the Brookover girl threatened to talk to his wife. But what was this little charade all about?"

I tapped the medical report on my desk. "She had artichokes at her last meal, which only the killer could have known. I'd spotted two steak bones in the trash, so I figured he had dinner with her. From the state of that bedroom and bathroom, would you take Marge Brookover for a girl who'd get right up from the table and do the dishes, wash the counter and table and ash trays? Not on your life! Mr. Fastidious did it, after he'd killed her. Probably just started out to get rid of fingerprints, and got carried away. He's a compulsive neatnik. He even put the remains of the artichokes down the garbage disposal."

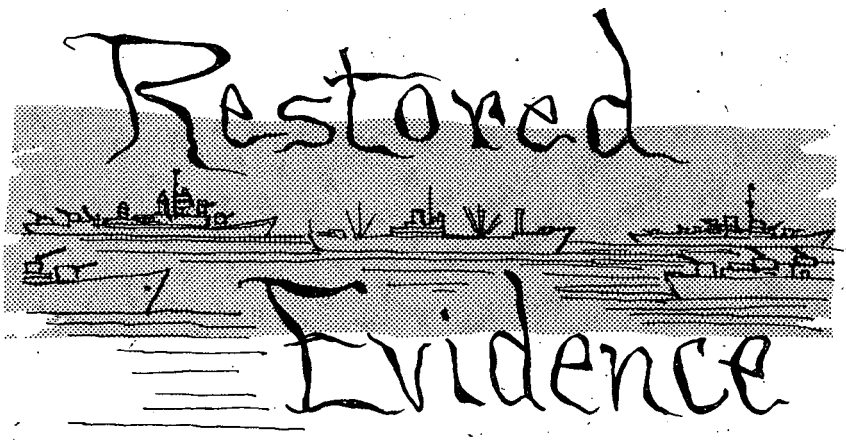
"Oh. And you salvaged enough of the leaves to check the teeth marks on them against the suspects." He eyed the paper bag dubiously.

I picked it up and tossed it into the wastebasket. "Nope. There wasn't anything left but a stringy mess. But Pennybaker couldn't be sure of that."

"This is the silliest thing I ever heard of!" Benson shook his head unbelievingly.

"Well," I said as we walked down the hall to see how the statement was coming, "sometimes you do silly things when you run out of sensible things to try."

Where espionage is involved, a particular designation may be nothing but a misnomer.



CAPTAIN SOMME views it, with no little amusement, as one of the closest-kept secrets of the war. It was purely by chance that he became privy to it, almost twenty-five years after the incidents surrounding it occurred. He was returning from a visit to a crew member lying in the Marine Hospital on Staten Island and, walking up State Street from the ferry in the sharp, spring air, he turned into the newly opened Seamen's Church Institute building, feeling a sudden desire for a cup of coffee.

While sipping it beside the cafeteria windows facing Battery Park, his gaze wandered over the other tables. It was midafternoon and not many were in use, but at one sat an old man who was staring at him intently. Captain Somme stared back, vaguely feeling that there was something familiar about the deep-furrowed face and cropped white head.

The old man suddenly rose and came over. "Ain't you Cap'n Somme, master of the *Delcrest* during the war?"

"That's right." The captain's face lit up in sudden recognition. "Old Pop Seymour! I was just thinking I'd seen you somewhere."

"I figured it was you, Cap'n." The old man looked pleased. "I wasn't sure, though, with them sideburns and moustache."

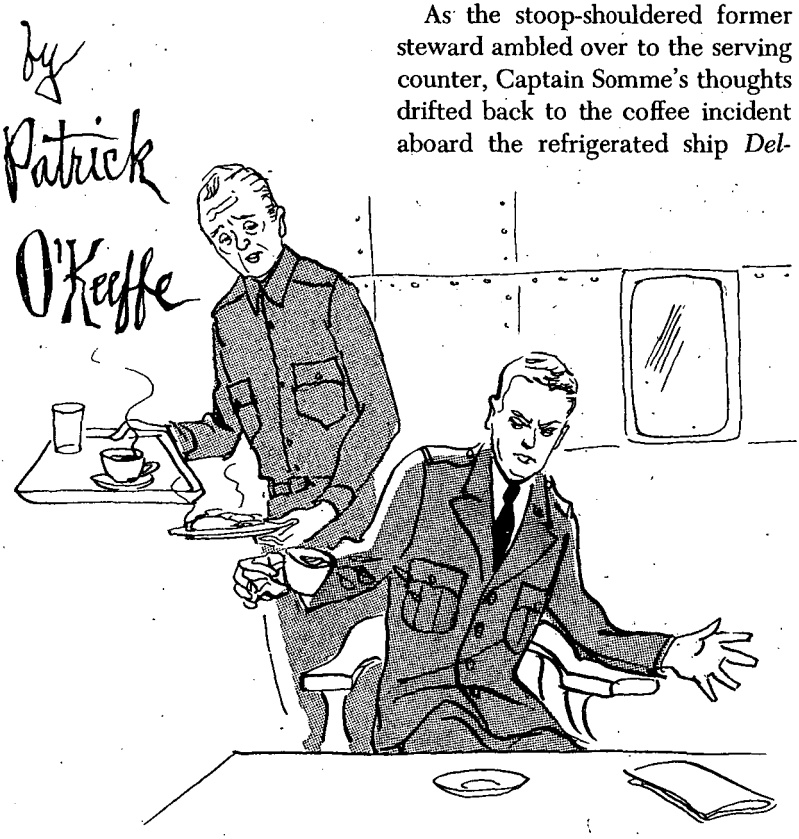
The captain smiled. "I keep up with the style of the mod crews we get nowadays. What have you been doing with yourself all these years, Pop? Still sailing, I'll bet."

Pop Seymour shook his head sadly. "I had to quit after the war. Pension rules. Too old, they said. So now I do odd jobs around the Institute. Get my room and board here, too." The old man eyed the captain quizzically. "You must be about ready to swallow the hook yourself."

"Another two years or so, Pop. But sit down and tell me what's been happening to you all these years."

"Let me get another cup o' coffee first, Cap'n."

As the stoop-shouldered former steward ambled over to the serving counter, Captain Somme's thoughts drifted back to the coffee incident aboard the refrigerated ship *Del-*



crest. She was discharging Army meat cargo in Naples at the time, shortly after the city had been captured by the Allied Fifth Army. It was his first trip as captain, relieving the regular captain for his vacation. When Pop Seymour was serving the Army security officer at lunch, Pop Seymour's hand accidentally knocked against the lieutenant's cup in avoiding a sudden movement of the officer's arm, and a little coffee splashed down onto the flap of a side pocket of his khaki jacket.

The stain was hardly noticeable, but the lieutenant, fastidious about his appearance, muttered, "Clumsy old fool! My only clean blouse."

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," said Pop, distressed.

The lieutenant looked across at Captain Somme, on the other side of the table. "He should be kept ashore out of harm's way."

Captain Somme offered no comment. Lieutenant Harmson was quick-tempered and would probably regret his hasty outburst. He was a young, wartime-commissioned officer, assigned to the *Delcrest* as Army security officer in charge of the meat cargo. The incident worried Pop Seymour, knowing that the Navy held a certain wartime veto over merchant-marine personnel it regarded as unfit or undesirable. If the security officer turned in a bad report about him to the Navy he'd perhaps be barred from sailing again.

He wasn't a clumsy old fool, he told himself, resenting the remark. A bit jumpy, maybe, from the war. Going on sixty, he wasn't as nimble and steady-handed as in the days when he was a first-class waiter in big liners like the old *Leviathan* and the *America,* but he was a lot better at the job than most of these war-trained kids sailing as officers' messmen.

Pop was still smarting over the spilled coffee as he prepared to go ashore after lunch. The Allied Military Government permitted shore leave to twenty percent of the personnel of each merchant ship between one and five in the afternoon, but because of the shortage of official launches, ships had to provide their own liberty-boat service. This was necessary because all quays had been blocked with ships scuttled by the retreating Germans, forcing Allied supply ships to anchor in clusters inside the breakwaters and discharge into amphibious "ducks" and lighters. Ships not equipped with a motorboat, such as the *Delcrest,* had to depend on bumboats and other oared craft to ferry their crewmen ashore.

Pop Seymour left the ship in a bumboat along with three other crew members, young men who

were bent on a lively time ashore in the few hours available to them. Pop wandered on his own through the docks area and the bombed-out waterfront streets to Via Roma. The thoroughfare was heavy with military traffic, and the sidewalks were thronged with soldiers, sailors and nurses in the various uniforms of the Allied forces and collaborating Italians. Most of the shops were closed and dark, but street vendors had set up displays of cheap cameos, shells, and religious articles.

Pop Seymour wandered about aimlessly, having come ashore chiefly to stretch his legs on the last day in port; the ship had finished discharging at noon. He ignored the cries of picture-postcard vendors and small boys offering sticky, nutted candy for sale. At one intersection, a swarthy young Italian policeman wearing an Allied Military Government brassard followed him with his eyes as he passed, no doubt thinking that this old man in striped shirt, serge trousers, and felt hat was an American seaman and an easy mark for waylaying and murdering for his clothes and dock pass and any seaman's papers he might have on him.

Pop Seymour finally came to rest in a small wineshop down a steep side street. He had spent almost an hour strolling through the narrow and hilly streets of the squalid neighborhood on the other side of Via Roma, and he was tired and thirsty.

A few civilians were sitting at tables and, except for one big man who scowled, they glanced indifferently at Pop Seymour as he entered. He took a vacant table by the door, heeding notices posted around the *Delcrest* warning personnel against talking to strangers ashore, in or out of uniform. He ordered a glass of Marsala from a waiter, paying for it with Allied Military Government lire.

Pop lit his pipe and sat gazing out into the quiet street. He thought the Marsala didn't taste anything like it did before the war. After a while, his pipe went out. When he relit it, he looked up in time to see two men in American Army officer uniforms enter a shop across the street. One was the *Delcrest's* security officer, Lieutenant Harmson. Pop wasn't surprised to see him going into such a shop, for a sign outside included the words, "Objets d'art," and he knew from the officers' conversations at mealtimes that Lieutenant Harmson ran a similar business with his father on Sixth Avenue, New York City. Pop Seymour had heard him remark that he hoped to pick up a rare piece or two as bargains while in Naples.

The glimpse of the security offi-

cer revived Pop Seymour's fear over the likelihood of having to dump himself onto his youngest daughter at the end of the voyage. She was constantly urging him to live a quiet and safe life ashore with her and her family, but ever since his wife died just before the war, it had been his hope to remain at sea to the end and be put over the side in a piece of canvas, with little trouble or expense to anyone.

Pop presently glanced at his wristwatch and then ordered another glass of wine. It was getting near time to start back toward the waterfront. He glanced across the street at the art shop. The security officer hadn't come out yet. The window was empty, and Pop couldn't see beyond it into the unlighted interior.

The door suddenly opened and two men came out. One was the officer who had entered with Lieutenant Harmson, but even before his companion turned his face in the direction of the wineshop, Pop Seymour could tell by his ill-fitting jacket that he wasn't the fastidious Lieutenant Harmson, although roughly of the same height and build. The other officer, he saw, wore the two silver bars of a captain.

The security officer had not left the art shop by the time Pop Seymour knocked out his pipe and pushed back the chair. The lieutenant, mused Pop, would, with his quick young stride, reach the docks in half the time he himself would take. The late afternoon chill was setting in, and Pop stepped along briskly. It was four-thirty by the time he reached the gate at the foot of Piazza Municipal. An M.P. eyed him closely and scrutinized his pass before waving him on.

When Pop Seymour arrived at the quayside, two of the ship's Navy armed guard and an oiler were hailing a bumboat. There was no sign of the security officer. Already most of the bumboats peddling wine and souvenirs to the anchored ships were starting to head back for the quays, fearful of being caught out in the open during the expected hail of bombs and antiaircraft shrapnel after nightfall. The white plume rising from Vesuvius would glow red at intervals in the darkness, providing a natural beacon to guide the Nazi planes.

While the little group was waiting for the bumboat to come alongside, black smoke and debris shot into the sky above a nearby waterfront street. The men gave it only passing notice, for time bombs and booby traps left behind by the enemy had been exploding almost daily since the ship's arrival.

The security officer still had not appeared when the bumboat owner

plied his oars in the direction of the *Delcrest.* Pop figured that Lieutenant Harmson would have to stay ashore all night, unless he were lucky enough to get a ride in an Army launch after the expected air raid.

There was no air raid on the port that night, however; two attempts ended when the bombers were turned back by fighter planes. The *Delcrest* moved out past the breakwater at dawn and anchored in the open bay among several other vessels awaiting convoy. At breakfast time, Pop Seymour heard Captain Somme remark to the chief engineer that the security officer was still ashore. "If he doesn't show up by noon, I'll blinker a message reporting his absence."

During the forenoon coffee break, Pop happened to go out on deck in time to see a launch heading back to shore from the *Delcrest.* Standing in the stern and looking back at the ship was a man he recognized as the Army captain he had seen enter the art shop with Lieutenant Harmson.

He turned to one of the armed guards standing beside him at the rails. "Did the security officer just come aboard?"

The guard nodded solemnly. "But it wasn't Lieutenant Harmson. He was killed yesterday afternoon when a time bomb blew out the wall of a building he was passing. That Army captain brought out a replacement for him."

Pop Seymour was shocked, telling himself that it must have been the explosion he heard while waiting for the bumboat. "He was one of the unlucky guys," he remarked sadly.

"The new officer is one of the lucky guys," said the Navy sailor. "I heard him tell our officer he was just off a torpedoed ship, landed here yesterday with nothing but the uniform he was wearing. He was the only officer available to take Lieutenant Harmson's place. The lieutenant's clothes were left aboard for him to use till he gets outfitted."

Pop did not see the new security officer until lunch time. When he went to take the Army officer's order, Captain Somme said, "Lieutenant Sanford, that's Pop Seymour, the Methuselah of all stewards and past master of the art. A wise old sea gull, too, even if he does decorate your uniform with a splash of coffee once in a while."

Pop Seymour grinned. After several years with Captain Somme as chief mate of the *Delcrest,* he was used to his kidding.

Sanford laughed. "As long as he doesn't go beyond scalding the back of my neck and pays my laundry bill, I won't object."

Pop Seymour was pleased. Lieutenant Sanford sounded like a better officer to get along with than Lieutenant Harmson, and he might be good for a favorable report. He stared at him for a moment. Sanford was a little older-looking than his predecessor, darker and with a jutting forehead and square jaw. "Ain't I seen you someplace before, Lieutenant?"

Sanford looked up quickly, scanning the old steward's lined face. He smiled. "You must be confusing me with someone else, Pop." Looking across at Captain Somme, he chuckled. "As though I could have run into old Pop before and not remembered him!"

Pop Seymour hurried off to the galley, shaking his head as if to stir up his memory. He was sure he'd seen the man somewhere. On his way back to the table, it suddenly came to him. Setting a plate of soup before Sanford, he said, "I knew I'd seen you someplace, Lieutenant. It was coming out of that art shop yesterday afternoon."

"Art shop?"

"Sure. I forget the name of the street. I was sitting in a little wineshop across the way and saw you come out."

Sanford shook his head in slow motion. "Pop," he said patiently, "I was nowhere near any art shop yesterday afternoon. I was at Army headquarters all day, trying to get outfitted and finding out what was to be done with me."

"That's funny, Lieutenant. My eyes ain't too good for reading, but they're fine for distance. You came out with another officer."

"Are you insinuating I'm a liar?" demanded Sanford, in a sudden show of anger.

"No, sir," said Pop hastily. "I didn't mean it that way. Don't get me wrong. It's just that—well, maybe my eyes are getting bad for distance too."

"Perhaps Pop had a glass of wine too much," said Captain Somme, smiling.

"When an old man starts seeing things, it's a sign of approaching senility," growled Sanford. "I had no permission to leave headquarters yesterday at any time."

Pop Seymour backed away from the table in misery. After lunch, he went out to the afterdeck with his pipe. He sat alone, pulling dismally on his pipe. He'd started off on the wrong foot with the new security officer. If the lieutenant reported him as going senile, this could be his last voyage.

Pop told himself angrily that Lieutenant Sanford was a liar. He'd seen him come out of that art shop as sure as he'd seen Lieutenant Harmson go in. He'd recognized that Army captain this forenoon, so

why should he be wrong about Lieutenant Sanford?

Why was the lieutenant saying it wasn't he who came out of the art shop? It was queer, too, Lieutenant Harmson going in with that captain and Lieutenant Sanford coming out with him, and the two of them coming aboard together this forenoon, with Lieutenant Sanford as the new security officer.

From mealtime conversations among the officers, Pop had heard that Naples was swarming with Nazi and Fascist spies and saboteurs, some masquerading in Allied uniforms. One with a Southern accent had been caught passing himself off as an American Navy lieutenant; he had been raised in Texas by German parents and was living in Germany when war broke out. He and other agents had been left behind after the fall of Naples to harass the Allies by taking advantage of the confusion and lack of coordination that would exist among Allied units until the wrecked electric-power and telephone services had been restored and all time bombs and booby traps removed.

After pondering at length on the art shop and the new security officer, Pop Seymour decided to take his ruminations to Captain Somme. He always served coffee to the officers around three-thirty, and when he went into the captain's cabin that afternoon, Captain Somme had just wakened from a brief nap. He sat up as the steward placed the tray on the desk, and then watched curiously as Pop, instead of withdrawing, closed the door and turned to him.

"Cap'n, it was Lieutenant Sanford I saw coming out of that art shop yesterday afternoon. I didn't mix him up with nobody else, and it wasn't too much wine. And I ain't going senile either."

Captain Somme smiled. "It's nothing to get worked up about, Pop. I was joking, and Lieutenant Sanford said that without meaning it. You're a long way from being senile, you wise old sea gull."

"That ain't what's bothering me, Cap'n. It's because Lieutenant Sanford's lying when he says it wasn't him I saw come out of the art shop."

"It was possibly a look-alike, Pop. That sometimes happens."

"It didn't happen yesterday. Another thing bothering me is that Lieutenant Harmson went into the shop with that other officer, a captain and Lieutenant Sanford came out. Don't that look kinda queer to you?"

"Well, what might have happened is that Lieutenant Harmson got into conversation with the Army captain about art shops, and

he took him to one. You've heard Lieutenant Harmson say that that was his line of business. An officer looking like Lieutenant Sanford happened to be in there at the time and came away with the captain. It's unfortunate that Lieutenant Harmson didn't leave with them. He'd be alive now."

"That ain't the way I figure it, Cap'n," Pop said stubbornly. "You're figuring it your way because you don't think Lieutenant Sanford's lying. And something you don't know is that the Army captain who brought the lieutenant aboard this forenoon was the same officer who came out of the art shop with him. Don't that look kinda queer too?"

"If that is so, it does seem odd," admitted Captain Somme. "But it may be nothing more than a coincidence. The way conditions are in Naples at present, nothing would surprise me."

"You know what I think, Cap'n: they're a coupla German spies. That art shop's some kinda Fascist joint. They killed Lieutenant Harmson in there. That's why Lieutenant Sanford's lying. He knows if I saw him come out of the art shop, I maybe saw Lieutenant Harmson go in."

The look of mild amusement faded from the captain's face. Pop Seymour continued. "You know what else I think? I think Lieutenant Sanford came out of that art shop in Lieutenant Harmson's uniform. Maybe you noticed the jacket ain't a good fit. And that's why Lieutenant Harmson's clothes are being left aboard. It ain't because Lieutenant Sanford lost his aboard a torpedoed ship. It's because he's a German spy, with only the uniform Lieutenant Harmson was murdered for."

Captain Somme stared gravely at his wise old sea gull. If what Pop Seymour had said were true, it would seem that German agents had seized an opportunity to put one of their number aboard the *Delcrest*. He had perhaps been too easily duped with a forged letter assigning the new security officer to the ship and by the possibly bogus captain accompanying him. With the ship secured for sea, convoy orders aboard, all contact with shore ended, there was little likelihood that the assignment of a new security officer would become known ashore and lead to inquiries. Lieutenant Sanford may have brought a secret radio transmitter aboard; one such had been used in the outward-bound convoy, enabling U-boats to home in on the ships. The bogus security officer would disappear the moment the ship arrived in the home port, to operate as a spy ashore, taking with him knowledge

of secret codes and convoy procedure.

"Pop, you've really got me worried now. You could be right."

"What makes you figure maybe I ain't right, Cap'n?"

The captain's young face took on a distracted expression. "Look at what I'm up against, Pop. If I blinker ashore for a confirmation of the death of Lieutenant Harmson and the assignment of Lieutenant Sanford, heaven knows how long under present conditions it'll take for the message to reach the right quarter, and perhaps even longer to get a reply. If the convoy gets under way on schedule at five o'clock and there's no word from shore, I'll have to hold back. There's a shortage of refrigerated ships, so if you turn out to be wrong, Pop, and we're delayed a week waiting for the next convoy, the Navy would crucify me. I'd never get command of another ship while the war lasted. They'd say I'd listened to the wild imaginings of an old steward, because he was an old shipmate, instead of taking the word of a United States Army officer."

"Cap'n," said Pop Seymour sympathetically, "I know how it is. It's your first trip as master and you don't feel you can risk sticking your neck out like some old-timer would. I ain't trying to tell you what to do, but it's okay by me if you want to play safe. Maybe you could figure out a way after we get to sea of showing up Lieutenant Sanford as a phony and put him in irons."

"If that art shop is an enemy agents' hideout and that Army captain is one of them, something should be done about it now; the military authorities here should know about it at once. Pop, if I could be sure you're not mistaken about Lieutenant Sanford . . ." The captain broke off with a helpless gesture.

"I wish I could help you out on that, Cap'n," Pop said sadly. "All I can do is say I ain't mistaken." He turned toward the door. "I'd better be getting on with the coffee for the officers."

Pop Seymour went out. He came hurrying back within a few minutes, looking excited. "Cap'n," he said, almost slamming the door behind him, "I've got something to tell you. When I took coffee into Lieutenant Sanford's cabin, he was out on deck somewhere. His jacket was hanging up. I couldn't miss seeing the coffee stain on it, right where I made it yesterday, on the pocket flap, same side. Don't that prove it's Lieutenant Harmson's?"

Captain Somme, sitting with coffee untouched, gazed at the old steward as if still unconvinced.

"Cap'n, you don't have to believe me this time. You can go in and see

it for yourself, just to be sure."

The captain suddenly stood up. "Pop, it looks as if it's about time I started believing you."

When old Pop Seymour returned to Captain Somme's table in the cafeteria of the Seamen's Church Institute building, the captain was smiling reminiscently. As the former steward put down the cup and saucer and drew out a chair, the captain remarked, "I was just thinking about that coffee stain years ago. What a sweat I was in, waiting for an answer to my blinker message and watching the convoy preparing to get under way. The grandest sight of my life was seeing that launch heading for the ship with the M.P.'s. If that coffee stain had turned out to be another coincidence, I think I'd have jumped overboard."

Pop Seymour gave an odd smile. "I knew for sure it wasn't."

"Pop, you couldn't have been really sure at the time."

"I knew for sure because there was no stain on the jacket."

The captain looked puzzled. "What do you mean, Pop? I saw it. Everybody saw it."

Pop Seymour grinned. "When I saw the jacket hanging up, I remembered the stain. So I looked for it. It wasn't there. I figured Lieutenant Harmson must have sponged it off before going ashore the day before, or maybe that phony security officer had done it. I didn't think figuring it out that way would be enough to make you stick your neck out. So I dabbed a little coffee in the right place."

Captain Somme seemed speechless. Still grinning, Pop Seymour said, "With everybody making me out to be some kinda hero over spotting that stain, and me sitting pretty with the Navy, I didn't see any sense in letting on that it didn't happen that way."

Captain Somme drew in a long breath, as if about to explode. "Pop, if I'd known that when I was waiting for an answer to my message, I think I'd have had you keelhauled." He broke into a laugh. "I used to call you a wise old sea gull. But you were really a crafty old buzzard."

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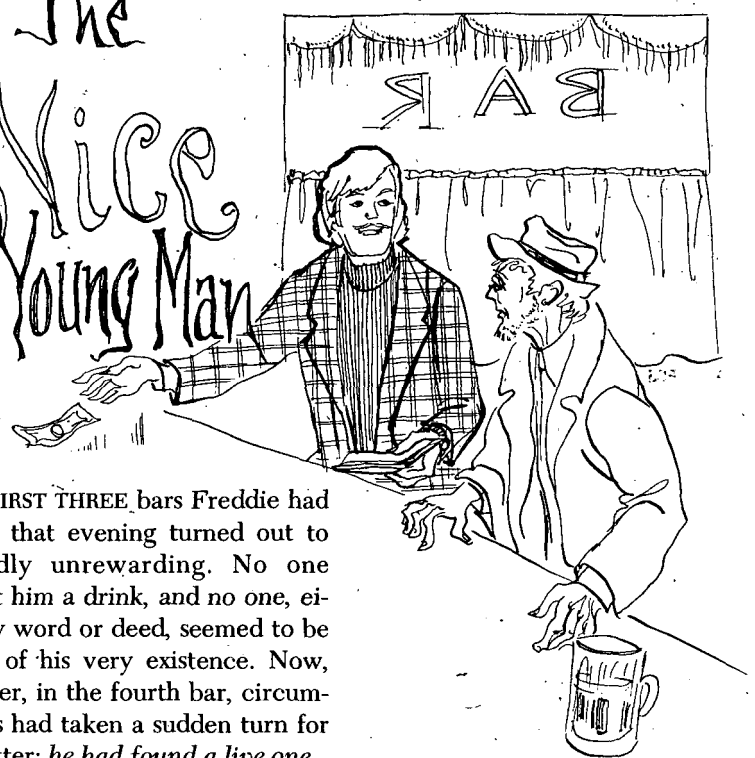
One really should return the compliment when given the opportunity.

The Nice Young Man



THE FIRST THREE bars Freddie had visited that evening turned out to be sadly unrewarding. No one bought him a drink, and no one, either by word or deed, seemed to be aware of his very existence. Now, however, in the fourth bar, circumstances had taken a sudden turn for the better: *he had found a live one.*

The "live one" was in the form of a young man who had come in and

by Richard O. Lewis

gazed about as if looking for someone, and had finally taken a stool at the bar right next to Freddie.

"Join me in a drink?" he invited, smiling in friendly fashion.

"Scotch," Freddie said, pushing his half-emptied beer glass to one side.

The young man was dressed in slacks, sport coat, and turtleneck sweater. He wore a small moustache and a shock of blond hair that was too long to be classified as the young-exec look and yet not long enough to be rated strictly hippie. Freddie noted the expensive watch on the man's wrist, the billfold he had taken from an inner pocket of his coat, and the twenty-dollar bill he placed on the bar. He couldn't fit the young man into any definite category and didn't waste any time trying. The needs of the moment were too pressing to allow random speculation to interfere.

After finishing off two Scotches in rapid succession and finding a third one already waiting for him on the bar, Freddie gloried in his good fortune and, at the same time, became fearful that it might end all too soon. There was a desperate need to capture the young man's fancy in some manner, to hold his attention.

"You may not believe it by looking at me now," Freddie began hopefully, "but I—I was once on the stage. Had quite a following then."

"You were?"

Freddie nodded, elated by the young man's apparent interest. "Magic. Legerdemain." He became expansive. "Mundo the Magnificent, I was called."

"Well, well!" marveled the young man. "Just think of that!"

Freddie climbed down from his stool and drew himself up to his full height of five feet, seven inches. "You wouldn't believe the audiences I played to!" He held onto the bar with one hand while the other stroked the short gray beard that was as seedy and unkempt as the long, rumpled overcoat he wore. "I packed them in! Held them spellbound!"

"Wonderful," complimented the young man. "I'll bet you were a great success!"

Freddie's narrow shoulders suddenly sagged and a trace of moisture came to his bleary eyes. "Alas," he said, shaking his head slowly from side to side and climbing back upon his stool. "Alas, things have changed. There is no call for stage performances anymore, you know."

The young man nodded gravely, watched Freddie finish his drink, and ordered him another one. "Say," he said suddenly, as if a happy thought had just struck him, "I happen to be a magician myself.

Not professional like you, of course—just sort of a hobby with me, something to amuse my friends. Perhaps you could help me smooth out some of my tricks and show me a few new ones."

"My right hand," said Freddie, holding it up. "Got it hurt a while back." He flexed his fingers stiffly. "Might be a bit awkward . . ."

"Doesn't matter. You could show me in slow motion. And, of course, I'd expect to pay you for your trouble."

Freddie brightened, tossed off the drink he was holding, and gazed wistfully at the empty glass. "Maybe I could show you a few of the easier ones," he admitted.

"I'll tell you what," the young man said, glancing nervously at his watch, "I've got to meet a very important client right now, but it shouldn't take more than, say, forty-five minutes. I could pick you up at the corner afterward and we could go to my apartment."

"Right," said Freddie.

The young man summoned the bartender. "Give my friend another one," he ordered, "and I'll take a fifth of Scotch."

Freddie could scarcely believe that things were turning out so well. Maybe the siege of bad luck that had hounded him for the past few weeks was at last coming to an end.

"This might help to limber up the fingers," the young man said as the refilled glass and a packaged bottle arrived.

"Sure thing!" Freddie clutched the glass with one hand and reached doubtfully but hopefully for the bottle with the other.

"Not now." The young man got from his stool and tucked the bottle under his arm. "Later, when I meet you at the corner." He glanced at his watch again, and his fingers trembled slightly as he picked up some bills from the bar. "Buy yourself another drink or two while you're waiting," he said, indicating the two one-dollar bills and some small change he had left. "And remember, at the corner in exactly forty-five minutes."

"I'll be there," Freddie promised.

After the young man had gone, Freddie picked up the money and stowed it carefully away into a coat pocket. Then, glass in hand, he made his way to a small booth at the far side of the room. He turned quickly and focused his eyes on the large, illuminated clock behind the bar. Exactly ten o'clock. He sat down and began sipping his drink slowly and thoughtfully. He had no intention of spending the money in his pocket at the present moment. If the young man picked him up at the corner, there would be a whole bottle to work on. If the young man

failed to keep his promise—well, he could use the money for a few beers at a cheaper joint and maybe finish off the evening with a bowl of hot soup.

After a while, he took some of the coins from his pocket, tucked them between his stiff fingers, made them appear and disappear, and plucked them out of thin air again. It was one of the very few tricks he knew, and his injured hand was not at all clever at it, but he felt he could bluff his way through for at least one evening.

As time dragged slowly on, Freddie found himself troubled by depressing thoughts. What if the young man had simply given him the brush-off? It had happened many times before, just when he had hoped that things had changed for the better. Too many times! The feeling of depression brought with it the vague sense of loneliness he had so often experienced. What if, after forty-five minutes of waiting, he didn't . . .

He shook the thought from him. The fellow was just a nice young man, friendly, sympathetic and all. Probably a salesman of some kind—real estate or insurance—and had to see clients at odd hours of the day and night. Probably chose to meet him at the corner because he might have trouble finding a parking place for his car. No reason, really, why he wouldn't keep his promise.

When the hands on the clock behind the bar indicated ten-forty, Freddie drained the last drop of liquor from his glass, made a quick trip to the men's room, and then ambled out into the street. A chill fall wind had sprung up and there were only a few people about. He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his coat and made his way slowly toward the corner. Finding no car waiting there, he shuffled over to a mailbox and leaned against it, depression taking hold of him once again. Perhaps he had let his hopes for a successful evening run too high, as he had done on several other occasions. He should have known better. Misfortune and disappointment had become a way of life with him lately.

What to do? Stand in the cold and wait for a young man who probably had no intention of showing up? Seek the warmth of another tavern and spend the rest of a fruitless evening drinking beer?

He was about to quit his post in utter defeat when a car slid to a sudden halt at the curb and a door flew open. Freddie pushed himself away from the mailbox, slid quickly into the front seat, and closed the door behind him.

"Had a bit of misfortune," the young man said, getting the car under way. "My client was sewed up

with other matters—I'll have to see him later on. Here." He handed Freddie the bottle from the seat beside him.

Freddie wasted no time getting the bottle from its package, unscrewing its cap, and tilting it to his waiting lips. As the fiery, life-giving liquid trickled down his throat, his hopes for a satisfying evening began to soar again.

"Didn't want to keep you waiting," the young man continued. "A promise is a promise."

"Right," Freddie said. "A promise is a promise." He tilted the bottle again.

"The only thing I can do is to take you to my apartment and let you entertain yourself there for a while. This little business deal I have going for me happens to be extremely important, you know."

"Right," Freddie agreed.

The young man drew the car into a parking space a few minutes later and shut off the engine. "My apartment is just around the corner and down the street a ways," he said, getting out. "Can you make it all right?"

"Sure thing." Freddie got the door open, succeeded in getting to a firm standing position on the second try, shoved the bottle into the safe confines of a coat pocket, and followed the young man around the corner, weaving only slightly.

The side street was certainly not one of the better ones in town, definitely not the type of area in which Freddie had expected the young man to live. In fact, the street was not more than a dozen blocks from his own shabby haunts.

Halfway down the street, the young man turned suddenly into a doorway, and Freddie stumbled in after him. There were a few tin mailboxes along one wall and a narrow stairway leading upward. Freddie started up the stairway; pulling himself along with the aid of a railing that threatened momentarily to detach itself from the wall. Near the top, he missed a step, swung precariously back against the wall, and clung to the railing for dear life.

"Steady, old-timer," said the young man, clutching him under the arms and bolstering him up until he got his feet firmly planted again.

"I'll—I'll make it now," promised Freddie.

The young man opened the second door along the right side of the dimly lighted hallway, reached inside, and switched on the lights. Freddie surveyed the room with a quick glance. There was a closed door along one wall and an alcoved kitchenette in one corner. Although cheaply furnished, the room was clean and showed the unmistakable

signs of a woman's personal touch.

"Not much of a place," apologized the young man. "But after I get this business deal under way, I'll be able to have something a lot nicer." He indicated the closed door. "We'll have to be fairly quiet—don't want to awaken the wife, you know."

"Sure thing." Freddie winked understandingly, took the bottle from his coat, and slumped down into an easy chair.

The young man glanced at his watch. "Hate to run off like this, but business is business. I'll be back in a half hour or so. Just some contracts and things to sign." At the door, he paused. "Make yourself comfortable. And remember, I'll pay you well for your time."

Once safely back in his car, the young man peeled the moustache from his lip, swept the blond wig from his head, and shoved them into the glove compartment. He drew in a deep breath and heaved a trembling sigh of relief as he got the car under way.

His affair with Millie had at first been merely a lark, a pleasing diversion, but thanks to her grasping nature, it had rapidly got completely out of hand. Her demands and threats had become intolerable.

"I want an apartment of my own, nice things to wear," she had insisted, "and no basement bargains."

"But I can't afford it."

"Then have your gracious and very rich wife increase your allowance!"

"I can't, and I'm already in debt."

"Then how would you like to have her find out about what you've been doing behind her back, and have her cut you off completely?"

Now, after finding the old derelict, and figuring out how to keep him waiting in the bar, he had been able to silence her threats and infernal bickering once and for all—and his timing had been perfect. Millie's roommate would arrive home from work within fifteen minutes or so. When she found the old drunk in the livingroom and discovered Millie's lifeless body on the bed, she would scream to high heaven, and the police would take it from there. Even if the old coot babbled something about a man with a moustache and blond hair, the description would lead nowhere.

Better for the old buzzard to be in jail than bumming about the streets for the rest of his life, he rationalized.

Left alone, Freddie waited until the sound of footsteps on the stairs had died away. Then he placed the bottle on a little table near his chair, pushed himself quickly to his

feet, and walked softly to the closed door at the side of the room. He twisted the knob silently and pushed the door slightly open. Light stabbing into the room from behind him revealed a young woman sprawled out on the bed. She seemed to be sleeping quite soundly.

He pushed the door farther open and tiptoed to the bed. He looked at the woman's pale left hand. There was no diamond or wedding band there, just a cheap ring that could be picked up at any bargain counter—certainly not worth fooling with—and a quick survey of the room brought nothing of value to his attention.

Back in the livingroom, he fished a billfold from his pocket and opened it. A low whistle escaped his thin lips as the stiff fingers of his right hand fumbled through a goodly sheaf of currency.

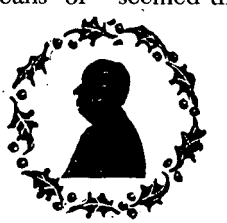
Not too long ago, when Freddie had put his fingers into another pocket, the owner of that pocket—a big man completely devoid of humor—discovered those fingers and twisted them unmercifully, putting a crimp into Freddie's means of livelihood. Even so, it had been an easy task for those experienced fingers to extract the billfold from the young man's inner pocket during the faked stumbling act on the stairway. It was the chance Freddie had been hoping for ever since he had spotted the billfold back at the bar.

He quickly jammed the billfold back into the safe confines of his coat pocket, picked up the bottle from the table and tucked it carefully under his arm.

At the doorway, he paused. The evening had been a great success, and since the young man had been such a nice fellow, buying him drinks and a bottle and offering to pay him for a few lessons in magic, there was no need to inconvenience him when it really wasn't necessary.

He took the billfold from his pocket again and extracted only the currency from it, leaving intact its contents of credit cards, driver's license, and other personal items—and tossed it into the doorway of the bedroom where the nice young man would be sure to find it when he came home later that night.

Under the circumstances, it seemed the decent thing to do.



There is one species of animal that is always eminently worthy of greater study.

"LAURA?" Ben called through the closed door of his inner sanctum, the spare bedroom he had converted into an office. *Ben's Den. Genius at work.* "Could we have some coffee?"

Ben always cushioned demands as questions. Anything you did for Ben was always a big favor. "Coming right up," she said, hurrying across creaky boards. In the slightly lopsided kitchen she poured the coffee: very black, plenty of sugar. Before taking it into Ben's Den, she quickly put on a slinky nightgown.

Ben didn't notice. Lean, boyish, intense, tousle-headed, he stayed hunched over his portable typewriter under the green-shaded light, surrounded by papers, files, and reference books. Her assistant professor of zoology at Mayberry College had turned out to be a deadly serious and ambitious young man.

"Thanks, honey." He stared at the typewriter, stirred at the coffee absently with his left hand, fingered his gold-rimmed glasses with his right.

She watched him from the shadows.

"I'm keeping the old title," he said. *"Migratory Habits of House Rats as Controlled by Food Supply."*

"A good working title," she said. "You want anything else, dear?" she added, being cautiously hopeful.

"What time is it?"

"Almost eight."

"Probably be working late again. I'm running behind and I've got to tie up this experiment before summer vacation ends. Don't wait up for me."

The lonely stillness of the old, somewhat rehabilitated farmhouse pressed in. "All right, Ben. How's the paper coming?"

"Okay, honey." There was the quick smile of tenderness which almost concealed his impatience at being touched by the commonplace. "I wish you'd work with me again, honey. Side by side like it used to be. Typing notes, research. Easier for me. Cozier too."

"I—I'm trying."

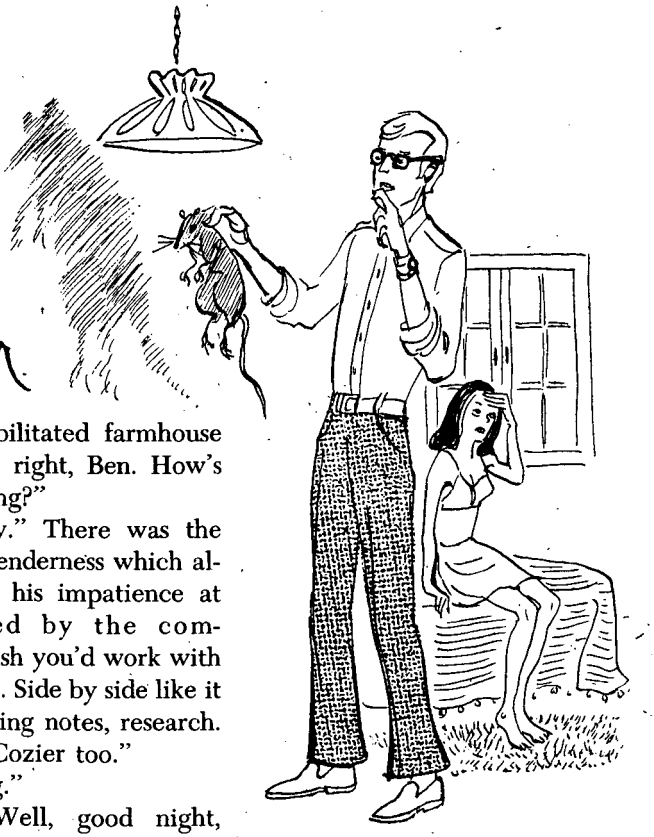
"Ummmm. Well, good night, honey."

"Good night. I'll miss you, Ben."

She walked through the shadows to the darkening bedroom and looked at the window. Insects thudded on the screen. Wind sighed through birch trees—or were they alders? There was the occasional sly, teasing rustle of the little folk scurrying in the walls.

She shivered. TV reception was awful out here. Her nerves were

by Bryce Walton



too ragged for reading. Even if she knew anyone around these remote Vermont hills, she couldn't invite them over. Ben didn't want to socialize until his paper was completed and approved for publication in *Science Quarterly*. Of course *he* wasn't lonely, not with his burning ambition and little furred friends. She decided to chance being slightly less bored by a Saturday night movie in Mayberry. Sliding open the closet door, she reached for a blouse.

A large brown house rat with grimy fur and crusted tail wobbled out and collapsed on the yellow shag rug. It writhed and kicked its legs. Its blunt, wet nose quivered. Its powerful jaws hung open, baring long, curved incisors with sharp cutting edges. Its sharp, shiny and joyless eyes looked up at her as its body twitched.

A scream rose up and choked off in Laura's throat. She mustn't scream. No scenes, please. Backing to the door, she called down the hall, her voice sounding louder than she had intended. "Ben! Come here, please, Ben."

He appeared, smiling to soften his irritation. Repressing a shudder, she pointed at the rat. It lay on its side, still twitching. She could imagine nothing more horrible than rats. She felt sick at the sight of them, and the musty smell. But Ben picked it up by the scruff of the neck with a gentle reverence and compassion. Now she knew why he'd begun dousing himself with cologne. It concealed the odor of rats.

"Dead," he said. "Malnutrition, I'd say." He held it up to the light to examine the toe-clipped markings on its right foot. "This is Mary IV. She's the eighty-seventh migrant."

Laura felt faint and sagged down onto the bed. She knew herself well enough to diagnose the cause of her migraines, one of which was now on its gruesome, throbbing way—repressed feelings piling up and exploding in the head; strong feelings, like the scream stopped up in her throat still wanting to get out. She wanted to let it rip out at the top of her lungs, but she couldn't allow herself to lose control, make scenes, upset Ben and his applecart. Yet controlling herself was getting more and more difficult, migraines growing more frequent. Rats being allowed to migrate out of the lab Ben had built in the basement were bad enough. She'd been able to take that, though. But this invasion of her closet . . . She imagined them nesting among her most intimate things!

"Ben," she whispered.

"This just about winds up the food limitation testing," Ben said proudly, still examining the rat.

"Ben . . ." No, she simply had to control herself. So much was at stake for Ben: reputation; prestige; salary increase; advancement from associate professor to a full professorship, and on to who knows where and what?

Not to mention the crucial scientific and practical considerations of the project itself. *Rattus norvegicus*, that common brown house rat, was a major enemy of man and civilization. No question about it. It was the cleverest, most adaptable and destructive animal on earth besides man. It destroyed four times as much property as fire. It bit babies, infected, deformed. It destroyed $250,000,000 in food every year. It carried 10 human diseases, including plague, typhus, spirochetal jaundice, rat-bite fever, rabies, tularemia, and food poisoning; was infested with 18 different kinds of lice, fleas and mites, and 11 kinds of parasites. A single *Rattus norvegicus* couple produced 19 generations in three years, or 359,709,480 new and ravenous rats.

Mankind's war with rats had been going on a long time. Millions of dollars were spent annually, but the rats were winning. They had killed more men than all of his wars against himself. In the year 163 they helped speed the fall of the Roman Empire by infecting its soldiers with bubonic plague, "the black death." Tragic statistics . . .

It can happen to us, Laura knew. She was familiar with *Rattus norvegicus* from having started out doing Ben's research and typing notes. Since scientific understanding would help control rats, help win the war against them, there was just no question about the terrific importance of Ben's research project. Nor was there any question about letting her personal discomforts stand in the way of success. She must not lose control.

If he would only get it out of the bedroom . . .

"At least now it's scientifically established what happens when the number of rats increases to the point where the limited food supply no longer supports the population."

"They go away," she said.

"They migrate, yes."

She knew that Ben had no idea what a bad time she was having. So how could he be sympathetic, especially when he was so preoccupied with his work? He saw only the surface of her defense, which appeared quite different than the inner torments. What he saw was probably aloofness, detachment, a coldness toward him and his work, disinterest. Still she must conceal the true inner feelings. If he knew her to be practicing brinkmanship with nervous collapse, he might abandon his project. If he did that, just for

her, their future together would be even less of a ball than it was now.

Ben laid the rat out across the top of the bed table, whipped a note pad from his back pocket and jotted down memoranda. "During one month of overpopulation threat, only ten marked rats left the basement lab and were caught outside. Now, you see, there have been over eighty migrants."

"Yes–yes, I've seen a few scampering about the–"

"I've kept the minimal food allowance of 1000 grams per rat per day stable. No increase. Now you see what happens as the population multiplies, but the food supply remains the same. Rats don't stop breeding. They don't attack each other. The excess population migrates, leaves the others with the 1000 grams per day necessary to sustain life and provide proper nutrition. Now, that's remarkable!"

Laura's face felt feverishly hot. Something from the rats? No. Before coming out here with Ben she'd received toxoid shots and a series of anti-rabies shots. No, her problem was strictly emotional. She just didn't like rats, and–

Ben was looking pensively at her face, his blue eyes blinking with studious concern. He took off his glasses and began wiping the lenses. "You're crying," he said softly.

"Am–am I?" It really was something of a surprise. She sighed.

He reached for her hand but she flinched back involuntarily, getting a visual flash of his fingers caressing a rat. She swayed toward him again but he was stepping away, looking hurt and resigned. "I know how tough it is for you, honey." He hesitated. "Do you want me to drop the project? Move back to the city?"

"Oh no, Ben!"

"Do *you* want to move back? We can't afford much of an apartment, but maybe you could move back in with Julie for a while. You'll have your old friends and your art lessons again. It won't be for long and–"

"No, Ben," she cut in, her voice rising toward shrillness. A dreary fear seized her at his mention of even a temporary separation. It would only be the prelude to the final split. And he didn't understand about the singles life in the city. That was real loneliness, indignity, and deepening depression without hope. The thought of going back to it made the rats seem more palatable. Anyway, the rats project would soon be over. She had to see them through.

"You're sure?"

"Very, very sure, Ben. Believe me, I'm sure. I'm not blaming anyone or anything but myself. I accepted all this when I married you. I knew what kind of work you did in the lab. I helped you do it. I

knew you worked with guinea pigs and rats. And I know you have to be isolated out here to carry on your experiment with migrating rats. It's just having them running around the house." She managed a smile. "A bit more than I bargained for, but the wife of an up-and-coming scientist must be ready for unexpected challenges, right?"

"Right, honey." A touch of his old grin flickered.

"I may be a little bit allergic to rodents, but I'm going to fight it, Ben. We're in this fight together, darling—all the way!"

"That sounds more like my old Laura." Ben's boyish grin turned on full. He slapped her on the back. Then his grin lowered to a sober frown. "Allergies have emotional causes, don't they, honey? Usually? It could be conflict about possessiveness. Unconsciously, of course, you may be jealous of my project—jealous of the rats for taking me away from you. This is a common problem with the wives of scientists and artists. Especially in this case when, as you said, the rats aren't off in a lab somewhere, but here in the house. Your house. The house has that special symbolic meaning for a woman. She identifies—"

"Oh yes, Ben," she interrupted eagerly. "I never thought of that, but it does ring a bell. It really does." She gave a mock shiver. "It's me against them—a whole houseful of squealing and voracious mistresses. Well, they're not running me out, Ben. I'm staying and asserting my authority over my domain!"

"Good girl." His grin came back. "So how about a direct confrontation? That's the sure, fast way to beat this hang-up. Get back into harness with me, honey, like old times, and help me wrap up this project. It'll go easier and a lot faster, and we'll be heading out of here that much sooner. What about it?"

She swallowed hard. She moved her head up and down. "Wonderful, Ben. Just a wonderful idea." She pulled the note pad out of his back pocket and the pen from his shirt pocket. "Might as well start now to get the rust out of my shorthand. What phase of the project are we in now, Doctor? And where do we go from here?"

"Well . . ." Ben began to pace around the bedroom, hands clasped behind his back, bespectacled eyes on the ceiling in mock professorial reflection. "We have kept the food supply at a stable level of 1000 grams per rat per day. The females keep on producing twelve litters a year, each litter numbering ten ravenous young rats. We know that when colony population exceeds food supply, there is no birth control, no attacking each other for

food rights, no killing. The excess members of the colony migrate, and keep on migrating. The colony thus remains stable with the continuing food supply of 1000 grams per day. What we must seek now is the answer to an even more astonishing and complex question. What determines which rats migrate? Are the older, younger, predominately male or female, weaker or stronger rats chosen? What rats make the crucial decision? And how do they make it?"

Laura looked up from the note pad. "Sounds fascinating, Ben. Ah—how much longer do you figure the project will take? I mean the whole thing?"

"That depends on how hard we can work—together."

In the morning, Laura put on her old slacks and work smock. She popped one of the blue-coated tranquilizers into her mouth from the fat bottle forwarded to her by good old Dr. Webb in the city. Then she knocked back a bourbon chaser and began to appreciate Ben's dedication, his love, patience, intelligence and insight. She was being childish and possessive and selfish. She would return to Ben's side, share his trials and his loathsome mistresses, and later his triumphs. Maybe even the Nobel Prize.

Take action against a sea of *Rattus norvegicus* and thereby banish infantile self-centeredness. Go to it, gal. Face up. Only way to conquer fear is eyeball to eyeball. She'd read it somewhere when she used to read a lot. She couldn't remember where.

"Do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain."

She went down the hall to the office and was soon busy in Ben's Den, sorting notes, typing and retyping. It went on that way, quite well and comfortably, even therapeutically, for several days.

Then Ben burst into the den, beaming with boyish excitement. He hustled her down the hall. Her stomach turned over as he pulled her across the kitchen to the bolted, steel-reinforced door that led down into the basement lab.

"Phase two, phase two," he said.

She popped another tranquilizer into her mouth. Her upper lip was wet. Her mouth was dry as dust inside and her tongue felt swollen. When Ben opened the door a damp, musty smell came up, along with a chorus of scurrying, scratching, squeaking, squealing and gnawing.

Ben beamed a flash down and naked white light played over wire mesh pens. The pens were kept open and hundreds of rats ran freely over the concrete floor,

around containers of food and water and in the corners littered with paper, cotton, and beaverboard for nest-building. The entire basement was rat-proofed with concrete and sheet metal around the walls to a height of seven feet. One drain pipe leading outside had been left open for migrants.

Laura forced herself down the stairs after Ben. It was the only way. This had to come and this was it. Face up, shape up or ship out. She found herself down there somehow, near the wall, hearing them scurrying and squeaking around her boots. But she couldn't look down. The palms of her hands were wet. Her fingers quivered. She stood rigid feeling her flesh shrink upward, pulling away from her bones as though drawn by a magnet. She felt like screaming and jumping straight up, up through the house and into the sky.

"You okay, honey?"

"Fine, Ben. I'm fine," she heard her voice echoing around metallically like a recording. She felt a smile pasted across her face.

"I've begun a new phase of the experiment, honey. See?"

She felt a twitch in the corner of her mouth. She forced her head to turn to the right, then to the left. Dim walls and the cobwebby rafters of the ceiling wavered and slipped and drifted like the walls and mirrors in a carnival crazy house.

"Yes. You've stopped up the one escape pipe. No more migrants?"

"Why do you think, my zoological associate, that the pipe is plugged?"

"Now we—we find out what happens if the population continues to increase, but the food supply does not—and the problem cannot be solved by migration."

"Right on, honey." Ben beamed proudly. "What happens? Cannibalism? Will the young, old, male or female have the better survival value? Reproduction might even slow down. We just don't know. But we'll soon find out. One thing we know—they'll have to eat. Rats are the most voracious eaters on earth. They can and do eat just about anything. They'll go through all their nests and they'll devour that nesting material. They'll gnaw up concrete and maybe even those plastic water and food trays. But very soon they'll have only each other."

"That's nice, Ben. I mean—" Her lower lip was trembling. "It's a fascinating problem. Fascinating. But now I—I've got to look at the pot roast." She backed toward the stairs. Something squealed and jerked from under her right heel. She froze.

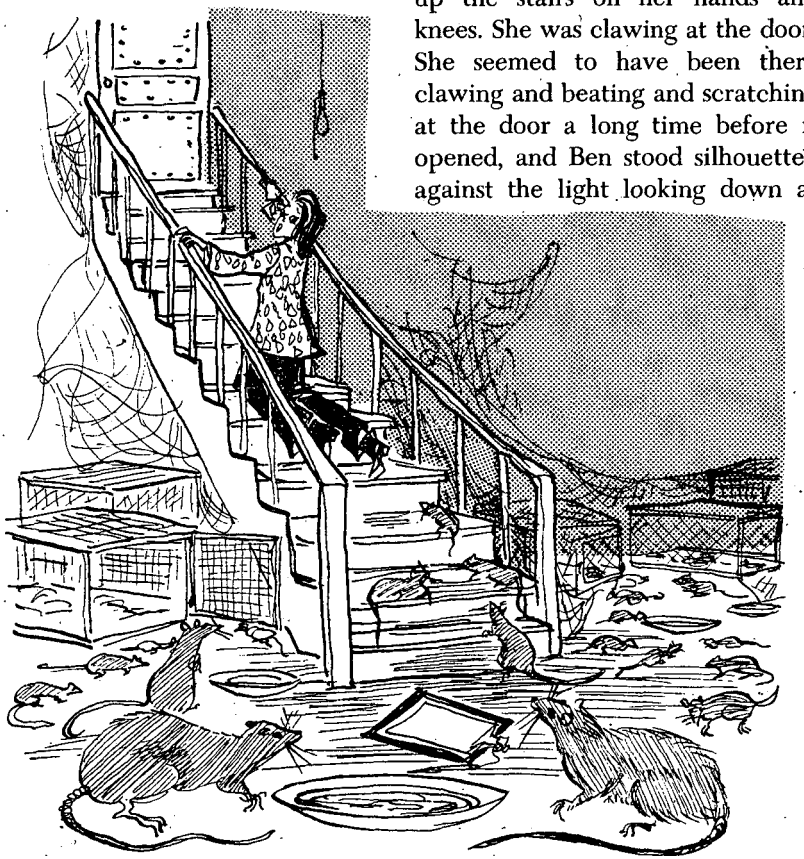
"I'll check the roast, honey," Ben

said. "Have to bring down some wire. I'm going to rig up another very sensitive microphone here." He handed her the clipboard to which was attached a pencil hanging by a string. "I've got to finish these population graphs. Now I want you to finish up this rough sketch of the lab as it looks now, with the plugged exit pipe, its position, and so forth. Every change in the experiment has to be sketched out."

"Ben!"

He was already halfway up the stairs. A loose board squeaked. She started to scream, but put her hand over her mouth. The door opened up there, then clanged shut.

She tried to sketch, but the clipboard fell out of her hands and then she was running, falling, scrabbling up the stairs on her hands and knees. She was clawing at the door. She seemed to have been there clawing and beating and scratching at the door a long time before it opened, and Ben stood silhouetted against the light looking down at



her. Then he was lifting her up.

"Laura, Laura honey—what on earth?" He was half carrying her to the bedroom. "I'm sorry—I'm really sorry, honey. I just didn't realize how bad it was."

She opened her eyes. She remembered vaguely waking up and seeing Ben's worried face bending over her, and the face turning misty and fading away. She didn't know how many times, but she seemed to have been in bed for several days. Some kind of fever, Ben had whispered once. She recalled Ben administering to her tenderly, preparing broths and medications, soothing her forehead with cold cloths.

Now he sat beside the bed again, only this time his face was clearer and it didn't fade away. At least it wasn't fading away yet.

"You'll be all right now, Laura. You'll be fine now."

"Yes," she said faintly. "I will. I know I will. Nothing like that will happen again, Ben. I promise."

"Don't worry about it. Want to know how the project's going?"

"Yes, yes, Ben. Tell me what's been happening in the lab."

Ben's eyes lit up with excitement. She listened carefully. Much was happening in the basement. Important, startling developments were occurring along the highway of scientific advance in rat genealogy.

"I've been trapping and weighing rats, examining their physical condition."

"How is their physical condition, Ben?"

"Varied. Rats have much the same nervous system as we do. That's why we use white rats for lab experiments. Anyway, many of them are developing symptoms of nervous disorder as the hunger pressure grows. Food supply doesn't increase. Population increasing rapidly. No way to get more food. No way out. None of the migratory methods can work. Many rats are showing signs of psychosis."

"What else can they do?"

"We'll soon see. Many new rats are on the scene, and many females are pregnant. They're really up tight down there, believe me. What will they do now? If they start attacking one another for the food, who will win? Some rats apparently are deliberately starving themselves to death; martyrs. What sort of rats decide on that role, and why?"

"Keep me informed, Ben," she said, smiling faintly. "Keep me informed," she repeated as he hurried out of the room.

She drifted off. And then it was at night; not that night, but some other night, and she was up and walking around, trying to feel strong, trying to stop giving in to

foolish, childish, over-possessive weakness. But she still felt weak and a bit feverish and with little dizzy spells. She stopped just outside the darkened livingroom, hearing the whispering in there and being afraid before she realized that it was Ben in there talking on the the telephone.

She listened. A moment later she realized that Ben had no idea she was up and about, but figured she was still in bed. The throbbing pain in her head was coming back. She could feel her heart grinding painfully.

"Listen, Julie honey," Ben was saying, "I'm telling you it won't be much longer. She's just about had it, I can tell you. Up to here. She's had a breakdown already, but she's just too stubborn to admit it and go the rest of the way. The rat project's coming along nicely too. It'll definitely put me on the map. And listen, honey, I said it was definite. We'll be together soon—very soon—that's a promise . . . Yes, I said she's about had it. She'll be pulling stakes or be taken to the hospital in a few days, depend on it—and I mean Bellevue . . . That's right. I've got a little thing worked out for her that'll send her right out of her tree . . ."

There was really no point in eavesdropping for more. Laura tiptoed back down the hall to the bedroom and slipped into bed and lay shivering and perspiring as though recovering from some nameless disease. She went to sleep and dreamed she was a bird flying away toward the sun. It was the first pleasant dream she'd had in a long time.

She awoke feeling much better. She got up and heard birds singing out in the green leaves by the window. She didn't feel weak or dizzy at all. The busy sound of Ben's typewriter came from the Den. She listened to it a while, then went into the kitchen and brewed up a fresh pot of coffee. She made it very black, poured a cupful and put in plenty of sugar. Then she opened ten tranquilizer capsules and dumped the white powder into the coffee and took the cup into Ben's Den. Just enough, she figured, to put him into a deep, sound sleep.

He glanced up and seemed startled. Then he smiled and took the cup and sipped it gratefully. The steam from the cup misted over his glasses until he had no eyes.

"You look a lot better, honey."

"I feel better. How's the project going?"

"Younger rats are holding their own and are surviving. They're killing the older rats and guarding the food supply. A real vicious, competitive hell going on down there."

"I've been thinking, Ben. I think

it's pretty mean, starving those poor creatures, making them kill and eat one another. The truth is, I've always felt it was cruel the way scientists treat guinea pigs, dogs, mice, rats and rhesus monkeys."

"Let's say lesser animals are here to serve man." Ben sipped and yawned. He stared at the cup and yawned again. His head sagged toward his chest.

"Such a callous attitude toward animals leads to a kind of contempt for human life, too," Laura said. "I'm sure it does. Is it really much of a jump from rats to people?"

"That's a—a horrible thought . . ." Ben reached over to put the almost empty cup on his desk, but his reach was too short. The cup fell and shattered on the floor. Ben stared at it and yawned. His body sagged forward. He straightened up a little and tried to look up at Laura. "Horrible—thought . . ."

He rolled over, head between his knees, onto the floor.

Laura looked down at him and remembered her dream of being a bird. She also remembered a mystery story she'd read and how to drag a body easily over the floor. She rolled Ben onto a throw rug and pulled him down the hall and through the kitchen to the door that led down into the basement.

She hesitated only a moment. Then she lifted the bolts and opened the door, shoved Ben through and heard his body sliding down the stairs. Before she could get the door shut a wave of crazed rats swarmed out and over the kitchen floor. But Laura didn't mind. There were plenty more—hundreds and hundreds—where they came from. They were voracious, starving, all of them. And they weren't discriminating, Ben had said. They would eat anything.

She called the sheriff's office in Mayberry. "There's been a terrible accident," she said. "My husband—the rats—the rats . . ." And then she began to scream—and scream—as though she were making up for lost time.

When the sheriff arrived, Laura was in Ben's Den typing her version of Alexander Pope's famous dictum:

"The proper study of man is Rattus norvegicus."

One may clearly see that it is not sharp, pointed words that decide a particular affair.

The Liver Feast

by E. Crandall

ABOUT FIVE-THIRTY I got on the horn and called Rube Edmonds, who lived in the apartment right above ours. It rang only three times before he answered.

"Hey, Rube," I said in a real jovial tone, "you like liver, don't you? How about you come down and join me for dinner? Bonnie's gone shopping and I hate to eat alone."

Rube hesitated a moment and there was a kind of surprise in his voice when he asked, "You really inviting me, Paul?"

"Sure I am. This liver's extra special—smothered in onions." Rube knew I was the meatcutter at the supermarket at the Elm Street Shopping Plaza, and lots of times I get special cuts of things. I used to ask him down before Bonnie and me got married a couple of years back.

"Okay, Paul. Sure, you know me. You want me to come down right now?"

"Yeah, why not? We'll have us a beer while I'm cooking the liver and onions. Come on down, Rube," I told him cheerfully.

I hung up and went into the kitchen, took out a couple of cans of brew and set them on the kitchen table. Rube knocked and I yelled

for him to come on in. "Door's not locked."

Rube came to the kitchen door and looked at me, and I grinned at him cheerfully. "You never used to knock before me and Bonnie married up," I told him. "You gone polite, or something?"

Rube shrugged and gave me a small smile which lifted his lips from his nice white teeth. No doubt about it, Rube was about the handsomest man I ever knew. Women had always gone for him; he'd had his choice, the lucky bum. Not like me; with this face, I figured I was the luckiest guy in the world when Bonnie said she'd marry me.

I motioned to the kitchen table and to the cans of beer. "Sit and drink," I suggested. "How's the work going?" Rube worked the night shift at the cannery, which meant he went to work at eleven—and also it meant he was free to do what he wanted all day.

"So-so," Rube answered. "The union got us a three-cent raise, only it costs so much to live it didn't do no good. Not really." He sat down and ripped off the top of one of the cans.

I left off slicing the liver for a moment and sat down opposite him. I ripped off the top of my can. "Well, cheers," I said.

Rube grinned and leaned back, crossing his legs. "Cheers."

"Been some time, ain't it, Rube?" I commented. "I mean, since I got married."

"Sure has, Paul, it sure has." He gave me a knowing grin. "I didn't want to bust up newlyweds, you know, or anything like that."

"Ain't she something, Rube?" I asked. "I mean, ain't she, really?"

"She's a nice-lookin' filly, Paul, she sure is. Not my type, maybe, but she is sure some looker."

"That figure, Rube?" I made a gesture with my two hands even if I was holding the beer can in my right.

"Yeah, she's got a cute figure, all right, Paul. I'll say this for you, you sure can pick 'em."

"She's out buying something—said it was a present for me. She's going to dinner with some of her girlfriends." I made a kind of a grimace. "You know how they are. Women!"

"Yeah, women!" Rube said. "Well, here's how." He took a deep draw on the beer and so did I.

I got up and went to the counter beside the sink. I held up a little slice of the liver. "Rube, ain't that beautiful?" I asked. "Did you ever see a piece of liver like that?"

He glanced at it indifferently. He was still watching me cautiously. "Me, I'm not a meat man, Paul. I wouldn't know a good piece of liver until I ate it."

"Well, you just wait till I cook this," I told him. "Then you'll know."

I turned my back to him and started to slice the rest of the liver into small, thin slices, very, very carefully. As a good meatcutter, I know how important a sharp knife is, and I keep my knives extra sharp at home as well as at the market. When I'd finished, I turned around to tell Rube he could have himself another beer. I still had the sharp knife in my hand and naturally there was blood on it.

"Rube," I started to say, but he got up quickly, which was very quickly indeed because Rube was an agile man—not big and strong like me, but very fast. His eyes were on the knife. "Hey, Rube? What's with you? You think I was going to stick you, a good friend of mine, with my knife? Go get another beer, Rube, and get another out for me, too, huh?"

I grinned at him and he grinned back. "That's what I was going to do," he said glibly, and I nodded.

While he was busy getting the beers, I reached down and got my sack of onions from the lower cupboard. "Here's where I bawl," I said. "Onions always make me bawl."

"You're the crying type," Rube said companionably.

"Not really," I answered. "Only onions make me bawl. If something else comes up that might make a guy cry, I go for action, know what I mean? I do something. I don't stand and bawl. Not then." I turned and grinned at Rube and he nodded and grinned back, though he didn't look like he was enjoying my chatter so much.

I sliced the onions, using the same sharp knife. Like I said, I started to cry, but I went on slicing them anyway. "Some people say if you slice 'em under water, they won't make you bawl," I said conversationally. "I'd rather bawl."

"Yeah, you would," Rube said like he was kidding me.

So for a couple of minutes the tears ran down my cheeks, and then I got out the skillet and put it on the burner. "I got salads already made. You like liver gravy?" I asked.

"Sure," Rube answered. "You know I do."

"Okay, so I make some. I'll season it good—I like high seasoning, don't you, Rube? Sort of hides bad tastes sometimes. Know what I mean? I got mashed spuds all ready."

Rube took a draw on the beer.

I got the skillet hot and then I put the meat and onions in with some margarine. "Rube, what do you do all day?" I asked like I was still just making conversation. "I

mean, I sleep all night and I work all day. You don't sleep all day, do you?"

"No. I sleep until about one," Rube said. "Then I get up."

"You got lots of time to do things, then, don't you, Rube? You could go visiting—see people." I gave him a sly look. "Maybe you even got a woman you can visit, huh? Maybe some woman when her husband's working, and there you are, with all the time in the world. How about it, Rube?"

He gave me a quick look and smiled. "Not me, pal. I ain't going to go playing around with some woman with a husband. It ain't safe."

I sighed. "It ain't, for a fact," I agreed.

The liver smelled good while I cooked it, and the onions were strong and satisfying too. "You want to get the salads out, Rube? You know where they are. You can set the table, too, and save me the trouble."

"Anything for a pal," Rube said mildly. His black eyes were still a little cautious, but he was relaxing.

I put the liver and onions on a platter and set it down in the middle of the table. Rube put down plates and silverware and got out the salads. "Get a couple more beers, too," I told him.

I put some flour in the skillet and let it brown nicely. Then I poured in some cold water and a little milk. It thickened just right. I seasoned it like I told Rube I would.

The mashed potatoes were already on the back of the stove. I put them on, and we sat down. Rube speared a piece of liver and a lot of onions. I watched him carefully while he took a big bite. A smile spread over his face. "Man, that's eating," he murmured. "You never done better in your whole life."

"Good, huh?" I said, pleased. "That makes me feel good." I forked liver and onions onto my own plate. Rube helped himself to potatoes and gravy and so did I. We ate in companionable silence for a while, enjoying the flavor of the liver which, of course, was in everything I'd cooked.

We each ate three pieces. There was one piece left. "Rube, you eat it," I said. "I'm so full I can't take another bite."

He shrugged and took it. I watched him finish it down to the last little bit.

"That was real good," Rube said. "I never tasted anything like it."

"Well," I said judicially, "it was a kind of special liver, Rube," I said. "Something real special. I don't think I've ever butchered up liver like that before."

Rube lit up a cigarette and

looked at me through the smoke he blew out his lips. "How? I mean how is it special?"

"Well, Rube, you know me. I'm probably the champion meatcutter of the country. I can cut up anything. Know what I mean?"

"Sure, Paul, I know. You're a good meatcutter. What'd you cut up? You going to tell me?"

"I rightly shouldn't tell you, Rube, because you might tell somebody else and get me into trouble."

"I wouldn't do that!" he said. "What was it? Goat liver or something?"

I shook my head, and sighed. "You know me, Rube. I can't tell you. It wouldn't be fair."

He laughed. "Okay, so don't! I don't give a damn. It was good liver, anyway."

I took a cigar out of my pocket and bit off the tip. Then I got up and got a kitchen match from behind the stove. "Rube," I said, "I got troubles."

"What troubles, Paul?"

"Want another beer?" I asked. He nodded, so I broke a couple out. "Troubles with women." I sat down heavily. "Rube, I lied to you," I said slowly. "Bonnie, she ain't shopping. She ain't anywhere."

"What do you mean, she ain't anywhere? Everybody's somewhere, ain't they?"

"Bonnie ain't," I said. "Not anymore she ain't. Rube, I loved that woman more'n I loved living. And you know what? Some guy has been coming up to the apartment while I'm working at the market. She's letting him!"

Rube swallowed hard. "I don't believe it," he said positively. "Not Bonnie!" He peered at me. "You got any idea who?"

"No, but I will!" I answered. "I will! I hired a detective. He's going to tell me tomorrow. He says he knows."

"No kidding! Any—anybody I know?"

"How'd I know, Rube? *I* don't know yet. Only what I'm going to do to him is exactly what I did to Bonnie."

"Did to Bonnie? What do you mean, Paul?" Rube's face was getting white.

I smiled blandly. "Rube, that was sure good liver, wasn't it?"

He looked at me, his eyes getting bigger and bigger.

I smiled and nodded. "Yes, Bonnie's. Man, wasn't it tender? She never even knew it when I did it. Never felt a thing."

He just barely made it to the kitchen sink. I watched him until he was finished. He was positively green when he turned around. "You're mad, Paul," he said in a hoarse voice, which was natural, him doing what he'd been doing.

"You're really stark raving mad!"

"Maybe so," I answered. "Just the same, when I find out the name of the guy, same thing'll happen to him." I frowned. "Probably won't be so tender, though." Then I smiled. "Want to join me again, Rube?"

"You're mad," he said again and ran out of the apartment like the devil was on his heels.

I sat there smoking my cigar. I always enjoy a good cigar after dinner, particularly if it was a good dinner like this. I thought it was pretty good liver, myself. It had a fine taste of something young and tender.

I heard the apartment door open and then Bonnie's heels on the floor. She came into the kitchen, her arms full of packages. She looked at the table with dirty dishes on it. "Hey, what's this?" she said gaily.

"I had Rube down to join me in some extra nice calves' liver," I said. "He didn't like it so good though."

A guarded look came on her face. "Rube?"

"Yeah, Rube. Kind of a farewell present. He's leaving town."

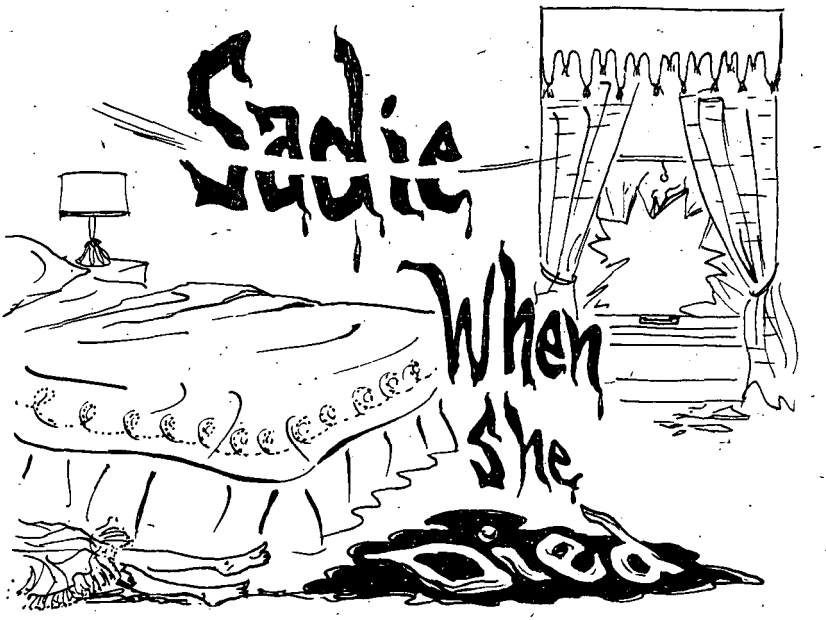
"Leaving town . . . ?"

"Yeah. I expect maybe he's already gone. Too bad, too. He was a good friend." I looked at Bonnie through cigar smoke. "He sure was, wasn't he?"

Bonnie shrugged like she didn't give a damn. "Want to see what I bought for you?" she asked gaily.

"Sure," I answered. "Of course I do." A guy always wants to see what his wife's bought, especially when he loves her as much as I do.

As Mr. Bell undoubtedly discovered, the message one attempts to transmit may, at times, be slightly garbled.



"I'M VERY GLAD she's dead," the man said.

He wore a homburg, muffler, overcoat and gloves. He stood near the night table, a tall man with a narrow face, and a well-groomed gray moustache that matched the graying hair at his temples. His eyes were clear and blue and distinctly free of pain or grief.

Detective Steve Carella wasn't sure he had heard the man correctly. "Sir," Carella said, "I'm sure I don't have to tell you—"

"That's right," the man said, "you don't have to tell me. It happens I'm a criminal lawyer and am well aware of my rights. My wife was no good, and I'm delighted someone killed her."

Carella opened his pad. This was not what a bereaved husband was

supposed to say when his wife lay disemboweled on the bedroom floor in a pool of her own blood.

"Your name is Gerald Fletcher."

"That's correct."

"Your wife's name, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Sarah. Sarah Fletcher."

"Want to tell me what happened?"

"I got home about fifteen minutes ago. I called to my wife from the front door, and got no answer. I came into the bedroom and found her dead on the floor. I immediately called the police."

"Was the room in this condition when you came in?"

"It was."

"Touch anything?"

"Nothing. I haven't moved from this spot since I placed the call."

"Anybody in here when you came in?"

a Novelette by Ed McBain

"Not a soul. Except my wife, of course."

"Is that your suitcase in the entrance hallway?"

"It is. I was on the Coast for three days. An associate of mine needed advice on a brief he was preparing. What's your name?"

"Carella. Detective Steve Carella."

"I'll remember that."

While the police photographer was doing his macabre little jig around the body to make sure the lady looked good in the rushes, or as good as any lady *can* look in her condition, a laboratory assistant named Marshall Davies was in the kitchen of the apartment, waiting for the medical examiner to pronounce the lady dead, at which time Davies would go into the bedroom and with delicate care remove the knife protruding from the blood and slime of the lady, in an attempt to salvage some good latent prints from the handle of the murder weapon.

Davies was a new technician, but an observant one, and he noticed that the kitchen window was wide open, not exactly usual on a December night when the temperature outside hovered at twelve degrees. Leaning over the sink, he further noticed that the window opened onto a fire escape on the rear of the building. He could not resist speculating that perhaps someone had climbed up the fire escape and then into the kitchen.

Since there was a big muddy footprint in the kitchen sink, another one on the floor near the sink, and several others fading as they traveled across the waxed kitchen

floor to the livingroom, Davies surmised that he was onto something hot. Wasn't it possible that an intruder *had* climbed over the windowsill, into the sink and walked across the room, bearing the switchblade knife that had later been pulled viciously across the lady's abdomen from left to right? If the M.E. ever got through with the damn body, the boys of the 87th would be halfway home, thanks to Marshall Davies. He felt pretty good.

The three points of the triangle were Detective-Lieutenant Byrnes, and Detectives Meyer Meyer and Steve Carella. Fletcher sat in a chair, still wearing homburg, muffler, overcoat and gloves as if he expected to be called outdoors at any moment. The interrogation was being conducted in a windowless cubicle labeled Interrogation Room.

The cops standing in their loose triangle around Gerald Fletcher were amazed but not too terribly amused by his brutal frankness.

"I hated her guts," he said.

"Mr. Fletcher," Lieutenant Byrnes said, "I *still* feel I must warn you that a woman has been murdered—"

"Yes. My dear, wonderful wife," Fletcher said sarcastically.

". . . which is a serious crime . . ." Byrnes felt tongue-tied in Fletcher's presence. Bullet-headed, hair turning from iron-gray to ice-white, blue-eyed, built like a compact linebacker, Byrnes looked to his colleagues for support. Both Meyer and Carella were watching their shoelaces.

"You have warned me repeatedly," Fletcher said. "I can't imagine why. My wife is dead—someone killed her—but it was not I."

"Well, it's nice to have your assurance of that, Mr. Fletcher, but this alone doesn't necessarily still our doubts," Carella said, hearing the words and wondering where the hell they were coming from. He was, he realized, trying to impress Fletcher. He continued, "How do we know it *wasn't* you who stabbed her?"

"To begin with," Fletcher said, "there were signs of forcible entry in the kitchen and hasty departure in the bedroom, witness the wide-open window in the aforementioned room and the shattered window in the latter. The drawers in the dining-room sideboard were open—"

"You're very observant," Meyer said suddenly. "Did you notice all this in the four minutes it took you to enter the apartment and call the police?"

"It's my *job* to be observant," Fletcher said. "But to answer your

question, no. I noticed all this *after* I had spoken to Detective Carella here."

Wearily, Byrnes dismissed Fletcher, who then left the room.

"What do you think?" Byrnes said.

"I think he did it," Carella said.

"Even with all those signs of a burglary?"

"*Especially* with those signs. He could have come home, found his wife stabbed—but not fatally—and finished her off by yanking the knife across her belly. Fletcher had four minutes, when all he needed was maybe four seconds."

"It's possible," Meyer said.

"Or maybe I just don't like the guy," Carella said.

"Let's see what the lab comes up with," Byrnes said.

The laboratory came up with good fingerprints on the kitchen window sash and on the silver drawer of the dining-room sideboard. There were good prints on some of the pieces of silver scattered on the floor near the smashed bedroom window. Most important, there were good prints on the handle of the switchblade knife. The prints matched; they had all been left by the same person.

Gerald Fletcher graciously allowed the police to take *his* fingerprints, which were then compared with those Marshall Davies had sent over from the police laboratory. The fingerprints on the window sash, the drawer, the silverware and the knife did not match Gerald Fletcher's.

Which didn't mean a damn thing if he had been wearing his gloves when he'd finished her off.

On Monday morning, in the second-floor rear apartment of 721 Silvermine Oval, a chalked outline on the bedroom floor was the only evidence that a woman had lain there in death the night before. Carella sidestepped the outline and looked out the shattered window at the narrow alleyway below. There was a distance of perhaps twelve feet between this building and the one across from it.

Conceivably, the intruder could have leaped across the shaftway, but this would have required premeditation and calculation. The more probable likelihood was that the intruder had fallen to the pavement below.

"That's quite a long drop," Detective Bert Kling said, peering over Carella's shoulder.

"How far do you figure?" Carella asked.

"Thirty feet. At least."

"Got to break a leg taking a fall like that. You think he went through the window headfirst?"

"How else?"

"He might have broken the glass out first, then gone through," Carella suggested.

"If he was about to go to all that trouble, why didn't he just *open* the damn thing?"

"Well, let's take a look," Carella said.

They examined the latch and the sash. Kling grabbed both handles on the window frame and pulled up on them. "Stuck."

"Probably painted shut," Carella said.

"Maybe he *did* try to open it. Maybe he smashed it only when he realized it was stuck."

"Yeah," Carella said. "And in a big hurry, too. Fletcher was opening the front door, maybe already in the apartment by then."

"The guy probably had a bag or something with him, to put the loot in. He must have taken a wild swing with the bag when he realized the window was stuck, and maybe some of the stuff fell out, which would explain the silverware on the floor. Then he probably climbed through the hole and dropped down feet first. In fact, what he could've done, Steve, was drop the bag down first, and *then* climbed out and hung from the sill before he jumped, to make it a shorter distance."

"I don't know if he had all that much time, Bert. He must have heard that front door opening, and Fletcher coming in and calling to his wife. Otherwise, he'd have taken his good, sweet time and gone out the kitchen window and down the fire escape, the way he'd come in."

Kling nodded reflectively.

"Let's take a look at that alley," Carella said.

In the alleyway outside, Carella and Kling studied the concrete pavement, and then looked up at the shattered second-floor window of the Fletcher apartment.

"Where do you suppose he'd have landed?" Kling said.

"Right about where we're standing." Carella looked at the ground. "I don't know, Bert. A guy drops twenty feet to a concrete pavement, doesn't break anything, gets up, dusts himself off, and runs the fifty-yard dash, right?" Carella shook his head. "My guess is he stayed right where he was to catch his breath, giving Fletcher time to look out the window, which would be the natural thing to do, but which Fletcher didn't."

"He was anxious to call the police."

"I still think he did it."

"Steve, be reasonable. If a guy's fingerprints are on the handle of a knife, and the knife is still in the victim—"

"*And* if the victim's husband re-

alizes what a sweet setup he's stumbled into, wife lying on the floor with a knife in her, place broken into and burglarized, why *not* finish the job and hope the burglar will be blamed?"

"Sure," Kling said. "Prove it."

"I can't," Carella said. "Not until we catch the burglar."

While Carella and Kling went through the tedious routine of retracing the burglar's footsteps, Marshall Davies called the 87th Precinct and got Detective Meyer.

"I think I've got some fairly interesting information about the suspect," Davies said. "He left latent fingerprints all over the apartment and footprints in the kitchen. A very good one in the sink, when he climbed in through the window, and some middling-fair ones tracking across the kitchen floor to the dining room. I got some excellent pictures and some good blowups of the heel."

"Good," Meyer said.

"But more important," Davies went on, "I got a good walking picture from the footprints on the floor. If a man is walking slowly, the distance between his footprints is usually about twenty-seven inches. Forty for running, thirty-five for fast walking. These were thirty-two inches. So we have a man's usual gait, moving quickly, but not in a desperate hurry, with the walking line normal and not broken."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, a walking line should normally run along the inner edge of a man's heelprints. Incidentally, the size and type of shoe and angle of the foot clearly indicate that this *was* a man."

"OK, fine," Meyer said. He did not thus far consider Davies' information valuable nor even terribly important.

"Anyway, none of this is valuable nor even terribly important," Davies said, "until we consider the rest of the data. The bedroom window was smashed, and the Homicide men were speculating that the suspect had jumped through the window into the alley below. I went down to get some meaningful pictures, and got some pictures of where he must have landed—on both feet, incidentally—and I got another walking picture and direction line. He moved toward the basement door and into the basement. But the important thing is that our man is injured, and I think badly."

"How do you know?" Meyer asked.

"The walking picture downstairs is entirely different from the one in the kitchen. When he got downstairs he was leaning heavily on the

left leg and dragging the right. I would suggest that whoever's handling the case put out a physicians' bulletin. If this guy hasn't got a broken leg, I'll eat the pictures I took."

A girl in a green coat was waiting in the apartment lobby when Carella and Kling came back in, still retracing footsteps, or trying to. The girl said, "Excuse me, are you the detectives?"

"Yes," Carella said.

"The super told me you were in the building," the girl said. "You're investigating the Fletcher murder, aren't you?" She was quite soft-spoken.

"How can we help you, miss?" Carella asked.

"I saw somebody in the basement last night, with blood on his clothes."

Carella glanced at Kling and immediately said, "What time was this?"

"About a quarter to eleven," the girl said.

"What were you doing in the basement?"

The girl sounded surprised. "That's where the washing machines are. I'm sorry, my name is Selma Bernstein. I live here in the building."

"Tell us what happened, will you?" Carella said.

"I was sitting by the machine, watching the clothes tumble, which is simply *fascinating*, you know, when the door leading to the back yard opened—the door to the alley. This man came down the stairs, and I don't even think he saw me. He went straight for the stairs at the other end, the ones that go up into the street. I never saw him before last night."

"Can you describe him?" Carella asked.

"Sure. He was about twenty-one or twenty-two, your height and weight, well, maybe a little bit shorter, five ten or eleven, brown hair."

Kling was already writing. The man was white, wore dark trousers, high-topped sneakers, and a poplin jacket with blood on the right sleeve and on the front. He carried a small red bag, "like one of those bags the airlines give you."

Selma didn't know if he had any scars. "He went by in pretty much of a hurry, considering he was dragging his right leg. I think he was hurt pretty badly."

What they had in mind, of course, was identification from a mug shot, but the I.S. reported that none of the fingerprints in their file matched the ones found in the apartment. So the detectives figured it was going to be a tough one, and they sent out a bulletin to all of

the city's doctors just to prove it.

Just to prove that cops can be as wrong as anyone else, it turned out to be a nice easy one after all.

The call came from a physician in Riverhead at 4:37 that afternoon, just as Carella was ready to go home.

"This is Dr. Mendelsohn," he said. "I have your bulletin here, and I want to report treating a man early this morning who fits your description—a Ralph Corwin of 894 Woodside in Riverhead. He had a bad ankle sprain."

"Thank you, Dr. Mendelsohn," Carella said.

Carella pulled the Riverhead directory from the top drawer of his desk and quickly flipped to the C's. He did not expect to find a listing for Ralph Corwin. A man would have to be a rank amateur to burglarize an apartment without wearing gloves, then stab a woman to death, and then give his name when seeking treatment for an injury sustained in escaping from the murder apartment.

Ralph Corwin was apparently a rank amateur. His name was in the phone book, and he'd given the doctor his correct address.

Carella and Kling kicked in the door without warning, fanning into the room, guns drawn. The man on the bed was wearing only undershorts. His right ankle was taped.

"Are you Ralph Corwin?" Carella asked.

"Yes," the man said. His face was drawn, the eyes in pain.

"Get dressed, Corwin. We want to ask you some questions."

"There's nothing to ask," he said and turned his head into the pillow. "I killed her."

Ralph Corwin made his confession in the presence of two detectives of the 87th, a police stenographer, an assistant district attorney, and a lawyer appointed by the Legal Aid Society.

Corwin was the burglar. He'd entered 721 Silvermine Oval on Sunday night, December twelfth, down the steps from the street where the garbage cans were. He went through the basement, up the steps at the other end, into the back yard, and climbed the fire escape, all at about ten o'clock in the evening. Corwin entered the Fletcher apartment because it was the first one he saw without lights. He figured there was nobody home. The kitchen window was open a tiny crack; Corwin squeezed his fingers under the bottom and opened it all the way. He was pretty desperate at the time because he was a junkie in need of cash. He swore that he'd never done anything like this before.

The man from the D.A.'s office

was conducting the Q. and A. and asked Corwin if he hadn't been afraid of fingerprints, not wearing gloves. Corwin figured that was done only in the movies, and anyway, he said, he didn't own gloves.

Corwin used a tiny flashlight to guide him as he stepped into the sink and down to the floor. He made his way to the dining room,

emptied the drawer of silverware into his airline bag. Then he looked for the bedroom, scouting for watches and rings, whatever he could take in the way of jewelry. "I'm not a pro," he said. "I was just hung up real bad and needed some bread to tide me over."

Now came the important part. The D.A.'s assistant asked Corwin what happened in the bedroom.

A. There was a lady in bed. This was only like close to ten-thirty, you don't expect nobody to be asleep so early.

Q. But there was a woman in bed.

A. Yeah. She turned on the light the minute I stepped in the room.

Q. What did you do?

A. I had a knife in my pocket. I pulled it out to scare her. It was almost comical. She looks at me and says, "What are you doing here?"

Q. Did you say anything to her?

A. I told her to keep quiet, that I wasn't going to hurt her. But she got out of bed and I saw she was reaching for the phone. That's got to be crazy, right? A guy is standing there in your bedroom with a knife in his hand, so she reaches for the phone.

Q. What did you do?

A. I grabbed her hand before she could get it. I pulled her off the bed, away from the phone, you know? And I told her again that nobody was going to hurt her, that I was getting out of there right away, to just please calm down.

Q. What happened next?

A. She started to scream. I told her to stop. I was beginning to panic. I mean she was really yelling.

Q. Did she stop?

A. No.

Q. What did you do?

A. I stabbed her.

Q. Where did you stab her?

A. I don't know. It was a reflex. She was yelling, I was afraid the whole building would come down. I just . . . I just stuck the knife in her. I was very scared. I stabbed her in the belly. Someplace in the belly.

Q. How many times did you stab her?

A. Once. She . . . She backed away from me. I'll never forget the look on her face. And she . . . she fell on the floor.

Q. Would you look at this photograph, please?

A. Oh, no . . .

Q. Is that the woman you stabbed?

A. Oh, no . . . I didn't think . . . Oh, no!

A moment after he stabbed Sarah Fletcher, Corwin heard the door opening and someone coming in. The man yelled, "Sarah, it's me, I'm home." Corwin ran past Sarah's body on the floor, and tried to open

the window, but it was stuck. He smashed it with his airline bag, threw the bag out first to save the swag because, no matter what, he knew he'd need another fix, and he climbed through the broken window, cutting his hand on a piece of glass. He hung from the sill, and finally let go, dropping to the ground. He tried to get up, and fell down again. His ankle was killing him, his hand bleeding. He stayed in the alley nearly fifteen minutes, then finally escaped via the route Selma Bernstein had described to Carella and Kling. He took the subway to Riverhead and got to Dr. Mendelsohn at about nine in the morning. He read of Sarah Fletcher's murder in the newspaper on the way back from the doctor.

On Tuesday, December 14, which was the first of Carella's two days off that week, he received a call at home from Gerald Fletcher. Fletcher told the puzzled Carella that he'd gotten his number from a friend in the D.A.'s office, complimented Carella and the boys of the 87th on their snappy detective work, and invited Carella to lunch at the Golden Lion at one o'clock. Carella wasn't happy about interrupting his Christmas shopping, but this was an unusual opportunity, and he accepted.

Most policemen in the city for which Carella worked did not eat very often in restaurants like the Golden Lion. Carella had never been inside. A look at the menu posted on the window outside would have frightened him out of six months' pay. The place was a faithful replica of the dining room of an English coach house, circa 1627: huge oaken beams, immaculate white cloths, heavy silver.

Gerald Fletcher's table was in a secluded corner of the restaurant. He rose as Carella approached, extended his hand, and said, "Glad you could make it. Sit down, won't you?"

Carella shook Fletcher's hand, and then sat. He felt extremely uncomfortable, but he couldn't tell whether his discomfort was caused by the room or by the man with whom he was dining.

"Would you care for a drink?" Fletcher asked.

"Well, are you having one?" Carella asked.

"Yes, I am."

"I'll have a Scotch and soda," Carella said. He was not used to drinking at lunch.

Fletcher signaled for the waiter and ordered the drinks, making his another whiskey sour. When the drinks came, Fletcher raised his glass. "Here's to a conviction," he said.

Carella lifted his own glass. "I

don't expect there'll be any trouble," he said. "It looks airtight to me."

Both men drank. Fletcher dabbed his lips with a napkin and said, "You never can tell these days. I hope you're right, though." He sipped at the drink. "I must admit I feel a certain amount of sympathy for him."

"Do you?"

"Yes. If he's an addict, he's automatically entitled to pity. And when one considers that the woman he murdered was nothing but a—"

"Mr. Fletcher . . ."

"Gerry, please. And I know: it isn't very kind of me to malign the dead. I'm afraid you didn't know my wife, though, Mr. Carella. May I call you Steve?"

"Sure."

"My enmity might be a bit more understandable if you had. Still, I shall take your advice. She's dead, and no longer capable of hurting me, so why be bitter. Shall we order, Steve?"

Fletcher suggested that Carella try either the trout *au meuniere* or the beef and kidney pie, both of which were excellent. Carella ordered prime ribs, medium rare, and a mug of beer.

As the men ate and talked, something began happening, or at least Carella *thought* something was happening; he might never be quite sure. The conversation with Fletcher seemed on the surface to be routine chatter, but rushing through this inane, polite discussion was an undercurrent that caused excitement, fear, and apprehension. As they spoke, Carella knew with renewed certainty that Gerald Fletcher had killed his wife. Without ever being told so, he knew it. *This* was why Fletcher had called this morning; *this* was why Fletcher had invited him to lunch; *this* was why he prattled on endlessly while every contradictory move of his body signaled on an almost extrasensory level that he *knew* Carella suspected him of murder, and was here to *tell* Carella (*without* telling him) that, "Yes, you stupid cop, I killed my wife. However much the evidence may point to another man, however many confessions you get, I killed her and I'm glad I killed her. And there isn't a damn thing you can do about it."

Ralph Corwin was being held before trial in the city's oldest prison, known to law enforcers and lawbreakers alike as Calcutta. Neither Corwin's lawyer nor the district attorney's office felt that allowing Carella to talk to the prisoner would be harmful to the case.

Corwin was expecting him. "What did you want to see me about?"

"I wanted to ask you some questions."

"My lawyer says I'm not supposed to add anything to what I already said. I don't even *like* that guy."

"Why don't you ask for another lawyer? Ask one of the officers here to call the Legal Aid Society. Or simply tell him. I'm sure he'd have no objection to dropping out."

Corwin shrugged. "I don't want to hurt his feelings. He's a little cockroach, but what the hell."

"You've got a lot at stake here, Corwin."

"But I killed her, so what does it matter *who* the lawyer is? You got it all in black and white."

"You feel like answering some questions?" Carella said.

"I feel like dropping dead, is what I feel like. Cold turkey's never good, and it's worse when you can't yell."

"If you'd rather I came back another time . . ."

"No, no, go ahead. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know exactly how you stabbed Sarah Fletcher."

"How do you *think* you stab somebody? You stick a knife in her, that's how."

"Where?"

"In the belly."

"Left-hand side of the body?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Where was the knife when she fell?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Was the knife on the *right*-hand side of her body or the *left*?"

"I don't know. That was when I heard the front door opening and all I could think of was getting out of there."

"When you stabbed her, did she *twist* away from you?"

"No, she backed away, straight back, as if she couldn't believe what I done, and . . . and just wanted to get *away* from me."

"And then she fell?"

"Yes. She . . . her knees sort of gave way and she grabbed for her belly, and her hands sort of—it was terrible—they just . . . they were grabbing *air*, you know? And she fell."

"In what position?"

"On her side."

"*Which* side?"

"I could still see the knife, so it must've been the opposite side. The side opposite from where I stabbed her."

"One last question, Ralph. Was she dead when you went through that window?"

"I don't know. She was bleeding and . . . she was very quiet. I . . . guess she was dead. I don't know. I guess so."

Among Sarah Fletcher's personal

effects that were considered of interest to the police before they arrested Ralph Corwin, was an address book found in the dead woman's handbag on the bedroom dresser. In the Thursday afternoon stillness of the squad room, Carella examined the book.

There was nothing terribly fascinating about the alphabetical listings. Sarah Fletcher had possessed a good handwriting, and most of the listings were obviously married couples (Chuck and Nancy Benton, Harold and Marie Spander, and so on), some were girlfriends, local merchants, hairdresser, dentist, doctors, restaurants in town or across the river. A thoroughly uninspiring address book—until Carella came to a page at the end of the book, with the printed word MEMORANDA at its top.

Under the word, there were five names, addresses and telephone numbers written in Sarah's meticulous hand. They were all men's names, obviously entered at different times because some were in pencil and others in ink. The parenthetical initials following each entry were all noted in felt marking pens of various colors:

Andrew Hart, 1120 Hall Avenue, 622-8400 (PB&G) (TG)

Michael Thornton, 371 South Lindner, 881-9371 (TS)

Lou Kantor, 434 North 16 Street, FR 7-2346 (TPC) (TG)

Sal Decotto, 831 Grover Avenue, FR 5-3287 (F) (TG)

Richard Fenner, 110 Henderson, 593-6648 (QR) (TG)

If there was one thing Carella loved, it was a code. He loved a code almost as much as he loved German measles. He flipped through the phone book and the address for Andrew Hart matched the one in Sarah's handwriting. He found an address for Michael Thornton. It, too, was identical to the one in her book. He kept turning pages in the directory, checking names and addresses. He verified all five.

At a little past eight the next morning, Carella got going on them. He called Andrew Hart at the number listed in Sarah's address book. Hart answered, and was not happy. "I'm in the middle of shaving," he said. "I've got to leave for the office in a little while. What's this about?"

"We're investigating a homicide, Mr. Hart."

"A *what*? A homicide? Who's been killed?"

"A woman named Sarah Fletcher."

"I don't know anyone named Sarah Fletcher," he said.

"She seems to have known you, Mr. Hart."

"Sarah *who*? Fletcher, did you

say?" Hart's annoyance increased.

"That's right."

"I don't know anybody by that name. Who says she knew me? I never heard of her in my life."

"Your name's in her address book."

"*My* name? That's impossible."

Nevertheless, Hart agreed to see Carella and Meyer Meyer at the offices of Hart and Widderman, 480 Reed Street, sixth floor, at ten o'clock that morning.

At ten, Meyer and Carella parked the car and went into the building at 480 Reed, and up the elevator to the sixth floor. Hart and Widderman manufactured watchbands. A huge advertising display near the receptionist's desk in the lobby proudly proclaimed "H&W Beats the Band!" and then backed the slogan with more discreet copy that explained how Hart and Widderman had solved the difficult engineering problems of the expansion watch bracelet.

"Mr. Hart, please," Carella said.

"Who's calling?" the receptionist asked. She sounded as if she were chewing gum, even though she was not.

"Detectives Carella and Meyer."

"Just a minute, please," she said, and lifted her phone, pushing a button in the base. "Mr. Hart," she said, "there are some cops here to see you." She listened for a moment and then said, "Yes, sir." She replaced the receiver on its cradle, gestured toward the inside corridor with a nod of her golden tresses, said, "Go right in, please. Door at the end of the hall," and then went back to her magazine.

The gray skies had apparently infected Andrew Hart. "You didn't have to broadcast to the world that the police department was here," he said immediately.

"We merely announced ourselves," Carella said.

"Well, okay, now you're here," Hart said, "let's get it over with." He was a big man in his middle fifties, with iron-gray hair and black-rimmed eyeglasses. "I told you I don't know Sarah Fletcher and I don't."

"Here's her book, Mr. Hart," Carella said. "That's your name, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Hart said, and shook his head. "But how it got there is beyond me."

"Is it possible she's someone you met at a party, someone you exchanged numbers with?"

"No."

"Are you married, Mr. Hart?"

"No."

"We've got a picture of Mrs. Fletcher. I wonder—"

"Don't go showing me any pictures of a corpse," Hart said.

"This was taken when she was

still very much alive, Mr. Hart."

Meyer handed Carella a manila envelope. He opened the flap and removed from the envelope a framed picture of Sarah Fletcher which he handed to Hart. Hart looked at the photograph, and then immediately looked up at Carella.

"What is this?" he said. He looked at the photograph again, shook his head, and said, "Somebody killed her, huh?"

"Yes, somebody did," Carella answered. "Did you know her?"

"I knew her."

"I thought you said you didn't."

"I didn't know Sarah Fletcher, if that's who you think she was. But I knew *this* broad, all right."

"Who'd *you* think she was?" Meyer asked.

"Just who she told me she was. Sadie Collins. She introduced herself as Sadie Collins, and that's who I knew her as. Sadie Collins."

"Where was this, Mr. Hart? Where'd you meet her?"

"A singles' bar. The city's full of them."

"Would you remember when?"

"At least a year ago."

"Ever go out with her?"

"I used to see her once or twice a week."

"When did you stop seeing her?"

"Last summer."

"Did you know she was married?"

"Who, Sadie? You're kidding."

"She never told you she was married?"

"Never."

Meyer asked, "When you were going out, where'd you pick her up? At her apartment?"

"No. She used to come to my place."

"Where'd you call her when you wanted to reach her?"

"I didn't. She used to call me."

"Where'd you go, Mr. Hart? When you went out?"

"We didn't go out too much."

"What *did* you do?"

"She used to come to my place. The truth is, we never went out. She didn't want to go out much."

"Didn't you think that was strange?"

"No," Hart shrugged. "I figured she liked to stay home."

"Why'd you stop seeing her, Mr. Hart?"

"I met somebody else. A nice girl. I'm very serious about her."

"Was there something wrong with Sadie?"

"No, no. She was a beautiful woman, beautiful."

"Then why would you be ashamed—"

"Ashamed? Who said anything about being ashamed?"

"I gathered you wouldn't want your girlfriend—"

"Listen, what *is* this? I stopped

seeing Sadie six months ago. I wouldn't even talk to her on the phone after that. If the crazy babe got herself killed—"

"Crazy?"

Hart suddenly wiped his hand over his face, wet his lips, and walked behind his desk. "I don't think I have anything more to say to you gentlemen."

"What did you mean by crazy?" Carella asked.

"Good day, gentlemen," Hart said.

Carella went to see Lieutenant Byrnes. In the lieutenant's corner office, Byrnes and Carella sat down over coffee. Byrnes frowned at Carella's request.

"Oh, come on, Pete!" Carella said. "If Fletcher *did* it—"

"That's only *your* allegation. Suppose he *didn't* do it, and suppose *you* do something to screw up the D.A.'s case?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know like what. The way things are going these days, if you spit on the sidewalk, that's enough to get a case thrown out of court."

"Fletcher hated his wife," Carella said calmly.

"Lots of men hate their wives. Half the men in this city hate their wives."

"But her little fling gives Fletcher a good reason for . . . Look, Pete, he had a motive; he had the opportunity, a golden one, in fact; and he had the means—another man's knife sticking in Sarah's belly. What more do you want?"

"Proof. There's a funny little system we've got here—it requires proof before we can arrest a man and charge him with murder."

"Right. And all I'm asking is the opportunity to *try* for it."

"Sure, by putting a tail on Fletcher. Suppose he sues the city?"

"Yes or no, Pete? I want permission to conduct a round-the-clock surveillance of Gerald Fletcher, starting Sunday morning. Yes or no?"

"I must be out of my mind," Byrnes said, and sighed.

Michael Thornton lived in an apartment building several blocks from the Quarter, close enough to absorb some of its artistic flavor, distant enough to escape its high rents. A blond man in his apartment, Paul Wendling, told Kling and Meyer that Mike was in his jewelry shop.

In the shop, Thornton was wearing a blue work smock, but the contours of the garment did nothing to hide his powerful build. His eyes were blue, his hair black. A small scar showed white in the thick eyebrow over his left eye.

"We understand you're work-

ing," Meyer said. "Sorry to break in on you this way."

"That's okay," Thornton said. "What's up?"

"You know a woman named Sarah Fletcher?"

"No," Thornton said.

"You know a woman named Sadie Collins?"

Thornton hesitated. "Yes," he said.

"What was your relationship with her?" Kling asked.

Thornton shrugged. "Why? Is she in trouble?"

"When's the last time you saw her?"

"You didn't answer my question," Thornton said.

"Well, you didn't answer ours either," Meyer said, and smiled. "What was your relationship with her, and when did you see her last?"

"I met her in July, in a joint called The Saloon, right around the corner. It's a bar, but they also serve sandwiches and soup. It gets a big crowd on weekends, singles, a couple of odd ones for spice—but not a gay bar. I saw her last in August, a brief, hot thing, and then good-bye."

"Did you realize she was married?" Kling said.

"No. Is she?"

"Yes," Meyer said. Neither of the detectives had yet informed Thornton that the lady in question was now unfortunately deceased. They were saving that for last, like dessert.

"Gee, I didn't know she was married." Thornton seemed truly surprised. "Otherwise, nothing would've happened."

"What *did* happen?"

"I bought her a few drinks and then I took her home with me. Later, I put her in a cab."

"When did you see her next?"

"The following day. It was goofy. She called me in the morning, said she was on her way downtown. I was still in bed. I said, 'So come on down, baby.' And she did. *Believe* me, she did."

"Did you see her again after that?" Kling asked.

"Two or three times a week."

"Where'd you go?"

"To my pad on South Lindner."

"Never went anyplace but there?"

"Never."

"Why'd you quit seeing her?"

"I went out of town for a while. When I got back, I just didn't hear from her again. She never gave me her number, and she wasn't in the directory, so I couldn't reach her."

"What do you make of this?" Kling asked, handing Thornton the address book.

Thornton studied it and said, "Yeah, what about it? She wrote this down the night we met—we

were in bed, and she asked my address."

"Did she write those initials at the same time, the ones in parentheses under your phone number?"

"I didn't actually see the page itself, I only saw her writing in the book."

"Got any idea what the initials mean?"

"None at all." Suddenly he looked thoughtful. "She *was* kind of special, I have to admit it." He grinned. "She'll call again, I'm sure of it."

"I wouldn't count on it," Meyer said. "She's dead."

His face did not crumble or express grief or shock. The only thing it expressed was sudden anger. "The stupid . . ." Thornton said. "That's all she ever was, a stupid, crazy . . ."

On Sunday morning, Carella was ready to become a surveillant, but Gerald Fletcher was nowhere in sight. A call to his apartment from a nearby phone booth revealed that he was not in his digs. He parked in front of Fletcher's apartment building until five p.m. when he was relieved by Detective Arthur Brown. Carella went home to read his son's latest note to Santa Claus, had dinner with his family, and was settling down in the livingroom with a novel he had bought a week ago and not yet cracked, when the telephone rang.

"Hello?" Carella said into the mouthpiece.

"Hello, Steve? This is Gerry. Gerry Fletcher."

Carella almost dropped the receiver. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. I was away for the weekend, just got back a little while ago, in fact. Frankly I find this apartment depressing as hell. I was wondering if you'd like to join me for a drink."

"Well," Carella said. "It's Sunday night, and it's late . . ."

"Nonsense, it's only eight o'clock. We'll do a little old-fashioned pub crawling."

It suddenly occurred to Carella that Gerald Fletcher had already had a few drinks before placing his call. It further occurred to him that if he played this *too* cozily, Fletcher might rescind his generous offer.

"Okay. I'll see you at eight-thirty, provided I can square it with my wife."

"Good," Fletcher said. "See you."

Paddy's Bar & Grill was on the Stem, adjacent to the city's theater district. Carella and Fletcher got there at about nine o'clock while the place was still relatively quiet. The action began a little later, Fletcher explained.

Fletcher lifted his glass in a silent

toast. "What kind of person would you say comes to a place like this?"

"I would say we've got a nice lower-middle-class clientele bent on making contact with members of the opposite sex."

"What would you say if I told you the blonde in the clinging jersey is a working prostitute?"

Carella looked at the woman. "I don't think I'd believe you. She's a bit old for the young competition, and she's not *selling* anything. She's waiting for one of those two or three older guys to make their move. Hookers don't wait, Gerry. *Is* she a working prostitute?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Fletcher said. "I was merely trying to indicate that appearances can sometimes be misleading. Drink up, there are a few more places I'd like to show you."

He knew Fletcher well enough by now to realize that the man was trying to tell him something. At lunch last Tuesday, Fletcher had transmitted a message and a challenge: *I killed my wife, what can you do about it?* Tonight, in a similar manner, he was attempting to indicate something else, but Carella could not fathom exactly what.

Fanny's was only twenty blocks away from Paddy's Bar and Grill, but as far removed from it as the moon. Whereas the first bar seemed to cater to a quiet crowd peacefully pursuing its romantic inclinations, Fanny's was noisy and raucous, jammed to the rafters with men and women of all ages, wearing plastic hippie gear purchased in head shops up and down Jackson Avenue.

Fletcher lifted his glass. "I hope you don't mind if I drink myself into a stupor," he said. "Merely pour me into the car at the end of the night." Fletcher drank. "I don't usually consume this much alcohol, but I'm very troubled about that boy."

"What boy?" Carella asked.

"Ralph Corwin," Fletcher said. "I understand he's having some difficulty with his lawyer and, well, I'd like to help him somehow."

"*Help* him?"

"Yes. Do you think the D.A.'s office would consider it strange if I suggested a good defense lawyer for the boy?"

"I think they might consider it passing strange, yes."

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm in your voice?"

"Not at all."

Fletcher squired Carella from Fanny's to, in geographical order, The Purple Chairs and Quigley's Rest. Each place was rougher, in its way, than the last. The Purple Chairs catered to a brazenly gay crowd, and Quigley's Rest was a dive, where Fletcher's liquor

caught up with him, and the evening ended suddenly in a brawl. Carella was shaken by the experience, and still couldn't piece out Fletcher's reasons.

Carella received a further shock when he continued to pursue Sarah Fletcher's address book. Lou Kantor was simply the third name in a now wearying list of Sarah's bedmates, until she turned out to be a tough and striking woman. She confirmed Carella's suspicions immediately.

"I only knew her a short while," she said. "I met her in September, I believe. Saw her three or four times after that."

"Where'd you meet her?"

"In a bar called The Purple Chairs. That's right," she added quickly. "That's what I am."

"Nobody asked," Carella said. "What about Sadie Collins?"

"Spell it out, Officer, I'm not going to help you. I don't like being hassled."

"Nobody's hassling you, Miss Kantor. You practice your religion and I'll practice mine. We're here to talk about a dead woman."

"Then talk about her, spit it out. What do you want to know? Was she straight? Everybody's straight until they're *not* straight anymore, isn't that right? She was willing to learn. I taught her."

"Did you know she was married?"

"She told me. So what? Broke down in tears one night, and spent the rest of the night crying. I knew she was married."

"What'd she say about her husband?"

"Nothing that surprised me. She said he had another woman. Said he ran off to see her every weekend, told little Sadie he had out-of-town business. *Every* weekend, can you imagine that?"

"What do you make of this?" Carella said, and handed her Sarah's address book, opened to the MEMORANDA page.

"I don't know any of these people," Lou said.

"The initials under your name," Carella said. "TPC and then TG. Got any ideas?"

"Well, the TPC is obvious, isn't it? I met her at The Purple Chairs. What else could it mean?"

Carella suddenly felt very stupid. "Of course. What else could it mean?" He took back the book. "I'm finished," he said. "Thank you very much."

"I miss her," Lou said suddenly. "She was a wild one."

Cracking a code is like learning to roller-skate; once you know how to do it, it's easy. With a little help from Gerald Fletcher, who had pro-

vided a guided tour the night before, and a lot of help from Lou Kantor, who had generously provided the key, Carella was able to crack the code wide open—well, almost. Last night, he'd gone with Fletcher to Paddy's Bar and Grill, or PB&G under Andrew Hart's name; Fanny's, F under Sal Decotto; The Purple Chairs, Lou Kantor's TPC; and Quigley's Rest, QR for Richard Fenner on the list. Probably because of the fight, he hadn't taken Carella to The Saloon, TS under Michael Thornton's name—the place where Thornton had admitted first meeting Sarah.

Except, what the hell did TG mean, under all the names but Thornton's?

By Carella's own modest estimate, he had been in more bars in the past twenty-four hours than he had in the past twenty-four years. He decided, nevertheless, to hit The Saloon that night.

The Saloon was just that. A cigarette-scarred bar behind which ran a mottled, flaking mirror; wooden booths with patched, fake leather seat cushions; bowls of pretzels and potato chips; jukebox gurgling; steamy bodies.

"They come in here," the bartender said, "at all hours of the night. Take yourself. You're here to meet a girl, am I right?"

"There *was* someone I was hoping to see. A girl named Sadie Collins. Do you know her?"

"Yeah. She used to come in a lot, but I ain't seen her in months. What do you want to fool around with her for?"

"Why? What's the matter with her?"

"You want to know something?" the bartender said. "I thought she was a hooker at first. Aggressive. You know what that word means? Aggressive? She used to come dressed down to here and up to there, ready for action, selling everything she had, you understand? She'd come in here, pick out a guy she wanted, and go after him like the world was gonna end at midnight. And always the same type. Big guys. You wouldn't stand a chance with her, not that you ain't big, don't misunderstand me. But Sadie liked them gigantic, and mean. You know something?"

"What?"

"I'm glad she don't come in here anymore. There was something about her—like she was compulsive. You know what that word means, compulsive?"

Tuesday afternoon, Arthur Brown handed in his surveillance report on Gerald Fletcher. Much of it was not at all illuminating. From 4:55 p.m. to 8:45 p.m. Fletcher had driven home, and then to 812 North

Crane and parked. The report *did* become somewhat illuminating when, at 8:46 p.m., Fletcher emerged from that building with a redheaded woman wearing a black fur coat over a green dress. They went to Rudolph's restaurant, ate, and drove back to 812 Crane, arrived at 10:35 p.m. and went inside. Arthur Brown had checked the lobby mailboxes, which showed eight apartments on the eleventh floor, which was where the elevator indicator had stopped. Brown went outside to wait again, and Fletcher emerged alone at 11:40 p.m. and drove home. Detective O'Brien relieved Detective Brown at 12:15 a.m.

Byrnes said, "This woman could be important."

"That's just what I think," Brown answered.

Carella had not yet spoken to either Sal Decotto or Richard Fenner, the two remaining people listed in Sarah's book, but saw no reason to pursue that trail any further. If the place listings in her book had been chronological, she'd gone from bad to worse in her search for partners.

Why? To give it back to her husband in spades? Carella tossed Sarah's little black book into the manila folder bearing the various reports on the case, and turned his attention to the information Artie Brown had brought in last night. The redheaded woman's presence might be important, but Carella was still puzzling over Fletcher's behavior. Sarah's blatant infidelity provided Fletcher with a strong motive, so why take Carella to his wife's unhappy haunts, why *show* Carella that he had good and sufficient reason to kill her? Furthermore, why the offer to get a good defense attorney for the boy who had already been indicted for the slaying?

Sometimes Carella wondered who was doing what to whom.

At five o'clock that evening, Carella relieved Detective Hal Willis outside Fletcher's office building downtown, and then followed Fletcher to a department store in midtown Isola. Carella was wearing a false moustache stuck to his upper lip, a wig with longer hair than his own and of a different color, and a pair of sunglasses.

In the department store, he tracked Fletcher to the Intimate Apparel department. Carella walked into the next aisle, pausing to look at women's robes and kimonos, keeping one eye on Fletcher who was in conversation with the lingerie salesgirl.

"May I help you, sir?" a voice said, and Carella turned to find a stocky woman at his elbow, with

gray hair, black-rimmed spectacles, wearing Army shoes and a black dress. Her suspicious smile accused him of being a junkie shoplifter or worse.

"Thank you, no," Carella said. "I'm just looking."

Fletcher made his selections from the gossamer undergarments which the salesgirl had spread out on the counter, pointing first to one garment, then to another. The salesgirl wrote up the order and Fletcher reached into his wallet to give her either cash or a credit card; it was difficult to tell from an aisle away. He chatted with the girl a moment longer, and then walked off toward the elevator bank.

"Are you *sure* I can't assist you?" the woman in the Army shoes said, and Carella answered, "I'm positive," and moved swiftly toward the lingerie counter. Fletcher had left the counter without a package in his arms, which meant he was *sending* his purchases. The salesgirl was gathering up Fletcher's selections and looked up when Carella reached the counter.

"Yes, sir," she said. "May I help you?"

Carella opened his wallet and produced his shield. "Police officer," he said. "I'm interested in the order you just wrote up."

The girl was perhaps nineteen years old, a college girl working in the store during the Christmas rush. Speechlessly, she studied the shield, eyes bugging.

"Are these items being sent?" Carella asked.

"Yes, *sir*," the girl said. Her eyes were still wide. She wet her lips and stood up a little straighter, prepared to be a perfect witness.

"Can you tell me where?" Carella asked.

"Yes, *sir*," she said, and turned the sales slip toward him. "He wanted them wrapped separately, but they're all going to the same address. Miss Arlene Orton, 812 North Crane Street, right here in the

city, and I'd guess it's a swell—"

"Thank you very much," Carella said.

It felt like Christmas day already.

The man who picked the lock on Arlene Orton's front door, ten minutes after she left her apartment on Wednesday morning, was better at it than any burglar in the city, and he happened to work for the Police Department. It took the technician longer to set up his equipment, but the telephone was the easiest of his jobs. The tap would become operative when the telephone company supplied the police with a list of so-called bridging points that located the pairs and cables for Arlene Orton's phone. The monitoring equipment would be hooked into these and whenever a call went out of or came into the apartment, a recorder would automatically tape both ends of the conversation. In addition, whenever a call was made from the apartment, a dial indicator would ink out a series of dots that signified the number being called.

The technician placed his bug in the bookcase on the opposite side of the room. The bug was a small FM transmitter with a battery-powered mike that needed to be changed every twenty-four hours. The technician would have preferred running his own wires, but he dared not ask the building superintendent for an empty closet or workroom in which to hide his listener. A blabbermouth superintendent can kill an investigation more quickly than a squad of gangland goons.

In the rear of a panel truck parked at the curb some twelve feet south of the entrance to 812 Crane, Steve Carella sat behind the recording equipment that was locked into the frequency of the bug. He sat hopefully, with a tuna sandwich and a bottle of beer, prepared to hear and record any sounds that emanated from Arlene's apartment.

At the bridging point seven blocks away and thirty minutes later, Arthur Brown sat behind equipment that was hooked into the telephone mike, and waited for Arlene Orton's phone to ring. He was in radio contact with Carella.

The first call came at 12:17 p.m. The equipment tripped in automatically and the spools of tape began recording the conversation, while Brown simultaneously monitored it through his headphone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Arlene?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"Nan."

"Nan? You sound so different. Do you have a cold or something?"

"Every year at this time. Just before the holidays. Arlene, I'm terribly rushed, I'll make this short. Do you know Beth's dress size?"

The conversation went on in that vein, and Arlene Orton spoke to three more girlfriends in succession. She then called the local supermarket to order the week's groceries. She had a fine voice, deep and forceful, punctuated every so often (when she was talking to her girlfriends) with a delightful giggle.

At four p.m., the telephone in Arlene's apartment rang again.

"Hello?"

"Arlene, this is Gerry."

"Hello, darling."

"I'm leaving here a little early. I thought I'd come right over."

"Good."

"I'll be there in, oh, half an hour, forty minutes."

"Hurry."

Brown radioed Carella at once. Carella thanked him, and sat back to wait.

On Thursday morning, two days before Christmas, Carella sat at his desk in the squad room and looked over the transcripts of the five reels from the night before. The reel that interested him most was the second one. The conversation on that reel had at one point changed abruptly in tone and content. Carella thought he knew why, but he wanted to confirm his suspicion.

Fletcher: I meant after the *holidays,* not the trial.

Miss Orton: I may be able to get away, I'm not sure. I'll have to check with my shrink.

Fletcher: What's he got to do with it?

Miss Orton: Well, I have to pay whether I'm there or not, you know.

Fletcher: Is he taking a vacation?

Miss Orton: I'll ask him.

Fletcher: Yes, ask him. Because I'd really like to get away.

Miss Orton: Ummm. When do you think the case (inaudible).

Fletcher: In March sometime. No sooner than that. He's got a new lawyer, you know.

Miss Orton: What does that mean, a new lawyer?

Fletcher: Nothing. He'll be convicted anyway.

Miss Orton: (Inaudible).

Fletcher: Because the trial's going to take a lot out of me.

Miss Orton: How soon after the trial . . .

Fletcher: I don't know.

Miss Orton: She's dead, Gerry, I don't see . . .

Fletcher: Yes, but . . .

Miss Orton: I don't see why we have to wait, do you?

Fletcher: Have you read this?

Miss Orton: No, not yet. Gerry, I think we ought to set a date now. A provisional date, depending on when the trial is. Gerry?

Fletcher: Mmmm?

Miss Orton: Do you think it'll be

a terribly long, drawn-out trial?

Fletcher: What?

Miss Orton: Gerry?

Fletcher: Yes?

Miss Orton: Where are you?

Fletcher: I was just looking over some of these books.

Miss Orton: Do you think you can tear yourself away?

Fletcher: Forgive me, darling.

Miss Orton: If the trial starts in March, and we planned on April for it . . .

Fletcher: Unless they come up with something unexpected, of course.

Miss Orton: Like what?

Fletcher: Oh, I don't know. They've got some pretty sharp people investigating this case.

Miss Orton: What's there to investigate?

Fletcher: There's always the possibility he didn't do it.

Miss Orton: (Inaudible) a signed confession?

Fletcher: One of the cops thinks I killed her.

Miss Orton: You're not serious. Who?

Fletcher: A detective named Carella. He probably knows about us by now. He's a very thorough cop. I have a great deal of admiration for him. I wonder if he realizes that.

Miss Orton: Where'd he even get such an idea?

Fletcher: Well, I told him I hated her.

Miss Orton: What? Gerry, why the hell did you do that?

Fletcher: He'd have found out anyway. He probably knows by now that Sarah was sleeping around with half the men in this city. And he probably knows I knew it, too.

Miss Orton: Who cares what he found out? Corwin's already confessed.

Fletcher: I can understand his reasoning. I'm just not sure he can understand mine.

Miss Orton: Some reasoning. If you were going to kill her, you'd have done it ages ago, when she refused to sign the separation papers. So let him investigate, who cares? Wishing your wife dead isn't the same thing as killing her. Tell that to Detective Copolla.

Fletcher: Carella. (Laughs).

Miss Orton: What's so funny?

Fletcher: I'll tell him, darling.

According to the technician who had wired the Orton apartment, the livingroom bug was in the bookcase on the wall opposite the bar. Carella was interested in the tape from the time Fletcher had asked Arlene about a book—"Have you read this?"—and then seemed preoccupied. It was Carella's guess that Fletcher had discovered the bookcase bug. What interested Carella more, however, was what

Fletcher had said *after* he knew the place was wired. Certain of an audience now, Fletcher had:

(1) Suggested the possibility that Corwin was not guilty.

(2) Flatly stated that a cop named Carella suspected him.

(3) Expressed admiration for Carella, while wondering if Carella was aware of it.

(4) Speculated that Carella had already doped out the purpose of the bar-crawling last Sunday night, was cognizant of Sarah's promiscuity, and knew Fletcher was aware of it.

(5) Made a little joke about "telling" Carella.

Carella felt as eerie as he had when lunching with Fletcher and later when drinking with him. Now he'd spoken, through the bug, directly to Carella. But what was he trying to say? And why?

Carella wanted very much to hear what Fletcher would say when he *didn't* know he was being overheard. He asked Lieutenant Byrnes for permission to request a court order to put a bug in Fletcher's automobile. Byrnes granted permission, and the court issued the order.

Fletcher made a date with Arlene Orton to go to The Chandeliers across the river, and the bug was installed in Fletcher's 1972 car. If Fletcher left the city, the effective range of the transmitter on the open road would be about a quarter of a mile. The listener-pursuer had his work cut out for him.

By ten minutes to ten that night, Carella was drowsy and discouraged. On the way out to The Chandeliers, Fletcher and Arlene had not once mentioned Sarah nor the plans for their impending marriage. Carella was anxious to put them both to bed and get home to his family. When they finally came out of the restaurant and began walking toward Fletcher's automobile, Carella actually uttered an audible, "At *last*," and started his car.

They proceeded east on Route 701, heading for the bridge, and said nothing. Carella thought at first that something was wrong with the equipment, then finally Arlene spoke and Carella knew just what had happened. The pair had argued in the restaurant, and Arlene had been smoldering until this moment when she could no longer contain her anger.

"Maybe you don't want to marry me at all," she shouted.

"That's ridiculous," Fletcher said.

"Then why won't you set a date?"

"I have set a date."

"You haven't set a date. All you've done is say after the trial. *When*, after the trial? Maybe this

whole damn thing has been a stall. Maybe you *never* planned to marry me."

"You know that isn't true, Arlene."

"How do I know there really *were* separation papers?"

"There were. I told you there were."

"Then why wouldn't she sign them?"

"Because she loved me."

"If she loved you, then why did she do those horrible things?"

"To make me pay, I think."

"Is that why she showed you her little black book?"

"Yes, to make me pay."

"No. Because she was a slut."

"I guess. I guess that's what she became."

"Putting a little TG in her book every time she told you about a new one. *Told Gerry,* and marked a little TG in her book."

"Yes, to make me pay."

"A slut. You should have gone after her with detectives. Gotten pictures, threatened her, forced her to sign—"

"No, I couldn't have done that. It would have ruined me, Arl."

"Your precious career."

"Yes, my precious career."

They both fell silent again. They were approaching the bridge now. Carella tried to stay close behind them, but on occasion the distance between the two cars lengthened and he lost some words in the conversation.

"She wouldn't sign the papers and I ( ) adultery because ( ) have come out."

"And I thought ( )."

"I did everything I possibly could."

"Yes, Gerry, but now she's dead. So what's your excuse now?"

"I'm suspected of having *killed* her, damn it!"

Fletcher was making a left turn, off the highway. Carella stepped on the accelerator, not wanting to lose voice contact now.

"What difference does that make?" Arlene asked.

"None at all, I'm sure," Fletcher said. "I'm sure you wouldn't mind at all being married to a convicted murderer."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the possibility . . . Never mind."

"Let me hear it."

"All right, Arlene. I'm talking about the possibility of someone accusing me of the murder. And of my having to stand trial for it."

"That's the most paranoid—"

"It's not paranoid."

"Then what is it? They've caught the murderer, they—"

"I'm only saying suppose. How could we get married if I killed her, if someone says I killed her?"

"No one has said that, Gerry."

"Well, *if* someone should."

Silence. Carella was dangerously close to Fletcher's car now, and risking discovery. Carella held his breath and stayed glued to the car ahead.

"Gerry, I don't understand this," Arlene said, her voice low.

"Someone could make a good case for it."

"Why would anyone do that? They know that Corwin—"

"They could say I came into the apartment and . . . They could say she was still alive when I came into the apartment. They could say the knife was still in her and I . . . I came in and found her that way and . . . finished her off."

"Why would you do that?"

"To end it."

"You wouldn't kill anyone, Gerry."

"No."

"Then why are you even suggesting such a terrible thing?"

"If she wanted it . . . If someone accused me . . . If someone said I'd done it . . . that I'd finished the job, pulled the knife across her belly, they could claim she *asked* me to do it."

"What are you saying, Gerry?"

"I'm trying to explain that Sarah might have—"

"Gerry, I don't think I want to know."

"I'm only trying to tell you—"

"No, I don't want to know. Please, Gerry, you're frightening me."

"*Listen* to me, damn it! I'm trying to explain what *might* have happened. Is that so hard to accept? That she might have *asked* me to kill her?"

"Gerry, please, I—"

"I *wanted* to call the hospital, I was *ready* to call the hospital, don't you think I could *see* she wasn't fatally stabbed?"

"Gerry, please."

"She begged me to kill her, Arlene, she begged me to end it for her, she . . . Damn it, can't *either* of you understand that? I tried to show him, I took him to all the places, I thought he was a man who'd understand. Is it that difficult?"

"Oh, my God, *did* you kill her? *Did* you kill Sarah?"

"No. Not Sarah. Only the woman she'd become, the slut I'd forced her to become. She was Sadie, you see, when I killed her—when she died."

"Oh, my God," Arlene said, and Carella nodded in weary acceptance.

Carella felt neither elated nor triumphant. As he followed Fletcher's car into the curb in front of Arlene's building, he experienced only a familiar nagging sense of

repetition and despair. Fletcher was coming out of his car now, walking around to the curb side, opening the door for Arlene, who took his hand and stepped onto the sidewalk, weeping. Carella intercepted them before they reached the front door of the building. Quietly, he charged Fletcher with the murder of his wife, and made the arrest without resistance.

Fletcher did not seem at all surprised.

So it was finished, or at least Carella thought it was.

In the silence of his livingroom, the telephone rang at a quarter past one. He caught the phone on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Steve," Lieutenant Byrnes said. "I just got a call from Calcutta. Ralph Corwin hanged himself in his cell, just after midnight. Must have done it while we were still taking Fletcher's confession in the squad room."

Carella was silent.

"Steve?" Byrnes said.

"Yeah, Pete."

"Nothing," Byrnes said, and hung up.

Carella stood with the dead phone in his hands for several seconds and then replaced it on the hook. He looked into the livingroom, where the lights of the tree glowed warmly, and thought of a despairing junkie in a prison cell, who had taken his own life without ever having known he had not taken the life of another.

It was Christmas day.

Sometimes, none of it made any sense at all.

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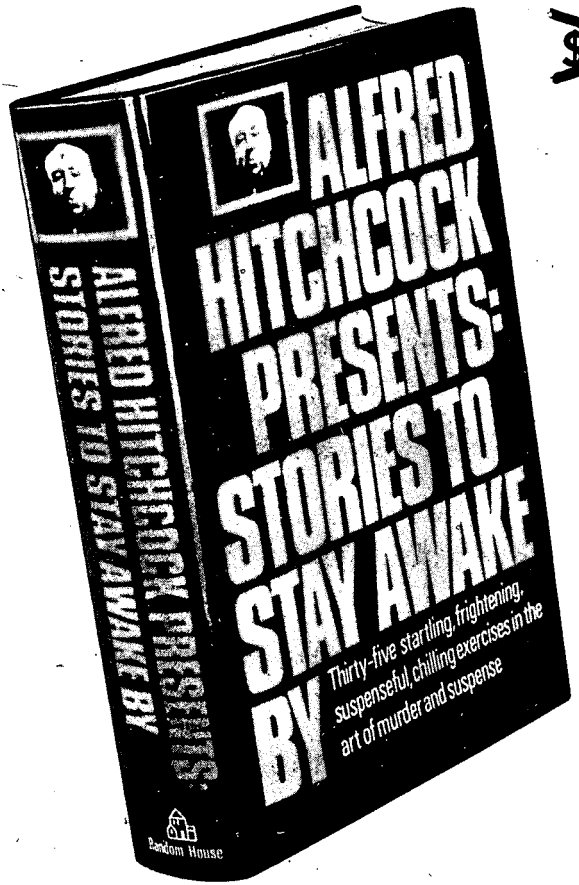

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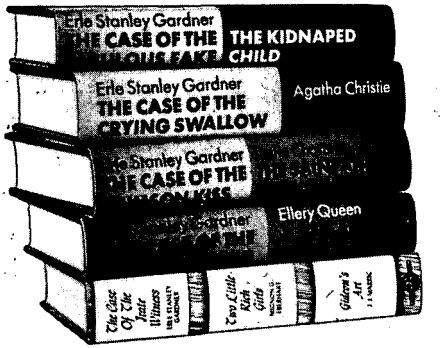

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