ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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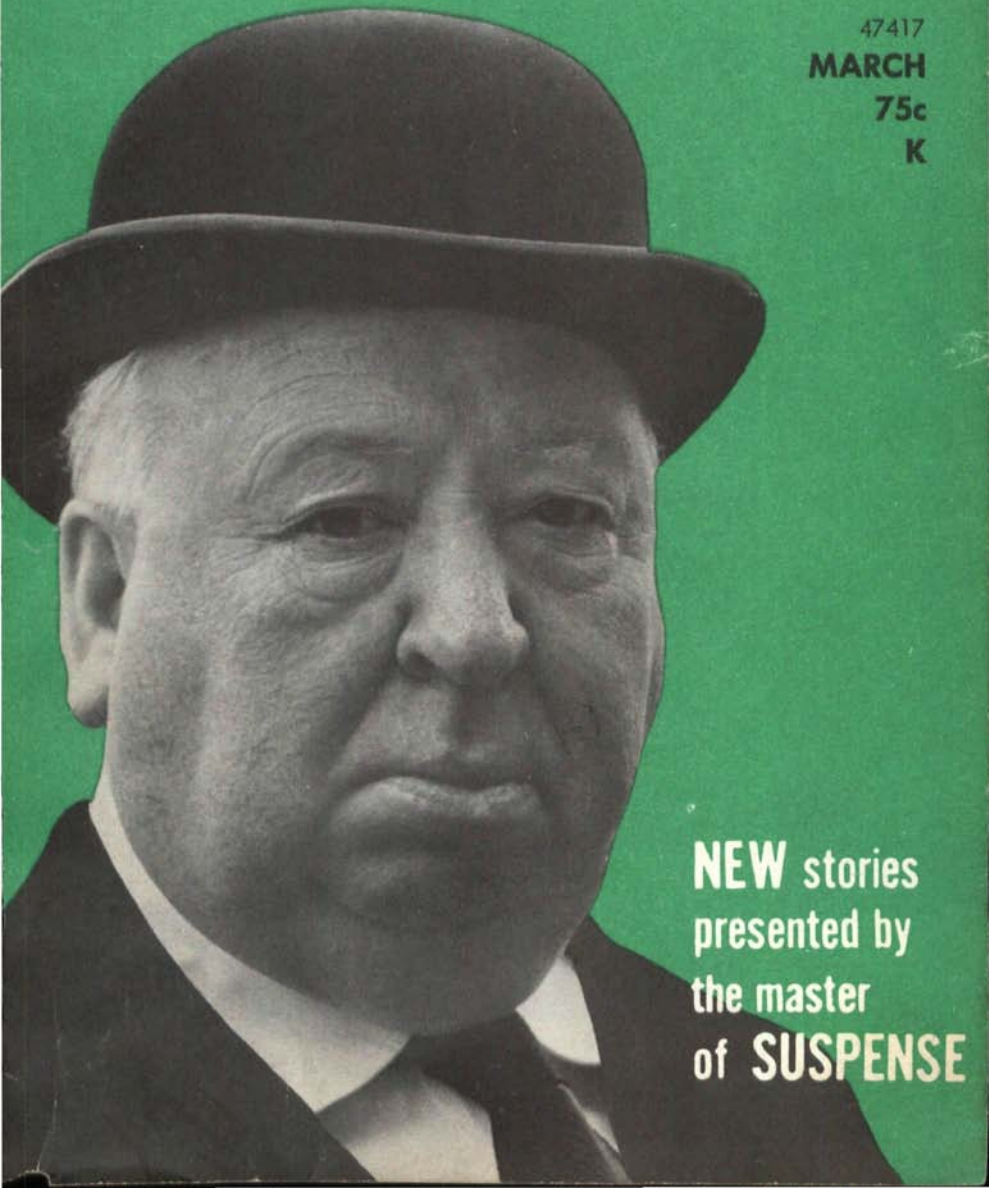

NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

March 1973

Dear Reader:

With vernal zephyrs springing upon us, it is fitting that we offer herein a field of boundless surprises. One never knows what will pop up next, outdoors or in, since a sizeable number of red thumbs of high repute have planted some of their best new suspense in these pages.

Examine, if you will, *The Best Hideout* as constructed by Clark Howard, then wind your way through the ensuing bizarre doings and assist Max Van Derveer's private eye locate *The Missing Priest* in this month's novelette.

By that time you will have enjoyed a detective who is "with it," a shadow without equal, a murder that isn't, a primitive mad scientist (but everyone must begin somewhere), and a host of other enthralling people and events. You should have yourself a brawl.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 18, NO. 3 MARCH 1973

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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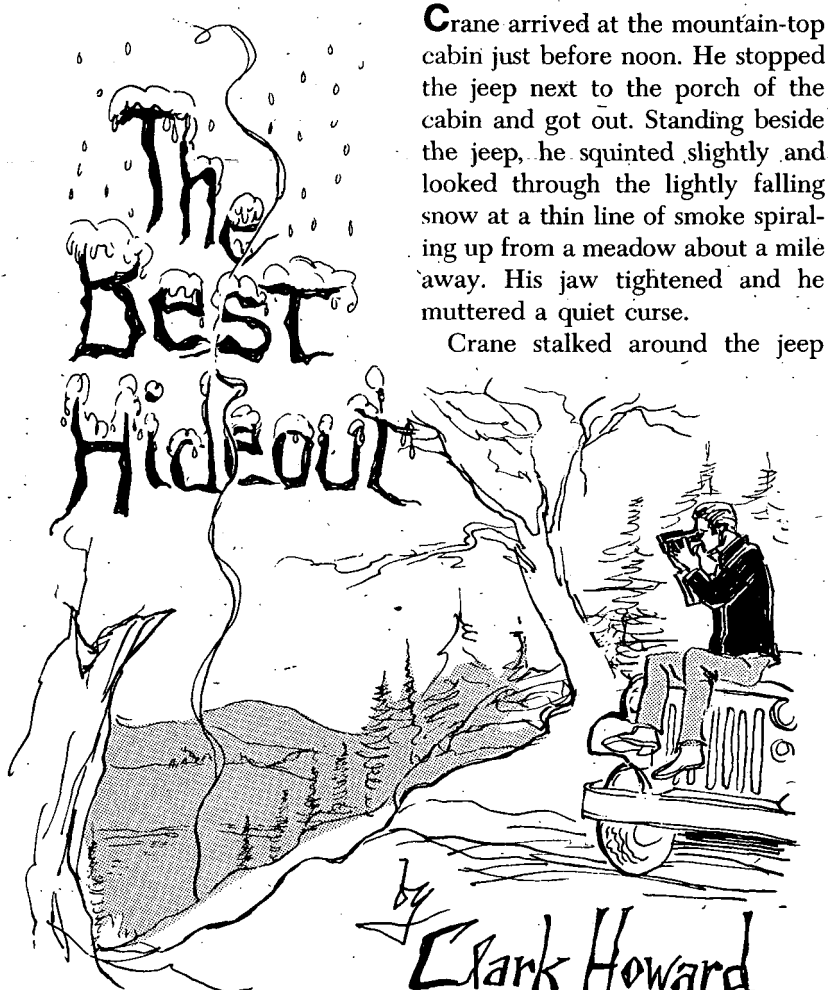
SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 18, No. 3, Mar. 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.

In the final analysis, it might be wiser for one to forgo doing his own thing.



Crane arrived at the mountain-top cabin just before noon. He stopped the jeep next to the porch of the cabin and got out. Standing beside the jeep, he squinted slightly and looked through the lightly falling snow at a thin line of smoke spiraling up from a meadow about a mile away. His jaw tightened and he muttered a quiet curse.

Crane stalked around the jeep

and opened the door on the passenger side. He dragged a khaki duffel bag and a bulldog-looking sawed-off shotgun from the seat. Crossing the porch, he unlocked the cabin door and went inside. The cabin was L-shaped, one long main room with a small perpendicular wing at one end that housed a bedroom and bath. Crane went directly to the bedroom. He put the duffel bag and shotgun in a closet, locked it, and returned to the main room.

Kneeling in the middle of the main room, Crane turned the valve of a coal oil stove and lighted it. Then he went to a gun cabinet, removed a .30 caliber, lever action rifle, loaded it, and slipped it into a saddle boot. He picked up a pair of seven-power binoculars from a table next to the wall and went back outside, locking the door behind him.

Climbing onto the hood of the jeep, Crane focused the binoculars on the rising stream of smoke. It was a small campfire, no doubt about it. The smoke was coming from a meadow about three hundred feet below him, on the opposite side of the mountain from the side he had just driven up. There were hiking trails over there that led down the other side. The trails would probably be passable for another four or five hours, he thought, studying the steadily accumulating snow. Whoever was on the meadow would have just about enough time to make it down-mountain if they started quickly.

Crane jumped down off the hood and got into the jeep. He drove it around behind the cabin, left the motor running while he opened the single wooden door of a lean-to shed, then drove inside and parked. Getting out, he turned to the other side of the shed where a five-year-old bay mare watched quietly from a stall.

"Hello, girl," Crane said. He rubbed the horse's ears with his gloved hand. "Come on, let's give you some exercise."

He bridled the mare and led her outside. She stood obediently while he brought out a blanket and saddle and got her ready to ride. Before he closed the lean-to, he lighted the small coal oil heater that he had put in to warm the mare's stall. He went outside then and checked the lines leading from the big aluminum coal oil tank that fed the stoves and heaters and generator. For a brief moment he forgot about the intruders down on the meadow and thought with great personal satisfaction what an exceptionally fine hideout this cabin was going to be. Of the eight hideouts he'd had over the years—eleven, going on twelve years—this one was definitely the best yet.

After making sure everything was working properly, Crane buckled the rifle boot to the bay's saddle, hung the binoculars under his coat, mounted, and rode down toward the meadow.

He found five of them in the camp, two men and three women. One of the men was brown—Mexican or Indian—wearing buckskins, with a beaded headband around long black hair. The other man was scrawny, pale, stoop-shouldered, with a thin, patchy beard. Of the women, two were in their mid-twenties, the other younger by perhaps five years. All of them wore blue jeans and sweat shirts with hoods. The younger girl's hood was down. Her hair was thick and yellow, ruler-straight.

Crane watched them from the edge of the meadow for a few moments, holding the mare quiet in a cover of dense pines. The five intruders had a small tent pitched near their campfire; it was grimy with dirt and not erected properly. There was no sign of a vehicle, so Crane assumed they had hiked up the mountain. Back in the summer, when he had been outfitting the cabin, he had seen numerous bands of young people like these down in Delano and the other resort towns that ringed the mountain. Most of them, he had noticed, were on foot, lugging sleeping bags, apparently going nowhere in particular. They had thinned out as summer passed into fall, and with the first cold of the new winter, most of them had disappeared entirely. The last time Crane had gone into Delano, he had not seen a single one of the young nomads on the street. Now, today, when he had planned to be the only one on the mountaintop when the access road and the hiking trails became snowed in for the winter, he found five of them camped practically on his doorstep.

Removing the carbine from its boot, he held it loosely across the saddle horn and gently prodded the mare out of the trees. He let the horse walk slowly across the snow-covered meadow toward the camp. Halfway there, the five people noticed him coming and stopped what they were doing. They stood watching him approach.

When he reached the edge of their camp, the dark man in buckskins walked over to meet him. Looking up at Crane, he made a peace sign. "Peace, brother."

Crane stared at him impassively. "I'm not your brother," he said in a flat, neutral voice. "And you happen to be on private property."

"All men are brothers," the dark man replied. He extended his hand to shake. "They call me Red Fred—Red because I'm an Indian. These," he nodded toward the other man

and the three women, "are the members of my family."

Crane ignored the proffered hand. He looked past Red Fred at the others. The bearded one sat on the ground staring at the fire with eyes that appeared glazed. Crane guessed he was on drugs. The two older women were huddled together with a torn blanket around their shoulders. The younger one stood alone, a light breeze teasing her yellow hair. Crane's eyes paused when they reached her. As he stared at her, he thought he saw a slight curving of her mouth, a brief, bare smile, but it could have been his imagination.

Crane turned his attention back to Red Fred. He looked at his watch, then shifted the rifle so that its stock rested on his thigh with the muzzle pointed skyward and his finger on the trigger. "Like I said, you're on private property," he repeated to the young man in buckskins. "It's noon now. I'll give you two hours to pack up and start back down the trail."

"We weren't heading down," Red Fred said. "We were going up to the top, then down the road on the other side to Delano."

"The road to Delano is snowed in," Crane said. "And at the rate it's snowing, foot trails on this side will be closed by nightfall. You either go back down the way you came up or you'll be trapped above the snow line."

"What about you?" Red Fred asked. "Won't you be trapped too?"

"I live up here," Crane said. "I'm prepared for the winter."

He put the rifle back across the saddle horn, its muzzle now pointed at Red Fred's face. "Anyway, we aren't talking about me, we're talking about you. I want you packed up and gone by two o'clock. Understand?"

"What if we're not?" Red Fred said.

"I'll ride back down in two hours," Crane told him flatly. "Be gone, or be sorry."

He backed the mare away a few steps, then turned her and trotted her back across the meadow. The last thing he saw as he left was the girl with the yellow hair, still looking at him as if she might smile.

Crane found the lean-to pleasantly warm. He unsaddled the mare, rubbed her down well with a heavy towel, brushed her briskly all over, picked her hooves clean, and gave her a trough of green hay. Later, he thought, he would come back out and hand-feed her a cold apple.

He closed the lean-to and went into the cabin. It, too, was warm and comfortable after the cold, snowy outdoors. Crane hung up his

coat and put the rifle and binoculars away. Suddenly realizing how hungry he was, he went to the end of the main room that served as a kitchen and put two frankfurters in a pan of water to boil. Opening a can of beans, he set the can next to the pan of water to heat.

While his lunch was warming, Crane went over to a large transistor radio on the utility table. It was already tuned to the station in Delano. He turned it on and listened for the news. It came when he was halfway through his plate of franks and beans.

"Here's a late report on the bank robbery in Delano this morning," the newscaster said. "Bank officials have now established that the holdup man got away with an estimated forty-four thousand dollars in unmarked, small-denomination bills. In case you missed our earlier newscast, the daring robbery was executed by a lone gunman just minutes after the Delano Valley Bank opened for business this morning. Holding the bank's two male and three female employees at gunpoint with a sawed-off shotgun, the bandit took less than two minutes to pack all of the bank's currency into a small duffel bag. Leaving the bank by a rear door, he escaped down the alley in a late model Ford pickup truck. The truck, presently being traced by authorities, was found abandoned an hour later four miles south of Delano. The county sheriff's department has theorized that the holdup man had another vehicle and possibly an accomplice waiting where the pickup truck was found. Steadily falling snow between the six-thousand and eight-thousand-foot levels quickly covered any tire tracks the holdup man's second vehicle may have made. Police are certain, however, that his escape was made down-mountain, since the only upgrade road out of Delano was believed to be snowed in too soon after the robbery to allow higher elevation traffic. Stay tuned to Station KDEL for further news on the Delano bank robbery as it develops."

Crane turned off the radio. He glanced out the window at the large snowflakes which were still floating lightly down. It was perfect for him. The longer it snowed, the more snowed-in the upgrade road would become, and the more snowed-in it became, the more convinced everyone was going to be that the bank robber went *down*-mountain.

All he had to do now, Crane mused, was lie low in the cabin for five or six weeks. Then, when everyone was certain the bank robber had made good his getaway, and when Delano and the other mountain villages were overflowing with

the ski crowd, he would take the money and quietly ride the bay mare down one of the tree-sheltered riding trails. Once he reached the edge of one of the ski towns, it would be no problem at all to disappear.

Crane finished his lunch and put the disposable dishes and utensils in a plastic bag. Taking an apple from the refrigerator, and a hunting knife to slice it, he went around the cabin to see if the mare had finished her hay yet.

At two o'clock, as he had said he would, Crane rode the mare back down to the meadow where he had seen Red Fred and his group that morning. He found the tent gone and nearly all signs of their camp covered by freshly fallen snow. In another hour, he figured, he wouldn't be able to find the place.

He turned the mare and started back for the pines. Before he reached them, he saw the girl with the straight yellow hair. Startled, he drew the horse up short.

She was sitting under a pine tree at the edge of the clearing, her knees drawn up in front of her. The hood of her sweatshirt was still down, and wrapped around her shoulders was the worn blanket the other two women had been using earlier.

Crane pulled the carbine out of its boot and looked around cautiously. Except for the girl, he saw no sign of life. He walked the mare slowly over to her.

"Where are your friends?" he asked when he got to her.

"Going back down," she said. "Like you told them to." Her voice was soft, the texture of a whisper with the volume turned up. Her eyes met his unflinchingly.

"Why aren't you with them?"

"I decided to keep on going the way I started. Up to the top and down the other side."

"Are you telling me they left you here?" Crane said incredulously. "Alone?"

"Why not?" she asked matter-of-factly. "Everyone's got to do his own thing. Besides, I wasn't really one of them, not one of their family, I mean. I just joined them a few days ago down in Edgerton. I wanted to go over the mountain with them."

"And now that they've turned back, you decided to do it alone." Crane shook his head in slow disbelief. "Do you have any idea what the temperature will be up here an hour or two after it gets dark?"

"I know it'll be cold," she said. "But I also know that I can build a snow shelter to protect me at night."

"You'll have enough snow for it, that's for sure," Crane said irritably.

"What do you intend to eat?"

"I have food," she declared. From under the blanket she produced a plastic bag that bulged with several cans and a box of saltines.

Crane shook his head again and put the carbine back in its boot. He sat forward in the saddle and looked around thoughtfully for several moments. Finally he sighed quietly and turned back to the girl. "Get on behind me," he said, taking his foot out of a stirrup for her. "I'll give you a ride up to the top."

He thought he saw that same hint of a smile on her lips as she quickly got up and handed him the bag of food. She mounted behind him, adjusted the blanket on her shoulders, and slipped her arms around his waist. Even through the thickness of his mackinaw, Crane could feel the subtle pressure of her body against him.

He started the mare back up to the top. Most of the way he held the reins in a loose loop and let the horse select its own path through the snow-covered crags. There was no wind at all and the high, thin air felt warmer than it actually was. As the mare made her way upward, Crane let his back relax against the girl. Presently he felt the side of her face pressing gently between his shoulder blades. He sensed that she was very tired.

"What's your name?" he asked after a while.

"Janis." She paused for what seemed like a long time, then said, "What's yours?"

"Crane," he told her.

They reached the cabin and he put the mare in the lean-to. Since the horse had not worked up any sweat, all Crane did was unsaddle her and put a double-size Navajo blanket over her. Then he led the girl around to the front of the cabin.

"You might as well come on in. You wouldn't get two miles in this snow anyway. Too wet."

Janis followed him inside. She put her blanket and bag of food on the floor by the door and went over to stand next to the stove. Crane noticed for the first time that on her feet she wore only moccasins, and that they were soaked through. He got a towel and a pair of his heavy boot sox and tossed them to her.

"Dry your feet," he quietly ordered. She silently obeyed, then sat down by the stove and drew her knees up in the same manner in which he had found her sitting under the tree.

Crane made coffee and gave her a cup. Then he turned on the radio and played solitaire at the kitchen table while the girl rested. Twice there were news broadcasts that mentioned the Delano bank rob-

bery, but Janis appeared to pay no attention to them. After she finished her coffee, she stretched out on an oval rug near the stove and dozed. Crane kept playing solitaire, keeping the radio volume low.

By four-thirty it was dark and still snowing. Crane lighted the burners under the camp oven and put in two frozen turkey dinners and a pan of rolls. As he was setting the table, the girl awoke and sat up on the floor.

"I slept," she said.

"You slept," Crane confirmed.

Janis looked out the window. "It's night already."

"Yes." He went around the long room, closing and locking the window shutters. "You'd better stay here until morning," he said. "You'd never be able to find your way in the dark." He nodded toward a door near the other end of the long room. "There's a bedroom in there you can use. I'll bunk out here on the couch."

"You don't have to do that," she objected. "I can use the couch. I don't want to take your bed."

"The couch is just as comfortable," he said. "It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does," she argued. She padded across the room in the sox that were too large for her and began helping him with supper. "I mean, it *is* your bed."

They argued about it throughout the meal, then off and on during the evening while he taught her to play cassino. They were still arguing about it late that night when Janis heated a pot of coffee and warmed up a tray of butter cookies for them.

In the end, all their talk was for nothing. Crane did not sleep on the couch, and neither did the girl.

Janis was up before he was the next morning and had pancakes ready when he came out of the bedroom.

"Shall I throw out those things I brought with me?" she asked as he sat down at the table.

Crane looked over at the torn blanket and bag of meager supplies lying by the door. "Might as well," he said. There was no longer any question of her trying to hike down the mountain by herself. "Good pancakes," he told her after several bites.

Janis sat across from him, sipping coffee. She studied him thoughtfully as he ate. "How old are you?" she asked finally.

Crane smiled. "Too old for you to trust."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it your generation that says never trust anyone over thirty? Well, I'm over thirty—two years over. How old are you?"

"Guess."

"Nineteen," he told her casually.

"Smart aleck," she said. "No more pancakes for you—"

A loud thud interrupted the girl's words and caused Crane to whirl around tensely from the table.

"What was that?" she asked.

"Something hit the door," Crane said. "Sounded like a rock." As he moved quickly to get the carbine, there was a second thud, louder, more demanding.

"Hey, you in there!" a voice yelled from outside.

Crane opened a window shutter and looked out. Fifty feet in front of the cabin, standing in knee-deep snow, was Red Fred.

"Your Indian friend," he said to Janis. "Looks like he didn't make it down the mountain after all."

Crane closed the shutter and went to the door. He stepped out onto the porch carefully, the rifle ready.

"Peace, brother," the Indian said, smiling. He looked past Crane and saw Janis in the doorway behind him. "Hey, I see you found our little stray. That's cozy, man."

"What do you want?" Crane asked.

"It's like this, man," Red Fred said seriously. "We couldn't get back down the trail in time, the snow got so deep. So we headed up to the timberline looking for shelter. We found a cave just below the ridge over there and it would—"

"I asked what you wanted," Crane said.

Red Fred shrugged. "Well, I thought maybe you could spare a little food, just enough for a day or two. After we've rested and got ourselves together, we'll make our way down somehow."

Crane's lips parted to speak, but he checked his words. He had been about to tell Red Fred that the four of them would be insane to try going down-mountain on foot, particularly in the kind of clothes they were wearing, and without adequate supplies. Then he quickly reminded himself that as long as they remained on the mountain, they were going to be a problem to him. It would be better to let them go their own way. If they ran into difficulty, it would be their concern, not his.

"I suppose I can let you have enough food for a couple of days," Crane said. "Then you're on your own. Understand?"

"Sure, man. Sure."

Crane went back into the cabin. "Spread that blanket of yours on the floor," he told Janis. "Put that food you had on it and I'll get some more."

He opened his well-stocked pantry and removed several cans of tuna, beans, Vienna sausages and fruit salad. He added two boxes of

crackers, some disposable spoons, and a large water bucket. Piling it all in the middle of the blanket, he tied it in a bundle, picked up the rifle again, and went back outside. He walked a few yards from the cabin, put the bundle down, and returned to the porch to stand with Janis.

"Come and get it," he told Red Fred. "I can't let you starve."

The smiling Indian came forward and hefted the bundle. "I appreciate this, man."

"Forget it," Crane said. "Just don't bother me anymore."

"Whatever you say, man." Red Fred slung the bundle over his shoulder and started off. When he was still within talking distance, he

stopped and turned back. "Say, listen," he said, smiling again, "I want you to know we all think that was a beautiful bank job you pulled in Delano. We've got a little transistor radio and we've been listening to the news bulletins. Man, they're looking for you everywhere *but* up. I mean, who'd ever expect a guy to bust a bank and then run to the top of a mountain and get himself snowbound for a hideout? Of course, *we* figured it out right away, what with you telling us to get off the mountain and all. But the fuzz, man, they are really snowed!" Red Fred smiled wider. "Hey, that's not a bad pun. Well, take care, man." With a wave of his hand, he turned away.

Crane, his expression dark, silently watched him go. Presently he and the girl went back into the cabin. Crane put the rifle away and sat back down at the kitchen table. Janis poured him some fresh coffee.

"Is it true?" she asked him after several moments. "Did you really rob a bank, like he said?"

Crane nodded. "Yes."

"How much money did you get?"

"I'm not sure—I haven't counted it yet. The radio said forty-four thousand."

The girl thought about it for a moment, then said, "But why? I mean, what do you need that much money for?"

"To live," Crane told her. He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm lazy. I don't like to work, so I steal. This isn't the first bank I've robbed—it's the seventh in eleven years."

"But . . . don't you ever get caught?"

"No. And I probably never will. I work alone, I have no police record, I've never even been fingerprinted. The seven banks have all been small ones, in little out-of-the-way places like Delano, where it takes the F.B.I. a little while to get to. I always have a very good hideout waiting for me, so I know exactly where to go after each robbery."

He got up and went over to the window to assure himself that Red Fred had gone, then returned to the table. "I don't get a great deal of money from small banks like the one in Delano," he continued, "but I get enough to lead an easy life. That forty-four thousand will do me for about two years, maybe a little longer."

"And when it's gone," Janis said, "you'll just look around and find another little bank? In another out-of-the-way place? And you'll do it all over again?"

"Exactly. As you said earlier," Crane reminded her, "everyone has to do his own thing."

Janis nodded. "Sure, I can dig that." She smiled and looked

around the cabin. "Did you plan to stay up here all winter?"

"No. Just five or six weeks. I can ride the horse down one of the tree trails."

"Will the horse carry two riders?"

"If I want her to," Crane said carefully.

"And do you want her to?" Janis asked.

Crane returned her smile and shrugged his shoulders again. "Why not?" he said.

"That's exactly what I was thinking," she told him. "Why not?"

She got up and walked slowly around the table to him.

The next morning Crane was letting her count the money. Janis had emptied the duffel bag in the middle of the floor and was delightedly sorting the bundles of currency by denomination. Crane was stretched out on the couch, watching her in quiet amusement.

"Looks like you've got more tens than anything else," she commented.

"I won't complain about that," he replied. "Nine years ago I took a little bank in the backwoods country of Michigan and got mostly ones. I think the total take was something like fourteen thousand dollars. I had to pull another job less than a year later. I made up for it though, on the next job after that—I hit one down in the Arizona desert just a few miles from the Mexican border and got enough to last me three whole years. You should have seen the packs of old, unmarked fifties that little dump had piled up in the vault—"

His words were suddenly interrupted by another loud thud against the front door.

"Hey! You in there, hey!"

It was the voice of Red Fred again. Crane muttered a curse and pulled on his boots. He quickly slipped on his mackinaw and picked up the carbine. Before Red Fred had time to shout again, Crane was facing him from the front porch.

"What do you want?" Crane asked.

"How are you, man?" the smiling Indian said. "Uh, listen, we decided not to try making that trip down the mountain just yet. Too much snow, you know? We thought we'd wait a few days, rest up a little more, see?"

"Get to the point," Crane said.

"Well, like we could use a couple of blankets, and some smokes. And if you've got some wine or something to drink—"

"When did you say you were starting down-mountain?" Crane asked coldly.

"Oh, maybe day after tomorrow,

or the next day at the very latest."

Crane stared at him thoughtfully for a moment. "All right," he said finally. "I've got a couple of extra blankets you can have, and a bottle of brandy. No cigarettes. And this is the last of it. Understand?"

"Sure, man."

Crane went back inside the cabin. He piled one blanket, a bottle of brandy, and some more canned goods on a second blanket which he tied into another bundle for Red Fred. Back outside, he put the bundle down in the snow in front of the cabin.

"Don't come back again," he told the Indian. His words were clearly a warning.

"Sure, man, sure," Red Fred said laconically. He picked up the blanket and turned his back on Crane almost in scorn. Saying nothing further, he walked away.

Crane returned to the cabin and sat down on the couch, still holding the rifle.

Janis knelt on the floor and looked up at him solemnly. "He'll be back," she said.

"I know," Crane said quietly. "I know."

Red Fred was back before noon the next day.

Crane went out to meet him. This time he walked all the way out to where the Indian stood. He held the carbine at the ready, his hands on the barrel grip and the stock. "What do you want this time?" he asked flatly.

"Well, man, it's like this," the Indian said. "We decided this morning not to try making it down the mountain on foot at all. We think it would be a bad scene, you know? We're going to stay up here for a while instead. Only thing is, that cave we're using for a pad is like primitive, you know—"

"You want to move into the cabin, is that it?" Crane said.

Red Fred shrugged and smiled widely. "Hey, you're pretty sharp. That's exactly what we had in mind. We thought since you already had one of our family as a guest, you wouldn't mind putting up the rest of us—"

"You cheap tramp," Crane snarled. "Get away from me before I wrap this rifle around your skull."

"No reason to get hostile, man," the Indian said. "No reason to start name-calling, either. I mean, if you think *I'm* a tramp, what do you call that chick you got inside—"

Red Fred's words were abruptly halted by a vicious blow to the stomach as Crane drove the rifle stock into him. The Indian doubled up with a groan and stumbled backward.

"Go back to your cave, tramp," Crane said through tightened lips.

"If you come near my cabin again, I'll shoot you. Now move!"

Clutching his stomach, Red Fred staggered away.

Crane, his face white with anger, returned to the cabin.

"What did he want?" Janis asked.

"He wanted to move his so-called family in with us."

"What did you tell him?"

"I answered him with a rifle stock in the gut. I told him if he came back again I'd shoot him." Crane wet his lips thoughtfully. "You know him better than I do. What do you think he'll do?"

"I don't know," Janis said, shaking her head. "I wasn't with them long enough to really get to know him."

Crane pondered the situation for a few moments. "I suppose we'll just have to wait him out," he said finally, "but let's take a few precautions. I'll go out back and give the mare enough hay and water for the night, then padlock the lean-to. While I'm gone, you close and lock all the shutters. When I get back inside, we'll put the safety bar across the door."

"All right."

Together they secured the cabin as best they could. The rest of the day seemed to pass quickly. Janis finished counting the money and announced that there was a total of $44,350. She packed the money neatly back into the duffel bag. They played cards for a couple of hours and then Crane listened to the radio while Janis cooked supper. After the meal, Crane put on his boots and coat, got the rifle, and had Janis let him out so that he could reconnoiter the area around the cabin. He stayed out for twenty minutes, checking the lean-to, the trees on both sides of the cabin, the sloping knoll directly behind it, and the small clearing in front of it. Seeing nothing suspicious, he went back inside. Janis barred the door after him.

"Everything is quiet," he told her. "Maybe I'm worrying over nothing."

Even so, that night he slept with the loaded carbine on the floor next to the bed.

The next morning Crane learned that he had been wrong about worrying over nothing when he went back to feed the mare.

"They've taken the horse," he told Janis as he hurried back inside. "And slashed the tires on the jeep."

"But how? I thought the lean-to was locked—"

"The screws have been taken out of the hinges. They must have twisted them out with a pocketknife or something."

"How could they do that without us hearing them?"

"They could have done it while

the generator was on last night." He took a pair of snowshoes from the wall. "Pour me a Thermos of coffee and put it in that utility bag, will you?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I've got to try to get the horse back. If Red Fred rides down to Delano, he'll get picked up by the first policeman that sees him. After that it won't take the F.B.I. ten minutes to find out where we are."

While Janis got his coffee ready, Crane put on an extra sweater under his mackinaw and slipped a pair of earmuffs over his head. He put the binoculars into the utility bag with his Thermos.

She went to the door with him when he was ready to leave.

"I'll get back as quickly as I can. Bar the door after I leave." He kissed her lightly on the lips and said good-bye.

From the rear of the cabin, Crane followed the mare's tracks up the low knoll and along its sloping crest into the pine trees off to the right. With the snowshoes on, he was able to move fairly fast over the surface of the snow. The trail through the trees bore to the right in what seemed like a long, gradual curve. Crane followed it for half an hour, then sat on a log and rested for five minutes. After he resumed his pursuit, it was only a short distance until the tracks led him out of the trees and onto a downgrade horse trail. He paused at the trail and stared at the ground. The tracks of the mare continued down the mountain, but a set of human tracks led back into the trees, continuing in the same gradual curve to the right.

Crane took the binoculars out of his utility bag and stepped to the edge of the horse trail. He followed the narrow winding path with the glasses until he reached a point about twelve hundred feet below him. There, picking her way slowly down-trail, was the mare. She was unsaddled, riderless.

Crane lowered the binoculars. There was no way he could catch up with her. She had too much of a lead on him, and she knew exactly where she was going. By midafternoon she would be down to where the snow level ended and the winter grass was growing.

He turned from the trail and followed the footprints that led back into the trees. He knew now where the tracks were going to lead him, and he hurried along in their wake. His thoughts were exclusively of the girl. With each step he took, he realized with an ever-growing foreboding what a mistake it had been to leave her alone.

Less than two hours after he started, he was back in the clearing where the cabin stood. The foot-

prints he had been following led directly up to the porch, and he saw other prints, several sets of them, coming from the other side of the clearing. They were in the cabin, there was no doubt of it. Sighing, he looked around in the snow until he found a rock. He threw it and hit the door.

"Hey! You inside, hey!"

The door opened a crack. "Yeah? What do you want, man?" It was Red Fred.

"Come out and talk," Crane said.

"Get rid of that rifle first," Red Fred answered.

Crane walked over and left the carbine leaning against a tree. When he returned to his original place, the cabin door opened all the way and the four of them filed out onto the porch. Red Fred was first, then his scrawny, pale friend, then the two older girls in their hooded sweat shirts.

"Where's Janis?" Crane asked.

"She's inside," Red Fred said. "You want to see her?" Crane nodded and Red Fred turned to the door. "Hey, girl! Come on out. Your old boyfriend is here."

Janis came out on the porch. She stood next to Red Fred.

"Are you all right?" Crane asked her.

"I am now," Janis said. She slipped her arm around Red Fred's waist. A look of disbelief fell over Crane's face and everyone on the cabin porch started laughing.

"Man," Red Fred howled, "my old lady really faked you out!"

Crane stared openmouthed at the girl for a full minute while Red Fred and the others continued to laugh. Then, still laughing, they filed one by one back into the cabin. Red Fred was the last one at the door. He reached inside and got the sawed-off shotgun Crane had used in the bank robbery.

"Just in case you've got any ideas about charging the cabin with that rifle, remember we've got this hog's leg of yours. You come too close to us and I'll use it on you, dad." With that he went inside, closing and barring the door behind him.

Crane stood alone in the quiet clearing for several minutes after they had gone inside. Then he went over to get his carbine and walked slowly back into the trees.

Just after dark that night, while the cabin's generator was churning noisily, Crane slipped quietly down the low knoll behind the lean-to and climbed the short ladder leading up to the rooftop fuel tank. He opened the drain spigot a quarter of a turn so the fuel would run silently out of the tank. Then he carefully climbed down the ladder and crept back up the knoll.

He had searched the mountain-

top earlier and after three hours had found Red Fred's cave. He returned there now to wait for morning. There had been nothing left in the cave except part of a box of saltines, but Crane had found several large pine limbs that had fallen from the weight of snow, and had dragged those in to cover himself with during the night. With those and his warm clothing and the Thermos of coffee and the crackers, he made it through the long hours to morning.

At daybreak, cold and hungry, he left the cave and trudged back to the knoll behind the cabin. He lay down in the snow and trained the binoculars on the fuel tank. A steady trickle was still flowing from the spigot, but now, after a dozen hours, the bluish coal oil had saturated the roof of the cabin, the roof and one wall of the lean-to, and as much of the jeep as Crane could see inside the hingeless door that still hung by its padlocked hasp.

Crane moved the binoculars along the fuel lines that ran from the tank down to the heating stove in the long room and the cooking stove in the kitchen area. The lines were unfrosted, which meant that they were open, that fuel was still running through them.

Crane rolled onto his side and unslung the carbine. Aiming very carefully through the hanging lean-to door, he squeezed off a single round into the jeep's gasoline tank. The tank exploded, and like an ocean wave a sheet of flame spread over the lean-to and across the roof of the cabin. A moment later Crane heard two lesser explosions inside the cabin as the two stoves blew up. He also thought he heard a scream, a girl's scream, but he couldn't really be sure. It was drowned out by the fiery collapse of the fuel tank as it exploded into the roof and blew away the walls of what had been Crane's best hideout yet.

Crane watched the whipping inferno for a while, then got up and put on his snowshoes. He walked along the sloping knoll to the trees and started his long trip down the mountain on foot. If he made it, he thought, it would be a miracle.

He was right. It would have been a miracle.

Nothing beats experience and objectivity gained from on-the-job training.

Move with the Times

by Sonora Morrow

Fuller came stamping into my office, slammed the afternoon paper on my desk and sat down in a chair hard enough to crack the tip of his spine.

"Damn, damn, damn," he swore.

I was working on a report for the captain on the rising rate of homicides. "Now what?" I asked.

"That stupid, idiot jury has turned Solpo loose."

"So?" The vagaries of the American jury system have, for a long time now, ceased to amaze me.

"He's a rapist and a murderer; eleven rapes and two killings." Fuller's voice became emotional. "That one fourteen-year-old girl will be in a mental hospital for the rest of her life."

"Fuller," I said sternly, hoping to calm him down. "If you want to remain a cop, you'd better learn one thing and learn it quickly. We get paid to arrest and *nothing else.* We don't have an opinion, we don't try them and we don't convict them. An emotional cop is a bad cop. If you can't be objective about this

job, you'd better look around for something else to do for a living. Do you understand?"

He gave me a long look and nodded his head. "You're right, Lieutenant, but it's so wrong, so very wrong."

While I agreed, the futility of worrying about fair and unfair in crime was no reason to start or aggravate an ulcer.

"Look, Fuller," I said, "for thousands of years, millions of good guys have been getting the shaft, while a handful of bad guys seems to slither along to a ripe old age. It's a fact of life, accept it. And in the meantime, just keep right on being the best homicide sergeant I've got. Okay?"

He managed a smile and got up. "Sure, and thanks." He glanced at the wall clock. "It's nearly six, I'd better get on home. You going?"

"Pretty soon." Through the glass windows of my office I watched him leave.

Home. For me it was a ridiculous box with a cement lawn and nosy neighbors ten feet away on both sides—complete with Jenny, my alleged wife of nearly thirty years. I was considered a pretty good cop, but as a man, I knew myself to be a spineless, pacifistic dope, just drifting along in a marital vacuum.

I'd staggered across Jenny on Hollywood Boulevard during World War II while on a weekend pass from the Marine base. I was twenty, she was pretty and had her own apartment, her own car and a source for all the black-market gas it could use. We got to be a weekend habit and when my ship-out orders to the Pacific came through, she cried a lot and I figured I'd probably end up dead anyway, so we got married.

I didn't end up dead, however. I came back to Jenny and, after my discharge, applied for a job as a policeman and was accepted; a natural course of events for an ex-Marine gunnery sergeant.

It hadn't been bad while we'd had our nice two-bedroom house. I loved the lawn work and especially gardening. Roses, pansies, zinnias, petunias, sweet peas and marguerites were my joy and my pastime. Don't laugh—when you deal in dirt, blood and misery for a living, quiet beauty in your spare time keeps you from going bananas.

Then Jenny's best friend from up the street sold out and moved to a mobile home park. From then on that was all I heard, and I got dragged through a dozen models with a constant stream of "why-we-shoulds."

"It's a perfect place for retired people," she'd yammered.

"But I'm *not* retiring."

"It's quieter, no little brats run-

ning around, easier, more friendly, and certainly cheaper," she'd continued.

My disagreements were futile.

Finally, one night at midnight when I was trying to sleep, I said, "Jenny, let's get a nice, friendly divorce. You get a mobile home and I'll keep this place and everybody's happy."

"Oh, no, you don't," she shrilled. "One of those cute civil service secretaries caught your eye?"

"For pete's sake," I moaned.

"Well, forget it, Lee Hansen, just forget it. You try for a divorce and you won't have enough money left to buy a geranium."

Which settled *that* for the time being.

I did make one condition, however. We'd get the mobile home, but she was to shut up about my retiring. As long as I passed my physical and could do my job I intended to stay on the department. She agreed.

The "parking lot," as I derisively called "Peace and Friendship Acres," was twenty-six miles from the police building. The developers had hacked out ninety forty-by-seventy-foot lots from what once must have been beautiful rolling hills. Our north-end space was up against the concrete block wall that separated it from the back yards of residences which faced on the next street, a good country block away.

Jenny plunged into the social life at the recreation hall with her best friend and the other biddies, and when the weather permitted, lounged around the community pool, having squeezed her size twenty body into a size sixteen bathing suit. The old broads played bridge, bingo, and took trips to town to see the museums, matinees, and whatever. I stayed at work as much as I could.

One hot Sunday morning, when Jenny had risen early for a beach party excursion aptly billed, "Sunday in the Sand," which I had declined to attend, I shambled out into the kitchen-dining area and poured a cup of coffee. For the first time, I glanced out the dining room window.

The back yard of the house down behind us was a fairyland of flowers, trees, grape arbor and even an old-fashioned gazebo. I looked to either side of that yard and saw tract houses running rampant, but the house that went with "my" garden was an old one and the lot was bigger than the rest.

As I watched, out of the back porch screen door "she" came. No chicken, mind you, probably in her mid-forties, but with a lithe, slender body, serene face and fabulous natural golden blonde hair piled atop her head. She took a small pair of

clippers from the pocket of her shorts, snipped a bunch of ripe, juicy green grapes from the arbor and strolled around the garden, checking the soil and roses.

Then the screen door banged open and a beefy, double-chinned, nearly bald man stood there. "Carolyn," he shouted, "when the hell do I get my breakfast?"

"I'll be right in, Jack," she replied softly.

"You and your stupid garden," he ranted. "You should love me half as much, pay me a quarter of the attention you give *it*."

She walked quietly to the door, went inside, and he slammed the door behind her.

From then on, I spent all my off-duty, non-sleeping hours at our dining room window. That Carolyn had me hooked from the first moment I saw her. She spent a lot of time in her back yard—she sprayed, she clipped, she watered, and I was in love with her.

Two Sundays later, she came out about four in the afternoon, a cotton-candy vision in a pink pants suit, to cut a bouquet of roses. Jack the Ripper, as I had come to consider him, once again made an appearance at the back door.

"Carolyn," he yelled again, "you can have a rose bouquet on the table and beef stroganoff coming out your ears, but *nobody* can make me sit down at the table with those stupid, stuffy old relatives of yours."

She didn't reply, but kept cutting blooms.

"Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, Jack," she said so softly I almost didn't catch the words.

"I'm going down to Brannigan's Bar and Grill. Call me when they're gone."

She went toward the door, a beautiful bouquet of roses in her hand. "All right, do as you please, they won't miss you," she replied.

She tried to pass his bulky body and he grabbed her arm savagely. She dropped the roses and stared at him. He raised his arm as if to strike her, but she didn't flinch.

"You Dulaks," he sneered, "just because you used to own this whole valley, you think you're really something."

She remained frozen.

"Well, you're not. You're nothing!" He released her arm and stalked into the house.

She stood for a moment, and finally, taking a deep breath, bent over and began to retrieve the fallen roses.

I was seething. I wanted to go over there and beat the clown's brains out, but I knew better. My cop's instinct told me so. Stay out of family affairs unless you're sent for, and even then the score was usually Husband and Wife 2, Cops 0.

I finally came to the conclusion that marriages were *not* made in heaven, else he would have married Jenny, and I would have married Carolyn.

It was a Peace and Friendship excursion to the mountains that set me free of Jenny one Saturday, the sight of Carolyn in her garden, and a "what-have-I-got-to-lose" attitude that sent me, on foot, uphill and downhill out of the parking lot, around the block and to the front of my beloved's door.

I rang the bell and she answered.

"Is your husband home?" I asked politely. I had already determined I would represent myself as a realtor if the ox came to the door.

"No," she smiled, "I don't expect him back much before five."

"Good," I smiled back.

She looked startled, then apprehensive.

I hastened to reassure her. "I'm your back-yard neighbor. Our trailer overlooks your beautiful garden. I had to come over and tell you how much I enjoy looking at it."

"I see," she said faintly.

I took out my badge case with my I.D. card in it. "I'm a perfectly respectable citizen, really. I'm a police lieutenant." I proffered the case and she took it, inspected it carefully and handed it back.

"Won't you come in, Lt. Hansen?"

The entry hall was dark after she closed the door, but I discerned that the walls and the floor were of that shiny old wood that hardly exists anymore.

She led me through the livingroom, dining room and kitchen until we reached the back porch and the door to the garden. It, and

she, were even more wonderful close up.

Somehow, within a matter of minutes, I was drinking lemonade and eating delicious homemade cookies and we were chatting like old friends. Her married name was Maddox and she'd had it for twenty-eight years.

"He was such a handsome sailor and I was such a dumb seventeen," she confided. "In those days, this was the only house for a mile in all directions. It was all orange grove then. But," she sighed, "things happen. There was a terrible housing shortage after the war and my parents began to sell a parcel here and there for developers. It meant a lot more money for a lot less work. Growing oranges is not as easy as it looks. Three days and nights a month of sloppy, muddy irrigation and no sleep, and then the smudge pots when it got cold, and trying to find pickers."

Her hookup with Jack was even dumber than mine with Jenny.

"He was hitchhiking his way back to San Diego one Sunday night when a storm hit, and he came up on the porch looking like a drowned rat. My father brought him in and my mother fussed over him, drying his clothes, feeding him. Early next morning my father drove him down to the base. I guess he told Jack to come any time he wished, because pretty soon he was a weekend fixture." She sighed and folded her hands in her lap and looked down at them.

"My folks were from the old country where marriages were arranged by the parents, and before I knew it, Jack and I were married. We all lived here together and somehow he put on a good facade for my father. Jack pretended to love the country life, but he urged my father to keep selling the land until pretty soon there were only forty acres left. Then ten years ago my father died after a heart attack, and Mom wasn't far behind. They'd been married forty-five years."

"Couldn't you have sold out and left Jack?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Dad left the place to us in joint tenancy and Jack wouldn't agree to anything I wanted. He had an offer to sell the last forty acres, partly for your trailer park and partly for the housing on either side of us. I wanted to keep five acres so we could at least have some privacy." She shuddered involuntarily. "That was the first real beating he ever gave me, to make me sign that sales contract. I'm a coward, I signed it."

"You should have called the police," I said furiously.

"And he'd have been put in jail for a while, eventually let out, and then he would have killed me."

We both sat in complete silence.

"I don't know *why* I've told you all these things," she said finally.

I reached over and patted her hands. "Kindred spirits, I guess, with a love for land and flowers and privacy and an intense dislike for violence, stupidity and selfishness."

I left then, as Jenny and Jack were due back and neither of us wanted our friendship known.

We saw each other as often as we could, which wasn't as often as we would have liked, and our romance consisted mostly of hopefully unobserved glances between my dining room window and her back yard.

Something certainly had to give. Running away together was no answer.

Maybe love alone is enough when you're in your teens, but middle age demands and needs comfort and security along with it. I wasn't about to let Jenny clean me out, and I certainly wasn't going to let Jack the Ripper take everything Carolyn had.

Murder crossed my mind in a hundred different ways, and anyone who says there is no perfect murder is an uninformed fool. There are hundreds every year filed under Missing Persons, Accidental Death and even Death by Natural Causes. Busy coroners, inept coroners, overworked police departments, not to mention the proven murderers the courts set free on technicalities, account for most of them.

You have to move with the times. Right?

The planned demise of either Jack or Jenny wouldn't bother me a bit, but Carolyn must not know. She was a precious woman—a follower, not a leader; a feminine, unliberated woman who liked it that way.

I made my plans. I knew the "how" of disposing of Jack, I just needed to wait for the "when."

I had one preview of Brannigan's Bar and Grill, a dark, stale-smelling pinball country bar two miles from the trailer park. It was filled with dirty-shirted and dirty-fingernailed men; long-haired young men, usually with back-packs, apparently just in for a beer on their way to nowhere; and hard-looking women in T-shirts and pants. The jukebox blared country and western music quite a few decibels higher than a nearly-deaf person would need to hear it. I could see where Jack Maddox would be in his element in the place. As "lord of the manor" or "country squire," who bought a round for the peasants now and then, he was found to be a man to whom it paid to be nice.

For seven nights I walked to the dark parking lot of Brannigan's, waiting for the Ripper to show up. I had a full pint of whiskey in my

coat pocket. Finally he came. It was another three hours before he staggered out alone and made his way to his car. I was leaning up against it, the bottle tilted to my lips, when he approached.

"Hi, Jack, we going to see those broads like you promised?"

His eyes tried to focus on me. "Sure, sure," he slurred.

"Here," I handed him the bottle, "you take charge of this, give me your car keys and the address, and away we go!"

He fumbled for the keys in his pocket and finally handed them to me. He sat on the passenger side, swigging down the pint of whiskey in large gulps.

I started the car and pointed it toward his home.

"It's thirty miles away, friend, but these girls are worth it. Besides," he hiccuped, "never play in your own back yard. Right?"

"I'm not playing," I muttered under my breath.

A desolate spot, a large, heavy rock and the job was done. I got his wallet, took the money and a few credit cards and threw the remains on the front seat floor. When I got home, Jenny was in bed asleep, and I cut the currency, credit cards and gloves I'd worn into tiny little pieces and put them into our trash compactor.

He was found the next day. One down and now only one more to go.

Two nights later Jenny went into the city with her "gang," and I went around to see Carolyn. She was alone, dressed in black, and very glad to see me.

"He was an awful man," she said, "but that was a horrid way to go."

"I can't think of any easy way," I replied. "What did the sheriff's office say?"

"That he'd probably been asking for it for a long time, flashing a lot of money in that scroungy bar. They think the person who did it is probably in Canada by now. They don't seem to have a clue."

"They'll check out everybody who was in that bar that night, dear," I consoled. "They'll catch the man eventually."

"It doesn't matter," she sighed. "I know I'm free now, but I can't feel good about it for a while yet. I've got all his clothes packed for the Salvation Army." She picked up a small pile of letters from the table beside her chair. "I was just going through the few notes he wrote me before we were married."

A sudden flash hit me. I took them gently from her. "Unless you want to keep these for sentimental reasons, let me throw them away for you."

"Sentimental!" She almost snorted. "We had no sentiment in our marriage, no love, no compan-

ionship . . . just money, and slavery for me."

"My poor baby," I soothed.

She smiled wanly. "After the funeral tomorrow, I'm going to stay with my Aunt Tildy in Pasadena for a few days. She insists, and I'd really like to get away from here for a while. I've hired a gardener to take care of the lawns. Will you call me?"

"Of course I will, darling." I kissed her good-bye with fervor and almost ran home to finalize plans for the disposal of Jenny.

I read through the notes. Three were usable. Jack Maddox was not much of a writer, but his terseness was fabulous.

"Can hardly wait to see you. J."

"Am waiting impatiently for us to be one. J."

"This is the weekend we've been waiting for. J."

The sentences were each on one small sheet of bonded stationery, no salutations, undated and unweathered by time. I suspected Carolyn had kept them away from light and air in the secret places women have for saving useless documents. Bless her heart.

Maybe I've been too hard on Jenny. She had curves—in excess, perhaps, but they were there. She slept in creams, a chin-strap, and curlers, and had her hair done every week. Her clothes were fashionable for the stylish stout, and she bathed every day and used perfume. What I mean is, it was not inconceivable that a middle-aged, nearsighted, partially-hard-of-hearing, good-income man with no sex drive might find her attractive—especially if he hadn't watched her disintegration over the past thirty years.

So, one evening I lugged a five-pound box of candy over to the clubhouse and dumped it on her bingo card.

"Somebody left this on the trailer porch," I said quietly. "The card on the front says Jenny Hansen." I left then, knowing full well that the reverse side of the card had printed on it, "Sweets to the sweet. J."

That'd give all those old hens something to think about.

Several telephone calls from a man with a faintly foreign accent, asking for Mrs. Hansen, were made to the clubhouse. "Her home phone, it does not answer."

There were no secrets in the clubhouse, and while tongues were wagging in all directions, Jenny didn't say anything, and poor-dumb-hard-working cop me didn't know anything.

One Tuesday, when I came home, I said, "Jenny, I'm beat, and I think we both deserve a vacation. Why don't you draw out a couple of thousand from our savings account and book us on a ship to Ha-

waii. And just for once don't tell your buddies. It might be nice, just you and me, without making it a tourist cruise."

Her eyes narrowed as she looked at me. "What have you been up to?"

I tried to smile. "I've been up to my hips in homicide and lots of paper work and night calls, what else?"

"I don't know," she said suspiciously. "We've never had a real vacation together."

"That's *your* fault," I replied. "Now I'm tired and I want to get out of this conglomerate of boxes. If you don't want to go, I'll go by myself."

"Fat chance!" she snorted. "No sexy little swinger is going to spend the money *I've* slaved so hard to save."

"Good." I smiled. "You deserve a nice long trip, too, and it's about time I realized it."

I was afraid for a moment she was going to hug or kiss me, but she didn't.

Several days later, on a Friday, she called me at work and told me she had the money and the tickets for the cruise to Hawaii.

"Jenny, why don't you take a taxi and meet me at Le Biarritz," I said. "We'll have a good French dinner, those pastries you like and all the champagne we can drink. This calls for a celebration." The restaurant was midway between our home and the police building.

She really and truly almost simpered over the phone. Poor thing.

I watched for her to be sure she had taken a taxi and not asked one of her friends to drive her. That would have blown my plans temporarily. However, she did arrive in a taxi, and she ate and ate and drank and drank. No condemned person ever had a heartier meal.

I won't tell you how I did it. Just say that modern progress is a marvelous thing, what with large plastic trash bags, guaranteed unbreakable; concrete being poured for hundreds of miles of freeway every day; not to mention those great big sanitation trucks that pick up trash for the public and can mash even a cow's carcass to a size small enough to fit into a cigar box. Jenny no longer existed.

When I got home I took care of the elimination of most of her clothes, her jewelry, her suitcases, and everything else I could find that a woman might take when she leaves home.

The next afternoon I went to the clubhouse. A dozen women were sitting around the lounge for the "cocktail hour." I headed for Jenny's best friend.

"Where's Jenny?" I demanded.

She looked startled. "Why, I

don't know where she could be."

I looked around at the women. "One of you must know where she's gone."

All I got were blank looks.

"All right, ladies," I said sternly. "If you want to make this a police matter, we'll bring in a few officers to question you." I threw the three notes into the lap of the nearest female. "You people never had any secrets between you, so who's this 'J.'?"

They clustered around to read the notes, and then they began to talk, each contributing a little something.

"Well, she did get phone calls from a man."

"There was that big box of candy, but she said she didn't know *who* sent it."

"She did say something about taking a trip."

"Where?" I demanded.

They all shook their heads. Jenny hadn't confided in them. Miracle of miracles.

I retrieved the notes, and tried to look sad. "After nearly thirty years, this is the thanks I get for being a faithful, hard-working husband. She's run off with another man. Couldn't at least one of you have warned me?"

"We didn't know, truly we didn't," came a chorus of commiserating voices.

I walked out of the clubhouse, to all intents and purposes a broken man.

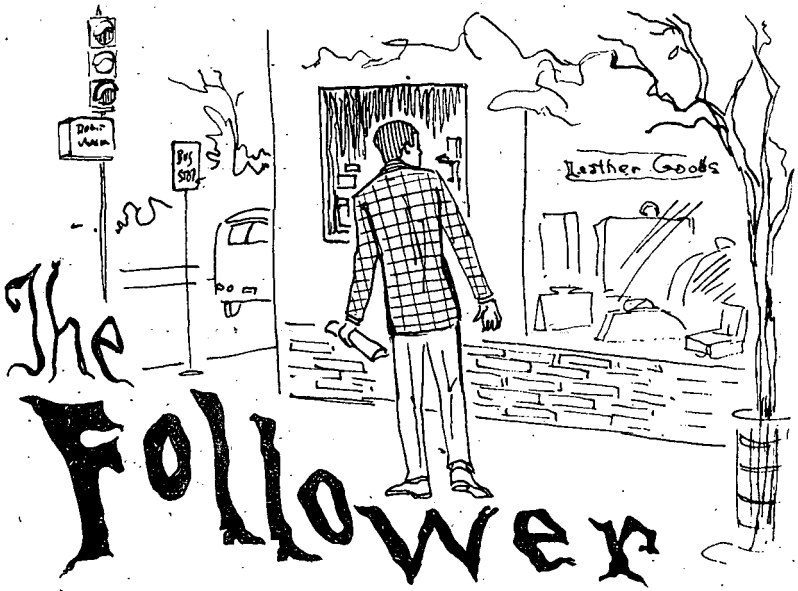
Naturally, I took my retirement. It's hardly fair to expect the taxpayers to support a policeman who's a murderer.

I got rid of the trailer and Carolyn sold her house. Part of her feels sorry for my rejection, but most of her is glad Jenny went away. Our twenty-acre ranch in the northern part of the state is beautiful. You should see our garden.

Only one thing really bothers me. I can't file for divorce on the grounds of desertion for quite a while, so Carolyn and I are living together without benefit of wedlock.

Still, these days that's pretty much the norm, and one does have to learn to move with the times. Right?

The individual who commits himself to "the pursuit of happiness" is rarely satiated.



The Follower

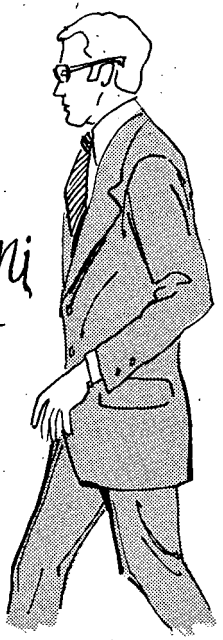
It was while he was walking toward the bus stop, after leaving the mid-city office building where he worked as a junior account executive, that Chambliss glanced over his shoulder and first realized he was being followed.

The man behind him, matching his stride fifty yards distant on the crowded sidewalk, wore horn-rimmed glasses and a neat brown business suit; young, medium-sized, sandy-haired, with features that were undistinguished without being bland, he might have been just another white-collar wage-earner like Chambliss. Yet it was the fourth time that day Chambliss had seen him—first, in the cafeteria where he had his morning coffee; again, outside Mardi's, the small restaurant four blocks from the office where he generally ate lunch; again, a few minutes earlier, in the lobby of his

building—and that seemed like too many times for simple coincidence.

Chambliss felt a chill settle on the back of his neck. Why would anybody want to follow *him*? He was just an ordinary citizen, no better, no worse, no different in-

by Bill Pronzini



trinsically, than thousands of others in the city and the country; a bachelor, he did not play around with other men's wives, had been between girlfriends for three months, had no skeletons in his thirty-year-old closet, and had no enemies and no major vices. If, as he suspected, the guy in the horn-rimmed glasses *were* following him, he could think of no conceivable reason for it.

Well, hell, he told himself, *maybe you're making something out of nothing. This is a big city and in big cities coincidences do happen, paths do cross from time to time during the same day. Sure, that's all it is; and you're becoming a little old lady, Joseph. Next thing you know, you'll be looking under the bed for prowlers the minute you get home.*

He smiled slightly as he walked, chiding himself, but he could not quite shake the feeling of uneasiness. He turned left at the next intersection, toward the bus stop, and when he had gone half a block he looked covertly over his shoulder; the sandy-haired man was still there, still fifty yards behind him. Impulsively, Chambliss stopped and peered through the window of a jewelry store, turning his head in an almost surreptitious movement as he did so; the man in the horn-rimmed glasses had stopped, too, and was examining a display of luggage in a leather-goods shop.

The uneasiness grew in Chambliss' mind, and gave birth to a faint glow of anger. This was ridiculous—cloak-and-dagger stuff, for heaven's sake! His face suffused with blood, and he felt an abrupt urge to approach the guy and demand to know just what it was he thought he

was doing; but as quickly as it had come, the urge dissipated. Like most people, he had a dread of making an ass of himself—and if his imagination were, in fact, running away with him, indignantly bracing a perfect stranger on a busy city street would accomplish just that.

Chambliss turned instead and began walking again, briskly. As he crossed with the light at the next corner, he glanced once more behind him and the sandy-haired man was still there, hurrying somewhat now to catch the light. *All right,* Chambliss thought grimly, a little apprehensively; *all right!* He quickened his own pace, and then ducked abruptly into the entrance of a large department store filled with late afternoon shoppers. He threaded his way rapidly through the aisles, saw a side-street exit, and went through there to the sidewalk. Four doors up was a small tavern with a windowless exterior; he entered, walked to a rear booth, and sat down with his back to the door, breathing heavily.

A waitress came over and he ordered a glass of beer. When it came, he sipped at it slowly and looked across at the mirror behind the bar; he could not see the door reflected there, but the area immediately inside was discernible. No one came in except a young couple holding hands.

Chambliss began to feel vaguely foolish. He had acted like a man with a guilty conscience or, worse, one of those Milquetoast types afraid of his own shadow. There was no tangible reason for running as he had; the sandy-haired man had done nothing overt, certainly. It was just that he had been . . . *there.*

Determinedly, Chambliss paid for his beer and left the tavern. Outside, he paused briefly, but there was no sign of the man in the horn-rimmed glasses. Smiling then, a little ruefully, he walked, shadowless, the remaining two blocks to his bus stop.

By the time he had ridden cross-city to the quiet, residential section where he lived, the incident had paled considerably in his mind. He read the evening paper, as he did every night on the bus, and then wondered idly whether he would have pork chops or a small steak for dinner; things once again had fallen into a pattern of comfortable normalcy.

He left the bus two blocks from the small frame house where he lived alone. It was a warm, late-spring evening, and the familiar suburban quiet of his neighborhood was scented with the commingled odors of freshly mowed grass and cooking food and blooming flowers. He walked leisurely, not thinking of

anything in particular now, and he was a half block from home before he became aware of the careful, measured steps behind him.

Immediately, the hair on the back of his neck bristled; but Chambliss told himself, *Don't be silly, it's just someone else coming home from work or somebody out for a stroll; don't be silly.* Though he tried to keep from looking, the desire for it was too acute and, finally, in a movement that was almost self-defiant, he swiveled his head to look behind him.

It was the man in the horn-rimmed glasses—and Chambliss, suddenly, irrationally, tasted the brassiness of real fear.

His step faltered and the muscles of his chest constricted and his throat was abrasively dry. He tried to tell himself there was nothing to it, that there was no way it could have any meaning or menace, but the argument was weak and reassured him not at all. Acting on impulse again, he stopped walking and stood with his hands vaguely trembling at his sides.

The sandy-haired man did not pause or halt this time; he continued walking toward Chambliss in his measured way, face mild and expressionless. When he drew abreast, and started to pass without acknowledgment of any kind, Chambliss stepped up to him with a greater boldness than he would customarily have displayed. His eyes were dark and angry, reflecting the irritation that had come as a palliative to the fear.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Who are you? Why are you following me?"

The sandy-haired man blinked at him behind the glasses. "I beg your pardon?"

"You've been following me all day. Why? What do you want?"

"I'm afraid you've made some sort of mistake. I don't know you; why on earth should I be following you?"

"That's just what I'm asking *you.*"

"I am *not* following you."

"Well, I think you are," Chambliss said. He was trembling visibly now. "Listen, who are you? Tell me that. Tell me what you're doing in this neighborhood."

"That is none of your affair," the sandy-haired man said coldly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, please." He brushed past Chambliss and continued up the street, passing Chambliss' house; at the corner, he turned right and disappeared from sight.

Confused, angry and still afraid, Chambliss hurried to his gate, entered the yard and the house, and sank into his reclining chair in the livingroom. The encounter with the

man in the horn-rimmed glasses had yielded nothing. If he were completely innocent, why hadn't he given his name and stated his business in the area? Did he live hereabouts? Well, that was possible, and yet the coincidence of his presence at every turn still seemed inconceivable.

But if the man *were* following him, that seemed just as inexplicable to Chambliss. A mugger, some sort of thief? The neighborhood was not rich and Chambliss was obviously not well-off; and criminals did not make themselves so blatantly conspicuous to their intended victims by following them openly an entire day. Someone mentally disturbed, then? He had seemed calmly rational and perfectly normal, although that did not necessarily have to be an accurate reflection of what went on inside the man. Well, suppose he *were* unbalanced in some way, what did he want with Joseph Chambliss, of all people in the city?

Maybe I'm making too much out of this, he thought. *Maybe it's just a twisted kind of game the guy is playing. He doesn't intend me any harm, he couldn't possibly, and when he's had enough he'll go away. There's nothing to worry about; there's no reason to be frightened . . .*

A little unsteadily, Chambliss went into the bathroom and washed his face in cold water. Then he changed into slacks and a pullover and entered the kitchen to prepare his dinner; but as he started to bread the pork chops, he found he had no appetite. He put the meat away, made himself a small drink and, tipped back in his recliner, tried to finish the novel he had begun the night before. It was useless; he couldn't concentrate. He threw the book down, brooded for a time, and then made himself another drink. The house, silent and small, a place of comfort and pleasure since he had bought it two years earlier, was oppressive on this evening. He decided to sit for a while on the porch, where it was cool; carrying his drink, he opened the front door and stepped out.

The man in the horn-rimmed glasses was leaning against the trunk of an elm tree across the street, writing in a large, leather-bound notebook.

Damn you! Chambliss thought with sudden vehemence, and he ran down off the porch, pushed through the gate, and crossed the street. The sandy-haired man looked up unconcernedly, and put the notebook away inside his coat. His eyes, behind the glasses, were steady and void of expression.

"I've had enough of you," Chambliss said in a voice that was

almost querulous. "I've had enough, I tell you! You're going to tell me who you are and what you want, or I . . . I'll call the police. Do you understand me? I'll call the police!"

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

"I mean it, you! I want to know why you're following me, watching me."

"You're drunk," the man said softly, looking at the glass in Chambliss' hand. "Why don't you go home?"

Chambliss grasped the sleeve of his coat. "Listen, damn you—"

The sandy-haired man removed Chambliss' fingers as if they were so much lint; his grip was strong and powerful, but there was still no emotion in his eyes or on his face. "Go home," he said again. He turned away from Chambliss, took off his glasses, and began polishing them carefully with a linen handkerchief.

Chambliss stared at him for a moment longer, then he pivoted and ran back across the street, reentering his house. He went directly to the telephone, fumbled open the city directory that lay on the table beside it. He located the number of the nearest police station, dialed it in agitated haste. A moment later a male voice answered and identified itself as belonging to Sergeant Filippi, then asked who was calling.

Chambliss said, "My name is Joseph Chambliss and I live at two-eleven St. Albans. A man, a sandy-haired man wearing horn-rimmed glasses, has been following me all day—all day! He's across the street now, watching my house, and he won't tell me who he is or what he wants." The words sounded vaguely hysterical in his own ears, but it was too late to rearrange them into a more coherent pattern.

Silence hummed over the wire for a moment, and then Filippi said, quietly, "You're certain this man is following you, Mr. Chambliss?"

"Of course I'm certain. I saw him four times downtown and he followed me home from work and now he's across the street watching my house!"

"Why do you suppose he's following you?"

"I don't know, I don't have any idea."

"You've never seen him before today?"

"No. He's a complete stranger."

"You've talked to him, did you say?"

"Yes. He denies everything but he's lying. He's there and he won't go away."

"*You* approached *him* when you had this conversation?"

"Yes, yes, I approached him."

"Uh-huh, I see. Well, are his ac-

tions at all furtive?" he asked.

"No. He's just standing out there, big as life. It's as if he wants me to know he's following me, watching me."

"Has he threatened you in any way, Mr. Chambliss?"

"I just told you, he denies any interest in me."

"Has he made an attempt to enter your place of residence, your property?"

"No, but he might; I don't know what he might do."

"Mr. Chambliss, just what is it you expect *us* to do?"

"Why—why, arrest him! Make him leave me alone."

"On what charge?"

"I don't know what charge! He's been following me all day, can't you arrest him for that?"

"No, Mr. Chambliss," Filippi said patiently, "we can't arrest a man just because you say he's been following you."

"Suppose he means me harm, suppose that!"

Filippi sighed. "All right, Mr. Chambliss, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll send a patrol-unit over to St. Albans and if this man is still there, the officers will talk to him and to you and straighten the whole thing out. How's that?"

"Yes," Chambliss said, relieved. "Yes, thank you, I just want him to leave me alone, that's all. It's a terrifying thing to have somebody following you when you don't know who he is or what he wants."

"I'm sure it must be," Filippi said. "Good-bye, Mr. Chambliss."

"Good-bye." Replacing the phone, Chambliss took several deep, tremulous breaths in an effort to attain calm again. Then he crossed to one of the front windows and looked out through the drawn curtains, at the elm tree across the street.

The sandy-haired man was gone.

Chambliss threw open the door and hurried outside. He went across the street, and both ways along the block—futilely. As he returned to his gate, sweating, his thoughts tangled, a black-and-white police cruiser turned the near corner and drew up to the curb. Two uniformed officers stepped out, and one of them asked if he were Joseph Chambliss. Numbly, he answered that he was.

"Where's this man you called in about, Mr. Chambliss? The one you claim has been following you."

"He's . . . not here now. He went away."

"Oh? Did you see where he went, in which direction?"

"No. After I called, I looked out and he was just . . . gone."

The two patrolmen exchanged glances. The second one said, "Can you describe him for us?"

"He's sandy-haired and he wears horn-rimmed glasses, I told that to Sergeant Filippi. He's about my age, about thirty, medium-sized, wearing a brown suit. I . . . that's all I can tell you. That's all I know."

"All right, Mr. Chambliss," the first officer said. There was a hint of patronage in his tone. "We'll have a look around the neighborhood and if we see him, we'll have a talk with him and then we'll get in touch with you again. If you don't hear from us . . ." He shrugged.

"You've *got* to find him," Chambliss said. "I have to know why he's been following me all day, why he was watching my house."

"We'll do what we can. Good evening, Mr. Chambliss."

The two patrolmen returned to their cruiser and drove away, and Chambliss went inside the house again. He locked the front door and sat down in the recliner, trying to understand, to piece together some sort of logical answer. Why had the sandy-haired man been writing in a notebook? Private detectives used notebooks, but there was no credible reason why a detective should be following him; he simply had no enemies, no women, no rich relatives, no skeletons. The guy was not a private detective, then, but if he were mentally deranged, the only other possible explanation, why had he been writing in that notebook? You didn't associate maniacs with note-taking, it made no sense; none of it made any sense whatsoever, and because it didn't, the fear continued to lie heavily, starkly in Chambliss' mind.

He sat there in the silent livingroom for three hours, waiting for the officers to come back and tell him they had found the man in the horn-rimmed glasses and had talked to him and had learned what it was all about. No one came, the phone did not ring, and when he looked out at the darkened street, he saw no one. Finally, he went to bed and lay in the blackness, listening for sounds that never came and waiting for something that never happened, until a fitful and restless sleep engulfed him.

The jangling of the alarm clock woke him at seven, and he sat up convulsively in bed. He had a throbbing headache, and the brassy taste of apprehension still clung to the roof of his mouth. He got up, went through the mechanics of getting ready for work, and left the house just before eight to walk slowly to the bus stop.

The Follower was there behind him, just as Chambliss, with a sense of crushing inevitability, had known he would be.

At the stop, the sandy-haired man sat alone on one of the

benches, looking straight ahead.

Chambliss approached him again, compulsively. "Why are you doing this?" he asked with pleading desperation. "What do you want from me? What do you *want*!"

The sandy-haired man ignored him.

The bus arrived and Chambliss boarded it; The Follower sat four seats behind him. Chambliss thought he could feel the man's eyes on his neck, but when he turned they were averted to the window. Chills played along his back, and he felt dizzy and fevered. *I don't understand,* he thought dully. *Why is he doing it, why to me? How long does he intend to keep it up before . . . before what?*

Chambliss left the bus a stop ahead of his normal one; the sandy-haired man exited with him, and shadowed him to the cafeteria opposite the building where he worked. While Chambliss stared at his morning coffee, unable to force any of it through his constricted throat, The Follower drank tea and ate a cinnamon pastry. When Chambliss left to enter his building, the sandy-haired man followed him across the lobby, rode up in the same elevator, got off on the same floor, and saw him right to the door of his office before moving on to the end of the hall and vanishing.

The day was nightmarish for Chambliss; he couldn't work, could not keep his mind on even the most prosaic of business affairs. At noon he remained in the office, afraid to leave because he knew The Follower would be waiting for him somewhere in the building or on the street outside. He dreaded five o'clock, the trip home—and the night, especially the night.

When five o'clock finally came, Chambliss' nerves were so taut that he felt physically ill, and two of his co-workers expressed concern over his haggard, agitated condition. As he left the office, he was unable to face the walk to his bus, the long ride home, with The Follower there behind him; instead, he rode the elevator down to the second floor, took the service stairs to the rear of the building, and let himself out through the back exit. A half block away he caught a cab that he couldn't afford and gave his address on St. Albans.

When the taxi pulled up in front of his house, the man in the horn-rimmed glasses was standing under the same elm tree as on the previous night, writing in his notebook.

Chambliss threw a bill on the front seat, jumped out of the cab and ran inside, slamming and locking the door behind him. The police . . . He would call the police again. In his nervousness, he made a mistake in dialing the number and

had to do it over again with almost childlike care. Finally, Sergeant Filippi's voice came on the line.

"This is Joseph Chambliss," he said, trying to keep his voice under control. "He's out there again, that man I called you about last night. He followed me today, too, just like yesterday. Can't you do something? For the love of heaven, can't you *do* something?"

"Take it easy, Mr. Chambliss," Filippi said. "The officers who spoke to you canvassed the neighborhood after they left your house. There was no sign of any sandy-haired man wearing glasses and a brown suit."

"I don't care about last night," Chambliss said desperately. "He's out there *now*, he's been after me all day. You've got to arrest him, you've got to make him leave me alone!"

"Has he threatened you today? Has he—"

"No, no, no! He's just there, that's all, he's just there—always there!"

"Mr. Chambliss, look, I hate to say this when you're so upset, but there's simply nothing we can do. We can't offer you protection without due cause, if that's what you want, and we can't arrest somebody who—"

Chambliss slammed the phone down in angry frustration.

He stood staring at the door as if he expected it to burst open at any second, trying to get a grip on himself, to think rationally. Did he really need the police, did he really need protection? The Follower *hadn't* done anything; that was the part that frightened him as much as the man's constant presence. He didn't seem to want anything except to follow at will, and yet he must want something, he had to want *something*! Chambliss' fear was that of the unknown, of some dark, as yet unrevealed purpose—the worst kind of fear imaginable.

He looked out the front window again, minutes later, and the man was gone.

At seven, while Chambliss sat drinking steadily in the livingroom, the doorbell rang. His glass dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers, spilling amber wetness across the carpeting, and bright terror ran through him. Trembling, he went softly to the window and edged the curtains apart. A black-and-white police cruiser was parked at the curb outside.

Chambliss released a breath shudderingly and opened the door. The same two uniformed officers he had spoken with the previous night stood on the porch. They told him that Sergeant Filippi had decided to have them make one more check of St. Albans for the man in the

horn-rimmed glasses; they had done as requested and had seen no one answering the man's description, and it might be a good idea for all concerned if he forgot about the sandy-haired guy completely.

Skepticism and condescension were plain in their voices, and it was obvious to Chambliss that they felt he had imagined the whole thing; but he hadn't imagined it. It had happened, it was still happening. He tried to tell them that, but they went away and left him alone again. Alone except for The Follower . . .

It was midnight when Chambliss finally stumbled into bed. Exhaustion consumed his fear and let him sleep almost immediately, but he woke several times during the night to listen, to look out through the bedroom window and the livingroom window—to see and hear nothing at all.

The sandy-haired man was there in the morning, at the bus stop and on the bus and on the way to the cafeteria. Chambliss was pale and haggard, and he had developed a nervous tic along his jaw. As he walked, a darkness seemed to coat his vision and the raw nerve ends inside him short-circuited with alarming suddenness, consuming all reason and restraint. He swung around and ran back to The Follower, staggering, his eyes wide and inflamed. He caught the man by his jacket lapels and shook him and screamed, "Leave me alone! Leave me alone, stop following me, you're driving me insane! Stop it, I tell you, stop it, stop it!"

The sidewalks were jammed with office workers and some of them stopped at a distance to stare at the two men.

Surprise and indignation crossed the sandy-haired man's face, and he said irritably, "What's the matter with you? I don't know you, take your hands off me." Firmly, he disengaged Chambliss' clutching fingers and hurried away into the crowd amid sympathetic murmuring.

Panting for breath, looking at the hostile or pitying faces surrounding him, Chambliss knew that he could not spend another day in the office pretending normalcy, feigning calm. He stumbled away, found a taxi. St. Albans was deserted when the cab brought him home. Once inside, behind the locked door, he called his office and told them he would not be in that day or the next—that he had contracted some sort of virus.

When he went to the window a little later, and looked out, The Follower was standing across the street under the elm tree.

Chambliss remained locked in the house the rest of that day, and

all of the next. He thought about calling the police again, but intuition told him it would be useless, that they considered him, now, little more than a crank. He didn't sleep, he didn't eat, he could not sit still for more than a few minutes at a time; he prowled from one room to another incessantly, stopping now and then to peer cautiously through the drawn curtains. Even though he did not see The Follower again, he knew the man was out there someplace, waiting, waiting for Chambliss to come out so he could follow him again.

Who was he, who was he? Why was he doing this, why?

The questions repeated themselves over and over in Chambliss' mind. He wanted desperately to know the answers, and yet he was, at the same time, deathly afraid of the truth.

On the morning of the third day, a Saturday, Chambliss knew that he could not stay in the house any longer; he had to get out, if only for a little while. The size of each room seemed to have shrunk, as if the walls were vertical planes moving inexorably toward him, malevolently intent on crushing him.

Perhaps, mercifully, The Follower had abandoned his filthy game when Chambliss failed to emerge from the house for two full days. That was possible, wasn't it? Yes, yes, of course it was possible, of course it was! One part of him refused to believe it, but another part of him seized the hope and clung to it feverishly.

Quickly, while the resolve and hope were still strong inside him, Chambliss opened the front door and looked out at the street. Kids were playing, the man across the way was watering his lawn, sunlight and shade, and a dog was barking somewhere. No Follower; he was gone. Saturday morning normalcy, everything was all right; it was over, it *was* over!

Knees weak with relief, Chambliss moved down off the porch and along the walk to his gate. He paused there, looking up and down the street, and saw nothing that was not blissfully ordinary. He released a deep, soft sigh and began to stride along the sidewalk, no destination in mind, just walking free and alone again.

In the middle of the second block, he heard the footsteps behind him.

A muffled, tormented cry burst from his throat; rancid terror spiraled inside him, took away his breath. *No!* he thought wildly. *It's over, it has to be over! He's not there behind me, please, please, he's not there! I can't stand any more; I'm right at the breaking point . . .*

Chambliss stopped walking and

then suddenly he whirled around.

The Follower was there. Fifty yards away, sandy-haired and undistinguished, with the sun reflecting almost demoniacally off the lenses of his horn-rimmed glasses, he was still walking, still coming, slowly, drawing nearer, nearer . . .

"No!" Chambliss screamed. Then he turned and began to run.

He ran with his head bent, his mouth open wide and his legs pumping violently; running blindly, with sweat in his eyes and a brain consumed by terror. People in their front yards turned to stare at him, but no one paid any attention to the sandy-haired man walking leisurely on the sidewalk behind. Chambliss raced to the corner, still blind, and jumped off the curb into the street—directly in front of an oncoming car.

There was the agonized scream of brake-locked tires skidding on warm asphalt, and then the sickening thud of metal on flesh. Chambliss went up and over the front bumper, struck the hood a glancing blow, and fell rolling into the street. When he stopped rolling, he lay in a broken and motionless sprawl.

The driver of the car threw open his door and jumped out, his face blanched gray. He ran to where Chambliss lay and knelt down beside him, not touching him. Some of the neighbors in the vicinity had seen the accident, and they came running, too, to form a small half circle nearby.

The driver looked up at them imploringly. "He's dead—he's dead! Listen, he ran in front of me, I didn't have time to stop. I didn't even see him until it was too late . . ."

"I saw the whole thing," one of the neighbors said. "He was running like a crazy man, and I heard him shouting too. It wasn't your fault, Mister, there was nothing you could have done."

"Maybe he went berserk," a fat woman said.

"Who is he?" another woman asked.

"I think it's Joe Chambliss," a man in a T-shirt answered. "He lives a couple of blocks from here. Always seemed like such a nice, quiet guy, sober, never bothered anyone."

"Somebody better call the police," the driver said. "And an ambulance. Hurry!"

One of the men rushed off toward his house. The other neighbors, and the driver, stood staring down at the dead man and talking in subdued tones.

None of them noticed the man in the horn-rimmed glasses standing on the far corner, writing furiously in his large, leather-bound note-

book as he watched the proceedings.

It was two p.m. when The Follower entered his room at a quiet, midcity hotel. Shedding his coat, he went directly to the writing desk set against one wall. He unpacked the small portable typewriter from its case, and a ream of bond paper; then he sat down at the desk, laid his notebook beside the typewriter, and rolled in a sheet of bond.

Carefully, he tapped out the words *Joseph Chambliss* in the center of the page. Pausing then, he opened the notebook and studied several pages, fingers poised above the keyboard. A moment later, he began to type in a steady, deft rhythm.

Darkness lay outside the room's single window when he rolled the twenty-fifth page out of the typewriter and laid it with the previous twenty-four in a folder. He sighed, yawned, affixed a large white label to the folder, which read:

The Follower: Authentic Case Histories in the Study of the Psychology of Fear, Conscience and Madness.

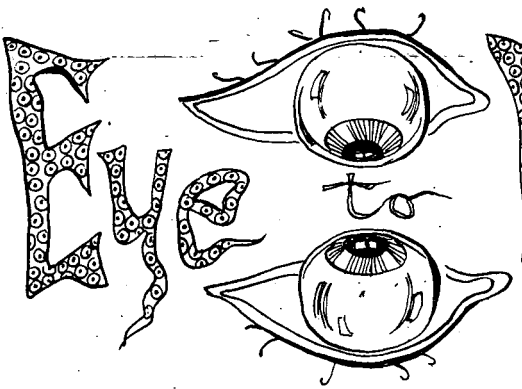
Behind the horn-rimmed glasses, his eyes glittered brightly. Chambliss had been a classic study in persecution; future possibilities were just as exciting to contemplate: suicide, the various forms of insanity, apathy, fantasy negation, murder of an innocent party.

Ah, what a challenge this project was! What a gigantic breakthrough in the field of psychological research! When the book was finished, his name would be legend in the field, and those fools at the university, who had scoffed at his ideas, who had hinted that he was mad, would at long last regard him with the proper awe.

Contentedly, the sandy-haired man undressed and slipped into bed. In the morning, when he was well-rested, he would pack his clothes and his typewriter and catch the train to another city. Once he arrived, he would begin the exhaustive search for his next subject—for another average citizen like Joseph Chambliss, male or female, who would one day look over his shoulder to see The Follower walking behind him—and who would, eventually, become Authentic Case History Number Two . . .

In many a frame, one suspects, there is more than meets the eye.

Eye to Eye



by Donald Olson

He was asleep when the ringing of the doorbell awakened him. There had been a time, twenty years past, when being aroused in the middle of the night had been a common and not unwelcome occurrence. It had meant that someone needed him. If he had grumbled then, it had been for Mary's benefit, though he suspected she was not fooled and knew that he enjoyed those midnight emergencies. He was a born doctor.

Now it caused him nothing but alarm. No one in this neighborhood—except his one good pal and drinking crony, Harry Adams—knew that he'd ever been a doctor, and so the first thought that came into his head was that Mary

had died or that Tommy was in trouble again.

He threw on his robe and shuffled to the door; as soon as he unlocked it, the knob turned and a man pushed his way into the room, shoving Leonard backward and aiming a revolver at his chest. The gunman's features were flattened beneath a woman's silk stocking.

The first feeling was relief; it wasn't about Mary or Tommy. He actually smiled, too old now to be afraid, too bitter to dread death, too proud to cringe.

"You've come to the wrong door, friend," he said easily. "My wallet's on the bureau in there, but it's not worth heisting. Take it and get out. I'm an old man and I need my sleep."

The voice came out of the stocking, muffled, curt. "Get your duds on, Doc. You got work to do."

"Another mistake, friend. I'm not a doctor."

"Once a doctor always a doctor. Get your instruments."

"I haven't any."

"Quit stalling! Get 'em and make it snappy!"

Leonard shrugged and did as he was told. He could have refused and let himself be shot—if the man would actually risk a shot in this semi-tenement. It would settle his problems once and for all. More than once he had thought of suicide, but the thought of Mary, alone and unwell in a distant part of the city, had always stopped him. Occasionally he was of some use to her, when he could find work and stay off the sauce long enough to draw a week's pay.

"Hustle it up, Doc. You got a little operation to perform."

A slug in some hoodlum's gut? Of course *they* would know. *They* probably kept their own private registry of doctors who had lost their licenses.

He reached into the closet for his bag. It wasn't even dusty, for at least once a week he would drag it out and clean and polish all the instruments—and dream about what might have been.

In the other room, the gunman motioned him to put the bag down.

"Okay, Doc. Now turn around."

Except for the motion of turning and the instant of impact, Leonard remembered nothing beyond that moment.

In a car now, hands tied, eyes blindfolded, he lay like a sack on the floor, conscious of the sounds of heavy traffic and of the driver beside him. Until he heard the foghorns he had no idea where

they were. Even now he couldn't be sure. The Hudson? The East River? It had been a muggy night but now he was comfortably cool, and the ride was smooth. An air-conditioned limousine?

Only one thing made sense: racketeers needed someone patched up. Should he refuse? Oddly, he felt a pleasurable pulse of excitement when he thought about it. He was needed again. Needed; so he knew that if they told him to do it he would. No, they wouldn't even have to threaten him. If they only knew it, all this strong-arm stuff was entirely unnecessary.

The car stopped and the driver got out and came around to his side and opened the door.

"Come out quietly. Not a peep out of you, hear? Or you won't be waking up from the next tap."

Leonard let himself be led across the sidewalk, through a door, up two flights of stairs and down a hallway. The building had a rank, damp smell and the echoing resonance of desertion.

"Far enough, Doc."

The man rapped on a door. It opened and Leonard was pulled gently inside. He caught a whiff of masculine cologne, expensive and too subtle to fight the stench of an abandoned tenement. The hand on his arm was almost caressing, and the voice was cultured.

"Please sit down, Doctor. I'm sorry for this melodramatic way of soliciting your services. Please compose yourself. You'll join me in a drink?"

"Yes." His throat was achingly dry.

"All I can offer is Scotch. No ice, I'm afraid. The facilities are primitive, as you may have guessed."

Leonard asked to have the blindfold removed.

"Sorry. Not quite yet." The voice was urbane, ingratiating. "Not too uncomfortable, is it? Good. My friend here is going to untie your hands, but I must caution you not to disturb the blindfold. If you should see our faces we would have to deal more harshly with you than we'd planned. Is that clear?"

Leonard nodded and was immediately untied. He rubbed his numb wrists. He was handed a glass and felt the good Scotch slide down his parched throat.

"You've acquired rather a demanding taste for the stuff, haven't you, Doctor?" The tone was slightly malicious.

"As I told your buddy, I'm not a doctor."

"Oh, let's not be modest. You were once a very skillful surgeon,

highly respected, until you were so imprudent as to perform a certain illegal operation on a young woman. The young woman died, and you were sent to prison for manslaughter. Are my facts not correct?"

"I never denied the facts. Only the implications."

"Ah, yes. You felt morally justified. The young woman would have died anyway. Nor did she have the most savory reputation. The child she would have borne was your son's. All involved persuaded you to perform the illicit surgery. You have my sympathy, Doctor. You were the victim of a stupid code—as so many of us have been."

"Get on with it, Stu!" The other man's voice was raspy with impatience.

"Dutch is right, Doctor. We haven't any time to waste. Tell me, have you ever heard of the Lion's Eye Ruby?"

"No."

"A pity. If there were time I should so enjoy telling you its history. Suffice to say, it came many hundreds of years ago from the Mogok mines of Burma. In the eighteenth century the Persians stole it from the Mogul palace in Delhi. It's had a most romantic history. Recently it was worn by a royal personage at a gala in Iran. It was stolen—by me. The hardest part was smuggling it into this country. For that I relied, regrettably, upon a confederate."

"All very interesting," said Leonard. "But what's it got to do with me? If one of your chums is bleeding to death, hadn't you better let me have a look at him?"

The man called Stu chuckled. "Of course, that's what you would naturally have assumed. I must disappoint you, Doctor. Be patient a bit longer and I'll finish my story. The person who smuggled the Lion's Eye Ruby into the country aboard a Liberian freighter was a more enterprising lad than I suspected. This evening we met, here in this building. I was prepared to pay him the agreed sum for his services. He demanded twice as much. I don't permit myself to be blackmailed, or double-crossed. I shot him."

Leonard began to understand. "I see. Shot him before he told you where the gem was. And now you want me to keep him alive long enough for you to find out where it is."

"Hardly. I'm not so rash, Doctor, as to shoot a man who has information I need. No, I'm afraid all your skills could not save that poor wretch. He is quite dead, I assure you. Right now his body is lying on a table in the next room.

You see, Doctor, he had time to do one thing before he died. He swallowed the ruby. Now do you understand why we need you?"

A shudder of distaste passed over Leonard. He hadn't anticipated anything quite as grim as this. He gave a short laugh. "Why me? You know where it is."

"Time, Doctor. Neither Dutch nor I is overly squeamish, but the evisceration of a corpse isn't quite in our line. You're a surgeon. You would know where to cut to retrieve the stone quickly and neatly."

"You're sure he swallowed it? A ruby that big wouldn't be the easiest thing to swallow, especially after you'd been shot."

"It's the size of a big marble, but Dutch saw his hand dart to his mouth as he fell. And he was not a magician. He had the stone with him—I saw it—and I can assure you every stitch he was wearing and every cranny in these two rooms has been thoroughly searched. The ruby must be in his body. It's your job to find it, as fast as possible. The man claimed to have taken certain precautions for his safety before coming here, and he might not have been bluffing. We want to get out of here as soon as we can."

He stepped forward and took the glass from Leonard's hand. "To work now. In the next room you'll find the man's nude body lying on the table. When the door closes behind you, you may remove the blindfold. You will be alone in that room with the corpse. There are no windows and only this one door. There's no way for you to escape from that room. When you're finished, knock on the door. If you refuse to do this thing, you will be killed. Agree, and you'll be well-paid."

"How do I know you won't kill me, once you've got the stone?"

"You have my word. That man in there is dead because he was greedy and treacherous. Waste no sympathy on the likes of him. Besides, I shouldn't have wasted time on these precautions against your seeing our faces if I'd meant to kill you."

"You'll let me go when I'm finished in there?"

"You'll be tied up and left here. You should be able to free yourself in minutes. By then, we'll be beyond pursuit—should you feel it necessary to advise the police of your little adventure."

Leonard urgently wanted another drink, yet realized the need of a clear head.

"Well, Doctor, are you prepared to do this for us?"

"I guess I've got no choice."

"Excellent reasoning. Give him his bag and help him to the door. And, Doctor, when you are finished, make sure you blindfold your eyes again before signaling us."

With that he was guided forward, the bag placed in his hand. As the door opened, his captor had one last word of advice: "Work swiftly, Doctor. Carefully but swiftly."

He was gently pushed forward and the door closed behind him. He waited five seconds, then tore the blindfold from his eyes.

The cold starkness of the room made him shudder. It was small and damp, patches of plaster fallen from the ceiling, floor and walls bare. In the middle of the room, under a single lighted bulb, the nude corpse of a young man lay faceup on a wooden table. The flesh glowed greenly under the light, as if shedding a ghastly incandescence of its own. Cool as the room was, Leonard began to sweat.

When he was sufficiently composed he stepped forward and examined the corpse with a more professional eye. Although the eyes were shut, the face wore an expression of tranquil satisfaction. The bullet that killed him had entered the right lumbar region.

Leonard set his bag on the floor. 'Hurry,' the man had said; but Leonard was in no hurry to mutilate further this oddly beautiful human sculpture, to which death had given the dignity of marble. Alive, the young man must have been quite handsome. Leonard wondered what perilous impulse had led him to risk his young life for a bauble.

He dared delay no longer. Somewhere in this flawless body was buried a fortune in a stone. He opened his bag and chose the necessary instruments, and as he raised the gleaming scalpel above the man's abdomen he thought how ironical it should be that his first operation in twenty years should be performed upon a dead man.

Some thirty minutes later, Leonard knocked on the door after he had carefully reaffixed the blindfold. The door opened and a hand pulled him into the other room.

"I could use a drink, if you don't mind."

"You look as if you could use one. Are you sick, Doctor?"

"I've felt better."

A glass was handed to him. The one called Stu said, "May we drink to your success, Doctor?"

"Sorry. The patient died."

"Very unfunny. But you found the ruby."

"No. You must've been wrong."

The man called Dutch made an angry, startled sound, but the other one shut him off. "Don't play games, Doctor. We haven't time. Give me the ruby."

"There was no ruby. See for yourselves."

He moved by instinct toward the door. The two men grasped his arms and hurried him inside. Suddenly he felt the one hand tremble and go slack.

"You've never been in a dissecting lab or watched a postmortem? Does take a bit of getting used to." He enjoyed the men's discomfiture, which he could sense but not see. "The point is, if an object is swallowed, there are only so many places it can be. As you can see, I've laid open the entire alimentary canal. No ruby. If you don't believe me, examine it yourselves."

Dutch's voice had a sick note. "Stu, I can't! I can't even look at it. He musta done something else with it. It's got to be hidden someplace."

"Don't be an idiot. Perhaps the good doctor is counting on our weak stomachs in order to trick us. Watch him."

Leonard could feel Dutch's sweat ooze from his palm as it tightened on Leonard's arm. He heard the other man step toward the corpse. There was a long period of silence.

Finally, the ringleader spoke. "OK. I'm satisfied the stone's not there." His voice was ragged with strain. "That leaves but one conclusion, Doctor. I didn't really suppose you'd be so foolish as to think you could steal the ruby yourself."

"I didn't."

"We'll see. Get in the other room."

There, Leonard was forced to strip naked. The two men did a thorough job of searching him and his clothes.

The ordinarily unflappable leader swore for the first time. "It's impossible. The stone couldn't just disappear. It's got to be here!"

"We can't hang around here all night," Dutch said.

Leonard could have used another drink. "Aren't you overlooking the obvious?" he said quietly.

"What's that mean?"

"A ruby the size of a marble doesn't vanish from a room—unless someone removes it."

"That guy never left this room."

"I don't mean him. One of you left this room. To bring me here."

The silence roared. When Dutch spoke, his voice was an

angry squeak. "Why, you bloody—you sayin' *I* took the ruby?"

"I'm saying that *one* of you must have taken it."

The leader spoke with icy precision. "You're the one that searched him, Dutch."

"But you were with him when I went for the sawbones. Maybe you found it while I was gone. *I* don't have it. But maybe you do."

Leonard was conscious of a sudden movement and could guess what it was. Stu's voice was deadly. "Tie him up, Dutch. And don't try anything. I've used this once today. I'm sure you know I won't hesitate to use it again. I don't like double-crossers."

Dutch let loose a stream of oaths.

"Shut your mouth and tie him up!" Stu ordered.

Leonard's arms were wrenched behind him and he was roughly bound.

"Sorry, Doctor." The leader's voice was calm once more. "But I'm sure you won't have too much trouble getting free. I'm going to take my *ex*-associate here for a little ride. He's going to tell me what he did with the Lion's Eye Ruby. Or else he's going to end up exactly like our pal in there."

After they were gone Leonard remained motionless, wondering if they'd taken the bottle with them—or if it were empty. The bottle's image shone more vividly in his mind than the ruby's. When he was sure the men were not coming back, he set to work freeing himself from the ropes. Five minutes later he could reach up and tear off the blindfold.

The bottle stood on the table, half full. He took a couple of quick slugs, then looked out into the hall. The building was obviously untenanted, probably condemned. From the window he could see the East River.

Moving swiftly now, he went into the other room with his bag. Smiling, he took out a pair of forceps, leaned over the table and carefully pulled back the right eyelid of the corpse.

The Lion's Eye Ruby stared up at him.

With the forceps he skillfully plucked out the gem, just as, a half hour earlier, he had plucked out the dead man's eye to make room for it.

With the gem in his pocket, he hurried from the apartment and ran down the two flights of stairs to the street. In an hour he was home.

It was a celebration, and if Harry couldn't quite figure out what he and his pal were celebrating it didn't matter to him as

long as the booze kept flowing as freely as it had all evening. His buddy Leonard was in a rare good humor.

"What's got into you, Len? You act like you won the Irish Sweepstakes."

"Drink up, old friend. There's more where this came from."

Leonard was more talkative than the other man had ever known him to be, and about such intimate things: his youth, his dreams, his lost ambitions and endless sorrows.

"But it's not too late, Harry, my lad. There's still time to catch up. The game's not over yet, not for either of us. I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve." He leaned closer. "Listen, did I ever tell you about the time I swiped the famous Lion's Eye Ruby out from under the noses of a gang of international jewel thieves?"

"You're stinko, Len!"

"I never told you? Fancy that. That was an adventure, pal," and he went on to describe the event as if it were something that had happened years ago, instead of the night before, visibly enjoying it.

Harry was plainly skeptical.

"It's the truth, pal, so help me. I plucked the jewel out of the poor guy's gut and I had to find a place to hide it where they'd never think of looking. So I performed the neatest enucleation you'd ever want to see."

"The neatest what?"

"Surgical removal of the eyeball, my friend; and in its place I put the Lion's Eye Ruby. I closed the lid over it and they were none the wiser. Finally, they gave up and started blaming each other. Off they went to have it out. I reclaimed the ruby and got clean away."

Harry made a razzing sound. "Sure you–did–pal. It's a good yarn, but you forgot one thing."

"What's that?"

"The eyeball you took out. What did you do with the guy's eyeball?"

Leonard gave him a slyly superior grin. "Same thing the dead guy did with the ruby." He took another long pull from the glass of whisky. "I swallowed it."

Slim budgets do not necessarily preclude the production of spectaculars.

The Intruder

by Henry Slesar

Jeffry Dumont lit a fortifying panatela before ringing Margo's doorbell. He listened to the happy noises on the other side of the door with a smile of wry amusement, knowing that his entrance would result in a new crescendo of sound. With a sigh compounded of both pleasure and boredom—it was the fourth party celebrating a Jeffry Dumont hit—he put a lean brown finger on the button.

"Jeffry! It's Jeffry!" He wasn't even sure whose shrill cries heralded his arrival. He laughed as he was swiftly surrounded by bare white shoulders and smiling red mouths; grinning men in immaculate evening clothes; white-clad waiters eager to press costly caviar and the best champagne upon him, as if his patronage of their trays would be some special honor.

"Darling, the play was magnifi-

cent!" one of the smiling mouths said, and Jeffry focused long enough to recognize one of America's richest women. "Another smash, old man," said a deep voice, and Jeffry found himself shaking hands with England's foremost Shakespearean actor. "How do you *always* manage a hit?" another voice said, not without a hint of envy, and Jeffry knew it belonged to Hollywood's first-ranking producer, with whom Jeffry had been negotiating screen rights for some time.

He tried to extricate himself from the circle, but it had been drawn too tight. With a shrug, he succumbed to the undeniably pleasant shower of compliments and praise. Most of his admirers were women—Jeffry's tall, slender good looks, his thick mane of hair with its single streak of silver-gray, his air of poised irony, were magnets for women—but he noticed that this evening's assortment was unusually lovely. Yet the loveliest of them all was still to appear: their hostess, and the star of his new play, Margo Meredith.

He was just about to inquire after Margo when he saw the strange man in the dirty gray uniform slipping in and out of the throng. The stumpy, grimy figure was in such startling contrast to the impeccably-attired guests, and even to the rest of the servants, that Jeffry was appalled that the man had been allowed to intrude on the party, for whatever excuse of service. Embarrassed for Margo, he said nothing, but then he became aware that the man was carrying some strange tool, perhaps a plumbing device, that he swung from a chain looped about his wide leather belt. The object was a metal shaft with a sponge-rubber ball at the tip, and as he swung it, the man was muttering something in a voice audible despite the talk and laughter of the crowd.

"Take it easy, folks . . . just take it easy . . ."

Jeffry's mouth opened, and then emitted a chuckle at the man's sheer, unadulterated gall. He was about to remark on it to the woman at his side, but by then the gray-uniformed figure was gone; even more important, he saw Margo at last, floating toward him in a cloud of chiffon, looking even more beautiful than she had on stage three hours before.

"Jeffry, darling!" She murmured the greeting against his cheek. As always, his body pulsed when Margo was near, stirring him with feelings he wasn't ready to define. The other guests were clamoring for the attention of their hostess, but she didn't leave before whispering an invitation in his ear. "The library, darling? Ten minutes?"

When they were finally alone, Margo turned her eyes away from the producer and looked into the flames of the library fireplace. "Thank you, Jeffry," she said humbly. "Thank you for everything."

"It's I who should be thanking you," Jeffry said. "Your performance, Margo—"

"You're still the most gallant man on earth, darling. *You* made me a star, just as you've done for so many others. I'm so very, very happy." But the tears that were filling her eyes didn't seem to be tears of happiness.

"Is there anything wrong?"

"Wrong? Of course not. I have everything in the world now." She caught the last word in a sob.

Worried, Jeffry came to her side. "What is it, Margo?"

"I have everything in the world, Jeffry. Except the one thing I really want."

"What's that?"

"Oh, Jeffry, how can you be so blind! *You!*"

In Jeffry's ear, it seemed as if a symphony orchestra had suddenly filled the room with heady music; he could almost hear the sweep of the violins. He put his hands on Margo's creamy shoulders and looked deeply into her violet eyes; then he kissed her with passion.

"Darling, darling!" he said.

"Let me come to you tonight," she whispered. "Please, darling! Don't turn me away!"

"Never!" Jeffry said. "Tonight—at midnight!" Then he kissed her again, as if to seal the bargain.

Just as his lips parted reluctantly from hers, Jeffry saw the shuffling figure of the man in the dirty gray uniform crossing the library, swinging the strange metal and sponge-rubber implement from the chain around his belt. Margo clung to Jeffry, but his resentment at this untimely intrusion was even stronger than his sentiment.

"Take it easy, folks," the man was saying, scuffling his dusty shoes on the carpet. *"Just take it easy now . . ."*

"Hey! You!" Jeffry shouted.

Margo looked startled, but the figure was already out the library door by the time she turned. "What is it, darling? What's the matter?"

"That servant of yours—in the gray uniform—"

"What servant?"

"Some kind of workman or handyman—walked right in here—"

"For heaven's sake," Margo said. Then she looked at Jeffry's livid face and began to laugh. "You should see yourself! I haven't seen such indignation since you threw that *Times* critic out of your office!"

Jeffry glowered, but then realized how funny it really was. He

began to laugh, too, and still laughing, they went back to join the party.

He left Margo's party at ten, with her whispered promise to be with him two hours later. There were still some business details awaiting him at home, production problems that only Jeffry could handle. He planned to begin dictating solutions the moment he sat in the rear of the limousine that was waiting at the curb.

His chauffeur had just turned the key in the ignition, and Jeffry was just settling back, microphone in hand, when he saw the gray-uniformed man crossing the street in front of them, swinging the odd soft-headed implement back and forth. Quickly, he tapped on the glass.

"Yes, sir?" Philip said.

"Lower your window," Jeffry commanded. "Call that man over."

"Man, sir?"

"In the gray uniform—just crossed in front of us."

"Sorry, sir, I don't see him now."

Jeffry peered out of the side window and saw that Philip was correct. The workman was gone again.

"Never mind," he said, vaguely troubled. "Drive me home." He put the microphone back into the hidden compartment and dictated nothing on the way back to his penthouse.

He felt more at ease when he entered the apartment. It had taken extensive and costly decorating to create the luxurious and yet relaxed atmosphere of this aerie, but it had been worth the trouble. He entered his bedroom, where the bed, storage units, lighting, and mirrors all operated smoothly and silently by an electronic control panel, and changed into a silken dressing gown and llama-fur slippers. With an exquisitely dry martini in hand, he strolled out on the penthouse terrace and looked down at the panorama of the city at night, the lights spread before him like jewels on a tray. He breathed deeply of the balmy air, feeling contentment and more: the comfort of his wealth, the anticipation of satisfying work, and soon, the promise of Margo. He looked at his fine watch, a gift from the man who was now President of the United States, and saw that it was five minutes of twelve. He smiled, and went back into the livingroom. The man in the dirty gray uniform was walking toward the front door.

"Take it easy, folks, just take it easy . . ."

Jeffry was stunned into inaction, and the moment he took to recover was long enough to allow the man to make his escape. He shouted for Barclay, and then remembered that he had dismissed his servant for the

evening, in respect of Margo's visit. He found that he was frightened, and he knew that fear was alien to his character; hadn't he shot charging rhinos in Africa, been decorated for bravery in two wars, brought plays to Broadway that others claimed could never succeed? Yet at the door, peering into the hallway for signs of the mysterious gray-uniformed intruder, Jeffry found himself cold with fear. Then the elevator door slid open, and Margo was there, stunning in a tight-clinging black dress, and instead of fear, Jeffry knew a stronger emotion—desire.

"Darling! If you knew how long I've wanted this . . ."

"Margo! I never dreamed . . ."

"Oh, you fool, Jeffry! There was never any man for me but you."

In the bedroom, his fingers touched the control panel, and a flood of warm pink light suffused the satin covers of the bed. He heard Margo's soft, throaty laugh, and then she slipped out of his embrace. When she returned, the arms that entwined him were smooth and bare.

"Margo! My angel!"

He reached for the music control switch, and his eyes caught movement in the floor-length mirror on the other side of the bedroom. The man in the filthy gray uniform was crossing the thick white carpet, swinging the obscene implement from the chain looped to his leather belt.

"Take it easy, folks . . . just—"

Jeffry screamed. Margo looked shocked as he leaped from the bed with animal cries of terror and rage. Once more, the uniformed figure had moved too swiftly for his reflexes. Jeffry ran into the livingroom, pulling the dressing gown over his nakedness; but the man was gone. He hurried to the apartment door and threw it open; he saw the elevator door sliding shut and ran into the hall, punched desperately at the button as if he could stop the car in mid-career. The second elevator stopped, and Jeffry rode it to the ground floor, cold, trembling, beyond knowing whether fear, anger, or temperature were responsible.

"Mr. Dumont!" the doorman cried. "Anything wrong, sir?"

"The man—in the gray uniform—" He was gasping.

"Man, sir? Colly, did you see any man?" The second doorman looked at them stupidly and shook his head.

"He just came out! With some kind of metal—stick in his hand!"

"No, sir," Colly said, "nobody came downstairs in the last ten minutes."

"Better not go out like that, Mr. Dumont," the doorman said.

"You'll catch your death of cold."

Jeffry started for the street, and the doorman was forced to pull him back. "Don't do that, Mr. Dumont, you're practically nekkid, Mr. Dumont."

"Let me go!"

"Colly," the doorman said, "grab his other arm."

"Let me go!" Jeffry cried. "Got to catch him!"

"Sure, Mr. Dumont, sure. Now you just go back to your apartment and everything will be fine . . ."

"You fools!" he screamed. "Do you know who I am?"

"Sure, sure, we know," the doorman said, and to Jeffry's surprise, he winked at Colly. When he saw the wink, Jeffry squirmed and twisted all the harder, trying to break their grip, feeling tears of vexation running down his face. Then he realized that they were only acting for his own good; he was hardly dressed for the street. He looked down at his baggy trousers and saw the torn patches at both knees.

"What is this?" he said, going limp in their arms. "I didn't put on any pants."

"Sure, mister," the doorman chuckled; only when Jeffry looked at him again, his uniform had altered strangely. It was blue instead of red, and there weren't any epaulets on the shoulders. There were two large initials sewn on his cap that Jeffry had never noticed before: D.T. Then he realized that the man—both of the men, in fact—weren't his building doormen at all.

"What the hell is this?" he said. "You're not my doormen!"

"No," one of them said. "No, buddy, not your building. You'll be okay in a minute; it happens sometimes, after a dream."

"After a what?"

"You'll be okay, no foolin'. Just a little reaction, that's all. Happens once in a thousand times; don't go gettin' ideas about suin' the theatre."

"The theatre? What theatre?"

"Think we'll need the doctor?" the second man asked in a worried voice. "This one's really hanging on."

"The bums are the worst," the other said, his lip curling. "They dream hard. We'll put him outside; he'll come around fast."

"Outside?" Jeffry said, the word filling him with dread. "What do you mean, outside?"

They put their hands under his arms and half-carried him to a green door. "Outside" proved to be nothing more than a city street. There were a few small brownstone houses, a dress shop, a florist's, and a theatre, its nested electric bulbs bubbling in a dozen colors. Above the marquee were the informative words:

DREAM THEATRE
Your Dreams Come True
Electronically
Admission $2.50
Children Half Price

He stared uncomprehendingly at the words, and then stumbled toward the glass-enclosed booth where a young woman was idly scratching her scalp with the tip of a mechanical pencil. As he approached, he saw a reflection in the curved glass: a thin face, a veined nose, a week's growth of beard, a hairless scalp.

"One?" the woman said with a snap of her jaws.

"What?"

"One admission?"

"Please, I've got to go back in there—"

"Two-fifty."

"What?"

"Two-fifty, that's what it costs."

He slapped at his pockets. Something bulged. It was a ragged billfold, with four single dollar bills. He gave her three of them, and she returned a coin. A yellow ticket slid toward him. He took it, and looked at it helplessly.

"Through there," the woman said disgustedly.

He went through the door.

When his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw the vast, open auditorium, enclosed by a bubble skylight. He saw the endless rows of armchairs. Only a few were occupied. The people in the chairs were asleep. Their wrists were clamped with electrodes, and wires ran deep into the electronic hearts of the chairs. They slept, but not all were at peace. Some squirmed and moaned. Others cried. Some were laughing with happy abandon. Here and there, one twisted in peculiar ecstasy, the wires about his wrist stretched taut.

Then he turned as he saw the man in the dirty gray uniform, walking among the rows of sleepers; now and then prodding some overactive dreamer into a semblance of peace with the sponge-rubber tip of his metal stick; then walking on among the dreaming rows, muttering his words of good advice.

"Take it easy, folks . . . just take it easy . . ."

Perhaps one really needs an enemy in order to attain that evasive fulfillment.

Not an Enemy in the World

by Charlotte Edwards

I always thought of myself as the sort of person of whom, if I were murdered, everybody would say, "She didn't have an enemy in the world. It must have been a madman. One of those senseless crimes, you know?"

After all, you spend your life really caring for people, trying to get along with all of them, even the nasty ones, pulling in your horns when you want to gore, keeping your mouth shut when you've got more than a few names you'd like to call, doing unto others as they sure as hell never do unto you, and you expect some understanding—eventually.

"She didn't have an enemy in the world. Everybody was her friend." Eh?

That's why the letter came as such a shock.

I was in a hurry, on my way to work. If I miss the 7:15 bus, I have

to wait for the 7:40. It gets me there on time, all right, but I'm so out of breath that I feel as if I were running the whole day. I like to be neat and planned, and arriving a few minutes early at my desk is just the ticket to pace myself till night.

Anyhow, I met the mailman on the sidewalk outside my house. I just grabbed the mail he handed me, stuck it in my purse and double-timed down to the corner. The bus was pulling away, but the driver knew me, so he slammed on the brakes and waited.

Well, I had enough breath to say, "Thank you so very much. It's wonderful to know that somebody recognizes you and takes a bit of extra trouble for you."

He grunted without looking at me, changed my dollar bill while the bus was in motion, a trick with which I've always been impressed, and zoomed along. I found a seat near the door and folded my white-gloved hands one over the other. Everything was so familiar out of the window that I closed my eyes and made a mental list of my daily tasks.

I could see my nice sleek desk, shining with the touch of polish I've given it every other morning for twelve years. I could see my typewriter, and I almost composed the first words that had to come out of it.

If I could get that letter and two others out before Mr. Ingraham came in, I could win one of those rare smiles of his and even, perhaps, that treasured remark, "Sara Ellison, I don't know what I'd do without you."

I might just as well admit it now as later. I'm in love with my boss and have been for at least eleven and a half of those twelve years. I don't know what was the matter with me the first six months. Nervous about my duties, I guess, and afraid to look at him. When I did, I fell—all the way. Tall, ruddy, with serious and kindly blue eyes, I was sure almost at once that he, with his quiet, somber voice, his slightly formal manner, had nobody to understand him; certainly not anybody in the office, and above all, not his beautiful, spoiled, demanding wife. He was a man alone. Suddenly I was handed a torch, already aflame, and I carried it proudly, if secretly, every day of my life. It gave me a purpose, a reason for getting up, a hopeful, wonderful, exciting optimism for each day ahead of me.

So when the bus came to my stop, I got off as usual, with the same happy feeling of anticipation in my heart and the same hurry in my feet.

I was alone in the elevator with the operator, Joe, because everybody else in the office came piling

in at the very last minute. "Mornin', Miss Ellison," he said, sounding surly, but then he often did. As I told him once, "It can't be much fun, you poor man, up and down and up and down and going nowhere." See what I mean? I'm always concerned with people. After that, Joe began to tell me his troubles, like most everybody does.

"Good morning, Joe," I answered pleasantly. "Isn't this a beautiful day?"

"What's beautiful about it?" he muttered. So I kept quiet, knowing that's the way he wanted it, and we didn't say another word all the way up to the 41st floor.

The long corridor smelled clean and looked it, with all the doors proffering shining knobs. I counted off my steps—sixty-seven of them—to the pane of smoked glass that read in gold lettering: *Dale Ingraham and Company. Building and Planning Contractors.*

My key turned smoothly in the lock and I walked through the dear, familiar door. In the outer office there were four desks, set neatly, like pairs of twins, across from each other.

The pair on the left belonged to Melissa, the pretty, pretty thing, who came to me for help with all her boyfriends, and who did the typing for everybody; and George, the top salesman, whose desk was most often empty of him, but a mess atop until I couldn't stand it any longer and cleaned it up for him.

On the right, closest to the door, with the switchboard in front of her, Doris held sway. I mean she really held sway, officious with her plug-ins, and with hips that didn't know the meaning of dignity every time she took a step or two.

At the desk behind her, cornered away from the windows and the activity, was Mr. Mealie. Honest truth! He lived up to his name, with big glasses, pursed mouth, narrow shoulders and all. A real bookkeeper, too, he kept everything as spic and span and neat and honest as you could wish.

In my more egotistic moments I felt that Mr. Mealie was in love with me and working up his courage, over a couple of cups of coffee a week, to tell me so. It tickled me—I, who could love a man like Dale Ingraham with such loyalty and passion. Looking up pretty high, Mr. Mealie was.

Like almost all mornings, I stood for a moment looking at those desks with tenderness surging in me. They were my life, my family, the four of them: the smart brother, George; the naughty sister, Doris; the baby sister, Melissa. And Mr. Mealie? Well, an uncle maybe, or the boarder, you know? The one

who was, quite simply, just *there.*

I kept my own office door locked, and nobody but Mr. Ingraham had the key. There really wasn't a sensible reason for it, no top-secret papers or anything like that. Just my own sense of privacy, plus the beautiful feeling I got when I unlocked it and knew that it led nowhere except to Mr. Ingraham—as if it were a small apartment where my love and I, in two rooms, shared a secret world.

When I reached in my purse for my key, I pulled out the stuff the mailman had handed me. I set it on my desk while I took off my immaculate white gloves, slipped out of my coat, and hung it in the minute closet, where soon Mr. Ingraham's topcoat would join it in delightful intimacy.

I sat down in my comfortable chair, surveyed my domain for a moment, and opened the first piece of mail. It was for special bargains in magazine subscriptions, little stamps you stick on things. I put it in the wastebasket at my feet. The second was the electric bill. The third was a letter from my Aunt June in the nursing home. It was thick and would be, I knew, rambling and whining, so I put it aside for my lunch hour. The third was typed, addressed to me with my middle initial, and had no return address on it.

I opened it with a nail file because I couldn't seem to find my long letter opener. I hunted for a minute or two, a little worried, for I valued it a great deal. Mr. Ingraham had brought it to me when he and his wife returned from a trip to Spain. It was shaped like a small and perfect sword, with the handguard all etched in gold and enamel—beautiful.

With the letter in my hand, my eyes landed on the calendar. I thought, *There goes my noon hour.* It was Leila Ingraham's birthday and I always shopped for her gift from Mr. Ingraham.

Knowing Mr. Ingraham's generosity and income, I had often found myself doing a crazy thing. Birthday, Christmas or anniversary, I'd walk into the most exclusive shops and pick out the flimsiest negligees, the most musky perfumes, the highest-fashion jewelry. All the way back to the office, and sometimes even alone at home at night, I'd picture myself wearing those lovelies, smelling exotic, looking alluring, with candlelight shimmering on the jewels. Mr. Ingraham would come up the walk . . .

I tore myself away from that dream, saving it till later, after I'd done today's shopping. I looked down at the paper in my hand and read the words quickly, as I had trained myself to do with the corre-

spondence and the articles I read in the trade magazines, but for some strange reason these words might have been in a foreign language, so slow was my mind in a sort of double take.

It was because of what the note spelled out, of course: "Dear, dear Sara Ellison, sweetie-pie:

"This is to notify you that you won't have to wear out your precious feet today searching for something expensive and beautiful for Leila Ingraham, and that your boss will undoubtedly be late and highly disturbed if he ever does come to work.

"Because, you stupid, adoring fool, by the time you get this, Leila's broken body will have spent a dismal, chilly night in the canyon below the Ingraham house. Maybe even by the time you get this, it will have been found and you will be accused of the crime.

"And sweetie-pie, it's some crime! You'd hardly know her. That little Spanish letter opener, honed razor-sharp, does a real job.

"That isn't the point of this letter, really, although it was fun to write the above and wonder what your sicky-sweet face looks like as you read it. If you're white and shaky now, dearie, hear this: YOU ARE GOING TO BE NEXT! You'd better start looking over your shoulder as of right now.

"It's none of your business why I killed Leila Ingraham, but you have the right to know why I'm going to kill you. I hate, most of all, women like you—slobbering and catering to married men, always so damned sweet and cheerful and do-gooding.

"SO HERE YOU ARE. IF THEY DON'T GET YOU FOR THE MURDER, WITH YOUR FINGERPRINTS ON THAT BLOODY, BLOODY OPENER, THEY'LL FIND YOU SOONER OR LATER, DEAD AS A DOORNAIL, A SUICIDE FROM ALL THAT REMORSE!"

There was no signature, of course.

The whole little room went wild, whirling around me. It seemed to be filled with insane psychedelic colors and sounds. I don't know how long it went on. I suppose you could call it a sort of faint. When everything slowed and quieted, I began to search frantically for the letter opener. It wasn't there, not anywhere at all.

Then I started at the beginning of the letter, as if it were an important contract with a lot of fine print that I had to get straight for Mr. Ingraham. I took each word alone, searching for its separate meaning.

This time the world stayed still, except for my heart, which was like a bass drum, slow, steady, punching against every vein in my body.

"A joke," I whispered at first. "I don't have an enemy in the world. Everybody is my friend. I'm always so—"

Sicky-sweet, seemed to whisper back at me. *Slobbering and catering.*

Oh, I had an enemy all right. I had a real one.

After a while my mind, as if it had undergone some sort of a transfusion, began to work again. I looked at the envelope. It had a Los Angeles postmark, which is as bad as any needle in any haystack. The typewriter was a regular one, portable size, most likely. Every letter was so clean and clear I knew that it was fresh from a supply store, so no way of tracing any special little traits or quirks or tipped keys or fill-ins.

Who could try to trace it, anyhow? *Call the police,* my mind suggested. *Show them the letter. They can trace anything, the paper or something. They'll read the letter and know you've been threatened and give you some protection—*

No. They'll go to the canyon and find Leila Ingraham's body and the letter opener smeared with my fingerprints, of course—and blood, too, most likely. What's to prove to them that I hadn't written the letter myself? Five would get you ten the only fingerprints on the paper were mine, too. In all the stories and movies, it's just the sort of thing a suspect does to throw suspicion away from himself.

Panic began to add a tickle in my throat to the pound of my heart, now located somewhere in the center of my stomach. What a neat little trap it was, carefully planned by somebody with a good, if warped, brain. I couldn't ask for help with that terrible letter staring me right in the face, without implicating myself in a murder which pointed directly at me.

The outside door opened softly and clicked shut. The panic turned to a sort of nuclear heat, threatening to burn me to a crisp. It was a moment before I could straighten up enough to look at the gold-fingered clock on the wall and see that it was eight-thirty, the time the staff began to come in.

I had to hang onto the desk to pull myself up, like an old woman with arthritis. I had to cling for a time until some strength came back into my legs. Then I shambled across the soft rug, which threatened to trip me with every shuffle, and looked out of my door.

Melissa was hanging up her jacket on the wall hook beside her desk. She looked little and frail and pretty even from the back, with that long, smooth hair almost to her waist. She whirled when she heard my breath, harsh in the quiet place.

"Sara," she said. "Oh, Sara . . ."

She ran across the room and flung herself into my arms. Automatically I patted her as I had so many times before, but I couldn't force the usual, "There now, there now," through my dry lips.

She wasn't crying, but when she lifted her head I saw that her eyes looked as if they were painted around with red eye-liner.

"I did it again," she cried, "and they almost caught me. If they ever do—if John or my family—" She stopped on a hiccup.

My family, I thought. Melissa and all the rest of them.

Melissa and I had a secret. I was the only person in the whole world who knew that she was a compulsive shoplifter. The lovely clothes and trinkets she wore to work, to her many dates and parties—and finally to go out with the boy she wanted so much to marry, who just last week had asked her the question she'd waited to hear—were smuggled out from shops all over the city.

Just last week she had made a promise to herself, to me, and indirectly to her young man, John. She had broken it.

Melissa could want to kill me, I thought shockingly. She could feel that I am the only one who threatens her.

Silly, crazy, you're going off your rocker, I told myself. This dear, pretty little thing couldn't hurt a fly.

On the other hand, who would ever believe that this dear, pretty little thing, walking so proudly in the shops, would know all of the tricks of hiding various treasures under her trim clothes?

Even as I was hating myself for thinking it, Melissa backed off and stared at me. There was a strange look in her eyes that I had never seen before.

"How do I know," she said slowly, spacing each word, looking neither very pretty nor very young, "that I can trust you, Sara? That you're not just pretending all this mother bit? That someday, when John and I are married—all that rich, rich married—you won't drag it out and blackmail—"

Dear Heaven, I thought, *this is all a nightmare. My little sister, looking at me like that.*

"She didn't have an enemy in the world . . ." The past tense frightened me all over again. I began to shake.

The door opened behind me. Melissa made a quick move to her desk, settling down as if she'd been there for hours, flashing a quick, bright smile at George, who rushed through the entrance as if chased by the devil.

"What are you doing here fairly

on time?" she cooed. I couldn't find the hard-faced, hard-voiced girl anywhere.

"Have to go to Chicago," George barked. He was a barker, all right. He'd have made a good one in a carnival, as a matter of fact. "A sharp dresser" they would have called him in my mother's time.

I stood behind Melissa, and it was as if I'd never seen George before. I noted that he had two deep-cut lines between his brows, equally deep-cut ones down either side of his full mouth. His brown eyes, which I had always thought of as those of a friendly beagle, a little sad and disillusioned, seemed hidden above the loose bags of skin that supported them.

Would *George* have a reason to kill me? my crazy mind asked. Even as it did, I watched him smooth his hand against Melissa's silken hair.

I heard him cry, "Sara-doll, do me a favor and help me unscrabble this mess so I can get a briefcase filled, will you?" He was suddenly beside me with his arm tight around my shoulders.

George is my friend, I reassured myself. Of course he is. Even if, the new undercurrent thinking went on, I know that he's on the way to Vegas instead of to Chicago on business. Even if he's into me for over two thousand hard-earned and harder-saved dollars—the dollars I used to cover, even from Mr. Mealie (no easy task), the money from an order which he blew in the gambling city, instead of turning it in.

His arm felt threatening instead of cozy, as it usually did. It seemed to be giving some secret pressure against my shoulder bone. Asking for more money? Letting me know it was Vegas again? Or sharing the secret of the letter which still lay on my desk?

I pulled myself abruptly from his grasp. I said, "I have so much to do, George. It's my busy morning."

I hurried into my office and shut the door. I sat, trembling, on the chair which was no longer comfortable. I tucked the letter in my right top drawer, the one that locked, and did just that.

I didn't want to see Doris come in. The way my mind was working, she had one of the best excuses of all of them to want to get rid of me.

I never took much of a vacation, but when I did I stayed near home. There was a motel about fifty miles south on the shore, not too expensive, quiet, where I could read and rest and think about how gorgeous the scenery would be if I were seeing it with Mr. Ingraham.

Last summer, August 14th, to be exact, I went out onto the balcony of that motel. Lying in deck chairs in the balcony section next

door, in as fine a clinch as you can achieve in separate chairs, were Doris and a man I recognized instantly, despite his Bermuda shorts and flowered shirt. He was one of Mr. Ingraham's biggest customers, a married man with four children, whose pictures he proudly showed me trip after trip, year after year.

I tried to get out of my own chair, but it squeaked. The clinch was broken. The two of them were staring at me, both guilt and recognition written all over their faces. I managed to pull myself erect and walk proudly back into my room. I packed and checked out at once.

We never mentioned it, Doris and I. I tried, with as easy a manner as I could manage and with as bright a smile, to let her know that I understood my naughty sister, that I was safe as a tomb with secrets.

Heaven only knows, though, what she could have been reading into our daily contact. Or how much the man meant to her, or his reputation to him. The *pair* of them could have plotted the whole thing.

All of a sudden I wanted to cry. I wanted to cry for a thousand reasons which all crowded in on me at once, but mostly I wanted to cry for Sara Ellison, who was so sweet and cheerful and really loved people, or when she didn't, fought like a tiger not to show it. It just seemed to me that my whole life, my whole attitude toward everything—even without any letter—was going right down the drain.

The truth of the matter was, I didn't have a friend in the world—and I hadn't ever had one. You couldn't count Mr. Mealie. Great guns, Mr. Mealie had more reason to hurt me than anybody else. I'd been curt with him when he asked me out to dinner or to the movies. I'd been in a hurry when he wanted to share coffee in our breaks. I'd *overlooked* him. That was the worst—the way to stir people up more than any other. I had read that somewhere. Love, with a little man like Mr. Mealie, is just the thin other side of the coin of hate.

I pulled some tissues from the second drawer, blew my nose, daubed my eyes, got out my makeup kit and repaired the visible part of the morning's damage. I stared at my own eyes in the little compact mirror for a long time. They were nice eyes, wide and kind and soft gray. I moved from feature to feature. I was not bad-looking. I was really pretty nice-looking. Why should anybody hate me so? Me, such a simple, loving, giving human being? Probably, though, even Joe, the elevator man, and the bus driver, hated to see me coming.

I guess I got all psychological in one lump. Suddenly I realized that

nobody wants to be understood; that it's a burden on them to have somebody know something about them; that even when they confide in you they hate themselves for doing it. Even as they ask for help they resent the fact that they have to do it. They can't afford to hate themselves too long, or resent themselves at all—consequently they turn the whole filthy load right on you. So there you are—threatened with murder, threatened with being a murderess, caught in the trap of a sick mind.

I realized that the office on the other side of my closed door was buzzing with activity now and that the day had truly started. The gold-fingered clock said almost ten. Where the time had gone I would never discover. Where Mr. Ingraham was, I could guess: at the police department, reporting the disappearance of his dear wife.

The thought of him settled down that part of me that felt so lost with enemies and without friends. Mr. Ingraham was my friend. When he finally came in I could show him the letter, hoping that he already knew what had happened to Leila, and that I couldn't possibly have done such a thing. I could turn it all over to him, and he would protect me.

He walked in.

He walked in straight, tall and proud, ruddy and handsome. There was nothing in his appearance or in his manner to show that he might have found his wife's "broken body," or even had missed her for a moment.

"Busy day," he said. "Sara friend, we must be up and at 'em."

He hung his coat beside mine, smoothed it gently and laid his hand for a short, strange moment on the collar of my camel's hair. "Will you come into my office?" he asked.

I followed him in. He shut the door and turned to look at me.

"There's something I have to tell you," he said, very serious, very quiet.

I nodded. "I know."

"Do you?" He kept looking at me. No man had ever looked at me like that before. I started to shake and it was a far different trembling from that caused by the letter.

"Sara," he said again in a way I'd never heard, "do you know what you mean to me? Have you any idea?"

It was such a surprise, such a change of pace from my thinking, that all I could do was to shake my head numbly.

He smiled. He had a wonderful, warm smile, but this one was special in a way I couldn't interpret. "You wouldn't," he said gently. "You're so dear, so unassuming. You

are a giver, Sara. A wonderful, wonderful giver."

Everything was numb now, all shaking stopped.

"Sara," he said, very slowly. "I love you. I have loved you for a very long time. I have tried to stop it, tried to hold it back, tried to keep quiet, but I can't any longer. Do you understand? I can't. I love you. I want you."

He was across to me in one long stride. I was in his arms. It was exactly like all of those times I'd dreamed, only better now, real, all there. I never felt so safe in all of my insecure life.

I don't know how long it lasted, but I did know that when we finally drew a small distance apart, Mr. Ingraham must have been sure that I loved him, too. Talk about being a giver!

"I want to ask something very big of you." His eyes were close to mine, brilliant and blue as heaven. His voice was soft, almost a whisper, and his words ran together, clear but very fast, as if he had thought them out for a long time.

"Leila left a note this morning. She is going to Bermuda with some of her gay drinking companions. She will be gone for six weeks. Six weeks, Sara."

I shuddered. I pushed back all the words in that note except my own P.S. *Not six weeks. Forever.*

"I want you to go home and pack, quickly. I'll drive you and I'll wait for you. Then we'll go down the coast, the two of us, alone, together. Please, Sara, I've waited so long. We'll go down the coast to Mexico and we'll find a little place high in the mountains with a view of the sea and we'll love each other, and love each other . . ."

He was describing heaven. I was a robot. I was an automaton. I was hypnotized. I was nobody except what Dale Ingraham told me I was. I was in my coat and he was in his and we were walking through the door into the outer office. We were walking past the startled faces that were turned to us, past the still typewriters, the hushed switchboard.

At the door Mr. Ingraham turned, all grace and charm. "Sara is going with me to see about the final touches for Planned City. There are a lot of details that have to be cleared up. We probably won't be back today. Carry on."

He shut the door behind us.

I don't remember the ride down in the elevator, or even seeing Joe, or walking to the parking lot, or getting into the car. I was immersed in Dale Ingraham, his nearness, his voice, his clean scent, his hand on mine.

I didn't come to until my suitcase was half packed. Then I stood fro-

zen. My mind clanged a warning like a church bell. I listened to it ring. Then I really began to think—or the real thinking was done for me, as if it came from the sanest mind in the world.

Mr. Mealie had a reason, a small reason, even if he were a psycho, to want to kill me. Melissa had a reason, a small reason, to want me out of the way. Doris had a reason, a small reason, to hate me enough to get rid of me. George had a reason, a small reason, for the same.

But not one of them had a real reason, large or small—a good, solid, airtight, passionate reason, to want to kill Leila Ingraham.

Except me, I thought sharply. I've hated her for years, flaunting herself in and out of the office, liquor on her breath as early as ten o'clock in the morning, leaving Mr. Ingraham with that slapped-across-the-eyes look on his face.

Except *me.* I hated her. I hated, hated, hated.

Except me. And except Dale Ingraham!

Those arms around me didn't seem to feel phony. That mouth didn't seem to lie. Heaven knows I hadn't had much experience, but that man who strode to reach me was a desperate man who, for some unknown reason, really seemed to love me, really wanted me. I was sure of that, and that alone.

How would he accomplish that, with a greedy wife who probably wouldn't divorce him, who taunted him if he told her of me? Who poured another drink, and took another lover, and laughed in his face? What would he do if she laughed once too often?

I sank down on the bed, every nerve writhing. I was packing to go to Mexico with a murderer—a murderer who sat right outside in his big car, ready to skip the country with "the other woman."

His words came back, the telltale, revealing words. "Leila left a note *this morning.*" No, no, Leila had been dead—in that canyon—all night!

There was a blank here—a blank that waited for the worst, and yet most logical thought of all.

All right, discard the love. Any man can get worked up about any girl in his arms, and especially when he has fish to fry. Suppose he doesn't love you? Suppose, good old Sara, that he has other plans. Sure, let's take it for granted he killed Leila. Then, let's take it for granted he had to throw all suspicion away from himself; he, who would be the first suspect of all to be interviewed.

He knew that canyon so well. He knew a place to hide her that would give him time—but not all the time in the world, as the bulldozers

would soon begin to clear for the new houses on that property.

The letter was knowing in so many ways, now that I came to analyze it: Leila's birthday; the letter opener; "It's none of your business why I killed Leila Ingraham;" and me—"sicky-sweet" me, "slobbering and catering to married men."

Why, Mr. Ingraham hated *two* women—his wife and his office-wife. Once rid of one, he found a dandy way to get rid of the other, at the same time he showed himself innocent as a babe.

Somewhere on the way to Mexico, not across the border because that could be traced with the big car, but somewhere, we would get out to take a look at the view. We would have a picnic perhaps, so that we'd not be seen in any restaurants together. We would stand near the edge of one of those handsome cliffs, and push, slam, down goes Sara Ellison, down far enough to die, but not too far to be found—Sara Ellison, a suicide from "remorse" after killing the wife of the man she adored to madness.

They could all testify; certainly they could: Mr. Mealie and Doris, Melissa and George. I wasn't that good an actress. Probably it had been an office joke for a long time, the way I looked at him, sprang up at his every command, and served him devotedly in all those extra noon-hour ways.

I found myself, my purse thudding against my side, out the back door, climbing over neighboring fences, walking quickly to the street behind my own, getting on the bus with the unfamiliar name and the unfamiliar driver. I rode it the length of the line and back, again and again.

The day rode past with the bus. I was like ice all through me. I prayed that he had walked in and found me gone; that he had driven on to Mexico, getting out fast; that he had been so rattled when his careful plans had changed, the only thing he could think of was escape.

I prayed it, but toward dusk I knew one thing for certain—that letter, locked in my top right drawer, would bother him. It didn't prove that I was innocent, but if he ran away it wouldn't prove that I was guilty, either. Especially if I were alive to talk about it, and he was gone.

The next time the bus stopped in the heart of town, two blocks from the office, I got off. There was simple, unthinking compulsion in my fast walking. I didn't know what the letter would do for me, but it would do something. Dale Ingraham needed it—and my dead body. I needed it—and my live body. It sounded no crazier than

the rest of the events of this crazy day—and I was going to get it!

The downstairs corridor looked dark despite the evening lights strung along it. The elevator door was open and the automatic switch was turned on. I pushed for the 41st floor and it was the loneliest ride of my life. I even missed surly Joe.

I walked as quietly as if I were a burglar and had jimmied a window to get into the place. My heels hardly echoed. I turned the key in a mere whisper. The darkness of the outer office assailed me like a bad smell. I reached to turn on the switch and everything jumped out sharper than it ever had. Even the piled-high mess on George's desk looked starched and white.

The rug hushed my feet to nothing. The door of my cubicle was unlocked as I had left it that morning. I kept it dark, knowing my way better than in my own bedroom. I fitted the small key in the desk drawer.

For a sudden, shocking moment I thought I couldn't feel the paper of the letter. Then my fingers caught and hugged it. It was there, and I knew how much I needed it by the way the air spilled out of my lungs and throat and mouth. I folded it into my purse. Not until then, so utterly encased was I in fear, in ice, did I hear the voice.

I swung on my heel and faced Dale Ingraham's office. There was a thin line of light under his door.

His voice came, weary, defeated, but with such cold hatred in it that I started to shake all over again. "You," it said softly. "You dirty—You did that? I'm going to kill you."

I thought wildly that he'd gone completely crazy. He's talking to himself, and waiting for me to come for the letter and he's building up steam. I started to turn away, frantic to get out of there before he discovered me.

Then I heard the other voice—shrill, angry, foul of words.

I was in his office—the door slammed open before I knew what I was doing. I was running toward Dale. He stood in a hunched sort of crouch, moving slowly toward—Leila!

She stood there, lovely enough, but swaying drunkenly, her mink coat weaving with her movement. "Go ahead," she cried. "Go ahead. You haven't got the guts. But if you do, the letter will fix that, I promise you. The letter will fix that. Dear Sara. Dear Sara this, dear Sara that, I don't know how I'd get along without Sara, Sara, Sara. I fixed her little wagon. I gave her a day of hell, you can bet on that. And you can bet she's long gone by now."

Dale moved fast, but I was faster. I was there, holding him for dear life. Dear life.

"Don't," I cried. "Don't. It's what she wants. Don't you see? She's crazy as a loon, insane. Dale, darling. Dale, no!"

Standing before him like that, surely looking melodramatic as I set my body in front of his, I turned and faced my enemy. I stared at such pure hate, such naked anger, that my spine stiffened into steel to put it down.

I knew two things with great surety: Leila Ingraham was indeed out of her mind, with liquor, with excesses, and with—yes, with jealousy.

I knew, too, in a great flash of joy, that Dale Ingraham really loved me—he loved *me*, Sara Ellison—and that the past twelve years of my life, of my caring, had not been in vain.

I turned to him. He came back to me, slowly, slowly, just as the blue came back to his eyes which were faded almost white with anger. He started to shake, as I had shaken all day off and on. I helped him to the desk. He clung to me like a child.

"Sara," he whispered. "Sara."

"Sara," Leila mimicked. "Sara."

Something made me turn. There she was, coming toward me, my letter opener in her hand. I could tell by the way the light hit it that it was indeed honed razor-sharp.

I went after her. Tooth and nail and rush, I tore toward her. Sober, it would have been more of a struggle. Drunk as she was, I got hold of the opener with one grab.

"Get out of here!" I screamed. "Get the hell out of here, you—"

I knew about murder then, all right, with that sharp opener in my hand. I knew what could drive people to such an act.

She saw it. "Sara," she sneered. "Dear, good Sara." But she saw it. She turned unsteadily and walked out of the door.

That's the way it ended—almost.

There was the letter, you see. I found out the meaning of murder, yes; but I found out about blackmail, too. That letter got Dale his divorce, and it kept Leila away from him. If she ever comes back, that letter will put her in a mental institution—at the least—and she knows it.

The alimony was generous. I insisted on that. I really do believe in kindness, and now that I am proudly, cheerfully, sicky-sweetly and forever Mrs. Dale Ingraham, I can afford to be more generous than I ever was.

Know something? Sometimes it pays off.

Unique, indeed, it would be were there a day of reckoning imminent for every injustice.

The Reckoning

by Michael Zuroy

To Chester Grant, the penitentiary had been a tomb. When he was released, he didn't look back. Five years and three months of his life had been left there. His health was gone. He'd lost the girl who mattered to him. He had a criminal record.

On the city-bound bus, rolling toward what had been home, watching the countryside flicking backward, he wasn't feeling bitterness. That had drained out of him in the early years. What remained with him was the bewilderment and wonder that the injustice had been possible. He'd never committed the crime.

It was a thing with which he could not come to terms, this injustice, happening to himself. Of course, he'd known that life was not

always fair and ordered, but he was a fair and ordered man; cause should produce effect, planning should not be futile, these had been his personal expectations.

The objective was clear, had grown clear in prison, was firm now; the books must be balanced. He would have justice.

He left the bus at the terminal in the city. It was hard to realize that he was free, that all these people milling about were free people, no cells waiting for them, no rifles trained on them from walls.

He took a deep breath. Standing still, he looked about, absorbing the reality, a tall, gaunt man just past thirty. The cheap suit dangled on his frame; his face was hollow-cheeked.

First thing was a place to stay. He wouldn't bother his brother and his family, but he needed a place. He was tired. He had some strength, but no endurance.

"Take care when you get out," the prison doctor had told him. "Rest a lot. Find a good doctor."

"Why?"

"It'll help."

"Help me get to be an old man someday?"

"That's my advice, Grant," the doctor had said sharply. "It's your life. Suit yourself."

In a run-down part of town, he found a room. He brought in some food and spent the rest of the day lying around in the luxury of freedom. He wanted at least one day just sensing his freedom.

He left the rooming house early the next morning and walked toward midtown, looking at things. He had griddle cakes, bacon and coffee in a snug, scrubbed restaurant, sitting among work-bound people, remembering when he had been like them. He looked into shop windows. In a sporting-equipment store, he bought the hunting knife.

It was a well-made tool, keen-edged and shapely. It came with a sheath. There was no chance of balancing the books legally, he knew, but he did not feel that what had been done to him was legal.

One friend only, Sam Bindloss, had kept in touch with him while he'd been in prison. The rest had erased him from their lives. Sam had sent him information. He had Joan's address.

In the men's room of the subway, he discarded the wrappings of the knife and ran his belt through the loop of the sheath. His jacket covered the knife. He could go anyplace without incurring suspicion. He could go into a bank.

Joan lived in the suburbs, in a street of ranch homes. Grant stood on the sidewalk for moments, looking at the house; nothing great,

only Paradise; a brick and clapboard building with a roofed veranda, a clipped and hedged front lawn. Once, he'd expected to live in such a place with Joan.

He went up the path and pressed the button. Soft chimes rang in the house and then Joan opened the door.

She gasped. There was a measureless period during which it was as it had been and might have been, but reality cut it.

She said, "Chet. I didn't know—"

"That I was out? How would you? You didn't care. I'm just a bad memory."

"Chet, no."

"You shouldn't care. You have your own life, husband, children, home. Only I thought, once, you might wait."

"I'm sorry," she said in a low voice. She looked at him nervously. "Come in, Chet."

Walking behind her, he watched the graceful swaying of her body, the dull gold of her hair. She hadn't changed much, just become a little more womanly. She was still what he wanted.

In the livingroom, they faced each other. He said, "You were right not to wait. What would you have had? A broken-down ex-con."

She said, "It could have gone either way. But then, time was passing, and—"

"Of course. You were right."

"You're awfully thin, Chet. Are you well?"

"I'm all right." There was a brief silence. He said, "I had to see you again."

"I'm glad you came." She still sounded nervous.

"Don't worry," he said. "Don't worry about me. I just had to see you once more. I wish you had believed in me."

"I did, Chet!"

"All right," he said. She hadn't believed. His own brother hadn't believed. The frame-up had been too perfect.

He said, "I'd like to see the children."

She took him to a rear window. He looked out at the two children playing in the yard. He looked a long time because they might have been his.

He walked around the house, observing closely. Comfortable, a home; a place where a man could be happy with his family. He thought of his prison cell; over five years.

He turned and roughly pulled Joan against him.

"No!" Her breath caught. She struggled.

He tightened his arms. Soft woman's body, driving him wild, melting his control . . . Five years. His lips pushed against hers and

there was the familiar soft warmth as though time hadn't passed, and there was the closeness that blotted out the world, and she now was kissing him too, but her hands were only gentle on his neck, only sorry for him, not desperate and wanting, like his.

He turned cold, and they were apart.

She was not his. It was still puzzling, this injustice. She was meant to be his.

"Good-bye, Joan," he said.

The business street hadn't changed much in five years. He could almost imagine that he was coming to work again at the bank, in the old unworried routine. There were the restaurants where he'd spent his lunch hours. There was the building that housed the bank itself, the branch of the Sterling Banking and Trust Company, with its polished granite facade, brass-trimmed doors and black marble sign. There was the dignity of the bank, and again he could visualize the future that should have been. From teller to cashier, then assistant bank manager, manager . . . He'd planned the steps, even to studying for a business degree at night college. It was a hard grind, but it had to produce results, and one day his dedication and loyalty to the bank, his knowledge and competence would send him to the home office as a vice-president. . .

Grant shook his head. Call him an eager beaver, a young hopeful, it would have worked. Effect followed cause, and faith and diligence were rewarded, given ordinary justice. Only one thing had ruined him, this unpredictable injustice. It could not be left hanging.

His hand pressed against the knife inside his jacket. He went through the swinging door.

A scattering of customers were in the bank. To one side, the guard was standing, with the bored graven look peculiar to bank guards. Grant's quick glance took in the tellers at their windows. He knew three of them, but they were busy with their lineups of depositors, not concerned with the floor. He had changed enough, too, so that a casual glance wouldn't register, he was sure. Nevertheless, he went to one of the glass-topped stands against the wall so that his back was turned to the tellers' windows.

He took a deposit slip from the stacks under the glass and began slowly to write down numbers. He would put down meaningless numbers, slip after slip if necessary, until he was sure he could make his move.

He watched the office area behind the wooden rails. Two girls

were working at desks in the space in front of the offices. He wasn't surprised that he didn't know them; turnover among office girls was frequent and over five years had passed. It was a help; otherwise he'd have had to slip in when they were away from their desks, a common enough occurrence in a bank.

He looked past the girls, down the corridor. The neat flag outside the last office door read: *Kevin Hindlers, Manager.* He'd known Hindlers was still here; Sam Bindloss had given him that information.

After a time, Hindlers' door opened. With a last patter of conversation from the doorway, a man left. Grant went into the railed area. "I'd like to see Mr. Hindlers," he told one of the girls. "It's in regard to a substantial loan."

She looked at him incuriously, as at another detail of her day's routine. "What is your name, please?"

"Howard Merrill. Mr. Hindlers doesn't know me, but I'm sure he'll find my business of serious interest."

"Yes, all right," she said, with shallow crispness. She spoke briefly into the intercom. "Mr. Hindlers will see you. Last office on your right." She turned back to her work.

Grant walked quickly down the corridor, feeling edgy as he passed the other doors. If one of the officials who knew him should come out just then, it would be a spoiler, but the doors remained closed.

Grant opened and closed Hindlers' door, slipping in fast, clicking the snap lock shut, familiar enough with the room. As an employee he'd often taken orders here.

He reached Hindlers in a couple of strides, while Hindlers was still staring. Knife flashing out, he pressed the edge to Hindlers' throat. Hindlers' heavy, assured face blurred with confusion and fear. His eyes started.

"How are you, Mr. Hindlers?" Grant said quietly.

"Grant," Hindlers said, without belief.

"Just sit still, Mr. Hindlers," Grant said. "Keep your voice normal. I can slit your throat if I wish. Isn't that ridiculous, me, Chester Grant, slitting throats? But I've learned about knives and a few other things in prison. Did you expect me to stay in prison forever, Mr. Hindlers?"

Hindlers was recovering from the initial shock. His voice came with more of its usual authority. "I expected you would have learned your lesson."

"You're a marvel," Grant said. "A marvel. Yes, I did learn my lesson. That's why I'm here." He pulled the knife back from Hindlers' throat and rolled man and chair a short distance away from

the desk. He seated himself on the edge of the desk, facing Hindlers, covering the drawer where he knew the man kept a gun. He held his knife-hand in his lap, jiggling it now and then. He watched Hindlers closely. Hindlers remained very still.

"You didn't think I had the guts, that was it," Grant said. "Meek, respectful, earnest Chester Grant was never a man to fear, I'll agree. Your choice seemed logical. But, somehow, here I am, wanting a reckoning."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Grant," Hindlers said. "But I know prison has been a rough experience. You're upset, you want to strike back somehow; I assure you, I understand. However, this can only get you into worse trouble. I don't like to see it. Leave now and I'll overlook this."

"You're a great actor, Mr. Hindlers," Grant said, "considering it was you who framed me."

"What's that supposed to mean? Nobody framed you, Grant."

"You took the money, Mr. Hindlers. You stacked the evidence to make it look like I did."

"Ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous, of course," Grant agreed. "Who'd believe it? Look at your position and standing. I don't have a chance of convincing anybody, but in prison, Mr. Hindlers, I had plenty of time to think. In my mind, I put everybody in the bank under a microscope. I had one big advantage over the police, you see. I knew I hadn't stolen the money; they didn't. So it was easier for me to come up with the right answer. The answer is you, Mr. Hindlers."

"That's only a notion in your head, Grant, even assuming you weren't guilty, which is a pretty far-out assumption. You don't call it fair, do you, to come to such a conclusion without evidence?"

"Never mind the smoke screen," Grant said. "We both know you took the money. The same evidence that indicted me points to you, if I'm innocent. I worked it all out in prison. I went over every possibility a thousand times. It has to be you."

"I swear to you you're wrong. But if there's a chance there was some miscarriage of justice, perhaps we can look into it again. Why don't you put up that knife and I'll see what I can do?"

"You'd convince a snake, Mr. Hindlers," Grant said. "But you were the one who called in the police and accused me, weren't you?"

"Because there was that shortage in your accounts of—"

"Of exactly $26,300. I know the figure. And nobody but you could have rigged the accounts to make me responsible."

"The money was found in your

briefcase. You were apprehended with it as you left. The serial numbers matched the list that was made up when it was suspected money was being taken."

"Only a few hundred dollars was found in my briefcase. *You* put it there, Mr. Hindlers, while it was in the coatroom. You had the freedom of action; all you had to do was make sure the rest had enough tasks to keep them busy. You sent me out on an errand that afternoon—I haven't forgotten that detail. With your phony interest in my ambitions, you knew all about my briefcase and the studies on banking systems in it that helped incriminate me. And it was *you* who made up that list of serial numbers. How come there was no list for the rest of the money, the greater part of it, which was never found?"

"It was taken before we suspected."

"They hammered away at me enough about that missing money. I couldn't help them. I didn't have it. You did. Now I want justice, Mr. Hindlers."

"I told you, I'll see what—"

"I served five years and three months that I can't get back," Grant said. "I did time for money I never took. Now, I want that money. To balance that account."

"Are you serious?"

"I want $26,300. Right now."

"Do you think I carry that much money with me?"

"The bank has it."

"Look here, Grant," Hindlers said soothingly, "they'd only be after you again for bank robbery. Does that really make sense?"

"There's not going to be any robbery. You're going to turn that money over to me in a legal transaction."

"I don't understand you."

"You're going to make up papers approving a cash loan to a Howard Merrill. You'll have that money brought in here in hundred dollar bills and give it to me."

Hindlers' eyes narrowed in his heavy face. He scrutinized Grant thoughtfully, calculatingly. "Now, I'm not for a minute admitting anything, but what you're telling me is that the bank's money will satisfy you? It doesn't have to come from me personally?"

"That's right. I was prosecuted for taking the bank's money. I didn't get it. I want it."

"So we're quits and it doesn't cost me anything," Hindlers said musingly. "Perhaps we do understand each other, Grant."

"Well, then?"

"When the loan goes bad, it can be lost in the shuffle," Hindlers said, still thoughtful. "There are always bad ones. If there's ever any come-

back at me at all, it would only be for a mistake in judgment, insufficient investigation; my record can survive that . . . Tell me, suppose I refuse?"

"You're dead. Don't make a mistake, Mr. Hindlers; I'm not bluffing. A ruined man doesn't worry about consequences. I'm at the point of murder." Grant flicked the knife.

Hindlers' eyes took on a liquid look. "Then I have no choice."

"No."

"All right," Hindlers said smoothly.

Grant looked at the man he'd once held in such respect and awe. "You might be thinking of calling in the police after I leave."

"No, no. I think we understand each other."

"You won't call in the police, Mr. Hindlers." Grant's eyes were flat and metallic—promising.

"No, no. I don't want any future vengeance hanging over me. I won't."

"You won't, Mr. Hindlers." Grant swung off the desk. With his free hand, he opened a drawer and removed Hindlers' automatic. He pocketed it. "Make out the papers. You invent the data."

Hindlers rolled back to the desk and went to work on the forms. Grant checked the details over his shoulder. "Put in the Howard Merrill signatures too," Grant ordered. "You can change the handwriting." Coldly, he disregarded Hindlers' objections.

When the papers were executed, Grant drew Hindlers' automatic, clicked it off safety and sheathed his knife. He went to the door and released the catch. He took the chair alongside Hindlers' desk, automatic in his lap, his hands completely covering it. He said, "Send for the money. You know what to say and do. One wrong note and you're dead."

Hindlers pressed a button, spoke into the intercom. Within a few moments, the young woman who'd talked to Grant walked in.

Hindlers said briskly, "Here's an approved loan, Miss Young; enter it. First draw the full amount, $26,300, in hundreds, against it and bring it right back."

"Yes, sir." She hesitated. "You want it *all* in cash?"

"Cash," Hindlers said with a show of impatience. "It's for a check-redemption service."

"Oh. Yes, sir." She left.

"Good," Grant said.

Presently, the girl brought in a tray containing the banded bills and withdrew.

Grant distributed the money about his various pockets. He said in a precise voice, "So much for *that* account."

"We're quits, then," Hindlers

said, sounding extremely relieved.

"This money settles for the time I served, yes. But there's another account."

"What?"

"That's right. One more debt still hanging, one more injustice. The years in prison weren't all I lost. There's my life."

"What do you mean?"

"I have no future, Mr. Hindlers. There'll be no wife and family for me, no more years. I caught an incurable kidney disease in prison. The doctor gives me maybe five, six months, with care. All this money can do is make my last days easier, providing I don't get caught."

Under Grant's flat, relentless stare, apprehension settled on Hindlers' face. His voice came hoarse. "I gave you what you wanted! We're quits! I'm not responsible for your other troubles."

"You're responsible, Mr. Hindlers. The main account is still unbalanced." Grant pulled the knife again and placed the automatic on the desk between them. "I'm giving you more of a chance than you gave me. Try for the gun, if you like."

The silence grew heavy. Hindlers' mouth worked. Grant was motionless, eyes locked on Hindlers, inviting his move. Hindlers said shakily, "I won't accept this. I'm not touching that gun. We'll talk this over like reasonable beings."

Grant said, "Whatever you say or do, Mr. Hindlers, I intend to put this knife into you within the next minute."

Seconds slid by. Hindlers made a visible effort, seemed to relax. He said, pleasantly, "Come now, Grant, there's no need for drama. I have a proposition for you—" His hand plunged for the gun, like a spring released.

Grant's knife crossed. The hand stopped short of the gun-butt, flexed hard . . .

After a while, Grant removed the knife from the throat, cleaned it and sheathed it. The books were balanced. He had a chance of getting away.

Setting the snap lock on the door, he left the office, walked out through the bank and into the street . . .

Granted that a degree of mental rapport is practicable, physical stamina, in certain situations, can be a practical asset.

by Richard Deming

Juan and Juanita Cabanellas were the last persons in the hotel dining room. Hotel manager Carl Bremer had already put the CLOSED sign in the glass pane of the front door and had pulled the shade over it, but he told the Cabanellases not to hurry their meal, because he and his wife would be cleaning up for another half hour. Carl and Helen Bremer not only ran the dining room but, except for room-cleaning maids, were the entire staff of the Mercer Hotel.

Twenty minutes after Bremer locked the front door, Juan and Juanita finished. As usual, they left by the door into the lobby, as they were staying at the hotel.

Juanita let her husband operate

the wheelchair himself instead of pushing him, for he preferred her to go ahead and open doors. He always said he needed the exercise.

She was a slim, wiry woman of fifty, gray-haired but still attractive, and possessed of a kind of athletic yet feminine gracefulness. She had kept her figure by religiously working out every day. At fifty-five, Juan was still handsome too. Despite his useless legs, he also managed a daily workout in the gymnasium nearest to wherever they happened to be staying, mainly on the parallel bars, and the upper part of his body was still lean and muscular. He looked ten years younger than his actual age. His face was unlined and, although his hair was now peppered with gray, he still had as much of it as he had possessed at twenty.

No one was in the small lobby when they emerged from the dining room. They took the elevator to the fourth floor. Juanita held the elevator door open to make sure it wouldn't close on Juan as he ran the wheelchair out of the cage, then she went ahead to open the door to their suite.

They always preferred several rooms in a small hotel, such as the Mercer, to a single room in a class-A hotel. The suite consisted of only a sitting room, bedroom and bath. They didn't need a kitchen, because they had long ago developed the show-business habit of eating in restaurants.

As Juanita closed the door behind them, Juan stuffed tobacco into his pipe, then felt in the pockets of his suit coat. In an apologetic tone he said, "Honey, I must have left my lighter on the table."

"I'll run back down and get it," Juanita offered.

The lobby was still deserted when she got off the elevator. In the dining room their table had been cleared. There was a swinging door into the kitchen. She pushed it open and looked in.

Three people were seated around a table in the kitchen. Hotel manager Carl Bremer was a red-faced, heavyset man of middle age. His wife Helen, a thin, shrewish-looking woman of middle age also, sat between him and a bulky, square-shouldered man of about forty. The man had a lantern-jawed face with a slit for a mouth and the coldest eyes Juanita had ever seen. A livid scar ran from near the corner of his right eye nearly to the chin. An open suitcase lay in the center of the table, and the scar-faced man was taking banded packets of currency from it to pile in three equal stacks.

When Juanita pushed the door open, three sets of eyes swung toward her. The lantern-jawed man quickly dumped the money back

into the suitcase and slammed the lid.

Juanita's heart began to pound. Although the lantern-jawed man was a total stranger to her, he bore a remarkable resemblance to a composite drawing, made by a police artist, that had appeared in that evening's paper. Actually there had been three drawings, but the other two bore only the vaguest resemblances to Carl and Helen Bremer. Juanita would never have associated either with the drawings if she hadn't seen them with the lantern-jawed man, but because the composite drawing of the latter had been so good, she realized instantly that she had walked in on a division of the Kleinbeck kidnap loot.

Little Freddie Kleinbeck, a six-year-old child-prodigy violinist, had been released by kidnappers after payment of a $200,000 ransom by his industrialist-father only twenty-four hours previously. Apparently the kidnappers had made the mistake of assuming no six-year-old would be able to give adequate descriptions of them, for they had made no effort to disguise themselves in front of him; but little Freddie had an I.Q. of 186. He had been unable to tell the police anything about where he had been held, except that it was in a large basement, but he had described his three captors in enough detail for a police artist to draw all three.

Juanita made a valiant effort to pretend she had neither seen the money nor recognized the lantern-jawed man. Carefully avoiding looking at either him or the suitcase, and somehow managing to overcome a suddenly dry throat, she said to the hotel manager, "My husband left his lighter on our table, Mr. Bremer. Did you find it?"

Carl Bremer had been staring at her with something of the expression of a trapped animal, but now he made an effort to convince himself she had not really seen anything. Summoning an ingratiating smile, he said, "Yes, I have it, Mrs. Cabanellas."

Rising to his feet, he took a lighter from his pocket and started to carry it over to Juanita. The other man beat him there. Moving with remarkable speed for such a big man, he crossed the kitchen, pulled Juanita all the way into the room by one arm, released her and then stood in front of the door.

In a flat voice he said, "She made me the second she spotted me. You could tell by her expression. That damn drawing in the paper!"

Helen Bremer looked upset. Glaring at her husband, she said, "I told you we should have handled it different. That kid was too smart."

The implication shocked Juanita even more than her realization that

the Bremers had been involved in the kidnapping. Apparently Helen Bremer had wanted to murder the child after collecting the ransom, but had been overruled.

Ignoring his wife, Bremer looked from Juanita to the scar-faced man and licked his lips. "What are we going to do?"

"Who is she?" the big man countered.

"Mrs. Cabanellas from 420. She and her husband have been here about a week. They're doing some kind of a nightclub act at the Golden Penguin down the street."

"Yeah?" The man glanced at a wristwatch, then at Juanita. "It's after nine o'clock. How come you ain't there now?"

"The Golden Penguin is closed on Mondays."

The man examined her with his cold eyes while he considered.

Carl Bremer broke the lengthening silence by saying, "Her husband's in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down."

"Yeah?" The other man cocked a quizzical eyebrow at Juanita. "What kind of act does he do from a wheelchair?"

"Mind reading."

The man grunted. Turning to Helen Bremer, who was still seated at the table, he asked, "You got any bright ideas, Helen?"

She shook her head. "No, but I've got a prediction. If Mrs. Cabanellas doesn't get back to 420 pretty soon, her husband will be phoning down. If we tell him we haven't seen her, eventually he'll phone the cops."

The big man gave his right earlobe a thoughtful tug. "I see your point. There's really no way not to include him in, is there?"

Juanita said quickly, "Leave my husband out of it. I won't say anything. I prom—" She bit it off, realizing the futility of it.

The big man's cold eyes examined her with cynical disbelief. "Sure, if we turn you loose, you won't phone the cops or even tell your husband, huh?"

Juanita said nothing. He wasn't going to release her no matter what she said, she knew, so she decided to save herself the indignity of begging.

The lantern-jawed man reached beneath his coattails, produced a flat automatic from his hip pocket, showed it to Juanita and put it away again. "Just to let you know I've got it," he explained. "You wouldn't want to make me use it, would you?"

Licking her lips, she silently shook her head.

The man said to Bremer, "Give her the lighter she came after, and let's go up to 420."

Bremer looked faintly startled, but he handed over the lighter he

had been holding all this time.

Juanita gave him a mechanical, "Thank you," which she knew sounded ridiculous the moment the words were out.

Carl Bremer went over to the freight elevator, which was right next to the delivery door into the alley, slid open the door and stepped into the cage. The big man motioned Juanita into the elevator also, then followed.

Helen Bremer said, "Mack?"

"Yeah?" the big man said.

"You won't do anything in the hotel, will you? I mean—" She let it trail off.

"We may not do anything anywhere," Mack told her. "First, we'll talk money. Depends on their reaction."

The woman's face became pinched. "You mean cut them in?"

"Not a full share," he said patiently. "We could spare a few grand to shut them up."

He gestured to Bremer, and the hotel manager slid the door closed and started the elevator upward.

Since the freight-elevator door had to be slid back and forth manually, at the fourth floor Bremer was able to crack it open to make sure the hall was empty before opening it all the way. They reached the door to 420 without anyone seeing them, and Bremer opened it with his passkey.

Juan, still in the front room in his wheelchair, had turned on television. Apparently he had found a paper of matches, because his pipe was going. He glanced up in surprise when the hotel manager entered, then saw Juanita and the other man behind Bremer and he seemed pleased. Juan enjoyed company.

As the big man closed the door behind him, Juan ran his chair over to switch off the television set. With a hospitable smile he said, "Good evening, Mr. Bremer. And you too, sir."

He peered at the man named Mack expectantly, then his smile faded as recognition dawned. At the same moment he became aware of his wife's strained manner. He gave her an inquiring look.

"Yes, he's who you think he is," she said quietly. "And Mr. and Mrs. Bremer are the other two whose drawings were in the paper."

Juan looked at the hotel manager in astonishment. "*You*, Mr. Bremer?"

Carl Bremer flushed even darker than his normal reddish hue.

"I can understand your wife going in for kidnapping," Juan said. "Frankly, she struck me on first meeting as a money-grubbing virago. But how did you ever get involved in such a criminal act?"

Jerking his head in the direction

of the big man, the hotel manager said in an oddly defensive tone, "He's my wife's cousin."

"Oh, you were led astray by evil companions." Juan turned his attention to Mack. "Shame on you, sir."

After gazing at him for a moment, the big man said to Juanita, "Your husband is quite a comedian. I thought you said it was a mind-reading act."

"We use a certain amount of banter," she said. "Audiences seem to like it."

She went over to hand Juan his lighter. Dropping it into his pocket, he drew on his pipe, blew out smoke and asked, "Just how did you happen to become involved with this gang of thieves?"

"I walked into the kitchen downstairs just as the three of them were dividing the loot. Incidentally, Mack here has a gun." She nodded toward the scar-faced man.

"Indeed." Juan looked him up and down. "Hardly seems necessary. I doubt that he would have much difficulty handling either or both of us without it. Or does he plan to kill us?"

"He mentioned buying our silence."

Juan glanced up at her and their gazes locked. Although their mind-reading act was based largely on tricks, there was a certain mental rapport between them that allowed them to sense in a general way what the other was thinking when they really concentrated on it.

Juanita moved alongside her husband's wheelchair. Juan looked at the scar-faced man. "What do you consider a fair price for our silence, Mack?"

"I ain't considered it yet. Depends on how you're already fixed. You make a lot of money on this mind-reading act?"

"We get by," Juan said reservedly.

The big man glanced around the room. "If you was loaded, you wouldn't be camping in a fleabag like this. What would happen if you couldn't get a booking for a couple of months?"

"That happens periodically," Juan said dryly. "We draw unemployment insurance."

"So you're really not too well off?"

"I said we get by," Juan said with the beginning of irritation. "We don't take vacations on the Riviera."

"Don't get touchy," Mack said. "I'm just trying to find out how bad you need money."

"It's not so much needing it as desiring it," Juan told him. "We would not starve if you had never walked into our lives, but the prospect of otherwise unattainable luxuries is appealing."

Mack said cynically, "I always figure everybody has a price."

Juan smiled just as cynically. "A cliché, but like many clichés concerning human nature, unfortunately true. You will allow me the rationalization, I hope, that the boy was returned safely and his father is a multimillionaire who could well afford the ransom. I am not at all sure we would be unbuyable even if you had murdered him, but please do us the courtesy of allowing us to make the righteous statement that we would be morally incapable of dealing with you in any way if the boy had been harmed or his father had been bankrupted."

"If it makes you feel better," Mack said with his frigid smile. "Now, let's find your price."

"That's easily computed. I understand the ransom was two-hundred thousand. I assume it was to be divided three ways, but now there are five of us. Two one-fifth shares of two-hundred thousand comes to eighty thousand."

Mack's normally frigid smile actually became amused. "You get funnier all the time, mind reader. Can you actually read minds?"

"It's mainly a trick," Juan admitted.

"Too bad, because if you could read my mind you'd know I'm figuring the simplest thing to do would be to erase you both. But then we got the problems of disposing of bodies and the cops coming around to investigate why you're missing. I'm willing to go a few grand to shut you up, but if you get too greedy, we'll just have to risk an investigation."

Nodding soberly, Juan said, "You present a strong inducement to remain reasonable, Mack. Tell you what. There is an operation that might make me walk again that costs eight thousand dollars. Throw in two more to tide us over during the months I'll be laid up after the operation and you have a contract."

"Ten grand?" Mack looked at Bremer.

"It's better than trying to get away with a couple of murders," the hotel manager said. "I'll go along, but I don't know how Helen will take it."

"If she squawks, bat her in the mouth," Helen's cousin said unfeelingly. "You should've done that years ago anyhow." He looked at Juanita. "Let's have your reaction, lady."

Juanita said, "My husband makes the decisions in this family."

Mack gave an approving nod. He said to Bremer, "Go downstairs and get ten grand. If Helen gives you any lip, tell her *I'll* be down to bat her in the mouth if you're not back with it in ten minutes."

"All right," Bremer said, and he

went out somewhat apprehensively.

The scar-faced man sat on the sofa. He said to Juan, "You always been in that wheelchair?"

Taking his pipe from his mouth, Juan shook his head. "About ten years. I broke my back in a fall."

Juanita said, "That's when we started the mind-reading act, because he couldn't catch anymore." Her head raised proudly. "My husband is Juan Cabanellas, you know."

Mack cocked an eyebrow at her. "I'm supposed to know that name?"

Juanita stared at him. In an offended tone she said, "He was one of the great catchers."

The big man shrugged. "I was never no baseball nut. The only catcher I remember is Yogi Berra."

Juan emitted a chuckle and looked at Juanita, who smiled back at him with amusement.

"What's so funny?" Mack inquired.

"Nothing you would understand," the man in the wheelchair said. "Just a family joke."

"Yogi Berra is a family joke?"

Juan gave him a smiling nod. The big man shrugged again.

Minutes dragged by. Periodically Mack glanced at his watch, each time with increased impatience. Finally he went over to the window and glanced down at the street four stories below. The window was closed, because even as seedy as it was, the Mercer was air-conditioned.

Turning away from the window, he muttered, "She's giving him a hard time about the money. Five more minutes and I *will* go down there and bat her in the mouth."

"Your cousin Helen seems to be a greedy woman," Juan said.

Mack emitted something between a chuckle and a snort. "If she had the say, we wouldn't have done no bargaining. You two would be dead."

Juanita's shoulders moved in a little shiver. "I gathered from what she said downstairs that she wanted to kill the Kleinbeck boy."

"Sure. Helen would've made that female Nazi concentration camp official who made lamp shades out of human skin look like a Girl Scout leader. I ain't no angel myself, but I wouldn't kill nobody just for kicks." He glowered at the two of them. "I coulda killed you people if I figured it was necessary to save myself thirty years in the Joint. But that's self-defense. There's a big difference, see."

Apparently he wanted to make sure Juan and Juanita understood that his settling for a payoff instead of murder was no indication of softness. Juan salved his ego by saying equably, "Yes, there is a difference."

"I balanced it out in my head. Only thirty-three hundred and thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents of that ten grand comes out of my pocket, because we're splitting three ways. I'm not going to commit no two murders for that kind of dough when I got a third of two hundred grand in my kick."

"Sound reasoning," Juan said, still equably. "And quite fortunate for all of us, including you. Our murders might have been solved, you know."

"Yeah, I took that into consideration."

At that moment the door opened and Carl Bremer came in carrying a paper grocery bag. There were two fresh scratches running the length of his left cheek.

As he handed the bag to Mack, he said, "I had to smack her." His voice contained a mixture of pride and wonder at his own temerity.

"You should've done it on your wedding night," Mack growled.

Opening the bag, he withdrew five banded packets of currency long enough to examine them, dropped them back into the bag, went over and tossed the bag into Juan's lap.

"All used twenties, not in numerical order," he said. "Probably the serial numbers was took down and have been circulated, though. So you wait a couple of months and then start turning them in for fifties or hundreds, about a hundred dollars at a time, at a different bank every time."

Juan said, "Only a hundred dollars at a time? That will mean visiting a hundred different banks."

"So look at our problem. We got to visit nearly two thousand. You get around all over the country, don't you? Remember this is hot money. We don't want you getting knocked over, and maybe ratting to the cops where you got it."

"Well, we wouldn't like to have to explain it. I guess we'll take your advice, even though it will delay my operation several months." His voice was convincingly disappointed.

"Now you're talking smart," the scar-faced man said. "It wouldn't be no skin off my back if you got picked up two months from now, because I won't even be in the country. But Carl and Helen will still be around. They're going to use their cut to buy this fleabag."

"Well," Juan said, with a glance at the hotel manager, "our system of private enterprise triumphs again."

Bremer regarded him sourly, but said nothing. Juan returned his attention to the big man. "When are you departing these climes?"

"I'm starting the first lap in the morning. That drawing in the pa-

per made this town too hot for me."

"Then I assume we will not be seeing you again," Juan said politely. "It has been a pleasure doing business with you."

"Well, I can't say the same," Mack said. "But no hard feelings. I would've done what you done in a turnabout situation. Come on, Carl, let's blow. But both of you stay put. Helen will be up to see that you don't do anything foolish."

When the pair had departed, Juan and Juanita looked at each other. Juanita asked, "Do you have a dime?"

Feeling in his pocket, Juan produced a dime and handed it to her, then he cautioned, "They may still be waiting for the elevator."

The rooms at the Mercer had no phones because there was no switchboard. Instead, there was a pay telephone on each floor. The one on fourth was across the hall from the freight elevator, between the fire extinguisher and the glass-enclosed fire ax.

Juanita waited ten minutes, then cracked open the door into the corridor. When she saw it was deserted, she hurried down the hall to the pay phone, dropped her dime into the slot and dialed "O."

When the operator answered, Juanita said crisply. "Get me the police, please."

The phone rang three times before a bored male voice said, "Police headquarters, Sergeant Jensen."

Juanita said, "Sergeant, I wish to report some information about the Kleinbeck kidnapping. I have the names of the kidnappers and their location. Ready?"

"Who is this?" the sergeant said in a startled voice.

Before Juanita could answer, a thin hand snaked past her from behind and slammed down the cutoff hook. Another hand snatched the receiver from her grip and smashed it back onto the hook. Then Helen Bremer was all over Juanita, scratching and kicking and hissing like an enraged cat.

Raising both arms defensively in front of her face, Juanita retreated at a rapid backward trot, then tripped and sprawled on her back. Instead of following up her advantage by pouncing on top of her, Helen turned and raced back in the direction of the phone.

As Juanita pushed herself to her feet, she heard the tinkle of breaking glass and saw, to her horror, that Helen was jerking the fire ax from its brackets. As the woman rushed at her with the ax upraised, Juanita spun and raced for her door. Terror gave her speed she would never have dreamed she possessed. She had increased the lead on her pursuer by a good six feet by the time she reached the door. That

was just enough for her to get it open, dart inside, slam it shut and click the lock.

She was emitting a sigh of relief when she heard Helen's passkey slide into the lock. The door had no inner slide bolt, but it did have a burglar chain. Juanita quickly slid it into place. A moment later the door opened as far as the burglar chain would allow, and Helen's enraged eyes glared in at her. Juanita

backed away, not daring to turn.

Behind her, Juan inquired, "What's going on?"

The door abruptly clicked shut. Turning, Juanita said, "Helen Bremer got off the freight elevator while I was phoning and overheard me. She grabbed the fire ax off the wall and chased me back here."

"Did you get your message across to the police?" Juan asked.

Juanita shook her head. "I didn't have time. I sure got it across to Mrs. Bremer, though. We'd better do something fast."

Turning toward the door again, she reached for the knob. Juan said sharply, "Don't open that! She may be standing right there with the ax."

"I'm not disconnecting the chain," Juanita said.

She opened the door as far as the burglar chain would allow and peered through the crack. Helen Bremer was using the phone. The ax leaned against the wall next to her. Seeing Juanita's face in the narrow slot, Helen glared at her. Juanita hurriedly closed the door again.

"She's using the phone," Juanita said. "Calling downstairs, I imagine."

Juan made a face. "Too bad she had a dime. If she'd had to take the elevator back down for help, you could have slipped up the hall to the fire escape and gone for help."

"Maybe one of the other tenants will pass and we can yell at him," she said, again hopefully.

"How many other tenants have you seen since we moved in?" he inquired.

The question discouraged Juanita. The Mercer was only about half full, and a large portion of the permanent residents were elderly people who were always sound asleep at this time of night.

She said, "What are we going to do, Juan?"

"Let's start by seeing if anyone is down below on the street."

Juanita went over to raise the sitting-room window. The bedroom window overlooked Sixth Street, which was well-traveled and which the front of the hotel faced. This one overlooked the side-street running alongside the hotel, however. It was now about ten-thirty, and in that neighborhood pedestrians were rare after dark because muggings were too common. Furthermore, Monday was the night most nightclubs and taverns were closed, which reduced the traffic even more.

There was not a soul on the street, nor even a passing car.

Pulling in her head, Juanita closed the window and went into the bedroom. Juan followed in his wheelchair. Opening the bedroom

window, she leaned out, peering.

There was not a pedestrian in sight in either direction on Sixth Street either. There was some car traffic, but there was also a persistent summer breeze blowing. It wasn't strong enough to be classified as a stiff breeze, but it was strong enough to carry off her words before they ever got down to the street when she attempted to shout at passing motorists.

Giving that up, she leaned farther out to study the windows in the stories below fourth, looked sideways in both directions, and finally upward. Her shouts weren't likely to penetrate to neighbors either, she decided. Because of air-conditioning, there wasn't an open window anywhere.

Pulling her head back in, she said, "Is anyone living on either side of us?"

"I don't know," Juan said. "But if you're thinking of pounding on the walls, forget it. This place was built in an era when solid construction was fashionable. The walls are probably a foot thick. Have you ever heard a sound from rooms on either side of us?"

"No," Juanita had to admit.

"Well, at least they can't get in at us," Juan said. "I guess we just sit it out until a pedestrian finally passes, then yell down to him to explain our predicament."

"What if none passes until morning?"

"Then we sit here until morning."

Juanita sat on the windowsill, her feet inside but her head out, holding onto the underside of the raised window above her head. In that position she could see any approaching pedestrians on her side of the street as well as across the street.

Suddenly they heard the door from the sitting room into the corridor open to the limit of the burglar chain. Pulling herself back inside, Juanita ran out into the sitting room. Juan followed in his wheelchair as far as the bedroom doorway.

Through the open crack of the door into the corridor there appeared the jaws of a bolt cutter. Their size suggested that the tool must have at least three-foot handles. The jaws gripped the burglar chain and began to crunch through it.

Juanita gave Juan's chair a shove that sent it backward halfway across the bedroom, darted into the room and slammed the door. There was no keyhole in the bedroom door, but there was a lock with a control handle on the inside only. Juanita turned the handle, then grabbed the chair to the writing desk and shoved its back under the knob.

Someone tried the knob on the other side. Then a shoulder hit the door. It hardly even shook. The Mercer's doors were as solid as the rest of it.

There was a muffled curse, followed by the barely audible voice of Helen Bremer in the background saying something about an ax.

Mack's voice, from close to the other side of the door, growled, "Too noisy. We'd have tenants from all directions coming to see what was up."

"He doesn't know the Mercer," Juan remarked. "You could run a jackhammer in here and the other tenants wouldn't hear it."

"Shh!" Juanita said. "He might hear you. If he thinks that, let him think it."

Mack's voice said, "Carl, you got a keyhole saw in your tool kit?"

They could hear Carl Bremer reply, but they couldn't make out what he said. Then Mack's voice, now somewhat farther from the door, said something in which the only understandable words were, "Brace and bit."

Juan said, "They're going to drill a hole in the door, then saw out a section large enough to reach in, unlock the door and push that chair out of the way."

Juanita's eyes darted about the bedroom. "Do we have anything we could hit the hand with when it comes through?" she asked him.

"Mack has a gun, remember," Juan said dryly. "That might anger him enough to start taking potshots at us through the hole."

Juanita paced over and looked out the window again. When she pulled her head in, she said, "Nobody's going to walk by. How long do you think it will take them to cut a hole?"

Pursing his lips in consideration, Juan said, "Well, Bremer has to go downstairs to get the tools. And it's pretty tough wood. Twenty minutes, maybe."

Juanita looked down at the street. Juan ran his wheelchair over next to her to look out also. Suddenly Juanita asked in an odd voice, "How far do you think it is to the street? I mean exactly."

Juan peered down at the street, pursed his lips, then glanced up at the ceiling. "Ceilings here are ten feet high. I would guess there's a foot between each floor. So the three floors below us take up about thirty-three feet. The foundation puts the first floor about four feet above the street. Thirty-seven feet total."

"And the windowsill is three feet above the floor. That makes forty feet."

He looked at her curiously. "What are you getting at?"

Instead of answering, Juanita

asked another question. Pointing downward, she said, "How far above the ground would you say that wire is? The lowest one, I mean. The thick one."

Juan peered downward again. Strung on wooden poles next to the curb were utility wires. Highest were two thin wires attached to glass insulators at either end of the single crosspiece atop each pole. A couple of feet below them was the first of three wires attached to insulators on the sides of the poles, about six inches apart vertically. About six feet below the lowest of these was a single thick wire perhaps three-quarters of an inch in diameter.

"Three times your height, I would say," Juan guessed. "A little over fifteen feet."

"Then it's about twenty-five feet below the windowsill. Just exactly right. Do you think it has electricity in it?"

"It's a telephone cable," Juan said. "But if you're thinking what I think you're thinking, it wouldn't matter anyway. You have to be grounded to get a shock. Birds sit on high-tension wires all the time. You're not going to do it, though. It's crazy."

"Not as crazy as just sitting here and waiting to be murdered," she said.

She started to strip off her clothing and toss it onto the bed. When she was down to bra and panties, she ran over to the closet and pulled out a small, brassbound, leather trunk. Lifting the lid, she rummaged in it and withdrew a slightly age-yellowed white garment decorated with glittering sequins. Quickly she pulled on the one-piece tights and zipped up the back. As the tights had attached slippers, the single garment constituted the entire costume.

Juanita pirouetted, then sank to the floor in a graceful curtsy. She said, "Please take notice, lucky man, that I have gained not one ounce in ten years."

"You also haven't made a dive in ten years," Juan said. "Don't be crazy."

Rising to her feet simply by straightening her legs, without using her hands, Juanita said, "It's something you never forget, like riding a bicycle. Besides, it won't be nearly as hard. I used to dive twenty-five feet at a moving target."

"You'll kill yourself, honey!"

"Possibly," she admitted. "But not necessarily. On the other hand, neither of us will have any chance at all if we simply wait for them."

Then both started convulsively as an ax head suddenly chunked through the door. Apparently it had belatedly dawned on the trio in the

sitting room that the rooms of the Mercer were virtually soundproof. The ax was withdrawn, then smashed through again, sending a shower of splinters into the room.

Juanita ran over, planted a quick kiss on Juan's lips and said, "I love you."

Only moments later there was a hole in the door panel large enough for a hand to reach through, jerk the chair from beneath the knob and toss it aside, and unlock the door. The door slammed wide open to crash against the wall.

Mack, the first into the room, had rushed halfway across it before he came to an abrupt halt with a dumbfounded look on his face. Carl and Helen Bremer paused either side of him in equal astonishment. Juanita, in her glittering white costume, was standing outside on the windowsill, both hands behind her back gripping the underside of the raised window. She glanced back over her shoulder through the glass, gave the three kidnappers a bright smile, and launched herself into space.

The trio recovered and rushed over to the window. Juanita's back was arched and her arms were spread wide in a graceful swan dive. For an instant she seemed to hang motionless in the air. Then, as she began to fall, her arms scissored together in front of her.

Fifteen feet from certain death her hands gripped the telephone cable. The momentum of her fall spun her body around until her feet pointed straight upward. With a graceful twist she brought herself to a seated position on the thick wire and threw a kiss in the direction of the fourth-floor window.

"What the hell!" the scar-faced Mack said in a thunderstruck voice.

Juan emitted a long-held breath. "When my wife mentioned that I was a catcher, Mack, she wasn't talking about baseball. I was the catcher in our aerial act. My crippling fall was from a trapeze. We were called the Flying Cabanellases."

Mack reached for his hip pocket and drew out his gun. As he started to aim it downward through the window, Juan, just behind him in the wheelchair, leaned forward and gave him a hard shove. The scar-faced man fell forward across the windowsill, saving himself from going out headfirst only by dropping the gun and grabbing at the sill with both hands.

The Bremers, either side of Mack, assisted him back into the room and to his feet. Spinning around, he aimed a furious backhand slap at Juan, which missed because Juan gave the wheels of his chair a powerful spin that shot the chair backward nearly to the door

that opened into the sitting room.

Mack was distracted from following by Carl Bremer saying, "Look what she's doing now!"

Turning back to the window, the big man saw that down below Juanita was now hanging beneath the wire by both hands, and was effortlessly moving along hand-over-hand in the direction of the front entrance to the hotel.

She was attracting an audience, too. Cars coming from both directions had stopped, blocking traffic both ways, and drivers and passengers were getting out to stare upward.

Directly opposite the front entrance to the hotel, Juanita shifted the grip of one hand so that she faced the hotel, swung her feet backward, then forward again, and released her grip on the wire. Doing a half turn in midair, she came down on her back on the canvas awning over the front door, slid down its inclined surface and did another half turn as she slid over the edge, just in time to grip the edge of the awning with both hands and halt herself with her feet dangling less than three feet from the sidewalk. Lightly, she dropped the last short distance and turned to face her growing audience.

Another car had stopped on this side of the street, a black-and-white sedan with a flashing red light on its roof. As two uniformed policemen stepped from it, Juanita ran toward them.

That was the signal for Mack and the Bremers to head for the sitting-room door at dead runs. Juan wheeled himself out of the way and Helen Bremer shot through the door first. Her husband was a close second and Mack brought up the rear. Juan heard the door into the corridor slam back against the wall, then three sets of footsteps were pounding in the direction of the freight elevator.

They might manage to get out of the hotel, but there was really nowhere they could run, Juan knew.

The thought crossed his mind that if the full ransom were recovered, Mr. Kleinbeck might well decide to let him and Juanita, as a reward, keep the ten thousand paid them by the kidnappers.

There is consolation, if any be needed, for many of our afflictions.

I suspected that this time Richter and I were irretrievably lost, for most of our supplies were gone—supplies which civilized man depends on for survival in such a hostile environment as the Serra do Roncador rain forest in Brazil.

We had lost our amphibious jeep to a swollen river when a defective winch cable broke. With it went our shortwave radio, compasses, and most of our rations, medicines, drugs, high-caliber weapons and ammunition.

More precious supplies went during the night to thieving Huambiza Indians.

We lost more when we tried to paddle the rising waters of the Araguaia River in two native canoes and one of them sank.

Then I lost my toupee.

During all of our expeditions I'd managed to avoid exposing my head *au naturel.* Now Richter, seeing me crouched in riverbank mud, rain pattering on my old bald pate, began to laugh.

Richter had a narcissistic love

by Bryce Walton

of his own Nordic good looks, especially his long, thick, sun-streaked, wheat-colored hair. He sat on the prow of our remaining canoe and I thought—or hoped—that he would die laughing.

I pointed out that we didn't know where we were, had no idea which direction to go to reach the airport at Cocama, had no idea how far away it was within a radius of several hundred miles, and that soon he might be laughing on the other side of his face.

Richter shrugged wide shoulders. "We'll find a way, Skimmer. We always do."

I always do, I thought bitterly.

We were "medicine scouts"—pharmacognosists; hired by botanical firms to search back countries, pick medicine men's brains and rifle their voodoo bags for herbs and remedies. Many drugs—quinine, curare, Rauwolfia, ipecac, and penicillin—have been found in the medicine chests of jungle witch doctors. Thousands of other remedies wait to be found, tested, analyzed, refined, given intriguing semiscientific names, and put on the drug market at fantastic profits. South America abounds in exotic plants, is probably the world's richest mine for these unknown herbs and miraculous brews.

This was my third expedition. I was a specialist in botanical chemistry and had made several important finds, but Richter somehow managed to get all the credit. He had all the TV interviews and got the popular articles and books ghosted in his name, so he was officially in charge of this expedition while I was, of course, stuck with the responsibility.

Richter had taken many things away from me in a few brief years: wealth, fame, status, knowledge, self-respect. He even took my wife for a while, after which she divorced me and went into the pharmaceutical business.

Richter never acted out of deliberately conscious villainy. He was simply amoral, thoughtlessly self-centered. He wanted power and possessions. He had the necessary *machismo* and total lack of sensitivity to the needs and feelings of others to attain success. Everything had come easily to him, and he considered things his due just because he wanted them.

In the most precarious circumstance, such as this one, Richter was an irresponsible child, sure that his good looks and good fortune—a kind of charmed life—would always see him through, whereas it was I who had always seen him through.

I fully intended to see us through this crisis, despite my fes-

tering resentments—until I contracted the fever, and Rima came along . . .

Everywhere the jungle was flooded. We were tied up on an island near the river's shore waiting for the rain to ease. I lay in the dark under the dripping palm frond roof—that and a south wall supported by bamboo was my shelter. Richter had another like it nearby.

My bed was a soggy mat spread on eight poles. I lay in humid sweat, listless, itching, drifting in and out of fever dreams. I had the fever and I had to admit it. I also had to admit that there was little left of our vital medicinal drugs. Therefore, my chances were not good, but I was oddly unconcerned about my probable fate. As I lay listening to the endless rain I felt only a tired sense of futility. In the larger civilized jungle, I'd proved to have little survival merit. I was not a fighter. I'd been used, exploited. All of my natural talents and intelligence had accomplished nothing but a festering accumulation of injustices and self-contempt.

I kept a small smudge fire going, but it discouraged only a token few of the millions of swarming, biting insects. Sweat itched in the wounds made by the constant scratching of sand-fly and mosquito bites. Sores had reopened. I was covered with a vile rash. None of these offered much encouragement to a dwarfed ego trapped in a shrunken and enfevered body.

The only thing that kept me from openly admitting that I might welcome death was Richter; the thought that he might go on somehow and survive. He would have a somewhat better chance to do so with my half of the medicines and rations.

Then I heard a faint cry. Peering out, I saw just outside my shelter, squatting in the rain, an Indian woman so small and delicate that she resembled a girl.

She watched me intently, then crawled toward me in the mud, reaching out a small brown hand for help. She looked like a moonshadow, blending with earth and tropical color with the nearly perfect camouflage of a bird. She wore a ragged part of a faded yellow dress around her hips. Her face was red with mango stain. Her breasts had been tattooed on the sides by being stuck with thorns and the wounds filled with the dyeing soot of burned crude rubber.

I was not so weak that I couldn't drag her into my shelter, cover her with my poncho and dose her with a little of our remaining antibiotic. She whispered

to me in an *Antipas* dialect that she was weak with hunger and exhaustion; that the rest of her people had been butchered by white homesteaders who wanted Indian land; that she was the last of her small tribe.

She had many X's scattered through a long Indian name, so I called her Rima, after the bird-girl in W.H. Hudson's novel *Green Mansions.*

She smiled at me in gratitude and with a soft, vague sweetness. She took an instant liking to me, I knew that. Oddly, she seemed utterly fascinated, enthralled, by my bald head. She kept staring at it, murmuring, caressing it with her hands that fluttered as delicately as brown moths.

She stayed in my shelter, even under my poncho later. She was warm, giving, generous, soft as a bird. She played to me later on a kind of flute that had a heartbreaking note of desire, always in a minor key, like the voice of that sad and desolate forest.

The next day Richter took her away from me. He made her stay with him and serve him in his shelter, not because he really desired her for herself, understand, but because he considered a possession of mine as his. Too, perhaps he didn't want her taking care of me in my illness. It had occurred to me that Richter was not at all concerned about my condition as, indeed, why should he be, now that I was no longer able to help him reach Cocama. He would be thinking just as I did, that my half of our remaining medicine and rations would considerably increase his chances of reaching civilization.

He cowed her into doing his every bidding like a slave. She detested him but was afraid to resist. Often I saw her watching me sadly, tears on her cheeks. What I didn't understand was why she didn't just fade away into the forest.

Then Richter bragged to me that he had made Rima promise to guide him back to Cocama. If I weren't strong enough to go, I would have to stay behind until he reached Cocama. Then he would hire a helicopter to come back for me. They would leave tomorrow.

I nodded without looking at him or agreeing with him. I was nodding to myself, to my own sudden inner resolve that Richter would never leave this island; or that if he did manage to leave and reach shore, he would never live to reach Cocama.

If I were not going to make it, neither would Richter. I would see to it.

. That night I stumbled down through the rain and mud and reeds to the riverbank. I untied the canoe and let it go. It plunged away into the soggy dark, leaving nothing around me but that staggering smell of flooding rain—the decaying stench of exposed roots, mold, worms, rot and germination everywhere.

We had left all of our remaining supplies—one rifle, some ammo, all of our rations—in the canoe, reasoning that, if the river rose again rapidly, we could make a fast getaway without having to leave our vital supplies behind. The river could do that—rise several feet in as many minutes. We would, of course, have left that island long ago but were afraid to risk the canoe in that raging flood.

As I staggered back to my shelter through the tall cane, I saw Rima's face looking at me through the dripping green leaves like a strange flower. She had seen me let the canoe go—I knew she had—but she only nodded at me and gave me an enigmatic, somehow conspiratorial smile.

I started toward her, but her face disappeared. I lay down in my shelter and built up the smudge fire. I was confident she would never tell Richter what I had done. She detested Richter at least as much as I did, and the canoe meant nothing to her. Her survival in her jungle did not depend in any way on a few civilized artifacts.

That I had finally taken action against Richter buoyed my spirits a little. I lay in the eye-burning smudge smoke and listened to the rain and anticipated the pleasure of watching Richter crack, or start to crack. Perhaps I wouldn't live long enough to enjoy more.

The rain had been falling heavily, nonstop, for I had no clear idea how many days. Now it seemed to slacken a little. The river could drop before morning as fast as it rose. That meant that the Antipas or the Huambizas might pay us a visit. Their actions were never predictable this close to civilization. No one really knew how many there were in the decimated remains of these tribes, or how they still could appear and disappear like a smoke dream.

Then I remembered that Rima had said there were no more Antipas, that she was the last; but how much of what she had said was true? I had begun to wonder. What was the real reason she had come into our camp that night? Why had she stayed? I had a sudden strong reason to suspect that she had been following us all along, knew where we were and

had tied up with us for some unknown motive of her own. Otherwise how could she have gotten to the island after the river rose?

At dawn, Rima's shrill cries awakened me; I stumbled into a sticky mist. Rima's cries came up from the riverbank, high and shrill as a parrot's. I ran down through the wild cane that reached twenty feet high along the two-mile length of the narrow island. I broke out of the cane. The river was lower. Giant hardwood trees, uprooted, still hurled down the muddy tide though, like toothpicks. The green wall of the shore was only several hundred yards away now.

Rima lay curled on the sand. Richter, in his khaki shorts and sandals, chest bare, was bending over her, beating her naked back with a cane switch. Her face was turned toward me like a bleeding hand.

Fury such as I had never felt consciously before broke out of the cyst of my body. I screamed as I went down the path. I leaped and struck out at Richter. He grabbed my arm effortlessly with his left hand, punched me in the stomach with his right and I fell on the sand, sick and gasping for air.

Physical brutality like this was alien to Richter. Now he was shiv-

ering, yelling wildly, accusing Rima of turning the canoe loose. His golden skin and blue eyes seemed dirty, his long wheat-colored hair a filthy mat. He was frightened, I knew; more frightened of our circumstance than I had ever been.

Richter struck Rima again. Finally I managed to speak, to tell him to stop. "She hasn't done anything," I said.

"She turned the canoe loose," Richter shouted. "So her Indian friends could pick it up downriver."

"No. Last night I thought I had a fever—thought I saw two painted Huambizas sneak through the camp. Now I know I really saw them. The river lowered enough for them to come across from the shore. They took the canoe. Rima is not a Huambiza."

Richter had the hot, angry, flushed look of a boy betrayed by indifferent authority. He backed away from Rima, seeming a little ashamed, but pale and shivering with apprehension.

"Anyway it's done," he mumbled. "Everything is gone. What the hell can we do now?"

Rima sat up and said in Antipas that she would help.

"How?" I said, surprised, curious.

"I still take you to Cocama."

Why? I thought, but I didn't ask. She must know I would never hold up long enough to get there. Why should she help Richter?

She made a salve to protect us from insect bites. She boiled herbs and I drank the brew and my fever immediately began to heal. I felt stronger.

She knew how to hunt, how to find food and the way to Cocama; how to cross the raging river. She knew many things.

First we ate. She got a monkey and dipped the *coto* into the river to moisten its hair, singed it as it hung from its tail by a pole. As the muscles contracted with the heat, its dead limbs moved and it contorted its face in a last wild grin.

Soon we savored monkey meat, a pâté of monkey brains, with side orders of two turtle's eggs each, while macaws cried in shrieking chorus and wild turkeys, or *paujils*, took off with those odd cries that sound like lowing cows. Other *cotos*, once known as the Howling Monkeys of the Incas, jabbered at us from the cane.

Then Rima led us to the dead tapir she had spotted earlier half a mile up the island. Soldier ants had killed it somewhere upriver. It had been carried away on sudden floodwater before the soldiers

got a chance to eat it, and here it had been beached. It weighed 600 pounds, was bloated with gas and very buoyant. Rima said it would float us easily, and it did, as we each hung onto it with one hand, paddling with the other and kicking our feet. We touched shore three miles downriver under a dripping jungle wall.

We kept going; straight for Cocama, Rima promised. She gave me another curative dose of her special herb. It was indeed a miracle cure for a rare and deadly jungle fever.

Rima made a bow from bamboo, and straight arrows twelve inches long and sixteenths of an inch thick. She made another brew from a crushed vine. An arrow dipped into this potion had only to break the skin of any game to kill it within five seconds.

Another poison she whipped up was dropped into a pool of water. Fish floated up instantaneously to the surface, dead but edible. Their flesh in no way absorbed the poison.

We were never hungry anymore.

Rima guided us on through jungle that would have choked us and bound us in a few hours. We were surrounded by a thick, green, stifling mass, a quasi-Mesozoic swamp as dense and clinging as a huge wet spider web. Only Rima could have found a way to slither through. Richter and I had no idea where we were or in what direction we went. For days we never saw the sun, but Rima always knew the way.

I grew more puzzled about why Rima should go to so much trouble to save Richter. She wouldn't do that just to save me also. I knew she could easily have cooked Richter's goose separately, at any time.

Why hadn't she? I knew she detested Richter as much as I.

I felt betrayed, disappointed.

Two days later we broke into a semiclearing with a floor of something oozing and bubbling like soggy peat moss. It led to a green-scummed river ripe with alligators. Monkeys howled. A tapir kept up a strange whimpering whine.

Rima whispered suddenly, *"Huangana!"* Even she seemed afraid.

"Wild hogs," I told Richter, and he turned pale.

The *huangana* is one of the two murderous species of *Pecariesi*, probably nothing more murderous in all of nature. Rima heard them coming. I smiled. Perhaps now even Rima would have no way out for Richter. Then I stopped smiling. It seemed an extraordi-

nary price for me to pay—even for the thousand insults of my parasitic partner.

Alligators bellowed and churned the water to green froth in a frenzy of fear. All things run in terror from wild hogs. Their musk scent filled the air. Their rustling snorts, their massive rooting and snuffling came at us like a tornado, and then they showed black through the leaves, tusks glistening in their lower jaws—tusks for digging up roots, or ripping the entrails out of anything that gets in the way, from jaguar to bull-buffalo. The wild hog eats anything. It can devour a buffalo, head, tail, skin and feet in a few minutes.

The *huangana* war cry, a terrible rattling of hundreds of tusks, bore down on us. Richter was screaming and turning around and around, waving his hands.

Rima led us up the bank to an ironwood tree. We got up it just in time. We would never have reached that tree, even if we'd known it was there, without Rima.

The *huangana* smashed past below us, snorting, stinking the forest with their kill tide. The green river scum turned red where hogs and gators met.

That night Rima said we were close to Cocama, that we could be there in another day. I believed her fully now. I heard a big jet pass above the umbrella of jungle and mist. Still, "close" was a highly relative if not altogether meaningless word for us. Without Rima we could not have gone a mile.

We stayed that night in a small clearing near a river. It seemed that it had been used before, more than once. By whom and for what, I had no idea. We built a fire and, as usual, ate well, thanks to Rima. She had killed a *huangana* and planked its ribs near the fire. I ate so much that I rolled over on the white sand and dozed right off.

I woke after dark. Richter still slept. Rima was on the other side of the fire making some sort of song to the sky and dancing expressively without moving her feet. She swayed and twisted like a part of the fire's smoke.

I dozed off again and was wakened by thunder above the trees, and wind. Rain was coming down in solid sheets. It was an intense tropical storm, with lightning ripping and the sound of trees being struck down and slicing great swaths through foliage.

I woke again in the quiet morning. I stared at Richter's body a few feet away, in the center of the clearing. His body was dressed the same. It looked the same—except that it had no head.

The rain had pounded his corpse for hours. Tatters of flesh in his torn neck had turned pale and water-soaked, like fish-bait left too long in the water.

Rima still danced on the other side of the dead fire ashes. Richter's eyes glittered as they went bobbing around, up and down, as she swung his head by a tiny fistful of wheat-colored hair . . .

I watched through leafy curtains as Rima made a crude cutting instrument from a shell, then carefully parted Richter's hair from the crown to the base of the skull. She slit the skin down the line of the part. She turned the skin back on both sides and peeled it from the bone, just as someone else might peel off a silk stocking.

She cut delicately at the eyes, ears, nose. Then the flesh and muscles came off with the skin. She threw the clean, naked skull away like an apple core. It rolled through the ashes and into a mass of dead leaves. She cut the crown to the base of the neck, then sewed it together again with a bamboo needle and palm-leaf fiber called *chambira*. She skewered the lips with three bamboo splinters, each about two and a half inches long, and lashed together with more fiber.

She closed the eyeholes by drawing down the upper eyelashes. The eyebrows didn't fall. They were held up by small pegs of bamboo.

She worked as if she'd had years of practice, perhaps as a priestess in her tribe before it was wiped out, and this was her specialty. Beautiful, an art. Now a lost art.

It took many hours. During the ritual Rima noticed me a few times behind the leaves. I was very glad to see that her manner remained warm and friendly toward me.

Then there was Richter's face—that boyish, grinning, arrogant face—perfectly preserved.

This was not finished perfection; not yet. Rima got a fire going out of the old ashes. She brought a stone pot, carefully wrapped in palm leaves, out of the brush. I knew it was a ritual pot, and that this was a special site—that Rima had been leading us here all along.

She filled the pot with water and filled Richter's head with sand through the neck opening. She put the head into the pot. Just as the water began to boil, she took out the head. This was to prevent the softening of the flesh and the scalding of the hair roots.

Richter's head had shrunk now

to about one-third its living size. When Rima poured out the pot water, it left a scum of yellow grease that soaked into the sand.

Rima then poured the sand that had been heating under the fire into Richter's shrunken head, and ironed the head carefully on heated stones.

This bringing of the head to a boil had to be repeated many times. Every act was painstakingly delicate and thorough. Finally the skin of Richter's head was smooth, hard, tough, like expertly tanned leather. Though his features were still exactly as they had been in life, his face was no larger than an orange.

Every feature, even the cheek scar, was intact.

I admired Rima's work. She accepted my praise with modest pride. She gave me samples of the herbs that cured my fever, poisoned the arrowheads, repelled the insects. These I have parlayed into some of the recognition and wealth I have considered long overdue.

Then she led me to the big modern airport at Cocama, or I should say, to a paved road leading to the city only a mile away.

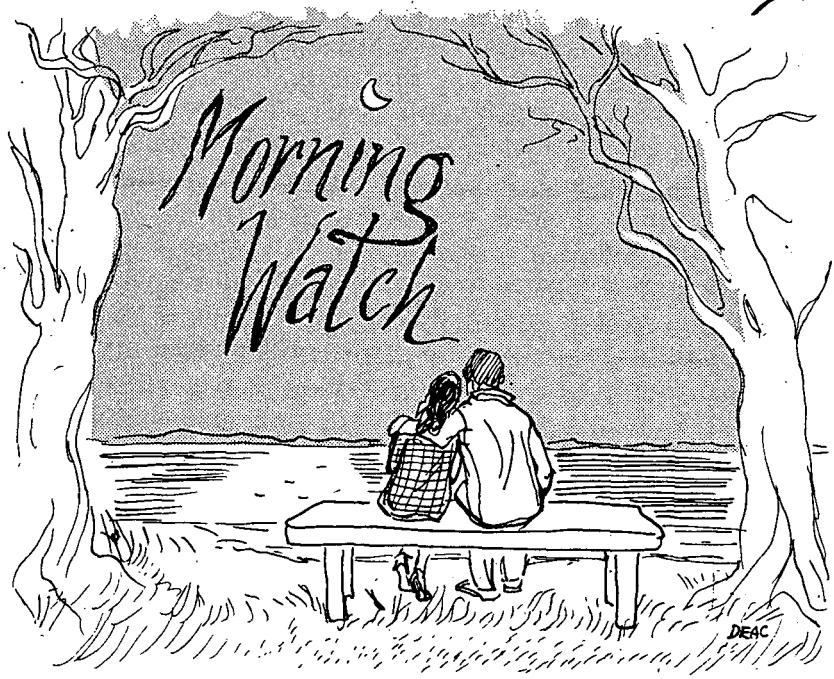
The reason she kindly showed me to the airport while Richter remained behind is not so simple as a mere liking for me.

Contrary to popular belief, most headhunters have never been primarily interested in heads. You may verify this by reading any authoritative work on the subject, including one of mine soon to be published.

The value of a head to a headhunter ends soon after the ceremony. Then the hair is removed and kept as the permanent trophy. The head, no longer valued, is thrown away. Most of the otherwise authentic heads you see have been discarded. The hair is false, added later by collectors, or sellers. Any shrunken head with the original hair has either been stolen, taken by force, or found in the ruined remains of an extinct race—perhaps those of the ancient *Antipas*.

So my bald head was of no ritual interest whatever to Rima.

Just when one has everything figured out, along comes a killjoy.



Patrolmen Alonzo Trippy and Garth Morgan were moving into the last half of the morning watch and fighting to stay awake. Their shift began at one a.m. and extended an hour past the morning rush hour, but between five a.m. and the time freeway and city street traffic began to build at seven, their district was dead.

Duck Lake district's furtive night people had closed up their dubious shops. The hippies and wandering street people who had not been arrested for loitering, smoking pot, or caught selling or buying it, were coming down hard with the real world of dawn staring them in their vague, beleaguered faces. The world of garbage trucks, street

cleaners, newsboys and produce vans began seeping into their drug-floating world and they scurried from that world to crash-pads to escape this reverse plague. Coffee shops began opening their doors to Duck Lake district's few prostitutes who were grabbing a cup of coffee before calling it a night. Also out on the streets were the anonymous wanderers, wayward troubled people neither Trippy nor Morgan had identified as criminals or potential suicides, sex maniacs or just plain kooks with a few vital nuts loose in their heads.

Old men came out during these dull hours to walk their dogs, or to sit on a bench at Duck Lake and reflect, or merely to put behind them with each step, troubles too heavy to bear on their stooped shoulders. Of all the flotsam and near-flotsam afloat in a half-sleeping, just-waking world, it was this group that troubled Garth Morgan most. Often he thought it would be a helpful gesture to tell these aging men, for whom the world no longer had work, that their leisure was a golden reward for the years of thankless, repetitive toil, that they should not feel shame because of it, that they should not be so preoccupied with their next reward—the heavenly reward—that they failed to enjoy the rewards now in their hands. Morgan knew, however, that he would never draw up the courage to tell this even to one old man.

The morning was chilly, but the squad car's heater had been spewing warmth on them all night. Officer Morgan cracked open the wing window to stir the heavy heat inside the car and the indolence inside his brain. Before heading over to the freeway for their two hours of roving patrol at six-thirty, they had only a few routine checks to make; but first on their list of routine business was their fifth and final cruising tour of Duck Lake.

Besides its perimeter, they were responsible for the surveillance of the West Duck Lake and East Duck Lake bathing beaches, bathhouses, indoor pools, cul-de-sac parking lots, boathouses, and bicycle houses. Vandalism in the Duck Lake district was not the highest in the city, but it could break out at the most unexpected times nonetheless. The task did not exactly have Officer Garth Morgan crawling with anticipation of action, but it was part of

by Jerry Jacobson

the routine and the routine had to be done.

Behind the wheel, Officer Alonzo Trippy worked off a monstrous yawn and sneaked a look at his watch. "Do the lake again?" he said. "It's about time, unless you want to grab a cup of coffee."

"I can wait if you can," Morgan told him. "Let's hit the lake, Jeeves."

It was while they cruised past an open patch of rolling grass fronting the lake that Officer Morgan spotted them in the near darkness—a man and a woman, it appeared, sitting together on a stone bench before the asphalt bicycle path about fifty yards away. Their backs were to the squad car and the man had his arm draped across the woman's shoulders as they looked out at the moonlit lake.

Morgan reached across and tapped his partner on the shoulder lightly, a signal to slow down. "A couple down at the lake. On one of the benches."

"Young lovers," Trippy said.

"At five a.m.?"

"Then they're getting an early start or a late finish. You want to check them out?"

"Wouldn't hurt," Morgan said. "Maybe the two weren't together originally. Know what I mean?"

"Morgan, you've got a dirty mind."

"I've got a suspicious mind. You want to come along? Stretch your legs? Skip a few rocks?"

"If it were warmer," Trippy said. "And we may get a call. I'll wait here."

"Suit yourself," Morgan told him and got out of the car. The grass beneath his shoes still held a shimmering coat of predawn dew and the freshly mowed blades stuck to the soles and toes as he walked. The breeze off the lake was fresh and wholesome and for a moment he forgot he was a city patrolman and that he was on duty.

That had been, and still was, a sore point between Morgan and his wife. He was always on duty, she often said. He fretted and stewed and worried as though he owned the entire department, she sometimes told him. If he kept taking his job so personally, she'd admonish, he would have a big, throbbing ulcer long before he even came up for his examinations for sergeant.

He never argued with her on the point, because he knew Glenna had only his interests at heart. She didn't want him taking it all too seriously, was all. She didn't want him sick inside at thirty, she didn't want to see him eating himself away because of crime and criminals and because he couldn't single-handedly wipe them both from the face of the globe.

Perhaps she was right about that, about his becoming so involved in his work in a personal way. Perhaps his makeup, the crazy, complex way that he was deep inside, made him powerless to change, helpless to be any other way. He did not hate crime or criminals, not the way many of the older officers did. He could not rage against them, or curse them for the way they were or for the crimes they committed. Instead, he felt deep empathy for criminals, understood in some cases the forces which had driven them into their dark lives. *You cannot hope to begin to forgive until you understand,* his father had once told him when he was a young boy of eight or nine. *And you cannot begin to understand until you have worn another man's skin, lived another man's sorrows, felt another man's hatred and cried another man's tears.* That was how he had been brought up, with a belief that there was worth in every human being and that there was a reason behind every transgression.

As he approached the stone bench from behind, Garth Morgan could now see the couple was not yet man and woman, but boy and girl. They were both perhaps no more than seventeen or eighteen at the most, but intelligent enough to have dressed warmly for the morning's chill breeze moving in off the lake. They didn't seem to hear him.

When Morgan had come within ten or fifteen yards of the bench he called out, "Good morning," in a pleasant voice, not to startle them, and from that distance so they could turn and identify him. The girl's face was healthy-looking, peachy and fresh, though not from the chill wind. It was the way it looked for another reason, but for the moment Morgan could not put his finger on the reason it glowed with such serenity. The boy's face held a mildly guarded look until he recognized the uniform Morgan was wearing and then it, too, became relaxed and pleasant like the girl's.

"Is something wrong, Officer?" the girl said. "We haven't done anything wrong. We just came out to look at the lake."

Morgan continued walking until he was between the bench and the lake. Then he turned slowly and smiled. "No, nothing's wrong," he said evenly. "It's just that it strikes me as a little early to be out looking at the lake." He now identified the reason for the young girl's serene glow. She was going to have a baby. Even the bulky, wool coat she wore could not hide the fact. Seven or eight months, Morgan judged.

"It does seem awfully early," the girl said, "but George catches the bus for work in a little while and

we thought how nice it would be to spend some time here together while he's waiting. This is my husband, George, by the way."

Perhaps because he had been mentioned as an afterthought, George grimaced mildly, though he did not remove his arm from around her shoulder. Neither wore a wedding ring, Morgan noticed, but that was not unusual in this age of trial marriages, and living-in, and shacking, and whatever else the young kids used as a euphemistic substitute for the cold finality of marriage these days.

"Where do you work, George?" Morgan asked.

"Down at the gypsum plant on Industrial Avenue," George said, with mild distaste. "I crush hydrous calcium sulfate. Sounds like some chemical big deal, but I'm just a common laborer."

"We all did a little of that when we were young," Morgan told him. "Come to think of it, I'm doing a lot of that right now."

"Yeah, I might give being a cop a whirl," George said, with careless disdain. "You have to take a civil service test, right? And you gotta be a high school graduate, too, right?"

"Or get your high school diploma. Lot of night study and classes involved, but it's worth it. You can't be too far behind your graduating class."

"Last September," George said. "I had to drop out, because my father got crushed in a plant accident and we didn't have any money coming in. He died in April, anyway, so it wasn't any big deal."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Morgan said.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't any big deal," George said.

Somehow they had slipped into a mood of mild morbidity. Morgan made an attempt to break it. "I see you two are going to have a baby."

Again George grimaced mildly. The girl's slender hands seemed to tense in her lap without actually clenching. "*She's* having the baby," he said.

"And you're having the worries and the bills," Morgan said, suddenly realizing he had opened his big mouth again and mentioned two more negative thoughts. "What's it going to be? Boy or girl?"

"Oh, we don't care," the girl said. "One or the other is all right with us."

"A boy, maybe," said George, in a brief moment of wistfulness. Then the implacability in his expression and voice returned, and he added, "Whatever."

"Well, whatever it is, I hope it is a healthy, brilliant child," Morgan said.

"Thank you, Officer," the girl

said and smiled at him briefly.

The breeze off the lake blew up suddenly and the girl fought through a shiver. George instinctively hugged his wife closer with his protective arm.

"Do you live with your parents?" Morgan asked, not defining whose parents.

"We used to live with hers," George said, "but we moved out about three months ago."

"We have a small apartment back there." The girl gestured behind her with her arm. "On Duck Lake Avenue. It's only three rooms, but it's very nice and close to the lake. I come down here sometimes while George is at work, when the weather's nice."

"I met Lucinda at this lake," George put in, with modest pride. "She was going with this other guy, Mike. Big muscleman, with a tan like a roast chicken. Very big deal beach-bum type. I sure put out his fire in a hurry, didn't I, Lu?"

Lucinda nodded with a blush and seemed to push closer to his side.

"I didn't put it out soon enough, though," George said suddenly.

"How do you mean?" Morgan asked.

"Aw, it's no big deal. I put it out, that's all that counts. I got Lucinda, and all he's got now is his crummy suntan lotion and sand crabs all over him. I really think guys like that are queer, if you want my opinion. What do you call it? Narcissism, or something like that? I wouldn't be surprised if the guy runs around his house with dresses on, and queer garbage like that."

"*George,*" Lucinda said, in soft but stern censure.

"Yeah, well anyway, it's no big deal."

Lucinda smiled again, and George gave her waist a possessive little squeeze.

Morgan glanced swiftly at his watch and saw they were running behind on their patrol rounds. They would have to skip the supermarkets if they were going to put in an honest bit of traffic control on the freeway.

"It's been nice meeting you two," he told them, smiling warmly. "You have a good baby, both of you. And George, you start thinking seriously about going after that high school diploma. And Lucinda, you make a nice home for the three of you."

Both smiled up at him but did not answer.

"And I'd suggest you not come down to the lake until it begins to get light. This can be a dangerous place at times, especially in the early-morning hours. You never can tell about the kind of people who are out and about this time of morning."

"We'll be all right, Officer," Lucinda told him.

"It's no big deal, but thanks for the warning anyway, Officer," George said.

"Well, have a nice morning. Don't miss your bus."

"I won't. Thanks."

"Good-bye, Officer," Lucinda said, in a tone Morgan could not read precisely, a mixture of sadness and fondness, of cordiality and barren emptiness; of something other than what Morgan supposed a good-bye should be.

He left them then, returning up the slope to the squad car idling in the near distance. Two young married people out gazing at a lake in the predawn wasn't the gloomiest thing in the world, Morgan decided. In a strange way, the act contained an element of pure beauty, a basis of simple love. They'd had it rough in their lives, with an early (and very possibly forced) marriage, the abrupt discontinuance of education and early entry into the labor market, the tragic death of a father in a senseless industrial accident. Yet they would prevail somehow, Morgan was sure of it.

"How did they check out?" Alonzo Trippy asked, as Morgan slipped back into their patrol car. "Runaways?"

"Nothing like that," Morgan said. "Just a young married couple out looking at the lake."

"They high on something?" Trippy was just a little more suspicious and cynical about people than Morgan.

"Just each other," Morgan told him. "Girl's going to have a baby and the husband works at the gypsum plant on Industrial Avenue. They were just spending a few private minutes together before he caught his bus for work."

"One of those *modern* marriages?" asked Trippy. "Reciting poetry to each other in a forest, with an owl for a minister and a flock of doves for wedding guests?"

"Something like that," Morgan said.

"You check their identification?"

Morgan gave Alonzo Trippy a brief scowl. "I asked them their names. Lucinda and George were good enough for me."

"You're the investigating officer, Officer."

"Let's start checking those schools before the freeways get so clogged we have to go downtown and watch traffic on a video relay unit," Morgan said gruffly.

He wasn't worried about Lucinda and George and the baby they were about to have. They would weather it all and survive and have a fairly good life. They would never again cross Morgan's path, except by ac-

cident or chance meeting, would never cross his path the way most humans he met did: in the process of robbery or burglary, in the midst of an act of physical violence, or in the commission of an act against private or public property. He felt equally certain he would not meet them as participants in any of the sad phases of the drug experience. Basically they were good kids, a little confused and frustrated by the vagaries and pressures and injustices of life perhaps, but strong enough to surmount them, or accept them philosophically. They would live within the law, with respect for the law and would not turn out to be the kind of people over whom Morgan mourned, by whom he was perplexed and puzzled, and for whom he felt, deep inside him, tremendous sadness and personal guilt.

"Hey, cheer up, partner," Alonzo said, as he drove them in the direction of Carmen Gatzert Grade School. "We've got this shift made now, and you look like we just ran over your dog."

"Just thinking," Morgan said.

"And I was just thinking that kid George has got a long hike to his bus."

"What?"

"His bus. He's gotta walk at least ten blocks. There aren't any bus lines on Duck Lake Avenue."

"So he has a long walk to his bus," Morgan said, in an anxious voice. "So what does that prove? Trippy, I swear you're the most suspicious cop I ever met. I'll bet you even suspect that old Blind Charlie, the newspaper vendor on Lux Avenue, has been able to see all along."

"You never know what goes on behind those black lenses."

Morgan slumped down into his seat and said no more. He had faith in people, tremendous faith, and Lucinda and George would be all right. They, like thousands of others, would grin and bear through it all and land on their feet.

What appeared to be a family of ducks had waddled up from the lake bank beyond the stone bench and the asphalt bicycle path. There were six in the family: a mother, a father and four baby ducklings churning their tiny webbed feet into the sand and desperately trying to keep up with their parents.

"A family of ducks, George," Lucinda said, tugging his arm.

"Yeah. Big deal. I wonder if the old man knows they're all his. Or if he thinks there's a stud duck named Mike hanging around in the bushes."

For a moment they were quiet. They listened to the ducklings' squeaky quacks, the breeze moving through the trees around them and

the lake waters lapping on the shore.

"You could get your job back," Lucinda said. "If you really wanted it back, you could get it back. Talk to Mr. Molling about it."

"I beat him up, remember?" George said. "I warned him twice to quit leaning on me, to quit yelling at me, to quit hanging over my shoulder while I was crushing his damned hydrous calcium sulfate. He got fair warning."

Lucinda tried to change the subject. "I thought the policeman was nice. Didn't you?"

"Cops are all the same," George said. "Always trying to pry, always trying to learn about the private things in your life, trying to get something on you."

"I liked him."

"Cops are all alike. What do you know about anything, anyway? You're no big deal, I'm no big deal, cops are no big deal. Nothing is no big deal."

The family of ducks passed the stone bench in single file and disappeared into a hamlet of thick bushes behind them. Their quacking ceased but the water continued its soft lapping and the breeze kept singing into the trees.

"Well, it's about time now," George said, without turning his head toward Lucinda, who was beginning to sob very softly. He removed his arm from around her shoulder and put it into a pocket of his Windbreaker. When he extracted his hand, it was gripped around the handle of a small, black pistol. He let it rest in his palm and stared down at it as though it were a small, black bird he was nursing back to health.

"It's no big deal, Lucinda," he said, and then without speaking another word to her, without even uttering a good-bye, he placed the pistol's barrel against her right temple and pulled the trigger.

He watched Lucinda as her body tumbled from the stone bench and onto the hard sand beneath his feet. Then he placed the pistol's barrel against his own temple.

"You see, Lucinda? It's no big deal, just like I promised," he whispered, and then pulled the trigger the second and final time.

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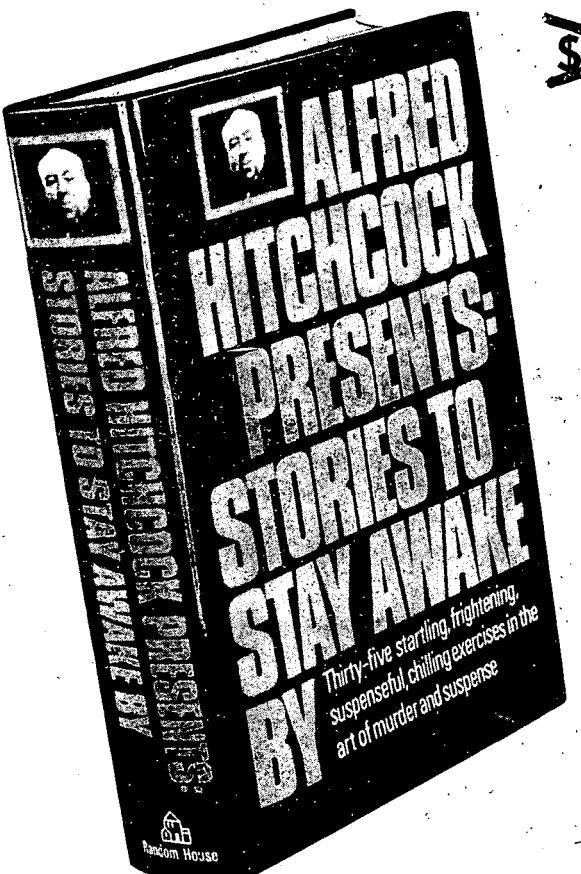

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It always looks greener across the street—and very often is.

Another Crazy Way to Make a Living

by Ed Dumonte

I run this little neighborhood saloon just off 24th Street. Been here more than twenty years. Drunks, fights, bad checks, stickups, I've had it all. It's a crazy way to make a living.

I get to thinking this way and feeling sorry for myself about four times a year. That's when my accountant sends out his quarterly review of the business and my tax bill. Summed up, it says that I'm taking in more and more money and getting to keep less and less of it. Do you know what taxes are in this city? And licensing fees? Outta sight.

On top of that, the character of the neighborhood is changing. Or maybe it's that people everywhere are changing. Like last month, for instance, some malicious little punk heaved a rock through the plate-glass front door. No reason for it, just meanness. I used to run with a pretty rough bunch in my younger days and we raised our share of hell, but we never destroyed anything just to destroy.

Well, I was thinking along these

lines and paging through the accountant's report when my first two customers of the day walked in and sat at the bar. One was a business type—white shirt and tie, dark suit, attaché case. The other, the bigger of the two, had on a plaid flannel shirt and a zippered leather jacket.

They ordered tap beer. I drew two, took their money and went back to my cleaning and polishing.

"This is a nice sort of place," the business type said after a minute. "Don't you think so, Gus?"

"Yeah," Gus said.

"Clean, quiet, nicely set up. The sort of place a man might like to go for a quiet drink. Or bring a woman without worrying about running into trouble."

"Yeah," Gus said.

"I bet a man who runs a place like this could make a pretty good living without getting a lot of grief."

"Yeah," Gus said.

Maybe it was supposed to sound like casual bar talk, but I was beginning to get a prickly feeling down my back—the sort of feeling you might get holding a time bomb set to go off at 12:00 and you suddenly notice it's 11:59.

I turned to take a good look at the two. They didn't seem to be paying any attention to me, but the feeling grew stronger, and there was something familiar about one of them—the business-type one.

I walked to the end of the bar and stood in front of them, polishing a glass, until they noticed me and looked up.

"Something kinda familiar about you," I said to the business type. "You been in my place before?"

"Not that I remember. But I get around town a lot, I may have dropped in sometime. My name is Paulsen," he added. "I'm in the insurance business."

"If you came in here hoping to sell a policy," I told him, "you'll be an alcoholic before you leave."

"No, I've made my quota for the week," he laughed. "Any stops I make today are strictly social."

Their glasses were empty, so I filled them and took a bill he had on the bar.

"But it's surprising," he continued when I brought back his change, "how many times I walk into a place with no intention of making a sale and walk out with another client. My policy just seems to sell itself. Isn't that right, Gus?"

"Yeah," Gus said.

"Sounds like a pretty sweet racket you have."

Paulsen choked and coughed over a swallow of beer. "I—uh—I prefer not to use that word in connection with my line of work. The fact is, the policy I sell offers a coverage that no other insurance com-

pany touches," he informed me.

"And what might that be?" I asked.

"Nuisance protection," he said. "Gus and I were just commenting on what a nice place this seems to be. That right, Gus?"

"Yeah," Gus said.

"But think what a headache it would be if there were a sudden rash of holdups or a little vandalism or a few rowdies in the place. Right, Gus?"

"Yeah," Gus said.

Gus shifted position on the bar stool to turn unblinking, watery-pale eyes on me, and one big hand knocked over his glass of beer. I mopped it up with a bar rag, refilled the glass and put it in front of him.

"The policy costs twenty-five dollars a week," Paulsen said, "but any sort of trouble in here would drive out three or four times that much business."

Gus picked up his full glass of beer, held it out over the floor and dropped it.

"And how do you prevent that sort of trouble?"

"I'm glad you asked me that." Paulsen removed a gold, sunburst decal from his wallet and placed it on the bar. "The organization I represent is well-known and highly respected. When I put this seal on your front door, it'll be recognized by any potential holdup man or troublemaker. He'll know you're protected by the organization and if he bothers you he'll be buying more trouble than he can handle.

"Gus and I will be around once a week to collect the premium and see that everything is running smoothly. In addition, certain of our—field agents—will drop in occa-

sionally to keep an eye on things. Might even increase your business a bit."

I reached across the bar to grab Paulsen's lapel and pull him toward me. "I don't need or want that sort of business," I told him. "What's more, I know all my customers and I don't need protection from them. And now I think I remember you—and I don't need protection from you, either."

"You're a hard man to do business with, old-timer," he said. "Isn't he, Gus?"

"Yeah," Gus said.

Gus got up and took off his leather jacket and I started around the end of the bar. It must be a sign of age. Time was, I used to go over the top of the bar two or three times a week to stop trouble—or to start it.

Gus met me at the end of the bar with a looping right that bounced off the side of my head, and then stepped back to see which way I'd fall. That was his second mistake. I moved in with a driving one, two, to a point just below his rib cage. He folded inward and I doubled my hands and pounded the back of his head like driving a railroad spike. Gus wouldn't make any more mistakes for a while.

When I turned to face Paulsen, there was a big .45 automatic on the bar beside him, pointed in my direction. He sure wasn't fooling.

"You certainly are a hard man to do business with," he said.

"I wasn't positive about you, but I sure do recognize that," I pointed to the automatic. "You held up the place a few years ago and got over five hundred dollars."

"Did I? I really don't remember. But I've been out of that line of work for a long time. Now, just sit down right where you are and keep both hands on the bar. We may have to wait a few minutes for Gus to rejoin us. And he'll be rather upset with you when he wakes up. You just did him out of a two hundred fifty dollar a week job."

"So buy yourself another hoodlum. They come a dime . . . How much?

"Two fifty a week. That's his cut of the money we take in."

"I don't believe it."

"Figure it out for yourself," Paulsen said. "We service ten accounts a day at twenty-five dollars a crack. And the list gets longer every week."

"I work seven days a week and don't *gross* much more than that," I grumbled. "By the time I'm done with taxes, rent and liquor bills, I'm lucky to have enough left to buy a few drinks to forget my troubles. And every other barkeep I know is in the same boat. I'm surprised so many of them can be muscled into

buying your racket," I told him.

"It's like I've been trying to tell you, hard nose: we provide a legitimate service. Well . . . almost. But the seal on the door really works. In the last three months there have been only half a dozen holdup attempts at all my accounts. Twice we managed to get the bar owner's money back and once a couple of my boys were on the scene and broke up the robbery.

"As for muscling anybody, Gus is just along for the sake of appearances. You're the only one he's ever had to try to strong-arm."

At the sound of his name, Gus moaned and struggled to his hands and knees, shaking his head to rearrange the cobwebs. Paulsen reached over, rapped him smartly across the head with the barrel of the .45, and Gus went back to sleep.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"Salesman's instinct," he said. "I feel I'm on the verge of selling you a policy and I don't want Gus to pull you apart before we close the deal."

"I can take care of Gus," I told him absently. The major part of my mind was weighing twenty years of work against the figures in the accountant's quarterly report and the pitifully anemic number that represented my bank balance. When the scales came to rest I stood up, took off my apron and dropped it over Gus' unprotesting head.

"In fact, I'm going to take very good care of him. I'm going to need a bartender, and Gus has got the job. Like it or not.

"Now, as to our deal—what sort of employee discount are you going to give me on the gold seal?"

It has been said that what is not good for the swarm is not good for the bee.

One for the Crow

Ed chose the fast route, the new highway which was engineered to bypass Ozark and go directly into the hills. Had he taken the old road south from Springfield, he probably would have lived a longer and a happier life. He certainly would have enjoyed a more

pleasant trip along a more scenic route than the one he elected.

About twenty miles out of town, on the old road, he would have come upon a scene with the misty charm of a French impressionist painting: from the hilltop, grapevines march down the slope in orderly rows; in the valley below, as if protected by the hills from change and blight, lies the clean, sleepy town of Ozark, Missouri.

From his vantage point on top of the hill, Ed would have seen the water tower rising white against the green hills beyond, and the iron-gray smokestack of the cheese factory. Had he then continued downhill, he soon would have come to an official sign: *Ozark, Pop. 800* and, on a nearby tree, a less formal but more enthusiastic announcement: *Welcome to Ozark, a good live town.*

Clattering across the Finley River bridge and passing an abandoned mill with its rusty wheel forever still, he would have arrived at the Ozark square where the red brick courthouse stands in the center.

by Mary Barrett

There are always a few men sitting on shaded benches in front of the courthouse, chewing tobacco and occasionally exchanging a few words about the weather, the crops, chicken feed, pesticides. Any of these local experts could have warned Ed about the risks he was taking, but he might not have listened anyway, or heard what was said to him. He was that kind of guy. Besides, a warning of sudden death in such a setting would be difficult for anyone to believe, for the scene is deceiving. All appears to be peace and rural contentment; but primitive passions and strong hatreds are bred in the hills, and old ideas and old grudges die hard. Just five minutes' conversation with one of the fellows in front of the courthouse would have given him a warning, but to gain a little time, he missed his chance.

The powerful engine of his big rented car purred quietly under the hood as Ed looked out the window with distaste at the scrubby oaks and hickory trees struggling for life in the thin topsoil. He felt a city man's scorn for wasted space and a successful man's scorn for what he saw as failure.

"In this Godforsaken place," he said to himself, "the hillbillies will be glad for the chance at a little cash."

Ed had a reputation in Hollywood for always being on top of any job, and he was certainly going to be on top of this one with no trouble; *no trouble at all,* he thought.

He wheeled the car off the highway onto a likely-looking farm-to-market road. It was pitted from the winter freeze, and Ed was forced to slow down. A thin film of dust blanketed the weeds and wild strawberries growing on each side of the narrow road, but no matter. The air-conditioned car was sealed against intrusion by the environment.

Ahead appeared the first sign of habitation—a dilapidated farmhouse with a much-patched roof. One window was covered with cardboard, like a patch over a missing eye. A thin streak of smoke drifted from the chimney. A white hen clucked dispiritedly in the front yard.

Ed turned the car off the road onto dry grass, stopped and stepped out, slamming the car door closed behind him. He looked around speculatively.

It was a clear, cloudless spring day, and after the steady hum of the car, the silence was startling. Far away, a meadowlark sang its pure notes.

Ed walked toward the house. "Hello," he called. "Anyone here? Anyone home?" There was no answer.

He rounded the corner of the house. There, bent low over the red earth, was a tall, bony man in faded blue overalls. His skin, tanned to leather, was bare to the sun over the bib of the overalls.

"What's the matter with you?" Ed demanded. "Didn't you hear me?"

The man didn't look up. He said shortly, but with no animus, "I heard you. Long ways off."

Ed came closer. "What are you planting there?"

The man at last stood up. He looked Ed in the eye and said, "Corn," the monosyllable discouraging conversation.

Ed tried to remember what he knew about corn. It was very little. He had seen some pictures, though, and they didn't look like this.

"I thought you planted corn in furrows," he said.

"Some do. Where there's not much rain. Plenty of rain here. Plant corn in hills. Four seeds to a hill."

"Why four?"

The man explained, matter-of-factly, "One for the cutworm, one

for the crow, one for the dry rot, and one to grow."

"Oh," Ed said, unenlightened. "When will it come up?"

"Tassels out about July," the man answered. Then, clearly dubious, he asked, "You thinking to grow corn hereabouts?"

"Oh, no," Ed said hastily. "I'm just looking for local color."

The man looked around at the familiar greens and browns of his landscape, and then inquisitively back at Ed.

"The way people talk," Ed explained, "their customs, their folkways. Those things."

The farmer frowned; whether disapproving or puzzled, it was impossible to tell. "Reckon you better come inside, then, and talk to Ma. She knows all about folks' ways." Moving to the back door, he added, "I'm Luke Anderson. This is our place, Ma's and mine, since we lost our son."

Ed followed him through a squeaking screen door into the kitchen. It was cool and dark after the bright sun outside.

A woman with gray hair stood at a stained sink, shelling beans.

Luke said, without preamble, "This fellow wants to know about our ways."

The woman turned to them, her face expressionless. She wiped her hands on her cotton apron, slowly and deliberately. She inspected the visitor as she might have scrutinized a mule offered for sale. Like her husband, the woman was browned by the sun; and like him, she was economically lean, without an ounce of unnecessary flesh.

She pulled a straight wooden chair up to the kitchen table and put her hands on the oilcloth, palms down, as if preparing for a seance. Luke and Ed sat down too.

"Why do you want to know our ways?" she asked with guarded curiosity.

"We want to make a movie here in the hills," Ed said. "The setting has to look authentic. Real, you know." He was uncertain how much these ignorant people could understand. "We want to cast local people, in minor roles, of course. And we'll pay."

The woman was clearly not impressed. She looked at him sharply from startlingly-light blue eyes. "They done made a movie once, nearby."

"I know," Ed said. It had been a disaster. Every possible thing had gone wrong—the entire cast sick, equipment breaking down and even disappearing, and the director actually dropping out of sight, never to be seen again. That had caused quite a stir in the press. It was, in fact, the only

thing which saved the movie from being a box-office disaster. No one particularly mourned the loss of the director. He hadn't turned out any good work in years.

The woman said, "Those other movie folk built cabins and pretend barns from stuff they brought with them. Those things are still there. Maybe you could use them for your movie and not mess up a new part of the hills?"

Ed smiled indulgently. *These people are so naive.* "I'm afraid that won't do. That old set is much too artificial. We need virgin territory. Of course, we'll improve on it some. But the old site is ruined for our purposes."

The woman spoke quietly, "That's how it seems to us, too—spoilt. Spoilt for living. Spoilt for farming. Spoilt for looking at. You think to do that here, on this side of the hill? Spoil it?"

"Not at all," Ed said impatiently. *Don't these hicks understand anything?* "We'll bring new life to this place. Lots of tourists will come just to watch us shooting. There'll be new business, new money pouring in, lots of action."

A glance passed between husband and wife which Ed could not interpret.

The woman put both hands on the table and pushed herself to her feet. "Since you're here, you best stay on for dinner," she said.

The meal was quickly served. She put the plates on the oilcloth. Ed looked dubiously at the food. There were ham hocks, beans, and hot corn bread, with fresh warm milk. Ed managed to choke down enough not to offend. He thought wistfully of a cold martini and rare roast beef.

"I'll red up the dishes," the woman said. "You men go along to the front porch. We can set in the shade and talk awhile."

Ed followed Luke through the livingroom. The shades were down, and the room had the dimly-lit appearance of being underwater. The faded carpet was worn through to the floor in places. A sofa, tilting on three legs, was covered with an afghan. Ed thought with satisfaction, *We can use this. It certainly looks authentic.*

They stepped out onto the porch. The floorboards were warped, and for a moment the wavy effect made Ed dizzy. They sat down in straight wooden chairs, identical to those in the kitchen. The woman soon joined them.

They looked through the haze of the warm afternoon across the yard to a hill beyond. A wasp buzzed busily at his nest in a corner under the roof.

"That hill over there," Ed said. "We could use that in several scenes. It looks easy to climb."

The woman glanced at him. Her voice was soft but clear. "Some say that hill should be let be. Most folks won't go there for any reason."

"Oh?" Ed asked, intrigued.

"It's the Bald Knob," Luke said, as if that explained everything.

"Bald Knob?" Ed asked.

The woman explained, "A bald knob is nothing but a hill with no trees growing on top. This one's different, though."

"It's where the Bald Knobbers met," Luke said.

The woman leaned her head against the back of her chair and gazed off into the distance. "Was a time," she said, "when roads were bad and town too far away. We hadn't no pertection of the law. No one to see that cows wasn't stolen nor strangers didn't come, causing trouble." She paused and looked at Ed. If he found any significance for himself in the statement, however, he gave no indication.

She went on: "Some of the men hereabouts got together to make themselves the law officers. They had their meetings atop that bald knob there. Sometimes at night a person could see their bonfire. It was a good sight. Made a body feel safe, to know someone was there, caring.

"Then real trouble set in. Some outsider come and set to build himself a fancy house on Bald Knob. He liked the view, he said. We never had much truck with outsiders. They never seem to catch our ways of thinking. This man was extra bad, building there on Bald Knob where our men had their meetings, and not understanding why that was wrong. He brought a curse to the hills and to all the folks hereabouts. We knowed 'twas him all right. No one else was new in these parts.

"There wasn't no rain for months on end. The cows went dry. The hens stopped laying. Folks was hungry, and we couldn't see no way out of our trouble. It was the outsider and the strangeness he brought to the hills. The hills don't tolerate no alien ways. Something had to change. So the Bald Knobbers came in the dark one night and killed him where he lay."

She paused to let the point strike home.

"Then the real lawmen came from Ozark. They heard of what was done, and they said our men had to be punished. The Bald Knobbers came to trial, and the jury said they had to be hanged. One of those was our son."

The tone of her voice hadn't altered in any degree with that statement, and Ed could almost imagine that he hadn't heard it correctly.

"The real lawmen had trouble, though, when it come to carrying out what they wanted to do. No one hereabouts would do the hanging. Those men were our own, and nobody would have it on his soul to kill their own folks. So the law sent off to Kansas City for a real hanging man."

Luke prompted, "Brought his own ropes."

"Yes. And built the gallows, one for each man, twelve in a row right there on the courthouse square. People come from miles around to watch.

"On the hanging morning, they brought the Bald Knobbers from the jailhouse—some men, and some just boys not yet to razor growed. Our son was one not yet a man."

The woman was silent for a moment, in tribute to the blindness of justice. "But then a strangeness come. Seemed like that hanging man just couldn't get his job done. There was something didn't want our folks to hang. Some say the rope he brought from Kansas City was green, and stretched. That's as may be. Maybe it was something else. Anyways, the trap would spring and a man would drop through, stretching that rope with his weight, and dangle there with his feet bouncing on the ground. You can't break no man's neck that way.

"When it was all over, they couldn't hang but two. At last, they just give up and let the others go. No one had the heart for any more. The Bald Knobbers were let go free and told to go away, somewheres else. They never been seen since."

She gazed at the top of the hill. "And yet, there's some folks say their spirits never left. Some say that at least one Bald Knobber never went away at all. Sometimes you can see a bonfire on Bald Knob at night. Some say the Bald Knobbers do pertect us yet. From strangers and the like."

Only the wasp, buzzing, made a sound in the still air.

Ed said, "That's quite a story. I'm going to climb that hill and see how things look on top."

Luke said quietly, "I wouldn't, if I was you."

The woman said, "Go, if you want." There was warning in her tone—and promise.

Across the still afternoon a mournful, cooing sound came from far away.

"Rain crow," Luke announced.

"Means rain soon, for sure."

Ed looked up, unbelieving, at the clear sky, and smiled complacently. "Well, I'd better go take a look at Bald Knob now, before the deluge."

He set out across the dry, brittle grass. In a few minutes Luke and the woman saw him start up the hill. Then he passed from sight among the oak trees.

The two stood up. "It'll be all right, Luke," the woman reassured, putting her hand on his arm. "He's there. I know he is. He'll take care of everything. Just like he done before, with that other movie man."

They went indoors.

Night came. Ed didn't return.

A watchful person might have thought that he saw a fire burning on top of Bald Knob as darkness set in.

Then the storm struck. Lightning flickered on the horizon. The first huge, spattering drops of rain fell, bringing the odor of moisture on dry land. A howling wind bent the trees. Then torrents of water poured from the sky. Lightning bolts flashed and thunder bounced from hill to hill.

Luke and the woman looked at one another wordlessly, and went to bed.

The morning sun shone on a world washed clean and shining. Luke and the woman set out up the hill. Ed's footprints were washed away. There was no sign that anyone had been there before them.

Luke found him just below the tree line. Above where Ed lay, the hilltop was bare. The big oak tree which lay on top of him had been split by a lightning bolt. Under it, Ed was crushed like a bug under a man's heel.

The woman spoke softly: "Get him out from there, Luke. We'll plant him in the hill, where we planted the other man."

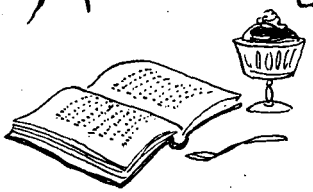
Luke bent to the job.

"It was our son again," the woman said with pride. "He lured that man under the oak tree. Any hill man knows better than to go under a tree in a thunderstorm."

Luke intoned, "One for the cutworm, one for the crow . . ."

In the misfortunes of "friends," somehow one often finds something that is not exactly displeasing.

Albert and the Amateurs



by Len Gray

He came in the Commons swaggering and smiling, and he said, "Hey, kid, you look like you could use some money."

I put my book down on the lunchroom table. "No," I said. "No, I don't need any money."

His smile fell into the top pocket of his silk jacket. "You don't need any bread?"

"No. Not really."

"How come?"

I pushed my book away and said, "I have no reason to tell you."

"Oh, come on. I'm dyin' to know."

His face did look a little pale. "Well," I told him, "in that case, I must inform you that I'm a service veteran, I receive my educational benefits which allow me to go to the graduate school on this campus, and when I need more money I earn it from my part-time job. But you already know about that."

He sat back in his chair, putting protesting palms out in front of him. "No, no! I know nothin' about your job!"

"Oh, but you do," I said. "You know that I work evenings over at the plant and you also know it's one of the few remaining places that pays its payroll in cash because we're in a rural area and many of the workers live a long way from here and therefore they couldn't cash an out-of-the-area check very

well, so Mr. Morris—he's the manager, and I think you know about him, too—Mr. Morris pays once a week in cash. And now you want to talk to me."

"You got it all wrong." He looked around to see if there were any interested witnesses to our conversation.

"No. No, I have it all right and what you want me to do is let you inside the plant to steal the money in our combination vault and maybe hit me on the head, just a little, and then you'll leave and send me a check later. Am I close?"

"Not so loud." He looked over his shoulder. "Keep it down and we can work this out."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I have all the money I need and I am not a crook. I would advise you not to attempt a robbery because you will only fail. Like all the rest."

He licked his lips. "Can't you keep your voice down?"

"No. And I am about to start screaming. I am going to scream for the campus police and they will either catch you or you will go away and I CAN GET BACK TO MY BOOKS!"

People were already starting to look at us.

"You are one big idiot, fella," he told me, sneering.

"POLICE! POLICE!! THIEF!!"

For a rather big man, he moved quite fast. He moved so fast, in fact, that I had time for another half of a chapter before the campus police arrived—puffing.

Late that night, my silk-jacketed friend slipped inside the grounds, past the security cars that regularly patrolled the outside fence area.

He came in (I had him in my field glasses nicely while he was still on the grass over there by the fence), and I let him get real close to my well-lit security building before I turned loose the dogs.

We use four Dobermans and I made sure, earlier in the evening, that they had not had dinner. I heard the usual noises and the usual screams, but by that time I was well into another chapter and he just had to wait his turn.

The dogs weren't very nice to his silk jacket.

Three weeks later, out of the corner of my eye I saw her come in and she came all the way across the Commons floor, past all sorts of empty tables, and came up to me, beaming, and said, "Hi!"

"No," I said, "I'm sorry. It just won't work."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean, it won't work. You're very attractive but it's been tried before. Unsuccessfully, I might add."

"Just what are you inferring?"

She stood above me, staring down.

Sighing, I moved my tray of food. Several of the fellows nearby were looking over here and they weren't staring at me.

"What I'm inferring," I said, "is that someone has sent you in here. You are very attractive and I hardly think you would come all the way to this table, past football players, baseball players and a few rich kids, the ones with the cashmere sweaters, just so you could sit with me, Albert Stevenson."

She blinked. "You're cute, Albert." She tried very hard.

"No, I'm not cute. I'm a little under five-foot-six and I'm at least fifteen pounds overweight. I've never really cared for girls. I'd rather eat." I reached for my chocolate pudding.

She sat down across from me. I spooned in my pudding and she watched my spoon, she watched me and then she said, "I heard you were a little weird."

"Oh?"

"Uh huh. And you want to know something?"

"I already know. They were right, right?"

She blinked. "You're no dummy, either."

"Thank you for that."

"Don't mention it." She was watching me again as I reached for my vanilla ice cream.

Suddenly embarrassed, I said, "Would you like some?"

She stared at me. "Well, well, he's a gentleman, too." She had very short, beautiful red curly hair and I thought her face was just fine.

"Would you like some?" I asked, repeating myself.

"Yeah, you know, I would. Halvsies?"

I nodded and got her a clean dish. We sat at the table eating our ice cream in silence until she said, "I never should have let myself get talked into this in the first place. I belong in the big city. Where it's warm." She looked at me. "You ever come to the city?"

"Once in a while."

She gave me a phone number and her name, which was Pat, and said I should call her sometime. I shrugged but it really didn't sound like too bad an idea.

"I've gotta go," she told me.

"Good-bye."

"Take care of yourself, Albert."

"I will."

"And Albert?"

"Yes?"

"Watch out tonight."

"Your friends?"

She seemed to think about it. "Friends? No. I don't think they really are, at that. So long, Albert."

I said so long and went back to my books. Later, at work, three men hopped down out of a low-fly-

ing helicopter and they had guns in their hands and hoods over their heads. I told the dogs to keep quiet while I hit the release mechanism of the tear-gas propellants which shot fifty yards in the air, landing at the intruders' feet.

From all the noise and sobbing they made, I guessed that they couldn't breathe very well under the hoods. They tried to dance around and reach up for the rope ladder to the helicopter, but the pilot had the good sense to fly away. I left them out there a while and then I threw them a few more canisters of gas and after they had gotten down on the grass and were crying considerably, I walked out, gas mask on, and picked up their guns and we waited for the outside security police to make their next round.

As you can probably tell, it goes on like this all the time. You see, we're located, as I mentioned earlier, in a rural community and that makes some of the big-towners figure they can come in here and more or less have their own way. Our jail has held a lot of people who felt this way, people who were waiting to be transferred to the state prison system.

To show you how bad things can get, I had no sooner gassed the three from their helicopter and was back reading, a few days later, in the Commons, about to bite into a tuna sandwich when this fraternity person, a guy I hardly knew, came up to me and said, "Albert, I have got to have some money!"

I put down my sandwich and said, "I think I have a couple of dollars. Here, let me check."

He grabbed my arm, looking anxious. "Albert, Albert! You don't understand the situation."

"I guess I don't." I went back to my sandwich.

"No, you don't, Albert. I need a *lot* of money!"

"Uh oh."

"What did you say?"

I told him what I had said. "Don't ask me to do anything dishonest," I added.

"Oh, I'm not, I'm not! You don't have to do a thing. That's just it."

"I don't follow you," I said, beginning to follow him.

"You just sit there. Sit there in your little shack and kind of shut your eyes. You know."

"While you walk by. With your eyes and your sack open. Is that it?"

"I think you understand now, Albert."

"No."

"No? You don't understand?"

"No, I won't do it."

He panicked. "Albert, you've *got* to do it!"

"How much money do you owe them?"

"Huh? Why do you ask that?"

"I remember you now. You're the one with that crazy Pogo stick, the one who works out at the costume factory, the one who spends his vacations in Las Vegas losing all his money. How much is it, this time?"

He didn't want to but I made him tell me anyway. "Albert, I owe two guys $9,000."

I considered the figure. I chewed on my sandwich and then I told him, "If I were you, I'd start saving my money."

Believe it or not, he had the audacity to glare at me. I tell him 'no soap' on any partnership of crime and *he* gets mad at *me!*

"Albert, you are one big louse."

"I'm busy. Good-bye."

"You're going to regret this, Albert."

I looked up from my sandwich and my book. "I just hope that *you* don't regret it. Stay away from me and my work. Clear?"

Instead of answering, he stormed away out of the Commons. I shook my head and reached for my pudding.

It's always the same. As I sit now in my security shed, thinking about it, it always turns out the same.

People come up to me and pretend to be friends, but it's only the money they're after, not my friendship. They always have to try for the money and, of course, they've all failed.

Mr. Morris, my boss, a man I've known all my life, thinks I have a lot to do with it and I like to think he's right. I'm the one who thought up a lot of the special security, something I learned in the service. When Mr. Morris found out I was majoring in Criminology at the college, he just had to have me around at night to supplement the regular staff and it's worked out well for us both.

It's worked out well for me, particularly, because I've been able to protect the cash source until I figure out a way to take it myself. All these other people are showing me the ways not to do it and the books I'm reading are giving me a lot of ideas about how professionals did things and got away with them.

When you add it all up, I can just sit here until I have the right plan and then I'll have maybe $200,000 one week. It'll be mine, all mine.

I might even go into the city and call Pat and buy her an ice cream—or something.

But all that must wait. You'll have to excuse me because I think I just saw a pigheaded idiot go past the fence on a Pogo stick.

If an individual is possessed of no virtues, then perhaps somewhat may be learned from his vices.

by Max Van Derken

Albert Heinz asked, "From what I have told you, Mr. Cross, are you satisfied that the girl stole my Priest?"

Cross reserved judgment. "Have other pieces disappeared from the house during her employment?"

"No."

"Then, in your opinion, the girl is not a kleptomaniac?"

"In my opinion, she is not."

Cross nodded acceptance. They were in the den of the elegant mansion. Cross sat comfortably in the deep wing chair opposite the millionaire octogenarian. Heinz was withered in body but remained sharp in mind and speech, clear in eye, and—most important, in Cross' opinion—in control of his emotions.

"Mr. Cross?" prodded Heinz, nipping tequila.

"She could have stolen the statu-

ette, I suppose," Cross conceded.

In the employee folder that now lay closed on the coffee table in front of Cross, he had read that Elizabeth White, purported to be single, 29 years of age, experienced in domestic work, was reputed to be of impeccable character. She had come to Albert Heinz two years previously with excellent recommendations. According to those recommendations, she was diligent and confident in her work, quiet in manner and voice, discreet, trustworthy, and unobtrusive in the presence of other persons. While in the employment of Heinz she had remained all of these things—until now.

Heinz said, "You seem to be a cautious man, Mr. Cross."

"I do not leap to conclusions, Mr. Heinz."

"Are you too cautious?"

Cross lifted one eyebrow, stared straight into flint eyes. "Am I, for you?"

Heinz hesitated, then waved off the suggestion. "No, no. I want you to find my Priest."

The Priest, a $100,000 statuette, according to Heinz, was an archaeological piece believed to be one of the oldest examples of Olmec Indian culture of Veracruz, Mexico, dating back to 400 B.C. Twenty-two inches tall and sixteen inches wide, and made of jadeite, it represented an Olmec priest in a kneeling position with a sun child clasped at his thighs. The value of the statuette was said, by Heinz, to be in the showing of two different Olmec stages of culture. Cross was not interested in *why* the Priest was valuable.

"Are not the terms of the contract I have offered satisfactory?" Heinz wanted to know.

"I'm satisfied," said Cross. "But I am not yet condemning Elizabeth White."

"But doesn't it seem rather obvious that—"

"Two things are obvious, Mr. Heinz. The statuette is missing, and your maid did not come to work today."

"And," Albert Heinz added significantly, "the Priest was right over there in the corner, on its pedestal, when I retired last evening, but gone when I entered the den this morning. Elizabeth left the house *after* I retired, Mr. Cross."

Cross again nodded acceptance. "Tell me, Mr. Heinz, why do you have only one domestic? I should think in a mansion—"

"Because one is all I need," interrupted the ancient man, finishing off the tequila. "My granddaughter, who divorced her husband approximately one year ago, and my grandson and his wife live with me. One chauffeurs me when I need chauf-

feuring, the outside work is done by three gardeners who have been with me thirty-five years and reside off the grounds, and I retire at nine-thirty every evening. I have no use for service from nine o'clock at night until around eleven o'clock the next morning. My granddaughter prepares my food, what little I eat."

"Then Elizabeth White never has lived in?"

"She preferred to live elsewhere. It was her single stipulation when I was considering her employment. She did not give a reason for the preference."

"How about absenteeism?"

"Elizabeth failed to come in on two working days in two years. She called in on both occasions, professing illness."

Cross drew a breath. "Mr. Heinz, I am bothered by the fact that you kept such a valuable statuette on a pedestal in an open room."

"Does the owner of a Rolls Royce hide his pleasure in a garage?" the aged man countered. "The grounds and the house are secured. I have a rather elaborate alarm system to guard against entrance by intruders and/or thieves, and the system is functioning properly. It was the first thing I checked when I discovered the Priest was missing this morning."

"Then that leaves one more question," said Cross. "Why did you summon me instead of the police?"

The question did not faze Albert Heinz. "I purchased the Priest from a questionable source, Mr. Cross. I paid $100,000 cash for it, but I may have purchased stolen property. I do not know, nor do I care. I do know that the Priest is genuine and that it came out of Mexico. Recently Mexico and the United States signed an agreement about such pieces, an agreement whereby Mexico can recover stolen articles taken to the United States. Therefore it is of import to me that the police are not made aware of the theft from me. When the Priest has been returned to me, I do not wish to face a new challenge of ownership."

Cross removed the excellent photograph of Elizabeth White from the employee envelope. She had dark-haired good looks, he noted, a small, pixie face. "I'll take the photo," he said, "because she may have changed, or will change, her appearance. However, there are certain lines of bone structure and planes of cheek that cannot be altered without surgery."

Heinz nodded. "Do you need the photograph of the Priest?"

Cross shook his head. "I have it in mind, Mr. Heinz. I think we can assume it will not be altered."

"Let's hope not," breathed the

aged man. "If there are developments, Mr. Cross, I want to be informed at any hour of the day or night. Call me on my unlisted phone, 752-4646."

Cross mentally noted the number.

Heinz accompanied Cross out of the den into a corridor. Far down the corridor, putting on wraps in a foyer, were a man and a woman, both of whom registered mild surprise, then curiosity, over Cross. Albert Heinz introduced his grandson and wife, Roland and Mae Heinz. They were going out for a late dinner. Roland Heinz was in his early forties, tall, balding, sharp in nose, flat in plane of eye, reserved in manner. He clipped off Cross' name upon introduction, and his handshake was weak and damp. Mae Heinz was plumpish at forty but had retained enough lines and curves to let a man know she probably once had a startling figure. Cross thought her attractive and beautifully groomed as she inventoried him boldly from gray-green eyes.

As the couple departed, Albert Heinz kept Cross in the doorway and they watched the couple get into a sparkling automobile and drive off into the mist. "You noticed, I assume," said Heinz, "that I did not reveal the purpose of your visit. My grandson purports to be a writer. He is not. He is a parasite and short-tempered, a combination I find to be trying. I support him adequately because he is family and I love him, but I do not include him in my affairs. When I die—and *if* he continues to remain patient in awaiting my death—he will inherit half of my estate, the other half going to my granddaughter, Cora. He is aware of this settlement and at the moment, therefore, he is guarding my wealth with a jealousy that often blinds him to reason. The point being, Mr. Cross, that if Roland knew of the theft he would become insanely angry and an added worry to me."

"And your granddaughter?" Cross asked.

Heinz ran a finger down the bridge of his nose. "Cora is much more stable. I could tell her of the loss now, but I have not. If it becomes necessary, I will talk to Cora and Roland."

Cross wondered about Mae Heinz as he turned up the collar of his coat against the Wednesday mist and went down the stone steps to his modest sedan. What would be her reaction to the theft? Was she a parasite living on a parasite? Albert Heinz had not said.

Cross got into the car and started the engine. His right ankle ached. It always ached with rain, but he again reminded himself not to com-

plain. Formerly with the CIA, today he was methodically becoming a comfortable and independently wealthy man. His price as an investigator was high. It would remain high. He was qualified.

Cross noted that it took him an hour to drive through the mist from the mansion to the apartment building. Had he been sure of the route, had it been a dry evening, and had he pressed a little, he could have made the trip in forty-five minutes. The two-story building was a cement block structure located in a modest neighborhood near the university campus. Immediately to his right as he entered the building were the mail slots. He counted seven names, four for the second floor, three for the ground floor. With the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wimberly who apparently resided on the ground floor, all of the names implied that the apartments were occupied by single females. Elizabeth White's name was among the four on the second floor.

Cross peered down a lighted corridor into the rear of the building. He could hear the sound of string music intermingled with soft voices. No one appeared. He went up steps to the second floor and put a thumb on the buzzer of Elizabeth White's door. Then he stared idly at the fire-escape light as he waited. He did not expect the girl to open the door. She could be out of the country by now, with the Priest.

"Can I help you?"

The curious voice came from behind Cross. He turned at the approach of a young, bearded, medium-statured man who was barefoot and attired in faded blue jeans and a ruffled yellow shirt. The young man had long hair and wore plain gold-rimmed glasses on a short nose. He looked clean and alert.

"I am Charles Wimberly," he said. "I own this building. I also am a teacher of Romance Languages at the university. Are you looking for Elizabeth? She isn't here."

Cross took the photograph from his coat pocket. "I'm looking for this girl," he said.

Wimberly nodded. "That's Elizabeth. You have the right pad, but she isn't here."

"How do you know?" asked Cross.

"If she were here, she'd be with us in the Commune Room, which is downstairs, at the back of the building. It's our central gathering place, a place to rap, relax, exchange thoughts, feelings. All of my girls enjoy it. Elizabeth spends most of her time in the Commune Room when she is here."

"Couldn't she be ill inside her apartment?"

"It isn't likely," said Wimberly. "If she were ill, we'd know. We're like that. We communicate. We live together and we help each other. Surprisingly, it works, Mr. . . . ?"

"Cross."

A frowning girl appeared on the stairway. She approached Cross and Wimberly. Cross thought the girl very plain but pretty in beads and spangles and a wide headband that held back flowing dark hair.

"My wife, Karen," said Wimberly. "A Mr. Cross, honey," he said to the girl. "Mr. Cross is looking for Elizabeth."

The pretty girl continued to frown. "I think, Mr. Cross," she said, "that you are the first person ever to call on Elizabeth here."

"Why? Am I off limits?"

"Not at all," put in Wimberly. "Guests of the girls are welcome. It's just that Elizabeth never has had a guest call on her. Most of her hours are consumed by her work. She is a domestic for—"

"Albert Heinz," Cross interrupted, nodding.

Wimberly fingered the gold-rimmed glasses. "And are you also employed by Mr. Heinz?"

"At the moment, yes. Elizabeth failed to appear at Mr. Heinz' residence today and, naturally, Mr. Heinz is a bit disturbed, especially when she did not telephone either. Have you seen Elizabeth today?"

Collectively, the Wimberlys shook their heads. "She joined us in the Commune Room after she came home from work last night," Charles Wimberly said. "She left us around one o'clock this morning."

"Did she leave the building too?"

"I assume she came up here."

"Did you see her when she came in from work last night?"

"No. Why?"

"She might have been carrying a rather bulky package."

"We didn't see her until she came into the Commune Room. That was around ten-fifteen, perhaps ten-thirty."

"Could Elizabeth have moved out today?"

"Not without somebody in the building seeing her."

"Then I'd like to see inside her apartment, Mr. Wimberly."

Wimberly hesitated, frowning. He fingered the glasses again. "You're worried, aren't you, Mr. Cross? Are you a policeman?"

"I am a confidential investigator. Will you open the apartment for me?"

"Turn the doorknob, Mr. Cross. I had all of the locks removed when I purchased the building. There's already too much hiding in the world."

The first thing that hit Cross was the smell of death. Then he saw the

blood and the body on the livingroom floor. The girl wore a granny nightgown. She had been stabbed several times, through the gown. Her blood had soaked into and dried on the floor.

Karen Wimberly cried openly and silently. Huge tears flowed down her cheeks. She looked mesmerized. Charles Wimberly was pale in shock, his lips and his fingers working.

Cross closed the door and took in the room. Faded blue draperies covered two walls. The other two walls had been painted alternating stripes of dull yellow, blue and green. The single picture was a life-size, unframed, black-and-white photograph of a nude Elizabeth White. The photograph had been slashed three times.

There was no furniture. Giant pillows and tiny Indian rugs had been sprinkled haphazardly on the floor. Two ceiling lamps provided dim illumination. There was a camper's refrigerator and a two-burner gas plate in a far corner. Cross found three maid's uniforms and a simple black coat in the livingroom closet. On the closet shelf and the floor were a few kitchen utensils and a skimpy assortment of packaged foods. The bedroom contained a set of open shelves and two stacked mattresses. Undergarments had been folded neatly and placed on the shelves. Two Indian blankets and a top sheet had been kicked down to the foot end of the mattresses. There was a telephone and a single floor lamp beside the mattresses. The closet was jammed with a vast assortment of today's mod clothing.

Cross sighed. Dual personalities always troubled him. He searched for a bloodied weapon and Albert Heinz' statuette. He found neither. He sat on the edge of the stacked mattresses and called the Detective Division at police headquarters.

When the police arrived, a Sergeant McAndrews assumed command. About forty-five, husky, neatly groomed and handsome, with gray sideburns and black hair, he told one of his men to take Karen Wimberly downstairs and to find some coffee or tea for her. Then he faced Cross, and Cross—without mentioning the statuette—explained who he was and why he had come to the apartment.

McAndrews gave Cross a quizzical look. "The girl misses one day's work without calling in and Albert Heinz employs an investigator?"

Cross wanted to throw in the statuette. The police should be told about the Priest, but it was Heinz' place to do the telling.

Cross said, "Albert Heinz is a very wealthy man, Sergeant. He can afford me for the least of rea-

sons—or for no reason at all."

It was obvious McAndrews was not satisfied. He said, "I see." Then he turned and waved a hand across the body of Elizabeth White. "Okay, how about this? You got any ideas?"

Cross lifted his shoulders. "I'd say the killer was, or went, berserk. I'd say she has been dead several hours. Off the top of my head, I'd say she was killed sometime early this morning."

"Why?" McAndrews asked bluntly.

"It may be that, other than her killer, Mr. Wimberly and his wife and possibly some others who reside here were the last persons to see Elizabeth White alive."

"No one in the building saw the girl today?" McAndrews asked.

"I can't vouch for the others, of course," said Wimberly, "but neither my wife nor I saw her."

"How about after she left this . . . this Commune Room—is that what you call it?—early this morning? You didn't hear any screams or—"

"We heard nothing out of the ordinary last night or today, Sergeant," Wimberly said firmly.

"Elizabeth White could have been totally unsuspecting," Cross put in. "I'd say she was acquainted with whoever came to her door. She allowed this person to enter without qualms. Any noise she might have made was stifled by a hand or a pillow, anything."

"I guess it's entirely possible for someone to walk in and out of the building without being seen by at least one of the other residents," McAndrews said.

"In the early hours of a day it is possible," Wimberly admitted.

"And there's a fire escape just down the corridor a few feet, Sergeant," said Cross.

"Either of you think this might be a sex thing?" McAndrews asked.

Cross shrugged, but Wimberly said, "Elizabeth was pregnant, Sergeant. About four months, I believe."

"Was she married?" McAndrews asked sharply.

"No."

"Okay, so who is the boyfriend?"

"I don't know of any," said Wimberly. "If there were one Elizabeth never said, nor was she worried about the pregnancy. She told us about her condition about a month ago."

"Us?"

"Those who reside here."

"You've got quite a little clique, haven't you, Wimberly?"

"We communicate. We help one another."

"And you're the only male in the building, right?"

Wimberly fingered the gold-

rimmed glasses. "I couldn't have been responsible, Sergeant. I can give you the names of various specialists in the city with whom you can check."

"All right," McAndrews said with a wave of his hand.

His remaining questions were routine and Cross found the answers unimportant to himself. He was becoming impatient. He had news to relay to Albert Heinz, alert the aged collector to the invasion by the police that had to come within hours, allow Heinz time to assemble his story of the missing Priest.

Cross finally was released on his own recognizance. He went downstairs with Wimberly. They were alone and Cross said quickly, "Wimberly, I hope you didn't lie to the sergeant. I hope you don't know the identity of the father of Elizabeth's baby."

"I don't," he said simply. "She never said."

"And in all the time Elizabeth White lived here, you never saw a male visit her?"

"I never in my life have seen Elizabeth with a male. I have never heard her speak of a male friend."

"Well, she obviously did not live in a totally female world."

"Obviously, yes."

"Did Elizabeth own and drive a car?"

The abrupt switch in question made Wimberly finger his glasses. "There is a compact car," he said, "but it is in a garage downtown. It has been since last Saturday. Elizabeth has been traveling by cab."

Cross was disappointed. He had thought he might find a statuette secreted in an automobile.

Using the unlisted number, he telephoned Albert Heinz from his apartment, awakening the man. He briefly summarized the death of Elizabeth White and then he said, "So it would seem that you can expect police visitors."

"The hell with the police," said Albert Heinz with surprising determination. "They are not to know about my Priest. Do you understand, Mr. Cross?"

"But if the Priest is relevant to their investigation?"

"Certainly it's relevant. It's obvious the girl had an accomplice, someone who was awaiting her in her apartment and killed her when she arrived with—"

"She wasn't killed until three to four hours after she returned to her apartment," Cross pointed out.

"All right. So her accomplice went to her place early this morning, killed her, and took my Priest."

"Did you know that Elizabeth White was pregnant?"

"I did not."

"Did you ever hear her speak of

any male friends at any time?"

"Never. Cross, could she have pawned the Priest?"

"When?"

"Well . . ."

"I think we can assume she's been dead all of today, and it's at least a forty-five minute trip from your house to her building. Assuming that she left your house around nine o'clock last night, she did not have time to go to a pawnshop on her way home last night, even if she could have found one open. She was with other people shortly after ten."

"Check the shops anyway, Cross. Her accomplice could have gone to one today."

"Mr. Heinz, I'm not convinced Elizabeth White stole your statuette."

"Wh-at?"

"You have to tell the police about the missing Priest."

"I do not!"

Albert Heinz hung up on Cross. Cross, briefly angry, drank a whiskey in hot water and retired.

He arrived at the Heinz mansion at 11:30 Thursday morning and was received by Heinz in the den. Lunch was served in the den by Heinz' granddaughter, a woman of thirty-five named Cora Dodd, who was neither attractive nor unattractive; vaguely rawboned, she had some of her brother's features, particularly the sharp nose and the flat plane of eyes. She was friendly and courteous to Cross. If she were curious, she did not show it. She disappeared quickly and allowed Heinz and Cross to confer alone. Heinz remained firm against telling the police about the missing Priest. A police sergeant named McAndrews had phoned; he was due at the house at 12:30.

"McAndrews is faced with murder, Mr. Heinz," Cross said. "And it's quite likely he can turn up your statuette much quicker than—"

"I want *you* to find it, Mr. Cross," Heinz interjected. "I have hired you to find it. And now, if you will excuse me?"

"I'm dismissed?"

"Not at all. I'm going to wash my hands."

Cora Dodd appeared relaxed when she reentered the den. She smiled at Cross. "Grandfather can be a blunt man," she said. "I suppose some of that bluntness comes with age."

"And you've been eavesdropping," said Cross.

She shrugged. "I always eavesdrop on Grandfather, but I never *interfere*. He is an intelligent, lovable man, Mr. Cross, but someday his life will end. I expect it to be rather abruptly. Grandfather is that kind. When it happens, I will be prepared to pick up the reins. It's

what he wants. He knows I eavesdrop. He'd be disappointed if I did not. It's a silent communication we have between ourselves. Do your best to find his beloved Priest for him, please?"

"Is your brother also as aware as you?"

Cora Dodd laughed softly. Cross thought it a pleasant sound. "Roland and Mae were sailing all day yesterday," she said. "They left the house around six-thirty in the morning and did not return until the weather turned foul around five last evening. They went out to dinner last night, as you know. It is only noon, too early for them to have left their beds today. Besides, Roland isn't *interested* in Grandfather, he's merely *waiting*. Do you understand?"

"And do you think Elizabeth White was a thief?"

Cora Dodd frowned slightly. "Someone *could* have entered the house in the night."

"In spite of your grandfather's alarm system, of which he seems to be rather proud."

"In spite," she admitted.

"And what do you think your grandfather should tell the police?"

"Elizabeth's death and the theft could be totally unrelated," she said, the frown deepening. "If they are, I see no reason for Grandfather to mention his loss. On the other hand . . ." She let the words hang, and then she brightened suddenly. "But that's Grandfather's decision. He still isn't dead."

"Mrs. Dodd," he asked out of nowhere, "did you and your husband live here while you were married?"

"Certainly," she said, looking vaguely surprised.

"What broke up the marriage? This house? Your grandfather?"

Cora Dodd lifted her chin. "I knew you had to be sharp, Mr. Cross, or Grandfather never would have considered you." Then she shook her head and laughed. "But don't bother yourself with Alex. Alex is not a vindictive man. Alex merely is disorganized, not sure of where he is going, and—well, frankly—doesn't really care if he gets there. A very easygoing, happy man, I doubt if he has ever held a grudge in his life. We simply did not get along as man and wife, so we divorced. We got along beautifully before our marriage and we have recaptured that relationship since our divorce. Alex did not steal Grandfather's Priest. Alex is content with his cameras."

"Cameras?" Cross asked, lifting a brow.

"Alex is a free-lance photographer. He has talent. He could be a professional; more than a professional. He could be an artist—but he doesn't want to be either a tied-

down professional or an artist."

Detective Sergeant McAndrews was prompt in his arrival at the mansion. He did not seem surprised to find Cross present, but he concentrated on firing his questions at Albert Heinz. McAndrews had checked out Cross and he was not accepting Heinz' employment of Cross merely because a maid failed to show up at work one day, but Albert Heinz hung tight; he was wealthy enough to afford an investigator for any reason, if he wanted one. He was sorry Elizabeth White had been the victim of a killer, he would provide Sergeant McAndrews with everything he knew about Elizabeth White, he would even *allow* Mr. Cross to assist Sergeant McAndrews if the sergeant wanted that assistance, but the sergeant also had to accept a simple fact: Cross had been retained to find out why a girl had not appeared for work.

In that moment, Roland and Mae Heinz burst into the den. "Grandfather!" breathed Roland. "Elizabeth! We just heard on a radio newscast! Murdered in a hippie conclave!"

McAndrews said dryly, "The *conclave* is an apartment building near the university. One of the professors at the university owns the building. Most of the residents are students. The building *isn't* a conclave and the residents are not *hippies* in the sense I believe you mean, Mister. . . ?"

Albert Heinz made the introductions, and then he said, "Away from here, Sergeant, Elizabeth lived her own life. Obviously, it did not conform to ours."

"She was pregnant," McAndrews said bluntly.

Albert Heinz sat like stone. Cora Dodd lit a cigarette. Roland and Mae Heinz gaped at each other.

McAndrews said, "Does anyone know who she might have been dating?"

No one had an inkling. "Why not ask some of those people where she lived?" Roland Heinz threw out. "*Our* association with the girl ended at the front door, naturally."

"You know nothing of Elizabeth White's life outside of this house? Is that what you are telling me?" pressed McAndrews.

"Sergeant," said Roland Heinz, "I don't think any of us even knew where Elizabeth lived."

Cross left his chair.

"Where are you going?" McAndrews snapped.

"Have you more questions for me?" Cross asked politely. "If not, I have another engagement."

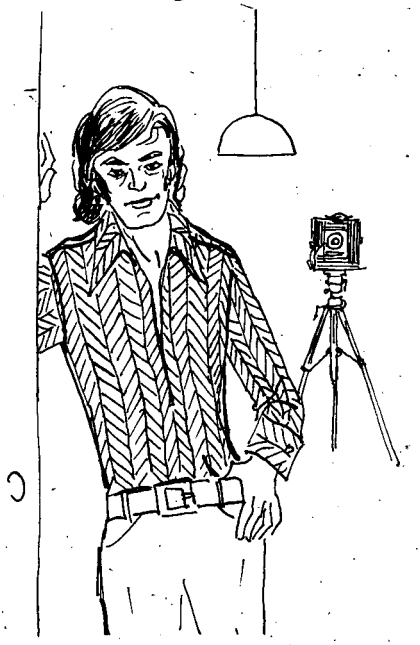
Cora Dodd escorted Cross to the front door. She smiled. "Tell Alex hello for me," she said.

Cross thought Alex Dodd would

be attractive to women—any woman. He was tanned, athletic in construction, had chiseled features, smiling dark eyes, a full head of black hair and a good set of white teeth. He lived in a combination studio-apartment that was elegant in its black-and-white simplicity.

"I hate color," he explained. Then, with Cross' conveyance of Cora Dodd's salutation, the young man grinned and told the vibrant girl who stood placidly in the nude across the room from his camera to find wine and placate herself. The girl caught up a black robe and closed a door behind her.

Alex Dodd grinned. "I've been back in town two hours and already I'm at work. I've been in Paris for a couple of weeks, loafing. But it's good to be home. Incidentally, her name is Sue. Sue is a natural. Cora never understood naturals, and I couldn't buy her put-ons. Cora isn't a put-on, but all of her friends are. How is she?"



"She looks fine."

"And you are here because?"

"Of a girl named Elizabeth White."

Alex sobered. "What a helluva thing to happen. I find it difficult to believe. It was the first thing I heard on the radio coming in from the airport this noon. Liz was a good girl, Mr. Cross—whoever you are. A natural."

"Which is why you photographed her?"

Alex Dodd looked surprised. "Where did you see my work of her?"

"On her livingroom wall."

Alex Dodd seemed to contemplate that for a moment, and then he nodded. "I told you she was a natural."

"Tell me, too, you didn't know it was hanging there."

"I will. I didn't know it was hanging there. I don't even know where Liz lives—lived."

"She was about four months pregnant, Alex."

"Good for Liz."

"But her boyfriend remains a ghost."

"Hey, all of a sudden I've got a hunch you're a cop."

"*You* photographed her in the nude, Alex."

"*Are* you a cop?"

"No."

"Then I think I need one. Point me to the nearest police station."

"You can call in and volunteer after I leave. What was the relationship between you and Elizabeth White?"

"I liked her."

"More."

"She liked me. That's as far as it went. Then one day I was handed walking papers by Albert Heinz. Not that I gave a razz. I didn't like living with him anyway. It was just a question of my wife coming with me. She chose not to, so I departed. About a month later, Liz showed up here one Saturday afternoon. She surprised me. I had no idea she even knew where I had decided to set up camp. But there she was on my threshold. We had a very pleasant afternoon, doing nothing, just talking, and then she asked me to take her photograph in the nude. I did. That's all there was to it, I swear, Mr. Cross. Dammit, who are you, man?"

"I'm employed by Albert Heinz. Something has been stolen from his house."

"From his collection, you mean?"

"I didn't say that."

"Wow! But just where the hell does . . . Aw, no, that old egocentric isn't thinking that Liz stole from him!"

"It's the way it may shape, Alex."

"Bull! What happened to Redfield? Did he die and I missed it while I was in Paris?"

"Redfield?"

"Peter Redfield, the radio and television man. He's got a couple of stations here in the city and God only knows how many around the country. And he's a collector, like Albert. They're always competing. I wouldn't want to be a third party attempting to muscle in on any of their potential buys—they'd get together like bourbon and water and kill the guy—but eye to eye, they'd steal each other blind!"

"Sue?" Cross called out.

She opened the closed door, still naked.

"Alex is ready to go back to work," Cross said.

Peter Redfield lived on the opposite side of the city. Redfield was a rotund, bald, crisp man who looked sixty and probably was seventy. He said, "I don't know you, Mr. Cross. I've never heard of you. You are inside because you mentioned Albert Heinz. What are you selling?"

"Are you in the market for a statuette called the Priest, Mr. Red-

field?" Cross asked him pointedly.

Redfield reached for a telephone.

"Who are you calling?" Cross said quickly.

"The police."

"The Priest has been stolen from Mr. Heinz. I have been employed by him to find it. I thought you might have it."

Redfield again reached out to the telephone, but he did not lift the receiver. "What do you know about archaeological pieces, Mr. Cross?"

"Nothing."

"Albert must be failing. I'll take care of this matter. I'll find the Priest. You are dismissed, Mr. Cross."

Cross drove toward his apartment, torn between discussing the missing Priest with McAndrews and respecting the confidence between himself and Albert Heinz. Waiting for him in a car in front of his building was Mae Heinz. She motioned him into the front seat beside her and she was blunt. "I am out of bounds, I know," she said, "but this is important to me. Why has Albert retained you? To dig into my past? Is that why he sent you to Elizabeth White? Is he preparing to throw me out of the house, much as he did Alex Dodd?"

"This must be your day for feeling guilty, Mrs. Heinz," Cross said carefully.

"I've had my affairs," she said. "I like young men. But those affairs are behind me now. I am determined to live with my husband. I have learned to live in wealth, and I intend to continue. I—"

"I am not interested in you or your affairs, Mrs. Heinz," Cross interrupted.

She stared at him briefly, then she almost smiled and seemed to relax. "I think you've just taken a tremendous weight from my shoulders, Mr. Cross. I had thought . . . Well, once several months ago there were some indiscreet telephone calls made to and from the house and I'm sure Elizabeth was aware . . . But never mind. Why go into all of that now?"

"Yes, why?" Cross said, vacating the car seat.

Mae Heinz leaned toward him. Her smile was genuine. "Buy me a drink?"

"I'm no longer a young man, Mrs. Heinz," Cross said with a poker face.

His phone was ringing when he entered his apartment, but he was too late to catch the caller. He got a can of beer from the refrigerator and sat in the comfortable armchair. He kicked off his shoes, put his head back and closed his eyes.

If Elizabeth White had stolen the Priest, where was it? It seemed almost a certainty she had not had time to pawn or sell it. Had she had

an accomplice, someone who came to her apartment in the early morning hours, killed her and departed with the statuette? And would Elizabeth and/or her accomplice have known the true value of the Priest? Would they have known where to market it? The statuette was not an easily marketed item.

Perhaps Peter Redfield had lured her into stealing for him. But was Redfield a killer? Or there was Charles Wimberly, of course; a landlord, a teacher of Romance Languages—and a friend. Wimberly, with his teaching, probably was acquainted with the history of Mexico and its culture. He might well know the true value of the Priest. Had Elizabeth stolen and Wimberly killed?

On the other hand, if the theft and the death were unrelated—other than by coincidence—there were those who lived in the mansion. Roland Heinz was greedy and a parasite, Mae Heinz was determined to live in luxury, and Cora Dodd could be presenting a false front. Cora Dodd could be prepared to break out of the mansion and from under the magnetic fingers of her grandfather. All would be aware of the Priest, all could know its true value, all—eavesdropping on Albert Heinz through the years—could have knowledge of markets, even though a particular market might be in some far corner of the world.

Also, of course, there was Alex Dodd who had been rejected, had lived in the mansion at one time, and had photographed a nude Elizabeth White. Had Dodd talked Elizabeth into stealing for him? Had Dodd and Elizabeth been indulging in an affair, first at the mansion and later in his studio?

Cross made a decision in his sleep that night. When he awoke Friday morning, he was determined Detective Sergeant McAndrews was to know about the Priest. He drove to the mansion to confront Albert Heinz and was surprised to find Peter Redfield and Heinz huddled in the den. Heinz was miffed.

"Why did you go to this man?" he asked Cross, snapping the words and thumbing Redfield. "Don't you respect confidence?"

"I told you, Albert," Redfield put in with a heavy sigh, "Mr. Cross was trying to find the statuette. He was attempting to do exactly what you are paying him to do. And I'll appreciate your not raising your voice again. I've spent the entire night calling the world markets. I'm fatigued, and I do not like shrilling when I am fatigued. Why don't you dismiss Mr. Cross? We'll find the Priest. You should have come to me in the first place."

"Grandfather?" Roland Heinz

entered the den, carrying a bulky package. "This just came in the mail," he said, putting the package on the massive coffee table.

To Cross, the Priest did not look as if its value would be more than twenty dollars in any antique shop. The package had been mailed from a city substation on Thursday afternoon.

"I'll drive over to the station," said Cross. "Perhaps a clerk will remember who mailed—"

"You are dismissed, Mr. Cross," said Albert Heinz without looking up, as he traced his fingers lovingly over the statuette. "I have no further need for you. I will put a check in the mail."

"But who stole the Priest, Mr. Heinz? Who returned it? And why?"

"It has been returned, that's all that is important."

"Elizabeth White could not have mailed it yesterday afternoon."

"Please, Mr. Cross! Depart!"

"Yes, Mr. Cross," Roland Heinz put in suddenly. "Go. Grandfather has dismissed you. The death of Elizabeth White is no longer our concern. It is unimportant to Grandfather, therefore it is unimportant to anyone in this house."

"Elizabeth White was a human being," Cross said flatly.

"And a . . . tart," Roland Heinz said stiffly. "A girl who would flagrantly expose herself to be photographed and then display herself on a wall, a girl who—"

"And just how do you know about that photograph?" Cross broke in sharply.

Silence hung in the room.

"Yesterday," Cross pressed, "I believe you made the statement that no one in this house knew where Elizabeth White lived."

Roland Heinz suddenly shuffled. His fingers worked. He looked as if he might bolt.

"You were the father of her baby," Cross accused, pressing. He felt he had found leverage. He felt exhilarated.

"Alex," Roland Heinz breathed. "Alex Dodd and Elizabeth—"

"Alex just returned from Paris yesterday noon. I imagine he can prove he was still there Wednesday morning, the morning Elizabeth was killed," Cross said, his thoughts clicking. "Elizabeth became pregnant and you became frightened, Mr. Heinz. Elizabeth could ruin things here for you. You could be put out of the house, you could lose your wife. So you killed her to end the threats. You went to her in the early hours of Wednesday morning, you went up the fire escape, and she allowed you to enter her apartment because of your association. You killed her and you slashed the photograph. That photograph must

have worked on you, Mr. Heinz.

"Then you returned here and somewhere along the line you envisioned the theft of the Priest. You expected the theft and the death to be linked. An accomplice could have killed Elizabeth. So you took the Priest, secreted it. Perhaps, at one stage, you might even have been harboring an idea about keeping the Priest, selling it in future years. You knew the value. But yesterday you did not like the way my investigation of the theft was going. I haven't been sold on the theory that the theft and the death were related. So you decided to get me out of the picture by returning the Priest. You anticipated your grandfather's reaction once he had his statuette in hand again. He would dismiss me. He would—"

"That's all theory!" Roland Heinz shrilled. "You have nothing!"

Silence again descended on the room. Finally Albert Heinz said, "Roland?" in a voice that cracked. He held a telephone receiver in his hand. He extended it to his grandson, his aged face wrinkled in dejection and grief. "Get yourself a good defense attorney," he said, "and then telephone Detective McAndrews."

Roland Heinz sagged. "There was a time I loved her, Grandfather," he whimpered. "Then one night I went up to her apartment and saw that horrible photograph on her wall. I was shocked. I envisioned her with Alex. I could not rid myself of the image. It drove me wild. And finally I made up my mind that if I couldn't have her, Alex wasn't going to have her either . . ."

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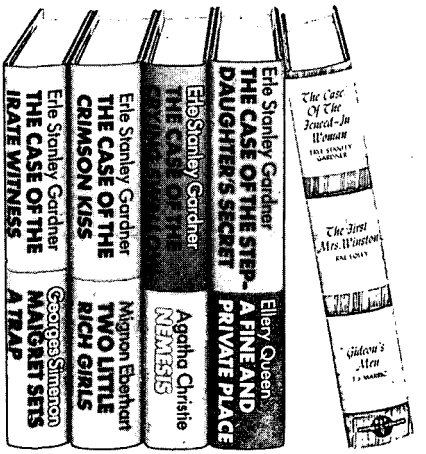

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