ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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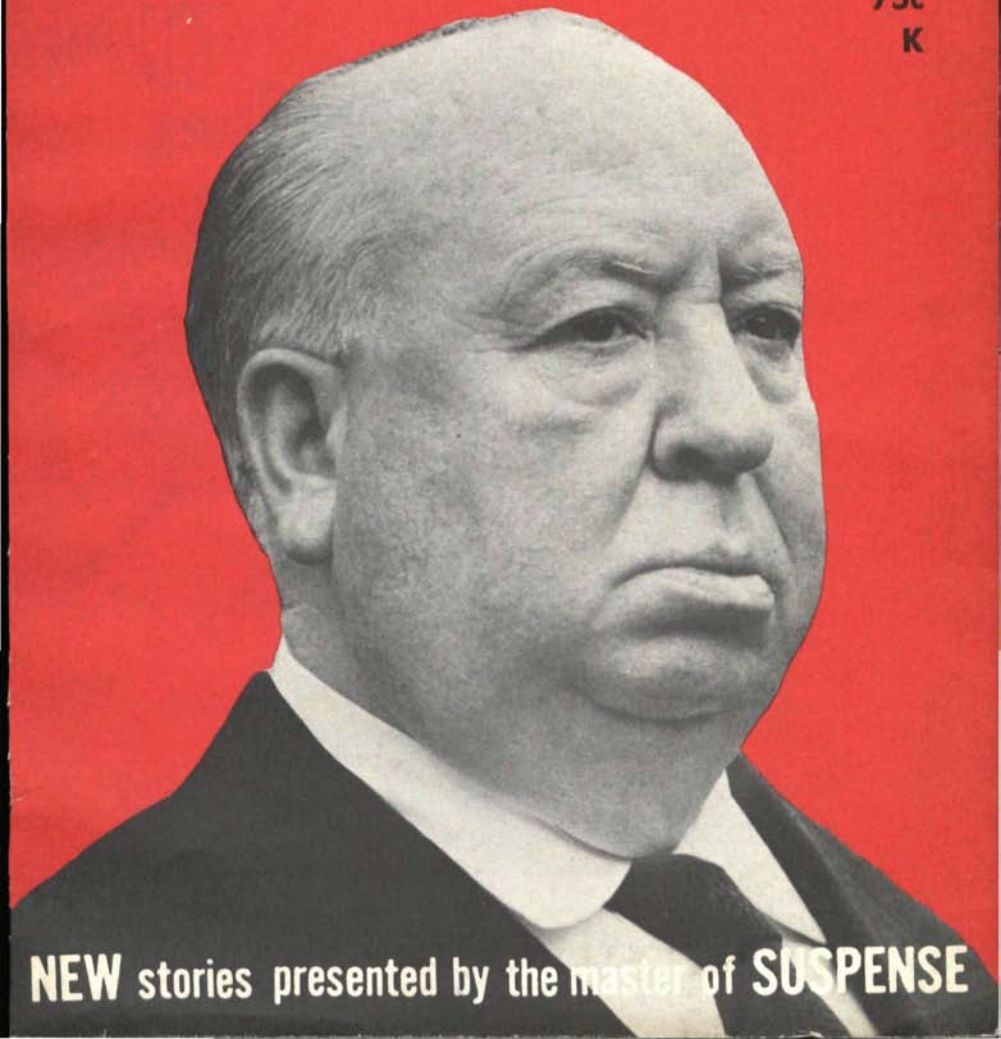
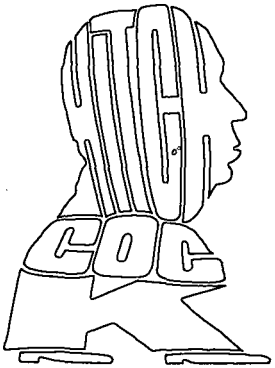


NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE



May 1973

Dear Reader:

Since everyone had a mother and a father, we will make a rather timely bow to that segment of our society this month and let them compare their own progeny with those of the authors who grace these pages. The chances are excellent that few readers' offspring are able to match the miscreants depicted herein.

For instance, how many parents may claim a kidnapper for a daughter, or a strangler for a son? I am reasonably sure the list is not long.

Of course, no one is perfect, and so along with the infamous we also present a few shining examples of the more widely accepted methods of child-rearing. From *A Message from Andrea* by Robert Colby to *The Graft Is Green* by novelettist Harold Q. Masur, you may find a few random characters to gladden any proper parental heart. Never let it be said that I am biased in favor of evil (but isn't it stimulating).

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 18, NO. 5 MAY 1973

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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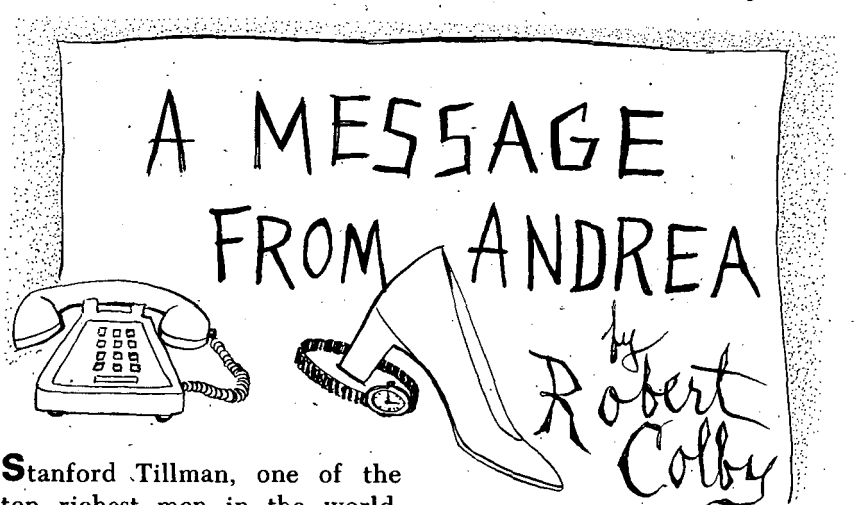
NOVELETTE

SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 18, No. 5, May 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.

Close association, experience dictates, has a propensity for wielding immeasurable influence for good—or for evil.



Stanford Tillman, one of the ten richest men in the world, numbered among his holdings the Tillman Land Development Company, Tillman Real Estate, Tillman Mining, Tillman Oil, and a controlling interest in the Tricontinental All Risk Insurance Company.

Tillman, a lean, athletic forty-two, lived in Bel Air, in a rambling house surrounded by grand old trees amid casual groupings of shrubs and flowers. There were three servants: a maid and a cook who commuted daily, and a chauffeur, Fred Hammond, who lived in quarters above the garage.

Although his place was not nearly so pretentious as some in the neighborhood, Tillman had no need for a mansion, for only he and his twenty-eight year old wife, Andrea, lived there. They had been married just over a year and were still in the honeymoon stage. Stanford was not simply in love with Andrea; she was a more obsessive passion than his whole commercial empire, and Andrea worshiped him.

That was the way it was on a Monday evening in October, as Tillman prepared to leave for Sacramento. There, in concert with

other brass who controlled the insurance companies dominating California, he was to meet with the governor to discuss a proposed bill for mandatory auto insurance.

It was dusk. The dark-blue limousine had been brought around to the front of the house and Hammond was loading a suitcase into the trunk. Stanford Tillman, carrying a portfolio containing pertinent insurance statistics for the meeting, appeared in the doorway with Andrea. She was a beautiful woman, with a superbly proportioned figure and her proud, queenly stance seemed effortless, almost casual.

Tillman's strong, youthful features were sun-bronzed and unlined. He did not appear to be incongruously matched with Andrea, despite a difference of fourteen years in their ages.

With an arm about her waist, he said, "Sure you wouldn't like to come along with me, Andrea dear? Three days without you is going to be absolute torture."

"Oh, I know, I know." She frowned unhappily. "But none of the other wives are going and I'd be at loose ends. Still, I might fly up Wednesday afternoon and then we could have one night and come back together Thursday."

"A fine idea! Is that a promise?" he pleaded.

"Mmm." She nodded. "I do solemnly swear."

"Then we'll plan something special for Wednesday night. Ride with me to the airport and we'll discuss it on the way."

"I'd love to, darling, but there wouldn't be time. I'm due at the Brunswicks for dinner and I haven't begun to get ready."

"Well, I'm glad you'll be staying with Janis and Chet. You'd be depressed rattling around the house alone, and I'd worry." He glanced at his watch. "See you Wednesday, then, sweetheart. Meantime, I'll phone you at the Brunswicks—incessantly."

She turned and lifted her face toward him and he kissed her.

"I'll miss you terribly," she murmured. "I'm a lost child without you."

"Hey, it's only Sacramento, not the far side of the moon, baby," he said. "But don't forget, I love you, honey." He kissed her once more, quickly, then entered the limousine.

Waving, Andrea watched the taillights coast around the curve of the drive, winking once brightly at the road beyond the gate, turning right, then gone.

She went upstairs to their bedroom and began to undress for her bath. Jan Brunswick was an old chum and her best friend so An-

drea was looking forward to a couple of days with her (despite Chet, who was jolly but shallow), and the two thundering Brunswick kids, who would be mostly in school. The round trip to the airport should take Fred no more than an hour and a half, by which time she ought to be dressed and waiting for him to drive her to the Brunswick house in Pacific Palisades.

Andrea had stepped from the bath and was drying herself when she heard a muted thump, as of a door closing. Wilma, the maid, had left earlier, while Debby, the cook, had remained to fix dinner for Stan. No doubt that was Debby making her exit from the kitchen, though she should have been gone by now. Her husband, an itinerant gardener, called for her nightly in his truck.

Andrea listened for the starter whine of the truck but heard nothing, and was nudged by a soft finger of alarm. Since Stan was, if anything, overprotective, she was rarely left alone in the house. Yet it was equally rare for Stan to take any sort of trip without her, and this was just an accident of circumstance.

By her tiny, jeweled wristwatch, it would be at least another hour before Fred returned with the limousine. Her clothes were laid out on the bed and she dressed quickly, not really frightened, but a bit unnerved.

She went to the head of the stairs and peered down. A couple of lamps in the livingroom cast a pale glow into the hallway. Cocking her head, she listened. There was nothing but the dignified hush of twilight, the reward to those who can purchase the deep privacy of space and isolation. She descended the stairs and switched on more lamps to cheer the dusky livingroom.

There! That was much better. It was silly to be edgy just because she was left alone for a short time. She was spoiled by too much attention, Andrea reasoned. She crossed to the dining room, entered the kitchen. As expected, it was dark. Though she didn't hear the gardener's truck starting and grinding off, it must have been Debby leaving for the night.

With a shrug, Andrea lighted the kitchen and went to see if the back door had been securely locked.

Fred Hammond braked the limousine before the house, and rang the door chime to signal Mrs. Tillman that he had returned. Then he waited behind the wheel, smoking a cigarette. Hammond, gray and craggy-faced and almost

sixty, was a tall, solid chunk of a man, nearly as trim and muscular as he had been at forty, when he was one of the private security cops who made the nightly rounds of the Bel Air estates in a patrol car.

He had been Stanford Tillman's chauffeur for a good many years and had no desire to be anything else. Tillman paid him handsomely and treated him more like a friend than an employee. There was a strong, unspoken bond between them. When Tillman married Andrea, he had told Hammond that henceforth his most important duty would be to keep watch over Mrs. Tillman in his absence, guarding her from the least harm or disturbance. Hammond was pleased to be trusted with such an assignment, for he had discovered at once that Andrea Tillman was a warm, undemanding person who seemed basically unaffected by two of the world's most generous gifts, wealth and beauty.

After a few minutes, when Andrea did not appear, Hammond went around to the back door. He had a ring of keys in his hand and was preparing to unlock the door when he saw that it was ajar. Debby must still be around, he figured, and he was going to give her all kinds of hell for being so careless; but then, when he stepped in and tried to close the door, he found that it would not latch.

Bending for a closer look, he understood. The door had been jimmied! The implication caused him to stand in petrified shock for a moment, listening in a vacuum so intense that he could catch the faint sighing of the wind, the whispery whine of the refrigerator.

He bolted through the lighted kitchen and rushed to the foot of the stairs. After shouting her name, he went up to Mrs. Tillman's bedroom. Her door was open, the lights blazing. Everything seemed in good order, so he crossed to the bathroom, glanced at the sunken tub, still damp, and into the empty stall shower. Her purse stood open on the vanity and he poked a finger inside. The contents included a cosmetic bag, an expensive lighter, and a wallet. The wallet was stuffed with bills.

He made a quick search of the other bedrooms, then went below, where he saw that in the livingroom a lamp and a table had been overturned. On the carpet, just beyond, was one of Andrea's shoes and her jeweled wristwatch, its platinum band twisted when the watch was wrenched off in the struggle.

The study was empty, but the door had been smashed in. This indicated, Hammond concluded, that Andrea had fled to the study where she had locked herself in, perhaps hoping to escape by a window, or gain enough time to use the phone.

In any case, it all became clear when he reached the front door. A note had been attached to the inside of the door by means of a thumbtack. Printed on a piece of cheap yellow paper in severe block letters that must have been fashioned with a ruler, the note read:

Stanford Tillman:

We are holding your wife for a ransom of *one million dollars*. She has not been harmed but we will return her to you in sections if you do not obey the following instructions:

1. Do not inform the police or the FBI. Keep this matter secret from *all* persons, trust no one!

2. You have *one* day to gather the money. The bills must be *old* and *unmarked*, in denominations of fifty and one hundred dollars. Place the money in a suitcase and keep it in your house, ready for delivery on Tuesday evening.

3. Further orders will come to you by phone after six p.m. tomorrow. At this time your wife will be allowed to speak to you briefly.

Don't try to play cops and robbers with us, or she will be dead. One million or your wife—take your choice!

Hammond read the ransom note without touching the paper. Using his handkerchief, he removed the note and folded it into a pocket of his uniform jacket. He went back to the study, sat behind the desk and pondered what to do next. Mr. Tillman had been flown to Sacramento in his own jet. It was a short hop in a fast plane, yet there had not been time for him to reach the hotel. Nevertheless, Hammond placed a call, leaving an urgent message for Tillman to phone home immediately upon his arrival.

He phoned Mrs. Brunswick and told her that at the very last second Mrs. Tillman had decided to fly to Sacramento with her husband. She had asked Hammond to convey her regrets and to apologize for her inability to call in person.

This done, Hammond sat waiting. In a little over thirty minutes Tillman rang, his usually calm voice now edged with tension.

"What's the trouble, Fred? Is

Mrs. Tillman all right, or why—"

"Well, I—I believe so, but—"

"You *believe* so? What does that mean, Fred?"

"I can't possibly tell you on the phone, Mr. Tillman. Not if there's any chance we could be overheard."

"I see." His voice sank.

"You'd better come home, sir. It's a big problem, real trouble."

"Fred, you're scaring hell out of me, you know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. But try to keep cool, sir. It's something we can work out if you'll hurry back."

"Is there some way you can help until I arrive?"

"No, sir. I can do nothing further. There are decisions to be made, and there's a great deal of money involved. But I would suggest that you cover your trail with some logical reason for leaving, one that won't arouse suspicions."

"Yes, I understand. In fact, I think I've got the whole picture. Are you alone there?"

"Yes."

"And Mrs. Tillman has been—detained?"

"Yes, that's right. Exactly. I called the Brunswicks, said she went with you."

"Good. Then drive to the airport and wait for me, Fred."

Seated in the study with Fred Hammond, Tillman had placed the ransom note before him on the desk, Andrea's tangled watch resting beside it. When he saw the watch and the lone shoe, his face crumpled, but then he quickly composed himself.

"I'm not going to touch this note with my bare hands," he said, "but I don't think there's any chance that a single print will be found on it."

Nodding, Hammond nervously fingered his uniform cap. "Does that mean you intend to call the police?"

"No, no!" Tillman shook his head, lighted a cigarette. "I don't care a damn about the money. I'm going to pay the ransom. It's only important to save Mrs. Tillman. Do you agree? I want your honest opinion, Fred."

"I wouldn't give you my opinion," said the chauffeur. "It might influence you to make the wrong move. Then I'd never forgive myself."

"Unless there's a change in the situation, my decision is final, Fred. I just want you to tell me what you think."

"In your place, I'd do the same thing, Mr. Tillman. But I might hedge my bet a little," he suggested.

"How would you do that, Fred?"

"I'd pay the ransom but I'd inform the police of every turn. I'd have them standing by, just in case."

"In case they don't let her go?" he asked.

"No. By the time you were sure they weren't going to turn her loose, it would be too late. But when the delivery is made, that's when these creeps are most vulnerable. The cops might be able to tail the pickup man to the hiding place. That's important, because if the kidnappers are going to . . . silence Mrs. Tillman, they won't do it until they've got the money."

"Why not?"

"Until they have the cash, they need her for insurance. They can't put her on the phone, otherwise, to break you down."

Pursing his lips, Tillman considered. "I see your point. The police could give us an advantage."

"Sure. They might even take the contact man into custody and make him talk."

"Yes, they might. But this has been well-planned and I have a hunch we're not dealing with amateurs. They'll be watching for a trap and if the cops tip their hand, the kidnappers will run scared. If they see the net closing in, their first thought might be to get rid of Andrea, then scatter in all directions. No, I can't afford to risk it, Fred. And I want your solemn pledge to keep this from the police. Not a word. Just don't interfere."

"I wouldn't think of it," he answered. "I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize Mrs. Tillman's safety. She's a fine person and I'm very fond of her."

"Thank you, Fred," Tillman said quietly, and seemed on the verge of tears. "But I'm not just fond of her, I love her beyond words. I own a good slice of this world but I'd give it all up, and my life in the bargain, if I could save her. That's how fond of her *I* am, Fred." Tillman sealed his eyes as if in prayer.

Abruptly he then reached into a drawer and came up with an address book. He began to search it for a number. "A million dollars cash," he said with a wry face, "is quite a chunk of money to raise quickly and deviously—even for me. So I'd better get the ball rolling tonight."

He reached for the phone.

The ransom call came at six twenty-five the next evening. Tillman answered, and Fred Hammond picked up an extension phone at the same instant.

"Mr. Stanford Tillman?" a male voice, soft and cool, inquired.

"Yes, yes, Tillman speaking."

"You have the money? One million in fifties and hundreds?" Though the enunciation was careful, the grammar good, there was the mildest hint of a foreign accent.

"Yes, the money is here in a suitcase, ready for delivery."

"The bills are old and unmarked?"

"Yes, as you demanded." Tillman contained an urge to shout an obscene threat.

"Very well. Now, sir, you will leave with the ransom at once for San Francisco in your private plane. But for the pilot, you will travel alone. A reservation has been made for you at the Wellington Bayview Hotel. You will check in and go to your room, you will not leave it until you have further instructions. Is that clear?"

"I understand, yes."

"You may have a considerable wait, perhaps a day or two. Do not use the phone, simply wait. Your contact will say, 'I have a message from Andrea.' Do not take orders from anyone who does not use this identification.

"We will be watching. We will be able to detect the police by the most sophisticated means. If they are present, we will chop off your wife's hand and mail it to you—the left one with the rings. Next, you will receive a foot, and then—"

"Why, you filthy—"

"And then, if you are still not persuaded, we will make you a present of her beautiful head. Now, one minute has passed and we will allow you fifteen seconds to speak with your wife."

There was a pause. In the background, Tillman could hear what seemed the hollow rumble of traffic crossing a bridge, the deep bass of a ship's horn.

"Hello—Stan?"

"Yes, Andrea, yes, darling, it's Stan. Are you all right?"

"Yes, and that's the only question I can answer. But, Stan, I'm so frightened! These people are going to do some horrible things to me if you don't pay, or if you bring in the police. I'm convinced they'll kill me if you don't deliver the money. Darling, I love you—and please hurry! Because I can't bear another day in this—"

Andrea was sliced off. The line was empty.

"Well," Tillman said grimly, "what do you think, Fred?"

Hammond ran fingers nervously through the gray bristle of his hair. "I don't think they're bluffing," he answered. "Sometimes from a voice you can get the personality, the character of a man—

and that one is a little colder than death."

Tillman nodded. "I got the same feeling. The threat he made about Andrea's hand . . . It makes me shudder. Because I have this conviction that he means it absolutely, means it literally. He's psychotic, demented. If I could have just one minute alone with him!"

"Did you notice the foreign accent, sir? Very slight, I had to strain to catch it."

"Yes. I'd say he's a Latin type, well-educated. What else did you notice, Fred? How about sounds in the background?"

"There was traffic noise, definitely. Heavy traffic nearby, with that hollow drumming of wheels on a bridge."

"I agree," said Tillman. "They were in a building near a bridge, over water, I think. Just before Andrea came on, I heard the blast of a ship's horn. It was unmistakable."

"San Francisco Bay?"

"Possibly, yes. It would make sense, since that's where I'm to deliver the ransom." Tillman stood. "I'd better get moving, Fred. You call Mike at the airport and tell him I'll be taking off for San Francisco within the hour. He's been alerted to stand by until further notice."

"You want me to cover with an excuse for the quick trip, sir?"

"If he asks what it's about, say you overheard talk of a big business deal in the works."

"All right, sir. And then I'll be waiting in the limousine for you."

"I'll be only a minute." In passing, he dropped a hand to Fred's shoulder. "I'm glad you're on my team, Fred. It's a terrible time for me, the worst in my life. And I don't know what I'd do without you."

With a million dollars cash in an outsized suitcase, Stanford Tillman arrived that night at the Wellington Bayview in San Francisco. There was indeed a reservation in his name and after checking in, he ascended to a room perched high above the city, having a grand view of the bay and the Golden Gate Bridge. For a period he stood by the window, wondering if perhaps somewhere out there, in a sordid, makeshift prison, Andrea waited in terror for him to buy her freedom. Although it was one of the highest ransoms in history, Tillman was eager to pay it, had given no thought to the money, except as a means to an end.

He left the window and after stripping off his jacket and tie, sat in a chair with his feet propped by the big suitcase—that million

dollar ottoman. His face was grim.

Near one a.m. he closed his eyes for the first time, and fitfully slept upright in the chair, though the room was fully lighted. A few minutes after two, the phone rang. Instantly awake, he lifted the receiver.

"Stanford Tillman," he said.

"I have a message from Andrea." It was the same icy-smooth voice.

"I'm listening," said Tillman.

"You have it with you?"

"Yes."

"Go to the lobby at once. Ask at the desk for an envelope in your name. It will contain an aerial map. Return to your room with the map, and hurry. There will be another call with final instructions for the delivery. You have exactly five minutes. If you miss the next call, there will not be another."

Tillman put up the phone, glanced at his watch, pulled on his jacket and went out the door. Locking it, he plunged down the corridor to the elevators.

"Someone left an envelope for me," he told the clerk, then gave his name and room number.

After a puzzled search, the clerk shook his head. "Sorry, Mr. Tillman, there's nothing at all for you, sir. Perhaps a bit later. Would you like me to—"

"No, never mind," Tillman said. He dashed off to the elevator and returned to his room.

He wasn't at all surprised to find the suitcase gone. There was another of those geometrical, block-printed notes on the bed:

> If the count is correct, your wife will be driven back to Los Angeles tonight and released. Be patient. If there is a delay, do not call police!

Tillman sighed. Another torturous wait; was it a stall? Well, he would give them all that night, plus six hours' leeway. No longer; and the minute Andrea was safe at home, the hunt would be on!

It was midmorning of the same day, but Andrea did not know that it was daylight because her watch had been taken and the third-floor room had no windows. There was air-conditioning, however. From a vent near the ceiling, chilled air drifted down.

The room, with an adjoining, windowless bath, was furnished with a bed, a couple of chairs and a table. There was also a lamp which she left burning to dispel her fear and loneliness. The cell was entered by means of a concealed panel made of metal but finished on the outside to match the exterior wall. The room was soundproof and Andrea had been

told that it had been redesigned for the purpose of holding her prisoner.

Andrea was fed simple but adequate meals three times a day, and by these meals she could approximate the time. Her last meal had been dinner, but that was too many hours ago, it seemed, and no one had arrived with breakfast. She sensed that the delay had some special meaning which she felt was not encouraging but ominous. Suppose they left her here to die?

Thinking about it, she began to pace. The entire plan had been so diabolically clever, and yet three of the people involved were totally incongruous. Certainly their breed was not capable of deliberate, calculated murder, even for a million dollars; and surely they would let her go.

She was neither stupid nor naive, but the way it happened, who could possibly say that she should have seen it coming? From her bedroom she had heard a sound which, looking back, was nothing more sinister than Debby going out by way of the kitchen door. It must have been one of those days when her husband, working in another part of town, did not call for Debby in his gardening truck, and she walked to Sunset Boulevard instead and caught a bus; but it was an odd coincidence, or perhaps intuition, that she had been curiously uneasy.

She had checked the kitchen door and had found it locked. She had then gone back up to her bedroom and was in the process of applying her makeup when the phone rang. It was Claire Vanderhoff who lived in the big stone house next door. Claire was about her age, perhaps a couple of years older. She had been divorced and was recently married to Dwight Vanderhoff of the Vanderhoff Steamship Company.

The company was founded by Dwight's father who had left him the house and a few millions to boot, it was said. Dwight was vice-president in charge of the West Coast office, while his older brother was president and ran the big show out of New York. The Vanderhoffs were alone in the house, but for a live-in servant couple, the man doubling as butler-chauffeur. The Vanderhoffs, complaining that they could not get reliable help, had discharged their servants about three months previously, and hired new ones. Apparently they were pleased with the present pair.

The Tillmans had been dinner guests at the Vanderhoffs on occasion, and vice versa. They were all members of the tennis club

and often played doubles on the Tillmans' court. Born of proximity and initiated by the Vanderhoffs, the friendship had not been deep, but they were at least a convivial foursome who shared a common interest in tennis. Over cocktails, Stan and Dwight had talked Big Business, while Claire and Andrea chatted of this and that, mostly surface trivia.

On the phone, Claire had sounded breathless. "Andrea, something dreadful has happened! Dwight said he wasn't feeling well and I was taking him up to bed when he suddenly gasped, and then collapsed. He looks gray, he looks awful! I can hardly find a pulse. Andrea, I'm all alone. Our couple, Nita and Kirk, have gone to the movies. I've sent for a doctor, but meanwhile I think he's dying and I don't know what to do. Could you and Stan come over to help me?"

"Oh, Claire, of course! But Stan went up to Sacramento for a conference with the governor—thought we told you. I'm all alone myself at the moment, but I'll be right over, dear."

"Please hurry, Andrea! To save time, cut across the grounds and come through the hedge behind the tennis court. You know, that little gap."

"Yes, yes! Don't panic, Claire. I'll be there in half a minute!"

She had raced from the house, and darting across the lawn to the space in the hedge behind the court, she had squeezed through and dashed to the front door.

Claire had opened at the first ring. "This way, darling," she said. "I'm just pitiful when it comes to an emergency. I go all to pieces!"

They crossed the livingroom, which was bleakly lighted and in gloomy shadow, heavy draperies drawn over the windows. Though the atmosphere was oppressive, Andrea had no sense of danger or menace, only a feeling that the scene was incomprehensively subdued, as if they were to be confronted, not by Dwight in a state of collapse, but by a candle-ringed coffin.

They turned into a dim hallway, at the end of which she could see the stairs, though not a sign of Dwight. Then, although she did not actually hear a sound, she had the impression that someone was behind her. She hesitated. Peering over her shoulder, she had a fleeting glimpse of Kirk, the butler-chauffeur, his upraised hand clutching a towel.

Fingers closed around the back of her neck and at the same instant the towel, moist and malodorous, was clamped smotheringly over her face.

After a timeless void, she awoke in this cell of a room on the third floor. She was lying supine on the bed, her shoes removed, her watch gone. Claire was seated at the foot of the bed, Dwight standing behind her. The other two, Kirk and Nita, shorn of their servants' uniforms, hovered just above her, observing with the clinical expressions of doctor and nurse attending a patient.

"Now, Andrea," said Dwight, "you're in this cozy pad on the third floor and you have nothing to fear. We're not going to hurt you, not unless you become rebellious, that is." He was a beefy man of middle height. Close to forty, his florid, puffy-eyed face was marked by the erosions of self-indulgence. "You may still be a little groggy from the drug," he continued, "but you've only been out for twenty minutes. And while you were under, we broke into your house and set the stage, so to speak. Then we left a ransom note for Stanford. It demands a million dollars, a truly modest sum for the return of such a precious jewel."

Andrea was a bit dizzy and slightly nauseated, but her mind was clear and, though with astonishment, she understood well enough. "I can't believe this is real," she said. "I can't believe you would do such a thing. You practically run Vanderhoff Shipping and you've got millions." Aided by Claire, she propped herself up, against the headboard. "Dwight, I thought we were friends. Have you gone crazy?"

He shook his head. "Andrea, like everyone else, you've been snowed by the illusion that I'm rich. My older brother, Floyd Vanderhoff, runs the company from New York. He is *very* rich but I'm just a figurehead, and extremely poor, by our standards."

Andrea gasped and stared. "I still don't get it," she said.

"Very well, I'll explain," he said smugly. "You see, I had shown no inclination to work, and my father knew that, without money or position, I would become a glorified bum, thus defacing the untarnished image of the Vanderhoff name. So he gave me the bogus title of vice-president in charge of the West Coast branch of the company. I have a grand office and a big front, but absolutely no active function.

"As long as I check in sober every morning and remain on the premises until closing, I receive three hundred a week and the use of this house, owned and maintained by the company, complete with two servants of my choice. But Andrea, three hundred a *day* would not fill my extravagant

needs, let alone three hundred a week. Right?

"So we have conceived this invincible plan to relieve Stan Tillman of a million tax-free dollars. As friends and neighbors, we had a built-in spy system, and now we can watch from our windows to see if the cops are arriving to campaign our entrapment. And for a clincher, try this one: we can't miss knowing which way Stan will jump at all times, because we have a tap on your phone!

"Beautiful, oh beautiful!" he said. Beaming, he rubbed his palms together joyously.

"I can't understand," said Andrea gravely, "why you would confess all of this to me, and reveal your identity, unless you intend to kill me."

"My dear Andrea, we could be classed as kidnappers, perhaps, though you came here of your own accord. But killers, never. No, we can give you the whole blueprint of our scheme, but in the end it will be of no value to you. Because by the time a certain message reaches Tillman, informing him that you are only next door in this room, we will be lost beyond a trace in a remote corner of the globe where no questions are asked. And the only requirement is enough coin to pay the tab. Now do you understand?"

"Just the same, you talk too damn much, Vanderhoff," said Kirk, who had been shifting restively in place, his expression a sneer of impatience. "We have work to do. Let's get on with it." Kirk seemed younger than Vanderhoff. Tall and slender, he had a long, stone-quiet face and frozen, lusterless dark eyes. His hair was midnight black, his complexion swarthy and finely pocked.

Dwight shrugged and said, "This is our mastermind, Kirk Pardo, who used to supply me with happy pills back east. When he came out to L.A. and looked me up, I confided my secret, told him I was hungry for quick gold, and didn't care how I got it. Kirk found my setup perfect for his larcenous talents, and we joined forces. He brought along Nita, Kirk's little playmate."

"Oh thanks, thanks a bunch, Dwight," Nita said sourly. She was a tiny brunette with sharp little features and an awesome figure. She looked coarse beside Claire.

Ignoring Nita, Dwight said, "Kirk was a surgeon in another state before he was deposed for certain malpractices. But his knowledge of anatomy comes in handy for producing the most unendurable pain. Let me warn you,

Kirk can be very persuasive when people are uncooperative."

Kirk said, "You boil it down and what he means is, if you don't do precisely as I tell you, why then I'm going to bend your pretty bones until you scream."

"I think you would," said Andrea. "You have the eyes of a reptile."

"Now, Andrea," Kirk continued without a twitch of expression, "we are going to put you on the phone to your husband tomorrow." He took her hand in his and held it out for inspection. "And if he doesn't come up with the money, or if he calls the cops, then we'll have to amputate this little fellow and mail it to him, rings and all. Remember that, Andrea. And when you talk to old Stan, make it very convincing. Otherwise, you'll keep losing bits and pieces of yourself, you see?"

Andrea read in his gaze the twisted craving of the sadist in search of a victim, and the last, brave little flame of her resistance flickered out.

"All right," she answered, "I'll convince him."

In what must have been morning, Claire Vanderhoff brought her breakfast and went away quickly, not once looking Andrea in the eye. Well, at least Claire had *some* sense of guilt. Or did she?

Nita brought her a sandwich and a glass of milk for lunch, looking not at all like the timid maid who had served Andrea when she came to dinner with Stan. She was now brazen, mocking.

Several hours later they all entered her cell, Kirk bearing a portable extension phone which he plugged into a jack in the wall beneath the table.

Kirk warned her that the penalty for any attempt to blurt the information that she was being held next door at the Vanderhoffs was instant death—and backed the threat with a knife poised at her throat. Then he dialed their number and began talking to Stan in that crooning voice with just the barest trace of an accent. It was so marvelously underplayed and so totally real that she asked about it after she had that wretched excuse for a conversation with poor, dear Stan, and was disconnected in midsentence. She realized that every scrap of knowledge gleaned might aid the police later.

Kirk told her quite proudly that he had spent some time in Mexico, where he was running dope across the border to the U.S. He had been working with a Mexican who spoke flawless English, but for that subtle overtone of inflection, and he had made a study

of his odd patterns of speech.

That one-sided exchange with Stan completed, they took the phone away and left her with the aftereffects, a smothering depression. Shortly, Nita came again with dinner, but Andrea had no appetite and could get down only a few morsels.

A very long time had passed and now it was probably well into the next day. The million must have been delivered by Stan and she should have been released hours ago but, on the contrary, they had not even brought her breakfast.

Now she was frightened, overcome by the first real doubt that she would ever see Stan again.

Kirk had flown back from San Francisco with the suitcase, arriving at the house shortly before dawn. Dwight Vanderhoff had not gone to the office but had phoned in sick. The million had been counted and divided and now the quartet were discussing their triumph.

"It's fantastic," Dwight was saying as he leaned toward them across the desk, his eyes feverish with excitement. "To the last piece, it all falls right into place—a work of genius."

"I thank you," Kirk said with a little bow, for he had conceived the plan and wanted full credit.

"What I mean," said Dwight, "is the beauty of the way it all follows through, like a ball launched with perfect form and timing and placement. Your common criminal, if he could, in his wildest dreams, pull one like this, would be at a loss to know what to do with the money. He couldn't spend it freely because he would be the immediate object of suspicion. On the other hand, if a Vanderhoff lives in the most lavish style, it's only what's expected of him. Don't you see?"

"I see very well," said Kirk. "But it's not quite so simple. You must go on for some time in the ridiculous role of the Vanderhoff shipping magnate, and we must play the much less delightful parts of being your servants. Though I assure you, when the time is right, we'll be gone in a hurry. Right, Nita?"

"Betcha life," said Nita. "I wasn't born to be a flunky."

"You all sound so jolly," said Claire Vanderhoff. "I love money, too. Oh yes, dearly; but we still have to dispose of Andrea and I'm in no mood for celebration just now. Kirk, are you positive there isn't another way?"

"Sure, we'll let her go home and spill the beans to daddy," he sneered. "Or maybe you believe

we actually *could* hide out somewhere, some splendid place where we'd never be found. Like with the natives in the jungles of Africa."

"I think we should reconsider my plan to keep her walled up in that room," Dwight said.

"Nonsense!" Kirk shook his head. "For how long? Fifty, sixty years, until she dies of old age? Besides, the area will soon be swarming with cops, and there's always a slim chance that they might uncover the trail. If the least clue sent them here, Tillman would push with all his money and power until they tore this place apart. Sure, it's a seemingly foolproof hiding place, but they have all sorts of technical skill and equipment to uncover a secret room, once they've got the scent."

"C'mon now, Kirk," Dwight said. "Do you honestly believe they'd ever be able to figure this one in a hundred years?"

"No," Kirk said, "I don't think so. But if there's one chance in a thousand, I'm not gonna take it. Listen, it's all set up with my boy at the crematory, and it can't go wrong. He thinks I'm still running dope and have to get rid of a female fink. Tonight I slip him five grand and a body wrapped in a blanket. He doesn't look at the body and he burns it facedown. That's the agreement. No questions.

"While I stand by to see that the job is done, he puts in a little overtime and—presto!—what's left of Andrea you could stick in your pocket. Then we restore her little prison to its former innocence, just another room. Now, that's the way we planned it, and that's the way it's going to be, kiddies."

There was a heavy silence. Then Dwight said, "All right, I suppose it has to be done. You handle it, Kirk—and spare us the details."

"Nothing to it," Kirk said. "Nita will take the condemned a hearty last meal. I'll lace the coffee with a nice little potion for permanent sleep. Andrea will doze off quietly and she'll never feel the heat."

Just after midnight, Kirk carried the blanket-shrouded body out of the house to the Vanderhoff garage and deposited it inside the trunk of the black limousine. Then he wheeled off silently, drifting far below the Tillman place before cutting in his lights. Down on Sunset, he picked up the freeway and drove south carefully, his speed moderate. Even at so late an hour there was considerable traffic and a few patrol cars were cruising about.

In a while he slid down an offramp to a main thoroughfare and

went south again until he came upon the squat building of the mortuary. It was dark, but for a neon sign discreetly advertising death.

Kirk entered the driveway and drove to the rear, where he braked beside a separate building, doused his lights and left the limousine. He crossed to a door and jabbed a bell-button repeatedly, using a coded signal. The door opened narrowly with a dim splash of light, and then he was swallowed inside.

Another five minutes passed before Kirk returned with a man who toted a canvas stretcher. Kirk opened the trunk and the two men shared the burden of the body, lowering it, then carting it off on the stretcher, their movements outlined for a moment in the soft glow from the open doorway.

Just then, thrusting a .45 automatic, Fred Hammond stepped from the shadows into their path. "Hold it right there, gentlemen," he said, as Stanford Tillman materialized abruptly at his side. "Now, ease the stretcher down, raise your hands and lean forward against that wall. C'mon, c'mon! You heard me!"

Hammond searched the pair but found no weapons; Tillman frantically unwound the blanket. Andrea seemed pale enough to be very dead—but wasn't. There was a slow, steady pulse, and with a moan of relief, Stan gathered her into his arms.

It was nearly dawn; the Vanderhoffs and their accomplices were in custody. The police had gone, taking with them for evidence a tape recording of traffic and ship sounds used to deceive Tillman, and the sum of one million dollars paid in ransom. Andrea was lying on the sofa in the Tillman livingroom, Tillman and Fred Hammond sat in facing chairs.

Andrea took a sip of her coffee and said cheerfully, "Ahh, this is good! I like mine with cream and sugar, no drugs, thank you. Maybe it was something in Nita's expression that warned me—or is it only that she makes rotten coffee? Anyway, it had a rather odd flavor, and after a swallow or two I was suspicious. So I poured the rest down the drain. Then I fell into a deep sleep. But not forever, as planned."

"Thank God!" Stan Tillman sighed and solemnly shook his head.

"And now that there's time for details, what's *your* story, Fred?" asked Andrea. "Are you psychic? How in heaven did you figure that

I was held here, right next door?"

Hammond smiled. "Well, I knew it couldn't be done without inside information," he answered, "and I was already thinking along those lines. But I'm afraid the rest was mostly luck, Mrs. Tillman. I was worried, had a feeling they would never let you go, and I couldn't sleep. Near five yesterday morning I got up and began to wander over the grounds, thinking, thinking. I was right by the hedge on the Vanderhoff side when that creep, Kirk Pardo, drove in.

"I heard voices, soft but excited. So I peeked through the hedge. In the moonlight, I saw the Vanderhoffs and the maid, Nita. They were gathered around Kirk, who was taking a suitcase from the trunk of the limo. I got only a glimpse before the garage door closed. But I thought it was mighty strange for Mr. and Mrs. Vanderhoff to be dressed and about at that hour and cozy with the hired help, everyone fired up over a suitcase.

"I began to try it on for size, putting the pieces together in my mind. It was wild—but possible. I went to Mr. Tillman with it, and together we kept a constant watch on the Vanderhoff place through binoculars. When Kirk sneaked off in the limo at midnight, we tailed him, part of the way with lights out.

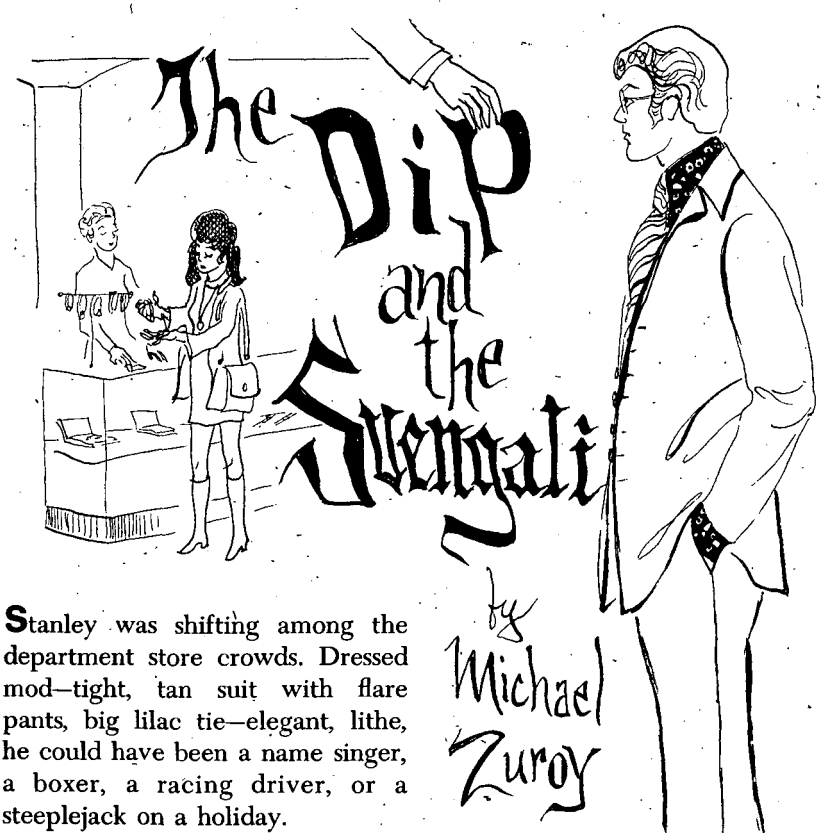
"And here we are, Mrs. Tillman, all safe and sound."

Andrea said, "Dear Fred, I hope you know that you have all our love and gratitude. But I believe we owe you something more tangible. Don't you, Stan?"

"Yes, indeed we do," said Tillman, who was gazing fondly at Hammond. "Fred, I'd like to make you a present of some shares in each of the Tillman companies. You'll have enough to make you independent for life." He sighed. "And I suppose that means I'll lose you."

"No chance of that, Mr. Tillman." Hammond grinned. "A Tillman stockholder is kinda like a member of the family. And families should stick together, don't you think?"

That welcome light at the end of the tunnel may turn out to be a mirage.



Stanley was shifting among the department store crowds. Dressed mod—tight, tan suit with flare pants, big lilac tie—elegant, lithe, he could have been a name singer, a boxer, a racing driver, or a steeplejack on a holiday.

He was, in fact, a dip; a pickpocket in camouflage, fingers quicker than a blink, lighter than air. Air, you could feel; not Stanley's soapy fingers. This came from talent—from practice, years of it. He was proud of his trade. He had class; he'd never have to sink to a regular job.

He was prowling the store for a mark when he spotted the chick.

It took him only minutes to figure out that she was working the territory too, shoplifting.

What caught him, Stanley never could say. She had dark-haired, liquid-eyed looks, and a body, sure; but it wasn't only that. Class she had, like a little lady, palming that watch in style so no store-dick would have tumbled, but it was more than that. How's a guy say what's special for him in a chick? Whatever, there it was.

There was nothing to warn him she had a whammy on her.

"Nice work," he told her quietly.

Her dark eyes didn't scare. She kept them masked, but he got a feeling they liked what they saw; all that was needed was trust. They were meant to click, a matched couple with class, a sharp, talented couple.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"The watch."

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

He stepped right with her. "I'm in the line myself. A dip."

"Sure," she said.

"Why would I say so?"

"You could be a bull."

"Uh-uh. I'm a dip."

"Prove it."

"How?"

"Take somebody."

"Okay," Stanley said. He looked along the swarming aisle. "That fatty."

The collision seemed entirely accidental. Stanley wove a quick tangle of words and motions, apologizing, steadying the stout, irritated man. They slipped on with the crowd afterward, quickly losing the man, angling and shifting among the aisles, Stanley steering for the exits.

"So?" the girl asked.

"Got it," Stanley said.

"Oh, come on! I didn't see you snatch anything."

"That's right. You don't see it when I operate." Stanley lifted his arm part way, showing her the billfold in his sleeve, then dropped his arm.

"Say, that was great," the girl said. Her eyes were on him now with respect. The pupils had contracted to pinpoints of excitement. "That was slick. Smooth. That was like—like music."

"Yeah," Stanley said.

"Where was it?"

"His inside jacket pocket."

"How'd you know? How'd you know it wouldn't be in his pants?"

They went out the revolving doors. Outside, Stanley dropped the billfold into his pocket and headed her toward Fifth. "I can read clothes," he told her. "Takes more than fingers, see? There's not much sign, but there's a little. You

got to read drape, takes years to read right most of the time. You got to watch their minds, make sure their minds are off the snatch. It don't work without the fingers, though. Altogether, it's a specialty."

"I'll say." She gave him a quick sideways glance as they walked. "Looks like you picked me up all right, didn't you?"

"It's what I was hoping," Stanley said. "You, I like. I got an idea we can run up some mileage together."

"You're cute yourself," she said. "I'll give you some good advice before it's too late. Forget the mileage. Run before you get burned."

"Like hell," Stanley said. "What's the danger? You married?"

"No, it's not that. For one thing—I'm bad."

"Big deal," Stanley said.

"Also, I got a whammy on me."

"Whaddya mean, you got a whammy?"

"A whammy, a spell, a curse."

"Like what?"

"Like I don't own myself. Somebody else does."

"Who?"

"Good-bye," she said.

"Nothing doing," Stanley said.

"All right, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Whaddya mean, somebody owns you? What are you, a slave?"

"More like a prisoner."

"You're walking around, aren't you?" Stanley said.

"I got to go back to him every night. I got to work for him. Whatever I take goes to him. He tells me something, I got to obey. I get the screaming meemies if I try to fight it. It's in my head. A whammy."

"Who is this guy? Svengali?"

"Who? No, his name is Hogan. Big Boy Hogan."

"How'd he get this whammy on you?"

"I don't know. I was seeing him, and then—there it was." She looked at him sideways again. "What's the use of talking? Let's go to your place. You got a place?"

"Sure, I got a place." Stanley felt a little shocked; he'd meant to start working up to this. He said, "I was going to take you out to eat and—"

"I know," she said. "Why waste time? It's what you're after, isn't it?" Her eyes had turned bright and he saw the same pinpoints of excitement in them. "And you're cute. Let's go."

"How about your whammy?"

"Won't stop us. Hogan doesn't know about you, and he can't

help what he doesn't know."

Stanley took her arm. "By the way, my name is Stanley Vebell."

She laughed. "Iris Jackson. Pleased to meet you."

Stanley liked to live fancy and Iris was happy with his East 52nd apartment. She twinkled around it, singing. A few hours with her and Stanley felt like he was hooked, whammy or no whammy; so he had to know, he had to act. When she told him she had to go back to Big Boy Hogan, Stanley said, "I'm going to break that whammy."

"How, Stanley? How can you help me?"

"I'm going to see that Svengali and make him let you go."

She looked at him and began to laugh. She went on laughing as he began to mutter. She laughed harder when he said: "What's so funny? I can handle myself in a scrap."

She said, "Big Boy would make two of you, Stanley. Big Boy is in the *rackets*, he's a mobster. He has knocked off people—I personally guarantee it. He would wipe you away like a spot. You want to get killed, Stanley? You are, after all, only a dip. Dips are artists, not heavies. Dips are not tigers, not killers. You are a very cute dip, but not in Big Boy's class. Stay away from him, Stanley."

"I ain't afraid of him," Stanley muttered, but said nothing more. All those things she'd said about dips were true, but he'd thought that was fine, to make out without taking bad chances. Now, he was feeling small and low. There was not enough respect from her. He would show her, Stanley decided. He would show her he was no French pastry at heart, and he would break her whammy too, someway.

The scene was different, seeing Iris—flashes of sunlight, pools of shadow, and a lot of rainbow. Altogether, she turned him on, but full. Without her around, he felt like an empty wallet. With her, he was more than himself; he needed to be more, for her. Devil in her eyes, taunt in her voice, whammy in her soul to be rubbed away; these made him dare.

They were walking on Fifth one afternoon. She had already lifted a pair of pearl earrings in a jewelry store, with a cool finesse that had almost raised his hair, but made him proud of her. It only bothered him that the loot would go to that lousy Svengali. That goon remained the spoiler, keeping the jealousy smoldering, deep and steady. He wasn't anxious to tangle after what Iris had told him about Big Boy, but maybe if he could wrap her up

close enough, the whammy would fade.

Iris said, "Where's his wallet, Stanley?" She'd stopped along the curb.

Stanley followed her eyes. The man was looking into a shop window at a display of Oriental art. He was tall, well-dressed and wore a wide-brimmed, Western hat. Texas type, Stanley figured automatically, big spender . . .

"Hip pocket," Stanley answered, reading the clothes.

"Take him, Stanley."

Stanley laughed.

"Why not?"

Stanley's laugh faded as he saw she was serious. "It's all wrong. Out on the street. Crowds aren't close enough, I could be spotted. The guy is wrong, wide-awake—he'd know I'm close, I couldn't scramble his mind. Reflection from the window . . ."

"Scared of the hard ones, Stanley?"

"I ain't scared," Stanley retorted quickly. "This setup just ain't professional."

"Small-time," she said. "I guess you can't help it."

Stanley felt the contempt. He had to dare, or lose.

He eased alongside the mark, inspecting the Oriental art too. He turned sharp, from toe to scalp, a tuned-in dip, receiving waves from the passing world and the mark, sensing for the instant. This would have to be perfect.

"Different, huh?" Stanley said, nodding at the art, gentle, friendly.

"Yup, kind of like it. Bet it'd open a few eyes if I brought one back home." The genial, open drawl was Western, all right.

"Out-of-state, huh?" Stanley's voice was casual as he made his move. It was now. Talking, the mark was as off-base as he'd be. Couple of eye-flicks and Stanley had registered the passing scene, the crowd positions, picking a proper split-second. Stanley could work with either hand. His left hand became an eel, the ghost of an eel, flowing behind, between jacket and trousers, fingers crawling into the pocket slit, delicately absorbing the wallet, flowing back almost as soon as it had started.

The guy didn't feel a thing. The wallet palmed up his sleeve, Stanley thought he'd made it, but the guy was sharp-eyed—been right not to trust him—and there was the dim window-reflection. The mark's hand clapped the back pocket, leaped for Stanley's wrist.

Stanley matched the reflex. Stanley was no longer there—he was twisting through the crowds. The mark came pounding after him, yelling. It was the first time

in Stanley's pro career that he'd been chased, but his talent held true, scared though he was. He slid among the bodies like a needle through thread, dodged into a building that he knew went through to undergound shops, turned and cornered through the lower levels, walking fast, no longer running, emerged on a different street, safe, the mark lost. He was on home ground; the other guy hadn't had a chance.

Still, Stanley was frowning. He might have been grabbed. The stunt hadn't made sense, but if it made him bigger with Iris, it was worth it.

"That was beautiful," Iris said later. "Thrilling. Graceful. The way you ditched him . . . like ballet."

"Nothing," Stanley said, modestly, but Iris was extra-loving for a while, and the take had been high, too.

Only, the whammy remained.

Stanley couldn't take the knowledge that only a piece of Iris was his, most of her still belonging to the Svengali. He was hooked on her stronger all the time, like he'd never been hooked with a skirt; he needed more than her spare time.

He kept trying to make himself so big with her that she'd come to him all the way and forget the whammy. He'd come to know that she had this thing about danger and excitement, and he went along when she prodded him to chancier and chancier jobs, like snatching billfolds inside an elevator, and practically under the eyes of cops, and in banks, and removing jewels from ladies in theaters. He'd developed a certain kind of thrill in it himself, and there was the kick of her admiration as she watched, and afterwards—but there came a time when Stanley had to add it up.

Nothing had helped the whammy; it was still there. His stunts didn't satisfy her for long. She kept wanting bigger and better, and it scared him to think how he might finish. Something else would have to be done.

"I'm taking you to a shrink," he told her.

"You are what? I ain't nuts."

"Who says you are? Shrinks ain't only for nuts, they're for anything with heads. The whammy's in your head, right? So maybe a good head-doctor could chase it."

"Hmm," Iris said, looking speculative. "I ain't never been to a shrink. Might be exciting."

So Stanley asked around and made an appointment with a head-fixer. Nine times he took her there—nine big bills he paid.

She still had the whammy.

"How much longer, Doc?" he asked the shrink.

The shrink removed his pipe from his chunky, eyeglassed head and said, "Can't tell. Two, three years, perhaps."

"Wh-what?" Stanley said.

"Her case is complex. I don't believe that hypnotic suggestion is involved; her fixations are more deeply rooted than that, twisted. I find an excessive need for male domination coupled with an obsessive resentment of the male. I'd say that these fixations continually require a male object to focus upon, as now; yet the very depth of the resentments precludes the devotion of a permanent relationship. Rather, a succession of such male objects, with possible destructive terminations, is indicated."

Stanley looked at the shrink. He wasn't paying for double-talk. "So what about the whammy, Doc?"

"There is no whammy, in the sense you mean, as I've just explained."

If a shrink couldn't tell a whammy when he saw one, who needed him? If a shrink couldn't fix a plain, ordinary whammy, what good was he?

"I was getting tired of him, anyway;" Iris said. "I had to do all the talking. He should have paid *me*, that's what I decided."

"I will figure something else," Stanley said.

"We better say good-bye," Iris said. "For keeps."

Stanley's heart turned into a doughnut, with a hole right through it. "Whaddya mean, good-bye?"

"I get bored," Iris said. "You're cute, but you're still small-time. You pulled some tricks, but you're still only a dip. I need nerve. I need power. It takes a man with fangs to reach me."

"Oh, yeah? I got fangs."

"Do you? Show me. Pull a heist, at least."

"A heist? But this ain't my line, Iris."

She laughed scornfully. "That's what I just said. You're not in that class. Big Boy Hogan would think nothing of it."

"Big Boy Hogan, Big Boy Hogan."

"If you had the nerve, we'd have a blast, Stanley. We'd pull it together. But you won't. Good-bye, Stanley."

"Okay, we'll pull a heist," Stanley said.

Her eyes pinpointed again. She drew a sharp breath. "I know where I can get the rods."

The liquor store was on a side street in the Village area. They'd settled on it because it wasn't al-

ways crowded like a main-drag store, but still did heavy business. They hit it just before closing time. Two customers were still in the store.

Their movements were planned. As soon as they were in, Iris put her back against the door and Stanley went down the side, along the bottles, both pulling their rods. So located, they could cover the counter and the occupants, but the guns could not be seen from outside. Also, at this hour, the chances that anyone would try to peer in were small; the street had turned quiet.

"This is a stickup," Stanley said. "Don't move your hands and do what you're told and no one will get hurt." He waved the two customers to the rear section of the counter. Stanley was astonished at how cold he'd become. A moment before hitting the store he'd been shaking inside like a cocktail; now he was calm. Maybe, after all, he had a talent for this, too.

A glance at the customers and he'd figured they wouldn't give trouble; one was a tall, skinny guy who looked like a rumpot, the other a middle-aged citizen, and they'd both come on scared. There were two store guys behind the counter; the young, dark-haired clerk, who'd gone white-faced, didn't worry Stanley either. The other one—they knew he was the owner from casing the place—was something else. He was short and pudgy and didn't look like a fighter, but his fat face had turned red and his eyes were bulging and glaring behind his glasses.

Stanley tossed the canvas bag onto the counter. "Fill it," he ordered the owner. "Clean out the cash register."

For an instant, the owner didn't move. Then Stanley saw the flicker in his eyes and the twitch beginning in his hand. What Stanley couldn't believe was that he knew he would shoot if the guy went for a gun under the counter. He'd never hurt anybody in his life, aside from swiping money, but he was ready to kill this guy, he was anxious to kill him, right on the brink. "Don't." Stanley heard himself whisper, hoping the guy wouldn't listen and would make his move so he could shoot.

The pudgy man met his eyes, saw his death. He clinked open the register and hastily began filling the bag.

Stanley ordered them all to lie down on the floor away from the door window, and they made their getaway in Stanley's car, clean and easy. In his apartment, they counted over $1200.

Iris was looking at Stanley in a new way. "You've got it," she

said. "I never thought you did, but you've got it. You were going to kill him, weren't you, Stanley?"

"Yes," Stanley said. He felt sick, he felt sad, thinking about it now. That couldn't have been himself, crazy to kill, that one instant back there. He hadn't known he'd had that in him, or maybe everybody had it if that certain time came; but he was sorry for it, sorry to know. He wished he'd never pulled this heist; he wished he could go back—but there was Iris, looking at him in this new way, hopped up.

"Satisfied?" Stanley said. "This could help you forget Big Boy Hogan? And that stinking whammy?"

Iris looked at him a long time, smiling a small smile. She said, finally, "No, Stanley, the whammy's still got me. That whammy ain't never left my head. Big Boy's got me and I can't break loose. I hate him, but he's got me. Nothing you can do can break the whammy—except one thing."

"What's the thing?" Stanley asked, afraid to hear, but knowing, as somehow he'd known for a long time.

"Kill Big Boy Hogan," Iris said.

It was out, and they both grew very calm. Iris' eyes were narrowed and pinpointed.

"Oh, sure," Stanley said.

"Help me," Iris said. "I never asked you because I didn't think you were man enough. Now I see different. Help me."

"Okay," Stanley said nonchalantly, nothing seeming important now except Iris. "I'll kill him."

"Face to face, like a man, Stanley, so I can respect you. No sneaking."

"Okay, like that."

"I want him to know why. Say my name to him when you do it."

"Okay," Stanley said stonily. "I knock him off, I tell him, 'Iris.' "

She laughed, low and wild. "That's it. The last thing he'll hear. Iris. Me. End of whammy. He'll know."

Stanley didn't rush. This was a thing that needed consideration. To knock off a tough guy like this Svengali, this Big Boy Hogan, this killer-mobster and get away with it, would require thought. He waited for days. He spent hours every day with Iris, checking on Big Boy and his habits, figuring how, where and when. He'd have to get him alone, that was sure.

Then he saw Big Boy Hogan for the first time. Iris gave him the address and he hung around, watching them come out together. Big Boy was big, all right, with a rocky, red face. Ordinarily he would have scared Stanley, but it made a difference who was the

hunter—and he was confident.

Putting it all together, Stanley figured his play. He was a dip, he was used to operating in crowds, and it was in a crowd that Big Boy could be most alone and least dangerous—and Iris said that Big Boy liked to go to the races.

Iris gave him the tip-off.

The sky was bright blue over the track, small white clouds chasing each other like horses. The stands were filled with the race crowds, bright and dull in dress, fancy and plain; the colors and hues of the clothes made mosaics, faces were calm, anxious, laughing, excited, morose. There were field glasses, the flutter of form sheets and women's hair. The continuous mob sound rose and fell, from a steady drone to fevered roars when closely-packed horses pounded to a finish.

Stanley was hardly conscious of this around him. His eyes and soul were focused on the backs of Iris and Big Boy Hogan, aisles below. He was waiting for the right time.

He hadn't wanted Iris to come along with Big Boy. She wouldn't stay away. She had to watch.

It was after the fourth race that Stanley felt his signal. He saw that Big Boy had won a bet and was heading across the grounds toward the booths to collect, leaving Iris in the stands. Stanley sauntered down, unconcerned.

He met Big Boy coming back with the mob. Big Boy was looking comfortable, race money in his pocket, pretty girl waiting, great day for the horses, nothing about death in his mind. Big Boy was swaggering in checkered jacket crossed by field-glass straps, tawny trousers, cleaving his way, haughty and mighty.

Stanley was wearing dark glasses and a charcoal jacket, in case of blood. At the last moment, Stanley put away the glasses; let it be eye to eye.

Big Boy's eyes touched Stanley without a bump, moved past like he was a pebble. Stanley floated in. His hands were like eels again, losing substance in the special way of a dip, slipping inside Big Boy's dappled jacket. Their eyes met this time, and in that split instant Stanley saw that the eyes were human, soft, and he almost wavered; but in that same instant he knew that eyes were only jelly and behind the jelly could live a louse. The sudden anxiety to kill hit Stanley. The knife had slid from sleeve to hand; he was a dip who was putting now, not taking. "Iris," Stanley said.

He put the knife into Big Boy three times, rapidly. Big Boy might be tough, but his flesh was butter to the knife. Stanley saw

the glaze start in the eyes. The knife was back in his sleeve and he was disengaged, past, and moving away. There had hardly been a pause.

Stanley wove within the mob until he was only a distant dot in the pattern. He knew that behind him Big Boy was collapsing, falling. A knot was forming around the body, but murder would not be suspected, at first; a stroke, a heart attack, a sickness, rather. Only when someone discovered the blood would they know . . . and by then Stanley would be traveling.

Driving away in his car, he looked at his sleeve; a small stain, hard to see, but inside it felt sticky. Stanley began to feel sick. Later, he threw jacket and knife into a sewer.

That night, Iris came to him.

She was like a dark, tender pool. Her face was meek, admiring. "He's dead," she said.

"I knew it when he started to die."

"It was lovely," Iris said.

He didn't answer.

"I'm free. His whammy is dead."

"That's good," Stanley said.

"Stanley—"

He hit her. He had never hit a woman before. She reeled away and fell, hand to her cheek.

"Damn you," Stanley said. "You made me kill. I never wanted to kill. I'm not the same, now."

She came crawling back. She embraced his knees, lifting her head, tamed, entreating. "He deserved killing," she purled. "I'm yours now, Stanley, not his. I'll work for you, I'll wait on you. Just tell me, I'll do; show me the hoop, I'll jump. You're the new owner, Stanley. I feel a new whammy, and you got it on me."

Stanley looked at her. There was a flash in his mind. A curtain parted, briefly. There was the double-talk of the shrink—and it was not double-talk. There was Big Boy Hogan, the Svengali, who'd been no Svengali. There were faceless dead men, dead the way Big Boy was dead, for the same reason. There was, in shadows—the shadows of the nearing future—another dead man. It was himself.

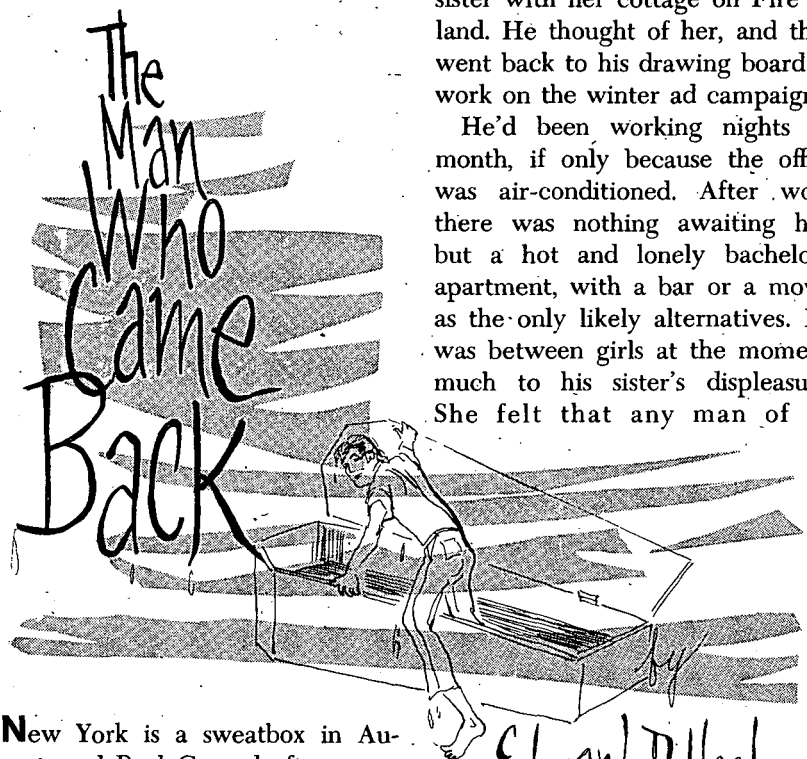
The whammy had never been on Iris. It had been on Big Boy, it had been on others, it was now on him.

The curtain closed.

Stanley looked at the beautiful girl, now his. He kissed her . . . tenderly.

A late husband should always be armed with an infallible alibi.

The Man Who Came Back



by Edward D. Hoch

New York is a sweatbox in August, and Paul Conrad often wondered why the city didn't simply shut down for the month as Paris did. This August seemed especially bad, with daily temperatures above ninety, and it was no wonder that he thought often of his sister with her cottage on Fire Island. He thought of her, and then went back to his drawing board to work on the winter ad campaigns.

He'd been working nights all month, if only because the office was air-conditioned. After work there was nothing awaiting him but a hot and lonely bachelor's apartment, with a bar or a movie as the only likely alternatives. He was between girls at the moment, much to his sister's displeasure. She felt that any man of 31 should be bringing up a family. Helen, two years younger and already on her second husband, had three children from her first marriage, with another on the way.

This night, alone in the agency art department, he was hunched over his drawing board when the telephone rang.

"Paul Conrad?"

"Speaking."

"Paul, I took a chance on catching you there, when nobody answered at the apartment."

"Who's this?" The voice was familiar, and yet some barrier of his mind kept him from identifying it.

"Ralph," the voice answered.

Ralph. He sat down hard, clutching the telephone as if it might suddenly fly away. "Ralph Jennings?" he whispered, though now he recognized the voice and knew the impossible was true. "You're *alive*!"

"I have to see you, Paul. Tonight."

"Where are you?"

"The Manhattan Manor Motel. It's over on the west side, near the river."

"I'll find it. Are you using your own name?"

"Sure." He hesitated a moment on the other end of the line and then added, "Paul . . . don't tell Helen. Not yet."

"Don't worry, I won't."

He hung up and sat staring at the phone for several minutes. Ralph Jennings, his sister's first husband, had returned from a watery grave after five years. The only trouble was, Helen now had another husband.

No, he wouldn't tell Helen.

The motel room was neat and modern, an impersonal room, but Paul Conrad barely noticed it as he faced the man he'd never expected to see again.

"What happened?" he asked, though he wanted to ask why. *Why did you disappear, why did you come back now, why did you call me? Why?*

"I fell off the boat, just like the newspapers said, but I didn't drown."

"I can see that," Paul said.

Ralph Jennings smiled. He'd always been quick with a smile, always the charming young man with the bright future. Helen hadn't been able to resist him. "I made it to shore somehow, but I was dazed and didn't remember clearly. It took me a couple of days before I was myself, and by that time Finley had told everybody I'd drowned. I didn't know what to do."

"So you did nothing."

Jennings averted his eyes. "Well, I guess so."

"What have you been doing for five years?"

"Sailing, mostly. I've been working on a cruise ship out of Miami. I always liked the sea, you

know. We make several runs each year between the various Caribbean ports, and to Bermuda. I only get to New York in the summer."

He was talking too fast, telling too much, and yet not enough. "What do you want me to do, Ralph? Helen's remarried, you know."

"I know. I saw it in the papers last winter. You probably won't believe this, but every year when I got to New York I'd say to myself, maybe this summer I'll call her. This year, with the remarriage and all, I figured I should. But the shock might hit her pretty hard—that's why I called you first."

"Weren't you ever curious about your three children?"

"Sure. Sure I was curious." His eyes were pleading, but somehow to Paul the pleading wasn't quite sincere enough. "You must think I'm some sort of a monster."

"You disappeared and let Helen think you were dead. You left your three children without a father."

Jennings ran a hand through his dark hair. "They had the insurance."

"Which will now have to be paid back."

"I don't know, Paul. I don't know what I was thinking of! So I was wrong! What can I do about it now?"

"Helen's pregnant, you know."

"I didn't know. How could I? Who is this guy, Paul?"

"Jack Winegood. He makes a pretty fair living as news director on one of the smaller New York radio stations. A good enough living so they can afford a cottage on Fire Island."

"Is that where she is now?"

Paul nodded. "Do you really want her to know you're still alive?"

"Of course! We've got to get this thing worked out."

Paul sighed and stood up. "I'll go talk to her, see how she's feeling. The police might take a dim view of your defrauding the insurance company, you know."

"*I* didn't get the money. And she was acting innocently. She didn't know I was alive."

"How long will you be in town?"

"The ship sails the first of next week, but I'll stay longer if necessary."

"It's too late to see her tonight," Paul decided. "I'll take off from work tomorrow and go see her in the morning. Stay close to your phone around noon."

"Right." He held out his hand. "And thanks, Paul."

"Don't thank me. You're in big

trouble, as if you don't know it."

The street was still hot, but he didn't really notice. On the way back to the apartment he stopped for a couple of stiff drinks.

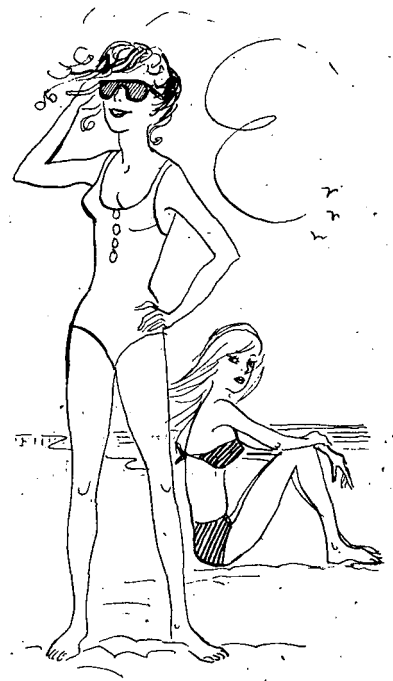
In the morning he drove out to Long Island's south shore and took one of the summer ferries over to Fire Island. The day was clear and a breeze off the ocean was just strong enough to make the heat bearable. He strolled along the boardwalk until he reached his sister's cottage, then went out through the sand to where he saw them at the water's edge. Helen was there with the three children and another woman, enjoying a morning swim in the salty surf.

As he approached, Helen stood up to greet him. "Playing hooky from work? This is only Friday, isn't it?" The white one-piece bathing suit was flat against her stomach, with no sign as yet of her pregnancy. At 29, she still looked like a college girl, and acted like one sometimes, too.

"How are you, Sis? Just thought I'd take a run out to see you."

"Great! Do you remember Sharon O'Connell? She was a bridesmaid at my first wedding."

Yes, he remembered Sharon O'Connell: tall and graceful and eternally sad, a serious girl in a world that needed one. He shook hands with her, noted the absence



of a wedding ring on her left hand, and wondered what she'd been doing with herself. "I didn't recognize you at first. How've you been, Sharon?"

"Fine. Just fine, Paul. It's been a long time."

"You working in New York?"

She nodded, studying him through heavy eye makeup that seemed out of place on the morning beach. "I still do a little modeling, though both the years and the pounds are catching up with me. I went to a party here last

night and ran into Helen. She invited me to spend the night, since Jack was working."

He turned to his sister. "Jack's in town?"

Helen nodded. "Covering the U.N. thing. He hopes to get out for the weekend."

"I wonder if Sharon would excuse us for a few moments, Helen. There's something I want to talk to you about. A family sort of thing."

Sharon rose to her feet on cue and grabbed the children's grasping hands. "Sure, you two go ahead. I'll take the kids for a run down the beach."

Paul watched her go, the long tanned legs kicking up sand as she ran. He was remembering that she'd once dated Ralph Jennings, a long time ago when they'd all been younger.

"Now, what's all the mystery?" Helen wanted to know.

"I'm afraid I've got a bit of surprising news for you. Last night—" He was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone in the cottage. Helen ran to answer it and he slipped out of his sport jacket, relaxing on the sand. Far off down the beach, Sharon and the children splashed noisily along the surf.

Helen came back after a few moments, her face pale even through the suntan. "That was Jack," she said.

"What's the matter?" His heart was pounding with sudden apprehension.

"He said . . . he said Ralph was alive. He said Ralph was alive until this morning, but that somebody had murdered him."

Ralph Jennings had died in the motel room where Paul had met him. He'd been shot in the forehead at close range, with a small-caliber pistol that made little noise. It appeared that he'd just opened the door to admit his murderer when he was shot. Another guest had discovered his body near the half-open door around eight a.m., and Jack Winegood had been covering the story for his station when Ralph's identity was determined.

Paul left Helen at the cottage with Sharon and the children, and caught the next ferry to the mainland. An hour later he was with Jack Winegood in his office.

"How's Helen taking it, Paul?" the big man asked. Jack was not a great deal unlike Ralph Jennings, though he'd always lacked Ralph's twinkle of charm. He was a businessman, and his business was the news.

"She's stunned, of course." Paul told Winegood about Ralph's phone call, and their meeting of

the previous night at the motel.

Helen's husband nodded as he listened. "The police will want to talk with you. That may have been the last time he was seen alive."

Paul had already considered the possibility, and he didn't like it. To his knowledge, on the previous evening he was the only one who knew that Ralph Jennings was still alive—and certainly that was one of the prerequisites for the killer: to know Ralph Jennings was alive. "You'd better get out there with Helen," he told Winegood. "I'll see the police."

He didn't, however, go directly to the police. They would only tie him up with hours of questioning or worse. There was somebody he wanted to talk with first.

Oat Finley had been a neighborhood character when Paul and Helen were growing up on the New Jersey coast. He'd come back from the war to open a boat charter service that allowed him plenty of time to sit on the dock and smoke his pipe. There had been those who spoke of an old war injury, of Oat being not quite right, but he'd always been friendly enough to Paul and his sister.

When Helen married Ralph Jennings, a strange sort of friendship had developed between Jennings and Oat. Before long, Jennings had bought a share of the failing charter-boat business, and he spent many nights and weekends on the water with Oat. It had been on one of those trips, five years ago, that he'd fallen overboard in the dark, and Oat Finley had reported him dead.

Paul hadn't seen Oat recently, but he knew where to find the man. The charter-boat service was still in operation, though now it had been moved to Staten Island, where its main customers were weekend fishermen who traveled out into the Atlantic with a collection of exotic lures and a couple of cases of beer.

It was midafternoon when Paul walked down the sagging wooden ramp to the deck of the *Brighter II* and called out to Oat Finley. "How are you, Oat? Remember me?"

Though Oat couldn't have been more than forty, he had a slow way about him that constantly brought forth guesses regarding his age, placing it anywhere over fifty. His hair was already gray, and the weather-beaten lines of his face seemed almost like old leather when he turned to smile at Paul.

"Conrad, aren't you? Helen's brother."

"That's right. Haven't seen you

in a number of years now, Oat."

"Been that long?" Oat bit on his pipe. "What can I do for you? Give you a good price if you want to rent the boat."

Paul sat down on a canvas deck chair opposite him. "I came about Ralph Jennings, Oat."

"Ralph Jennings?"

"He's dead."

The wrinkled eyelids closed for a moment, then opened to meet his gaze. "Ralph Jennings has been dead for five years," he said finally.

Paul shook his head. "No, Oat. Only for about ten or eleven hours."

The expression of friendly indifference didn't change. "He drowned."

"You thought he drowned, but he swam to shore. He's been alive all these years, working on a cruise ship. Last evening he called me and told me about it. Then sometime during the night he was murdered."

"What do you want from me?"

"I thought Ralph might have phoned you yesterday, too."

"He didn't. To me, he's been dead for five years, ever since that night on the boat. I don't know about anything else."

"Just what happened that night? Where were you bound?"

"I told all that when it happened. One of our boats, the *Brighter* it was, had developed engine trouble. We'd worked on it most of the day and took it out for a run to see if we'd gotten the kinks out. It was still making a funny noise, and Ralph leaned over the engine to try and spot the trouble. Just then we hit a swell and he went over the side. I swung the boat around, but in the darkness I couldn't find him."

"All right," Paul said. "And you haven't heard anything from him since?"

"What would I hear from a dead man?"

It was useless to explain any more. Paul thanked him and climbed back to the dock, feeling the sweat beginning to roll down the small of his back. He had visited Oat Finley and learned nothing at all. Now there was nobody left but the police.

Paul returned to the city and told his story to a calm and well-dressed detective who asked questions in a quiet voice and wrote everything down. They even gave him a cup of coffee, and when he left the station house it was with a relieved feeling that the worst was over.

"Hello, there," a voice spoke from the shadows as he was opening his car door.

"What?" He turned and saw

Sharon O'Connell leaning against the car next to his. "Well! This is unexpected."

"I always do the unexpected," she answered with a smile. "I spotted your car and decided to wait."

He wanted to ask how she knew what his car looked like, but instead he said, "Let's get a cup of coffee, then."

"I could use a drink a lot better, if you're buying."

"Sure."

She drove her own car, following him to a nearby bar that was reasonably quiet for a Friday night. Over two tall, frosty glasses he studied her carefully cool image and asked, "All right. You wanted to talk to me. What about?"

"Now that's a romantic opening!"

"My brother-in-law was murdered this morning. I'm not feeling romantic. You shouldn't, either, if memory serves. Didn't you date Ralph at one time?"

"My good man, that was a lifetime ago! He married your sister nearly ten years back. I went with him in college."

"Still—"

"Still, nothing! Besides, I didn't come here to talk about me. It's about your sister."

"Helen? What—?" Suddenly he was afraid of what was coming. He signaled the waiter for two more drinks.

"I told you I spent the night at Fire Island with her, but that's not strictly true. I met her at this party and came back to the cottage with her, but then she asked me to look after the children and she went out again. She was gone for three hours, Paul."

"Did you tell this to the police?"

"Of course not. Do you think . . . Paul, would that have been time enough for her to drive into Manhattan and back?"

He thought about it and nodded. "Just barely. Are you implying that Helen drove into town and killed Ralph Jennings?"

"Of course not! I'm just telling you because that's what the police might think if they get wind of this. Helen is a friend of mine, and I think she needs help. I think you're the only one who can reach her right now."

"What about her husband?"

"Oh, sure! I'm going to go to Jack Winegood and tell him his wife was away from home for three hours in the middle of the night! While he was working! How do you think that would sound?"

"Better than murder, I suppose. You know, another man might be

her only alibi if this thing gets out."

"How's it going to get out?"

He played with his glass, forming moist circles on the table. "Things have a way of getting around. If there's another man, he might talk. And if she took the ferry, several people must have seen her."

Sharon leaned back in her chair. "So now you can worry about it, too."

"Did she get a phone call while you were with her last night?"

"No. Not after we got back to the cottage. This all seemed to have been set up before."

He knew he'd have to face Helen with his knowledge. They'd never had secrets from one another, not all through childhood when they confided their innermost thoughts while hanging upside down from the big elm in Grandmother's yard. "All right," he said finally. "Thanks, I think."

"Is there anything I can do to help, Paul?"

"I guess not. Except . . . Well, you knew Ralph pretty well at one time."

"So did you."

"I know, but not the same way. Sometimes I wonder if I really knew him at all." He paused, not knowing how to put it into words. "Sharon, did he ever give you any hint that he might have been involved in something not exactly honest?"

"What do you mean?" Her eyes sharpened with something like apprehension.

"He'd been hiding for five years. Why? Was he hiding from Helen, or something else? If it was from Helen, why would he have come back this summer? Not just because he suddenly heard about her marriage. Examine the thing logically, Sharon. The news of her marriage brought him out into the open, therefore it couldn't have been hatred or dislike of my sister that kept him away."

"Maybe he reappeared just to make more trouble for her."

"Then why did he call me first, to ease the shock? Why didn't he just barge in on her—or better still, call her husband?"

Sharon O'Connell lit a cigarette. "Maybe he did call Jack. He was in town last night, remember. Jack could have killed him."

Paul tried to examine his current brother-in-law objectively. Yes, he could imagine Jack Winegood committing murder; but would he have shot Ralph Jennings, a man he'd never met, as soon as Ralph opened the door of his room? "I doubt it," he told Sharon.

"Then it gets back to Helen, doesn't it? There's no one else he would have called."

"I'll talk to her," Paul said. "Tomorrow."

"I'm driving back to Fire Island tonight, if you want to come along."

"Sure," he decided suddenly. "Helen and Jack have a guest room. I'll stay with them overnight."

The ride out was uneventful, and he began to regret having left his own car in town. Now he'd be stranded out there till Jack drove in sometime the following day, and he didn't know just when that might be.

"Looks like rain," Sharon said on the ferry, glancing up at the stars as they gradually faded from view behind a curtain of clouds.

"Summer storm. In another month we'll be having hurricanes."

"You're a dreamer, Paul. You always were. Only most of your dreams are nightmares." She gazed out at the rippling waters. "Why don't you get married and settle down?"

"Is that a proposal, or are you just filling in for Helen with the kid-sister bit?"

"Neither one. I like you, that's all."

"You liked Ralph, too," he reminded her, awaiting her reaction.

"Sure I did. I liked a lot of guys back in those days."

"What was it about Ralph? Why didn't you two ever hit it off?"

She turned her eyes toward him, just for an instant. "Maybe Helen came along. That's what you wanted me to say, wasn't it?"

"No."

"Maybe I left those kids alone last night, and took the ferry in myself. Maybe I killed him, because he'd come back to Helen again. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

"No."

"Damn you, Paul Conrad! You never change, do you?"

"How should I change? Should I go away and disappear for five years, like Ralph did? Should I jump over the side right now?"

They were mostly silent for the rest of the trip across, and Sharon left him before he reached his sister's cottage. It was night on Fire Island, but it was a Friday night, and there were parties in progress in some of the cottages. He found Helen and Jack alone on their porch with tall glasses clinking of ice cubes, and he settled into a chair opposite them.

"Can you put me up for the night?" he asked Helen. "I'll ride in with Jack tomorrow."

"Sure. How'd you get out here?"

"Sharon drove me. I ran into her at the police station."

"Anything new?" Helen asked.

"Jack probably knows as much as I do."

Jack Winegood shifted in his wicker chair. "The police think it might have been a sneak thief who thought the room was empty and panicked when he found Jennings there."

"Sure. Guys come back from the dead every day to get killed by hotel thieves."

Winegood shrugged. "Stranger things have happened."

"Jack, get Paul a drink, will you? We've been sitting here talking and he doesn't even have a glass."

Winegood mumbled something and disappeared into the cottage. It was the chance for which Paul had been waiting. He stared into the darkness at the glowing tip of his sister's cigarette. "Sharon says you were away from here last night."

"What? Oh, I guess I went up to the store for something."

"Are you in trouble, Helen?" he asked, wishing he could see her face more clearly.

"Why should I be?"

"You'd have been in trouble if Ralph had lived. You'd have had one husband more than allowed."

"So I'd have hired myself a good lawyer."

"Helen . . . I don't think I ever asked you this before. Did you still love Ralph when he disappeared?"

"He was the father of my children."

"But did you still love him?"

The screen door slammed and Jack Winegood reappeared with Paul's drink. "Hope you felt like gin, boy. The Scotch is all gone."

"Fine." He wondered how much of the conversation Helen's husband had heard, but he didn't particularly care.

"You'd better get some sleep if you're driving in with me tomorrow. I have to be at the station by nine."

"I'll be ready."

He sipped his drink, tasting the burning coolness of the gin going down. When Helen and Jack went in to bed, he decided to stay up for a while longer, and strolled down the beach with his glass, feeling the warmth of the sand as it sifted into his shoes. There was a moon now, and the threat of a storm had passed. He remembered Sharon, and headed for the cottage where she was staying, but there was a party going on there. A girl who might have been Sharon was laughingly fighting off

a shadowy young man on the front steps.

Paul felt old and tired and went back to his bed.

By noon on Saturday he was back at the police station, seeking out the young detective who'd questioned him. The man's name was Rivers, and he remembered Paul with a casual greeting. He was still well-dressed, but this time he didn't offer Paul any coffee.

"You've remembered something else, Mr. Conrad?" he asked pleasantly.

"Not exactly. I just had an idea that might help you."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Well, if Ralph's killer wasn't just a sneak thief—if it was someone who *knew* Ralph was still alive and back in New York—then Ralph must have phoned him as he did me. Hotels and motels keep a record of calls made by guests, don't they?"

The detective smiled slightly. "They usually record the total number of local calls made, and the individual telephone numbers in the case of long-distance calls."

"Then you can check—"

"We have checked, Mr. Conrad."

"Well?"

"Ralph Jennings placed only one call from his room, and that would have been the local call to you. It looks as if you were the only person who knew he was still alive."

After that, Paul had one more angle to try—the nagging suspicion that something other than Helen had kept Ralph in hiding during the past five years. Something else, and that something else just might have been an illicit undertaking of some sort. He'd always been suspicious of the amount of time Jennings spent on the boat with Oat Finley.

He found Jack Winegood at the station, checking the news ticker for the latest out of Washington. "I was wondering if you could help me, Jack. You've got an in with the police."

His brother-in-law blinked and put down the yellow sheet of news bulletins. "What do you want?"

"Can you find out if a man named Oat Finley has a police record? Either here or in New Jersey?"

"Finley? Wasn't he on that boat with Jennings five years ago?"

"That's right. He lives out on Staten Island now."

"You're trying to solve this murder all by yourself, aren't you? Mind telling me why?"

"I'd rather not, Jack."

Winegood studied him a mo-

ment longer. "Look, I didn't want to mention it in the car coming in this morning . . . I guess maybe you and I haven't been the closest of friends, but I heard part of your conversation with Helen last night. I know you're doing this for her, and I appreciate it."

"Then you'll check on Oat Finley?"

"Wait in my office. If he has a record in New York City, I can get the information over the telephone. New Jersey will be tougher."

Paul went into the office where he'd met with Winegood just twenty-four hours earlier, when both of them were still shocked by the news of Ralph's reappearance and murder. He dropped into one of the sticky leather armchairs and lit a cigarette, prepared for a lengthy wait while Winegood was busy on the phone. The office was a reflection of the man, drab and ordinary, with occasional flashes of interest in the form of framed and autographed pictures. A former mayor, a current senator—the newsmakers. On his desk was a paperweight in the shape of a microphone.

Winegood returned in ten minutes. "That was a good guess," he said. "Oat Finley's been arrested twice. The first time was eight years ago, on suspicion of running contraband Scotch whisky into the country from a ship ten miles offshore. The charges were finally dismissed, because of some problem with the evidence—illegal search and seizure. Two years ago, Federal agents grabbed him on a similar charge—this time selling whisky without a tax stamp on it. He was convicted, but received a suspended sentence for a first offense."

"Interesting."

"Here's something even more interesting. Did you know it was Finley who identified Jennings' body yesterday morning? A card in Jennings' wallet listed him as next of kin."

"I'll be damned!" Paul moved to the edge of the chair, feeling the rush of excitement through his veins. It was a long shot, but it had paid off. "I talked to him yesterday and he never mentioned it. In fact, he pretended to know nothing about Jennings surviving the boat accident."

"He knew, all right."

"I guess he did." Suddenly the pieces were dropping into place for Paul. "When I talked with Ralph, he mentioned that he was dazed after the accident. The water wouldn't have done that, but a hit on the head might have. I think Ralph was in on Oat's smuggling activities. He must have

known about them, with all the time he spent on the boat with Oat Finley. Something happened that night five years ago, and Oat tried to kill him. Ralph was scared and decided to play dead, until he heard about Helen's remarriage to you. Then he decided to return and straighten things out—and Oat killed him again."

"Where is this guy?" Winegood asked.

"Staten Island. I'm going out there."

"So am I, Paul."

"I think I can handle him."

Jack Winegood smiled. "I'm still a newsman, and this is the best story I've had all summer. I'm sticking with it."

They left together, and headed through Brooklyn toward the bridge to Staten Island.

Oat Finley's boat was there, bobbing gently against the dock, but he was nowhere in sight. Paul squinted into the sun and finally settled on a bald little man who ran a hot-dog stand at one end of the pier.

"How's the fishing, Pop?"

"Good, I guess. Don't fish much myself."

"We wanted to rent a boat. Oat Finley's boat."

"That one out there, with the big mast. Nice one, but he don't rent it much."

"You seen him around today?"

"Not in the last hour or two."

"Where does he live, when he's not on the boat?"

"Got an apartment with a nephew of his, up on the hill. That red brick building."

"The nephew been around today?"

The bald man shook his head. "He usually works the boat with Oat, but I ain't seen him in a couple of days."

Paul climbed the hill, with Winegood behind, thinking as he always did that Staten Island was a place apart. Even the bridge, stretching across the harbor entrance like some steel umbilical, had fed the island only with greater numbers, but not yet with the peculiar turmoil that was the real New York.

"Wait outside," Paul told Winegood when they reached the apartment building. "He might try to get away."

"All right."

Paul went up the steps carefully, wishing he had some weapon, then remembering that this was Oat Finley—old Oat, the neighborhood character. No one to fear, even if he were a murderer.

"Oat!" He knocked softly on the door, then louder. "Oat!"

The door was unlocked. Oat

had never been one for locking doors. He stepped in, ready for anything except what he saw.

Oat Finley was seated in a chair facing the door, staring at him with three eyes. The third eye was a bullet hole, and old Oat wasn't needing any of them to see.

Downstairs, Paul found Jack Winegood still waiting. "He's dead, murdered. Not too long ago."

The blood drained from Winegood's face, and he seemed to sway.

Paul steadied him. "I know how you feel. If Oat Finley was guilty, that meant Helen was innocent. Now we're back where we started, only worse."

"She's my wife, Paul."

"And she's my sister. I think . . ." He was staring back down the hill at the shoreline, watching one of the crafts pull slowly away from the dock. He couldn't be mistaken. It was Oat Finley's *Brighter II*. "Jack! Stay here and call the police!" he shouted, already running down the hill.

"Where are you—?"

Paul couldn't hear any more. He was running with the momentum of a downhill race, his eyes never leaving the sleek white hull as it moved slowly, but with gaining speed, through the choppy waters of the Lower Bay. It might have been heading for Fire Island, or for a thousand other points on the opposite shore.

"Quick!" Panting, gasping for breath. "What's the fastest boat I can rent here?"

"Well, mister, I've got a speedboat over there that's pretty fast."

"Can you catch the *Brighter II*?"

"Oat Finley's barge? Any day in the week!"

"Here's ten bucks if you catch it right now."

"You're on, mister."

The man knew his craft, sent it kicking through the crests as if driven by a fury. Within five minutes they were gaining, closing the gap with the *Brighter II*.

"He thinks it's a race," the man told Paul. "He's speeding up."

"Catch him!"

"I saw it go out, but that's not Oat on board."

"I know," Paul said. He no longer had to ask who it was.

"Clouding up. Looks like a storm to the east."

Spray in his face, salty to his tongue, Paul didn't bother to answer. They were overtaking the *Brighter II* again, and this time they would catch her.

"When you're close enough, I'm going to jump for it," Paul told the man.

"Damn fool stunt! Give me my ten bucks first!"

He handed the man his money, then stood upright, grasping the sticky windshield. "Get a little closer."

"You'll kill yourself, mister."

Paul waited another instant, until he felt he could almost touch the sleek silvery side of the other craft. Then he launched himself into space, clawing for a handhold. One foot hit the water, and he thought he'd be grabbed under, but then he was pulling himself over the railing, rolling into the stern of the craft.

He got shakily to his feet and clawed his way forward to the tiny cabin. He knew there'd be a gun, and when he saw it pointed at him he felt no fear.

"Hello, Ralph," he said above the roar of the engines. "Back from the dead a second time?"

Ralph Jennings didn't lower the gun. He kept his left hand on the wheel, but his eyes and the pistol were both on Paul. "You had to come after me, didn't you?"

"Helen's in trouble, Ralph. They're going to think she did it."

The eyes were hard and cold above the gun. "They'll know soon enough it wasn't me that got killed. I only needed to confuse things until I could get to that rat Finley and catch him off guard."

"I know about all that, Ralph."

"How, Paul? How'd you know?"

"I didn't tumble for a long time, not till just a few minutes ago, in fact, when I saw the way you were handling this boat. But I should have. Of course I didn't see the body, and neither did Helen. Winegood might have seen it while he was reporting the killing, but he'd never met you. And this morning I learned that Oat Finley had identified the body! That really set me to thinking. I'd already figured out how you and Finley were running whisky ashore from ships and selling it tax-free back in the old days. Your story about being dazed after the accident made me think that it wasn't an accident at all, but a case of thieves falling out. Finley tried to kill you, and you decided to go into hiding rather than call the police and get yourself deeper into trouble."

The craft hit a swell, and Ralph had to steady himself. "Keep talking."

"So this summer, finally, you came back. Helen had remarried, and I guess you realized you weren't being fair to her. You phoned me, and then you phoned Oat Finley, because you knew he'd find out you'd returned. You were more clever with those

phone calls than you realized. The police check showed you'd only made one local call from your room. This baffled me, till I realized that there wouldn't have been a Staten Island phone book in your room. You could have called Information, but instead I suppose you went down to the lobby, looked up the number, and called Oat from there."

"You're smart, Paul. Wasting your time in the art business."

"Oat Finley knew you were going to have to tell everything about your disappearance, including his attempt to kill you and his illegal smuggling business. He was already on a suspended sentence, and he knew it would mean prison for him. You figured he'd try to kill you again Thursday night, but what you didn't figure was that instead of coming himself he'd send his nephew—who'd taken over as his criminous partner after you disappeared."

"You're guessing now."

"Not at all! You were ready for something, killed the nephew, and switched identification with him, to confuse things till you could kill Finley and be safe from him. But in switching wallets you must have missed a card he carried listing Oat Finley as his next of kin. When I heard that the police called Finley to identify the body, I should have known right away it wasn't you. You wouldn't be listing your would-be murderer as next of kin. Apparently this card didn't have the nephew's own name on it, because the police only needed Finley's word to be convinced the body was yours. Of course, the truth would come out quickly enough if they checked the fingerprints or showed the body to Helen, but you needed only a few hours. Finley gave you more time than you expected, because he saw an advantage to himself in identifying the dead man as you—he could kill you later and throw your body in the ocean, and the police would never untangle the thing. He must have figured his nephew wouldn't be missed. He could always make up a story to cover his absence."

Ralph suddenly swerved the boat, scanning the harbor area with a quick eye. "Talk faster, Paul. I'm getting impatient."

"You got to Finley this morning, before he could find you, and killed him. When I found his body, the pieces began to fit together. The first dead man was a kin of Finley's, and a nephew was missing. If the dead man was the nephew, I figured you'd killed them both—otherwise, why go into hiding again right after reappearing? When I was chasing the

boat just now, I could see it was in the hands of someone who knew it. That made it you for sure. Now tell me where you're going."

"Away. Just away."

"You think you can? Even if the police don't go checking fingerprints, some newspaper's bound to print your picture from five years ago. The cops will know quickly enough that it's not your body, that you set up the scene in the motel room to look like you were shot opening the door. They've probably got a pickup out for you already."

"Then Helen won't have to worry." He stared down at the gun in his hand, as if seeing it for the first time. "I thought Oat was just running untaxed whisky, and I helped him with it. Then one night I discovered there was heroin in the cases, too. I wanted out, and that's when he tried to kill me. That's why he sent the nephew to kill me, too. I don't feel guilty about killing either of them."

The craft hit another harbor swell, throwing Ralph off balance. Paul went at him, trying for the gun, but he wasn't fast enough. There was a single shot and Ralph Jennings crumpled into the corner. By the time Paul tore his shirt away, Ralph's blood was on them both. He tried to speak, and then died in Paul's arms as the *Brighter II* cruised unmanned in widening circles.

Paul looked down at his sister, playing in the sand with her youngest child. "Do you want to tell me where you were that night, Helen?" he asked her quietly.

"I've told Jack, and he's the only one who needs to know. It was just a messy little Fire Island affair, and it's over now."

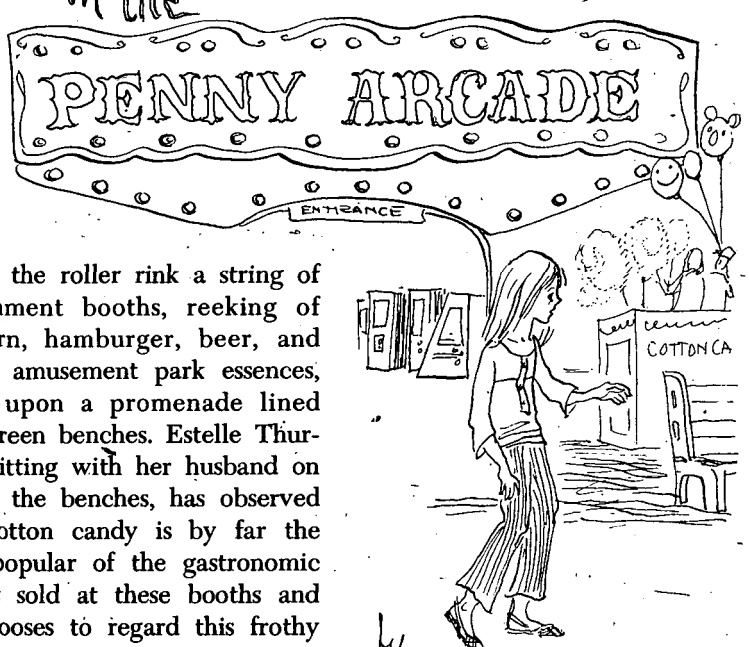
"I'm glad. Jack's a pretty decent guy."

She nodded. "Maybe this summer hasn't been so bad after all."

Paul kicked at the sand with his bare foot. Down the beach he could see Sharon O'Connell walking toward them. "Maybe not," he agreed.

Compassion, frequently one's ruling emotion, may also coincidentally reveal a personal vulnerability.

The Girl in the PENNY ARCADE



by Donald Olson

Under the roller rink a string of refreshment booths, reeking of popcorn, hamburger, beer, and similar amusement park essences, opens upon a promenade lined with green benches. Estelle Thurman, sitting with her husband on one of the benches, has observed that cotton candy is by far the most popular of the gastronomic horrors sold at these booths and she chooses to regard this frothy confection as a symbol of universal longing, a promise of delectable enjoyment which, like life itself, melts all too quickly into nothingness.

This is not the sort of notion she would dare impart to her husband; Guy is not what you would call a man of thought and that musing look on his face cloaks nothing deeper than a gross

wistfulness as he watches the cute young girls in hip-clinging jeans parade upstairs to the roller rink, from which is issuing visceral music of a generation Estelle makes no pretense of understanding.

Behind them is the penny arcade and beyond that, the rides; in front of them is the lake ringed with flares that will be lighted at ten o'clock. The annual fireworks display has been advertised for the same hour although Estelle, from past experience, knows this is a lie; greedy for every holiday nickle it can squeeze from the crowd, the park management will not climax the day's events until midnight at the earliest.

Over Guy's protests, they will remain, because only by preserving these rituals of the past can Estelle pay homage to the memory of little Barry. Even now her copper-colored eyes search among the children, picking out a thatch of blond hair, a pug nose, a slightly faun-like pair of ears that remind her of her dead son.

Her first glimpse of the girl interrupts this morbid preoccupation, for compassion is the ruling emotion of Estelle's nature and the pitiful appearance of the girl makes an immediate impression on her. A certain blankness of expression and timidity of movement, and the way she holds one skinny arm before her as if feeling her way among unseen obstacles, suggest the girl might be blind; but then a youngster crosses her path waving a candied apple and the girl pauses, her gaze following the bright bobbing object, and Estelle decides she is not blind but merely defective.

Sloppy huaraches, a sleazy green blouse and pink corduroy slacks give the girl the look of a refugee from some natural disaster who has dressed herself out of a Red Cross grab bag and now wanders dazed and forlorn among throngs of the dispossessed, looking for someone to whom she might belong. Indeed, she seems to be tagging along behind a family group who may or may not be aware of her but who pay no attention as she stands gaping while they munch hot dogs at one of the counters.

Estelle soon loses sight of her in the crowd and is left to ponder the injustice of a child as bright and winning as Barry having to die when the world is so full of hopeless ones.

"I'm tired of this place," Guy says, getting up. "Let's move around."

The lake is dismally uninviting in the grayness of dusk, so they wander up to the penny arcade where the musk of sweating youth

and the shelves of junky unattainable prizes and the slam-bang clamor of blinking, popping, rat-a-tat-tating games of chance do not offend Estelle, for this was Barry's favorite haunt on those Fourth of July excursions. There's the sharpshooter game he loved to play, the iron hand that tested his strength, the wax medium who told his false fortune, the booth where he mugged for two-bit snapshots which even now are enshrined among a dozen other photos in Estelle's purse, her precious pictorial record of Barry's ten years on earth.

Between the machines of chance, Estelle glimpses the strange girl's face once more, pale, rapturous, framed by lank ribbons of dirty brown hair.

"I'm going to the Men's," Guy says with a nudge, telling her to wait there for him. She nods absently, all her attention focused on the girl, who is now lingering over one of the machines. Estelle moves closer. It's the machine displaying slick-skinned smiling faces of film stars, male and female, which will pop out, autographed, at the insertion of a coin and the pressing of a button.

The girl fishes out a coin and slides it into the machine, pushes a button. Nothing happens. No picture drops into her waiting hand. Once more she presses the button, and again, and finally, trembling with frustration, she paws at the glass-shielded faces with white bony fingers.

Furious, Estelle rushes forward to help.

"Let me try, dear. This the one you want?"

Close up, the girl's eyes remind Estelle of a flowering plant called Job's Tears that bloomed in her grandmother's garden, bluer than violets but somehow sad-looking, perhaps because of its name.

Estelle jabs the button with no better results. Truly angry now, she sets her purse on an adjoining machine and, literally embracing the photo machine, she tries to shake it into action, the world once more reduced to symbolic terms: helpless victim against evil management.

My gosh, she thinks, *maybe the kid used the wrong coin.* She reaches for her purse—and finds it gone. Three laughing nuns jam her against the machine and not until they've passed does she realize that the girl, too, is gone.

When Guy comes back he finds Estelle quizzing the family the girl had been following. The woman answers lackadaisically, wary of this frail copper-eyed woman who has cornered her in this bedlam, but the small girl

pipes up: "*She* ain't with us. We don't even know *her.*"

The man says, "Saw her down by the rink. Some goofy teenager."

Guy demands an explanation; she tells him what happened.

"What do you mean, *took* it? Grabbed it out of your hand?"

"I set it down for just a—"

"Are you nuts? In *this* place?" Yet he seems maliciously pleased with what happened. "Feeling sorry for every freak you see, good, hope it learns you a lesson. Well, come on, might as well report it. Fat chance it'll do any good."

"All Barry's pictures. Every one. Oh, Guy, I've got to get them back. I can't lose them. They're all I've got left."

His reply is lost in the noise of the crowd and, anyway, she is crying too hard to hear.

In the following days she grieved for the loss of the pictures almost as intensely as she had grieved for the loss of the boy himself, all her energies absorbed by the emotion to the point where she could handle only minimal household duties. Together with a mind-wilting heat wave, this freshness of grief quite immobilized her and she would sit in the swing on the front porch gazing sightlessly over the unwatered boxes of geraniums and petunias to the empty street, over which the maple leaves seemed to cast shadows as thick and black as boiling-hot tar.

Then a strange and disconcerting thing happened. As she sat there one afternoon listlessly fanning herself with an unread magazine, she saw the odd girl from the penny arcade, dressed in the same shabby clothes, trudging down the street toward the house.

That the girl should pop up in this neighborhood filled Estelle with confusion and foreboding. Her first impulse was to scurry inside and lock the door, and this was such a strong impulse she would surely have yielded to it had the girl not by now come close enough for the object in her hand to be recognized. The purse!

Suddenly giddy, Estelle had to grip the chain from which the swing was suspended and cling tightly to it as she watched the girl come down the sidewalk and up to the porch, where she stood looking up at Estelle with those vivid, empty, flower-like eyes.

"You're the girl in the penny arcade, aren't you?" was all Estelle could think to say. The girl nodded.

"You've brought the purse back." Estelle slowly released her

grip on the chain. "Well, that was nice of you. Very nice. You'd better come up here out of the sun before you melt."

Obediently, the girl came up onto the porch and sat down beside Estelle on the swing, but this proximity was somehow unwelcome to Estelle; she was not quite ready for it and she got up, saying, "You must be parched. I'll bet a glass of ice-cold lemonade would just hit the spot. Be back in a jiffy."

The girl hadn't spoken a word, and though she looked perfectly harmless sitting there on the swing, Estelle remembered the vanishing act in the penny arcade. "I'll put the purse inside." When she moved to take it, the girl hugged it to her thin chest. Estelle laughed uncomfortably. "Okay. Lemonade first. Thanks for guarding it so well. My husband swore I'd seen the last of it."

No recriminations seemed the best way to handle it. All that mattered was that she get it back.

She brought out a pitcher and two glasses and some glazed doughnuts. The girl hadn't moved. This time, Estelle sat down in the green wicker chair. The girl raised her glass to her lips.

"My poor geraniums," said Estelle conversationally. "I guess they need a drink, too."

At this, the girl would have poured her lemonade into the flower box had Estelle not stopped her with a startled cry.

"They don't like lemonade. Too acidy. I'll water them later." She tried to keep her eyes off the purse pressed snugly against the girl's hip. "You haven't told me your name. I'm Estelle Thurman."

The girl reached into her pocket and handed Estelle a very grubby-looking card. It said: *I am mute.* Nothing more; no name, no plea for funds. The utter simplicity, the cruel baldness of the message quickened Estelle's sympathy.

"I'm so very sorry, dear. Would you like some more lemonade? And don't be afraid of the doughnuts." Having said this, she was at a loss. Of course it occurred to her, not being a complete simpleton, that the girl might be a phony, and yet she wouldn't really have cared one way or another, being the sort of person who looks beyond the obvious trickeries for those shadowy sick impulses of the soul that prompt them; in other words, the possibility of deceit did not undermine her compassion but only added an element of melancholy to it. If it were all a trick, she would play along.

"You're a dear precious child for finding my purse and bringing

it back to me. I'm going to give you a reward!"

She watched for some answering signal of complicity, but the blue-flower eyes were unreadable, the eyes of a born spectator, remote and uninvolved.

Once more Estelle jumped up and went inside, and when she came back she held a ten dollar bill in her hand. "See? Like I said, a reward. May I have the purse now, please?"

The exchange was made. Estelle settled back and then, realizing she had been sweating like an invalid with a high fever, she swabbed delicately at her forehead and eyelids with a handkerchief.

Victory was brief; the instant Estelle opened the purse to put the handkerchief away she saw that the album of pictures was not there. The money was there, astonishingly, as were the cosmetics, a receipted gas bill, pen and memo pad, a roll of candy, credit cards—but not the pictures.

She tried to smile at the girl. "There was a little white leather album, you must have seen it. Pictures of my little boy who died. Now, honey, you may not understand, but those pictures were very precious to me. More than the money or anything else. I must have them back."

Holding her glass in both hands, like a child, the girl drained the last drop, then sucked on a sliver of ice.

"Did you see the pictures, dear?"

She nodded, her expression still not so much solemn as remote.

"Do you have them with you?"

The girl calmly sucked on the ice. Estelle began to sweat; her face grew red. "Goodness me, I'm beginning to think you're a naughty little blackmailer, honey." Her voice developed an edge, sharp but not cutting. "Okay, then. If you insist on victimizing a poor mother who's lost her little boy, I suppose there's nothing I can do about it. The way of the world, alas." This plaintive lament was lost on the girl. Estelle took out five dollars. "Here. Take this, and give me the pictures."

The girl didn't move, not even an eyelid. Estelle quivered with rage. Tears stung her eyes. "You take it. You take this money and give me back my pictures. Give them back—or I'll go right in the house and call the police."

To her dismay, the girl instead drew the ten dollar bill from her pocket and held it toward Estelle. Estelle gasped. "I don't want that! I gave you that. Because I thought you were a good, decent, honest girl. That was a reward.

But it's the pictures! It's Barry I want back. They're all I've got left. Please, please give them back."

The girl upended the glass but the last piece of ice stuck to the bottom and wouldn't slide down into her open mouth. That horrid feeling of giddiness was taking possession of Estelle again and she knew she ought to go in and take a heart pill, only she didn't dare let the girl out of her sight.

"Tell me the truth. Do you have the pictures?"

This time the girl shook her head, but too quickly. Was she lying? There was no way to tell.

"Then who has them? Tell me—" but that was absurd; the girl couldn't *tell* her anything. A sudden inspiration; she opened the purse and took out the little gold pen and memo pad. "Here. Write it down. Who has my pictures?"

The girl picked up the pen and wrote something. Estelle grabbed the pad.

Dominus.

"*Dom*inus? Someone named Dominus has my pictures?"

A quick nod, and this time Estelle was positive she detected a trace of slyness. Oh, it was all too maddening. Her head began to ache and the lemonade which had tasted so refreshing going down seemed in danger of coming up again. She was afraid she was going to be sick in front of the girl, and with a murmured apology, rushed inside to the bathroom.

When she returned to the porch the swing was still gently rocking back and forth, but it was empty. The girl was gone.

Estelle had to lie down after that; with tight-shut eyes she reflected upon the encounter and the depths of human iniquity; extortion, kidnapping, murder—the world was full of it. War, cancer, and broken shoelaces; death and despair, and all you're given is a choice of miseries. Paralyzed by hopelessness, she felt needles of terror doing curious things to her heart. Once she gave a convulsive jerk, sensing that someone had entered the house.

Someone had, but it was only Guy. "Where the hell's supper?"

"What?"

"Supper. *Din-din.* The evening meal, dopey."

Was it that late? Had she dozed? "Guy, listen. The funniest thing happened. Look. I got my purse back."

He examined it carefully, as if it couldn't possibly be the same one. She told him the circumstances of its return and all about the missing pictures, a detail that seemed to please him, if anything. A beast would have shown more

sympathy toward its own mate.

"You got the important things back, so quit moaning. And put some grub on the table, will you? I've got to go out tonight." He was an insurance salesman and made frequent evening calls.

"Please, Guy. Not tonight."

"No choice."

"I don't want to be alone tonight."

"What are you scared of? The big bad wolf?"

She didn't know what she feared. The funny way her heart was acting; the storm that wouldn't break; some phantom of the unforeseen lurking in the bottom of the night? Fear is as undefinable as love and must be taken on faith.

"Dominus," she murmured, for she could not get that peculiar name out of her mind. "Have you ever heard of a name like that?"

"If you'd ever studied anything besides cake-mixing you'd know it was Latin, stupid. Means master. Lord or master. Like I'm your *dominus*, see? So hightail it into the kitchen and get busy."

The idea of spending the evening alone was so intolerable she called Maggie Dakin, one of her neighbors, to come and sit with her.

"Sort of queer, seems to me, honey," sly Maggie hinted. "All this night work. Thought the newer fellows had to do that."

"I really don't know." Estelle had never thought about it. Since Barry's death her emotional resources had been expended entirely upon his memory. It would not have been too great an exaggeration to say that Guy had been sacrificed, in a manner of speaking, in order to give Barry's ghost what substance it had.

Dissatisfied with so vague a response to her feeler, Maggie probed no further into the subject of Guy's domestic truancy, and finding Estelle's manner too withdrawn for even the most casual exchange of gossip, she soon made up a story about having a pie in the oven and quickly escaped.

Which is how the setting sun looked to Estelle, rather like a juicy pie, swollen and bubbly, which had been left in the oven too long and was in danger of running over. The streets were empty, as if everyone were hiding less from the heat than from some impending calamity. The storm, when it broke, would come as suddenly as the bursting of a concealed bomb. Left alone now at the mercy of her own unbalanced affections, Estelle longed for that explosion.

The laundromat was a dreary,

dilapidated hole in the wall, last surviving enterprise in a defunct shopping center in a decaying section of town. Estelle went there only because it was the nearest one to home. Tufted with whiskers of green grass, the parking lot was littered with great chunks of broken asphalt. Inside the laundromat, half the machines were broken, the lavatory dirty, the walls a pattern of cracked plaster, and the sour air as repugnant to Estelle as the ragged scandal tabloids littering a cigarette-burned table beside a torn orange couch. Nor were the patrons, transients and hippies mostly, any less depressing.

She was pleased to find only one other person there, but when she saw who it was she nearly dropped her bundle of laundry. It was the mute girl!

This time Estelle could think of nothing to say, no suitable word of reproach or recognition. The girl seemed not to expect one and yet she didn't appear at all surprised to see Estelle. She might almost have been expecting her this night.

No indeed, thought Estelle; *I shan't say a word. Two can play the same game.* So she proceeded to load her laundry into a machine without addressing a single word to the girl. When that was done she sat down on the orange couch and pretended to read one of the tabloids, but all the while it was as if she were waiting for something to happen. When it did, she seemed to know it without lifting her eyes from the print; she could sense the girl's distress and, though she struggled not to respond to it, she looked up.

The girl's machine had stopped before its cycle had hardly begun and the wretched child stood looking at it in a state of hopeless confusion.

Well, too bad, thought Estelle. *That was my first mistake and I'm not about to repeat it.*

Yet her heart was not made of stone and she was constitutionally incapable of ignoring someone in trouble. She tossed the paper aside and got up.

"For goodness sake, child, take them out and put them in another machine. That's all you have to do. This one's given up the ghost. Here, I'll help you unload it."

Not until she had pulled several wet garments from the machine—dungarees and T-shirts mostly—did she notice something odd. With a violent shudder, she dropped what she was holding. It was spattered with bloodstains.

She looked sharply into the girl's face and found it still as remote as the dark side of the

moon. In a faint voice she said, "Put them in another machine," adding, almost automatically, "you'd better use more detergent."

Estelle would have fled from the place at once had her own laundry not been thrashing away inside another machine. As it was, she went to the door and stood looking out into the ill-lit parking lot. How far away the nearest houses looked; they might have been on another planet. Her heart was working like a bad engine, racing, then sputtering as if about to stop, then recovering with ugly throbbing pulsations.

Never in her life had she been so relieved as when she saw a pair of headlights coming toward her across the parking lot, even though the vehicle itself when it came into view was hardly prepossessing—a battered van, its peeling green paint enlivened with wildly-painted flowers, stars, and symbolic designs she couldn't interpret.

The driver, an even less prepossessing sight, jumped down and strode cockily into the laundromat. He was black-bearded, young, wearing sandals, dungarees, and a blue tunic open upon his hairy bare chest where a silver medallion glittered under the fluorescent lights.

What happened next brought on a seizure of giddiness worse than any Estelle had yet suffered, for the man walked straight up to the girl and whispered something to her. The girl started making hand signals in that language of mutes which had always fascinated Estelle but which now merely sharpened her anxiety.

The man turned and looked at Estelle.

When he came toward her, she backed against the plate-glass window, one hand sliding up to her throat. He smiled as he approached, raising his hand in what was obviously some sort of occult gesture of greeting.

"I am Dominus," he said, as if confirming something he assumed Estelle already knew.

Her eyes flitted toward the machine, knowing it hadn't completed its cycle. She tried to appear unperturbed.

"Sorry about the pictures." His voice was as compelling as those wild dark eyes.

"Pictures?"

He laughed. "Pictures she crooked from your bag."

"Oh. Those pictures. Yes. Well . . ." Then, refusing to be cowed by a pair of hippies, she straightened her shoulders. "She said you have them."

He caressed his beard. "The

myth of property causes all our hassles."

"But they're nothing to you. Didn't she tell you? They're all I've got left of my little boy. Every picture I had of him. Every likeness." She tried without success to keep the emotion out of her voice. "Please. May I have them back?"

He shrugged. "Okay by me. But she's the one. Listen, Estelle—okay if I call you Estelle?—this kid's got a real bummer of a hang-up. Well, you know that." He leaned toward her, so close the touch of his beard on her cheek felt like a tiny electrical shock. His tone was archly seductive. "She's got this weird thing about photographs. Collects 'em. Thousands. Crooks 'em, buys 'em, anything. It's freaky, Estelle. They're more real to her than people. You know why?"

She shook her head.

"Because they can't talk. They're like her. Mute."

Estelle remembered the look on the girl's face in the penny arcade, the anguish, the way her fingers pawed at the photos behind the glass. Sick, sick . . .

"But if she has so many, what would those few matter?"

"They all matter. Every one of 'em. She feels safe when she's with 'em." His hand, dry and warm, and hairy like an animal's, pressed hers. "Would you swap?"

"Swap?"

"She might do that, you know. You got another photo?"

"Another? No."

"Aw, come on, Estelle. You must have one of your husband."

"No." It was the truth, she didn't. "Not a one."

"That's tough." He deliberated. "Hey, listen. I've got an idea. My camera's in the van. A picture of you in exchange for the others. Okay?"

His manner was so playful she couldn't be afraid of him. She even giggled. "Ransom?"

His eyes flickered; he gave her a mock villainous scowl. Guy would never believe all this. "Your pictures are at the farm. We'll take you back with us."

"Oh, no. Don't bother. You can send them."

He wouldn't listen to her arguments, and when her laundry was ready he insisted on putting it in the dryer for her. "We'll have you back here by the time it's done."

"But I can't just go off and leave it. Someone might steal it."

He gave her a coaxing smile. "Chance it, Estelle. For the pictures."

When they were ready to go she made one last attempt to assert herself. "I'll follow in my car.

I certainly can't leave it here."

"It'll never get through them back roads, Estelle. Look at the gook on this crate of ours. Up to the windows. Come on, baby, be a sport. Quicker we get started, quicker you'll be back."

Insane, to leave her laundry and her car and go off into the night with these weird creatures, and it was awful being shut up in the back of the van on a campstool, no idea where she was, no idea where she was going. She kept telling herself not to worry. They were just kids, really; wild, maybe, and the girl was a bad case, no doubt about that, but nothing actually *bad* could happen. Not this close to home.

Presently she felt the van lurch off the road; branches scraped the sides.

When they stopped, Dominus turned and spoke to her for the first time since they'd started. "You can get out here, Estelle. It's a good place to take the picture," he said.

"Is this the farm?"

"Almost."

"Can't we wait till we're there?"

"Now, do like I say, Estelle." He got out and opened the side door and reached for her hand.

When she saw that he was holding an honest-to-goodness camera she relaxed somewhat, but they were in the wilderness, not a light to be seen, nothing but underbrush and overhanging trees and croaking frogs. It smelled dank and the ground was oozy like a swamp. She stepped gingerly as he drew her away from the van and deeper into the trees. She began to cry, at first soundlessly, then with bursting, frantic sobs.

"Now, cut that out, Estelle, baby. You want your picture taken blubbering like an idiot? Course not. You stand right there, okay? Right up against that big ole tree."

Estelle looked toward him but he was only a dark blur, and then, so unexpectedly that she cried out, the flashbulb exploded, splashing the trees with moon-colored light. After that she couldn't see a thing, not even a shadow; she didn't know he was anywhere near her till his hands, dry and warm, and hairy like an animal's, touched her throat.

A crackerjack scheme is often born of desperation, but seldom just so.

Come in, gentlemen, and welcome. First, permit me to say that the regulations which prevented our having this interview several months ago were those of the medical staff of this institution and not my own. I personally am always glad to accommodate members of the fourth estate.

Perhaps those among you who are photographers would care to take pictures now, while the reporters are readying notebooks and sharpening pencils or whatever reporters do. Yes, those wooden benches are hard, aren't they? But a mental hospital—an insane asylum, if you will—can make little provision for the creature comforts of such a large number of visitors. Please forgive it.

I must also ask the gentlemen with the TV cameras to forgive the metal screening which separates my section of the room from yours. While I can give you my personal assurance that I would not attempt to harm any of you, my doctors still classify me as homicidal. A person who has run his

father-in-law through the chest with a 16th century halberd and hacked his wife of eight months to bits with a Moorish scimitar, as I did last winter, should be restrained, don't you agree?

The reason you are here, of course, is to get the answer to a question which has plagued your readers and viewers ever since the police arrived to find me standing over the bodies of my victims—and that question is, why? Why would a rather nondescript young man who had succeeded in marrying into a world of wealth, prestige and stratospheric social position so bloodily murder the two people who had made that lifestyle possible?

To answer, I must begin at a time two years ago almost to the day. It was then, as now, late spring. I was twenty-four years old, with visions of becoming a great writer, another Melville or Hemingway. Much to my chagrin I found that while my pile of rejection slips was getting higher and higher, the precise opposite was happening to my supply of cash.

I was sitting on my bed in the dingy rooming house where I resided when my landlady slipped my mail under the door—three rejected manuscripts on the same day. I picked them up, preparing to hurl them angrily into a corner, when a letter fell from among the large brown envelopes and floated to the floor. Quickly I retrieved it, tore it open and read it.

The letter was from Professor Rolf Kassachian—yes, the same man whom, months later, I was to skewer with the halberd—and he was replying to a query of mine. In a forlorn hope that perhaps articles rather than fiction were my forte, I had written to Professor Kassachian requesting an interview for a proposed article concerning his recent archaeological discoveries in the Nile Delta. I had posted the letter with little hope that Kassachian would reply; the man was famous for his reticence where publicity was concerned.

Yet not only had Kassachian answered my query, but he was willing to grant my request! I was beside myself with joy. An interview with the great and mysterious Rolf Kassachian would be bound to find a publisher, regardless of the technique—or lack of it—of the writer.

Two days later I arrived for the interview ten minutes before the

by William Brittain

appointed time. In an agony of anticipation, I paced back and forth near the huge wall that surrounded the rambling house. I wished neither to appear too eager by arriving early, nor to antagonize the professor by being late. It was exactly two p.m. when I lifted the ponderous knocker on the front door.

The door was opened by a girl about my own age who introduced herself as Dara Kassachian, the professor's daughter. A more unprepossessing creature would be hard to imagine. Lank brown hair hung about a vapid face marked by close-set eyes, a piggy snout of a nose, and a mouth to which lipstick had been applied with wild abandon. Her plump, almost obese figure was covered with a dress of black and white horizontal stripes, giving her the appearance of an elephant which had escaped from a penitentiary. In a thin, whining voice, she asked me into the livingroom and then left to fetch the professor.

The Kassachian livingroom resembled a museum, filled as it was with what were clearly artifacts collected during the professor's expeditions. Knives, jewelry and bits of pottery were hung on the walls or tastefully arranged along the room's many shelves. That this wealth of rare items could be displayed so casually was, I found out later, due to an excellent alarm system designed both to entrap anyone entering the house illegally and to summon the police within seconds. I must confess that while none of the items was familiar to me, the overall effect I found to be striking without being ostentatious.

Then the ring, lying on the glass-topped coffee table, caught my eye. It was of a dull, silvery metal, somewhat resembling pewter. Thick and massive, its design was that of an insect resembling a huge oval beetle almost an inch long. It was sculpted in beautiful detail, including tiny legs which protruded from under the divided carapace.

Merely as a way to pass the time, I tried the ring on the middle finger of my right hand. It was too small. I shifted it to the ring finger, and it slid into place with almost no effort whatsoever.

I was about to remove the ring when suddenly I heard a deep voice behind me. "You'd be that writer chap, wouldn't you?" Nervously thrusting my right hand behind me, I turned about to face a tall man whose thick glasses and iron-gray hair were in odd contrast to his tanned, well-muscled body.

"Professor Kassachian?" I asked, my voice cracking. Behind my back, the ring seemed to weigh a ton, dragging at my hand.

"Yes. Dara said you were here." He indicated the girl, simpering in the doorway. "How are you?" With that, Kassachian put out his hand to shake mine.

Wanting nothing more than to disappear into a crack in the floor, I extended my own hand. Kassachian took it, pumped it once, and turned it upward. He stared at the ring for what seemed an eternity, glanced at the coffee table, and then looked me in the eye.

"That's mine, isn't it?" he asked, nodding at the ring.

"Yes . . . yes, sir. But I was just—"

"No harm done," said Kassachian with a smile. "But take it off, will you?"

I pulled at the ring. Nothing happened. I pulled harder. Finally I wet my finger in my mouth and tried again. "It . . . it seems to be stuck," I said finally.

"Nonsense. Here, let me try." Kassachian jerked at the ring until I cried out with pain. It seemed welded to my finger, which was now raw and bleeding.

"It's the damned legs," said Kassachian. "They're pointed outward and dig into the flesh when the ring's pulled." He turned and shouted over his shoulder. "Dara! Get me some string, there's a good girl."

Galloping out of the room the girl soon returned with a length of string. Taking my hand, Kassachian wrapped the string tightly about my finger just ahead of the ring. "It compresses the flesh," he said. "This'll work. You'll see."

It didn't work. The ring remained firmly in place. "Soapsuds, that's the ticket," said Kassachian with a grin. "That'll fetch it."

I was directed to the bathroom, where I soaped my right hand liberally while the professor and Dara waited in the livingroom. Returning to them, I had to confess failure.

"Umm. We seem to be in a bit of a bind here," rumbled Kassachian.

"I don't see why, sir," I said brightly. "I have a friend who's a jeweler, and people come to him with this kind of problem all the time. He has a little saw that cuts a ring, then the ends can be pried apart . . ."

I thought I saw Kassachian go white under his tan as he gave a low moan.

"I'd be glad to pay for mending the ring after it's removed," I said weakly.

"My boy," replied Kassachian, "if your name were Getty or Onassis, you might—I say *might*—be able to pay me for any damage to that ring. Otherwise, it's out of the question."

"I don't quite understand, sir."

"That ring on your finger was presented to the pharaoh Zoser by his high priest about the year 2500 B.C. It is a depiction of *Scarabus sacer*, the sacred scarab of Egypt. It is the only one of its kind anywhere in the world. What is more to the point as far as you're concerned, it is priceless. No amount of money could purchase it. Right at present, I'm not too concerned about your welfare. You are nothing but a bit of useless humanity which has somehow become inextricably attached to my ring."

"Yes, sir," I replied. I had a vision of myself stuffed and mounted on a pedestal, my right hand extended to show off the ring to its best advantage.

"There is, of course, one more thing we might try," said Kassachian, an odd look in his eye.

"Anything, sir. Anything."

"I was thinking of amputation. Of the finger, you know."

"Father! That's horrible." Dara waddled to my side and grasped my arm tightly. "He wouldn't really hurt you," she said, gazing at me through eyes that, heavy with mascara, resembled twin pools of hot tar.

Tenderly I patted the hand of my newfound ally. "I'll go home and think all night about how I can get the ring off," I said. "I'm sure in the morning I can—"

"What!" shouted Kassachian in a towering rage. "Leave my house while you're wearing that ring? Out of the question."

"But I can't stay here forever."

"Why not?" said Kassachian, a little smile playing across his face. "Oh, I don't mean forever, confound it. Just until we can find some way to remove the ring."

"But I have to . . ."

"You have to what?" replied Kassachian scornfully. "Look, you're a writer. Do your writing here."

"But I couldn't impose on you that way."

"Very well, do whatever you want," said Kassachian. "But my ring does not leave this house."

With the ring and me now a package deal, that was how I came to take up permanent residence at the professor's house.

For the first few days we spent each morning discussing and experimenting with methods of removing the ring. Nothing worked. The ring seemed to be bonded to me as if I had been born with it.

At the end of a week, further attempts to remove the ring were abandoned as impossible. Instead, I was put on a strict diet and assigned a series of finger exercises in the frail hope that the offending digit could be slimmed down to a point where the ring could be slipped off.

To pass the time I began working on the article concerning the professor. Each day I would study Kassachian's notes and type rough drafts until time for the evening meal. Afterward the professor would retire to his study while Dara and I went into the livingroom where she listened in wide-eyed wonder to the lies I told concerning my writing experiences. Later she would put slow music on the phonograph and try to snuggle up close to me on the couch, an experience I found much the same as entertaining an amorous squid.

By the middle of July I had been a guest of the Kassachians for nearly six weeks, and then one evening I made a complete fool of myself. All I can say in my defense is that the only female to whom I had been exposed in all that time was Dara.

As usual, we were on the couch. An album called *Songs for Lovers* was playing and Dara, instead of dimming the lights as was her usual habit, turned them all the way off.

Gentlemen, I can only tell you that Dara Kassachian seemed much more desirable in the dark than when it was possible to see her. I felt her lips on mine. To my everlasting regret, I responded. I kissed her in return. After that, one thing led to another—until suddenly the lights went on.

Professor Kassachian was standing over us. In a stern voice he ordered Dara off to bed and asked to see me in his study. Once there, he took a bottle of brandy from the drawer of his desk and poured two glasses. "Of course you'll want to do the honorable thing," he began.

A week later, in a small, private ceremony, Dara Kassachian became my wife. Previously, of course, her father had made it quite clear that I would be expected to continue to live with them in the house.

The following month was a continuous round of parties at which the great and near-great of the scientific, intellectual and social worlds all came to congratulate Dara on her fine husband. I was examined from all angles and made to feel like a family pet on exhibition.

Still, all my wants—except for

my freedom—were satisfied. I received the finest foods, the best and most luxurious clothing. Even my writing, which had formerly been universally rejected, now found its way into the most prestigious journals. I might have learned to be content with my lot, except for one thing.

Dara loved me. She loved me in a way that made Tristan and Isolde seem little more than a couple of passing acquaintances. I would look up from my typing and there she would be in the doorway, her beady eyes staring at me in adoration.

I couldn't sit in an easy chair without having that slug-like body trying to climb into my lap. At parties she would hang onto me, a huge white leech. In the privacy of our room . . . Don't ask.

I could begin to feel my reason slipping. Every time I looked upon that accursed ring I saw not the scarab but Dara's bloated, love-sick face. I was being overwhelmed.

The sickness came the following November. I don't know how I contracted it. Pity the germ that tried to get at me; it would have to find some way around Dara first.

After a week during which a bad chest cold had contributed to exhaustion and aching muscles, I looked across the table at dinner one evening and—horror of horrors—I saw not one Dara but two. Suddenly I had a blinding headache and the room started spinning. Vaguely I remember Dara and her father taking me up to bed and someone strange—a doctor, I suppose—bending over me. Then for a time I remember very little—just vague visions of Dara's porcine body mounted on a huge ring and gigantic scarabs snuggling up to me. I must have had a few semilucid moments though, because I can remember feeling that I was dying, and that made me glad. Dying was the only way I could be rid of Dara forever.

I finally swam back to consciousness to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne*. It took me quite some time to realize that the music was coming from downstairs and that I was not imagining it. I heard an announcer's voice counting: "Five, four, three, two . . ." And then shouts of "Happy New Year!"

I had been delirious or unconscious for nearly two months.

I was warm, and so I kicked off the blankets. Somebody had provided me with a hospital gown, one of those short garments which do their best to destroy modesty. I stared at the skinny shanks that had once been my legs.

As I reached out weakly to pull

the blankets back into place I felt something slide on my finger. *The ring.* The ring had slid around until the scarab itself was toward my palm.

It took me several moments to realize the significance of this. The ring—that damned ring that was the cause of all my troubles—could now be removed.

Slowly, almost reverently, I grasped it and pulled. It slid away from my emaciated finger. I looked at it—this thing that had ruined my life and bound me forever to the toad-like Dara.

That, gentlemen, is when it happened. With a strength dredged up from hatred and desperation I rushed out of the room and down the stairs. In the hallway I found the halberd, its steel point glittering. I grasped it and with a loud shout leaped into the livingroom where Dara and her father were watching television. Professor Kassachian rose from his chair and turned to face me just in time to take the point of the halberd full in the chest. The scimitar, which hung above the fireplace, did, in turn, for Dara.

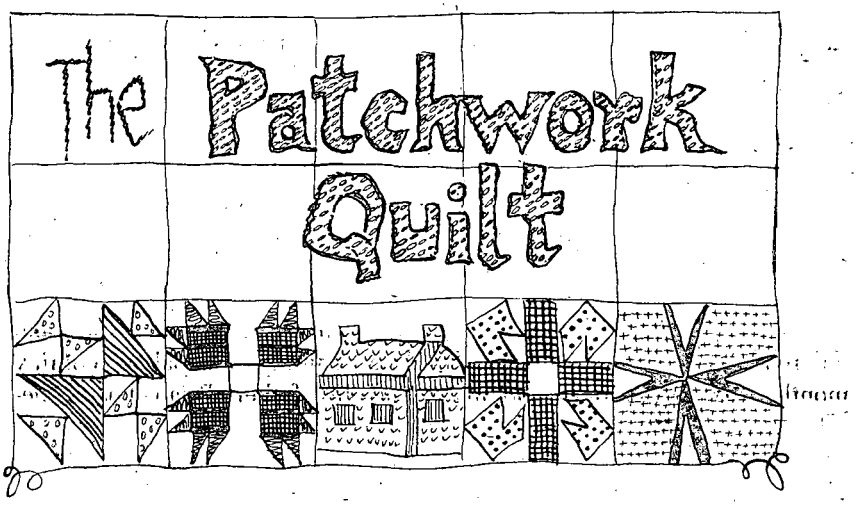
What's that, sir? Oh, you ask if I'm now sorry for what I did. No sir, I'm not. I will not lie about it, even though a lie might possibly earn me my freedom.

You see, gentlemen, lying there in bed staring at the ring, I suddenly realized that while the ring's getting stuck on my finger was blind chance, everything that occurred after that was a plot; a plot by Professor Kassachian to provide a husband for that impossible daughter of his, and I have no doubt that Dara, desperate for a mate, aided and abetted him in every way possible. An opportunity had presented itself, and they had seized it mercilessly, with no regard for me.

No, no. You misunderstand. This is not merely an assumption on my part. You see, when I finally got the ring off, there was an inscription on the inside of the band. I'm unable to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics, but I could read this all right:

HENDRIX NOVELTY COMPANY
MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

There seems to have been more under that hood than people thought.



I didn't think Tommy should go up on the mountain that morning, but it was the day for Miss Mattie Jackson's quilt, and since Tommy's got a calendar in his head instead of brains, he was, of course, determined. I argued thieves and killers until I was out of breath, with Tommy's only rebuttal a firm and stolid reiteration that Miss Mattie Jackson would be finished with her quilt and expecting him.

Tommy takes his responsibilities very seriously, probably because it's the first time in his eighteen years he has had any. He does all my running around for me, and believe me, that's some running around. I own and operate the Jane Flagg Old Time Store in Mountain Hollow, specializing in stitchery done in the old-time

by Pauline C. Smith

manner—cross-stitch mottoes, appliqued coverlets and patchwork quilts, crewel and other embroidery, needlepoint, wax-work, feather-work, quill-work, all lovely, and offering these hill women a pride of achievement and a bit of independence they have never known.

My best worker, Miss Mattie Jackson, lives alone, high up in a narrow gulch of the mountain. She was old when I was growing up in these parts, so she must be ancient now. Nobody ever sees her; nobody except Tommy, who drives the jeep up those treacherous roads on the first day of each month, carrying supplies and materials, and returning with her newest quilt.

Her patchwork quilts are wonderful, the stitches fine and true—with, each month, an old and different historical pattern, such as *Tippecanoe And Tyler Too,* reminiscent of the William Henry Harrison campaign, and *Clay's Choice,* a memory of the bitter Calhoun and Clay days. She does the old and favorite patterns and those that are old and rare.

My mother was a quilter, as was her mother and grandmother before her. They all lived in this house and left here records of the quilts of their times. I can identify most of Miss Mattie Jackson's patterns by searching through the detailed and titled sketches carefully recorded by these women of my family and stored in a suit box. Sometime I plan to copy them on graph paper for publication, except that nobody quilts anymore, nobody but the hill folk who quilt for the few traveling customers willing to leave the fast traffic of the superhighway and slow down for the old Mountain Hollow road.

I don't know exactly when I decided to come back to Mountain Hollow to stay, but it was long after I finished college, married and had Tommy. Probably Tommy and his father Brian finally decided me—poor Tommy, whose body grew but whose brain did not, and arrogant Brian who accused my hillbilly blood of causing the retardation.

I didn't argue the matter. Who could argue with an uptight businessman who thought of a wife as decorative background to his ambition, and a slow-witted boy as something to hide? I just went on getting my hair done each week, being nice to the right people, and trying to find someone who could spark the few brains Tommy was born with to make of him a reasonably functioning facsimile son of a rising executive.

Well, after a series of patholo-

gists, psychologists and special schools, at last I did what was best for him—for me, too—and came home to Mountain Hollow where the people wouldn't know the difference between a rising executive and a falling star, and where Tommy was accepted with love and admiration both for the calendar in his head and his way with a jeep.

"Tommy sure can drive that jeep," Mountain Hollow folk exclaim in wonder; and he can. He also understands what is under the hood and keeps it in perfect running condition. Tommy has realized his potential and now I don't have to get my hair done each week, which is a big relief.

I like breathing the clean air and living the slow life of Mountain Hollow. I like the unsophisticated goodness of the people. Nothing touches us here; nothing until those hoodlum killers got close—or were they close? Nobody really knew. Actually, nobody knew who they were, how many there were or what they drove. Nobody knew anything about them except that where they had been, they'd left death.

The radio newscasts dropped separate announcements: liquor store robbed, all witnesses killed; drugstore looted, proprietor slashed to death—until the separate announcements made a chain of identical iniquity along the superhighway, still far away, but heading toward the turnoff that entered Mountain Hollow. Then, after seven murders, the newscasts reported nothing new. It was as if these phantom killers had vanished, evaporated somewhere before, beyond or between the roadblocks set up along the highway—they and their phantom vehicle.

The hillbillies of Mountain Hollow, not having any great imagination, breathed a sigh of relief and I began to worry. If the killers weren't killing, where were they now? I worried more actively on the morning Tommy insisted on driving up to Miss Mattie Jackson's cabin in the gulch because he had this calendar in his head instead of brains, and the page had flipped to the day Miss Mattie's quilt would be finished.

"All right, all right," I finally cried, "go on," and he loaded the jeep with supplies, as happy as a dumb lark, doing his thing on the day he was supposed to do it.

I had a radio going in the shop, which used to be the parlor of the house when my folks and my folks' folks and their folks lived here. Tommy and I live in the rest of the house. I didn't give much ear to the country music,

which is about all we have on the local radio station, but I did listen to the news spots that offered such shameful items as Big Jed Bartlett's drunken tangle with the law at the local tavern and juicy little bits about Mary Louise Plunkett's latest hair-pulling melee; but nothing new about the killers who were "at large," the newscaster vaguely announced.

It took Tommy an hour to make the trip up to the gulch . . . what was it they used to call that place . . .? Well, I can't remember now. Anyway, it was about an hour's trip up there, then fifteen minutes to unload the supplies and load on the new quilt, so all in all, I figured Tommy should be back in two hours and fifteen minutes, if everything went all right . . .

We've got a sheriff; well, actually, we don't have him, the county has him, and it's a pretty big county. After Tommy had been gone a little over an hour, I phoned the sheriff and got him, too. He wasn't out chasing killers or standing beside roadblocks, he was right there at the sheriff's station, answering the phone!

"What makes you think, Mrs. Flagg, that they're around Mountain Hollow?" he asked with slight surprise.

"I didn't *say* I thought they were *here*," I shouted quickly and vehemently. "What I *said* was I thought they *might* be here, holed up somewhere."

"Well, I suppose they might be at that, Mrs. Flagg," he said with the drawl all mountain people have, probably because they live so slowly, their thoughts slow down and their tongues too, to match. "And if they come out, Mrs. Flagg, we'll try to catch them."

I sat there at the phone, shaking with inward rage. I could see the sheriff in my mind's eye, lolling back in that old swivel chair of his. How could he catch anything, lolling in a swivel chair—even flies?

"If they're holed up somewhere, Mrs. Flagg," he said, "they're probably holed up maybe fifty miles from here because that's where the hoodlums were last heard from . . ."

I banged down the receiver in despair, thinking: *These people! There's not an ounce of imagination in all their pea-brains rolled together.* I set about to rearrange the entire shop, hoping to keep my mind off of what *my* imagination was conjuring up while I waited for Tommy—who drove up to the shop, exactly on time, two hours and fifteen minutes from the time he had left it! Thank heaven!

I hugged him between the quilt he carried in his arms, and plied him with questions: Had he seen anyone on the way? Had he heard anything—like shots? Were there any dead bodies around? Was Miss Mattie Jackson all right? To which he answered, *Heck-no-Mom,* and *Sure-by-golly-Mom,* and went outside to shine up the engine of the jeep.

I stood there in a grateful daze, holding the quilt, and looking through the big window I'd had put in the front of the shop, at Tommy leaning lovingly inside the open hood of the jeep. I stood there quite a while with a heart full of thanksgiving and a bit of regret for banging down the receiver on the sheriff, who had probably been right in his assumption that the killers were holed up fifty miles away.

Then I spread the quilt out on a table. It was a bright and cheerful pattern, done in different shades of orange and yellow, the sunshine colors, and I ran for the suit box to find out whether it was the *Sunbeam* or *Rising Sun* pattern. I couldn't be sure as they are very similar; the one a circle with curved triangular patches forming a larger circle, around which are stitched smaller sunray triangles on a block; the other, a square with alternating shaded triangles. I studied the sketches.

It turned out to be the *Sunbeam,* simpler of the two blocks, and very lovely. I admired it for a few minutes, reached down for the part of the quilt that draped over the table and extended almost to the floor, then bent frozen, with my hand outstretched in rigid shock as I saw the bottom blocks of the quilt, which had none of the *Sunbeam* pattern, but was all in somber color, each different from the other!

I cried, "Oh, no!," and moved at last, yanking the bottom of the quilt to a heap on the table. "Oh, no!" thinking for sure that Miss Mattie Jackson had flipped her lid.

I had here a quilt, five 12-inch blocks wide by six 12-inch blocks long, regulation size, regulation *Sunbeam* pattern in variegated shades of orange and yellow, a beautiful and classic quilt *until* that very bottom row with its dark colors and strangely blocked patchwork. I leaned over the quilt in a kind of limp supplication—poor Miss Mattie, she must have popped her cork.

I brooded[9] for a while, then I went to the front door of the shop, opened it and called out to Tommy. "Tommy, did Miss Mattie Jackson say anything strange when you were up to her cabin today?" I had to call Tommy's

name four times before he pulled his head out of the jeep engine long enough to stare at me blankly. Then he said, "Heck no, Mom," and stuck his head back under the hood.

He wouldn't know.

I closed the door and went back into the shop. Well, if Miss Mattie Jackson had become psychotically senile after a lifetime of living alone up there in that mountainous gulch, she had the right, I guess, and the years.

I picked up the phone and called Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn, who said she'd be right over even though she was cluttered with trouble and busy as a bumblebee in a bucket of tar, which was probably true, what with a bunch of grandchildren and great-grandchildren always underfoot. Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn was as ancient as Miss Mattie Jackson and had just as much right to go crazy with senility, but probably wouldn't since she lived in the valley with all her posterity to keep her mentally alert.

I showed her the quilt, with the last row tucked under, as soon as she arrived all out of breath. "Look," I said. "Look at that!"

"As pretty a *Sunbeam* pattern as ever I did see," she admired.

Then I whipped the last row of blocks free on the table and watched her expression, which didn't change one iota.

"Well . . ." I said at last.

"Looks like Miss Mattie Jackson changed her mind a bit before she finished this here quilt," she offered.

"It looks like maybe she *lost* her mind," I said dryly, and Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn studied me with the remote gaze of the hill folk for outlanders.

"I mean," I said desperately, "it looks as if maybe something is very wrong; a quilter like Miss Mattie Jackson, an expert, an artist, suddenly going off the beam like this, throwing in just any old block pattern."

"Maybe it ain't just any old block pattern."

"She might be sick. She is, after all, very old. And living alone the way she does . . . Well," and I spread my hands helplessly in an attempt to explain senility to one who was ready for senility, "she might not have really known what she was doing. What do you think?"

"I ain't had time yet to think," Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn chastised me. "I am still at the ponderin' stage."

So there she stood—pondering—without intellect, without imagination, while her friend, a poor little lady alone on the mountain, went

crazy with old age. "What I mean," I said, "I think she needs help and somebody ought to go up there and bring her down where she can be taken care of."

Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn nodded, but instead of racing out of the shop to round up some able-bodied nonworking men to go up the mountain and bring down that poor crazed woman, she leaned over the quilt and drawled thoughtfully, "I reckon Miss Mattie Jackson is offerin' up a message and it's up to us to unscramble it. Now this, what would you say this block meant?" as she pointed at the first block in the last row of five, a seemingly helter-skelter design of different colored patches forming a staggered diagonal pattern.

"It's a crazy-quilt block," I said impatiently, and Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn tolerantly answered that no, it certainly was not, it was an *Old Maid's Puzzle* block, probably put there purposely to make me read the rest of them, or for *someone* to read, she added with the barest hint of scorn that made me suddenly feel like a dull-witted clod before such bright perception.

"Miss Mattie Jackson is sharp as a pin. Always has been, always will be. These blocks ain't just staggerin' off course. They're tryin' to tell us somethin' here."

Looking down at them, I regained my equanimity. Those blocks weren't trying to tell us anything, not unless they were trying to tell us that poor Miss Mattie Jackson had finally come unstrung after all the years alone up there on the mountain and, each time she made one of those blocks for that last row, thought she was starting a whole new quilt . . . "For instance, that block," I said, pointing at the second one, right after *Old Maid's Puzzle*, "that's a *Bat in Flight* and, really now, what meaning could it have?"

Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn cocked her head and studied the block. "It does look like a *Bat in Flight* and that's for sure," she said with wonder.

I began to riffle through the open suit box for a sketch of the block in question, when she stopped me dead. "But *Bat in Flight*, as I remember, flies outward toward the corner of the block, and this one sure is flying inward and looks a heap more like a *Bear's Paw* to me."

She was right!

It was a tricky little pattern, the block sectioned off in five squares across and five down, the center being dark, its corner squares dark, with those adjacent

to each corner square, triangled dark fabric patches, forming the wings and tail of a bat, four bats to a block; but, in this case, the pad and toes of a bear's paw, four paw prints to the block.

I looked at Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn with dawning respect, and then I said, "But *Bear's Paw* doesn't mean any more than *Bat in Flight.*"

"Not," she said, "unless you remember that *Bear's Paw* is the name of the gulch where Miss Mattie Jackson lives."

I remembered at last. They used to say, when I was a girl in Mountain Hollow, "Miss Mattie Jackson, up at Bear's Paw." Now I was sure that Miss Mattie Jackson, of Bear's Paw, was sending a message through the *Sunbeam* quilt—an *Old Maid's Puzzle* to be worked out, block by block.

The next was obvious: a patchwork house set in a ground of flowered material. I called out the name of the pattern almost as quickly as did Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn: *House On The Hill.* The cut patches were not as true, nor the stitches as tiny—Miss Mattie Jackson had become nervous or hurried, or *frightened*?

The fourth block was a teaser. Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn frowned over it and I riffled through the patterns, whispering names: *Drunkard's Path,* a block of four squares; *Wild Goose Chase,* no, that was sectioned off into diamonds . . . *"Jack In The Box!"* I cried. My voice rose and Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn nodded.

I ran for the phone and called the sheriff.

Thank God he was still sitting on his swivel chair at the sheriff's station. I yelled into the phone that Miss Mattie Jackson was being held prisoner up at Bear's Paw in her House On The Hill, and just as I banged down the receiver, Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn added that she was being held by five people, or had been held for five days, or something five anyway, because the last block was a *V Block,* and what else could it mean but five?

I raced back to look down at the *V Block,* formed of narrow V's, four of them, so placed on the block that their points came together in the center; the final stitches, not Miss Mattie Jackson's fine overcast, nor her hurriedly wavered stitch on the *Jack In The Box,* but an uneven basting that made me fear for her life.

"Well, jump down my throat and gallop my insides out, if Miss Mattie Jackson ain't in a heap of trouble now," breathed Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn, and

reached out blindly for a place to sit down. I led her to a chair and she dropped, sitting stiffly with her hands folded on her lap.

I finally got Tommy's head out from under the hood of the jeep and into the shop, and questioned him while we waited for the sheriff to arrive. "Now, Tommy, this is important," I said seriously. "What did you see when you were up at Miss Mattie Jackson's this morning?" remembering suddenly that it was no longer morning, but afternoon, and Miss Mattie was still being held by five people, or had been held for five days or—my goodness—would be held for five more hours before they killed her and took off!

"Tommy, think!" I cried. "What did you see at Miss Mattie Jackson's?"

He furrowed his brow, then he smiled. "Why, Mom, I saw the trees and the chickens like always."

"No, Tommy," I cried, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him in desperation. "Did you see anything *different*? Were there any *people* around?"

He shook his head, attempting to break away and head out for the jeep that was the love of his life.

"You see, Tommy," I said, my voice shaking, "we think those killers are in Miss Mattie Jackson's house. Did you go *in* the house?"

He shook his head vigorously, and I knew that he never did. He brought the monthly supplies up to her door and she handed the quilt out to him. Tommy was not gregarious nor was Miss Mattie sociable. They had that together, the rapport of two loners. "Did you *hear* anything?"

"Heck no, Mom," he said, smiling. "Not even the chickens. She told me where to drive so the chickens wouldn't squawk and stop laying eggs. She said, 'You drive clear off the road down below and through the trees and up to—' "

"All right, Tommy," I interrupted him. "All right, you can go on out now and shine up the engine of the jeep again," and I gave him a little shove.

From the minute the sheriff drove up in a jeep, Tommy stuck to him like a burr, probably feeling close kinship with another jeep driver, and stood right behind him while the sheriff and his two deputies leaned over the quilt and Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn explained the message.

"This here," she said, pointing to the first block of the last row, "is the *Old Maid's Puzzle*, that's how I knew Miss Mattie Jackson wasn't just throwing on any old

piece of patchwork because her brains was dusty, but that she was giving us a message, starting right out with, 'This here is Miss Mattie Jackson talkin'.'

"Then the next one, *Bear's Paw* being where she lives, and adding the *House On The Hill* to it, I knew she was tellin' us that something was going on there. *Jack In The Box* was real inspirational—I don't know of anything else she could have used to let us know she was bein' held prisoner.

"This last one though, has kinda got me," admitted Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn. "Maybe it means there are five of them cowardly dogs there in her cabin. Maybe it means they been there five days. Whatever, she's sure trying to convey a message in that there *V Block . . .*"

"That's the V," said Tommy pointing over the sheriff's shoulder. "That's the V of trees where Miss Mattie Jackson tells me to drive the jeep so the chickens won't set up a ruckus and stop laying eggs. That's the V right there. Miss Mattie Jackson says, 'You drive clear off the road down below and go on up to that stand of trees . . .' The V, she calls it. 'It looks like a V,' she says, 'and that V of trees cuts off the sound so the chickens won't be bothered.' "

"And so, whoever's in there with Miss Mattie Jackson won't hear us until we get right up on them." The sheriff thrust out a hand. "Son," he said, "you've got a brain and a half on you," and I wanted to cry with pride. It was the first time anybody had ever told Tommy he had any kind of brain.

"You put that boy's brain in a jaybird's head and he'd fly straight and true," announced Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn. "Why don't you deputize him, Sheriff, and let him drive you up to the V? He knows right how to get there, and he's the best jeep driver around."

Before I could protest, Tommy had become a smiling-faced deputy and was on his way up the mountain, carrying three officers of the law loaded down with guns!

Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn sat with me through part of that long afternoon. The spot newscasts on the radio continued to offer no news as to the killers. However, Mrs. Rachel Peabody, at the south end of the county, swore she saw what looked to be a very suspicious character fishing on the river bottom, and Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn snorted out her opinion that Mrs. Rachel Peabody's mouth was so wide that if it weren't for

her ears, the top of her head would be an island.

I walked the floor, looked at the clock every ten minutes and, in between the country music, listened to the weather reports, crop and hog prices and the local news items—until Tommy arrived home at near-dark and told me all about it. He told it as only a boy with the sophisticated, arrogant, ambitious part of his brain left out, and the homespun, down-to-earth, ready-to-help part left in. He told it chronologically, with few words and little emotion.

"I took them up there to the V place, and told them how to get to the house. Then I watched. They made me the lookout, Mom," he said proudly, and I patted his shoulder and swallowed.

He told how there were three against three, the sheriff and two deputies against the girl and two boy killers, and some shots fired, ". . . but they didn't do any hurt except to get the chickens to squawking so they probably won't lay any eggs for a while."

"Well," I said, "I guess Miss Mattie Jackson won't never mind about that," dropping into the vernacular of the hill people—my people and Tommy's—these wonderful people with great imagination and the talent to send a message on a quilt and have it read correctly.

The country radio music stopped abruptly to allow the latest news report to come through, all about the apprehension of the three young killers, found in their mountain hideaway. They didn't know the half of it!

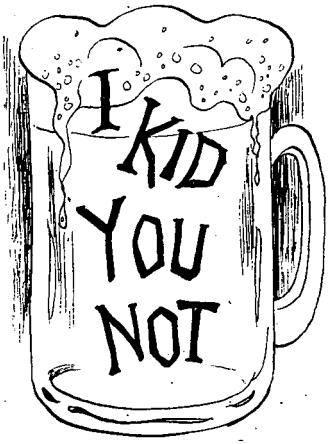
"Miss Mattie Jackson is all right?" I asked Tommy.

"Sure, by golly, Mom," he said. "She told me she was going to make a special quilt for me. She said it would be like a letter. How can she make a quilt like a letter, Mom?"

"Well, she can," I said. "Miss Mattie Jackson can send a beautiful letter on a quilt. Now, would you like to shine the engine of the jeep before supper?"

Tommy didn't get a chance before darkness fell, for the sheriff came to pick up the county jeep and told the story again, more graphically and more in detail, but not nearly as well as Tommy, who knew what the *V Block* really meant, and because he knew, Miss Mattie Jackson can make patchwork quilts until she dies a natural death.

Not all of a policeman's shooting, it appears, is done with a firearm.



A good cop," said Kavanah, the retired cop, "is a good shakedown artist."

"I know just what you mean," I said. "I never yet turned down a pair of tickets to a policeman's ball—even though I don't dance."

"Nah," Kavanah said, "you don't know just what I mean."

"Just what *do* you mean, then?"

Well, take one time I was covering a squeal. Say, why do civilians call cops pigs when it's all civilian squeals? Never mind. Well, this particular squeal came from this guy who was in town for a convention. He said that on the way back to his hotel—and when he could see its sign only a block or so away—he had the hackie let him off at some bar. When he finally left the joint and got back to his hotel, he found three hundred bucks missing from his wallet.

He said he had been drinking in a booth with a girl he picked up there—or she picked him up, since she seemed to be a regular—and that she must've rolled him for the three yards because she got up and said she was going to the little girls' room and never came back. He got tired of waiting and left. He said he couldn't remember the name of the bar, but it should be easy to spot because it was only a block or two from his hotel.

Well, the convention hall is north of the hotel, so I and the guy set out that way on foot.

by EDWARD WELLEN

Now, it may sound screwy to you if you know how civilized my town was, but for three blocks north of the guy's hotel there wasn't a bar on either side of the street. We've got a few oases since, but back then it was an absolute desert. I get dry thinking about it, so I'll have another beer on you . . . That's better.

Now, I could've dropped the case right there. If it had been some other cop and he let go of it, I wouldn't've blamed him for thinking the guy had been telling a lie straight from the start. It looked like the guy had lost his money playing cards or something and was trying to make out that somebody had rolled him for it so he could put in an insurance claim—only he hadn't bothered to check the facts so he could keep his story straight.

I didn't feel like going back to the hot station house for the balance of my tour, and the bar would have air-conditioning—if I could find the bar—so I stuck with the case. Besides, I had a hot flash—and none of your cracks about was I going through change of life.

See, it came to me that the hackie taking the guy from the convention hall to the hotel had really taken him by driving the long way around to run up the meter; regulation for strangers.

So now I turned around and walked the guy *south* of the hotel and, sure enough, we hit the place.

"Now I remember the name," the guy said.

Sure, now that the sign was staring him in the face, he knew the name—MacCabe's Bar & Grill.

We went in and sat down at one end of the bar and the barkeep came over. He spoke just to me, like he didn't see, or didn't want to see, the guy with me.

I flashed my tin. "What I'll have," I said, "is some information."

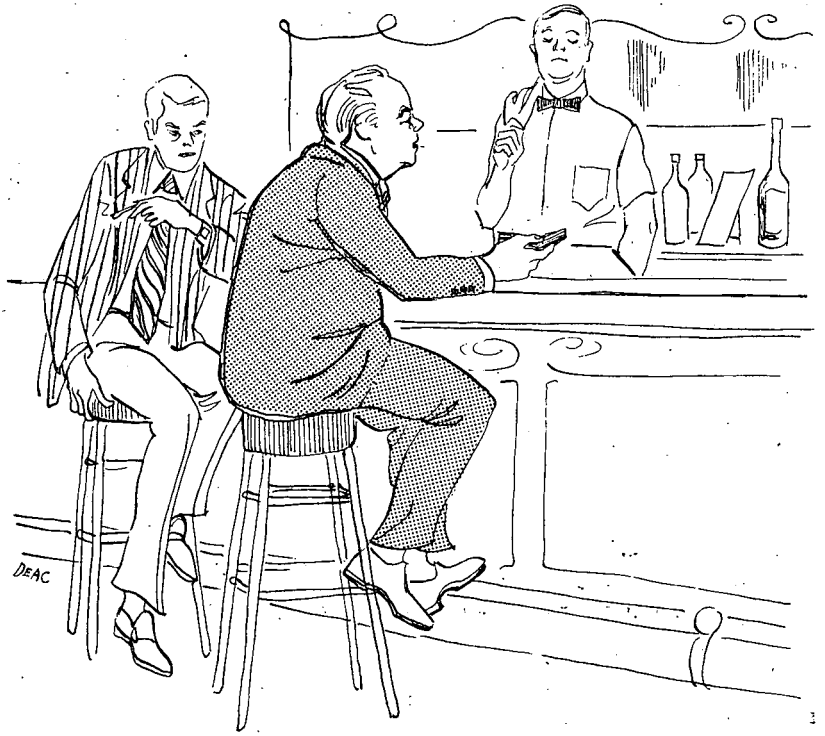
"What kind?" he said, real smart. "We may be all out of the brand you want."

"You're MacCabe?" I said.

"Do I look like I'm six foot under?" he said, and before I could say yes, he did have a moldy look, he said, "MacCabe's the owner that was. Aside from the goodwill, signs come too high to change. I'm Mulligan."

"Okay, Mulligan," I said, "this man was in here earlier and sat with a redhead with jade earrings. What does she call herself and where does she live?"

Mulligan shook his head. "I told you we might be all out," he said. "I don't remember faces. I see too many of them." Then he worked



himself up to put me on the defensive. "You trying to say I'm running a clip joint? All I do is serve drinks and keep the customers quiet. As long as they keep quiet they can be purple-headed with jade ears."

I let him go on about how he kept his nose out of his customers' business and then I said, "I didn't say anything about clip joints. You're the one who put the tag on yourself. I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Mulligan. I'm going now, but I'll be back. I give you fair warning that I'll be leaning on you, until you come across with the dame's name and address. I'll be looking for you to violate the law, and then you'll either tell me the name and address or I'll have the state liquor board yank your license and somebody else will take over the sign. Just the sign—there won't be any good will."

Mulligan smiled and said "Come around any time, Officer. I know how to keep my nose clean."

I got the complainant out of there and told him I'd let him

:now how it turned out, and tarted him back to his hotel. Then I called in with what I had ınd the lieutenant said that kind ıf thing was bad for the convenion business; but since my tour vas over to knock off and go ıome—but that kind of thing was ıad for the convention business.

My wife's mother and brother vere visiting us and I wasn't in ıny hurry to get home, so I took he hint. I put in a call to the ıouse to say I was still on a case. My brother-in-law answered and aid he was answering because my vife was giving her mother a hair inse to make her—my wife—look 'ounger.

He sounded so bored hanging ıround listening to girl talk that I ıad to laugh at him, and he got ore. I told him what he could do ınd hung up.

Well, I stopped in at a lunch :ounter and had a sandwich and a :offee and a bicarb and then I vent back to MacCabe's Bar & Grill.

Mulligan saw me, winked at his ıther customers, and gave me the ıig hello, but I didn't go over to ıim. I looked around. I spotted his young fellow sitting by himelf, nursing a rye on the rocks. I valked over to him and showed ıim my badge and asked him how ıld he was. Mulligan started to laugh, but he got a worried look when the kid went all red and said he was old enough for a lot of things.

"Come on, kid," I said, "let me see your draft card or your driver's license or something."

The kid bluffed a bit longer, making believe he was looking for his papers, then hung his head and said he'd be eighteen in a month.

"Well, Mulligan," I said, "you better use your bar rag because it looks like you ran out of handkerchiefs to keep your nose clean."

I got out my pencil and pad and took down the kid's name and then went over to where Mulligan had his license hanging and began to write. Mulligan stared at the kid.

"Kid," he said, "you must've had a hard life. I figured you for twenty-five at the least." Then he turned to me and said, "Jeez, Officer, look at the kid for yourself. Don't he look over twenty-one to you? That's why I never ast him to let me see proof."

I just kept busy writing and Mulligan let himself out from behind the bar and came around to where his mouth could reach my ear.

"Now, wait a minute, Officer," he said. "Does that still go, what you said before? Will you lay off if I tell you the dame's name and

address? No more badgering me?"

It was good to see Mulligan in a stew, so I let him simmer a minute before I answered.

"I've upped the ante since then," I said. "Now, besides telling me the dame's name and address, you got to clip the claws of the harpies in your joint from here on out."

He looked like he had just got religion. "That I will, Officer, that I will," and he whispered the dame's name and address.

I turned to the kid and told him he'd better beat it. I didn't like the look in Mulligan's eye when it fell on the kid. Then, so Mulligan couldn't call the dame and warn her, I phoned the station house right from the bar and asked the lieutenant to send a cop to pick her up. I waited until I got a call back that they had picked her up, and had found three yards in brand-new bills they could trace, before I wished Mulligan the balance of the evening and left.

The kid was hanging around outside, just beyond the light from the bar, and I walked over to him

"Okay, Tommy," I said, "yo did fine. Now let's head home But maybe we better stop off o the way and do something abou your breath or your mother an sister will be on me for debauch ing you."

"The hell with that," the ki said. "Let's stop off at a bar an do something about *your* breath."

We did.

"Kavanah," I said, "you shoc me."

Kavanah smiled. "Didn't expec the young fellow to be m brother-in-law, did you?"

"Well, no. But that isn't wha shocks me."

"Just what shocks you, then?"

"Do you mean to tell me Kavanah," I said, "that right afte shaking down one barkeep fo serving a minor, you went wit that same minor to another bar?"

"What minor? Tommy was a of twenty-five, like Mulliga thought, but he was the best could do on short notice. Ho about another beer?"

Unfortunately one cannot measure the degree of understanding he may hope to receive.

The temperature hit 82 degrees that day—unseasonably warm for early April; but, as had become more usual all over the country these past few years, spring's first warmth brought out more marchers and demonstrators than daffodils, even in small cities like this one. Here and now, soft vernal air was split by the shrieks of fire engines, ambulances and patrol cars.

It was almost 7:30, well dark, and only a few cars scurried through the streets. Most of the city's inhabitants were complying with the mayor's request for a self-imposed curfew; and on South Winston Street, the fire which raged through an abandoned tenement had been brought under control. There was nothing to do now but watch it burn and hope that no one else felt like exterminating rats with flames.

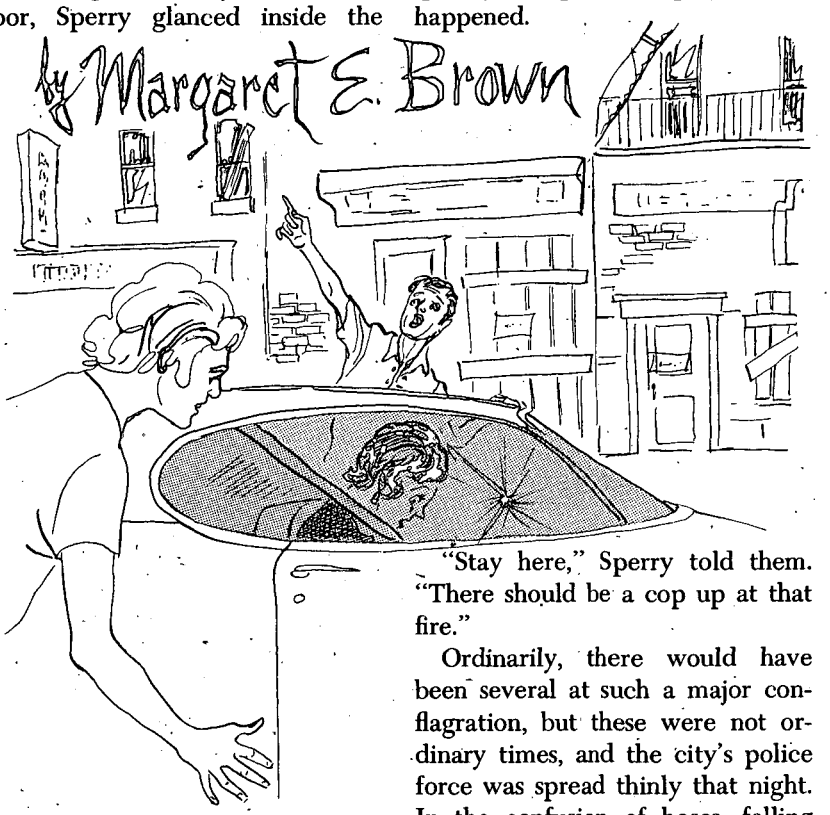
Three blocks south, an even grimmer situation unfolded as the driver of a late-model Chevy slammed on his brakes, causing the beat-up Volkswagen behind to crash into him. The accident itself wasn't serious; and the VW's owner, Ken Sperry, was more angry than hurt when he jumped out of his car to tongue-lash the idiot in the Chevrolet. His anger died, however, when he saw the

man's white face, heard him yell in a ragged voice, "My wife! Somebody's shot my wife! Get down! There's a sniper up there somewhere!"

Ducking down by the closed door, Sperry glanced inside the car and saw a woman, her body held erect by the safety harness while her head slumped forward.

Her husband clutched Sperry's arm as he strained to listen for another shot from the vacant windows of a condemned tenement opposite them. Only sirens in the near distance could be heard. An elderly couple in a sedan pulled up and the man joined them, quickly comprehending what had happened.

by Margaret E. Brown



"Stay here," Sperry told them. "There should be a cop up at that fire."

Ordinarily, there would have been several at such a major conflagration, but these were not ordinary times, and the city's police force was spread thinly that night. In the confusion of hoses, falling sparks and sullen onlookers, Sperry finally spotted a young, inexperienced patrolman, told his story, and waited while he radioed for help.

A small crowd had gathered

around the Chevy, but they fell back obediently as the young policeman took out his notebook and began jotting down preliminary facts. Through the windshield, the dead woman's eyes glistened dully. Street lights made her skin a greenish white and her lipstick appeared a lurid purple. Dark hair helped hide the darker hole in the right side of her head.

"She wouldn't listen," Philip Watson kept repeating. "She wouldn't *listen.* To die for a lousy bridge game!" Just under six feet, Watson was a thin man in his late forties. He wore lightweight gray slacks and his sport shirt was drenched with perspiration and clung to his body, revealing a slight bulge at his waist. Except for that sign of middle age, Watson carried himself with military precision; but the control implied by his posture was betrayed by the way he repeated, "If only she'd listened to me!"

At last another patrol car appeared and experienced officers took over. They moved back the curiosity-seekers, began a cautious search of the vacant building from which the shot must have come, and sifted the crowd for witnesses. No one seemed to have heard the fatal shot. The block was one of many which had suffered by the exodus of business from city to suburb, and consisted of small warehouses, boarded-up shops and run-down tenements. Except for an elderly deaf widow, everyone seemed to have been up at the fire. Sperry had been closest, of course, but because of the fire engines he had not heard the shot.

Silently, Watson watched police procedure unroll, blinking as the flashgun of a police photographer illuminated the car's interior. He saw ballistics experts work out the angle of trajectory from the shattered car window; he watched the medical examiner touch his wife's still-warm body, then saw it lifted into a police ambulance. He heard the young patrolman report that they had flushed no one in the deserted building.

Finally, as a city tow truck pulled Watson's car away, Lt. Albindi came over to him and said with gruff consideration, "We'd like you and the other main witnesses to come down to headquarters with us for complete statements." Albindi carried his jacket over one arm and his shirt was damp with sweat, for the evening was still quite balmy.

He had collected Sperry, whose VW was now out of commission, and given an escort to the elderly couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Grayley. As they walked toward a waiting squad car, Watson asked, "This

isn't going to be on a newscast, is it? My daughter—she's just fifteen—is spending the night with a friend. I'd hate to have her learn about her mother like that."

"I don't think so," Albindi said. "With so much happening, I doubt they've picked this up yet. What a night!" He pitied Watson, one of many who would suffer tonight.

"Mildred never listened," Watson said, as they drove downtown. "She always had to have her way. I told her it wasn't safe to go out tonight, but it was our regular bridge night at her sister's and nothing was going to stand in the way of it. And I don't even like bridge. Or her sister," he added glumly. "If just this once she'd listened to me, she'd still be alive. All this rioting and demonstrating, and my daughter saying we have to understand! She gets that at school, but what can I do? I can't afford private schools on my salary."

Watson lapsed into a bitter silence, and suddenly Albindi pitied him less.

Headquarters was an organized maelstrom. Phones rang constantly and tired officers, working sixteen-hour stretches as the overload of emergency calls poured in, strode through the halls. Albindi found a deserted office and motioned the Grayleys in first. Their statement was not very informative and Sperry's offered little more. "I was thinking about the riot," he said, "and deciding that I'd better turn off at the next block to get around the fire. Sure, my windows were down—it's like June outside—but I didn't hear the shot. First thing I knew, Watson slammed on his brakes and I piled into him."

Watson had his emotions under tight control and answered Albindi's questions almost coldly. Reading between the lines, Albindi got the impression that Watson's marriage had been a failure. Only when he spoke of his daughter did his tone thaw. Despite the riot, Mrs. Watson had insisted on keeping their weekly bridge date. Her sister and brother-in-law lived on the southwest side of town; the Watsons lived on the northeast. To get there, they had to drive through the fringes of the riot area.

They'd left home around seven, as usual. "She said it would be safe, that we weren't going through the worst part. We weren't involved—you know how it is, you think these things won't affect you." Watson seemed to watch his words. Perhaps he had sensed the subtle change of attitude his outburst in the squad car had produced in Albindi.

"One minute Mildred was talking about the riot and the next minute I heard the window shatter and she was dead. Gone—just like that!" He shook his head as if to deny the suddenness of death. "Do you think you'll find the killer?"

Albindi leaned back in his chair wearily. "I just don't know, Mr. Watson. You see, most people are killed by someone who knew the victim well and wanted him dead for a reason—love, hate, jealousy, greed, fear, you name it. Nine out of ten killings are simple. We ask around the victim's neighborhood, talk to his family or friends, and usually come up with the murderer right away.

"But when it's impersonal—some crackpot shooting at random . . ." Albindi threw up his hands. "If we don't catch him immediately, on the scene, where do we start in a city this large? We'll go over that tenement again with a microscope tomorrow. Maybe we'll be lucky. But don't worry, sir, we won't write off your wife's death without trying."

Watson nodded and stood up. At the door, he paused and asked, "What about my car? When can I pick it up?" He seemed almost apologetic. "I use it to commute, you know."

"We'll let you know as soon as we've finished going over it. I'll try to expedite it for you."

Albindi sat looking at the closed door for a long moment after Watson had gone. To his credit, Watson hadn't pretended a grief he didn't feel; but could the man really continue to use the car in which his wife had been killed? Flexing tired shoulder muscles, Albindi swiveled in his chair and began typing reports.

Although it was his Saturday off, Albindi came in at noon the next day, determined to whittle down his stack of paper work. Last night's violence had petered out with a drop in temperature, but he had gotten far behind.

"Need a good secretary?" gibed his partner, Jake Whittaker, riffling through Albindi's backlog.

"Your figure's lousy, but you're hired," Albindi said as he scanned the top sheet. "Hmmm. Ballistics report on last night's sniper: M-1 rifle; elevation, twenty feet; distance about fifty."

"Yeah, I saw that. A Mrs. Watson killed, right? Her husband called just now and asked if we'd released the car yet."

"I forgot. I told him I'd get the lab to hurry it up. Did we get a report on that tenement where the shot was fired from? Oh—yes, here it is." He read aloud, skim-

ming the pages: *"Building condemned. Used as a flophouse by area bums.* Oh, great! *Windows from which shot could have been fired all broken. No positive evidence. Multiple latents on all surfaces."* He groaned. "Want to bet they don't all belong to winos who saw and heard nothing because they were all passed out in gutters on the other side of town?"

"No takers," Jake said.

The phone rang and Albindi answered. The conversation was short and he turned to Whittaker as he hung up. "Watson again. He forgot to ask when we would release his wife's body; and, by the way, could I tell him how much longer we'll be keeping his car?"

He leaned back in his chair. "Tell me, Jake, what do you think of a man who's more interested in his car than his wife's body?"

"That it's too early in the year to go fishing," Whittaker warned. "So he's not all cut up by her death. We see a lot of men like that. What's it prove? Or did you see something last night that doesn't show up in the reports?" he asked shrewdly.

"I don't know. Guess I'm just tired and a little discouraged to think our city's going the way of Chicago, Detroit and L.A. Sure, we have our share of racial unrest, of kids marching against the war; and someone set fire to some empty buildings, *and* there was some minor looting on Dexter Avenue last night. But we haven't had a lot of violence in these demonstrations and we sure as hell never had a sniper before. I just don't like to think our little city's getting to be a jungle."

"And Watson rubs you wrong?"

"That, too," Albindi admitted. "Plus the fact that more women are murdered by their husbands than by snipers."

"Well, not in this case. Not unless Watson's a magician," Whittaker said as he shuffled through the reports. "The woman was shot from a distance, by a rifle, *while* her husband was driving. No one can be two places at one time, Al."

"I know, I know. But he could have set her up for it. He said they drove the same route every week at the same time."

"You've been watching too much television. This isn't New York or the wild West. Where does a man like Watson hire a killer?"

"You're right," Albindi said. "I guess I'm reaching." He rolled another set of report forms into his typewriter and began pecking at the keys with two fingers.

Whittaker started to do the

same, then paused. "You know, Al," he said slowly, "I don't see Watson hiring a pro, but what if someone else had it in for her? That regular drive *would* put her in rifle range every Friday night. It's worth a look."

April had become skittish; temperatures plunged and topcoats were a necessity again as Albindi and Whittaker dug into Mildred Watson's background.

They began by driving out to the Watson home Saturday afternoon through a bone-chilling spring rain. The house was located in an older section of town where property had held its value. The '30's construction had mellowed well and mature trees and shrubbery muffled all but the loudest traffic noises from the nearby freeway.

Set on a half-acre lot, the Watson home was typical of the neighborhood. It was a comfortable, two-story brick surrounded by tall, full-branched maples and screened from its neighbors by dense plantings of evergreens and overgrown privet. A blacktop drive along one edge of the yard led to a small garage in the back and flared into a circular turnaround there.

After leaving Whittaker a few doors down to interview the neighbors, Albindi parked in the Watson driveway. The garage was too small for a modern car and, judging from the clutter of cartons and tools inside, Watson probably used it as a storage shed and kept his car parked in the turnaround.

The rain had slacked off to a misty drizzle and Philip Watson looked like an ordinary do-it-yourselfer on his day off as he rounded the corner of the house with an extension ladder of lightweight aluminum on his shoulder. He broke step momentarily at the sight of Albindi, who called, "Need a hand with that?"

"Thanks," Watson replied, "but it's not heavy, just cumbersome." He slid it into the garage, closed the doors and turned to Albindi. "Yesterday was so warm, I thought I'd do a little yard work. Clean out the gutters, lop off a few dead limbs. Now, though . . ."

They looked across the deep yard to the back where a tall thick hedge of forsythia sported an occasional bright yellow blossom. "Mildred said they meant that spring was really here, but I guess it'll be another couple of weeks yet." He shivered slightly as he led the way out of the chill into a warm, neat kitchen.

The young girl who stood with her back against the refrigerator

held herself as erect as Watson and had his slim frame. Her light-brown hair was as long as any teen-ager's; but her clothes were an abnormally dark-hued assortment, as if her pathetic attempt to show mourning had been frustrated by the gaudy wardrobe of youth. A navy bodystocking clashed with her purple and black jumper, but she crossed the room with dignity when her father introduced Albindi, and offered her thin hand firmly.

"Have you found out who did it yet, Lieutenant?"

Briefly, Albindi explained the lack of clues offered by the tenement. "I was hoping you or your father would know if your mother had any enemies who knew about that standing bridge date."

Ellen Watson looked blank, but her father stiffened. "Are you suggesting that anyone we know could do a thing like that? You think we socialize with arsonists, rioters, snipers? You know where to look for that element, Lieutenant, and it's not among our friends!"

"Daddy, please!" the girl cried.

He glared at her. "It's your own mother they've killed! Are you going to preach to me now about understanding murder?"

She flinched, but stood her ground. "Rage and frustration aren't limited to any one class, Daddy. You don't know why Mother was killed and you shouldn't judge until you do."

Watson's anger changed to bafflement as he looked at her. "Okay, Ellie, that's enough. Why don't you finish getting ready? Nora said she'd be here soon."

To Albindi, he said, "Ellen's going to stay with my wife's sister till after the funeral." He sighed when the door had closed behind her. "I just don't know any longer. You have kids, Lieutenant? Do they listen when you try to tell them how things really are?"

Albindi shook his head. "I try to let them find out for themselves. Besides, my truths may not be theirs."

"You sound like Mildred. Truth is truth, isn't it? And everyone knows—"

"If you don't mind, sir, I'd rather discuss your wife's enemies."

There were none, Watson repeated. People might have gotten a little angry at some of Mildred's radical ideas, but nobody took her seriously and he'd put his foot down on her joining any of those "commie" groups or taking part in any demonstrations.

"Except that it was getting harder to keep her under control," Whittaker said when they met

and compared notes afterwards. "The neighborhood consensus is that they were on the verge of divorce."

"Over politics?" Albindi asked dubiously.

"Well, except for that bridge date with her sister, they pretty much went their separate ways. Watson moves in rather conservative circles and she was becoming an embarrassment. For instance, at a company party last month, she started sounding off about tax deductions to businesses and how they were nothing more than welfare for the rich. Watson's boss was livid. Mrs. Watson thought it was funny, but Watson told someone it cost him a promotion."

"So what was holding up the divorce?"

"The kid," said Whittaker. "They both wanted her and she's old enough now to choose which parent she'd live with. Friends say the daughter was always a daddy's girl and Mrs. Watson wouldn't take the chance; but recently they've heard the girl call him a narrow-minded bigot, so Mrs. Watson was putting on pressure."

"Even so . . ." Albindi mused.

"Right," Whittaker agreed. "We still come back to the fact that he was driving while she was shot. Did you tell him about the rifle? I wondered what he'd say."

"Yeah. He didn't turn a hair. Just said he used an M-1 in Korea twenty years ago and was surprised any were still around."

"He didn't happen to bring one home as a souvenir, did he?"

"He says not. I talked to Mrs. Watson's sister alone when she came to pick up Ellen and she doesn't seem to be a member of Watson's fan club. I asked if she'd ever heard of his having a rifle and you could see the wheels turning in her head. I got the feeling she'd have loved to say yes."

"But?"

"But nothing. She and her sister were very close. Restricting firearms was another of Mrs. Watson's hobbyhorses and she's sure she'd have heard about it if Watson had a rifle in the house."

"So there we are," Whittaker said. "Might as well face it, Al, our little city's in step with the bigger ones. Riots and now snipers. Unless you can nail Watson carrying an M-1 and put him in two places at the same time, it can't be a private kill. Nobody else seems to have been that bugged by Mrs. Watson. They just put her down as a misguided nut, and sympathized with Watson for having to live with her."

"I guess you're right," Albindi

said regretfully, shaking his head.

They spent the next morning in the unheated tenement on South Winston, hoping for a clue to their anonymous sniper which the lab crew might have overlooked. As they worked, they were joined by one of the building's squatters, a seedy old man with rheumy eyes, shaky fingers and an obvious hangover.

"Ain't you guys ever gonna finish with your scraping and measuring?" he complained. "Yesterday and again today—this is the second Sunday in a row you guys been stomping around up here with your tapes and things. A person's got a right to sleep, ain't he? Ain't I got a right to sleep Sunday mornings?"

Whittaker, who was examining the baseboard under the broken windows, ignored the wino, but Albindi asked, "The *second* Sunday? We weren't here last Sunday."

"Same difference," the little man said belligerently. "You're all on the city payroll, ain't you? Fat lot any of you care about a person's rights. Where's a person gonna find another flop this good? You think the city cares?"

"What's the city got to do with it?" asked Whittaker.

"Nothing!" the bum cried triumphantly, and sat down on the floor beside Whittaker. "That's exactly what I told him. I said, 'What right's the city got wrecking a person's life?' "

It took them twenty patient minutes to get a coherent picture. The aggrieved bum ("Call me Charlie"), had been awakened early last Sunday by someone kicking debris around in the room overhead. Worse, whoever it was hadn't closed the door properly and it banged every time the wind gusted. As the condemned building's steadiest tenant, Charlie had staggered upstairs to lay down some house rules and found a building inspector taking notes on the condition of the place. He'd told Charlie that the whole block was to be torn down as part of the city's urban renewal program.

Before Charlie could start grumbling about his rights again, they asked him how he knew the man was a building inspector.

" 'Cause he said so. And he was measuring things and writing 'em down like all you guys do."

Whittaker lifted his eyebrows, Albindi nodded, and they invited Charlie to headquarters. His objections dwindled abruptly when they hinted that the city often rewarded helpful citizens.

Downtown, Whittaker settled

Charlie in front of a selection of mug shots while Albindi went off to make a few phone calls. When he returned, his face wore a look of satisfaction. "Good news, Charlie! That firetrap of yours won't be bulldozed any time soon." To Whittaker, he added, "No building inspector's been in the place since it was condemned three years ago. It has to be our sniper getting the layout. Any luck with those pictures?"

"Just what you'd expect," Whittaker said sourly. "He narrowed the first fifty I showed him down to twenty-five. No two alike."

"What about this one, Charlie?" Albindi asked, shoving a newspaper photograph under the old man's rheumy eyes.

"That's him! That's the guy!" Charlie exclaimed, using both shaky hands to hold the picture steady. "Those others sorta mixed me up, but this is him, I promise you!"

Abruptly, Whittaker stood up, fished a bill from his wallet and hustled Charlie from the room with the city's thanks for his commendable citizenship.

"Forget it," Whittaker said when Albindi started to protest. "So he just identified Watson as his phony inspector. Terrific! You weren't here when he was almost as positive about two dozen others. Can't you just see our Charlie on a witness stand? A first-year law student could laugh him out of court.

"Granted, he might be cleaned up and dried out and made into a half-credible witness, but so what? Even if the jury believed him, what difference would it make, since Mrs. Watson wasn't killed last Sunday? In case you've forgotten, Al, she was shot *Friday* night while riding with her husband, and three much more reliable witnesses than Charlie will swear to it. You're acting like a green rookie who can't see the woods for the trees."

"But what if Charlie's right and Watson was up there last Sunday?" Albindi argued. "Somebody was. Charlie's not bright enough to make up a story like that for no reason. That means the murder was planned in advance, and who's the only one in sight with a motive?"

"Mr. Watson," Whittaker said patiently. "But you're the one who said politics made a poor reason for divorce. What makes it a better reason for murder?"

"Losing his daughter," Albindi said, remembering the way Watson had looked at her.

"Yeah, well . . ." said Whittaker, who had no children, as

he picked up his overcoat. "You've still got to show me how he managed it without leaving any evidence behind. Me, I'm going to spend the rest of *my* day off at home."

Albindi reached for his own overcoat and left with Whittaker.

Although he tried to put the case out of his thoughts and spent the rest of the day acting like a husband and father, his mind kept toying with the problem, and he went to sleep that night with fantastic diagrams of electrically-detonated, self-destructing rifles running through his head.

It was still cold and rainy the next day. There were going to be a hell of a lot of May flowers if it didn't let up soon, Albindi reflected, as he stopped in at the police lab.

Jarrell, the technician on duty, hooted when Albindi asked if Watson could possibly have shot his wife while driving. "See the way the window's smashed from the outside in?" he asked, leading Albindi out to the Watson car. "Everything lines up with the angle at which the bullet entered her head: twenty feet up, fifty feet away. Sorry, Al, there's no way he could have done it."

Discouraged, Albindi took the elevator and entered their office behind Whittaker. His resolve to forget about the Watson case until after he'd caught up on some of his other work was canceled by a knock on their open door. They looked up to see the familiar face of Gerald Hartford, claims investigator for a large insurance company.

"Heard you two had the Watson case," Hartford said, "and I just wanted to check it out with you—make sure everything's kosher."

"Any reason why it shouldn't be?"

"Not really," Hartford said cheerfully. "Just that we never lost a policyholder to a sniper before and, of course, double indemnity does bring it up to a nice round figure."

"How round?" Albindi asked softly, while his partner groaned.

"Sixty thousand," Hartford said, quirking a brow at Whittaker.

"Ignore him," Albindi said. "He refuses to believe in the impossible. I know inflation's hit everything, but isn't thirty thousand a lot to carry on a housewife?"

"Not really. Not when you consider that there's a minor child, and what a housekeeper costs these days."

"But the girl's fifteen. She wouldn't need a nursemaid now."

"Make him happy," Whittaker said. "Tell him Watson took out

the insurance policy last week."

"No," Hartford said slowly. "The original policy was issued twelve years ago as part of a family-coverage plan, but for the more usual five thousand. Last month, Watson reviewed his policies and upped them all: an extra five thousand on the daughter, fifteen on himself—"

"And twenty-five on his wife!" Albindi interrupted happily. "The other two were camouflage."

"It has to be," he repeated to Whittaker when Hartford had left. "I bet if we check, we'll find that Watson decided to 'review his policies' the day after that party when she insulted his boss and lost him a promotion."

"Coincidence," Whittaker said, but without conviction. "Besides, why would he need extra money? We've turned up no signs of heavy debts or expensive tastes."

"Everyone needs money, Jake. What if he were counting on that promotion to put Ellen into a private school away from public school contamination? Sixty thousand pays a lot of tuition."

"Okay, I'll grant you motive; I'll admit he's familiar with an M-1; hell, I'll even believe Charlie saw him in the building last Sunday. But you still have to—"

"Show you how he did it," Albindi finished. "You're starting to sound like a stuck needle. It's probably too late, but I'm going to get a search warrant and have a look for that rifle."

Right away, Albindi ran into a stone wall. Captain Fulner was sympathetic but said, "Unless you give me at least a theory as to how he could have done it, a search warrant's out, Al. People are touchy about their rights these days and I'm not going to have this department open to charges of high-handedness without good cause.

"I'm glad spring decided to hold off a while longer," he said, softening his denial. "Crazy weather, but at least no one marches on city hall in the sleet yet."

Albindi glanced at the window where freezing rain had begun to coat the panes with a thin film of ice. "Well, we knew it was just a matter of time. Everyone's been saying this was the year our city would feel the effect of protest movements." A germ of an idea wiggled in his brain. "That's it!" he said and hurried out.

"Don't you see?" Albindi asked, back in his office with Whittaker. "Everyone *expected* riots here this year. Remember that old riddle, where do you hide a tree? In a forest, of course. And where do you hide a private murder? In a

night of impending public violence!

"Except for that standing bridge game at her sister's, the Watsons had quit going out together, right? So why did he make that exception if it weren't to have an excuse to drive through an area everyone knew was ripe for an explosion?"

"Why?" he repeated an hour later, facing Watson in his own livingroom. Albindi had driven through icy streets to watch Watson's reaction to that question. "Neighborhood gossip had you two in a divorce court. You say you hate bridge and can't stand your in-laws. So why, Mr. Watson?"

More than ever, Albindi was aware of the man's rigid control as Watson eyed him steadily. "I could tell you we kept up appearances for my daughter's sake, but you probably wouldn't believe me." He shrugged.

"We have a witness who saw you in that tenement last Sunday figuring out the angle of fire."

"A reliable witness?" Watson asked coolly. "I thought that place was a flophouse for drunks and hopheads."

"But you did hate her, didn't you?" Albindi needled. "She knocked you out of a promotion and she was taking your daughter away from you. Well, *wasn't* she?"

Watson ignored the bait. "Isn't this where you're supposed to inform me of my rights, Lieutenant? Or do you reserve your kid-glove treatment for the kind of scum who killed my wife?"

His voice became icy as his anger deepened. "Listen, cop, and listen carefully: arrest me or get out! We may have been planning a divorce, but Mildred was still my wife when she died. I want her body released for a decent burial and I want my car, and if I don't get them you're going to see what kind of a stink law-abiding citizens can raise. We're still a majority in this city!"

Stymied, Albindi retreated to headquarters where he spent the rest of the afternoon filling out reports.

Whittaker had gone to recheck the three witnesses and returned just before five, gloomily predicting that he'd probably caught pneumonia in the process. "And unless everyone's lying his head off, there's no collusion. None of those three ever met Watson before. He was definitely in the car when Sperry rammed into him and the Grayleys were right by his side till we came, so he couldn't have disposed of any trick weapon."

To make matters worse, Cap-

tain Fulner was less than pleased when Albindi and Whittaker gave their progress report Tuesday morning. He began with a brief physics lecture ("Nobody may occupy two separate places at the same time, dammit!"), elaborated the more basic points of crime detection, reviewed proper procedures for questioning decent citizens and concluded by phoning Watson to announce the release of Mrs. Watson's body. "And your car will be returned this afternoon," he promised.

"It *is* in good enough condition for you to drive it over, isn't it, Lieutenant?" Fulner asked pointedly.

"He'll cool off," Whittaker consoled as they took the elevator down to the garage in the basement.

"I guess," Albindi agreed glumly, "but why does Watson feel so *right* to me? I've been less certain on far more evidence than this before. And now I've got to take his car back and all but apologize for suspecting him."

They picked up the keys to Watson's car, signed the necessary forms and Albindi slid behind the wheel. Whittaker was to follow in a squad car. Except for a small stain on the upholstery, the spider-webbed window and a crumpled rear bumper, there was nothing to show that a woman had died in this car four days ago. The Chevy cranked easily and cornered smoothly as Albindi drove it through the city streets. It was a comfortable car, one of the higher-priced models, and he could almost sympathize with Watson's desire to get it back.

The April rain had finally stopped and the sun was out, but the mercury remained low. The heater felt good as it warmed the chilly interior, and Albindi could feel it draining away some of his tension. He had just taken one hand off the steering wheel to loosen the buttons of his topcoat when it hit him.

Abruptly, he pulled the Chevy into a bus stop beside a telephone booth, waved a dime at Whittaker, who'd eased in behind him, and called Jarrell at the lab. He asked one question, received a negative reply and shouted to Whittaker, "Back to headquarters. Jarrell just told me how Watson could be in two places at one time!"

In their office, while Whittaker began laying out all the pictures the photographers had taken the night of the murder, Albindi tracked down Dr. Caird, chief medical examiner, by phone. There was a lengthy silence on the other end of the line when Al-

bindi had outlined his theory, then Dr. Caird said cautiously, "I'll have to recheck all my figures, but technically, there's no reason to disagree. Damn it! I must be getting old not to have noticed it myself."

As Albindi hung up, Whittaker laid a photograph in front of him and tapped the significant feature with his finger. "There it is!" Together, they tackled Captain Fulner, and this time there was no hesitation in the issuance of a search warrant.

If Watson were surprised to see them when they arrived with a search party, he was too disciplined to let them see it. He accepted the warrant and opened the door for them as coolly as if it were a social occasion. "May I ask what you expect to find?"

"The warrant states what we're looking for, Mr. Watson."

He read the paper he held. "An M-1 rifle? So you've decided I was in the building shooting my wife at the same time I was driving with her in the car?"

"Not at the same time and not from that building," Albindi said. "I rather think it was a half hour earlier and out in your back yard. What reason did you give her for keeping her waiting in the car while you climbed one of those big maples on your extension ladder? Did you tell her you'd left your pruning shears up there and it looked like rain?"

"Am I under arrest?" Watson asked, turning the warrant in his hand.

"Not yet," Whittaker answered as they listened to the sounds of the searchers moving through the house.

"We know you were in that tenement last Sunday studying the angles so you could duplicate them here," Albindi said. "We have a witness."

"A decrepit old drunk! Three people saw me in the car when Mildred was killed."

"A clever bit of misdirection, but no one heard a shot."

"The fire engines—" Watson began, but Albindi interrupted.

"Not good enough. We could buy it except for one small point: it was a warm evening. Your shirt was still wet with sweat when I first saw you, but it didn't register because mine was damp, too. On the other hand, I wasn't riding around that night with both windows closed *and a heater going full blast.* You were, Watson. You thought of everything—even to closing the car door when Sperry rammed you and you jumped out to begin your act—but you forgot to turn off the heater. By the time you remembered, it was too late.

You couldn't open the door and turn it off with Sperry and the Grayleys there. I noticed how powerful it was when I started to return your car today. The only thing is, I hadn't turned it on."

"One of your people could have done it."

"Sorry," Albindi said. "The witnesses all confirm that the windows were up, and photographs taken that night before your wife's body was moved show the heater on its highest setting. The medical examiner says it would be enough to push the time of death back at least a half hour, maybe more."

The search party came downstairs. "No luck, Lieutenant," one of them said.

"There's a garage out back. Lots of boxes and cartons, so take your time."

Albindi and Whittaker trailed along as Watson walked slowly through the house to halt at the back kitchen windows. Crisp sunlight filtered through lightly-leaved trees outside and was mirrored in the line of forsythia across the back where, despite the last few days of cold weather, more yellow buds had opened. The room was silent, then Watson pulled a letter from his pocket and crumpled it.

"It came today," he said, tossing it into a wastebasket. "A letter from Creighton Prep saying they had a vacancy for Ellen." He had heard the running footsteps across the yard outside.

A young detective stuck his head in the door. "We found it, Lieutenant! Up on one of the back rafters."

Albindi turned to Watson. "Mr. Watson, I'm arresting you for the murder of your wife. You have the right to remain silent—"

Watson held up his hand to stop him and, for the first time, Albindi saw his shoulders slump.

"All these past months, my daughter—Ellen—she's been so quick to understand and make excuses for every no-good, lazy malcontent in the country." He looked at them despairingly. "I wonder if she'll understand all this—or me?"

Albindi couldn't answer.

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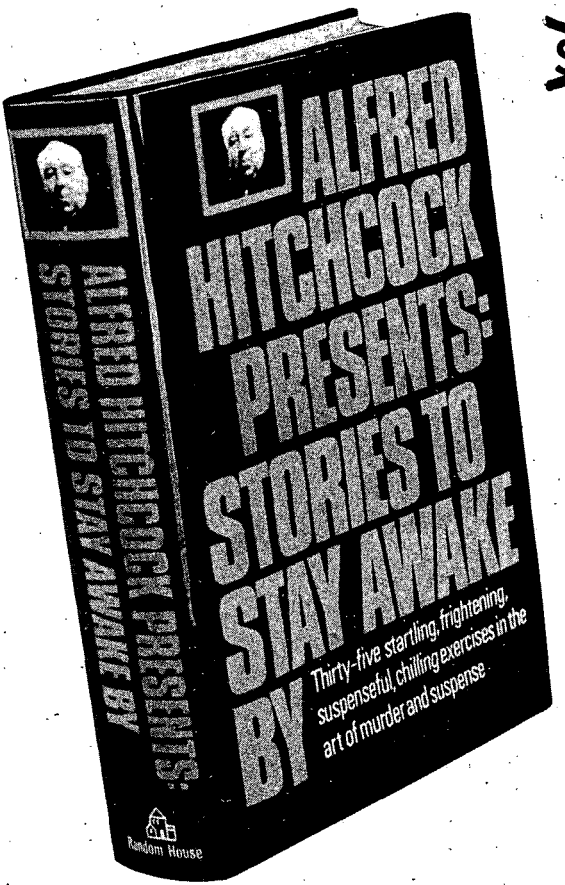

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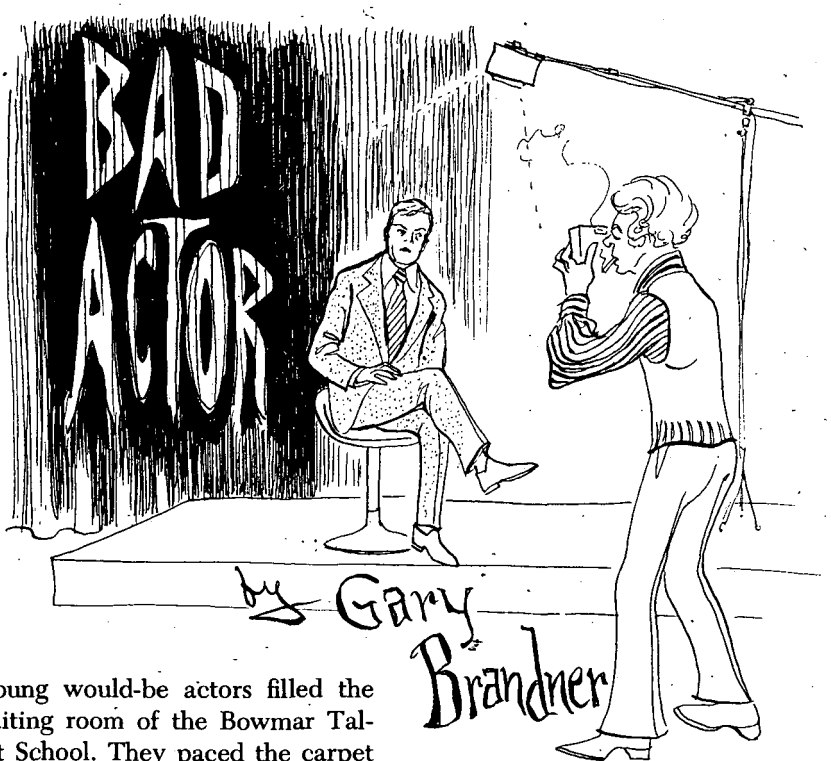


Young would-be actors filled the waiting room of the Bowmar Talent School. They paced the carpet or perched on the chairs, sizing up the competition. I walked through the crowd to the reception desk and gave the girl my phony name.

"I'm Alan Dickens. I'd like to enroll in an acting course."

The girl smiled without really looking at me and answered in a voice like a recorded message. "Fill out an application and leave it in this basket. You will be called for an interview."

I took a blank form from a stack on her desk and went over to a table where a couple of beach-boy types were struggling with their spelling. In this room full of eager kids I felt about a hundred years old.

I had felt much younger the day before when I rang the doorbell at Frank Legrand's house in San Gabriel, where the suburban greenery was a refreshing change from my dull office.

Legrand himself answered the door. A narrow-shouldered man in his mid-forties, he wore a dark business suit and a worried expression.

"Thank you for coming out, Dukane," he said. "I—I've never done business with a private detective before."

"Not many people have," I told him.

After inviting me in, he got on with the business. "As I told you on the phone, I want you to investigate this Bowmar Talent School."

"You said your wife and daughter were involved," I prompted.

"Yes. A month ago Tina, that's my daughter, acted a small part in her high school play. A couple of nights later a man from this Bowmar outfit came to the house and said he'd seen Tina's performance, and wanted to enroll her at the talent school. I was against it, but Tina got all excited and Esther, my wife, said it couldn't hurt to go down and talk to them. So the next day she and Tina drove into Hollywood, and *both* signed up for acting lessons. The cost seemed way out of line to me, and it sounded like those people had made some questionable promises about putting Esther and Tina into the movies."

"If you think there's fraud involved you ought to get the police in on it." I lit a cigarette and looked around for an ash tray.

Legrand jumped up and said, "Here, let me get you something." He left the room for a minute and came back with a china saucer. "You can use this. When Esther and I quit smoking she threw out all the ash trays in the house so we wouldn't be tempted."

I took the saucer from him and dropped my burnt match into it.

He said, "I don't really have anything to go to the police with—just a feeling. Anyway, I don't care about prosecuting these people. The important thing to me is my wife and daughter. I don't want them to get their hopes built up and then be hurt."

Legrand's eyes strayed to a pair of silver-framed photographs on the mantel. One was a dark-haired woman with dramatic eyes. The

other was a pretty teen-ager with a face unmarked by emotion or intelligence.

"What makes you suspect that the school isn't on the level?" I asked, tapping ashes into the saucer.

After a moment Legrand said, "Dukane, I love my wife and daughter. There is nothing I wouldn't do for them. But I know them both very well, and believe me, they are *not,* and never will be actresses."

I had accepted a retainer then and gone home to prepare for my entry into show business.

Now I waited in the lobby of the Bowmar Talent School while the receptionist worked her way down through the completed forms to mine. Then I almost blew the cue by not reacting when she called my new name. When the girl repeated it, I came to and hurried up to the desk.

"Miss Kirby will talk to you," she said, indicating a tall female seemingly made of styrofoam and vinyl.

I followed Miss Kirby through a short hallway with several doors opening off of it, and into a small office with walls the color of cantaloupe. She sat down and I took a chair facing her.

"Well, Alan," she said, scanning my application form, "so you want to become an actor, I see."

"I hope so," I said bashfully.

Miss Kirby leaned toward me, and the shadow of a frown marked her plastic features. "I hope you won't take offense, but you *are* just a tiny bit, er, mature to be starting out on an acting career."

My face stretched into what I hoped was a boyish grin. "I suppose I am starting a little late, but I just decided last month to have a fling at it. If it doesn't work out, I can always go back to the bank."

"Bank?" Miss Kirby's interest picked up.

"My father owns a bank back home in Seattle. I'll have to take it over eventually, but in the meantime I'd like to try what I've always wanted to do—acting. Unless you think it would be a waste of time."

Her tiny frown erased itself. "You know, Alan, now that I look at you more closely, I think you're just the type the studios are looking for these days. There are plenty of handsome juveniles around, but rugged leading men are hard to find. Yes, you're definitely the Burt Lancaster-Kirk Douglas type."

I lowered my eyes modestly.

"Come along now and we'll get some pictures of you."

"You want pictures of me?"

"Right. To send around to the studios and agencies. You want to get your face known in the business as soon as possible."

"Oh, sure," I agreed.

Miss Kirby led me across the hall and into a room where a man with orange hair and a big nose sat gloomily smoking a cigarette behind a desk. Photographic equipment cluttered the room, which smelled faintly of developer.

"This is Lou Markey," Miss Kirby said as she left me. "He'll take good care of you."

"Have a seat," Markey said, studying me without enthusiasm.

I put on an eager look and returned his gaze. There was something familiar about the bright little eyes, the comical nose, and the orange hair of the photographer. He used the glowing stub of his cigarette to light another, then jammed the butt into an overflowing ash tray. He offered the pack to me, but I saw they were triple-filter menthols and declined.

"Your nose is going to give us trouble," Markey said.

"It's been broken a couple of times," I admitted.

"They can straighten it, I suppose, but it won't help us now with the photos."

"Sorry," I said.

Markey sighed wearily. "Don't worry. I can light you so it doesn't look too bad, and later I can hit it with an airbrush."

"That's good," I said, feeling foolishly relieved.

He stood up and walked around the desk. "Let's get you over here by the curtain first."

When I saw the up-and-down bouncing motion of his walk I knew why he was familiar.

I said, "Are you *Beano* Markey, by any chance?"

He smiled for the first time. "Thanks for the present tense. Most people ask if I used to be Beano Markey."

"It was the early fifties, wasn't it, when you made your movies?"

"That's when it was. I must have been in two dozen low-budget teen-age epics. I was the comical kid who always lost his pants at the prom."

"Do you do any acting now?"

"Not since my voice changed. Of course, the critics said I didn't do much acting then either, the ones who bothered to review those pictures. And they were right. I never could fake reactions that I didn't feel, so I was always playing myself—the comical, clumsy high school kid."

Markey sat me down in front of a dark curtain, told me to turn this way and that, look up, look

down, while he snapped away with a small, expensive-looking camera and kept up a low-key conversation.

"You seem like a fairly intelligent guy," he said at one point. "Why do you want to be an actor?"

The question surprised me. "I don't know, I guess it seemed like it would be fun and exciting."

"Yeah, exciting," Markey said in a flat voice. "Let me tell you something—"

Whatever he was going to tell me was interrupted when the door burst open and a young man with a thousand-watt smile bounced in.

"Hello there," he said, "you must be Alan Dickens. I'm Rex Bowman, president of Bowmar. How are you coming, Lou?"

"I just got started," Markey grumbled.

"You can finish up later," Bowman said airily. Then he turned to me. "Miss Kirby has been telling me about you, Alan. Let's walk on down to my office and we'll lay out a program for you."

He hustled me out of the photographer's room and into a large office walled with pictures of show business celebrities. A mountain of a man with blond curls was just leaving as we entered. Bowman took a seat behind an acre of desk and pushed a legal form across the polished surface toward me.

"That's our standard contract," Bowman said. He lit a long greenish cigar and blew the smoke toward the ceiling where an air-conditioner sucked it out.

I ran my eyes down the paragraphs of fine print and saw that the contract implied much, but promised little.

"What's this 'career assistance'?" I asked, pointing to a line near the bottom.

"We make every effort to launch our graduates into successful careers in movies and television," Bowman said smoothly. "And I don't mind telling you that my personal contacts in the industry are a big help in landing that first part."

"What contacts are those?" I asked, as innocently as I could.

He chuckled indulgently. "The names probably wouldn't mean anything to you, but I'm in constant touch with the men who run things in Hollywood from behind the scenes." He walked quickly to a pair of filing cabinets and slid out one of the top drawers. He dipped into a row of manila folders and drew out several 8-by-10 glossy photographs. "Now, these are a few of my graduates whom you're probably seeing a lot of on the screen these days."

The attractive young folks might or might not have looked like somebody on television. All the stars under thirty seemed to come equipped with the Standard Face.

Bowman stuffed the pictures back into the file drawer. "That will give you an idea of the help I give my people to get them in front of the camera."

It gave me no such idea, but I nodded and said nothing. So far, though Rex Bowman appeared pretty fast on his feet, he didn't seem to be breaking any laws.

He took a look at his jeweled wristwatch. "If you want to sign the contract, you can start right in with classes this morning."

"Fine," I said, "I'm anxious to get started. But if it's all right, I'd like to take the contract home tonight and read it over."

Bowman's eyes narrowed a millimeter. "Ordinarily we don't let a student into one of our classes without a contract. You can understand that."

"Well—" I began.

He dazzled me with a smile. "But I'll make an exception in your case. That's how positive I am that we are going to have a long and profitable association."

"I appreciate that," I said.

Bowman touched a button on his desk and the plastic Miss Kirby floated into the office.

"It's almost time for the morning break," he said, "but Miss Kirby will take you in to catch the last few minutes of theatrical speech class."

In the classroom some twenty students sat on floor cushions listening to a young man who was mumbling something unintelligible. I spotted Esther Legrand and her daughter Tina near the front of the group. Both wore flared jeans and tie-dyed shirts. Esther had a loop of beads around her neck, and Tina wore a hammered silver ankh. The kid looked pretty good, the mother would have looked better if she dressed her age. I carried a cushion up front and sat next to them.

For several minutes I listened to the mumbler without understanding a dozen words. To start a conversation with Esther Legrand, I said, "There's a guy who really needs speech lessons."

She gave me an icy look. "That," she said, "is our instructor."

With that conversation out of the way I returned my attention to Mushmouth. Just before I dozed off he must have adjourned the class because my fellow students began standing up and chattering among themselves.

I turned to try again with Es-

ther Legrand, and found her staring back at the doorway where her daughter was in animated conversation with Rex Bowman. He looked over and gave us the big smile and started in our direction. Tina frowned as he walked away from her.

Bowman said, "Glad to see you're getting involved, Alan. It will be about twenty minutes until the next class. You're welcome to sit in if you want."

"Thanks, I'd like to."

"Most of us go up the street to a coffee shop for the break. Would you like to come along?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I'll stay here and look around."

"We'll see you later, then."

When Bowman and the students had trooped out I wandered back into the office part of the building, trying to look inconspicuous. The lobby was still full of aspiring stars. Through the open door of the photography studio I could see Lou Markey arguing with a chubby blonde about which was her good side.

As soon as I had a chance I slipped into Rex Bowman's office. His desk was clean except for the ash tray filled with cigar stubs. I moved to the filing cabinets and started pulling out drawers. Other than the one he had opened for my benefit, they were empty.

A bookcase gave me nothing until I came to a file folder wedged in at the end. The papers inside concerned the financial aspects of Bowmar. I hadn't read very far when I heard the voices of the returning students.

I was heading back toward the classroom when Bowman came in. He answered my smile with an odd look, but said nothing.

According to a schedule pinned on the door, the next class was going to teach us how to walk. I wasn't too surprised to see that the instructor was my friend Mumbles from Theatrical Speech. Before I had a chance to learn much about walking, the bruiser I'd seen leaving Bowman's office came to the door and waggled a finger at me. I walked back to see what he wanted.

"Mr. Bowman has a special class he wants you to take a look at," the big man said.

He led me down the hall toward the back of the building and held the door open while I walked into another room. At that instant I sensed that something was wrong—half a second too late.

The sap hit me high on the back of the neck, in just the right spot and with just enough force. Curly was an artist.

I landed hard on my hands and knees, and tried to shake the

buzzing lights out of my head. The room was small and bare with nothing to look at except the blond giant standing spraddle-legged in front of me.

He said, "Mr. Bowman thinks you ought to have a special class in minding your own business."

As I tried to push myself up, he leaned forward and tapped the point of my shoulder with the sap. My right arm went dead and I kissed the floor.

Curly was enjoying himself. He grinned and laid the sap along the side of my jaw. Pain clanged through my head like a fire gong.

"This class is just for private snoopers, Mr. Dickens-Dukane." He leaned over to let me have one in the kidney.

Curly stopped talking then and just moved around me picking his spots. My head had never cleared from the effects of the first blow, and every time I tried to get into some kind of fighting position he would hit me with the sap, just hard enough to put me down again.

After a while Curly tired of the game. Or maybe I wasn't showing enough life anymore to make it interesting. The last thing I remember was the big blond face saying, "Nightie-night, snooper. Don't come back." He swung the sap at my temple and the lights went out, suddenly and completely.

I awoke to a sound like the surf. Then the sound grew louder and I got a whiff of diesel exhaust. I opened my eyes to see I was parked on a dead-end street next to the Hollywood Freeway. My head and body felt like I'd rolled down a mountain, but nothing seemed to be broken and there were few visible bruises. My wallet and watch were still with me, but the Bowmar contract was gone from my pocket.

As I reached for the ignition I saw that my registration slip had been rotated from the underside of the steering post where I kept it. Bowman must have got suspicious and sent the muscle man out to check my car.

I kicked the engine to life and drove painfully home to my apartment. From there I called a friend on the staff of *The Hollywood Reporter*. She did some checking for me and learned that nobody of importance in the entertainment industry had ever heard of Rex Bowman. He had been a member of the Screen Actors' Guild a few years back, but was dropped for nonpayment of dues.

With a glass of medicinal brandy within reach, I eased my aching frame into a hot tub to soak and think. It was questionable whether Bowman was break-

ing any laws at his talent school, but at least I had enough information to cause him some trouble with the state licensing board. Also, I had a personal grievance now. Tonight I would pay him a visit and persuade him to let the Legrand ladies down easy, and then we would discuss my bruises.

Rex Bowman's house, I found, was small by Bel Air standards, which means it had something less than twenty rooms. It was after ten o'clock and the streets were empty when I pulled to the curb behind a gray sedan.

I climbed out of my car and started up the walk. When I was halfway to the house the front door opened and a woman ran out. When she saw me the woman stopped, looking around as though for an escape route.

"Hello, Mrs. Legrand," I said.

She went past me with a rush, swinging at my head with something on the end of a silvery chain. I made no move to stop her. She ran awkwardly across the lawn to the sedan, jumped in, and drove off with a shriek of rubber.

As I continued up the walk to the open door of Bowman's house I had a feeling I wouldn't like what I found inside.

I didn't.

Rex Bowman sat in the center of a furry white sofa, his head sagging forward as though he were examining the bullet hole in his bare chest where the silk robe gapped open. One hand rested on the back of the sofa while the other lay in his lap with a burnt-out cigar between the fingers.

In front of the sofa was a glass-topped coffee table bearing a heavy ceramic lighter, a clean ash tray, and today's edition of *Daily Variety*. A molded plastic chair was pulled up to face Bowman across the low table.

I went to the telephone and dialed Legrand's number. I told him he'd better get hold of a lawyer and get him out there tonight. Then I called the police.

When Sergeants Connor and Gaines from Homicide arrived I told them as much as I knew, including how I ran into Esther Legrand on her way out. They let me come along when they left for Legrand's house in San Gabriel.

Legrand's lawyer was there when we arrived. He stood protectively behind Esther's chair, advising her whether or not to answer the detective's questions. Tina, who had been summoned home from a party in Beverly Hills, sulked on the couch next to her father.

Esther Legrand admitted being at Bowman's house, but she refused to say why. Her story was

that she found the man dead on the sofa, then ran out the door and panicked when she saw me.

Legrand, in something like shock, said he had no idea his wife had gone to Bowman's place. She had told him she was going to a club meeting, and he spent the evening alone watching television.

While Sergeant Connor questioned the family, Gaines went out to check the gray sedan. In a little while he came in and called his partner aside for a conference. Gaines handed something to Connor, who came over and dangled it before Esther. It was the silver ankh I'd seen Tina wearing earlier.

"Do you recognize this, Mrs. Legrand?" Connor asked.

Esther turned to the attorney, who shook his head negatively.

The detective turned to me. "How about it, Dukane, is this what Mrs. Legrand swung at you when you met her coming out of the house?"

"It could have been," I said.

Connor returned to Esther. "It was found tucked under the driver's seat of your car."

"I don't know anything about it," she said in a monotone.

Tina spoke up then from the couch. "Oh, Mother, it's no use. They'll find out sooner or later." To Connor she said, "It's mine. I was at Rex Bowman's house tonight. I slipped away from the party and went there—it's only a five-minute drive. We were . . . in the bedroom when somebody came to the front door. Rex didn't want us to be found together, so he told me to go out the back way. While he slipped on a robe to answer the door, I gathered up my clothes and ran out. I must have dropped the ankh."

"Did you see who was at the door?" Connor asked.

"No."

"It wasn't me," Esther put in. She brushed aside the protests of her lawyer and went on. "Rex and I were . . ." here she forced herself to look at her husband, "having an affair. When I found out he was seeing Tina too, I went over to have it out with him. When I found Rex dead and Tina's ankh lying on the floor, I was afraid she had killed him. I picked up the ankh and ran out. I still had it in my hand when Dukane saw me."

Sitting motionless on the couch, Frank Legrand looked like he'd just taken a shot between the eyes with a poleax.

While the Legrand family talked themselves into deeper trouble, I got out of there. I wasn't helping anybody, and there were some unformed ideas in the

back of my head that I wanted to pull up front and examine.

It was the middle of the morning, and I was on my third pot of coffee and the last of my cigarettes when I figured it out. All I had to do was prove it, and I thought I knew how.

I drove out to the Bowmar Talent School. The death of the boss hadn't slowed the operation. I found the lobby as full of applicants as the day before. I walked past the reception desk to the office area. Through her open door I saw the plastic Miss Kirby in worried conversation with the mumbling speech teacher. As I continued along the hall, the big blond sap expert rounded a corner in front of me. He put on a weak grin and stuck out his hand.

"Hey, no hard feelings, Dukane. Okay?"

I hit him twice in the belly before he could tense his muscles. The big man's mouth flopped open and he turned the color of raw modeling clay. I stepped back and planted my feet for leverage, then let him have my best shot on the hinge of the jaw. His face jerked out of shape and he hit the floor like a felled oak.

"No hard feelings," I said.

Lou Markey looked up from behind the desk when I walked into Bowman's office. His hair was uncombed and his cheeks were sprinkled with orange stubble. The ever-present cigarette smoldered in his hand. It took him a moment to place my face.

"Oh, hello, Dickens. Were you looking for someone?"

"My name isn't Dickens," I said. "It's Dukane. I'm a private investigator."

"Are you here about Rex Bowman?" he asked.

"You know what happened last night?"

"I heard it on the radio early this morning," he said. "I thought I'd better come in and start getting our papers straightened out. There's a lot to be done."

"Does that include changing the name back to the Markey School of Acting?"

"How did you know that?"

"I ran across it in some of Bowman's papers. It looks like he kind of took over your operation."

Markey shrugged. "Rex knew how to make money, I didn't. The new name, Bowmar, was supposed to be a combination of his and mine, but most people thought it just came from Bowman."

"What was he going to do next, phase you out completely?"

Markey's forgotten cigarette singed his fingers and he jumped to light another. "It doesn't make any difference now, does it? As

the surviving partner I'll take over the school."

When he had his lungs full of smoke I snapped, "Give me the gun, Markey."

"What gun?" The words popped out immediately, but Markey's eyes flickered down and to his right.

I got to the desk drawer before he moved, and lifted out the .32 automatic that lay inside. Markey sagged back in the chair and aged ten years before my eyes.

"I didn't go there planning to kill Rex," he said. "But I couldn't let him push me out of my own school the way he planned. I hated what he turned it into, anyway. Sure, he made money, but all the lies he told the kids who came to us. I told him it was wrong to lead them on like that, but Rex wouldn't listen to me. He wouldn't give an inch." He blew his nose, then looked up at me. "Where did I slip up, Dukane? How did you tumble?"

"It was the way you left things in Bowman's livingroom after you shot him. Something was wrong, but I didn't pin it until this morning. Bowman was smoking a cigar when he was shot—it went out in his hand. Yet the big ash tray in front of him was empty. Wiped clean. It had to be the killer who cleaned it—not to get rid of Bowman's ashes, but his own. Neither Esther nor Tina Legrand is a smoker. Frank Legrand either, for that matter. But you light one after the other, a distinctive cigarette that would point straight to you."

He stared down at the desk top for a long time, then looked up with the ghost of the crooked smile that belonged to Beano Markey, the comical kid in the high school movies. He said, "You didn't really know I had the gun here, did you?"

"No," I admitted, "but I figured you came straight here, not even going home to shave."

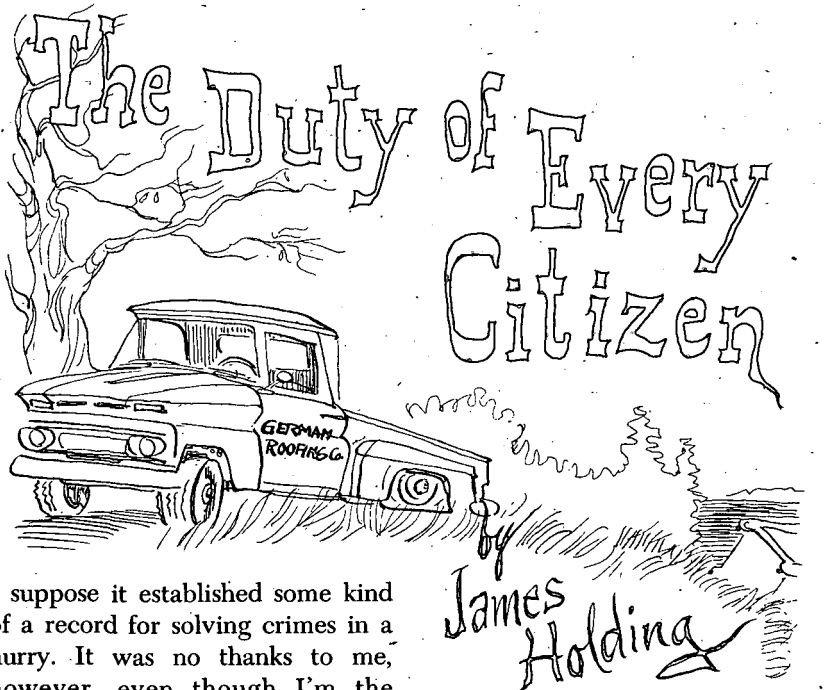
"And you tricked me."

"I just counted on your honesty. You told me you never could fake reactions."

"The critics were right," Markey said. "I'm a bad actor."

Avoiding involvement is often a matter of good timing.

The Duty of Every Citizen



by James Holding

I suppose it established some kind of a record for solving crimes in a hurry. It was no thanks to me, however, even though I'm the sheriff of Penton County and officially got the credit for it.

I was having my "wake-up" coffee at my desk early Monday morning when I got the first call.

It was from Bud Clinton, manager of the BeeBee Supermarket in our shopping center. "Harry," he said, very excited, "we've been robbed! Over the weekend, somebody took the safe out of my office!"

"Ouch!" I said. "You mean the safe itself is missing?"

"Absolutely. Somebody broke in at the back of the store, picked up my safe, and carried it off."

"Wait a minute," I said. "You don't just pick up a three-thousand-pound safe and saunter off with it under your arm."

"I know that," Bud said. "But with the help of my stock-room forklift, that's exactly what somebody did."

"Anything else missing?"

"No. Only the safe."

"What was in it?"

"Eleven hundred in cash and about three million trading stamps, I guess," Bud said with a sigh.

"Okay. We'll get right on it, Bud," I said. "Somebody from my office will be over to have a look at things in a few minutes."

That was at 6:31. I hung up, and immediately my phone rang again. It was Lonnie German from the German Roofing Company, reporting that one of his trucks had been stolen over the weekend.

"Give me its license number, Lonnie," I said, "and I'll send out an all-points on it. Does the stolen truck have your company name on it?"

"Yeah," Lonnie said. He gave me the license number.

"Insured?"

"Of course. But I need that truck on the job today, so I'd appreciate fast action, Harry. Extra fast."

"We'll do our best to give it to you," I said. "Our fast sleuthing."

"Thanks," Lonnie said. "I guess it helps to know the sheriff personally, eh?"

"*All* our citizens get the same fast, dependable service from the Sheriff's Department," I said. We both laughed and I hung up.

That was at 6:34.

At 6:36, just as I got the description and license number of Lonnie's truck on the air, my phone rang again. This Monday morning was busier than most Saturday nights. I picked up the phone.

A man's voice asked, "Is this the sheriff's office?"

"Right," I said. "Sheriff Boyle speaking. What can we do for you?"

"I want to ask you something, Sheriff."

"Ask away," I said impatiently. I had to get over to the BeeBee Supermarket.

"Did somebody steal a big iron safe out of the BeeBee Supermarket?" this guy asks me.

I gulped and sat back in my chair. "Maybe," I said cautiously. "Why?"

"I got it for you," said the voice. "Ran acrost it just now on my way home from work."

"How about that?" I said. "Who are you and where's the safe?"

He took them in order. "I'm Joe Stevens, the night man at Sachs' Service Station at Pontiac Road and Kleiff Highway. Right now, me and the BeeBee safe are both half a mile north of Kleiff Highway on Pontiac Road."

"Where you calling from, Joe?"

"Jenkins' farm, Sheriff. Right nearby."

"Get back to where the safe is, Joe," I said, "and stay there. I'll be with you in twenty minutes. And thanks for calling in. Okay?"

"Okay," Joe said.

I had an inspiration. "Say, Joe, is the safe in a German Roofing Company truck?"

"Yeah," Joe said.

"License number?"

"It's got out-of-state plates tacked on over local ones. I didn't get the numbers."

"Never mind," I said. "See you in twenty minutes."

Before I grabbed my hat and took off for Pontiac Road, I couldn't resist making a couple of calls myself.

First, Lonnie German. "Lonnie, you said you wanted fast action. I think I've located your stolen truck."

"What!" Lonnie said. "In five minutes?"

"Our usual fast service," I said smugly. "Remember it when I come up for reelection, Lonnie."

Next, Bud Clinton. "Bud, how many trading stamps you giving for the prompt return of your stolen safe?"

"You got it? Already?" Bud shouted, unbelieving.

"Child's play when your sheriff has an instinct for the work," I told him. "Remember to vote for me next fall, Bud," and I hung up.

Then I hightailed it to Pontiac Road in a patrol car with the siren going.

I turned right off Kleiff Highway at Sachs' Service Station without stopping. I covered the next half mile like the dog racing home for his dinner in the dog food commercials. I came over the brow of a hill and there it was.

A truck, with both back tires flat and the German name on the sides, was slued around at the side of the road, tipped backward at a slant. Ten feet below the shoulder of the road, down a steep bank, a big black safe was lying on its side with one corner actually in the water of Page Creek, which runs beside the road there.

A kid with medium-blond hair, and a thick blond moustache that hung down on each side of his mouth like a Chinaman's, was sitting on the tailgate of the truck. He jumped down when I skidded

my patrol car to a quick stop.

"Hi, Sheriff," he said. "Twenty minutes, right on the nose."

"You Joe Stevens?"

"Yep. I'm the one called you."

"Glad to know you, Joe." I shook hands with him, thinking that kids have a vote now. "Let's see what we've got here."

Looking over the setup, there were two possibilities, I figured. Theory One: that the thieves who stole the safe got it this far into the country, opened it, took out the cash and the trading stamps, dumped the safe into the creek, abandoned the German Roofing Company truck, and escaped in another car they'd stashed here ahead of time for their getaway. Theory Two: that the weight of the safe had been too much for the truck's rear tires and they'd blown, sluing the truck around, tipping it backward, and the safe had just naturally slid out of the truck and down the bank into the creek of its own weight.

I went down the bank and looked at the safe in the water. The combination lock and front door were uppermost. As far as I could see, the safe door hadn't been opened. So, scratch Theory One.

I turned to Joe Stevens, who was watching me intently. "Well, Joe," I said, "let's see how good a detective you are. What do you think happened here?"

Joe shrugged. "Pretty plain, ain't it? Heavy safe . . . not secured in the truck. When the back tires went, the truck skidded and tilted and the safe slid out. Ain't that the way you figure it?"

"Pretty close," I said. "And you think the thieves just took off when the tires went?"

"Sure. What else could they do? Daylight coming soon, traffic would be passing, they'd be caught with the stolen safe. So they left everything and split."

I nodded. "That's how I figure it, too. You must have been pretty surprised when you ran into this mess on your way home from work."

Joe said, "I wasn't too surprised. I figured I'd run acrost it right about here."

I gave him a sharp look. "Wait a minute," I said. "Did I hear you right? You mean you *expected* to find the truck and safe here?"

"Just about here," Joe nodded, "give or take a quarter of a mile, maybe."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Sheriff, I knew the safe was stolen soon as I saw that BeeBee name on it when they stopped for gas at my station about four this morning."

"At Sachs' Service Station?"

"Sure. And besides having that BeeBee safe in a German Roofing Company truck, they had out-of-state license plates masking the local ones underneath, like I said. And they all turned their heads away so I couldn't get a look at them, even when they paid their bill."

"You saw them, then!" I said urgently. "How many were there, Joe?"

"Three."

"But you couldn't describe them?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry. They kept inside the truck cab in the dark, and they didn't say a word to each other the whole time. The driver ordered the gas while he was coughing pretty hard, and I figured it was to disguise his voice. Oh, I could tell they were crooks, all right!" Joe said proudly.

I was disgusted. "That was at four o'clock this morning, Joe! And you waited till after six-thirty before you reported this to the police! How come?"

Joe was evidently a TV fan. "You think I wanted to get involved with a bunch of crooks?" he asked. "Turn them in to the police, and have them gunning for me when they got out of jail?" He shook his head. "Not me, Sheriff. I don't want any trouble with crooks. I know better than that."

I gave him my lecture number three. "Joe," I said sternly, "that's not the way we control crime in this county. It's the duty of every citizen who sees a crime being committed, or even suspects a crime is being committed, to *do* something immediately to help the police enforce the law. Immediately, Joe. That means right away—not two and a half hours later. You should have *done* something at four o'clock this morning, Joe. When you first saw this truck and safe at your station."

"Well," Joe said, considerably abashed by my serious reprimand, "I *did* do something, Sheriff."

"Then? At four o'clock this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do?"

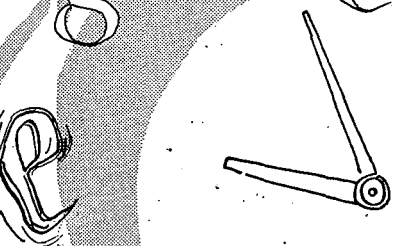
"When I was putting the gas in their truck," Joe said, "I unscrewed the valves in the rear tires enough to make both tires go flat in about half a mile . . ."

I gawked at him.

"Give or take a quarter mile," Joe finished apologetically.

Happily, the word that carries the most weight is sometimes that of the one who carries the most weight.

The Wrong Time to Die



by James Michael Ullman

Ben was about to take his first bite of supper when the implications of the radio newscast emanating from the little diner's kitchen seared into his brain.

". . . body was discovered about an hour ago. Maxine Treadway, the internationally known novelist, was bludgeoned to death in a small lakeside cottage here by an unknown assailant. Police Chief Howard Cream said an expert pathologist is on the way here and an autopsy will be performed tonight. It has also been learned that the police are seeking a prime suspect, a young man seen leaving Miss Treadway's cottage this morning. Miss Treadway, currently writer-in-residence at nearby State College, had rented the cottage for the summer. At City Hall, Mayor Hoke expressed

confidence that the crime would be cleared up quickly. Stay tuned for more details. And now . . ."

As the announcer began reading a commercial, Ben, a thin, slight young man wearing jeans and a denim jacket, put his fork down and rose.

Lounging behind the counter, the waitress gazed at him curiously and asked, "Anything wrong?"

"I just remembered," Ben replied, walking as casually as he could toward the door, "I left a cigarette burning in my room. I'd better make sure it's out, or that old hotel will go up in smoke."

Outside, he took a few steps toward his hotel, veered into an alley and broke into a trot. It was nearly dark, a good break, probably the last he could count on. If he could reach the outskirts of this resort city and get into the pine forest that fanned for miles in all directions, he might evade capture for a day or so at least.

He needed help first. At the next street he stepped into a phone booth. Fighting a growing feeling of panic, he spread his pocket change on the shelf. Did he have enough for a call to Milwaukee? Just barely.

He gave the number he remembered so well, dropped coins into the slot and the phone began ringing. Five, six, seven times. Hell, where was she?

A woman's deep voice said: "Ex-Con Rehab Center. Ernestine Barr."

"Miss Barr? It's Ben Phelan."

"Wonderful. We were just talking about—"

"Look, I can't explain now, but I'm in big trouble. The police here think I did something, but I swear I didn't. You've got to come up here. Without you, I'll do *anything* to keep them from bringing me in. You understand?"

There was a pause. "I think so," Ernestine said slowly.

"You'll read about what happened here in the papers. How soon can you make it?"

"Not until tomorrow afternoon. It's a long drive, and I have to rent a car and make office arrangements in the morning. But are you sure—"

"Yes," he told her. "I *need* you. There's a county park east of town. Drive past the entrance and turn left at the fire lane. I'll be in there someplace."

Ben hung up, slipped out of the booth and began hiking toward the forest.

In Milwaukee, Ernestine Barr gazed angrily at the dead phone. An immense woman, she was over six feet tall and weighed nearly three hundred pounds, with ro-

tund, fiftyish features that told a story of hard work and hard times.

What, she wondered, was she getting into now? Why should she care what happened to Ben Phelan? Hadn't she done enough, helping him get his parole and then finding him a succession of jobs, culminating with the landscaping company in that north woods resort city?

Something about Ben had touched her, all right. An orphan reared in a succession of foster homes, he'd become an accomplished burglar by the time he was sent to prison at 20. She'd first seen him there, where she'd gone to visit another convict. Seen him, and been impressed by his apparent desire to go straight and earn an honest living so he could teach himself to be a writer.

Of course, she had to admit that what got to her most was his remarkable resemblance to her only child, the boy killed in a faraway war . . .

She slammed the phone down, then said aloud, "The little rat's probably lying. But I've got to do it."

Memo To: CHIEF CREAM
From: MAYOR HOKE

1. The murder of Maxine Treadway, the novelist, is attracting a lot of attention. She was not only famous in her own right, but her ex-husband is Warren Mayfield, the big movie producer; and since she had no living relatives, I understand Mayfield is flying here from California to handle the funeral arrangements. This means there will be big-city reporters here and maybe even national television coverage. The way this case is handled will have a big impact on our national image.

2. Also, as you know, there will be an election this November. From all indications it will be close. Bad publicity of any kind would tip the scales against us.

3. Accordingly you'd better clear this up quickly and cleanly, with no bungling of evidence, etc. I want a full report on everything that goes on. Howard, I'll do what I can to help, but never forget it is you who must carry the ball. For instance, if the culprit turned out to be a little nobody killed resisting arrest, it might be best for all concerned.

Memo To: MAYOR HOKE
From: CHIEF CREAM

1. We think the Treadway woman was killed by an ex-con named Ben Phelan, who recently got a landscaping job here through a Milwaukee do-gooder outfit called Ex-Con Rehab.

2. The Treadway woman had befriended Phelan and was giving him advice on how to be a writer. We think he made advances and killed her when she resisted. Even though she was old enough to be his mother, she was well-preserved and wearing a skimpy sunsuit at the time.

3. The evidence against him is, he is the only person who could have done it, unless the murderer is a fish.

4. The autopsy was performed by Dr. Jurgen Von Wythe, the forensic medicine specialist at the state-medical school, and his testimony will stand up in any court.

5. Dr. Von Wythe said the Treadway woman died from blows to the head with a blunt instrument, probably the metal figurine we found beside her body. He also said she died between 9:30 a.m. and 11 a.m. It is impossible to pinpoint the exact time because of many variables, including the temperature in the cottage and the different rates at which rigor mortis sets in, but Dr. Von Wythe said he will stake his professional reputation on the 9:30 to 11 range.

6. Where we have Phelan is, the Treadway woman's cottage is alone on a little peninsula, surrounded on three sides by water. Ordinarily it is a fairly isolated spot, but yesterday morning, from 8 a.m. on, a road crew was working on the blacktop that runs on the land side. Nobody could have gotten on or off that peninsula without being seen by the road crew.

7. The crew saw Phelan go into the cottage around 9:45 and leave at about 10:30. While this leaves a half-hour in Dr. Von Wythe's 9:30-11 range when someone else could have killed her, nobody could have reached the cottage by land without being seen. In fact, the road crew was there until nearly 12, when they left because it was about to rain.

8. As for someone approaching or leaving by water, this was virtually impossible. There is a sharp drop-off all around, and nobody could have waded to the site. Also, there was high wind with small-craft warnings, plus a forecast of thunderstorms. No boats or swimmers were observed by the crew or by neighboring property owners. You'd have to be crazy to be in or on water under those circumstances.

9. Phelan disappeared last night after hearing a radio newscast about the crime. I have queried Milwaukee about the possibility of his having contacts there who might help him, but believe me, if I find him first there won't be no

need for any other kind of trial.

TELETYPE TO
CHIEF HOWARD CREAM,
RESORT CITY PD

RE YOUR QUERY ON PHELAN, HIS CLOSEST MILWAUKEE CONTACT IS ERNESTINE BARR, SUPERVISOR OF CASEWORKERS FOR EX-CON REHAB. SHE IS A FORMER LEGAL SECRETARY, SCHOOLTEACHER AND SOCIAL WORKER WHO TOOK A PERSONAL INTEREST IN PHELAN. SHE DROPPED OUT OF SIGHT HERE THIS MORNING AFTER ARRANGING FOR OTHER PERSONNEL TO STAFF THE OFFICE. IT IS POSSIBLE SHE RENTED OR BORROWED A CAR OR TOOK OTHER TRANSPORTATION AND IS ATTEMPTING TO MAKE CONTACT WITH PHELAN IN YOUR AREA. HER DESCRIPTION FOLLOWS . . .

Ben watched from behind a tree as a late-model sedan bounded down a wooded lane and coughed to a stop. It was nearly four in the afternoon of the following day.

Cautiously, he stepped out into the open. Ernestine was waiting for him, her great bulk hunched behind the wheel and her eyes appraising him with strict distrust.

"I brought food," she said, nodding to the back seat. "You'd better eat before we start talking business."

Eagerly, he wolfed a sandwich and drank a can of beer. When he was through, she studied him intently and asked: "All right, why'd you kill that woman?"

"I told you, it wasn't me."

"Then what were you doing there?"

He got up, thrust his hands into his pockets and began pacing. "Giving her background for a prison novel."

Someone, he went on, had told her about him. She'd come to the landscaping firm one day and offered to criticize his stories if he'd tell her about life in prison. It had seemed like a big break, having a famous writer criticize his work, but after a while it dawned on him that she was just using him. She spent hardly any time reading his stories, but most of her time getting him to describe what it was like being a convict.

"But she was attractive, wasn't she?"

"I suppose so. What are you getting at?"

"The state's case may be built on the theory that you made advances, and she resisted."

The notion shocked Ben. "A

woman that age? But I wouldn't—"

"Nobody knows," Ernestine said coldly, "what you would or wouldn't. Tell me what happened when you saw her yesterday morning."

"Well, as usual, she started asking questions, but she had some-

thing else on her mind. She didn't even hear my answers. Finally she told me to leave."

"Any boats or swimmers nearby?"

"No. A storm was coming. It's why I got the day off."

"Could anyone have been hiding inside the house while you were there? Someone who came out later and killed her?"

"In that little place? I don't see how, not without *her* knowing. And if she was hiding someone, why'd she let me hang around so long? She could have told me to go right off."

"A good point," Ernestine replied, "and all the more reason you should have turned yourself in as soon as you heard about the murder. The longer you stay in hiding, the worse it looks for you."

"I know," Ben admitted. "And I promise, I'll let you turn me in. But not now and not here. I've heard stories about what goes on in this jail. The mayor and the police chief are real rough on anyone they think gives the town a bad name. If it comes to that, I'll surrender someplace else and be brought here under guard, with you and the newspaper guys watching everything that happens."

"What do you mean, 'If it comes to that'?" she demanded.

"I think I know who killed her."

Ernestine's brows arched in surprise.

"Well, not his name or what he looks like," Ben went on hastily, "but she was seeing a man on a regular basis. He left signs. For instance, he smoked a pipe. Sometimes I'd smell stale smoke or see ashes. If she had a lover it was none of my business, so I didn't say anything. And once I saw a man's black raincoat, with a red-plaid lining, hanging in a closet. It had rained the day before, and I guess he forgot the coat."

Ben searched his memory further.

"And there was something else. When I was walking to see her one day, a guy in a little purple sports car barreled out of her driveway in a big hurry, like he was real sore. That day, she didn't even talk to me. They must have just had a big argument. So this guy smokes a pipe, has a raincoat with a red lining and drives—"

"*What* guy?" Angrily, Ernestine pounded a fist on the dashboard. "Ben, so far you haven't shown me how there could *be* any other guy. For your information, Dr. Von Wythe, one of the state's most highly regarded pathologists, said Maxine Treadway died be-

tween nine-thirty and eleven. A road crew was in front of her place all that time. Except for you, nobody could have gotten on or off the property."

"I don't care what anyone says," Ben responded stubbornly. "Somehow, the guy *did* get into the cottage without being seen. I don't know how he managed it, but if we knew who he was, maybe we could figure it out." He paused. "Anyhow, before I give up, I want to try to learn his name, so the police will have something to work on."

"How'll you do that?"

"By reading Maxine's journals. She told me she'd kept journals of all the important things that ever happened to her—names, dates, places, everything, even the personal stuff. She said she didn't have time to make entries every day, but she brought them up to date every month or so. One day, she planned to edit them down into an autobiography."

"Where are these journals?"

"In her studio at State College, where she was writer-in-residence. I was there once. It's on a quiet side street and I think I could break in easily."

"You," Ernestine wondered incredulously, "are now asking me to help you commit a burglary?"

"Oh, no, no," he assured her, "I'll do that alone. I've already made you take too many chances, and you'd be in an awful jam if we were picked up together. We'll wait here until dark. Then I'll take you to town, let you off and drive to the campus. It's only about sixty miles. I should be there in an hour. If the police pick you up, just say you tried to talk me into surrendering and I stole your car. If they catch me, that's what I'll say too."

"Uh-huh. But why not just tell the police about the journals and let *them* learn the man's name?"

"They might not believe me. Even if they did, by the time they got around to looking, someone else might have them. Her ex-husband, maybe. There must be a lot about him in those journals he wouldn't want anyone to know. Or maybe even the guy who really killed her."

"It's true," Ernestine mused, "that Mayfield is here. According to the last newscast, he and his party arrived on a chartered jet and went to some fancy motel, the Ajax. But suppose you don't find her journals? Or this man's name isn't in them?"

"No matter what I find, at ten o'clock I'll phone the all-night drugstore, say its an emergency and ask the clerk to page 'Mrs. Robinson.' That'll be you. We'll

arrange for me to pick you up and then work out the details of the surrender. If I don't call, it means the police got me."

Ernestine thought it over. Then she shook her head. "No," she announced emphatically. "I won't have anything to do with it. There are absolutely, positively, no conceivable circumstances under which you could talk me into going along with such a crazy scheme . . ." but several hours later, she stood moodily alongside a road at the resort town's outskirts and watched the taillights of her rented car receding into the dusk.

Wearily, she began hiking toward town until, a mile or so to her right, she observed a giant electric sign jutting into the sky: AJAX MOTOR INN.

That's where Warren Mayfield was staying. If anyone could shed some insight into Maxine Treadway's character, either confirming or denying the possibility of Ben's story being true, it would be Maxine's ex-husband . . .

A. A. Ajax, President
Ajax Motor Inns Corp.
Wilmington, Del.

Dear Mr. Ajax:

As manager of your North Woods motor inn, I wanted to report on tonight's riot while the details are still fresh in my mind.

Warren Mayfield's party came down to the lounge at about six o'clock. There were about two dozen people with him, friends and retainers from California. To shield them from curiosity seekers, I put them in a small banquet room, gave them their own bar and bartender and sent in some hors d'oeuvres. This seemed advisable since the main lounge was occupied mostly by a sportsmen's group, a somewhat rowdy crowd.

Frankly, in the next two hours there was more drinking and gaiety in Mayfield's party than I'd expected under the circumstances, but everything went smoothly until about eight o'clock, when an immense, middle-aged woman walked into the lounge, had two quick drinks and asked the barman where she could find Mayfield.

Unfortunately, he told her. I intercepted her at the door. She said she was a reporter sent by the Associated Press to cover Maxine Treadway's murder. I was about to order her to leave when Mayfield's press relations advisor, who had overheard the exchange, invited her to join the party.

I was suspicious of the woman because the police had alerted us to be on the lookout for someone

meeting her description, for what reason they didn't say. To play safe, I asked the desk to call AP to verify her identity. Then I went back to keep an eye on her. She had a few more drinks and, during a lull in the conversation, cleared her throat and loudly asked Mayfield if she could ask a few off-the-record questions..

Politely, he said he had no comment other than that he deplored murders, but she persisted. She said what bothered her most about the story was that the local authorities seemed so sure the ex-convict Phelan was the killer, closing their eyes to all other possibilities. For instance, she said, a confidential source had told her Maxine Treadway had a secret lover.

Some people ordered the woman to stop the questioning, but Mayfield said, since this was off the record, that his ex-wife's amoral character was well-known, that she almost always had a lover and it was almost always the same kind of man: younger than she, already successful in his chosen field but with a still-promising future. Gradually she would become more possessive and demanding until, at the end, there were usually very ugly scenes, some of which were no doubt chronicled in detail in personal journals she had kept for years, for whatever her reason.

At this point the desk told me the AP said the woman was an impostor. I demanded her identification, but she ignored me, got up and started to leave. When our security man tried to detain her, she shoved him violently out the door and into some of the sportsmen at the public bar. They threw him bodily back into Mayfield's party. I don't know exactly what happened next, but in the melee that followed our lounge sustained damages which I conservatively estimate at eight thousand dollars . . .

Warily, Ben circled the house. It seemed unoccupied and unguarded, so he decided to risk everything with a direct approach. He darted up the back steps, picked the lock to the back door and slipped inside.

No alarms sounded. Fine, his gambit had worked. Swinging the flashlight beam around, he moved from the kitchen to the dining room and then to a study. If the journals were still here, that's where they'd probably be.

They were, piled in cardboard cartons—stacks of loose-leaf notebooks with double-spaced, rough-typed pages.

Squinting under the light of his torch, Ben flipped through the

books. These were highly personal reminiscences all right, but they were old incidents, lurid recollections of past years.

Finding the current book took time, but ultimately he unearthed it and began to read.

Behind him, a floorboard creaked. Before he could turn around, something heavy came down on his skull with blinding force.

He came to in the trunk of a moving car, gagged and bound tightly. His head throbbed. How long he'd been unconscious, he didn't know. He tried to roll over, but couldn't. This was a small car; probably a purple sports car.

It was all too unreal. The knot of fear in his stomach got bigger and bigger. What the hell was going on?

The car slowed, turned, proceeded at modest speed, turned again and stopped. Then it moved a few more yards. There was a clank as an automatic garage door fell back into place. The driver cut the engine. Footsteps echoed on concrete, and the trunk's door swung open.

Peering down at Ben was a trim, mid-thirtyish man in a modish business suit. His eyes were shielded by tinted glasses and his hair had been coiffured by a professional. Ben had never seen the man even once before in his life.

"Nice of you," the man said, "to break into Maxine's studio for me. I'd been hanging around since dark, trying to figure how to do it. And nice of you to find her latest journal, the one where she had so many things to say about me."

He hauled Ben from the trunk and dropped him to the floor. Apparently, the garage adjoined a house.

"Maxine told me about you," the man went on. "Understand, I don't *want* to kill you, but I have no choice. Fortunes of war, plus the question of which of us can contribute the most in our life spans—and I'm afraid you're already a loser."

Pensively, he folded his arms.

"I'll admit," he continued, "from your point of view this isn't fair. It's never the right time to die, is it? But it isn't easy for me, either. I didn't have to make a conscious decision about Maxine, I just killed her in a rage. Picked up the figurine and bashed her head in. I'd told her I'd found a woman nearer my own age, with the right kind of family, someone who'd help my career. But Maxine wouldn't let me go through with it. She said she'd wreck the marriage before it could begin, and I couldn't allow *that*."

His eyes strayed to the car.

"Of course. I'll just put you to sleep. Carbon monoxide. You won't feel any pain and I'll dispose of your body at leisure. There's a deep lake not far from here. Wrapped in a weighted canvas bag, your body will never be found."

Quickly and silently, he tied Ben into a heavy chair, positioned him near the car's exhaust and kicked the engine into life. Before stepping into the house and closing the door, he said: "Too bad, kid. I wish it could be some other way, but it can't."

The engine kept running. Ben began to cough and found himself getting sleepier and sleepier. This was it, then? He'd die without even knowing who killed him, or what this was all about . . .

"Ben? Are you all right, Ben?"

He opened his eyes. He was outside, lying on his back. Looming over him was Ernestine Barr, and behind her were half a dozen other faces, most of them under policemen's caps.

"He's confessed," she continued, lifting Ben to a sitting position and loosening his bonds. "After we found you in his garage, he had to."

"But how—"

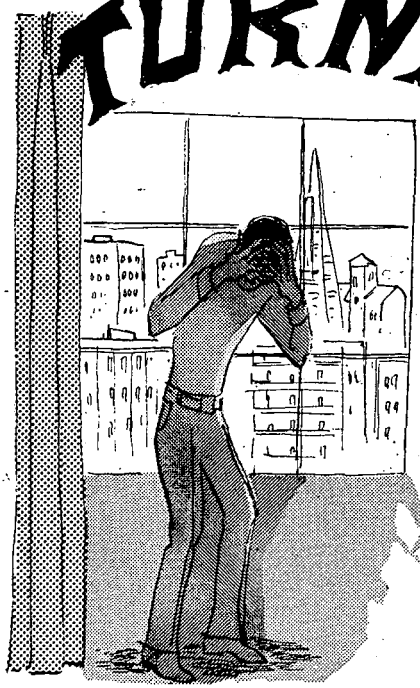
"Deduction. Once I decided you really *were* innocent, all came clear. Improbable as it seemed, there was only one solution. So I kept screaming it to the police, and when they finally checked and found that our man really did smoke a pipe, own a red-lined raincoat and drive a purple sports car, we came straight here."

"But I still don't understand. Who is the man? And how did he get into Maxine's cottage without being seen?"

"He wasn't seen," Ernestine said, "because there was nobody to see him. The road crew had already gone home. And much later that day, he deliberately misstated the time of death by several hours to give himself an alibi. Maxine's secret lover, whose office at the state medical school is a block from her studio, was Dr. Jurgen Von Wythe, the man who performed the autopsy."

Even the most perfect plan may take a turn for the worse.

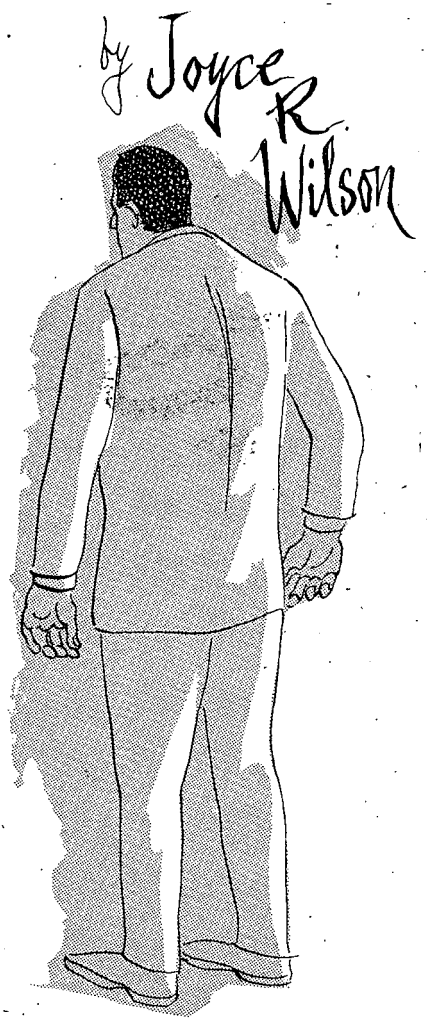
TURN ABOUT



At thirty-six, Tony Cajek was a very tired, middle-aged hit man. It wasn't a matter of facing up to the finality of his situation. Cajek had accepted the verdict with icy calm; he had rationalized that all men are inevitably faced with a catastrophe at some point in their lives. His happened to come sooner than expected. He had learned to cope with the vicissitudes of life, but now the agony and futility of simply existing from day to day had forced him to reevaluate his concept of life.

Cajek was a doer. Introspection

was as foreign to him as diamonds to a beggar. He had lived his life like a tightrope walker without a net. He was a professional who played the percentages. The element of luck, that sweet happenstance men worship, was looked upon with disdain by Cajek. He wanted no part of that which he could not control.



Cajek walked slowly into his kitchen and emptied an opened bottle of warm beer into the sink. He had taken one swig of the beer earlier in the afternoon—it had made him sick. It was now six p.m. and he was neither thirsty nor hungry.

The telephone rang. Cajek picked up the extension.

"Tony?"

"Yeah."

"What went wrong yesterday?"

"Nothing," Cajek said as he loosened his gray silk tie.

"You're a liar."

"So?"

"So what happened? You're supposed to be old-reliable. Listen, buddy, the girl left town two hours *after* you were supposed to make the hit. Very sudden-like, very cute. She went to L.A. on Western's flight 62. We had to make quick arrangements, thanks to you. The job was taken care of down there."

"That figures," Cajek said quietly.

"So what is this lying bit? I want an explanation and Jake wants an explanation."

"You get nothing."

"After all these years? My own brother, and that's all you have to say?"

"That's right."

"I can't cover for you, you know that."

"Yeah, I know." Cajek quickly covered his mouth to stifle a moan as pain shot through his guts like showers of sputtering fireworks.

"Tony, *listen* to me, there's a contract out on you. You messed up a big one. That girl was going to talk; she could have sent Jake up for life. I told Jake to give you a break—it's your first goof—but he wouldn't listen. He was raving like a madman, he never liked you much anyway. If only Jake owed me one favor—just *one*—but he paid me off a couple of years ago. I got nothing to go on, Tony. He's like a brick."

"Forget it, Mitch." Cajek leaned against the wall.

"No, this is crazy! Come on, give me a reason. What is this? I don't see you for four months and you talk to me like a stranger. I need an out, just something I can tell Jake so he'll cancel the contract. Are you sending him back the five grand tonight?"

Cajek said nothing.

"You idiot! This is no time for games. We've got to placate the guy. Send the money back, then go to South America for a while. It'll give him a chance to cool off. Go to Bolivia, but stay out of La Paz; I think we've got one connection in La Paz. This is bad for me too, you know. I mean, you fouling up like this. Look, will you give me a reason?"

"There is no reason, damn it, so butt out."

"OK, that's it, then."

"That's it."

"So long, chump."

Cajek replaced the receiver on the hook. He coughed as sudden nausea rose in his throat. He went back into the livingroom and stretched out on the couch. He would wait. It wouldn't be long—a few hours at the most.

How long had it been? Three months, four? The pain had begun then. He had taken a short vacation in Costa Rica. He remembered the hot sun that had fallen comfortably on his smooth, lithe body, remembered the joyous shouts of children playing along the edge of the pool by the hotel. Then, as he had risen to go back to his room, he felt a short, hot spasm in the pit of his stomach.

When he had returned to San Francisco, he made an appointment with an internist. There were the usual tests; then more tests. An operation was imperative and Cajek consented. They opened him up, looked around,

then closed him up. It was that simple; something ventured, nothing gained.

After the verdict was in, he resisted the temptation to indulge in fantasies of hope. Miracles were not in the cards for him. He would do what he knew how to do best: he would plan an execution.

He had accepted that last contract with no intention of carrying it out. It was a beautiful plan. The hit would be clean. Jake Mollette always hired the most efficient hit men in the business.

Cajek propped his body up on his elbows and swung his feet over the couch to the floor. He sat on the edge of the couch for a moment and then stood up. He walked over to the huge window that swept across the front of his livingroom, and looked down at the carpet of lights that spread over the Bay.

The doorbell rang. Cajek froze by the window; he did not turn around. The bell was pushed again. He knew whoever was outside would instinctively try the doorknob. He had left it unlocked. Cajek jammed his fists deep into his pockets. He heard the door open slowly, then click neatly as it was closed.

"Tony?"

He couldn't believe his ears. Jake had sent Mitch. Jake's a stupid idiot, a fool! Mitch would never carry it through.

Cajek whirled. "What the hell are you doing here?"

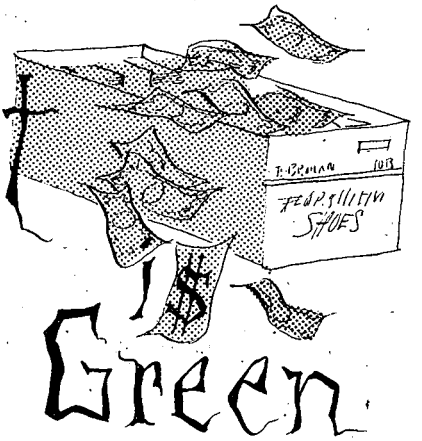
Mitch walked swiftly toward him. His big feet mashed the orange shag carpeting. "Tony, listen—"

"I don't want to listen!" Cajek shouted hoarsely. "Get out of here!"

"Tony, it's OK. Everything is OK." Mitch towered over him. "They got Jake tonight at Angie's Bar about an hour ago. Two guys walked in and bam, bam, that was it. Pete told me and right away I called Solly. Solly knew about the contract on you, but he said there'd be no problem, so you're home free, Tony. Damn, why don't you turn on some lights in here, I don't like talking to shadows. Listen, say something, will you? Hey, Tony, what are you crying for? Man, you don't know how lucky you are."

If it be true, indeed, that "every man is the architect of his own fortune," one must then consider that not infrequently plans are warped in adaptation.

The Graft Is Green



When a judge, a federal judge yet, calls on the phone, sounding urgent, and says please come to his home that evening, you go. You do not make excuses, especially if you are a lawyer practicing in the same district.

His Honor, Judge Edwin Marcus Bolt, U.S. District Judge, a lifetime appointment, fifteen years with a Wall Street firm, twenty years on the bench, was tall, spare, iron-haired, and physically fit. Twice married, his present spouse was a cool, slender beauty of thirty, exactly half his age.

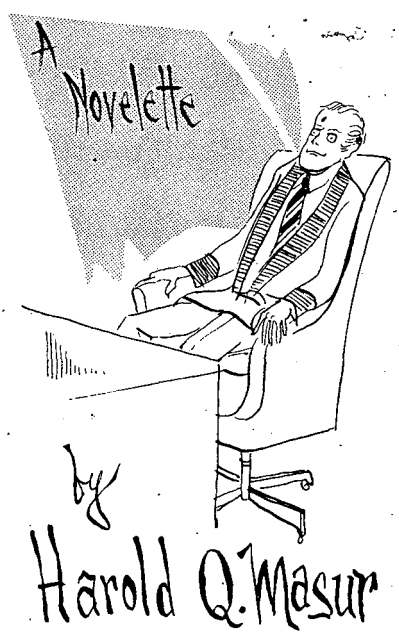
Judge Bolt was currently presiding over a case that commanded daily headlines: The United States versus Ira Madden and Amalgamated Mechanics, for misappropriation of union funds to the tune of one million American dollars; misappropriation—a euphemism for stealing, embezzling, the larcenous juggling of books—with Ira Madden, union president, as chief malefactor and prime beneficiary. The authorities had not yet been able to locate the proceeds, although they had certain suspicions. In the past year Madden had made several trips to Switzerland, probably visiting his money.

So that evening, obeying the judge's summons, I took a cab to his East Side town house. I saw

that he had a number of visitors ahead of me, leaving their cars parked alongside the curb in direct violation of parking regulations. None of the vehicles, of course, would be ticketed. No meter maid in her right mind would tag a police car.

I should have forgotten the whole deal and walked away, but curiosity needled me. The man in blue guarding the front door put a hand against my chest. I told him why I was there and he convoyed me to an upstairs corridor.

Sergeant Louis Wienick, swarthy, heavyset, bald, lifted a spiky eyebrow and shook his head.



"Well, well! Scott Jordan. Wherever there's trouble. What cooks, Counselor?"

"I was invited."

"By whom?"

"Judge Edwin Marcus Bolt."

"When?"

"This afternoon."

"What for?"

"I don't know. He called and said he wanted to see me. Urgent. So here I am. Where is his Honor?"

"In his study." Wienick gestured theatrically. "This door. Be my guest."

I should have known—but it always comes as a surprise. Judge Bolt was sitting behind his desk, smiling. The smile was purely technical, lips pulled back in rigor over porcelain dentures. His face was tissue-gray, eyes blank and sightless, staring into the far distance of eternity. A single bullet had pierced his right temple, plowing through the jellied matter of his brain and emerging over his left ear. I should have known because Wienick, after all, was Homicide. Why else would he be here if someone's exit had not been accelerated through violent means?

My stomach convulsed like a fist and I got the hell out of there. Wienick's grin was more or less genuine.

"Well, what do you make of it?" he asked.

"Contact wound," I said. "Somebody didn't trust his marksmanship. He walked right up close and pulled the thing. I believe I saw powder burns at the point of entry."

"You said, 'He walked up close.' How do you know it's a he? Maybe it was a she."

"Maybe. Manner of speaking, that's all."

"You know the judge's wife?"

"Met her once."

"The rumor is they were feuding. Seems she occasionally strayed from the fireside for a little extracurricular activity."

"I don't listen to rumors, Sergeant."

"Yeah. Anyway, this one knocks the props out from under the U.S. against Ira Madden."

"Not likely," I said. "They'll declare a mistrial, naturally, and then start all over again."

"So the taxpayer gets clobbered again. All that time and money down the drain."

"A drop in the bucket, Sergeant. Look how much we waste on wars, on hardware lobbed into space. Look how much we pay farmers not to grow things."

"You a Communist or something?"

"Hardly. What cooks with this shooting? Are there any clues?"

"Not yet. We only caught the squeal about an hour ago. The M.E. hasn't even arrived yet."

"Who notified you?"

"The widow."

"She contribute anything?"

"Only a couple of sentences. Said she'd been to a late movie and found him like this when she came home. Then she began to get hysterical, running around like a chicken, accusing union goons. A truly magnificent performance. Then her doctor rushed in. He got a hammerlock on her and used his needle. Must have been one hell of a blast. In two minutes she was horizontal. She's in her bedroom now, sleeping it off."

"Any servants?"

"One. Housekeeper. This is her day off."

"So the judge was all alone when it happened."

"Alone except for one other person—his executioner."

"You're really clicking today, Sergeant. Any sign of the weapon?"

"Who'd be stupid enough to leave a piece that can be traced?"

"Have you searched the house?"

It got me a long-suffering look. "Up, down and sideways. Nothing." But his eyes seemed evasive.

"Come on, Sergeant," I said. "Lift the lid."

"You clairvoyant or something?"

"I can tell when you're sitting on something."

"Keep your nose clean, Counselor. This is police business. The lieutenant would skin me alive."

"Where is the lieutenant?"

"Convention. Philadelphia."

"We always pool our information. You know that. So, please, Sergeant, lay it out for me."

Wienick lapsed into a small private huddle. He worked his lips for a moment, but finally he sighed, shrugged, and said, "On the other side of the judge's study is a bedroom. Adjoining door. Cigarette smoke in there, a lot of it. Not stale. And many butts in the ash tray. The assassin was sitting in there, waiting for him to come home."

"Not the judge's butts?"

"The judge smoked only cigars." Wienick looked piously down his nose. "Genuine Havanas. I hear he bought them from a Swedish diplomat."

"The wife's butts maybe?"

"She quit smoking when the Surgeon General made his announcement, she says. The doctor verifies it. But hell, that's not conclusive. Somebody gets uptight—back to the old habits."

"You're too eager, Sergeant, straining to tag the wife for this."

"We don't have anybody else."

"What about Ira Madden and his union muscle? Or outside talent for hire? Would it be the first time those clowns tried to break up a trial?"

"It's a possibility, sure, and we'll check it out. We'll have help, too. With a U.S. judge involved, maybe the FBI will stick its nose in." Wienick showed me his teeth, like the yellowed keyboard of an old piano. "Those boys will not take kindly to the meddling of a local mouthpiece."

"I am not a mouthpiece, Sergeant. I am a high-class attorney and counselor-at-law."

"I beg your pardon."

"Granted. I am not meddling. The judge initiated this visit. He was worried about something and he wanted to see me."

"He had reason to be worried. So what are your plans now?"

"Maybe I'll just go home and forget about it."

"That would be a very wise decision. Still, the lieutenant may want to see you when he gets back."

"The lieutenant knows my number. I'm in town for the duration." I paused at the door and waved. "Happy hunting, Sergeant."

The sudden and violent demise

of Judge Edwin Marcus Bolt was too late for the evening paper—not plural; singular. A city like New York—eight million people—and only one evening newspaper; all the others had folded. Bad management? Excessive union demands? Who knows? But the morning papers—and only two of those—bannered it big, with editorials. Nobody had the answers.

Then, early in the afternoon, I had another call—from the widow this time. Could I please come over for a family conference? The judge's daughter from his first marriage and her husband would be there. But please come a little early. The widow would like a few moments alone with me.

Laura Bolt, nee Pederson, a tall blonde Scandinavian type, at nineteen a cover girl in great demand by leading fashion photographers, at twenty-eight the bride of a highly respected jurist, at thirty a widow, had large blue eyes set at a wide tilt, gaunted cheekbones, flawless fine-grained translucent skin, perfect teeth nervously working on her fingernails. Impatiently she brushed aside the amenities and expressions of condolence.

"I need your help, Mr. Jordan."

"To do what?"

"The police have made it quite clear that they consider me a prime suspect. I don't like it and I'm frightened. I need legal advice. I need a lawyer. I know that my husband thought very highly of you. In the twenty-four hours before he died he mentioned your name several times. I am asking you to represent me."

"Did you kill your husband?"

"No," she said emphatically.

"All right." So I was back in the case whether the enforcement people liked it or not. I said, "They haven't accused you openly yet, have they?"

"Mr. Jordan, they went through everything in this house, with special attention to my bedroom and my possessions. I know they were looking for a weapon. I reiterate, I am innocent. I admit that Edwin and I were not getting along, but we still had our good moments. I liked being married to him; I liked the distinction. A judge and his lady perch high up on the social scale. A judge's position is—how shall I phrase it . . . ?"

"Sacrosanct?"

"To outsiders, yes. There is something awesome in those black robes, sitting on the bench, sentencing people. However," she made a fluttering gesture, "I hate to say this, but sometimes it's all hypocrisy and sham."

"How do you mean?"

"I have a suspicion that Edwin

just may have tainted his honor."

"In what way?"

"He was in trouble. Very deep trouble. I believe that is why he wanted to see you."

"Please. What kind of trouble?"

"Bribery." It soured her mouth. "They say he took money. He was being investigated."

"By whom?"

"The Justice Department."

"Whose money?"

"Ira Madden's. The union man who is under prosecution in Edwin's courtroom."

"How do you know?"

"Edwin told me. He was upset, brooding, agitated. We were having one of our good moments together and he confided in me. He desperately needed to confide in someone. I was shocked. I do not know what evidence they have or where they got it, but if Edwin were innocent, if the charges had no substance, I cannot believe that he would have been so troubled. My husband, Mr. Jordan, was a terribly tortured man—and there was nothing I could do about it."

I pondered the revelation. Could it possibly be true? A man of Judge Bolt's position, his stature, accepting a bribe? What would be the *quid pro quo*? Well, a judge presiding over a trial carries considerable clout. The payoff could be a very handsome quid for the quo. In myriad ways he can influence the proceedings—by his attitude, facial expressions, biased rulings, and ultimately a prejudiced charge. But Judge Edwin Marcus Bolt involved in such paltry shenanigans? One never knows. Money is a powerful persuader. They say that every man has his price—just make it big enough. The union coffers were bulging, and Ira Madden certainly didn't want to be shipped over. Maybe they had threatened the good judge, frightened him into compliance.

"Question," I said. "Did you personally ever see the judge in the company of anyone from Amalgamated Mechanics?"

"Edwin was not an idiot, Mr. Jordan. Whatever else, not an idiot. He would never have openly consorted with anyone even remotely connected with a defendant on trial in his courtroom."

"You want me to help you, Mrs. Bolt?"

"Of course."

"Then please lay it out for me, everything you know. Was the judge secretly in contact with those people?"

Strain lines deepened around her mouth. She put a thumb knuckle between her teeth. She

walked away and peered out the window. She came back. Her voice was low. "Edwin is dead. I have to protect his reputation."

"Be concerned about your own. Nothing will bother him now. To get you off the hook, we may have to elect another suspect."

She thought about it and then nodded slowly. "Last Sunday, in the afternoon, Edwin was here in the house, working with Andy—"

"Just a moment. Andy who?"

"Andrew Stock, his law clerk."

"All right. Continue."

"They had brought some legal reports from the library and they did not want to be disturbed. So they disconnected the phone in the study. Any calls came in, I took them in my bedroom."

"You and the judge had separate bedrooms?"

"Yes. Edwin was a long-standing insomniac; a nighttime reader, a floor pacer. As it happens, I'm a very light sleeper, awake and up at the slightest sound. Well, you know how it is, a lady needs her beauty sleep. Edwin knew that and was sympathetic, so separate bedrooms was his suggestion."

"All right," I said. "On the Sunday in question, you were available to answer the telephone."

"Yes. Only one call. Male. He wanted to talk to the judge. I tried to fob him off, told him the judge was busy, but he was adamant. He kept insisting, finally gave me a name and demanded I pass it on."

"What name?"

"Oster—Floyd Oster. Does it ring a bell?"

"It rings. Floyd Oster is one of Ira Madden's lieutenants at Amalgamated Mechanics. Did you pass it along to your husband?"

"Yes."

"In Andrew Stock's hearing?"

"Well, Andy wears a hearing aid which he keeps turned off unless he's directly involved in a conversation. I do not know whether or not he heard."

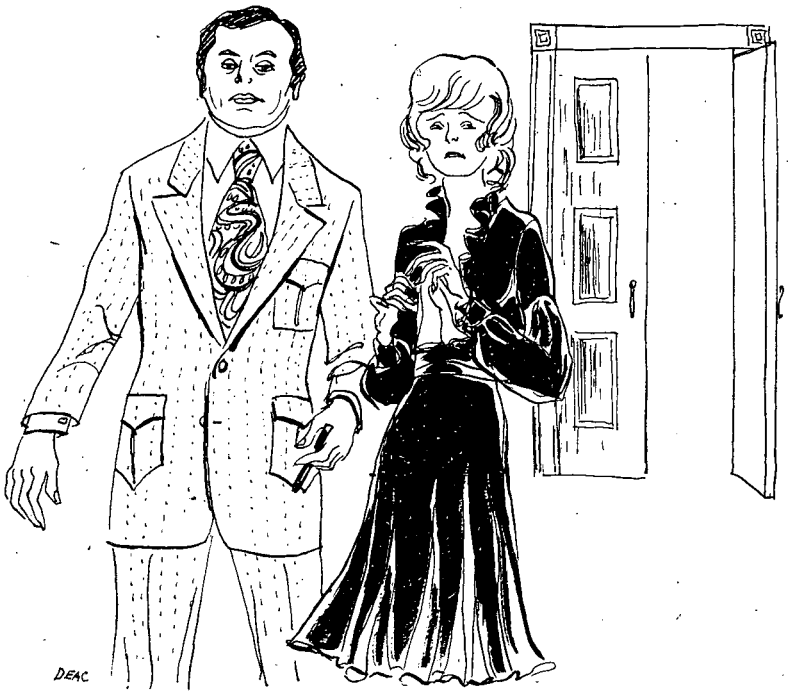
"What did your husband do?"

"He went into the adjoining bedroom and took the call in private."

Not good, I decided; stupid, in fact. The judge should have flatly refused any contact, avoiding even the faintest taint of impropriety—at best, an indiscretion; at worst, a serious breach. Folly or greed had adulterated his judgment.

The bell rang and she went to the door. She came back with her stepdaughter and husband.

One did not have to be an astute observer to read Carol Denby. She was a demanding, frivolous type, with thin lips, dissatisfied eyes and fussy, constantly moving hands. Dressed in black,



her eyes were red-rimmed from a night of mourning. Her father had been a very handsome man. Some aberrant chromosome must have produced this highly unappetizing creature. She did nothing to conceal her attitude toward Laura Bolt, and one could sense that her dislike was monumentally reciprocated.

Her husband, Clive Denby, insurance agent, was a plump, smug, humorless man, scented and pomaded and nattily dressed in a shaped suit of knitted acrylic.

He was curt with Mrs. Bolt, but solicitous of his wife, and he immediately took the floor as spokesman for the team.

"I understand, Mr. Jordan, you came to see my father-in-law last night."

"That's right."

"Would you tell me why?"

"Because he asked me."

"Do you know what he wanted?"

"I didn't then. I do now."

He put his hands on his hips. "Well?"

This kind of imperious behavior always gets my back up and turns me stubborn. "Sorry, Denby. It was a confidential matter. If the judge had wanted you to know, he would have confided in you."

"The judge is dead. That wipes the slate clean on privileged communications between lawyer-client, doctor-patient, everybody."

"Dead wrong. You don't know what you're talking about. Besides, the rule doesn't apply here, since the judge never retained me, formally or otherwise."

He curled a lip. "Ha! You never spoke to the judge. How would you know what he wanted to see you about?"

"Mrs. Bolt told me."

Carol Denby wheeled toward her stepmother and demanded in a shrill voice, "Why did Daddy want to see a lawyer?"

"Let me handle this, dear," her husband said. "All right, Laura, we have every right to know. What's this all about?"

"I can't tell you without my lawyer's permission."

"Lawyer? Who's your lawyer?"

"Scott Jordan."

He threw his arms up. "Why do you need a lawyer?"

"Because I'm under suspicion and you damn well know it because you made it perfectly clear to the police last night that Edwin and I were having difficulties."

"Well, it's the truth, isn't it?"

"The situation was not that bad. You put the worst possible face on it. As a matter of fact, Clive, the way you act I believe you think I'm guilty."

"Does the shoe fit, Laura?"

"Drop dead!" She spit it out and stormed furiously out of the room.

Denby was pleased with himself. He looked at me and said, "Are you going to defend her if she's charged?"

"It hasn't come to that yet. Maybe enough evidence for an indictment won't be found."

"My father-in-law's gun is missing. Who else but Laura would know where he kept it?"

A new wrinkle. "The judge owned a gun?"

"Yes. A Colt .32 automatic."

"The police know about that?"

"Of course. I told them." He folded his arms across his chest. "You haven't answered my question. Will you defend her?"

"Defending people accused of a crime is my business."

"That's a scrubby kind of business, wouldn't you say?"

A less civilized man might have loosened a few of the man's teeth but I just shook my head pityingly. It bothered him and he switched the baleful glance to his

wife. "We're wasting time on this character. Let's get out of here, Carol."

"Why should *we* leave?" she said, her tone surly. "I have as much right in this house as anyone."

"That depends on the judge's will," I told her sweetly. "For all you know, he may have left the house to his wife."

The very notion changed her expression to one of alarm and confusion. "Oh, no! I was brought up here. That can't be possible. Clive, what is the man saying?"

He gave me a nasty look. "I suppose you expect to probate the will, too."

"That's up to the executor," I said. "Whoever is named in the will."

"We may have to contest it."

"On what grounds? Undue influence? That he was *non compos mentis*?"

Carol Denby snapped, "He certainly could not have been in full possession of all his wits when he married that creature."

"You'd be wasting your time and your money. Too many people knew the judge as a shrewd, levelheaded jurist."

"He was obsessed by that woman. Mesmerized. She had a ring in his nose."

There is a limit to my endurance, and I'd had enough. Without a word, I turned on my heel and headed for the door, knowing they would follow shortly after. Neither that house, nor any other, regardless of size, was large enough to hold Laura Bolt and the Denbys.

Outside, I glanced at my watch. The afternoon was still young. Much as I dislike the subway, it is the only means of rapid transit that Manhattan has to offer.

The U.S. Courthouse on Foley Square is a tall, antiseptic building, more functional than distinctive. I consulted the hall directory and then rode an elevator up to the chambers of Judge Edwin Marcus Bolt. His law clerk, Andrew Stock, was in the anteroom. Stocky, somewhere in his middle thirties, he had a Pekingese face, colorless hair, and bifocals that magnified his eyes.

He looked apathetic, forlorn and cheerless; and why not? Any new appointment to the bench would certainly insist upon a law assistant of his own choice. Mr. Andrew Stock's job was in serious jeopardy.

He saw me coming through the door and turned up his hearing aid. I knew him as a fairly competent researcher who found it easier to concentrate on legal

complexities with all auditory distractions eliminated, which gave him a chance to put his hearing defect to good advantage. Having tried a case before Judge Bolt only seven months ago, my identity was familiar to Stock.

I commiserated on the death of his sponsor and divulged my connection with the case. He nodded morosely.

"Yes, I knew the judge had called you. As a matter of fact, it was I who dialed your number. We had discussed various alternatives when the trouble arose."

"The bribery investigation?"

He blinked through his bifocals. His tongue rimmed his lips. "You know about that? I thought he was already dead when you reached his home."

"His wife informed me. Was there any substance to the charge?"

He started a denial, then swallowed it and shrugged. "I don't know. I just don't know. It's hard to believe, but I'm afraid I have to admit it's possible."

"Ira Madden of Amalgamated Mechanics?"

"One of his men, yes. Acting on Madden's behalf."

"Floyd Oster?"

Stock nodded. "He's the one."

"So you think it's possible the judge succumbed."

He slowly nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Why?"

"Because the investigation had him on edge. I never saw him so nervous. If they had the goods on him, you know what it meant. Disgrace. Drummed off the bench. Perhaps imprisoned. Loss of income. Everything gone. All the years wasted."

"Was he delivering?"

"I don't know. I do not attend court sessions."

"And if he failed to deliver?"

"Would he take their money and then double-cross them? Do you play games with those boys?"

"Have you heard rumors about the trial?"

"Yes. He and the prosecutor were feuding."

"Then the judge may have been fulfilling his contract. Nevertheless, the judge is dead. How do you like Mrs. Bolt as a candidate?"

"That was not a good marriage. You see, the judge used to work at home a lot. We did our research here, but most of the jury charges and decisions were written at the house. I was often there to help him. He had a small desk installed in the bedroom for me, so that he could have seclusion in the study. Sometimes Mrs. Bolt would join him there for an argument, and I could catch it if my

hearing aid was on," Stock said.

"What did they argue about?"

"Money, mostly. Or sometimes the late hours she kept. She was a compulsive spender, that woman. When the bills came in at the end of the month, he'd hit the ceiling. She spent the stuff like it was going out of style."

So the judge needed money, I thought, *and maybe Ira Madden's offer looked attractive.* "I understand he had a gun."

"That's right, permit and all."

"Why a gun? After all, the man was a respected citizen. He didn't travel around with jewelry samples. He didn't use it for hunting, not a hand piece."

"It was a hobby. Target practice; he had a range in the basement. He knew how to handle the thing, a first-rate marksman. It had a practical aspect, too. Several of the convicts he'd shipped over had made threats on his life, promised to ventilate him when they were released. That's how he got the permit."

I wondered if the police knew about that and were checking the federal penitentiaries. "What are your own plans now, Mr. Stock?"

He looked dejected. "I don't know. It's too late for me to start a private practice. Besides, I don't have any clients, prospective or otherwise." He eyed me hopefully. "Do you need a good research man?"

"I'll keep you in mind. And I'll ask around."

It seemed to cheer him a little. He gave me a weak smile and raised his hand as I went through the door.

Outside, I patronized a telephone booth and got through to Sergeant Wienick at Homicide. He was not overjoyed to hear my voice. I asked about the autopsy.

"All finished, Counselor. Instantaneous death from a bullet wound in the head. Second shot not necessary. A little bonus for the corpse. You want the whole pathology?"

"No, sir. What's all this about a second shot?"

"Through the heart. You just didn't look closely enough. Or maybe the lack of blood threw you off."

"Please," I said, "elaborate."

"Hardly any blood at all on the judge's shirt. Figure it out yourself."

"Did you find any bullets?"

"Yep. One on the judge's desk and one lodged against his spine."

"What caliber?"

"Thirty-two automatic."

"Why an automatic?"

"Because an automatic ejects the shells and we found those too, Counselor."

"I understand the judge owned a gun, also a .32 automatic."

"Correct. And we found it."

"Where?"

"Taped under the left rear fender of your client's car. We put the arm on her half an hour ago and she's been screaming for you ever since. Said she retained you this afternoon. Now why in hell would an innocent woman want a lawyer before she's even charged? Tell me that, hey? So we're doing a ballistics check and five will get you twenty the lady's gun shelved her husband."

"Motive," I said, "where's the motive?"

"Money, Counselor, money. I don't know how the judge was fixed, but he took out an insurance policy only one month ago, five hundred thousand buckeroos, half a million. How does that grab you for motive?"

"Who's the beneficiary?"

"I haven't seen the policy, but who do you think?"

"It complicates matters," I said.

"No, sir, it simplifies them. Okay, Counselor, I'm talking too much. The lieutenant says I suffer from a loose lip. So no more conversation. *Fini.* You're on the other side now. You want more conversation, talk to the district attorney. It's his baby now. So please get your educated carcass over here on the double. The judge's widow is hollering bloody murder. She wants her lawyer."

The receiver clicked and the line went dead.

Laura Bolt had not yet been processed and was still at the precinct house. She had been politely and judiciously handled, advised that she was entitled to counsel from the inception of custody, and she had refused all dialogue. She knew enough to keep her tongue disconnected, but in those surroundings she was out of her element, pale and strained. They allowed me a brief private session. My eyes encompassed the room in a broad sweep, searching for bugs, but of course nothing was obvious.

"Keep your voice low," I said. "What do you know about the gun?"

"I don't know anything about the gun."

"You knew the judge had one."

"Yes."

"Where did he keep it?"

"In the drawer of his bedside table." She shook her head, whispering fiercely. "But I didn't take it, I didn't use it, and I didn't hide it."

"Did your husband mention a new insurance policy?"

"Yes. He had borrowed heavily on his old one and there wasn't

much equity in it. He wanted a new policy and he wanted to give Clive Denby the business."

"You know the amount?"

"Half a million dollars. He thought Clive could use the commission."

"Who is the beneficiary?"

"My husband's estate."

"Does he have a will?"

"Of course. He drafted it himself and Andy Stock typed it."

"Is it in his safe-deposit box?"

"I don't think so. I remember he told me that he kept most of his important papers locked in a file in his chambers at the courthouse. Just as safe as a bank, he said, and more easily accessible."

In a way, he was right. It was unlikely anyone would break into a federal courthouse to ransack a judge's chambers. Too, if he needed an important document at night, it would be available.

"If your husband named you as executrix in his will, would you want me to handle the probate?"

"Yes."

I took out a piece of paper and a pen, wrote out a brief retainer, and had her sign it. She returned the pen and plucked at my sleeve.

"Are they going to lock me up for the night?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to remain in custody until the preliminary hearing."

"Then what happens to me?"

"You'll be bound over for action by the grand jury."

"Will they grant bail?"

"Not on a murder charge, I'm afraid."

Her eyes swam in quick moisture. "Oh, what are they trying to do to me?"

"Whatever it is," I said, "I'll try to stop it. But I have to get out in the field to help you. Now, you know the script. No statements. Button up and stay buttoned. Am I clear?"

She nodded, gulped and smiled like a woman suffering from an attack of mumps.

A phone call to Judge Bolt's chambers caught Andrew Stock just as he was leaving for the day. I asked him if he remembered who had been appointed executor in the judge's will. He remembered. The judge's wife. I told him that she had retained me to handle probate. He had not yet heard about the arrest.

"Can you open the judge's confidential file?" I asked.

"Yes. I have a key."

"Good. I'd like to see the will and perhaps file it with the surrogate tomorrow morning. Please bring the will home with you and I'll pick it up later."

He said he would and he gave me his address. He seemed piti-

fully eager to cooperate with me.

Ira Madden, I knew, was out on bail. Naturally; only money was involved. Money can be replaced, but the big crime, murder, could never be undone. I realized that an attempt to see Madden, insulated by union retainers and isolated in a special apartment atop union headquarters, would be futile. The judge's demise, I suspected, had probably initiated festivities. They would be celebrating the declaration of a mistrial. Union lawyers knew that the longer a trial can be delayed, the harder it gets to convict.

So I decided on an alternative. A telephone directory gave me the address of Floyd Oster, Madden's hireling. I found it to be a renovated brownstone near Lincoln Center. By osmosis, perhaps, Floyd Oster might absorb a faint trace of culture. As I climbed to his apartment on the second floor, I realized that I had devised no approach, no campaign. I would have to play it by ear.

He answered the bell, a carp-faced, sulphurous and savage little man in a white T-shirt, holding an empty whiskey bottle like a club.

"Mr. Oster?" I said.

"Who wants to know?"

"You probably never heard of me. The name is Jordan, Scott Jordan. I'm a lawyer, you see."

"I heard of you." From the sound it seemed as if someone had permanently ruined his larynx.

"Could we talk in private?"

"About what?"

"Ira Madden and Judge Edwin Marcus Bolt."

The carp face suddenly closed up completely; it went utterly blank. "The judge is dead."

"True. But Ira is still alive."

"And just where do you fit in?"

"The judge's widow has retained me."

"To do what?"

"Defend her in court. They think she killed her husband."

He smiled, if the mechanical distortion of that blade-thin mouth could be called a smile. "How about that?"

"I thought you might help."

"Yeah? How?"

"The judge's widow will have to get up a decent fee. I'd like to know where the money is."

"What money?"

"The money you paid Judge Bolt to throw Madden's trial."

He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "You lost your marbles, Counselor? You off your rocker, making an accusation like that? You know what the penalty is for bribing a federal judge?"

"Not as heavy as the penalty for killing one."

"That's no skin off my nose, buster. Go defend your client."

"She's innocent."

"So prove it in court."

"I intend to, by showing who really did it."

It got through to him and a muscle started throbbing in his temple. "Get lost. If we bought the judge, why would we knock him off? You can't have it both ways. You can't—"

He clamped down on the rest of it because we suddenly had a pair of visitors mounting the stairs behind me. Two clean-cut, brush-cut, muscular all-American types joined us and politely inquired, "Floyd Oster?"

I pointed. "Him."

"And you, sir, who are you?"

"Just a visitor trying to get some information."

"Afraid you'll have to get in line, sir. We have a warrant for Floyd Oster's arrest." He flashed his wallet. "Federal Bureau of Investigation. The charge is bribery and corruption of a government official."

I edged sideways along the wall, anxious to avoid a crossfire if Oster were foolhardy enough to resist. But the boys were trained and highly efficient and in the single blink of an eye they had Floyd Oster by each arm and were hustling him toward the street so that his toes barely touched the stairs.

I followed them down and watched as they bundled him into a car and hauled him off. For all his bravado, I had a feeling that Oster would quickly melt under heat. Ira Madden's celebration was probably premature.

Suddenly it hit me that I was hungry. I had been cruising around the city all day, working, talking, ignoring the inner man, so I blew myself to a steak, with a large stein of beer.

Renewed, I sallied forth to take possession of Judge Bolt's last will and testament from his clerk, Andy Stock.

It was an old prewar building on Lex. A palsied self-service elevator took me to the fifth floor. The radio was playing some heavy classical music. I rang the bell and waited. I rang again and waited some more. I tried the knob and it turned and the door opened.

The music was appropriate—a volcano of sound from Richard Wagner. It fitted the scene. Somebody had taken a carving knife to Andrew Stock and opened his throat from ear to ear.

I almost lost my expensive steak.

No more problems for Mr. Stock, no worry about a new job; his life and his career and his

dream were over. He had joined his late employer. I did not bother calling a doctor. There would be no point in wasting a doctor's time. What Andrew Stock needed was a mortician.

I saw his briefcase resting on the dresser. I anchored it with my elbow and maneuvered the zipper, leaving no prints. I had no reservations about lifting the document. A quick look informed me that, following a few specific bequests, the judge had divided his residual estate equally between wife and daughter. I refolded the will and tucked it away in my inside breast pocket.

Then I used Andrew Stock's telephone and called Sergeant Wienick. On hearing the latest bulletin, he had a few choice Anglo-Saxon words for me.

They had done what had to be done, all the technicians, the photographers, the fingerprint men, then the assistant medical examiner, and finally the basket boys for hauling the remains to the morgue.

Now Sergeant Wienick and I were on our way in a police car to see Carol and Clive Denby. I needed some information about the judge's insurance policy. Neither of the Denbys, I knew, would give me the right time, but with the sergeant to back me up they would probably cooperate.

Apparently the lid was off and Wienick had instructions. "Well, Counselor," he said, "I spoke to the lieutenant, long-distance, and he told me to work with you in concord. So here it is. Ballistics finished their check. It locks it up for Mrs. Bolt. The bullets that killed her husband match the gun we took from her car, the grooves, the rate of pitch, the whole bit, micrometer accurate."

"I had no doubt they would."

"It doesn't worry you?"

"A little."

"And you know what else we found?"

"What?"

"A shoe box stuffed with money, large bills, fifty grand. The FBI thinks it's union money, they think the judge got it from Ira Madden."

"What clued them in?"

"They've had Madden under surveillance for over a year. They bugged his phone, heard incriminating talk. It led them to Floyd Oster and they picked him up."

"I know."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Who told you?"

"I was there."

He took it in stride. "Cash," he said. "Crazy. They must have

been spreading it all over the lot. Even that Andrew Stock. Thirty-five hundred in brand-new fifties stuffed into a shoe in his closet. What's with the shoes these days? Don't these people trust banks?"

I had nothing to say to him. But my mind was racing. All the little jigsaw pieces were falling into a discernible pattern.

The Denbys greeted us without enthusiasm. In her nasal voice, Carol Denby opened fire at once. "I heard on the radio that you arrested my stepmother. Is that true, Sergeant? Did you really?"

"It's true," he said.

"Good," she snapped with grim satisfaction. "I'm not surprised. I never trusted that woman from the first moment I met her. A vain, greedy piece of baggage after my father's money. I'm sorry only about one thing, that they've abolished capital punishment in this state. I hope you put her away for life at hard labor. A little sweat and humility would do her good."

Clive Denby said, "If Laura's guilty, we want to see her punished. Is there anything we can do to help, Sergeant?"

"Jordan, here, has a few questions."

I got a look of poorly veiled disapproval. "Isn't this a little irregular, Sergeant? Jordan represents the accused. He wants to exonerate her and you two most certainly would be working at cross-purposes."

"We just want to nail down all the facts, Mr. Denby."

He shrugged in a gesture of long-suffering forbearance. His eyes focused on me.

I said, "I understand you recently wrote a new life insurance policy for your father-in-law."

"Eight, nine months ago."

"For half a million dollars?"

"That is not an unusual amount for a man in his position."

"And you knew, of course, that his estate was named as the beneficiary?"

"Of course I knew."

"Were you also aware that under the terms of his will both his wife and his daughter would share equally in the proceeds of that policy?"

"He had so informed me."

"I take it that the policy was in force at the time of the judge's death?"

"Oh, yes. My father-in-law was meticulous about paying premiums. There were no arrears."

"Does the policy also contain that lovely clause providing double indemnity in the case of death by accident or violence?"

"It does."

Wienick's pursed lips emitted

an awed whistle. "You mean the five hundred grand becomes one million because somebody put a bullet through the judge's skull?"

Accurate, but indelicate, especially in front of heirs, but par for the course with Wienick.

"That is true, Sergeant." I turned back to Denby. "Is the policy nullified by suicide?"

"Yes. It is a standard provision in such contracts. Self-destruction cancels the policy."

"So if the judge knocked himself off, your wife gets nothing. Zero. She's out in the cold."

Carol Denby gasped. "That's a terrible thing to say. Only a deranged man would take his own life."

"So." I cocked an eye at her. "You yourself told me that your father must have been unbalanced when he married Laura."

"Now, wait a minute," Wienick broke in. "Hold on here, Counselor. Let me get this straight. Are you intimating that nobody killed Judge Bolt, that we're whistling up a tree, that the man was a suicide?"

"I am not intimating," I said. "I am proclaiming it outright. The judge was not a homicide victim. He took his own gun, pointed it, pulled the trigger, and blew out his own brains."

Carol Denby gave a stricken cry, her hands a bowknot of distress at her throat.

Her husband said, his face simulating a look of lofty contempt, "This man is demented, Sergeant. He has rocks in his head. He is utterly irresponsible."

Wienick's narrowed eyes searched mine. "How do you figure it, Counselor?"

"Judge Bolt," I said, "was frightened unto death, scared spitless. He knew that he was under investigation for accepting a bribe. He knew too that he was guilty and that—"

"*My father?*" Carol Denby shrilled. "*A bribe?* What are you saying?"

"We found fifty thousand dollars cash in a shoe box," Wienick snapped. "Where the hell do you think he got it?"

Her hands were fluttering, her mouth spluttering. She subsided when her husband put a protective arm around her.

"When the boys began to move in on the judge," I said, "he knew the game was up. He was afraid the contact man, Floyd Oster, would make a deal and turn state's evidence. He did not need a crystal ball. He could see the future, disgrace and a prison sentence, staring at him. The pressure was too great. He could not face it. He was terrified and distraught,

half out of his mind with despair. There was no way out—except one—and he took it. A bullet in his head."

"Come off it," Denby said. "You can't know that for a fact. If the judge killed himself, what happened to the gun?"

"You took it," I said.

"What!"

"You took it, Denby. You arrived at the house shortly after it happened. You went up to the study and you saw him sitting there, dead, and you knew what it meant. You could see that half a million dollars go down the drain. A terrible loss. So you acted. He had dropped the gun on the floor and you picked it up. You had to get out of there, but first, for insurance, to bolster the murder angle, you pumped another shot at him. Death by violence. Double indemnity, and double the ante. One million bucks."

A spasmodic twitch pulled at the juncture of Denby's jaw. "Slander," he said hoarsely. "In front of witnesses."

I laughed. "You've got a lot more to worry about than slander. And if you're talking about witnesses, hell yes, there was a witness."

Wienick's hand clamped over my arm. "A witness? Who?"

"Andrew Stock," I said. "The judge's law clerk. Stock saw it."

"How do you know?"

"Remember the cigarette butts? And the smoke? They were his. He was there, as usual, in the next room, the bedroom, working. He did not hear the first shot because his hearing aid was disconnected. Routine for him. But then, probably because he had found some rule of law or precedent he wanted to show the judge, he turned it on and headed for the study. That's when he heard the second shot. He peeked through the door and saw Denby, standing there with the gun. He never said a word. He was in shock. He backed away, thinking only of saving his own life. Maybe he even hid in a closet."

Clive Denby smiled, a hideous grimace. "Guesswork," he said. "All guesswork."

"It's a lot more than that, Denby. There was almost no blood from the second shot. Meaning the judge was already dead. That was thoughtless, Denby. Careless. You weren't thinking clearly. You were nervous, under pressure."

"You could never prove anything like that. Stock is dead."

Sergeant Wienick gave a start.

"Exactly," I said. "But how would you know? It hasn't been broadcast yet. You know because

you yourself put him on the shelf. Poor, ugly, ineffective Andrew Stock. When he thought it over, he realized he'd be out of a job. No work, no income. And then he had the glimmer of an idea. He had information. He knew something that was worth money. Why not make it pay off? So, Denby, he shook you down for a slice of the insurance money. You were on a spot and you had no choice. But all you could raise at the moment was thirty-five hundred dollars. We found it in Stock's apartment. You searched for it, didn't you? But couldn't find it, because you were in a hurry and didn't look in the right place. You could have found it in one of his shoes."

"More guesswork," he whispered.

"Is it? Suppose we check your bank account for recent withdrawals. What will it show? Have you pulled thirty-five hundred dollars in the last twenty-four hours?"

What it would show was etched on his face. He crouched back, his breathing ragged, watching me with a kind of reptilian venom. His wife edged away from him, staring in vacillating faith bordering on shocked incredulity.

"Andrew Stock," I said, "that poor sad little clown, did not know what he was getting into. He did not know that there is only one solution for handling a blackmailer. Unless you want to keep on paying until he milks you dry, you have to stop his clock for good, once and for all. You have to end the demands by ending the blackmailer—and that's what you did. You finished him off with a carving knife from his own kitchen."

Wienick had moved closer, watchful and alert. He said to me, not taking his eyes from Denby, "And are you telling us this man framed the judge's widow by planting the gun in her car?"

"I am telling you exactly that. Oh, he's a shrewd one, all right. It threw up a smoke screen to mislead the police. If it worked, if she were implicated and convicted, Denby's wife would rake in all the chips, the whole million, because under the law a murderer is not permitted to inherit from his victim through the commission of homicide. Cold-blooded? Letting an innocent woman take the rap? You bet your life! But he felt no compunctions at all because he hated the woman. So he began to spin his little web of duplicity to mask the truth and line his pockets."

Clive Denby's eyes were feverish, abnormally bright, and his breathing had a harsh catarrhal quality. He kept shaking his head.

"Whatever you may think of Laura Bolt," I said, "she is no cretin, no imbecile. She would never hide a murder weapon in her own car. She's at least smart enough to maybe drop it off the Staten Island ferry where it would be lost forever."

Moisture bathed Denby's face from hairline to chin. His whispered voice sounded hollow and forced. "No proof. You have no proof. Not one iota of proof."

"Wrong," I said. "Dead wrong. Haven't you ever heard of the nitrate test? Whenever a man fires a gun, some of the unburned powder grains are blown back and buried in the skin of his hand. Powder tattooing, it's called, and it can be picked out with a forceps to show whether or not you've handled a gun. It doesn't come off with soap and water, Denby. They're going to test you, sure as hell. You can't stop them. Is there any nitrate residue on your hand now, Denby?"

He clenched his fists and held them near his chest for a moment. Then he opened his right hand and looked at it—and then he left the rails completely. In a sudden obliterating fog of mindless rage, bellowing obscenities, he lunged at me. I sidestepped and as he went past, Wienick rabbit-punched him at the base of the neck. Wienick's hand is like a cleaver. Denby went down on his knees, gulping for air. His wife cut loose with a long despairing cry and then bent over, covering her face.

I didn't feel particularly sorry for either of them.

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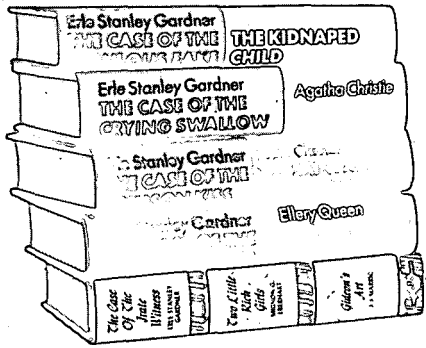

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