

ALFRED

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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

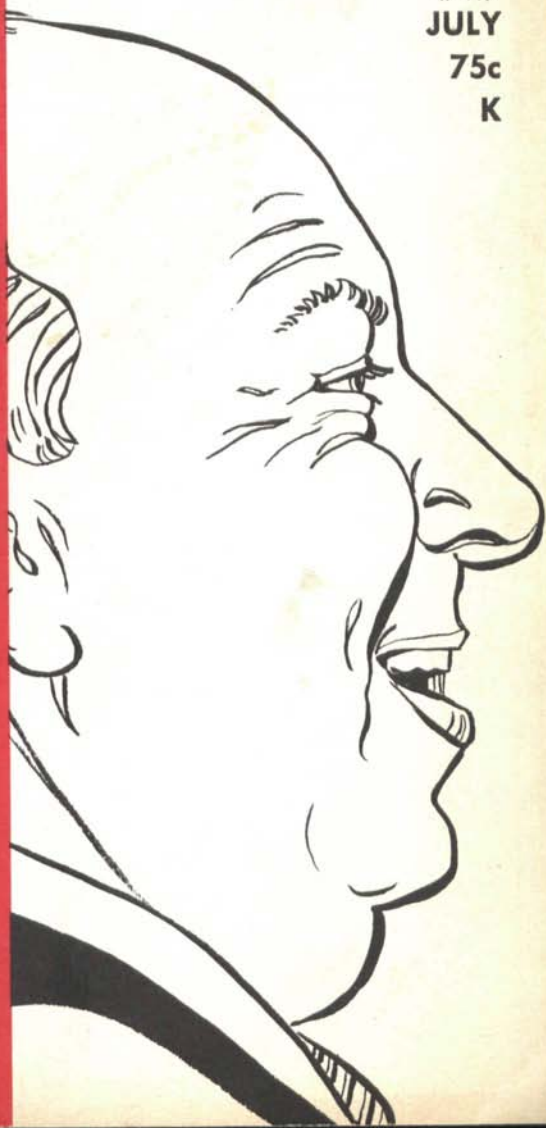
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NEW stories
presented by
the master
of **SUSPENSE**





July 1973

Dear Reader:

Safety and sanity may provide the basis for messages aimed your way for the impending Fourth of July, but there are no such restraints placed on the souls in these pages. Rather, danger and dementia are the watchwords they prefer in these all-new tales of mystery and suspense.

Explosive situations abound this month, and a host of your favorite purveyors of roguish amusements are here to ignite the fireworks, from Richard Deming, who offers the bride a bit of practical advice in *Premarital Agreement*, to Henry Slesar, who penned the novelette titled *The Girl Who Found Things*—such as those who drop from sight for one reason or another.

Speaking of finding things, you may detect more than who done it. You should also discover

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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One does not always get a return on his investment.

Premarital Agreement

by
Richard Deming



When Irma married Stanton Carr, the premarital agreement hadn't seemed important. While she wasn't exactly in love with her former boss, she liked him well enough and she expected the marriage to last. At thirty she had long since given up her dream of a romantic Prince Charming and was willing to settle for luxury without romance. She had every intention of being a good wife.

The agreement provided that in the event Irma ever instituted legal proceedings to dissolve the marriage, she would claim no

community property, no alimony, and would accept a lump-sum financial settlement of \$2,000 for each year the marriage had lasted as a full and complete discharge of all Stanton Carr's obligations to her. His lawyer had explained to Irma that the agreement would not apply if Stanton brought such an action, but only if she herself decided to end the marriage. Also, if she and Stanton had any children, the agreement would not affect any child-support claims she made, even if she instituted a divorce action herself.

It was understandable why Stanton insisted on such an agreement. His first wife, also a former

secretary, had nicked him for a settlement of nearly a million dollars after only two years of marriage. Even though that had been ten years before Irma became his secretary, he was still a little marriage-shy. It had struck Irma as rather silly for Stanton to insist on *her* signing such an agreement, but he was too skittish about marriage for her to risk refusing.

Signing really didn't bother her much. She had no intention of ever ending the marriage, and her rights were fully protected in the event he decided to divorce her. The latter seemed inconceivable to her anyway. Although he was quite a handsome man in a distinguished, gray-haired way, she was fifteen years his junior, extremely attractive, and he was evidently quite crazy about her.

Then, five years later, Prince Charming came along. His actual name was Gary Sommers. It was Stanton Carr's fault that they met.

Stanton was chairman of the board of the Crippled Children's Association, one of his several charitable activities; and when the organization decided to schedule some swimming classes for crippled children, he volunteered the pool at his and Irma's Beverly Hills mansion. He also volunteered to locate and pay the fee of a swimming instructor.

Gary Sommers was a relatively new employee of the Carr Refinery Equipment Company. When Stanton, the company president, asked the personnel division to check employee files to see if any employee were a qualified swimming instructor, they sent him Gary Sommers. The man was a drill-press operator, but under "previous experience" on his application form he had included the information that he had worked five summers as a life-guard and held a Red Cross certificate as a water-safety instructor.

Stanton Carr arranged for the man to handle the swimming classes, which were to run from one to three p.m. each Saturday.

The first class was on May fifteenth. Irma knew that someone named Gary Sommers was coming to conduct it, but she had a luncheon engagement that day; and of course her husband wouldn't be there to receive the man, because he always played golf on Saturday. Irma left instructions with Mrs. Felton, the housekeeper, to show Mr. Sommers and the children where to change into their swimsuits when they arrived. Then she left before any of them arrived.

She returned at three, just as the class was ending. The char-

tered bus the children had come in was parked in the driveway back near the three-car garage, so Irma swung her car onto the white-shell strip that circled around past the front door, where it would be out of the way when the bus backed out. Getting out of the car, she walked over to the pool.

Edith Pemberton, a volunteer worker for the Crippled Children's Association and the wife of one of Stanton's business associates, was supervising the exodus from the pool of some twenty children, ranging in age from about five to eight, toward the basement door leading into the playroom, off of which were the dressing rooms.

Irma had a momentary flash of guilt because she felt more repelled than sympathetic at the sight of so many handicapped children, but she repressed it and gave the middle-aged Edith a friendly greeting.

"How are you, Irma?" said the woman, preoccupied. "Don't dawdle, children. The bus is supposed to leave in ten minutes." She stooped to assist a five-year-old girl replace her leg braces.

Irma glanced at the bronzed man in swim trunks standing at the pool's edge. When he smiled at her, her heart skipped a beat.

He was tall and lean and had a weight lifter's muscles. His dark hair was becomingly curly and his handsome face possessed a sort of boyish charm. He was probably about thirty.

Irma was past the age where she could believe in love at first sight, but to her own amazement she found herself wondering if there couldn't be such a thing as lust at first sight. She had never before seen a man who appealed to her physically so strongly and so instantly.

She tried to reject the feeling as ridiculous by telling herself the man was obviously five years younger than she was, and that she had always preferred older men. Then, for some reason, she recalled an article she had read years before, written by a psychologist, who had argued that because women outlive men by an average of five years, the ideal age difference for mates was for the women to be five years older. When she had read the article, her reaction had been amused disagreement, but now she found herself wondering if the psychologist might not have been right after all.

Going over to the man, she said somewhat breathlessly, "You must be Mr. Sommers."

Exposing even white teeth in

another smile, he said, "Yes, ma'am, and who are you?"

"Why . . . Mrs. Carr," she said.

He looked surprised, and his expression managed to make the surprise flattering. In a subtle, completely inoffensive way it implied that he was wondering how a man of Stanton Carr's age had succeeded in getting such a young and lovely woman to marry him, but all he said was a formal, "Glad to know you, ma'am."

By then Mrs. Pemberton had followed the last of the children inside, and Irma and Sommers were left alone.

She said, "I understand you work for my husband. What do you do at the plant?"

"Drill holes in the base plates of heat exchangers."

"Oh?" she said. "That sounds interesting." Then she blushed when she realized what a vapid remark she had made. The man's radiations were making her act like a teen-ager. She made an effort to sound more adult by saying, "You work in the Plate Shop, then."

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "I see you've toured the place."

"I worked there two years. I was my husband's secretary before we married."

"That right?" he said. "I didn't know, but I haven't been around

very long. I've only worked there a few weeks." He glanced toward the house. "Well, I guess I'd better get my clothes on like the rest."

In her desire to extend the moment she reverted to a teen-ager again. She said almost breathlessly, "I was planning to take a dip. If you aren't tired of the water, you could stay and join me, if you'd like."

He eyed her contemplatively. His face was so expressive, she could almost read his mind. He was quite aware of his animal appeal—probably many women threw themselves at him—and sensed that she was almost desperately eager for him to stay. He found the prospect attractive, but also possibly dangerous. After all, she was the big boss' wife.

As a further inducement, Irma added, "We could have a cocktail by the pool. There's a bar in the playroom. You could mix them while I change into my suit."

His spirit of adventure won over caution. "All right," he decided.

"I have to speak to my housekeeper for a moment first," Irma said. "Would you mind just waiting here until I come back?"

"Of course not," he said with dry amusement, his tone letting her know he was perfectly aware

that she was simply making an excuse to delay changing into her suit until Mrs. Pemberton and the children were gone:

When she blushed again, he chuckled. "Take your time," he said. "I'll wait here until they're gone, then go in and start the drinks. What do you drink?"

"A salty dog will be fine," she said. "You'll find everything you need at the bar, including a bartender's guide on the backbar, in case you don't know the recipe of a salty dog."

Inside, Mrs. Felton told her that her husband had phoned from the country club only a few minutes before, and wanted her to call him back at the bar. When she contacted him, he asked if she had any particular social plans for the evening.

"I hadn't planned on going out unless you want to," she said. "I had in mind having dinner at home, then writing some letters."

"Well, some of the boys are getting up a poker game and they want to start early. If you don't mind, to save time I'll have dinner here."

"Oh, sure, go ahead, dear," she said. "You'll probably be quite late, then?"

"Probably," he conceded. "I'll try not to wake you."

When she hung up, she told

Mrs. Felton that Mr. Carr would not be home for dinner, and she felt like nothing more than a cold snack. "I can make it myself," she said. "If you've finished your other work, you may leave any time you want to."

"Well, I guess I'll go now, then," the housekeeper said. "Everything is done."

Irma changed into her suit in her bedroom. She first put on a bikini, but when she looked at her image in her full-length mirror she was appalled to see how she was beginning to bulge in a couple of spots where bulges were not attractive. She quickly changed into a one-piece black suit that tended to minimize the bulges.

Examining her reflection again, she decided she was still in pretty good shape for thirty-five. Her natural blonde hair as yet showed no sign of gray, her complexion was still smooth, and her figure was still generally good. She probably could stand to lose about ten pounds, but that wasn't much of a problem. She could accomplish that in two weeks on a crash diet.

From her bedroom window she watched the bus back out of the driveway, and a few minutes later saw Mrs. Felton's car drive away. Only then did she go downstairs.

Gary Sommers was at the bar, pouring the contents of a cocktail



shaker into two stemmed glasses with salted edges. He finished pouring and set the shaker down before he turned to examine her. He looked her over slowly from head to foot. The frank admiration in his eyes, mixed with something more intimate than mere aesthetic appreciation, made her blush for a third time, which in turn made him smile.

Handing her one of the drinks, he raised the other and said, "To love."

She hiked her eyebrows, then shrugged. "To love," she repeated.

They drank, set their glasses down and looked at each other. The quizzical, estimating expression in his eyes started her heart beating violently. His face was so expressive that again she knew exactly what he was thinking. He was simply considering how long he ought to wait before making an overt move.

Apparently her expression was readable too, because he decided no wait was necessary. Almost casually he drew her into his arms, but there was nothing casual about his first kiss. It was so savage and demanding that it instantly set her on fire.

They never did get back to the swimming pool.

In the beginning it was simply

a physical affair insofar as Irma was concerned. They spent most of their time during their clandestine meetings making love in motel rooms.

It wasn't hard for Irma to arrange to be with Gary. Her husband was so involved in community projects that he spent a good many evenings away from home, and he made no effort to check on his wife's activities. Irma could generally get away for at least a couple of hours several nights a week. Also, Stanton got in the habit of playing poker at the country club every Saturday night, and she could safely stay out quite late then.

After a rapturous period of compulsive lovemaking, Irma and Gary finally got around to talking to each other.

Their early dialogue involved little but trading personal information. Irma told him how she had grown up in foster homes, had attended business school, then had worked for years at a variety of stenographic and secretarial jobs until she had finally landed the position as Stanton Carr's private secretary, which led to their marriage two years later.

Gary told Irma of his boyhood on an Oregon farm under the despotic rule of a martinet father, how he had run away to join the

Army at sixteen, and how he had acquired a high school diploma by taking Army extension courses. Briefly he mentioned some "minor" trouble that had ended his Army career six years later. He didn't describe the trouble, but he assured Irma he had an honorable discharge—the reason recorded as "for the good of the service." He had been reduced from staff sergeant to private, he admitted, but it was still a "white" discharge.

Gary's Army service had been in ordnance, and in addition to acquiring a high school diploma he had learned to become a machine-shop worker. Since his discharge eight years ago, he had held a number of jobs up and down the coast in different manufacturing plants. His jobs had been so numerous because he would quit when summer arrived in order to work in some resort, usually as a lifeguard.

Despite this seemingly aimless background, he expressed to Irma a driving ambition to own his own machine shop eventually. He'd had enough experience with every type of power tool to run such a shop, he said, and his various jobs had given him friendly contacts in several plants that had government cost-plus contracts and farmed out a good part of their machine-shop work. He was sure

he could get all the subcontracts he could handle. All he needed was a sufficient stake to go into business for himself, he told Irma, and within five years he could be a millionaire.

As she got to know him better, Irma found that she liked Gary Sommers more and more. Toward the end of June she suddenly realized she was hopelessly in love with him; not just physically in love, but in love the way a woman is when she starts dreaming of changing her status from lover to wife.

When Gary told her he loved her too, all the luxury she enjoyed as Mrs. Stanton Carr became meaningless. Gary was the Prince Charming she had once given up ever meeting, and now that he had finally come along, she was instantly ready to move from the palatial Carr mansion into whatever type of residence a drill-press operator could afford.

Gary wasn't quite as ready, though. While he had every desire to marry her eventually, he assured her, they had to be practical. Moving out on Carr and in with Gary while the divorce was pending would be a bad tactical error.

"Our starting to live together openly would accomplish two things, darling," he said patiently.

"First, it would get me fired. Then it would get you a divorce without alimony. So what would we live on?"

After thinking this over, Irma said contritely, "I really hadn't thought about anything but being with you all the time. What do you want me to do?"

"Keep our relationship entirely secret until your divorce is in the bag and you have your settlement. If the court found out you planned to remarry as soon as your decree was final, you wouldn't have a chance of getting any money out of Carr. But if you're just a poor abused wife who can't put up with your mistreatment any longer, you can nail him good. I did some checking, and his first wife took him for nearly a million."

Irma was silent.

"Incidentally, it's not a divorce anymore in California. Now they call it a 'dissolution of marriage,' and the only ground is 'irreconcilable differences.' Which means you don't have to prove your husband beat you or seduced your housekeeper or anything like that. You just have to tell the court you can no longer get along. You don't have to *prove* anything, because the law no longer requires one party to be at fault and the other to be innocent of fault. You

ought to be able to have the marriage dissolved within a month if you see a lawyer right now."

Irma was still silent.

"What's the matter?" he asked finally.

Irma cleared her throat. "I'm afraid I won't be able to get anything near what his first wife got as a settlement, honey. I can't expect more than ten thousand."

He turned his head to frown at her. "Ten thousand? That's ridiculous. Your husband must be worth ten million. What are you talking about?"

She explained about the premarital agreement she had signed.

He glared at her. "You let him con you into signing a premarital agreement?" he said in an enraged voice. "How stupid can you get?"

After staring up at him in shocked astonishment, Irma began to cry. Immediately he became contrite and gathered her in his arms.

"Hey, cut it out," he admonished. "I'm sorry I called you stupid."

"It's not that," she said between sobs. "I thought you loved me for myself, not just for the money I could get out of Stanton."

"I do," he protested, "but there's no point in passing up money. I was counting on at least enough to open the machine shop

I told you about. You think I want you to have to live on a factory worker's salary the rest of your life? I want to cover you with diamonds."

Irma's sobs gradually subsided. Getting up, she wiped her eyes with some tissue, then put her head on his shoulder. "How much would your machine shop cost?" she asked. "Wouldn't ten thousand be enough for a down payment?"

He gave a sardonic chuckle. "The companies I plan to go after for subcontracts are big business, Irma. They aren't going to deal with any two-bit operator. They'll be parceling out jobs that run into the hundreds of thousands and they won't go to anyone who isn't tooled up to handle them. I had in mind something like a couple of hundred grand."

She sighed. "Stanton would never give me anything like that. In fact, I'm quite sure he won't go any higher than he has to under our agreement. He's not tight with personal expenditures, but he's very tight about business matters."

Gary made a face. "Then we'll have to think of some way to get money out of him *before* you leave him."

"Like what?"

He didn't answer immediately. After a time he asked casually,

"Are you named in his will?"

Stiffening, she withdrew from his arms and looked at him. "I hope that was a joke."

He emitted an easy chuckle. "Of course it was, honey. What else?"

"It sounded as though you were contemplating making me a widow, and that kind of talk is definitely out so far as I'm concerned."

Realizing his remark had really upset her, he said, "It was just a bad joke, honey. Do I look like a killer?"

Examining his smiling face, she decided she had never seen anyone look less like one. Relieved, she snuggled up against him. Neither said anything for some time.

Eventually he asked, "Do you have moral reservations about crimes less than murder?"

"What do you mean?"

"How far would you be willing to go to shake some money out of him?"

"Nothing criminal," she said definitely. "I'm not going to risk jail."

"Well, the idea that just popped into my head may be criminal, but I don't think there would be any risk of jail, even if it went sour. How would you like to be kidnapped?"

She stiffened again. "Kid-

napped! They put you in jail forever for that!"

"Only if it's a real kidnapping, honey. If we faked a kidnapping, and it backfired, the most we could be tagged for is attempted fraud; and it seems unlikely to me a man would push that against his own wife. You know your husband better than I do—would he push charges against either of us if we got caught trying to shake him down by pretending you'd been kidnapped?"

After thinking his words over, she shook her head. "I'm not sure exactly what he would do. He might kick me out, but then again he might even forgive me. He's pretty crazy about me. One thing I'm sure he wouldn't do is press charges, because he would want to hush it up. Stanton is quite vain, and he couldn't stand the thought of appearing ridiculous to the whole world."

"Then there's no risk," he said. "Let's do it."

She had some reservations, but eventually he convinced her there was absolutely no danger, only a little embarrassment if they got caught. Once she finally agreed to go along, the discussion turned to how much ransom to ask. He suggested they try for a quarter of a million.

"Oh, Stanton would never go

for that much," Irma said in a positive tone. "I don't think we should ask for more than a hundred thousand."

"I thought you said he's crazy about you. The way this is going to be presented to him, he either pays off or gets you back dead. You think he'll set a limit on what your life is worth?"

"No, of course not, but you have to understand how Stanton's mind works. He isn't in the least cheap, but he is quite calculating about major expenditures. He makes sure he always gets full value for his money. When he buys a new car, for instance, he shops and shops until he gets absolutely the best possible deal."

"What's that got to do with anything like this?"

"I'm just trying to explain how I think he will react to a ransom demand. You would class that as a major expenditure, wouldn't you?"

"I guess," he admitted. "So how would he react?"

"That would probably depend on the amount asked. Up to a certain sum—my guess is a hundred thousand—I suspect he would go along with all instructions without trying to set any traps, and maybe without even informing the police. He would figure it was worth that much to get me back without risking antagonizing the kidnaper."

per. If you asked much more than what he considered a reasonable amount, he would start balancing the risk to my safety against the money. It isn't that he doesn't love me; it's just that he also loves money."

"You mean he would refuse to pay a larger amount?"

"Oh, he probably would pay anything you asked, but if you ask

too much, he's going to do his best to arrange things so there is at least a chance to recover his money. Probably he would call in the FBI, have our phone tapped and set all sorts of traps for the kidnapper. I just think it would be safer to set our sights low. Can't you start your machine shop on a hundred thousand?"

"I could probably set up a pretty fair operation with that for a down payment," he admitted. "Okay, you ought to know how your husband ticks. We'll ask for only a hundred grand."

Gary took a week to work out the details of a plan. Then he spent a whole evening thoroughly briefing Irma. The following day they put it into effect.

Just before noon Irma stopped by her husband's office. Stanton Carr was dictating to his private secretary when she arrived.

Marie Sloan, a pert brunette of about twenty-five, was a relatively new secretary, the previous one having quit to join the Peace Corps. Stanton Carr always hired pretty secretaries, which partly accounted for his having married two of them, and Marie was no exception.

Marie, who as yet didn't know her boss' wife well enough to be fully at ease with her, immedi-



ately rose to leave when Irma came in.

"Don't let me interrupt," Irma said quickly, preferring to have the girl hear what she had to say too. "I'll be only a minute. Keep your seat, Miss Sloan."

The girl glanced at her employer, then reseated herself when he nodded. "What is it, dear?" he asked Irma.

"I'm supposed to meet Hazel Ellison for lunch, and I've discovered my wallet isn't in my purse. Can you spare a twenty-dollar bill?"

Stanton Carr drew a twenty from his wallet and handed it to her. "That all, dear?"

"Yes, thanks. You can get back to work now." She started for the door, then paused and turned. "The oddest thing happened, Stanton. A masher followed my car all the way down Wilshire from Beverly Hills. I noticed him in the rear-view mirror shortly after I left home."

Her husband frowned. "You sure it wasn't just somebody going in the same direction and traveling at the same speed?"

"Positive. En route I stopped at DeWitt's Department Store. That's when I discovered I didn't have my wallet. When I drove on, the same car was behind me again. It followed me right to the

entrance to the plant parking lot, then drove on by when I turned in."

Stanton Carr's frown deepened. "How do you know it was a masher? Did he make any overt move, such as honking his horn at you?"

"No, but what else could it have been?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, but I don't like it. Did you get a good look at him?"

Irma shook her head. "All I could tell was that he was a heavysset man. I couldn't see him well enough in the rear-view mirror to make out his face. But he was driving a black Ford and I managed to catch his license number as he drove by the parking lot entrance."

"Good. Give it to me and I'll have the police check the man out."

"It was FHB-548."

Carr glanced at his secretary, who jotted the number in her notebook. "I'll find out who your masher is," he said to Irma. "I have a friend in the Department of Motor Vehicles."

Irma was quite satisfied with the way things had gone. When the black Ford was discovered abandoned on the plant parking lot, it would be assumed the mythical heavysset man had waited

for Irma on the lot, then had abducted her in her own car. It shouldn't take long to find the car, because Irma was fairly certain of how Hazel Ellison would react when she failed to meet her for lunch. First, Hazel would phone her home, and Mrs. Felton would tell her Irma had left some time ago to meet her. Then she would phone Stanton at his office to find out if Irma had stopped by there. That call would most certainly cause Stanton to investigate the parking lot.

Finding the car there would lead nowhere even after its registration was traced, because it was a stolen car.

Gary's plan for getting the Ford on the lot had been both clever and simple. In the middle of the previous night he had stolen it from an all-night parking lot and had left it for Irma in a previously designated spot on a side street a short distance from the plant. Irma had simply parked her own car behind the stolen one and had driven the Ford onto the lot. When she left the plant, she walked back to her own car.

Gary's plan not only lent credence to the story Irma would eventually have to tell about her abduction, but also gave him an ironclad alibi in the remote event that he was ever suspected of

being the kidnapper. All the time the heavyset man was supposed to be following Irma's car, Gary was working in the Plate Shop in the middle of fifty other workers.

Irma drove to Griffith Park, parked the car in the zoo area, took a brunette wig and some dark sunglasses from the glove compartment and put them on. She walked to the nearest bus stop and caught a bus going to South Los Angeles.

Gary had reasoned that when Irma's car was eventually found in Griffith Park, it would be assumed the kidnapper had left his own vehicle parked there, had forced Irma to drive him to it, then had switched cars.

Irma got off the bus at 24th Street and walked the three blocks to the motel where Gary had rented a light-housekeeping unit. No one was in sight when she let herself in with the key Gary had given her.

The unit consisted of a livingroom, bedroom and bath, with a kitchen alcove off the livingroom. Gary had stocked the refrigerator and a cabinet with both food and liquor.

Irma took off her wig and sunglasses, fixed herself lunch, then sat down to watch television.

Gary showed up at six. He reported developments as he mixed

a pair of salty dogs at a counter.

"There's both good and bad news," he said. "I'll give you the good first. My phone call to your husband went beautifully. I called his office from the public phone booth in the plant foyer during the three p.m. coffee break. I made my voice so husky, even you wouldn't have recognized it. Your friend Hazel must have phoned him that you never showed for lunch, because he didn't sound surprised to hear from me. He sounded as though he had been expecting such a call. He agreed to pay the hundred grand, but first wanted proof that you were all right. I told him to be at home at ten tonight and he would get a phone call from you."

"What's the bad news?"

"Your guess that he'd pay up to a hundred grand without even calling the cops was wrong. I stretched my coffee break so I could check his reaction to my call by keeping an eye on his office door. Approximately fifteen minutes after I made the call, about half the LAPD walked into his office."

Irma frowned. "The news hasn't gotten hold of it. I've been watching every TV newscast."

"Well, the cops must have declared a news blackout, but they're sure as the devil in on it.

It doesn't really matter, though. There's no way they can set a trap with the delivery method I've worked out for the ransom money."

At nine-thirty p.m. they left the motel together, Irma wearing her black wig and sunglasses. Gary drove up to the Boyle Heights district to make the phone call, so that in the event it was traced, it would give no clue to the section of town where they were actually hiding-out.

They called from an outdoor public phone booth, squeezing into it together. Irma dialed the number. Stanton Carr answered instantly.

Making her voice tearful, Irma said, "Honey, I'm allowed to speak to you for only a minute, and I can't tell you where I am or answer any questions. I haven't been harmed, but there's a gun in my back and the man says he'll kill me if you don't pay. Please do as they say."

"I will, dear," he assured her. "Don't worry."

Gary Sommers took the phone from her hand and growled into it in a husky, disguised voice, "Okay, there's your proof that she's still alive, Carr. Now, here's what you do. When the banks open tomorrow morning, you get a hundred grand in used twenty-

dollar bills and put the money in a suitcase. Take the suitcase to your office and wait for the mail delivery. Further instructions will arrive in the mail."

He hung up.

As they got back in the car, Irma said, "I thought you planned to give all instructions by phone."

"I do. That mail bit was just to keep the cops from tapping his office phone. I'll be phoning his office again from the foyer phone at the plant, and I can't chance a trace. That's what got stupid Captain McCloud in trouble, phoning his girlfriend an hour after his wife's funeral. The post provost marshal had put a tap on her phone."

"Who's Captain McCloud?" she asked, totally at sea.

Pulling away from the curb, he said casually, "My Army C.O. It was his stupidity that ended my Army career. The provost marshal got the idiot idea that he'd paid me to murder his wife, mainly because he withdrew five grand from the bank the day before I deposited four thousand. I have no idea what he did with the money, but I wouldn't be surprised if he did hire somebody to kill his wife, because he was certainly glad to get rid of her. But it wasn't me. I won my money in a crap game."

"They accused you of murder?"

she asked in a shocked voice.

"They *investigated* me for murder," he said. "They never accused me of anything. There wasn't enough evidence to make a case against either of us, but the idiot provost marshal wouldn't let it go. So the Army did what it usually does when it decides soldiers are guilty of something, but can't prove it. It brought pressure on him to resign his commission and for me to request discharge. They gave him the choice of resigning or being shipped to Greenland. They busted me and put me on permanent garbage detail."

"But you didn't have anything to do with it, did you?" she asked.

He smiled sideways at her. "Do I look like a killer?"

Smiling back, she said, "You look like a lover."

Gary didn't stay when they got back to the motel. In case he needed an alibi later, he wanted to be seen as much as possible, while Irma was missing, by people who knew him. He planned to drive to a bar in his own neighborhood where he was well known and stay until the closing hour of two a.m.

Gary didn't reappear at the motel until the following midnight. Meantime there still had been nothing at all on the news about

the kidnapping; very hush-hush.

"Get your wig and glasses on and let's go," he said as soon as he was inside.

"Is it over?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. There's a hundred grand in a suitcase in the trunk of my car."

As she donned her disguise, she asked, "What about all the food left here?"

"I'll clear it out tomorrow," he said. "Rent's paid until the end of the week. Hurry it up."

When they were in the car, he headed south.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I'm going to take you to Long Beach."

"Oh? Why so far? I thought you were just going to turn me loose somewhere in L.A. I'm not supposed to know where I was held anyway, being blindfolded all the time."

"Slight change in plans," he said.

They drove in silence for a time. Presently she asked, "Any trouble about the pickup?"

"Not a bit. Matter of fact, I was able to simplify the original pickup plan considerably."

"Oh? How?"

"I'll tell you when we get where we're going," he said. "Right now I want to think about

all the lovely money in the trunk."

It was nearly one a.m. when he parked the car at a deserted stretch of shore in Long Beach.

"Why such an isolated spot?" she asked.

"Why not?" he asked. "Come on, let's walk down to look at the water."

He sounded as though he had romance in mind. The timing surprised her, but she was enough in love to be always willing. Agreeably she climbed from the car. It was a warm, pleasant night with a moonless but clear sky studded brightly with stars.

She took his hand as they strolled toward the water. "You were going to tell me how you simplified the pickup plan," she said.

"Oh, yeah. When I phoned your husband this morning, he threw me a curve. He said, 'I was hoping you would phone instead of write. I am in my private office alone, and no one is listening in. How would you like to make two hundred thousand instead of just one?' When I asked how, he reeled off a telephone number and asked me to call it at seven this evening. 'The phone won't be tapped and we can talk safely,' he said. 'I don't like this one because this call is going through a switch-

board.' I said okay, I'd call him at the number he gave me. When I hung up, I called information, said I was a cop and asked the name of the subscriber for that number. Turned out to be Marie Sloan."

"My husband's secretary?" Irma said in surprise.

"Uh-huh. That, plus the offer of an extra hundred grand, gave me a couple of clues to the puzzle. So I really wasn't very surprised when I phoned him at seven and heard his proposition. I guess he's decided to marry another of his secretaries. The extra hundred grand was to kill you."

They had reached the water's edge. They stopped and she turned to stare at him in the darkness.

"It's foolproof from his point of view," Gary said. "The cops listened in on our call from that phone booth, so there's no question in their minds about it being an actual kidnapping. Kidnappers quite often kill their victims after collecting the ransom."

"Why, that beast!" Irma said indignantly. "And to think I refused

even to *talk* about killing that—"

"Yeah. Tactical error on your part. After his proposition, there wasn't much point in going through all the rigmarole I'd planned for the payoff. I just had him leave it in an alley while I watched from across the street. I wasn't afraid he'd try to set a trap, but I still didn't want him to see me. The second pickup will be made just as simply."

"The second one?" she said, her eyes widening. She withdrew her hand from his.

"Sure. He'll pay it. He wouldn't want to risk an anonymous note to the cops from the kidnapper explaining who suggested the killing, and I've already told him that's what will happen if he tries to get out of paying the second hundred grand."

Her eyes grew wider and wider. Even in the darkness she could see his expression. This time she would have had to give a different answer to the question he had asked her twice. She had never before seen anyone who looked more like a killer.



Astronomy is said to compel the soul to look upwards—unless, of course, mundane distractions intervene.



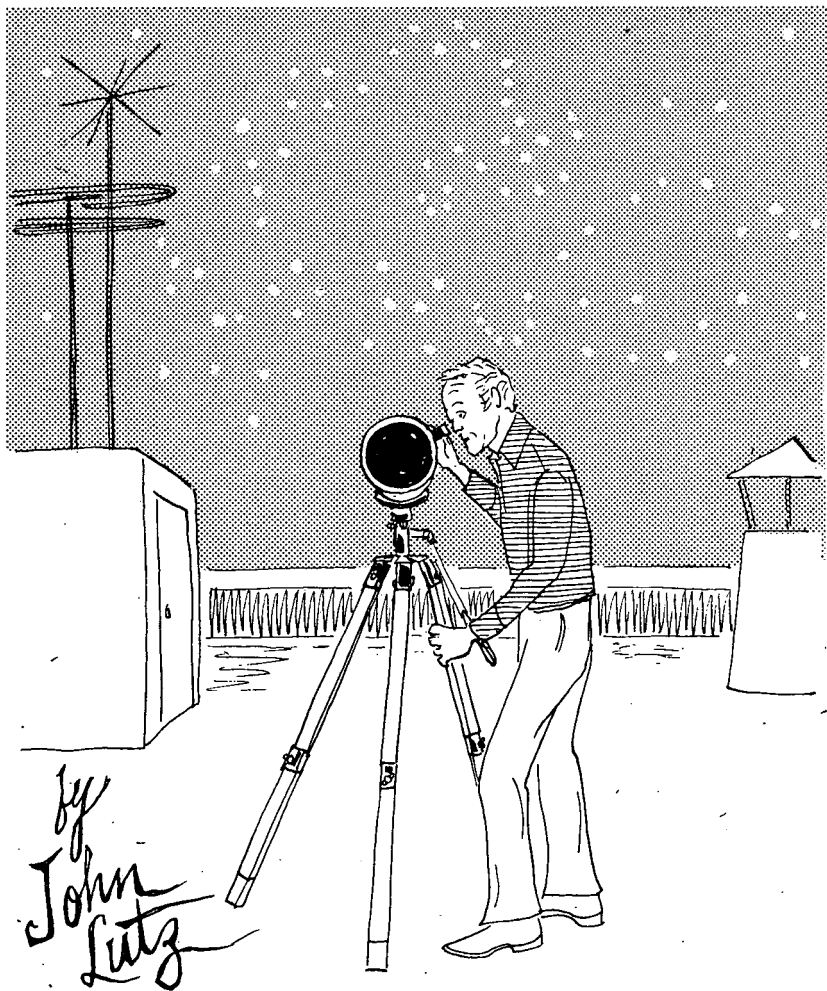
It was a perfect evening, almost absolutely still and clear. Ernest Streeker climbed the service stairs, as usual, to his astronomical observatory on the roof of his midtown apartment building. It was quiet on the roof, a flat blacktopped area broken only by shadowed chimneys, ventilator ducts, and slender but graceless TV antennae. Above the roof, vast, tranquil, dotted with beauty against the rapidly fading light, was the late-summer night sky, but there was one special tiny point of light that was Streeker's particular and consuming interest.

With quiet and pleasurable efficiency he set up his powerful reflecting-type telescope on its adjustable tripod. The telescope was, to Streeker, an instrument of precise beauty, the result of careful

consideration, hours of labor, workmanship—and the means of escape.

Not so much escape from as escape to, for Streeker was a lonely man, and he found solace in the greater loneliness of the far-distant stars. Like himself, they were remote, detached, as he had become remote to his world (or as his world had become remote to him). His wife Maureen seemed to become more distant and disinterested in him every day. The closeness of their youth was gone and, like two spinning astronomical objects that had once passed near to one another, then revolved away in separate vast orbits of increasing angle, the void between them was ever expanding.

One night some months previously, Streeker had come home



from his job as insurance salesman for Greater Hope Life (where no one ever really listened to him), and found the word-punctuated gulf between himself and Maureen intolerable. After a brief spat he

had left the apartment, and in his anger turned the wrong way in the hall to reach the elevators. Then, on impulse, rather than reverse his course he'd continued walking to the service stairway

and gone up to the roof to think and try to calm down.

It was a clear June night, and as he happened to look up at the sky, Streeker was actually startled by the immeasurable star-carpeted beauty above him, by the almost perfect silence. The apartment building was twenty stories high, and even the sounds of traffic from the busy street below failed to scale its heights. He lay for a long time, perhaps hours, the back of his head resting on his wadded coat, as he gazed up, fascinated, soothed by the glittering infinity above him.

Later that week he bought his first telescope and a book on astronomy. He got into the habit of going up to the roof almost every evening, and soon the stars in their myriad patterns became familiar to him and oddly comforting. There was the constellation Lyra, with its brightest star, blue-white and serene Vega. To the east was the four-sided keystone of larger Hercules, and near the horizon the dazzling Virgo cluster; then on to Libra, Delphinus, Aquila, all familiar and wonderful now to Streeker.

The roof became a special place to him and often, when he first emerged from the service door and let it swing shut behind him, Streeker would walk first to

the edge of the high building and look down at the slowly moving, glimmering lights of the traffic and neon below, at the random pattern of dots of distant windows. Then he would turn his eyes to the sky and experience a certain sensation that he came to treasure. Here on his roof he was like a man alone between two galaxies of light, and for Streeker there was about that an exquisite grandeur.

He bought a larger and more powerful reflecting telescope, in kit form. For months he worked religiously on it, improvising to meet his own particular needs and wishes as he went along. He visited Hans Fingers, the old man who ground lenses for the local astronomy clubs, and had his objective mirror—the polished concave mirror at the base of the scope that actually gathered light and formed the image—and his eyepiece lenses ground to clear perfection by that renowned and venerable craftsman. When Streeker was finished, he had a telescope that suited him perfectly, with interchangeable eyepieces for every type of viewing. 'Bring the universe closer to you,' the instructions with the telescope had read, but Streeker knew that the real purpose of the telescope was to allow him to escape far-

ther out into the universe, to move light years at a leap with a smooth, nimble twist of the delicate rack and pinion controls. There was something . . . well, almost Godlike about that, as if he were actually soaring in space among far and wondrous worlds. On nights like that Streeker's eminence seemed supreme; he was a man not bound by the dimensions or directions of ordinary mortals.

So one night he brought the focus of his powerful telescope lower, aiming in an almost horizontal plane at the stars, and his searching eye came to stop on the window of a building several blocks away. In that distant, starlike pinpoint of yellow light, now magnified to a wavering incomprehensible landscape, something moved.

The object was too close. Another eyepiece was needed. Streeker reached into his pocket and pulled out a soft cotton cloth, unfolded it and carefully withdrew his professionally-ground 18mm eyepiece. Deftly he removed the 9mm eyepiece from the telescope, wrapped it tenderly in the cotton cloth, then replaced it with the less powerful eyepiece.

The object was a woman. Streeker realized that in some subtle way he'd known that from the beginning, by the wavering,

out-of-focus movement he'd first seen. Now he could see her up close, and it gave him a sense of delicious power. He might as well have been in the room with her, so clearly could he see her: the tiny smudge of makeup near her left eye, the small beauty spot near the corner of her mouth—and yet she couldn't know she was being watched! His fingers twisted a dark knob ever so slightly, and he brought the woman even closer.

She was young, about twenty-five, blonde and quite pretty, wearing a long green robe. She was seated on a curved gray sofa in what appeared to be an apartment livingroom, staring at something, probably a TV. As Streeker watched, she smiled, then her lips spread in a laugh to show even teeth, and Streeker could even detect a lipstick stain. She continued to observe something Streeker couldn't see, a subdued smile of amusement set on her attractive features.

Streeker watched her for a long time, and she didn't move. Then he swiveled the telescope a degree at a time, taking in one window, then the next on the same floor. The window adjacent to the girl's was dark, the next had the draperies drawn. Streeker's breathing was deep and rapid as he peered

intently at the consecutive images. In the fourth window he saw a man and woman arguing.

They were both middle-aged. The man was standing by a bookcase, balding head bowed, fingertips pressed to his temples as if he had a headache. The woman was pacing, sometimes out of Streeker's view. She was a bit heavy, broadly muscular, dark-haired and rather pug-faced, wearing a flowered dress of bright colors. As she paced she was talking to the man, scowling and wringing her hands. From time to time the man would shake his bowed head.

Streeker grinned, feeling the soft vibrations of his beating heart. If he knew how to read lips he'd even be able to understand what the woman was saying. Then he did read her lips, one short, unmistakable word, a profanity! Streeker felt a strong and unreasonable animosity toward the woman, and he found himself wishing the man would strike her; but the man, probably her husband, continued to stand in the same spot, glancing up now and then with an anguished expression on his bony face.

Streeker lost interest in the man and woman and went on from window to window. He saw an old woman sitting, stroking her cat; a man with black curly hair

and a glinting silver ring on his finger talking on the telephone; a foursome engaged in a game of bridge that Streeker might have gotten interested in, had he played; a mother berating her square-banged teen-aged son. The rest of the windows were either dark, empty or curtained. Streeker licked his lips and swung the telescope back to the girl in the first window.

She was gone. The sofa was empty. He was about to turn away when suddenly she appeared, walking gracefully across his field of vision. She was now wearing a navy blue or black dress that showed the curves of her slender figure, and she was moving purposefully, as if against time.

She had answered a knock on her door, Streeker realized, when he saw her reappear a minute later in the company of a short, well-dressed man with hair graying at the temples. He was a broad-shouldered, dynamic-looking sort, and he had his arm about her waist and was smiling. She was smiling too, and then they kissed.

It was a light, perfunctory kind of kiss, a husband-wife kiss. The stocky man sat down on the sofa, propped his feet up on a hassock and began talking, waving his arms about emphatically.

When the blonde woman came back into view she appeared shorter and, though Streeker couldn't quite see floor level, he knew she'd removed her high-heeled shoes. She handed the man a drink, then walked back toward what must have been the kitchen. There was more of a sway to her walk now, and she glanced back over her shoulder as she passed out of sight. The man acted as if he hadn't heard whatever she'd said and sat sipping his drink, an amber liquid in a tall glass. After a while he got up and passed out of sight in the same direction the woman had gone. Then the light snapped off and Streeker jerked back from the telescope as if he'd been slapped.

He watched the building for another hour, observing those people who were not in the habit of drawing their draperies. It was as if he were with them, an unseen presence in their very homes, a secret factor in their lives.

When most of the windows had darkened, Streeker stopped watching and sat back, noticing that his back ached and his eyes were sore from the strain of concentration. He sat relaxed and thought about what he'd seen, the trembling in his fingers lessening as he smoked several cigarettes.

There were other buildings to

watch, some of them interesting, but night after night Streeker always found himself returning to that first building. It was ideal, with wide windows that afforded an almost total view of the livingrooms that faced his direction, and after a while it was almost as if he knew intimately the tenants he observed.

Weeks passed, and every night that weather permitted Streeker took his place behind his telescope, projecting himself into the worlds of the people who had once been total strangers to him. Of particular interest to him was the blonde woman he'd first observed; most of his time was spent watching her. She was almost constantly home alone, watching TV or curled up on the sofa with a book. Streeker had noted that she had very poor taste in literature and moved her lips slightly as she read.

He was watching her read on a clear, rather cool night, when her body gave a tiny jerk and her head came up sharply, as if she'd heard something. Streeker knew her reaction to the doorbell; probably her husband, who seemed never to carry his own door key.

It wasn't her husband this time. Streeker adjusted the telescope for even sharper focus. The woman was now seated on the sofa with

the dark-haired man from the floor below. In the light from the reading lamp his silver ring glinted as he put his arm around her and kissed her. The woman returned the kiss in a way in which Streeker had never seen her kiss her husband. Streeker focused his lens on tapered fingers, painted fingernails raking the flesh of the man's neck and the pale-blue material of his shirt. They kissed again, then the woman rose and began walking from the room. She looked back over her shoulder and said something in the same manner Streeker had seen her use to talk to her husband, and the dark-haired man rose and followed. The light remained on for a long time, but the livingroom was empty.

Now in the evenings, Streeker watched the woman's apartment more intently, and he saw the dark-haired man visit several more times. Apparently the husband traveled, for he seemed to be home at night only on weekends and Wednesdays, and on those nights Streeker spent more of his time with the other tenants, especially the pug-faced woman and her balding husband, who seemed to argue incessantly.

A driving curiosity about these people, his people, began to grow in Streeker, so one day he did a

bit of research. He went first to the area near the park and located the building he was addicted to watching, the Graham Crest Apartments, a modern, high-middle income sort of place. More investigation gave him the apartment numbers of his people, after which he drove directly to the city library's main branch. There he pored over cross directories until he found their names and listed occupations.

That night was perfect for viewing, and after scanning Libra and Equuleus with his more powerful lenses, Streeker changed eyepieces and aimed his telescope at the Graham Crest Apartments.

The blonde woman, whose name was Vera Roland, wasn't visible in her lighted livingroom and, it being Tuesday, her husband Lloyd wouldn't be home. The pug-faced woman, Irma Hogan, was home, apparently alone, reading a woman's magazine and eating some kind of hard candy that she chewed with difficulty. Disinterested, Streeker swung the big-scope to the left and down a few degrees to the apartment of Sam Rico. The dark-haired man's window was unlighted.

Perhaps he was with Vera.

Streeker brought the telescope back to focus on the Roland

apartment. The blonde was visible now, talking to someone to the right of the window. It was a man, all right. Streeker could tell by the taunting way she placed her hands on her hips and tossed her head slightly when she laughed. *How beautiful she is*, Streeker thought. *How beautiful and inaccessible, close yet so very distant.*

Then the man came into view. Clyde Hogan! The pug-faced woman's husband!

Streeker watched as Hogan approached Vera, kissed her tenderly at first, then with violence. Vera grinned at him, laced her fingers about the back of his neck, pulled him down onto the sofa. Streeker watched intently for the next half hour, and then all the next day he thought about what he had seen.

So she was *that* kind of woman. The dark-haired man might have been just an infatuation she couldn't help . . . and her husband did leave her alone too much. But now Hogan! Bald and henpecked Hogan who was possibly old enough to be her father! A great pang of pity went out for Lloyd Roland, no doubt working dutifully at his monotonous sales job to support the woman he loved, who spent her idle hours welcoming men's advances behind his back. Then Sam Rico and

Hogan, did they know about each other? Streeker was sure they didn't. Vera was playing a three-cornered game—at least three corners. Probably the three men knew each other and might even have been friends, not knowing the woman was making dupes of each of them.

The whole matter weighed heavily on Streeker. He had thought better of Vera Roland, foolishly judging her externally, and somehow he felt more than merely disappointed. He felt betrayed.

Streeker was surprised one night to find that Vera's actions were upsetting him to the point where his wife Maureen noticed. She looked up from her favorite television program, *Guess the Price*, and frowned at him.

"Are you going up to the roof tonight, Ernest?"

"I always do," Streeker answered. "Why do you ask?"

"I wondered, is all."

Streeker could see it was going to be the usual inane banter. "What made you wonder?" he asked, trying to furrow into the hard conversational surface.

"You aren't yourself," Maureen said.

Is anybody, he wondered, but he asked, "In what way?"

"Different, is all." The televi-

sion show was over with a crescendo of prompted applause. "Tonight's my night for cards," Maureen said, standing and glancing unnecessarily at the clock.

Streeker knew it was her heard night, as every Thursday had been for the past five years. Maureen moved in an orbit as regular and predictable as a moon of Jupiter.

After a few moments in the bedroom she emerged again into the livingroom and picked up her purse from its usual place on the desk. "Back later."

"Different in what way?" Streeker asked, but she hadn't heard him and was out the door.

"The bowl on the left is definitely cleaner," said a woman plumber from the TV. She was gesturing knowledgeably with a plunger as Streeker walked quickly to the set and turned it off. His glance at the window told him it was almost dark.

When he got to the roof Streeker saw that it was a clear night, a perfect night for viewing. Amid his galaxies of light, solitary and in silence, he felt more than ever like a god. Yet clear as the night was, he neglected the heavens for the moment, inserted his less powerful eyepiece in the telescope, and focused on Vera Roland's window.

He was there! Clyde Hogan was

already in Vera's apartment, sitting with her on the sofa enjoying a drink. Streeker's breathing increased as he swung the telescope in a practiced arc to take in the window of Hogan's own apartment.

Mrs. Hogan was there, reading one of those celebrity tell-all magazines and smiling at what she was reading. She didn't know that her husband was not where he said he'd be, but down the hall, only a few feet down the hall and through a door and with Vera Roland! She didn't know, but Streeker did! He felt the power of his position surge through him as he brought the scope back around and focused again on Vera Roland's window.

She and Hogan were still on the sofa, embracing wantonly now. It wasn't right, what Vera was doing! It was insidious, evil—but Streeker could only observe.

Or *was* that all he could do?

If he were a god, why must he only observe? There *was* a way for him to intervene! He could be the instrument—no, the instigator—of justice! He watched intently for the next five minutes; then, as if tearing away from a magnetic field, he forced himself to leave the telescope and rush downstairs to his apartment and phone.

Within a few more minutes he was back on the roof, watching Hogan's apartment window through the scope. The anonymous telephone call, the all-knowing voice from beyond, had shaken Irma Hogan. Streeker knew on the phone that she'd believed him, that she'd have to see for herself. She was seated in the chair where she'd been reading, the magazine folded on her lap, as she clenched and unclenched her hands.

Streeker caught his breath as the look of anguish on her homely features changed to fury and she rose decisively and left his range of vision. He hurriedly and smoothly swung the powerful telescope to focus on Vera Roland's window.

It seemed as if too much time had passed and he had failed. Then both Vera Roland and Hogan shot surprised, darting glances to their right, toward the door. Hastily pulling herself together, Vera rose to answer the knock.

Streeker's lips drew back in a grin as he watched Hogan sitting patiently, apprehensively, on the sofa where he couldn't be seen from the apartment doorway.

Then Hogan's eyes widened and he leaped hastily to his feet, facing his right.

Vera Roland came backward into view violently, as if she'd been pushed, and Irma Hogan came into view gesturing futilely with her fists, her face reddened by rage. Vera stood still with shock as Irma ranted at her husband, who was dressing with awkward but surprising speed. He practically ran out of sight to the right, like an actor exiting in an overplayed drama.

Now Irma Hogan fell upon Vera Roland with fists flailing. The smaller blonde woman tried to defend herself, covering her face with her arms and hands. Streeker's own hands were trembling as he watched the wronged wife smash away at the bowed figure, her pug features distorted by a driving lust for vengeance.

Vera fell back, half-seated, half-lying on the sofa, sobbing and looking unbelievably at the blood on her exploring fingers. Irma Hogan was screaming at her now, but the heavy woman's face was turned slightly so Streeker couldn't make out any of the viciously-shaped words.

Then Irma Hogan suddenly was gone, and Vera Roland was hunched over, sobbing, her body heaving uncontrollably. Streeker watched her try to stand, struggle unsteadily then fall back, feeling hesitantly about her face where

Irma Hogan had beaten her. Then she tried again to rise, accomplished it, and to Streeker's amazement made a defiant, obscene gesture toward the closed door on her right where her assailant had exited. Walking as if unable to straighten completely, she stumbled off toward her left and the bathroom.

Streeker sat back from the telescope and breathed evenly to calm himself. Vera Roland had gotten at least part of what she deserved, but Streeker couldn't feel that justice had been served. Irma Hogan hadn't finished the job, hadn't humbled the adulteress sufficiently.

Streeker was not surprised at what he then decided. For the first time in years he was reasoning completely objectively, unfeelingly. He knew what to do and how to do it, and so he did it.

He returned from the Graham Crest Apartments within forty-five minutes. It had taken but a short while, once he'd gotten inside. Vera Roland had taken a long time to come to her door or he would have been back even sooner.

The first thing Streeker did when he returned was to stop in his apartment and make his second anonymous phone call of the night. Then he hurried back up to

the roof and took his position behind the telescope.

He gave a little gasp when he looked. He might have been five feet from where he'd left Vera Roland's body sprawled on the sofa.

It seemed as if the police would never get there, but they did. First came two uniformed patrolmen who made a quick search of the rest of her apartment, then several plainclothes detectives. Soon the medical examiner and police photographer arrived. Streeker watched everything carefully, feeling a twisted pride at having been the one who had wrought justice and brought about these official proceedings. He knew that, at that moment, the police were questioning the vicious Irma Hogan, who would even believe herself guilty and suffer the remorse she deserved.

Then something happened that made Streeker's entire body stiffen and lean forward in even more eager concentration. One of the uniformed patrolmen had found something, was holding it out, showing it to a beefy, curly-haired detective. Streeker adjusted the focus on his telescope slightly, and there seemed to be a great roaring and hollowness in him as he recognized the object. His eyepiece! His 9mm telescope eyepiece! Ab-

sently his right hand went to his side pocket, explored the folded, soft cotton cloth. Only the cloth! Damn her, when she had struggled he had lost the eyepiece! As Streeker watched in horror, several more detectives examined the eyepiece, then everyone in the livingroom turned and seemed to stare directly at him, as if they were right there on the rooftop with him!

Streeker staggered back away from the telescope, and a soft whimper rose from his lips. Something cold passed through him.

He thought he'd been playing God, but he hadn't been at all. The ponderous universe continued on its predestined, unchangeable course, oblivious to Streeker's puny and futile maneuvering. No man could escape the consequences of his actions; no man could escape anything!

Streeker was having trouble breathing. Walking numbly to the edge of the roof, he leaned on the tile of the parapet and gulped the cool night air. He could see in his mind the detectives questioning

old Hans Fingers, could see the ancient lens grinder checking his records for an address at the correct angle from Vera Roland's livingroom window and sofa. Or perhaps one of Streeker's neighbors would read about the case in the newspapers and call the police. It was common enough knowledge that his hobby was astronomy.

One way or another they would find their way to Streeker, would find their way to him and he would be theirs. The roaring in his ears increased in pulsating, frantic rhythm with his terror-stricken heart. The countless stars above, below, around him seemed to whirl, and quite deliberately he lifted his hands from the parapet and pushed himself out into space.

A few people on the street happened to glance up at the vast, star-jeweled heavens at exactly the right place and time, and they pointed, eyes wide, mouths gaping in mute shock, as Streeker's madly gyrating body plummeted downward, his distant shrill scream a blaze of sound against the quiet night sky.



So there is, after all, honor among thieves—or, should one say, a reasonable facsimile?



The Unstained

The thing I hated most about Perk Madden was his insufferable arrogance. Between his haughtiness and his big mouth, there were times when I thought I would become physically ill. It didn't help that Perk was blond and handsome and built like Hercules, his two hundred pounds riding neatly on his six-foot frame.

In stir, which was where I first met Perk, he was always regaling the other cons with tales of his prowess as a safecracker. A lot of them believed him too, hanging wide-eyed on every word as he extolled his abilities, a la Jimmy Valentine.

It was downright laughable in a way. If Perk was so damned good, what was he doing in stir? Not

that I ever broached the question, mind you. I'm a spindly one-hundred-and-thirty-pounder built on a five-seven frame and Perk could

Code

have gobbled me up with one meshing of his massive jaws.

Why was I in stir? Would you believe my dislike of walking got me there? That's how it was, though. I'd been hitchhiking at the time (considerably more hiking than hitching), with the sun bearing down and not a trace of a breeze, when I saw the car standing beside a garage, keys and all. Since it was only fifty miles to Sanger, the home town, I figured I'd reach there and ditch the car on the outskirts before it was even missed. Anything seemed prefer-

able to another eight hours of standing along the highway and watching the cars whiz past. I hadn't made quite twenty miles when the state patrolman pulled me over and waved his revolver under my nose. He was reasonably

sympathetic, having done some hitchhiking himself; the judge was another story.

I got three years for my 'criminal depredations.'

Perk was holding sway over his court when I arrived at Stony



Lonesome, and he immediately tried to include me as one of his worshipers. I wasn't buying, though. None of us were behind the walls for exhibiting intelligence, and I wasn't about to subscribe to the notion that Perk was smart or glamorous. Instead, I invested my meager earnings in a correspondence course and began studying to be a locksmith. Actually it was the best place in the world to embark on such a venture. The place abounded with men who knew locks. Probably the best of the bunch was Charlie Judson, the tired old con with whom I shared a cell.

Charlie was tall and cadaverous, and on his sixth and last jolt in prison. He'd run afoul of the Habitual Criminal Act, and was in for the rest of his days. When he left it would be in a wooden overcoat. Still he kept himself busy with reading, studying chess, and helping me with my diagrams of locks and tumblers.

"That creep is bad news no matter how you read him," Charlie said one day when Perk pranced past our cell on his way to the yard for the exercise period.

I should have paid more attention to Charlie's intuition. I mean, after six hitches in stir he qualified as an expert on men like

Perk. Instead, I held up the diagram of a German padlock and asked his expert opinion on its merits.

Perk began stopping at our cell on a daily basis, trying to exude good fellowship and establish a certain camaraderie, but it didn't work. I was busy with my lessons and Charlie wouldn't have given him the right time unless Perk was sweating out the hangman. Then I discovered the reasons for Perk's buddy-buddy routine: Gloria.

I had a picture of her on the cardboard box I used for a desk, and every time Perk paused at the cell door he'd practically devour her with his serpentine eyes. Not that Perk could be held entirely to blame. Gloria is one of those women—black hair, snowy skin, and a gamin smile—that appeals to most men.

"Don't be surprised when Mad-den shows up in Sanger," Charlie said after one of Perk's visits. When I tried to scoff away the idea, Charlie shook his head doggedly. "He's poisoned with self-puff, Butch. He thinks he's the greatest guy who ever lived. And the very thought of you having a woman like that is more than his bloated ego can stand. I've known cons and I've known cons and that creep is about as subtle as a

television commercial. As sure as God made little green apples he'll show up in Sanger and make a play for Gloria."

"He sticks his nose across the city limits and the cops will be there to greet him," I snapped. I wasn't afraid Perk might take Gloria away from me; I just didn't want him in the same county with her for reasons best described as Contamination, with a capital C.

"No good, Butch," Charlie said paternally. "When you put the finger on a cluck like Perk, you have to take into consideration his coterie of bootlicking worshipers. Some of them actually believe in that counterfeit maxim: Thou shalt not squeal; and it is counterfeit, believe me. Ninety-five percent of the cons in this joint would sell their own mothers down the river if the price was right! Still, there are those who believe in it, and if just one of Perk's cronies is a believer, you could end up with quite a problem if it became known that you'd put the finger on him."

I hadn't even considered the angle, but it made sense. "So what do I do, Charlie?" I said. "Simply sit still if Perk shows up in Sanger and let him have the run of the town?"

Plucking one of my padlock diagrams off the cardboard box,

Charlie held it under my nose. "Anybody smart enough to figure out these things shouldn't let a creep like Perk Madden bother him. You can outthink him in a minute, Butch. But do it real sly-like, and hit him where it hurts!"

I wasn't sure I understood Charlie's reasoning, but I didn't press the matter. I had a lesson to get out, and I still didn't think Perk would show up in Sanger.

Then the long-awaited day finally arrived. My time was served and freedom beckoned. I shook hands with Charlie, doing my best to be blasé and not let the lump in my throat show. An hour later, in an ill-fitting suit and with my books and papers in a beer case, I was on the bus headed for Sanger. It was a perfect spring day with fleecy clouds, a soft breeze, and meadowlarks yodeling from the tops of fence posts. It would have been a beautiful day with five feet of snow and a sixty-mile-an-hour gale.

I hadn't told anybody I was getting out. The only person in Sanger I'd kept in touch with was Gloria and I wanted to surprise her. Still, when the bus groaned up to the café in Sanger, Arnie Humboldt was leaning indolently against the wall. Arnie is maybe eight years older than me, and a graduate of the same orphanage.

He crossed the tarmac, the sun ricocheting from the badge on his shirt pocket, and held out a firm hand.

"Welcome home, Butch," he said around a smile that came all the way from his toes.

I knew without being told that Arnie wasn't at the bus depot by chance. He'd made it a point to find out when I was getting released and had delegated himself to be my welcoming committee—not that his appearance at the depot had interfered with his work. Sanger's six-man police force simply doesn't have that much work to do. What I mean is, they almost always prevent crimes *before* they are committed, which makes for a much better town. Any strangers in town without a plausible reason are invariably the recipients of constant but casual contact with the authorities. Those with larcenous notions find this tactic unnerving in the extreme and usually depart without prolonged delay. The legitimate citizens, salesmen, tourists, and such, aren't bothered and everything works out nicely.

"You got any job prospects?" Arnie asked as we walked along the street. Then he hastened to add, "I'm not snooping, Butch. It's just that old man Danvers at the hardware store has been looking

for a man and if you're in need of a job it might pay to check it out."

I was certainly in need of a job. The twenty-five dollars the warden had handed me wasn't going to last very long, not with clothes to buy, a room to rent, and dinner with Gloria. "I need the job," I said, "but Danvers may be squeamish about hiring an ex-con. Some people are funny that way."

Arnie gazed innocently into space. "Not Danvers. I've already talked to him about you. He'll be expecting you at nine o'clock in the morning." Giving me a wink, Arnie moved along the street and around the corner.

Actually my readjustment to civilian life came off with surprising ease. With people like Arnie and Gloria and old man Danvers going out of their way to help me, it could hardly have gone otherwise. I went to work in the stock room of the hardware store, which was a break for me. I got to study all the locks and padlocks for free, and figure out how they worked. Spring blended into summer, summer into autumn, and things couldn't have looked better.

Then Perk Madden showed up in Sanger . . .

I was in the rear of the store, stocking the nail bins, when he came through the door, and

Charlie Judson's warning flashed into my mind. I kept on working like everything was just fine, but a knot the size and temperature of the polar ice cap was forming in my gut.

Perk gave me his friendliest smile, all teeth and frost. "Hiya, Butch." He was decked out in real swinger style, wearing bell-bottom slacks, alpaca sweater and suede jacket.

I shook hands without enthusiasm, noting that Perk didn't have the faintest suggestion of a callus. Somebody else had done the work that had paid for his threads. Perk hung around, making small talk, while I finished stocking the nail bins, then crossed the street with me when I took my lunch break.

When I inquired what he'd been doing for a living, he was expansively vague. "I was in aluminum siding for a few weeks, but some character made me a beautiful offer for my territory so I took his money and headed down the road. Right now, I'm looking around for some sort of investment." He was lying in his teeth. Don't ask me how I knew it; I just did.

His remark was the opening wedge. From there, he inquired about the various businesses that might be in need of capital and a

partner, but he was more interested in the ones that were outstandingly successful and didn't need either one. After lunch he said he'd see me around, and moved down the street.

"A friend of yours, Butch?" Arnie Humboldt asked from behind me.

It was a perfect chance to rid myself of Perk Madden but Charlie Judson's other words flashed into my mind: "Thou shalt not squeal."

I shook my head. "Not really a friend, Arnie. Just a guy I met in my travels."

That afternoon seemed to drag out for a week, and with my mind on Perk I couldn't attend to the business like I should have. I mixed up two orders of silverware, misplaced a crate of chandeliers, and put two dozen gallons of shellac in with the enamel display. Old man Danvers came by as I was straightening out the cans of shellac and enamel, and he grinned understandingly.

"We all slip up once in a while, Butch. Just don't make the same mistake twice."

A dozen thoughts fought to get control of my mind at the same time. Did he know who Perk was? Or did he figure Perk and I were real buddies, ready to do things together? I didn't know what I

was going to do, but I knew I had to do something.

Two days later, when Perk stopped in at the hardware store again, I still didn't have any answers. "You had lunch with the fuzz," he said conversationally. Then his cold blue eyes got a touch colder. "You wouldn't have mentioned me by any chance? I mean, we've been through the mill, Butch, and we know things other people would never guess—but we shouldn't be telling tales to the wrong people."

"You should drop dead for even thinking it," I said. "First, if I *had* told Arnie about you, he'd have escorted you out of town twenty minutes later. He doesn't know a thing and I'm not going to tell him what he doesn't have to know."

"You're a real cool cat," Perk purred silkily. "I had you figured for a real square, Butch." He looked around like he was considering buying the place. "Uh, whatever happened to your girlfriend, Butch? What was her name?"

What was her name! Perk knew her name as well as he knew his own. "Gloria," I said, frowning. "Gloria Masters. She changed a lot while I was in stir, Perk. When I got home she wouldn't even go out with me until I got a

job. Then she refused to marry me unless I had five thousand dollars saved. She's away visiting her grandmother now, but she'll be home next week and, boy, am I gonna surprise her!" I leaned close to Perk and lowered my voice confidentially. "I've got the whole five thousand salted down."

Perk's eyes widened greedily, then disbelief spread over his face. "You got five grand put away? By working in this crummy store?" A trace of anger flashed in his eyes. "Don't try to con me, Butch. It takes a long time to put that much bread together; a lot longer than you've been working here."

I kept my voice low. "Guess again. An eastern conglomerate bought up a whole bunch of small ranches a while back and I came up with a real brainstorm. I went up the valley to see the head man, and darned if I didn't end up selling him two carloads of steel posts and two more of barbed wire. Of course Mr. Danvers couldn't pay me the standard commission, which is seven percent, without his regular salesman getting wise, so he put the money in the safe for me. I mean, I sort of infringed on somebody else's territory, another reason the deal has to be kept hush-hush; but as soon as Gloria gets back I'm being promoted to the sales department

and Danvers is going to slip me the money a little at a time so nobody gets wise.”

Perk licked his lips and studied my face critically, like maybe if I was lying it would show in my eyes. “Five grand is a *lot* of commission,” he said skeptically.

“One of the chief reasons it has to be kept quiet,” I hissed. I looked around furtively but nobody was close enough to overhear us. “Steel posts and barbed wire go at fifteen thousand dollars a carload, which brought the order to sixty thousand dollars. Seven percent of that is forty-two hundred dollars, no matter how you figure it. The rest of the five thousand I saved out of my salary.” I winked slyly at Perk. “You were a salesman in the aluminum-siding business so you should know how such things work.”

For a few seconds my words didn’t register, then Perk came to life with a start. “Huh? Oh, yeah! I see what you mean.” He turned toward the door. “I gotta be going, Butch. I’ve got people to see and things to do. You know how it is. I’ll be in touch.”

I was in the diner across the street from the hardware store the following night when the explosion reverberated the length of the main street. Opposite me in the booth, facing the street, Arnie

Humboldt had just reached for his double cheeseburger. His hand froze in mid-air, his jaw sagged ludicrously as the ruptured windows of the hardware store crashed onto the sidewalk and skittered into the street. Then he was out of the booth and sprinting for the door.

A patrol car careened around the corner seconds later and two more cops hit the street before it was fully stopped. They found Perk in a corner, all tangled up in a jumble of wheelbarrows, hoes, rakes and shovels. He was cut in a dozen places and bruised from stem to stern, but had suffered no serious injuries. In his pocket were the tools of his trade: nitro, soap, blasting caps and fuse.

Perk was returned to stir two weeks later . . . for fifteen years. His left leg hadn’t fully recovered from his entanglement with the tools in the hardware store and he walked with a pronounced limp, but it was the damage to his bloated ego that really pained him.

I was having a piece of hot apple pie and a glass of milk later that day when Arnie entered the diner and slid into the booth across from me. He ordered the inevitable cheeseburger and coffee, then lit a cigarette and leaned back in his seat.

"Funny thing about Perk Madden," he said out of the clear blue.

"Funny?" Nothing about Perk had ever struck me as being funny.

Arnie expelled a cloud of smoke. "Not really funny, actually. More like odd. I mean the way he blew an empty safe that hadn't been used in years, it just doesn't fit the picture. According to his rap sheet he's cracked quite a few boxes. Not that he ever got much money; he just did a good job of blowing them. So why would a man with his experience make the mistake of using four times as much nitro as the job called for?"

I savored a bite of pie. "Who knows? I suppose, working in the dark like that, it would be fairly easy to make a mistake."

Arnie shook his head. "Highly improbable. My own theory is that there were *two* men involved in that fiasco."

A bit of pie skidded to a halt in my throat. "*Two* men?"

Arnie nodded. "The average safecracker will run a bar of soap or a chunk of wax around the edges of a safe door, sealing the crack so the soup he pours in at the top doesn't run out the sides or bottom. Soap or wax . . . *never both*. Madden had a bar of soap in

his pocket, along with his other goodies, but no wax. Yet there were *both* wax and soap on the safe and the door.

"The presence of the wax and the overload of nitro bring up one outstanding possibility," Arnie continued. "There was *another* safecracker in the store ahead of Madden. He had the safe waxed and souped, but before he could finish the job Madden came crawling through the rear window, scaring him off. Not suspecting anything, Madden soaped the safe, poured nitro onto the overload of nitro that was already there, and lit the fuse."

"But that leaves a very obvious loose end," I said. "How did this mysterious *first* safecracker get inside the store? The only sign of forced entry was the window Madden admitted jimmying to get inside, and old man Danvers has the only keys to the building."

"Oh, it had to be a man who knew his locks real well, a man who really didn't need a key," Arnie said, stubbing out his cigarette. "Also he had to have access to dynamite and some knowledge of—well, you know, the sort of things a man would learn in stir . . ." Arnie fell silent as the waitress served his order, then resumed when she was out of earshot. "Not much dynamite in this

area. Two construction companies have permits for limited amounts, but the big supply here is in the Danvers' magazine out at the old gravel pit. The place is double padlocked but there we come to the locksmith bit again. The right man could have gotten through those two locks with no trouble at all."

"You do have a fantastic imagination," I said. "But *two* safe-crackers in Sanger? Going after the same safe on the same night? It's a bit hard to swallow, Arnie."

Arnie bit thoughtfully into his cheeseburger. "Okay, so let's assume the first man—and there were two men involved—wasn't a safecracker. In which event he had something other than money as a motive—and the only thing that's left is getting rid of Mad-den. This mysterious first man had a reason to suspect Perk was going to blow the safe in the hardware store, so he slipped in ahead of him, souped it to the brim, and cut out."

I shook my head. "I can't swallow that theory either, Arnie. If

somebody wanted Perk out of Sanger, all he had to do was call the police and have a tail put on him. A bit of close surveillance by the authorities would have stamped him real quick."

"You're overlooking the code," Arnie pointed out. "You know: Thou shalt not squeal . . . Whoever rigged the booby trap for Perk didn't want to chance the stigma of being labeled a fink, so he used cunning and guile and let Perk blow the whistle on himself. As booby traps go, it was a real beaut!"

"He went to a lot of trouble just to honor a code," I said. "Not that it doesn't make for a helluva story, but you'll never get anybody to believe it."

Arnie downed his last swallow of coffee and stood up. "So what's wrong with honoring a code? I've lived by one for years and I wouldn't dream of violating it. Namely: Never look a gift horse in the mouth." Giving me a somber wink, he moved out the door and into the peace and quiet of the night.



It seems the rule of not talking to strangers is wisely extended into adulthood.



Lend Me Your Ears

Now and again a spy has to get away from himself for a while—away from his false self and back to his true self. Or else . . .

You've seen Marcel Marceau do his pantomime of the mask becoming the face—the clutching hands desperately trying to tear loose the clownish smile, and failing. Well, before it gets to that with me, every so often I take the mask off, just to make sure I still can.

I have to tell someone what I do, what I've done.

The need usually comes on me after I've gone through a bad one, when the reasons for going through it are not mine to know. What does the cog know of the machine? Or the pawn of the end game?

Your own government—or governments, if you're a double

agent—must disown you. You can never be sure your own people aren't using you as human bait. There have been times when, on orders from above, I've had to throw comrades to the wolves.

So I often stop to remember I'm a pawn too. I'm a thinking pawn, though, and I realize I face torture if I fall into enemy hands. So I find myself waking up sweating. Could I stand up to it? Would I talk? Could I kill myself first?

Yet I can't let myself brood. If I got the blues thinking of all these things, my superiors would see that as a sign of weakness and would liquidate me. And rightly so.

Likewise, a spy can't take to drink or drugs. Even if his people never get wind of it, it's bad. It affects his judgment and makes

him careless. A spy can misjudge badly, bungle badly, only once.

The answer—at least for me—is the confessional, but not the church confessional booth. Wasn't it the Croppy Boy, the captured

ening of feeling, the diminishing of trust, these occupational hazards see to that. No, I pick a perfect stranger, someone I'll never meet again.

Let me tell you about my latest



by Edward
Willen

Irish rebel in the ballad, who spilled all to a British soldier disguised as a priest? So to whom can a spy talk?

A spy has no friends. The dead-

assignment, the one from which I'm just returning. It was to dispose of an enemy agent whose cover, though he himself did not yet know it, had been blown. It turned out pretty bloody.

The mission before that had been a bad one too, and so I wondered as I planed in whether I was up to snuffing him out. I had not yet had a chance to discharge

the built-up tension from the earlier mission. Luckily for me, my superiors didn't know how shaky I was.

There would be no time for games, for keeping him under long surveillance, or for attempting to turn him around, or even for bringing him in to a safe house and working on him to talk. It was to be in; do the job; and out. It was up to me to make the most of the few hours they gave me before I had to plane back.

I found him right off. He was at the atmospheric—low wattage to hide the dirt—cafe where they said he hung out. I picked him up as he paid and left, and followed him down the dark street. I came even with him, made as if to pass, then clapped him on the shoulder, like so, and he jumped.

He turned pale when I said his name, showed him the bulge of my gun and told him to come along with me.

Of course he composed himself quickly, tried to play dumb, then indignant, but he knew it was all up with him. At last he let his shoulders sag and gave a shrug and a smile.

We walked our shadows along the empty street toward my rented car. At the last minute, as we passed an alley, he broke away, shoving me to the ground.

He then ran away into the alley.

Without getting up, I drew my gun and rested both elbows on the cobbles, gripping the wrist of my gun hand with the other one. He was zigzagging away, and a silencer throws you off, but my second shot got him in the leg before he wrenched around out of sight. I got up but was in no hurry to give chase. There was no need to, not merely because I was sure the man would be limping badly and would be weakening fast from loss of blood. I could have caught up with him easily and killed him, but I held back, kept out of sight.

The thing I had clapped to the back of his coat, placing it just under his collar, beeped in my inconspicuous earphone and gave me a constant fix on him. What I really wanted was not the man alone but as many of his contacts as I could get him to lead me to before it was time to finish him off.

Now, this may seem strange to you, but I knew his thinking as though I had planted a bug inside his head.

They're right behind me and I'll never shake them off, he told himself. *They know who I really am, so I'm no more use to our side. Where can I go? Who can I turn to? Someone had to give me away or I wouldn't be in this fix. Who*

did it? My girl? My comrades?

I tell you, he was a bitter, jealous, hopeless man by then, and he began thinking about who he might bring down with him. Now he took a kind of perverse pride in having blown his cover. Now he was a Typhoid Mary who carried guilt by association, who bestowed the kiss of death. His touch, his glance were fatal.

By simply making ambiguous contact with someone he knew to be a valued agent of ours, he could make us think the man had sold out to the other side. In the same way, he could destroy a personal enemy, gratify a private grudge. He could put the finger on his girlfriend just in case she had tipped us off anonymously, or just to keep her from living on to enjoy another man. He could pick anyone at random and place on that person the mark of death. What power he had!

As it happened, he did all of those things. I know, because I followed his trail and found out to whom he went for bandaging and money and documents and a car.

Of course I had to dispose of all his contacts. Couldn't take a chance on passing up any, could I?

The really strange thing was, he was actually wearing a look of hope at the end—when it came time to finish him off—till he saw me again.

So, as I say, this was a particularly bad one. That's why, maybe once a year, I pick a conversation with a perfect stranger and tell him all. Each time, of course . . . but I see you understand. If it's any comfort to you, I promise you won't feel a thing, though you may have felt the tiniest pinprick a while back when I clapped you on the shoulder. It will pass as a heart attack. No, no, don't try to move. It's too late.

There, I told you.

Oh, stewardess! Over here, miss, please. I'm afraid my seatmate isn't feeling well. He seemed to go funny all at once and slump over like that. I think it might be serious . . .

No, a perfect stranger.



Perhaps more is accomplished accidentally than purposefully when it comes to the composition of dying messages.



Head lowered against the rain, the little old lady had just crossed the street when it happened.

Behind her there was a thud, a tinkle of glass and an involuntary cry from someone in sudden, massive pain, followed by an onlooker's scream and a sound like that of a melon dashed onto pavement.

She turned. In the intersection a young woman sprawled facedown,

a red-gray mass oozing from her skull. Already the car that had felled her was a crazily weaving, fast-vanishing blur curtained by rain and mist.

Three pedestrians were running toward the body, while a fourth shouted and pointed at the fleeing car. Apparently unnoticed was the victim's purse, which had been knocked from her hand and now lay almost at the old lady's feet.

It was a pretty purse, prettier than any the old lady had ever owned. Made of black calfskin, it might also hold plenty of money. Obviously the girl wouldn't need it anymore . . .

Impulsively, the old lady kneeled, jammed the purse into a shopping bag under her coat, straightened, tugged at the babushka under her chin and walked on.

Nobody yelled, nobody followed. Although she felt increasingly uneasy about taking what had belonged to a dead person, an act the gravity of which was just dawning on her superstitious nature, she began speculating on

how much cash might be in the purse and what she'd buy with it.

Moments later, she dumped the purse's contents onto a table in her room. Nothing! Only about a dollar in change, some personal effects and a piece of paper on which someone had written:

25 - 2
40 - 2
60 - 4
75 - 4
100 - 6

Angrily, she crumpled the paper into a ball, threw it into a trash can, clenched her fists and let out a scream of frustration.

On vacation as anywhere else, Detective First Class Rudy Laszlo

by James
Michael Ullman



was a restless sleeper and an early riser.

A little after five, he dressed silently so as not to awaken his wife, and drove to an all-night stand that sold out-of-town papers. The only copy of his home city paper was three days old, but that was better than nothing. He'd been away a whole week now and it made him nervous, not knowing what was going on.

In his motel lobby he thumbed through the paper and almost missed the item on Page 11, but as he began turning the page, the headline caught his eye:

AD WOMAN KILLED BY HIT-RUN DRIVER

A hit-and-run driver Monday killed a young advertising woman who was crossing the street to the apartment building where she lived.

The victim was Linda Mays, 27, who had an apartment in the building at 5401 River Street.

Witnesses said she was crossing River at Birch Street during a sudden rain squall Monday afternoon when she was struck and killed by a car speeding east on River.

Because of the rain, witnesses were unable to describe the driver or see if any passengers were in the car, a late-model

sedan. Without slowing, the car continued east on River and turned north at Levee Drive, where River Street ends.

Police said paint samples on the victim's clothing will be sent to the Crime Lab to determine the death car's make and model.

Ms. Mays, a media buyer for Ranholdz, Gertz and Chisolm, had moved into the River Street apartment just last week. She is survived by . . .

Frowning, Rudy put the paper down. In his forties, he was of medium height and slight build, with a handlebar moustache and intent black eyes that gave him an oddly imposing appearance.

Just moved? Ranholdz, Gertz and Chisolm? Something about the story was jogging his memory. In his work he met so many people. Linda Mays?

Of course! The last time he'd questioned her, her divorce was still pending. She had a different surname and was living on the other side of town.

He hadn't seen her in months, but if her picture had been in the paper he'd have recognized her instantly. She'd been the taffy-haired girl, long-stemmed with wistful eyes, seemingly a little quiet and shy for the competitive business in which she was begin-

ning just then to make her mark.

The main and most outstanding thing about her, though, was that she'd been Ski Mask's third victim.

Rudy called the Detective Bureau from the lobby. Had the driver of the car that killed Linda Mays been found? He hadn't? What was being done? Is *that* all? Where in hell is Captain Wilhelm? The hospital? Coronary? Who's in temporary charge, then? Vail? Dear God, not Vail . . . No, never mind. After Vail gets in, he, Rudy, would talk to Vail himself.

A minute later Rudy was packing a bag and telling Marge something new had come up involving Ski Mask, a very long shot but something he'd have to check out. He'd take the next flight home but would be back no later than Monday—probably. Meanwhile, since this was Friday, she and the kids should start taking in the big amusement park without him. He'd phone tonight. Or, if not tonight, tomorrow at the latest, unless he got tied up.

He left Marge perched on the edge of the bed, half-asleep and bleary-eyed, a bemused expression on her pretty face, still not at all comprehending the enormity of what she had just heard. Of course, he was sure that when fully awake, Marge would no

doubt applaud his decision with wholehearted enthusiasm . . .

Acting Chief of Detectives Vail, his stout form encased in a blue suit perhaps only a decade out of fashion, eyed Rudy with the wariness of any administrator dealing with a zealot.

"I heard you wanted to talk to me," Vail said cautiously, "but I didn't think you'd come all the way back from Florida to do it."

"You should have *ordered* me back."

For emphasis, Rudy slapped Vail's desk. In Rudy's view, Vail was an administrative hack who had risen in the hierarchy by never making decisions. He also had a tendency to express himself in infuriatingly paternalistic platitudes.

"Ski Mask," Rudy continued, "is *my baby*. Captain Wilhelm gave him to me a year ago. Any time, anywhere, anything even remotely connected with Ski Mask happens, *I am to be told*. Surely you know that."

Of course Vail knew. The whole department knew of Rudy's obsession to find Ski Mask, a name the press had given to a husky young masked man who broke into the apartments of attractive women, gagged them and forced them to submit to an incredible

variety of indecencies. So far 16 such cases had been reported, and no doubt many others went unreported because of the victims' shame or embarrassment.

Rudy's concern with finding Ski Mask stemmed not only from his outrage at what was done to the women. That was bad enough. After an hour or so with Ski Mask, whose favored instrument of persuasion was a butane lighter, even the toughest of them needed sedation and hospitalization, and three were now mental cases.

No, what concerned Rudy most was his belief, concurred in by the police psychiatrist, that one day Ski Mask would kill. Then, having raised the ante to the limit by opening himself to prosecution for one murder, he would only commit more murders.

"Oh, the computer told us Linda Mays had been one of Ski Mask's early victims," Vail said smoothly, "but that happened nearly a year ago. We checked into her private life lately to be sure nobody had a big hate against her, but—you really think there could be a connection with that Ski Mask thing?"

"We'd better find out. It's stretching probability that she was the victim of *two* violent crimes by unknown offenders in less than a year." Rudy paused. "Vail—just

before she was killed Monday afternoon, where had she been?"

"Been? Well, probably out shopping. The Old Village section is near there. She'd moved in two days earlier and had taken the week off to get settled in her new apartment. Why? Is it important?"

"You bet. Like all the other victims, Linda never saw Ski Mask's face. But like many of them, she also told me that if she heard his voice again, she'd know it. Apparently Ski Mask thinks this city is so big that he'll never meet one of his victims later, in a day-to-day situation. But suppose he did, and the girl recognized his voice and ran? What would he do then?"

Vail thought that over. To Vail, as to most of the police establishment, Rudy was an impulsive loner, prone to taking unnecessary physical and administrative risks. Vail's dim view of Rudy's judgment was reinforced by his distrust of any middle-aged man who wore a moustache, sideburns and mod clothing, and had grown up in a foreign country.

Still, Rudy's unorthodox style, plus a long string of commendations for making insanely dangerous arrests, had attracted enough press and political support to give his opinions weight beyond his low rank.

"Very well," Vail said, as

though coming to a great decision. "Although there is so far no evidence to suggest anything but a routine hit-and-run, your point is well taken. By all means, leave no stone unturned. Of course, officially you are still on leave and will have to work on your own time. But I can assure you that if you *do* contribute materially to the resolution of the investigation, I will probe with Captain Wilhelm the feasibility of determining whether, under regulations, some way of compensating you can be arranged, either under Subsection B-12-9 or by the filing of a Form Q-11. I need not remind you that both also require prior Police Board approval as well as a hearing before the Patrolman's Association. Is that entirely clear?"

"Of course."

"Good. I suggest you begin by reading our file on the accident. Then you may wish to go to the Criminal Courts Building. Harper and Coen are handling the investigation into Linda Mays' death. This is their day off, but they are testifying in a trial. Tell them whatever they *do* is their own decision, but if they want to help you check out this Ski Mask angle on their own time and on the same terms I have outlined for you, I won't object. On the contrary, I would encourage it."

It was a typical Vail performance. He'd done nothing, but announced it in such a complicated way that he seemed to be doing a lot.

Vail added reassuringly: "And Rudy—if this theory of yours doesn't pan out, don't let it get you down. One day you'll see the light at the end of your tunnel . . ."

Rudy found Harper and Coen on a coffee break in a diner near the Criminal Courts Building. They were a Mutt-and-Jeff team, Harper the short, pugnacious-looking one and Coen the heavy-eyed string bean.

Both men were more than a decade younger than Rudy, who had never worked with either before; but as one of the department's genuine oddballs, they knew Rudy on sight. Poker-faced, they listened as he explained his theory.

"No," Harper said carefully when Rudy was through, "we haven't ruled Ski Mask out entirely. Let's just say he's a ten-thousand-to-one shot. Anyhow, after a foul-up at the lab, we finally got word on the paint. The car was a green 1970 Ford. Now we'll notify the media and cover the garages and repair outlets. We'll also get a list of all 1970 Ford

owners in the state and start checking them out."

"That," Rudy mused, "may take too long. Wasn't there anything to suggest where she'd been Monday afternoon? A package near her body? Maybe a small purchase in her purse?"

"We didn't find a purse," Coen said. "If she had one, someone picked it up and ran. There wouldn't have been any money in it, though. The Mays girl kept her currency in a wallet pinned inside a coat pocket, the way a lot of girls do so they won't lose much if their purse is snatched."

"We didn't find anything else either," Harper added. "But we didn't see any reason to check on her whereabouts."

"Look," Rudy said, "I'm going to ask a big favor. I want you to drop everything and help me try to learn what Linda went out to do Monday afternoon and who she saw. One way or another, that would tell us if Ski Mask drove that car."

Harper was dubious. "It could be a big order. The janitor said she was gone only about half an hour. But she was new to the neighborhood, and the accident was five days ago. What store clerk would remember her now? And there are nearly a hundred stores in Old Village, the nearest

big shopping area. Given the long odds on Ski Mask driving anyhow, I don't think it'd be the most efficient use of our time."

"Wouldn't it?" Warming to his subject, Rudy rubbed his palms together. "As the department's expert on Ski Mask, I think those odds are a lot shorter than your ten-thousand-to-one. To begin with, none of his victims lived anywhere near Old Village. The nearest lived more than three miles away. It stands to reason he'd pick his victims far from his own turf, and Old Village is one of the few areas where he *hasn't* struck."

"Okay," Harper replied, "so make it a thousand to one."

"We know he gets around in a car. Two of his victims managed to free themselves fast enough to look out a window and see him get into what they thought was a late-model sedan, the same general type of car your witnesses say killed Linda Mays."

"Five hundred to one, then."

"Now, combine what I've told you with what's in your file on the accident, which I just read. You found two witnesses who, actually saw the girl hit—a woman pedestrian and a man looking out his apartment window. Both agreed the driver made no attempt to avoid striking Linda or

even to slow down. This was confirmed by your examination of the scene. There were no skid marks."

"Two-fifty to one," Coen said. "But visibility was bad and the driver could have been blind-high on drugs or liquor."

"Uh-huh. Then there's your man's statement that just before the accident, he saw Linda running eastbound on River. *Running*. Was it just to get out of the rain? It had been raining for more than a minute. If she wanted to stay dry, she could have waited in a doorway until the downpour was over. Add to that the fact that the car was also going east on River, and you see where she could have been trying to get away and the car was following."

Annoyed, Harper drummed his fingers on the table. "Okay," he conceded, "so make it a hundred to one. But if Ski Mask was driving, we'll probably find him when we get the list of Ford owners. We'll start with addresses near that intersection. If Ski Mask lives or works anywhere near there and owned or had the use of a green 1970 Ford, there'll be signs of repairs on the right front fender and we'll have him cold."

"Exactly! That's why we don't have time to do it your way. Ski Mask reads the papers. If he was driving, he knows you found paint

samples and would soon have the car's make and model. He also knows that while we don't know his name, we already know a lot about him."

"What do you mean?"

"Each time he rapes another girl and I question her afterwards, I can give the press a more accurate profile of him. For starters, he's a Caucasian, probably in his twenties, about six feet tall. He weighs about two hundred and is heavily muscled, like an athlete. He has a mild southern accent. Nearly all of his attacks come after midnight, so I think he works a night shift that ends at twelve. In addition—but you get the idea. If he was driving and that car will be on your list of Fords, he'd be a damn fool to wait for us to match him with Ski Mask's profile. No, he'd clean up his affairs as fast as he could and skip town to assume a new identity somewhere else—if he hasn't done so already."

Harper and Coen exchanged glances.

"All right," Harper said, "we'll give it a try. We'll be through testifying by noon. We'll tell the media about the Ford, grab lunch and then meet you out there."

River Street at its intersection with Birch was a wide, four-lane thoroughfare, ideal for a speeding

car. It became a busy arterial street farther west, but here, near its terminus at the river, traffic was light.

Gathered in front of the building in which Linda Mays had lived, and looking in the direction from which she and the speeding car had come, the three detectives viewed a long stretch consisting mostly of other apartment buildings. The nearest commercial properties were a laundromat, a tiny delicatessen, and a pizza parlor a long block west at the next cross street, Essex.

"She could have been in one of those places at the corner," Coen said. "If not, the nearest stores are in Old Village. It begins on Essex, two blocks to the right."

"I'll try her building," Rudy said. "Maybe she told one of her new neighbors where she was going. You hit the places on the corner. If you don't score, you might as well go on up Essex to Old Village and I'll join you there."

"Old Village," Harper reminded him, "is pretty big. Why not concentrate on certain *types* of places? Like, considering the hour she went out, maybe she wanted to bring home something to eat or drink."

"Good. But let's hit the consumption-on-premises places too. If she walked into a restaurant

and the waiter greeted her in Ski Mask's voice, she wouldn't have stuck around for a meal."

It was frustrating work. In the next four hours, they found only two people who remembered seeing Linda Mays.

One was a woman who lived in Linda's building. She'd walked into the vestibule as Linda had been leaving.

"She was such a pretty thing," the woman recalled. "I told her she should go back for a raincoat, the sky looked so funny. She smiled and said thanks, she wouldn't be gone long. It couldn't have been much more than twenty minutes later when I heard the commotion, looked out and there she was, lying dead in the street."

"Was she carrying anything?" Rudy asked. "Clothes, perhaps, for the laundromat?"

"No."

"She have a purse?"

"I think so. Yes. Before she went out, she opened it for a cigarette."

The other witness, the owner of the laundromat at River and Essex, had seen Linda run by just before she'd been struck down. Linda had turned into River from Essex, confirming the theory that she'd come from someplace in the direction of Old Village.

At one time the city's antique row, Old Village had developed into a tourist attraction, its fake building fronts designed in Victorian style; but as rents rose, many of its original antique shops had moved. Mostly, they were replaced by bars, restaurants and high-style specialty shops.

By five, the three detectives had canvassed about half the places in Old Village with no luck. They compared notes over steins of beer in a busy outdoor cafe fronting on Essex.

"Some restaurants don't even open until five," Harper said moodily. "But the more I think about what we're doing, the crazier I think it is. She could have been looking for *any* kind of goods or services. For that matter, all we know is *she came from this direction*. She might not have gone to Old Village at all."

"That's right," Coen said. "Old Village is great for antique chamber pots or twenty-buck bikinis, but it doesn't have the usual business establishments. No drugstore, not even a food store, unless you count the health food joints and candy stores."

Rudy had to agree. "True." He looked up Essex toward its intersection with a broad boulevard called Mainline Drive, a block beyond Old Village. "She could have

gone to one of those places on Essex near Mainline. The jeweler. The furniture store. The instant printer, the fabric shop or the hardware store . . ."

"Hell," Harper put in sourly, "she could have crossed Mainline to those places on the other side. You've got the whole works over there. Supermarket, big drugstore, variety store, medical center, even a stockbroker's office. And just west on Mainline is a commercial district with two big department stores and a jillion other stores and offices."

Coen said something about how he and his wife were supposed to go bowling that night. Harper mumbled an inaudible reply. Clearly, morale was sagging.

"*Exactly* what time was it," Rudy asked, "when the car hit her?"

"As best we can place it," Coen said, "at 5:32 p.m."

Rudy glanced at his watch. "It's 5:12 now. What say we finish our beers, go back to River and Birch and stake out that intersection, just to see who normally passes by at about 5:32 on weekdays? Some important witness, maybe, who didn't want to get involved."

"Real clever," Harper said, "how you timed that."

Rudy stationed himself at the

southeast corner, the one toward which Linda had been running when struck down. Harper and Coen took the corners on the other side of River.

Even though it was the Friday rush hour, foot traffic was fairly slow. Between 5:25 p.m. and 5:45, the three detectives talked to several dozen people but learned nothing.

What now? Rudy had hoped the stakeout would produce at least a crumb of new information. That should have been enough to inspire Harper and Coen to stick for the rest of the night. He needed them for a last foray through Old Village and the places up on Mainline Drive. With two helpers, he could triple the ground he could cover alone, but without something new to fan their interest he'd probably lose them.

From across River, Harper and Coen began throwing him impatient glances. Rudy was about to give up the vigil, staking all on a final, pathetic plea to their professional integrity, when behind him a shabbily dressed little old lady walked out of an apartment hotel and turned toward him.

She carried a shopping bag and had a babushka over her head. Engrossed in her own thoughts, she wasn't even aware of Rudy

until she was almost at the intersection.

"Madam?"

Startled, she looked up.

"I'm a police officer," he went on politely, showing his star. "We're trying to learn more about the accident that occurred here Monday."

She looked away. "I don't know nothing."

Her voice wavered and she began to tremble. What was wrong with her? Under her coat, he caught a flash of white. A uniform?

"You work near here?" Rudy asked.

"The Riverfront Arms. Afternoons, I clean the rooms."

Her tremor increased.

"Always leave your job about this time?"

"Yes, but I didn't see nothing. Honest. Now let me go . . ."

She began edging around him. His gaze focused on her purse. It was black calfskin, the real thing, not cheap plastic, and it had an ornate gold clasp. Altogether far too expensive a purse for its owner . . .

Bingo!

"What a lovely purse," he said smoothly, motioning behind his back for Harper and Coen to get the hell over there. "May I examine it?" He turned it over. Yes, it

had been Linda's. On the side held against the old lady's body was the scuff mark made when the purse had hit the pavement.

For a moment the old woman stood as though paralyzed. Then she wailed, put her head in her hands and yelled: "I didn't mean it! I don't know what got into me! I shouldn't have done it, stealing from the dead! But I'm on Social Security! The hotel only pays a lousy dollar an hour! And I never had such a nice purse before . . ."

They hustled her into the back of Rudy's car and drove to a wharf, where they could question her without attracting passersby.

When she had calmed down some, Rudy said: "Now, *believe* me, we're *not* going to arrest you. What you did could happen to anyone. It's human nature, and we don't put nice old ladies like you in jail for little things like that. All we want is the truth. Tell us, did you see the accident?"

"No. I heard it. When I looked, it was over."

"Then maybe you saw the driver. Or something special about the car."

"Nothing."

"All right. About the purse. You picked it up—"

"I swear, there were only a few coins in it. Not even a dollar bill."

"We know," he told her reas-

suringly. "Her money was in a pocket. But was there anything in the purse to show where she'd been earlier that afternoon? A little bag from a store? A receipt? A shopping list?"

"No. Just the usual junk. Combs, compacts—well, there was a piece of paper. She'd written numbers on it."

"Do you remember the numbers?"

"Of course not."

"What'd you do with the paper?"

"Threw it out in the trash . . ."

Harper and Coen got their car and then they all drove to the building where the old lady lived. The trash can had been emptied, but the janitor led them to a bin in the basement.

In shirt sleeves, the detectives rummaged through a huge pile of debris. It was nearly an hour before Coen found the paper, showed it to the old lady for verification and then gave it to Rudy.

"What do you think?" Coen wondered. "A code?"

Rudy studied the numbers. They'd spent a lot of precious time trying to find this piece of paper. Had it all been wasted?

"Personally," Coen went on, "I'm beginning to think we're on the wrong track. As Captain Vail would say—"

"Vail? I'll be damned!" Rudy exclaimed. "I think I know what Linda went out to do Monday afternoon. Come on . . ."

He grabbed his coat and ran upstairs to his car, with Harper and Coen after him. They tailgated him to River and followed as he turned right on Essex and drove beyond Old Village. Just before he reached Mainline, he double-parked in front of the hardware store.

They all went inside, where a balding, middle-aged man lounged beside a cash register at the end of a long, narrow aisle.

Rudy identified himself and asked: "Could you tell me who was working here Monday afternoon, a little after five?"

"Sure. It was Wally."

"He here alone?"

"Yeah. I've got other business interests. Afternoons, I need someone to mind the store for me."

"What time would he have closed up?"

"Six o'clock. Friday's my only late night."

"Could he have closed a little early Monday without your knowing?"

"I guess so, but—"

"What kind of car does he drive?"

"Frankly," the man said, "I'm not sure. It's some kind of sedan.

There's a half-hour zone in front of the store, so he always parks around the corner. Why? He done something wrong?"

"We just want to talk to him."

"There must be a mistake. He's a nice kid. Real industrious. After he finishes here, he works until midnight at a filling station. Real clean-cut type, too. Doesn't drink, doesn't smoke. Spends his spare time lifting weights at the Y. He was ideal for this job because his family owned a hardware store back in Virginia."

"Where could we find Wally?"

"Hard to say. But he'll drop in here sometime this evening for his final paycheck. Losing him's a real blow. Said he's taking off for the West Coast. He cleared the last of his stuff out of his apartment this afternoon, and—" His eyes strayed to the door. Then he fell silent and just nodded.

The detectives turned.

A husky young man in his late twenties, about six feet tall and weighing about two hundred pounds, had just walked in. When he saw the men gathered at the end of the aisle, he stopped.

For an instant, the startled detectives stared at him and he stared at them—but in that instant, Wally knew.

With a powerful sweep of his arms, he toppled a huge stack of

paint cans into the narrow aisle between himself and the detectives, then turned and ran.

Cursing as they stumbled through the river of paint cans, the detectives took out after him.

It was a wild chase. The weight lifter headed first into the crowded streets of Old Village, where he sent some pedestrians sprawling. Then he raced up toward Mainline and crossed the big boulevard just as the light changed. The detectives couldn't cut through the heavy traffic until the light changed again.

However, no weight lifter anywhere could outrun a highly motivated onetime sprinter on the Hungarian Olympic team, even though the sprinter was now nearly double the weight lifter's age. A few yards from a green 1970 Ford parked in an alley behind Mainline, Rudy brought Wally down with a flying tackle. Getting to his knees, Wally sent Rudy sprawling with a mighty shove, but then Harper and Coen were on him. In another moment it was over . . .

With Wally safely on his way

downtown, the three detectives went back to their cars.

"Poor Linda," Rudy said. "Wally had assaulted so many women that I'm sure he didn't recognize her when she first walked into that store. But when he spoke and she fled, he knew who she was. He closed the store, got his car and went after her."

"But what," Coen wondered, "led you to the hardware store?"

"It was the logical place to start. Here. Look at Linda's list of numbers." Rudy unfolded it. "As the good Captain Vail would say, the light at the end of our tunnel. Ignore the right-hand column for a moment. When you do that, you get this sequence: 25, 40, 60, 75 and 100. And what does *that* suggest?"

Harper smiled. "Light bulbs. The most common wattages."

"Exactly. Linda went out to buy light bulbs for her new apartment. She wanted two 25-watters, two 40-watters and so on. She'd been warned it might rain, so she headed for the nearest place that sold them. And the nearest place was that hardware store."



Those who are imbued with a latent sensitivity to beauty may be expected to pursue it—even unto infinity.



Seven Story Dream

There it was: the old oaks, and the new firs and hedges, the ragged Bermuda on the vacant lot in the new sun, the thin rye grass

Gilford Gadberry had a contempt for dawns badly done. He knew how blatant and stylized the outdoor world can be in its pristine moments: the contrived shagginess of grass, the stupidity of trees, the falsity of flowers, the oafishness of the birds and their inept melody. These scratched the smooth surface of his soul. "Bad work, very bad work," Gadberry would opine, for he was an artist.

Yet there were times when these sorry units arranged themselves with striking effect. On this very early dawn they made an almost perfect harmony, and Gadberry gracefully acknowledged it.



by
R.A.
Lafferty

that held to the shade of the building, the corpse on the lawn, the row of hollyhocks and the lone aster in the middle of them, the drooping mimosa full of driving birds, the even rank of garbage cans standing chalky in the aluminum dawn, and that damned dew over everything.

In spite of the elements that went into the composition the effect was near perfect—and yet there was one clashing entity in that aubade scene. Gadberry reviewed it in his mind, for the artist is satisfied with nothing but perfection.

The firs, the hedges, the corpse, the mimosa, the garbage cans, the lawn, the hollyhocks with their lone aster—something was in that peaceful morning scene that simply did not belong there.

Gadberry strode over and savagely struck down the aster with its white flower. The harmony of the scene was now perfect. He walked away, his artist's soul satisfied.

On his way to find an early eating place, he met a policeman named Embree and told him that Minnie Jo Merry was lying dead on that little lawn behind the apartment where she lived, and perhaps it should be looked into.

Captains Keil and Gold were

there quickly and in charge. Minnie Jo was bruised about the throat and dried blood framed her mouth, but her death may have been caused by a violent concussion. Keil and Gold left her to Dr. Sanderson and their men. There was no crowd. This was very early on a Saturday morning, the apartment was on a quiet street, and the small rear lawn was secluded.

Orders were given for all the residents of the apartment building to remain in the building, and Captain Keil sent for Gilford Gadberry, the only one who had left. Gadberry told the patrolman who came for him that he would come as soon as he had finished his breakfast, and not a moment before. He finished it leisurely, drinking coffee and sketching while the policeman fumed. He was sketching a fuming policeman.

"Mrs. Raffel," Captain Keil said, "you are the owner and operator of this apartment. I assume that you know something of your renters. Who lives here?"

"Minnie Jo lived here, and how will I get her rent now? She used to say, 'You worry too much about my rent. I'm not much further back than some of the others. You should know that I'm good

for it. As long as I live I will always be good for what I owe.' But now who will be good for what she owes?"

"Your problem, Mrs. Raffel. Who else lived—lives here?"

"Dillahunty, Gadberry, Handle, Izzard, Lamprey, Nazworthy, all in a permanent or temporary state of singleness."

"Six living and one dead tenant. Is that all?"

"It's a small place, but I do have two other empty units—three it will be now. I doubt if this will help me rent them."

"It may not make a difference. The girl was murdered in her own room, we believe, and she seems to have made no outcry. She was either taken very suddenly, or she knew the intruder well."

"Not necessarily, Captain. Minnie Jo was a very open person. If Jack the Ripper himself had come in, red from his trade, she'd have said, 'Hi, honey, sit down and talk to me.' But it was probably someone she knew."

"What are your feelings on hearing of the death of Miss Merry?"

"Satisfaction—though I'll miss her—and relief and thankfulness that it has finally turned out all right."

"Turned out all right? Do you call it turning out all right that

she was murdered?" he asked her.

"Oh yes. There were many worse things that could have happened to her. How lucky that Minnie Jo was killed before they happened!"

"You will have to explain that. Did you hate her?"

"No, I loved her—and I will explain. Minnie Jo was quite a good girl, but she was on the edge of becoming quite a bad girl. I have seen it happen to so many of the young ones who are loose in the world. Every time I know one, and notice her nearing the change, I pray that something will intervene and prevent it. This is the first time my prayers have been answered, and I'm thankful."

"Could you yourself have done anything to bring about this, ah, intervention, this preventative death?"

"I have just told you: I prayed. I didn't know it would be death, but that's as good a solution as any."

Then they questioned her a little about other things.

Gadberry, now back from his breakfast, was questioned by Captain Gold.

"Gadberry, do you often get up so early?"

"Never. But I often stay up this late. I work at night and sleep in the daytime."

"Why?" Captain Gold inquired.

"It was originally a pose. Then I became used to it."

"You seemed extraordinarily cool on discovering Miss Merry dead. You did not make an outcry, or hurry to report it."

"I reported it to the first person I met, a policeman. This seemed the logical person, and the logical thing to do."

"Almost too logical. What was your opinion of Miss Merry?"

"Alive, or dead? The girl was somehow completed in death. It improves many people. So often we see only the outside of people, but to look at her smeared with her own blood gives an added dimension, a more total view."

"Ah, what was your opinion of her alive?"

"Her hands and ankles were rather good; between, she was conventional. She hadn't eyes, no eyes at all. It isn't usual for a girl her age to have eyes. A child will sometimes have eyes, a woman after thirty may have them again, or a man after forty. I never saw her hair, which is to say that it was doctored. I sketched her ears sometimes, and her throat. I was not satisfied with either of them, but then it isn't twice a year that I come on either that is really good. Are you interested in these things?"

"We are somewhat interested in the throat of this girl, and other matters. Since you work at night, you must have been awake. Did you hear any outcry or evidence of a struggle?"

"No. I could be throttled myself and not notice it. When I work I am taken by the Holy Spirit of art. I am probably unable to help you on the more mundane details you are seeking."

"What is your opinion of the tenant George Handle? It is reported that you sponge on him considerably."

"The artist is worthy of his hire. George is an oaf, a fool; but do not believe that a fool and his money are easily parted. I have to work for every dollar I twist out of him. George has caught the sickness of self-improvement. He learns at night. He has one of those sets with an earphone for under the pillow. He's put quite a bit of money into the recordings, money much better given to me. He has his own recorder, reads into it things he wishes to learn, then has them played back while he sleeps. Whatever he learns while asleep, he is still a fool when awake."

"You haven't any use for fools?"

"But I have! I often make use of fools."

They questioned him a little more, then went on to Izzard.

"Mr. Izzard, what were your relations with Miss Merry?" Keil asked.

"Avuncular—of the Dutch-uncle sort. Low Dutch, really, but she hadn't come to realize that yet. I lavished gifts on her, and she was friendly. I believe I would ultimately have been successful. There was a change beginning in her."

"Yes. Others have noticed the change. Were these expensive gifts?"

"Not to me. The price tags don't matter. I run the *A to Izzard Variety Store*. She was without discernment, and I have access to bargains."

"You wouldn't have been rebuffed by her, and been angry enough to do her in?"

"I was rebuffed by her constantly, but she did it in a graceful way—never so as to stop the flow of gifts. My timetable for her was a long one and I am sorry to see it interrupted. No, I never laid a hand on her, except sometimes in attempted affection."

They questioned him a little about the others, a little more about himself, and left him.

Next, they questioned Nazworthy, a large, sullen-appearing man. He said that any of them

might have done it: Handle, Izzard, Lamprey, Gadberry, Dillahunty. "They are a bad bunch. All of them always looking at the young girl. Any of them do it. Yes, I am awake when it happen. I hear the shots ring out. I say, 'Oh somebody have killed that pretty Miss Merry.' Whichever one you decide on, I will positively identify him as the killer."

"You are sure that you heard shots? She was not shot."

"It was the knife I hear, then. I hear it go in loud. I say, 'Somebody have killed that pretty Miss Merry.'"

"She was not knifed."

"How was it, then? What is the loud noise I heard? How did he kill her?"

"We believe that she was strangled, and then thrown or pushed from her window."

"My very thought. That is what I heard. The strangle noises and the thrown-out-of-the-window noises. I hear everything. I know everything. I will give testimony."

There was the look of arrogant laughter behind the hard eyes of Nazworthy. He was talking nonsense, either seriously or speciously. They would get nothing out of him.

Mr. Dillahunty told Keil and Gold, "My opinion of the lodgers I cannot give as I would like,

being opposed to profanity. You may have to discount my opinion of them, however. I always have a low opinion of those with whom I live; but when I have moved on to other lodgings I remember them with affection. No, I heard nothing in the night. I hear little without my aid, and I do not sleep with it. My acquaintance with the aforesaid Minnie Jo was sketchy. She would smile, and I would smile, but I am thrice her age and a crippled man. Having second sight, I knew that this would happen . . . No, I haven't second sight to that extent; I don't know who did it. You are sure it was one of the lodgers?"

"No. But she was apparently in her own room and in bed when accosted. She seems to have been strangled there and thrown out her own window. It was quite late, after the dew, and no feet left the building after the dew and before her discovery—except those of Gadberry, who reported her. At the moment we have no leads to anyone except those who lived in this building. Tell us, what about Mrs. Raffel?"

"A religious fanatic but a good woman. It is believed by the others that I pay the regular rates here, but that is not so. I live here partly on the charity of Mrs. Raffel."

"And Gadberry, the artist?"

"In one word, selfish."

"George Handle? He has been called a fool."

"Only a half-fool. But easily led."

"Izzard?"

"A merchant. He never spent a penny without a return."

"Nazworthy? Is he as crazy as he sounds?"

"No, he isn't. He's a sardonic kidder, with a dislike for all authority. I can imagine a little the line he would take with the police. The cat, the only other animal that indulges in straight-faced sardonic humor, betrays itself by a flick of the tail. Nazworthy has the same motion, but without the tail."

"Could he kill?"

"I doubt he could kill Minnie Jo Merry. He hates only pretentious people, and she wasn't. He could kill a policeman—or *her* killer. If another is killed, then you will know."

"We'll watch for that. Lamprey?"

"Nothing there. A nothing man. Did you notice the girl well? A beautiful thing and finely made, but there was plenty of strength to her. That nothing man couldn't have strangled her. She'd have strangled him and thrown him out the window. You'll have to look

to one of the others, not to him."

Dillahunty was right. Lamprey was a nothing man, and he was terrified of the police. "I didn't kill her. I didn't know her. I didn't know anybody. I wash dishes at Webbers. I don't know nobody. I'm in my room all night."

"Well, did you hear noises in the night?"

"Noises I always hear, and some of them never happen. I'm a nervous man, but I kill nobody, I hurt nobody. It is more I am always afraid someone would kill me."

Lamprey was a small man with small hands, a frightened man on the edge of incompetency. They questioned him a little more and left him.

"What do we have?" Captain Keil asked. "A heavy old woman who is a religious fanatic and also a good woman, and is glad that the girl was killed before something bad happened to her. An artist who is selfish. A sardonic kidder who is not as stupid as he acts. A half-fool who is easily led. A nothing man. A merchant who does not spend without a return. An old Irishman who is thrice her age, but can we be sure that all the sap is dead in him? Seven, and one of them is crazy, but which? Let's go talk to the half-fool."

"Handle," Captain Gold said, "did you sleep well last night?"

"No. I have never slept well any night of my life. I dream a lot and worry a lot. I'm totally alive when I sleep."

"Was it because of your restlessness at night that you decided to try the learn-while-you-sleep systems?"

"Yes. I want to know things, so I decided to tap my nocturnal energy, as the advertisement said."

"What is your relationship with Gilford Cadberry?"

"Oh, he takes me for quite a bit, but he knows all the things I want to know. He can talk about music and funny paintings and the new dirty novels and psychology and things like that. Sometimes I turn him on when he talks, and play him back at night. Sometimes when I lend him money, he'll make recordings for me—Gaelic furniture design, and things like that. He arranges the things I'll hear at night so I'll get a well-rounded liberal education."

"I see. Did you hear any noises last night?"

"I hear noises every night, though I sleep with the earphones on, and all outside noise is supposed to be cut out. It must be that I dream the noises."

"Did you dream last night? Did you dream anything about a murder

or a dead person?" Gold asked.

"Yes. About seven dreams like that."

"Tell us one of them."

"Which one?"

"Hell, I don't know. We're shooting blind. Tell us one."

"Well, this one, it's kind of silly. This was a long time ago, or anyhow it took place in a cabin and by candlelight. We sat wake over a corpse. We cracked and ate walnuts, but someone objected when we threw the shells in with the corpse, though that was a good place to throw them. Then someone else—"

"Oh Judas!" said Captain Keil.

"I believe that is enough of that one," Captain Gold said. "Were all of the seven dreams like that?"

"All of them about murder or corpses, yes. All of them kind of silly."

"Seven story dreams we have yet," Keil said. "We're getting nowhere."

"Then we'll get somewhere," Gold said. "Handle, have you any idea who killed Minnie Jo Merry?"

"I killed Minnie Jo Merry. I killed Minnie Jo Merry."

"What?"

"I killed Minnie Jo Merry. I killed Minnie—"

"You are talking for the record?"

"Strangled her and threw her out the window. I killed Minnie Jo Merry. I killed—"

So they took him downtown, but first they gave orders for a new lock to be put on George Handle's door and they left a guard at the apartment building.

Naturally they didn't leave it at that. The confession of the half-fool was complete enough. There were odd elements in it, but he was an odd man. He said that he had killed the girl in a dream; that he had risen and gone to her room and strangled her and thrown her out of the open window because he was jealous. Then he had gone back to his bed, to other dreams.

Yet there were points about that murder that hadn't been given out, that only the killer could have known; George Handle knew them . . .

Nevertheless, the two captains continued to check during that morning. They found that Minnie Jo was an inefficient but promising worker for a stationery company. Her particular girlfriend believed that Minnie Jo ran around only with the men where she lived. They checked the places she frequented, and she had been seen with all the men.

She had been out with Cad-

berry and with Handle often, and with Izzard nearly as often. She had even been seen dining with the sardonic Nazworthy at a sardonic place run by two Bulgarian brothers. She often went to Webbers, and sometimes drank coffee in the kitchen with the dishwasher Lamprey. It was believed by them at Webbers, though, that this was mere kindness on her part.

Minnie Jo had even been seen drinking Irish coffee with Dillahunty in the after-midnight hours at Maddigan's. Nor was she the only girl a third his age that he brought in. The sap was not all dead in him yet.

They found that Dillahunty was well liked, Handle was liked, and even poor Lamprey was liked.

Izzard was not liked, Gadberry was not liked, Nazworthy was not liked.

"We can tell nothing by that," Keil said. "Handle has confessed, and it makes no difference that the people who know him like him. There is nothing to tie onto the others, even if Gadberry is selfish, Izzard is demanding, and Nazworthy is sardonic. We still have the fact that Handle has confessed."

"Yes. Repetitiously. But to be sure, let's go hear him again."

Again, George Handle told them, "I killed Minnie Jo Merry.

Strangled her and threw her out the window. I killed Minnie Jo—"

"He sounds like—"

"Yes, doesn't he?" Keil interrupted Gold. "Let's go look for it."

"Has anybody been trying to get into Handle's room?" they asked the guard at the apartment.

"Gadberry has. Says Handle owes him money. Says he was to go in and get it. Says he wears Handle's shirts, and this locking out puts him to grave inconvenience. Handle never locked his door, according to him. Gadberry was disappointed to find the new lock on it; he seems pretty nervous now."

They found Gadberry.

"Come on with us. We'll go to his room and get it."

"What? Get what?"

"What you were trying to get. What is making you nervous that you couldn't get? It will be here, somewhere with the bunch of them. Quite a few of them here, aren't there, Gadberry?"

They were in Handle's room now.

"I don't know what you mean," Gadberry protested.

"The tapes, the wires, the records. How long would it take to play them all?"

"I don't know."

"You know pretty well. It would take about forty hours or more, wouldn't it? Will you find it for us, or must we play them all? And you will listen."

"I won't listen to forty hours of that drivel. I'll find it for you. I'd have said that nothing could break me down, but that surely could."

"Why did you kill the girl, Gadberry?"

"Jealousy, frustration, curiosity . . ."

"I can understand the jealousy. She was an attractive girl. What was the frustration?"

"She was almost perfect, but not quite, and it is that which is just short of a masterpiece that infuriates. It is so near—yet it misses. I'm always in anger to destroy a near-masterpiece."

"So you destroyed her. And the third element was your curiosity, like when you said 'The girl was somehow completed in death.' You had to see how she would look dead."

"Yes. That knowledge was necessary to my work."

Gadberry had located the tape for them, and Captain Kēil was threading it into the machine.

"I suspect that you weren't accurate in your appraisal to us of

Miss Merry, Gadberry. You said that she hadn't eyes, and other things."

"I lied. She had eyes, and she wasn't conventional. She was near perfect, gentlemen. So near."

"And in preparation for the murder it was only necessary for you to condition the easily-led George Handle to a confession?"

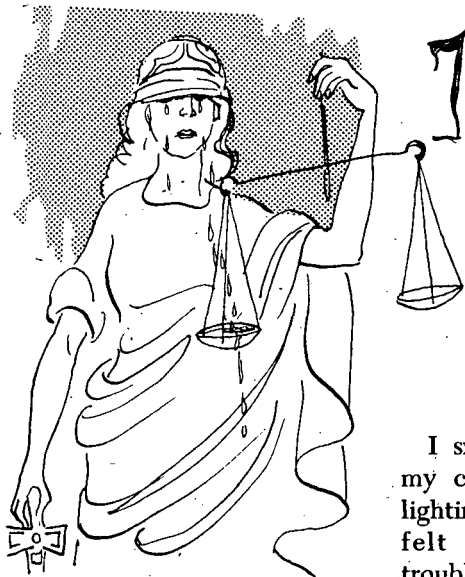
"Astute of me, was it not, Captains?"

The machine played now in the compelling voice of Gilford Gadberry, as it had night after night played to George Handle, in his sleep, till he had learned to answer on cue; and the cue, of course, was the question: "Who killed Minnie Jo Merry?"

"Pretty uninspired," Gadberry had to admit, "but I had to assume uninspired questioners, to whom the cliché would come naturally."

The machine went on to recount certain abominations that only the killer knew he would commit, but the voice of that most polished madman returned again and again to the command: "Say, 'I killed Minnie Jo Merry. I killed Minnie Jo Merry. Strangled her and threw her out the window. I killed—'"

Even by the most rigid code, punishment does not always come easily.



The Scales of Justice

I sighed a little and looked at my cigarettes and tried to resist lighting one of them. My chest felt tight and hot. Bronchial trouble, created and nurtured by the consumption of too many cigarettes—or maybe it was the other thing, the dark thing you don't like to think about. No. Bronchial trouble, that's all it was. What was the point in wasting money on a doctor to confirm it? Bronchial trouble. Sure.

I lit one of the cigarettes and blew smoke at the beam of sunlight and thought about the sixty-dollar check I had written and mailed the night before, in pay-

Warm April morning: clear and pale-blue sky, a gentle breeze coming in off the bay, sunshine putting a liquid gold veneer on one corner of my desk; on the other corner, a letter from the building's owner informing me that he had found it necessary to raise my office rent again—the second time in three months—effective immediately. It was, so far, one of those days that could go either way.

ment for thirty detective pulp magazines. They were rare items from the 1930's—*Black Mask*, *Double Detective* and *Ace G-Man*—and my collection was nearing the six thousand mark. I had felt that I could not pass them up at what was really a very reasonable price. Now I wished I had not been quite so hasty, because when I paid the new rent there would not be much left in my bank account even for groceries.

I stood up and went over to my single file cabinet. On its top I keep a small hot plate, and I had coffee heating there; it had finally come to a boil. I poured a cup and started back to the desk with it, when there was a careful knock on the door. It opened as I turned, and I was looking at a large and handsome woman in her early forties, a few years younger than myself; very poised and very self-assured, like a female stockholder entering a board room. She was also carefully coiffed, carefully made up, carefully dressed: black hair, dark eyes under long curling lashes, white gloves, white pants suit, teardrop earrings that

had the coldly bright glitter of genuine diamonds.

She paused for a moment after closing the door, looking the place over, and her wide mouth registered faint disapproval; it was not the sort of office she was used to seeing, obviously, although I keep it neat and clean and functional. She eyed me without smiling, and I seemed to make a better impression than the surroundings; the disapproval faded and she came across to the desk.

Offering me one of her gloved hands, she said that she was Mrs. Carole Nichols and that I had been recommended to her as a competent operative by her family lawyer, one David Robbins. I did not know any attorney named Robbins, but I had a fairly good name in San Francisco, and law offices and such periodically sent me clients of one kind or another.

I said, "Won't you sit down, Mrs. Nichols?"

"Thank you." Her voice was cultured, with careful enunciation, and I had the feeling that everything she did would be done with care. She sat in one of the two modern chairs in front of the desk, still self-assured but completely relaxed now.

"Would you like some coffee?" I asked.

"I don't believe so, thank you."

by Bill
Pronzini

I sat down with my cup. "How can I help you, Mrs. Nichols?"

"I've come about my brother, Martin Talbot," she said. "He has had a most unfortunate experience, you see."

"Oh?"

"Yes. He was driving back from a San Diego business trip two nights ago—a very long drive, as you know—and he fell asleep at the wheel of his car just outside San Bruno. It veered across the highway and struck another vehicle almost head-on. Miraculously, Martin was uninjured, but two of the people in the other car, a woman and her young daughter, were killed."

A most unfortunate experience, she'd said. That was some way of putting it. I drank a little of my coffee and did not say anything, waiting politely.

She went on, "The driver of the second car, a man named Victor Beckman, also escaped serious injury; he is the husband and father of the victims. Later, in the hospital, he was understandably hysterical with grief; what is not understandable or to be condoned, however, is that privately he threatened Martin's life. An eye for an eye, and all that nonsense."

I said, "Do the police know about this threat?"

"Yes, I called them as soon as

Martin told me about the threat."

"And?"

"They seem to feel it has no foundation. They spoke to Beckman, and he told them he could not remember making any such threat. He claims not to hold Martin responsible in any personal or vengeful way for what happened."

"That's entirely probable," I said. "People do and say things in shock and grief that they're unable to recall when they become rational again."

"Perhaps. But we cannot be certain that Beckman actually has no recollection of the threat, or that he doesn't intend to follow through with it."

"What does your brother think?"

"That Beckman is perfectly justified if he chooses to seek retribution."

"I'm not sure I understand that."

"You would have to know my brother quite well to understand him at all," she said. "He's a strange man."

"In what way?"

"In many ways. My father was a banker, quite well-to-do, and when he passed on he left Martin and me a substantial amount of money, as well as the family home in Sea Cliff. Martin, however,

refused to live in the house or to accept his share of Father's estate. He said from the beginning that the money was not his, and that he felt he had no right to it because he had not earned it personally. He worked his way through college, received a degree in electrical engineering, and proceeded to make his own way in life. He has been moderately successful, I will admit that, and owns his own home."

She paused, and I said, "Yes?" to let her know I was listening attentively.

"Martin is also the most moral man I have ever known. He lives by the strictest code of behavior imaginable; what is right is right, and what is wrong is wrong, and there are absolutely no gray areas or extenuating circumstances. I believe that is why he never married, why he is still a bachelor at the age of forty-four; he simply never found a woman who measured up to his standards."

"He's ridden with guilt over the accident, then."

"That is an understatement. I know for a fact that he has not slept since it happened, and I don't believe he has eaten either. He considers himself a murderer, to put it bluntly; his negligence—that is his word, not mine—caused the death of two human beings.

He cannot live with that. He wants to be punished for it and has expressed the wish that he stand trial for manslaughter—although Mr. Robbins tells me the prospect of it is hardly likely. If Beckman tried to harm my brother, I doubt seriously if Martin would attempt to prevent it; he is wholly on Beckman's side in the matter, if you see what I mean."

"Yes," I said, "I see what you mean."

"And so, if he refuses to protect himself, it is my duty to have it done for him. That is why I've come to you."

"You want me to act as his bodyguard, is that it?"

"Essentially, yes."

I moved uncomfortably in my chair. "Mrs. Nichols, I'm not sure I'm the man you want for this sort of thing. To begin with, I don't carry a gun; I don't even own a gun . . ."

"You're a big man, and you look strong and capable; and Mr. Robbins said you were a policeman once, that you've thus had experience in protective matters. I have no doubts that you could handle Victor Beckman if the need arises. He is thin and gaunt, from what I've been able to learn from Martin—a common laborer."

Common laborer, I thought.

Why do people like her always use the word "common" as if there were some social stigma attached to being a laborer? And aren't we all laborers of one kind or another?

I said, "If your brother is as strong-willed and as guilt-ridden as you say he is, why would he consent to having a bodyguard?"

"He wouldn't, if he knew about it."

"I don't follow."

"Martin lives on Crestlake Drive, across from Pine Lake Park. You can see his house quite clearly from several benches inside the park. Also, Martin is a compulsive walker; even the past two days he has been going out in the afternoons and evenings for long walks—he has not returned to work, of course. I thought you could watch his house for any sign of Beckman, and follow Martin when he goes walking, as a precautionary measure, and perhaps even strike up a conversation, an acquaintance with him. You're a polite, well-mannered, intelligent man; you might even be able to get him to talk about the accident, to help him find himself again and persuade him of the fallacy of his exaggerated guilt."

Sure, I thought, *sure I can*. I said, "I don't know, Mrs. Nichols . . ."

"You'll be quite well-paid, of course. I understand your standard rates are seventy-five dollars per day, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"I will pay you one hundred dollars per day for a minimum of one week."

I stared into my coffee and thought it over. It was not the kind of job I cared much for, but a minimum of seven hundred dollars—even discounting the percentage I would have to pay another operative, since I could not stand watch from dawn to midnight on my own—was a lot of money when your rent has been raised again and you don't have much in the bank. You can turn down a fee like that when there is a question of ethics involved; but when you're dealing with sensitivities, it's no damned contest at all.

I said, "All right, Mrs. Nichols," avoided the knowing look in her eyes, and reached into my bottom desk drawer for one of the legal contract forms.

The house where Martin Talbot lived alone was a narrow, gray-stucco affair that stood shoulder-to-shoulder with its immediate neighbors. It had white trim and a fumed oak door, and there were two rectangles of neatly barbered

lawn set on either side of cement-encased stairs leading steeply up to its tiny porch. Venetian blinds covered the two facing windows, drawn against the midday sunlight.

I could see all of that clearly from where I sat on the bench directly across the street and twenty yards into the park; and I could also see for several hundred feet in both directions along Crestlake Drive. It was more or less an ideal spot for an open stakeout.

I lit a cigarette and shifted position on the bench. Mrs. Nichols had arrived in her sleek new car ten minutes previously—a quarter of an hour after I had wedged my car into a parking place fifty yards to the west, and come across into Pine Lake Park—and she was still inside with her brother. She had told me, after we completed our arrangements, that she intended seeing him shortly, as she had done on the other two days since the accident. When the door opened for her over there, I had gotten my first look at Martin Talbot. He was a large, dark man wearing a white shirt and gray slacks; even from across the street I had been able to see his fan-shell ears and close-cropped, mud-colored hair. Mrs. Nichols had given me his description earlier in

my office. It matched him to a T.

She came out alone after another fifteen minutes had drifted away, carefully avoided looking over at me, and drove off. More time went by, like furtive footsteps, and I knew it was going to be a long, long day. I watched cars pass on Crestlake Drive, and occasional strollers, and an ice-cream truck that brought on a twinge of nostalgia for the long-vanished days of youth that were never quite as good as you remember them. Behind me, in the park, sparrows and a group of preschool children reaffirmed the fact that it was spring with their songs and their laughter.

There was no activity at or around the gray-stucco house across the way until twenty minutes past one, when the door opened and Martin Talbot came out.

He paused on the tiny porch, blinking against the sunlight, and then went down the stairs and turned east on his side of Crestlake. He walked in a stiff-postured, mechanical way, looking neither left nor right, and his gait was slow and purposeless. I stood up and left the park, following on that side.

A block distant Talbot crossed the street, without glancing in my direction; but I slowed anyway

and made a production of putting fire to a cigarette. I watched him enter the park, let him have fifty yards, and moved in after him.

It was obvious immediately that he was out for no more than his afternoon walk, that he had no particular destination in mind. He took me aimlessly into Sigmund Stern Recreation Grove almost to 19th Avenue, doubled back to the north through Pine Lake Park, and made a complete circuit of Laguna Puerca. It was no short stroll, but I seemed to be the only one of us visibly tired by it.

At the eastern tip of the tiny lake, Talbot stopped to watch the ducks floating languidly on the glassine water and several children playing nearby. Standing absolutely motionless, he was like a statue carved of white and gray stone. I thought, *Well, this is as good a time as any*—and kept on walking casually until I reached his side. He seemed not to be aware of my presence.

I said tentatively, "It's a tranquil scene, isn't it?"

Talbot did not move for a long moment; then he blinked slightly, as if coming out of reverie, and turned his head toward me. He had a narrow, bony, irregular face, pale and drawn, and there were deep creases like knife cuts in his cheeks and forehead. His

wide-spaced brown eyes gave the impression of bleeding, and I knew that his sister had been right: he had not slept in a long while.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice was colorless. "What did you say?"

"Just thinking aloud how peaceful it is here."

"Oh," Talbot said. "Yes."

"Those kids seem to be enjoying themselves."

He watched the children again. "So young and innocent and trusting. Will they be allowed to grow up, or will some criminal rob them of that gift and that right?"

The back of my neck suddenly felt cold. I wanted to say something to him, but I had no words. What can you say to a question like that?

He shook his head abruptly, blinking in that half-startled way. "Will you excuse me, please? I don't mean to be rude, but I really don't feel like talking to anyone today."

"Sure," I said, "I understand."

Woodenly, lost inside himself once more, Talbot turned away.

I waited there by the lake, with the coldness lingering on my neck, and did not start after him until he was better than a hundred yards away. He went over to Crestlake Drive, and along there

until he drew abreast of his house; then he crossed the street and climbed the stairs like an arthritic, disappearing inside.

I sat on my bench again, and smoked another damned cigarette, feeling badly depressed. As brief as our conversation had been, I realized something of the depth of Talbot's pain and guilt—and there was no self-pity involved in it. He was suffering for humanity, for all the innocent victims; a good and empathic man treated with savage cruelty by fate. Where is the justice in a thing like that?

This was some job I had taken on—one fraught with futility at every level. Beckman was another victim of bitter fate, a poor and harmless citizen who had lost his head as a result of shock, and who very probably did not harbor and never had harbored any genuine intention of avenging the death of his family. As far as I could see, the real and immediate danger was Talbot's internal desolation.

Still, you had to look at it pragmatically. Mrs. Nichols may have been jumping at shadows—but Talbot *was* her brother, and she could obviously afford the hundred dollars per day she was paying me, and always it was better to be safe than sorry. If she felt more at ease with me watching him—even if it developed that

Beckman's threat was as empty as I suspected—I had to admit that I was performing a worthwhile service for my money.

At four o'clock it began to grow cool in the park; the bay breeze had gathered strength and its voice was sharp and querulous in the surrounding trees. I had an overcoat in the trunk of my car, and I was thinking about going over there to get it when the taxi pulled up in front of Martin Talbot's house.

The driver blew his horn a couple of times, the door opened immediately and Talbot appeared. There was purpose in his stride now as he came down the steps and crossed the walk to enter the cab. I was already on my feet and moving by then, half-running in a long diagonal across Crestlake Drive to where my car was parked. I reached it just as the taxi edged away, fumbled my key into the lock, got the door open, and slid in under the wheel. If I'd had to maneuver to get out of the parking slot, I would likely have lost them, but there was enough room for me to swing out easily. I was a block behind and gaining when they turned onto Sloat Boulevard.

Traffic was heavy—the beginning of the commuter hours—but I was able to keep the taxi in sight

on Ocean and on Geneva, heading toward the San Mateo County line and the Cow Palace. The cab turned off onto Brookdale Avenue before we got to either one, and then angled into Visitacion Valley. If I'd had any doubts before about Talbot's destination, they completely vanished then.

Mrs. Nichols had told me Victor Beckman lived in Visitacion Valley.

Why would Talbot go to see Beckman? I asked myself tightly, and there were three possible answers: his guilt had finally become unbearable, and he felt the need to face Beckman again to seek forgiveness and a balm for his aching soul; masochistically, he wanted to confront Beckman in order to further punish himself for what he considered his criminal act; or, Beckman had called Talbot on the telephone and asked to see him for some reason or other. I was inclined to go along with either the first or the second explanation, or a combination of the two, but not the third. Beckman would have had no reason to call unless he intended to carry out the threat he had made on Talbot's life—and if you're going to kill a man, you don't invite him out to your house to do it. However, the important thing was not really the *why* of it; the important thing

was what might happen as a result of it.

I followed the cab into another turn, this time onto Delta Street. Two blocks along, it pulled up in front of a small frame house that could have used a coat of paint; but the front yard, shaded by a large horse chestnut tree, looked well-cared-for and there were pruned roses climbing intricately over an arched trellis at the far porch wall. I took my car into the curb two lots down, not liking the situation at all, and watched Talbot pay his driver and stand peering at the house as the taxi drove away. Then, slowly, he went along a cement walk and onto the porch.

I shut off the engine and put my hand on the door release, trying to make up my mind what to do. Legally, I could not prevent Talbot from visiting Victor Beckman; and I could not barge in on a private discussion on private property without provocation. Yet, if there were going to be trouble, violence, I obviously had to stop it; that was my reason for being there.

I opened the car door and stood, with one foot on the pavement, as Talbot rang the bell. There was no response. Talbot rang a second time, and nothing happened, and I released the

breath I had been holding and thought: *Maybe Beckman isn't home, maybe it's a good thing he isn't.* I stepped out of the V formed by the car body and the open door, and latched the door quietly, waiting to see what Talbot would do. He was still standing stiffly on the porch.

Five seconds passed, and finally Talbot turned and moved down off the porch. Then he stopped again, looking at the rose trellis and at the graveled driveway beyond, that curved slightly to the rear of the property. He went over there, paused, and vanished under the trellis along the side of the house.

It could be that Beckman was not home, all right, but it could also be that he was somewhere out back and had not heard or had chosen to ignore the doorbell. I moved around the car and onto the sidewalk and started toward the Beckman lot, walking rapidly. On a lawn across the street a couple of vocal boys were tossing a baseball back and forth, and behind me somewhere a dog barked steadily; but otherwise it was quiet. My chest began to tighten, and this time it had nothing to do with too many cigarettes; the palms of my hands turned moist, and I could feel the late afternoon sun too warm on the back of my

neck, yet it gave me slight chill.

I drew abreast of the Beckman house, turned off the sidewalk, and moved across the lawn under the horse chestnut. I had almost reached the trellis when the gun went off.

It was a flat, dull, cracking sound that fragmented the silence, echoing hollowly, and I began to run. When I got into the rear yard I could see a small vegetable garden, rows of sweet peas and a homemade wooden picnic bench, but no sign of Talbot or anybody else. There was a small tar-roofed garage set deep into the property on the left, and one of the double doors was standing open. I veered over there, caught the closed half and swung myself around it, inside.

I pulled up abruptly. It was not what I had expected to see at all; if anything, it was worse.

The interior of the garage was lighted by a drop-cord arrangement suspended from one of the overhead rafters, and the cord and its grilled bulb cage oscillated slightly, so that there was an eerie, shifting movement of light and shadow. A thin, gaunt and sallow-faced man, undeniably Victor Beckman, lay sprawled on his back near a long workbench fastened to the near wall. There was blood on his face and on the ce-



ment floor beneath his head, and you could see the ragged horror of the bullet wound in his right temple. Three feet away, Martin

Talbot stood staring down at the dead man, and only his jaws moved in a loose, rapid rhythm. His arms were down at his sides

again, and in his right hand was a flat .25 caliber automatic. The garage smelled of oil and dust, cordite and death.

Talbot swallowed heavily, and then looked up at me without recognition. Fear burned rancidly in my throat—you can never tell what a man with a gun in his hand will do—but he just stood there unmoving, with his eyes reflecting the empty sickness in his soul. The fear drained out of my throat and I went over to him, slowly, watching the gun; he still did not move. Gently, I reached down and took the automatic out of his hand, gripping it by the warm muzzle, and put it into my coat.

He said dully, resignedly, "I came back here and when he saw me he began shouting, calling me a murderer, saying over and over: 'Murderer, murderer, murderer! You killed my wife and daughter. You're a murderer.' I couldn't stand it—I couldn't stand it, and I lost control of myself for the first time in my life. The gun . . . the gun was on the workbench there, I don't know why he had it out like that, and I picked it up. He lunged at me and the gun went off. I shot him, I killed him. I *am* a murderer. He was right, I'm a murderer . . ."

I looked at him for a long mo-

ment, but there was nothing for me to say. I took his arm and pulled him out of there into the sunlight, telling myself silently that I could not have prevented it, that I had not really failed Talbot and Beckman and Mrs. Carole Nichols. Talbot eased out of my grip and moved gracelessly to the wooden picnic bench and sat down with his hands clasped between his knees.

I went in the opposite direction, to the rear door of the Beckman house; it was unlocked, and I entered, found the telephone and called the police.

I was sitting with Martin Talbot in the cluttered and neglected kitchen when Lieutenant Eberhardt and the members of the violent-death detail arrived.

After calling Eb at the Hall of Justice, I had returned to the rear yard and prodded an unprotesting Talbot inside, away from the staring eyes of the neighbors. We sat in silence at the vinyl-topped table in there—Talbot slumped-shouldered, looking at something that lay behind his eyes, something only he could see. I smoked and thought about several things, and the conclusions I reached were just as sad and depressive as the *prima facie* ones I had accepted earlier.

When the knock sounded on the rear door, I stood up and went over there and stepped out onto the narrow porch. With Eberhardt was Inspector Frazier, an assistant medical examiner, two uniformed cops and three members of the laboratory crew.

Eb and I exchanged sober greetings. I said, "Talbot's in the kitchen. You want to see the body first?"

"Yeah. In the garage, you said?"

I nodded. He told one of the uniformed cops to go inside with Talbot, and then I led him and the others across the yard and into the garage. While they went to work, I prowled around in front of the workbench and saw what I had expected to see there. Sighing, I went over to wait by the entrance.

Eberhardt detached himself from the others after a time and we stepped outside together. He was my age—late forties—and fashioned of an odd contrast of sharp angles and blunt planes: thick and blocky upper torso, long legs and slender fingers, square forehead, hooked nose, even mouth, sharply V'd chin. Clamped between his teeth, as usual, was one of the short-stemmed, flame-scarred briar pipes he favored. We had been friends for twenty-five years, had gone through the Police Academy

and fifteen years on the San Francisco force together before I resigned to open my own agency.

He said, "You want to fill me in on the background, as far as you know it?"

"Uh-huh." I told him about Carole Nichols and why she had hired me; and the circumstances of the accident which had taken the lives of Beckman's wife and daughter. I told him about my meeting with Martin Talbot in Pine Lake Park and how I had followed Talbot here to Beckman's home, and some of what had happened after we arrived.

He rubbed the cold bowl of his pipe across the bridge of his nose. "And Talbot confessed the killing of Beckman to you?"

"He confessed, yeah, but he didn't do it, Eb. He did not kill Victor Beckman."

That got me a long, impassive look. "I'm listening," he said.

"Okay. After Talbot and I got here, I waited in my car while he rang the front bell; when no one answered, I watched him disappear around the side of the house. I got out of the car then, and started up the street. I was just crossing the front yard when I heard the gunshot. That's all I heard, just the shot—and the neighborhood was pretty quiet. Talbot says Beckman shouted ac-

cusations at him, but I didn't hear any shouting; sounds carry a long way on a quiet residential street, Eb."

"Yeah," he said. "Go on."

"Well, there's the amount of time that elapsed between the moment Talbot disappeared from my view and the sound of the shot. It couldn't have been more than a minute and a half; I was conscious of time, and I'm positive of that fact. All right, a maximum of ninety seconds. One and a half minutes for Talbot to walk the length of the house, determine that Beckman wasn't in the rear yard, walk to the garage, see Beckman within, enter, listen to enough accusations to trigger a murderous rage in a gentle and moral mind, see the gun on the workbench, pick it up, and shoot Beckman when he lunged forward. It's simply not enough time, Eb, you can see that; there's no way he could have done all of those things in ninety seconds."

Eberhardt inclined his head, frowning.

"One last thing," I said. "When I first went into the garage, Talbot was standing motionless except for the rapid movement of his jaws; then he looked up at me and swallowed heavily. It didn't occur to me then, but I remembered it later—and the more I

thought about it, the more it seems as if he might have been *eating* something."

"I don't follow that."

"A piece of paper, Eb; a suicide note."

His frown deepened. "Then you think Beckman shot himself?"

"That's just what I think. When I was in the garage just now, I took another look at the workbench and there's a pencil and a pad of paper there. No apparent identations on the pad, but maybe your lab boys can bring some out. Anyway, what really happened here today is this: Beckman was in a state of utter despondency over the loss of his family. Sure, he threatened the person who had unwittingly killed them, but he was in shock at the time. He had no real intention of harming Talbot; just himself, when he was able to work up the courage, because he couldn't face the prospect of an empty life. So he finally made up his mind this afternoon and went out to the garage with the gun. A kind of tragic juxtaposition of time and space—or fate—put Talbot here, within yards of Beckman, when Beckman shot himself."

"And then?"

"Talbot ran into the garage and saw what had happened, and the horror of it was too much for him

to bear. He made an instantaneous decision, and took the gun out of Beckman's hand or from the floor near the body. Then he saw the suicide note, crumpled it, and put it into his mouth just before I—it could have been any neighbor, any passerby—came running into the garage."

"But why?" Eberhardt said. "Why would a man deliberately take the blame for a murder that wasn't a murder at all?"

The answer to that was both simple and infinitely complex. Martin Talbot was intrinsically and zealously moral; as his sister had told me and as I had seen for myself; he had been responsible for the death of Victor Beckman's family and, indirectly, for the death of Victor Beckman; he had, in his mind, murdered them all; he must be lawfully punished for his crimes. Yet in his case, where would that punishment be derived under the law? A man cannot be held legally accountable (in this instance) for the suicide of another man. Even if he stood trial for manslaughter as a result of the accident, he knew that falling asleep at the wheel of his car did not constitute criminal negligence; and that, as a well-to-do citizen with a spotless record, he would receive no more than a suspended sentence and revocation of his

driving privilege. But if he claimed to have murdered Beckman—and, in his mind, he *had* pulled the trigger of that gun—the law would be forced to exact punitive justice.

I told all of this to Eberhardt. He thought it over, sighed a little and said, "I guess we'd better go inside and talk to Talbot."

We went into the house, and Eberhardt introduced himself to Talbot and let him tell his story again; then he began breaking it down methodically, according to what I had told him. It was a dismal job, but it was what he was paid to do and it was necessary. Talbot put his tortured eyes on me more than once, and there was pleading in them, and accusation, and hollow despair; I could not meet them after a time. At first he refused to alter his version of what had happened, but Eberhardt kept after him, probing, and finally Talbot seemed to shrink in on himself, to age fifteen or twenty years in the space of minutes.

"All right," he said in his dull, empty voice, "all right, I lied to you. I've never lied in my life but I had to do it after I saw him lying there dead; it was my responsibility, don't you see? Can't you understand that? Even if I didn't pull the trigger of that gun, I

killed him, I murdered Victor Beckman!" Then he put his head in his hands and began to weep.

Eberhardt and I got out of there and into the livingroom. He said, "You're supposed to feel good when you've cleared an innocent man of a murder charge. But I feel kind of lousy just now."

"That makes two of us," I told him grimly.

"Talbot needs a doctor, and the sooner the better. You want to call his sister, this Carole Nichols?"

"I suppose it would be better if she heard it from me."

So I called Carole Nichols, and that, too, was painful; she said she would contact their family physician, and that she would also come out to Visitacion Valley as fast as she could get there. I hung up and lit a cigarette, and the sound of Martin Talbot's weeping was darkly and tragically funereal in the lonely silence of the Beckman home.

That might have been the end of it; but of course it wasn't.

Two weeks later, Eberhardt called me at my office and told me Martin Talbot was dead.

I sat holding the phone, and I felt a deep sadness and a deeper bitterness toward the incomprehensibilities of fate; and yet, I was not really surprised. I had not allowed myself to think about it, but I suppose I knew all along that such an ending to the whole tragic affair was inevitable.

I asked Eberhardt how Talbot had died, if it were suicide, and he said it was not—at least not in the eyes of the law. The family doctor's unofficial opinion was that Talbot had simply abandoned the will to live; he had refused to eat, refused to sleep, and finally he had succeeded in stilling forever the mechanisms of his body. The official verdict was "heart failure," but the truth is that Martin Talbot had executed himself for the unforgivable crimes he felt he had committed against his fellowman.

He had, at last and according to his own rigid code, balanced the scales of justice.

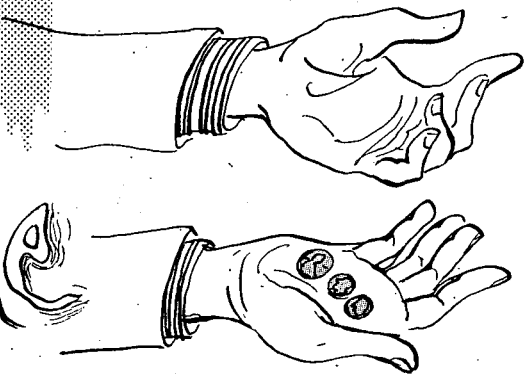


Surely no harm can come from the petty little crimes committed daily everywhere . . .



Only a Little Crime

time; now he had one at last, but he wouldn't be paid till the end of his first week. The landlady where he roomed was very decent; she had let him stay on with four



Have you seen a \$2 bill lately? They don't seem to be in circulation anymore. They used to turn up occasionally, and people would tear off a corner to remind them that they were twos and not ones.

Sam McKimmon had one the day he ate breakfast at the H&B Cafeteria. In fact, it was all the currency he had, and all he would have till the following Friday. He'd been out of a job for a long

weeks' rent owing, and agreed to take the money due bit by bit from his new salary. But he had to eat, and this was Tuesday, and how was he going to live for three days on the change left from \$2 after a seventy-nine cent breakfast—one that used to cost a quarter?

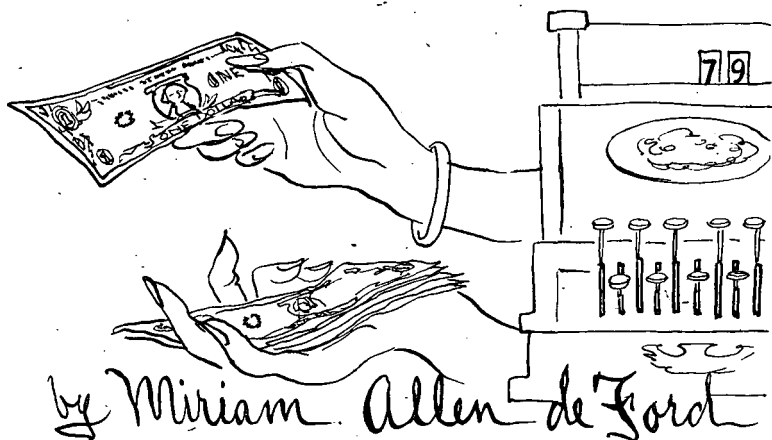
So, with a wild stab of surprised joy, he watched the cashier hand him a ten, a five, four ones, and

twenty-one cents in change. She, too, was unused to \$2 bills and had given him change for a twenty. He hurried away and down the street before she should discover her mistake.

Sam, as might be seen from his dealings with the landlady, was usually honest, but needs must when the devil drives, and this (to alter clichés), was surely pennies from heaven. He did wonder if

ask her for a dinner date (though dinners might be of small interest to a restaurant employee), and perhaps one thing would lead to another, and then . . . It's no fun, a young man's first months in a strange big city.

About six months later, Sam did drop in at the cafeteria with enough in his pocket to carry out his idealistic plan, but there was a different cashier, a hatchet-faced



they'd take the \$18 shortage out of the cashier's pay, and even resolved, when he had enough on hand, to go back someday, explain, and give it to her; but that day was a long way off, and meanwhile the H&B would be one place he'd avoid. The cashier had been a pretty girl, and Sam daydreamed a few times of how he'd return the money and get into conversation with her—maybe

woman twice the pretty girl's age, and he let it go. The cafeteria could afford the loss, and if it had been a crime to keep money that wasn't his by rights, it was only a little crime. By and by he forgot all about it.

At the end of her working hours on the day Sam McKimmon committed his little crime, Debbie Blair added up her cash and found

herself \$18 short. How it had happened she had no idea, until she noticed the \$2 bill and realized what she must have done.

She was scared, and with good reason. If she'd had that much herself, she'd have paid it in, no matter how much it inconvenienced her, but she hadn't. One of the conditions of her parole had been that she must repay the money she'd taken from the store where she'd been bookkeeper, and what was left every week just kept her with a roof over her head and enough for the most urgent purchases. If she didn't get breakfast and lunch free at the cafeteria—the other cashier came on for the dinner hours, so Debbie skipped dinner—she couldn't have managed at all. And now . . .

It had been a miracle anyway that she'd got a job where she handled money. Her parole officer, Mrs. Hastings, had wangled the job for her; the owner of the H&B was her second cousin, and she had persuaded him to take a chance with a convicted thief. "It isn't as if you had a criminal record, Debbie," Mrs. Hastings had said. "I know you never were a professional embezzler, and I know how great the temptation must have been, with your mother so ill and needing so much you couldn't afford. And I'm sure you

mean to go straight from now on."

"Oh, I do, I do," Debbie had said, and meant it. The three years in prison had been a nightmare, with her mother's death in the General Hospital a lasting heartbreak.

Well, there was only one thing to do. When she made her daily report to Mr. Whitlock, the manager, she would tell him what had happened, take the blame, and however hard it was going to be in consequence, repay the loss if he would let her do it at the rate of a dollar or two a week. She'd just have to forget the winter coat for which she'd been saving.

Debbie shuddered. Mr. Whitlock was an ogre. Near retirement age, thirty years with the cafeteria and eighteen of them as manager, he was the real boss although Mrs. Hastings' cousin owned the place. Debbie guessed that she had been hired over Mr. Whitlock's opposition, that he distrusted her and watched her suspiciously, and that he would never believe her story.

More than once he had almost driven her to tears but she had to control herself, to accept his baiting docilely. This, her first big mistake, would be the opportunity for which he had been waiting.

It was. When she told him falteringly of her error, producing

the \$2 bill in evidence, Mr. Whitlock smiled sourly. "Fantastic!" he snapped. "Is that the kind of tale you made up the *other* time?"

"I'll pay it back, Mr. Whitlock!" Debbie cried desperately. "I promise you I will!"

The manager laughed meanly. "No you won't, Miss Lightfingers," he announced. "I'm not swallowing that fairy story. You're through here. I'll give you this week's pay up to tonight, with \$18 out of it, and that will be that. You should never have been trusted to handle money, anyway. And I'm phoning your parole officer right now."

"Please, please!" Debbie fought to keep from crying. "Won't you give me just one more chance?"

"Nope," said Whitlock incisively, and reached for the phone.

It was too late in the day to reach Mrs. Hastings, which deepened the manager's anger. "I'll get her the first thing tomorrow," he said as he wrote Debbie's check. There wasn't much left after the reduction.

Debbie was waiting in the parole office before Mrs. Hastings got there the next morning. She hadn't slept much the night before. Heaven knew how Whitlock would put it; she must tell her side of it first.

The story stumbled out into Mrs. Hastings' sympathetic ears. "I believe you, Debbie," she said, "but I'll have to report—"

The phone rang.

Debbie strained to listen, to interpret Mrs. Hastings' end of the dialogue.

"I know," she heard her say. "She's here now . . . No, I don't think . . . I wouldn't do that if I were you . . . Yes, of course you have the right, but . . . I can't agree . . . Mr. Whitlock, I can't let you speak to me in such a tone . . ."

Then Mrs. Hastings jumped; apparently Whitlock had hung up on her.

"He's passed his version on to my cousin," she said sadly. "I guess he's been waiting for an opportunity. It took all my persuasiveness to have the experiment made in the first place. You were the test case; I'm afraid they'll never take a parolee again."

Debbie stared at her, a cold fear in her heart.

"But in another job—"

The parole officer shook her head. "He's going beyond me," she said. "He's got my cousin to complain to the parole board. I'll do the best I can for you, child, but the owner and the manager will carry a lot more weight with them. I'm convinced you really

are trying to go straight—”

“Oh, yes!”

“Well, we’ll see. Can you get by for a few days?”

“Sure. I’ve got two days’ pay, haven’t I—minus \$18?”

“Don’t be bitter, Debbie. I’ll try.”

The owner and the manager did outweigh a parole officer. Debbie Blair went back to prison for the rest of her term. What could she expect when she was free the next time?

Alissa Hastings had been a widow for eight years. She was over her first grief at the ending of a happy marriage, and she was very lonely. Lately she had been seeing a great deal of her second cousin, the owner of the cafeteria, whose wife had died two years earlier. Nothing had been said as yet, but one knows. Sooner or later Edwin was going to ask her to marry him, and she was going to say yes.

Then they quarreled violently over his approval of what Whitlock had done to Debbie Blair. After that she seldom saw him. The link was broken; she would live the rest of her life in loneliness.

Henry Whitlock drove to his suburban home in a glow of self-

satisfaction. At last he’d got the goods on that little thief! Damned bleeding hearts, trying to foist a common criminal on him! For eighteen years he’d been the real power at the H&B, and he was as jealous of his supremacy as he was proud of the restaurant. It wasn’t often that the owner interfered, thank goodness—look what a fiasco it had been when he did! “Let’s hope this will teach him a lesson,” Whitlock muttered to himself. Probably the old fool had been taken in by a pretty face, or knuckled under to that weak-minded cousin of his, who should never have been appointed to her position.

Once a thief always a thief! He never knew it to fail. He had no doubt that the accidental acquisition of a \$2 bill had been the cause of the whole flimsy story. Well, nobody could fool Henry Whitlock!

Phoebe had dinner ready as usual, the house was clean and orderly as it always was. It wasn’t Phoebe’s fault that years and weight had changed her from a slender girl with shining hair into a graying, heavy woman, but there was no pleasure in coming home to her. Whitlock pecked his wife’s cheek, then glanced around him with a scowl.

“Where’s Peter?” he growled.

"Can't you train that boy to get home promptly for his meals? Nobody supported *me* while I went to high school; I'd have been grateful for free food and lodging. The least he can do is to pay some attention to rules."

"He'll be home soon," Phoebe said meekly. "He probably had to stay late for practice."

"Practice!" his father snorted. "He'd better spend more time on his homework and less on that damned orchestra or whatever they call it."

"But—" said Phoebe, and then gave up.

"We're not going to wait for him," Whitlock said. "And you're not going to keep his food warm for him, either. Let him eat it cold if he can't be punctual."

There was no use arguing—she'd learned that long ago.

They were halfway through when Peter arrived, lugging his cello. "Sorry," he said. "We had to play the third movement of the Brahms concerto four times before Steve got his part right, and this was the last rehearsal." He sat down in the vacant chair.

His father glared at him. "Next time, you can go without your dinner," he barked. Peter smiled at his mother and she dropped her eyes.

His stomach full, Henry Whit-

lock relaxed. Over Phoebe's home-made lemon pie he expanded into amiability.

"Congratulate me," he said, smiling. "I finally got rid of my burden."

"What burden, dear?" his wife asked.

"That little thief the boss let himself be conned into hiring as cashier."

He told the story in detail, with flourishes. There were no congratulations. Phoebe looked distressed. "That poor girl," she murmured.

Peter exploded. "You mean," he roared, "you had that kid sent back to prison just because she made a mistake in a customer's change?"

"It was no mistake. I am completely convinced she saw a good excuse to steal from us and grabbed it. Prison is where she belongs. Heaven knows they coddle them enough there!"

Peter's face, so like his mother's when she was young, was flushed with rage. His voice dropped to a low venomous tone. "Why, you contemptible, cruel, narrow-minded—"

"Peter, please! Henry, he's just a boy—"

"I'm not a boy," Peter retorted. "I'm a man. And I despise you." He stood up and spat at his fa-

ther's feet, glaring at him.

"Get out of my house!" Whitlock thundered, his face white. "I'm through supporting an ingrate like you. You're a man, are you? Then support yourself. Get out!"



He slapped his son hard across the mouth. Peter sprang forward. His mother caught his arm and held it. They all fell silent, breathing hard.

Then Peter said in a strained, quiet voice, "OK, Father. I'm sorry about the spitting. I'm eighteen. I'll leave school and go to work." He threw his mother's hand from his arm and marched out of the room and up the stairs.

"Peter, where are you going?" Phoebe cried, the tears running down her cheeks.

"To pack. Steve Darnley will take me in till I find a place of my own."

She took a step forward, glanced at her husband's set face, and collapsed into her chair. Henry Whitlock stood like a statue carved in ice. Neither of them spoke.

Ten minutes later Peter appeared, carrying his suitcase and his cello. He went to his mother, put his arms around her and kissed her. "I'll keep in touch," he whispered. "Don't worry."

He did not even look at his father. He picked up his cases again, turned, and a moment later the front door slammed behind him.

Peter knew Steve Darnley from both senior English and history classes and from the amateur

chamber music quartet which had grown to be his greatest interest. Steve played the viola. He lived at home with a widowed mother and a younger sister; Peter had visited him and knew there was room in the old house for him to settle in as a temporary guest. He went straight there, and Steve made him welcome.

In the next two weeks Peter Whitlock learned a lot. He learned that dropping out of high school and following every lead earnestly and tirelessly does not result in a job for an unqualified, inexperienced, not too husky eighteen-year-old. He phoned his mother every few days, and she begged him to apologize ("grovel," he called it) to his father and come home. But things had come to a climax that had been long in the making. Henry Whitlock and his son would never tolerate each other's presence again.

He also learned a few things about Steve and Steve's family. One was that in Mrs. Darnley's eyes her son could do no wrong, but that this leniency did not extend to Steve's friends. For another thing, the little sister was intensely jealous of her brother. He discovered further that Steve at home was puzzlingly different from the classmate whose chief

bond with Peter had been the classical music to which they were both genuinely devoted. He couldn't put a finger on it, but it was there.

Two weeks of answering help-wanted advertisements and registering in employment agencies had netted not even a referral to a job. The little money he'd had was nearly gone; the best his mother could do was to mail him an occasional dollar or two squeezed out of her household allowance. Peter was caught in an insoluble dilemma. Go back? Never. Continue to sponge on Steve and his obviously unwilling mother? That had to stop. Something had to break.

It did, with a bang. Returning after another fruitless, weary day, Peter was confronted by a very angry woman. "Stop right where you are, young man," Mrs. Darnley commanded. "You're leaving right now, and I never want to see your deceitful face again."

Peter went white from shock. "B-but what—" he stammered, utterly bewildered.

The tirade went on. "Corrupting my children! Corrupting a little girl! I've kept you here for two weeks because I let my Stephen persuade me. If Lucy hadn't broken down and told me—"

"Told you what?" To his mind Lucy was a spoiled (almost as spoiled as her brother), sexually precocious little monster. He'd been careful never to let himself be alone with her after she had practically propositioned him on his first day there. Had she made up some lying story now, in offense and jealousy, to get back at her brother and at the same time --avenge herself on her brother's friend?

It was worse.

"Poor little Lucy," said Mrs. Darnley, her voice shaking with outrage. "Out of the kindness of her heart she offered to tidy the room I've been foolish enough to let you squat in for these two weeks or more. And there, right on the dressing table, she found *this*." She opened a clenched hand and showed him a small cellophane envelope.

"Wha-what is it?"

"As if you didn't know! To come here and accept my hospitality and then to introduce *drugs* into my home, to my innocent children . . ."

He stared at her, stupefied. "I never--"

She cut him short. "I don't want to hear another word. I've sent Stéphen to pack your things. Go up there and help him. And then get out."

Twice in one month, Peter reflected, he had been addressed in those words.

Disconsolately he walked upstairs to the guest room. Steve was there, but not packing. He was sitting on the bed, his head in his hands.

"That lousy kid!" he muttered, as he heard Peter enter. "She planted that dope herself so she could get rid of you. Mad at me for bringing you here, and then mad at you because you didn't fall for her fifteen-year-old charms."

"I thought the same thing. What I can't figure out is where she got it."

Steve looked at him in utter amazement. "Do you mean to say," he exclaimed, "that you didn't know that all of us in the quartet except you were hooked?"

Peter simply stared.

"Jack and Dick have both been needling me to turn you on. I've told them it was your business, and to lay off. But I thought of course you knew."

There was silence for a minute. Then Steve said, almost confidently: "Look, pal, I feel like hell having this happen. I wanted to keep you here as long as you liked, till you found a job, since that's what you want to do. But you haven't had much luck about that, have you?"

"None at all." He sighed.
"And I don't dare expose Lucy to Ma, because then I'd have to explain where she got the junk. You won't go back to your parents?"

"To my father? Not in a million years. If my mother would leave him—but she won't. He's worn her down till she's just a zombie slave. And her heart's bad, too."

"Well, then, there's this—don't go off on your high horse now—gee, that's funny: 'horse,' get it? Anyway, the fellow I buy from would be glad to take you on, and there's real money in it."

"You mean selling drugs?" cried Peter, appalled.

"Why not? How do you think I pay him? It's that or steal, once you're hooked. He'd much rather take on someone who isn't."

Without a word Peter turned and started to pack his suitcase.

"Now don't be like that!" Steve whined.

Peter ignored him. How could he have been such an idiot? All the months he had played with the three of them, and never sus-

pected! So that was what he had sensed wrong lately about Steve!

Bleakly he surveyed his situation, but wherever he looked there was no way out. He finished packing while Steve sat and watched him. He hurried; any minute now, that hysterical female would be plunging in and begging her darling Steve to throw him out bodily. There was only some change in his pocket. He hadn't eaten since breakfast.

Abruptly he turned to Steve. "Tell me the man's name and where I can find him," he said.

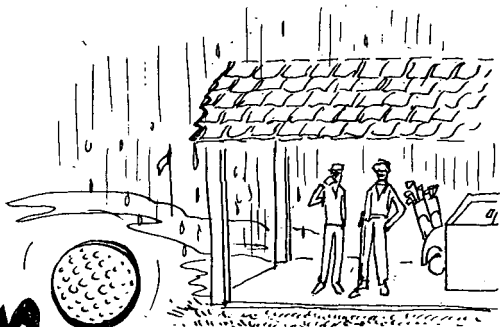
Unfortunately, the very first sale Peter Whitlock attempted to make was to an undercover narcotics agent. Before he was nineteen, he was serving time in a federal prison. News of his mother's death came to him less than a year later. "You killed her, you bum," his father wrote him. It was the last communication they ever had.

By that time Sam McKimmon had long ago forgotten his little undetected, unimportant crime.



There are times when one may find it insuperably difficult to discern an inequable balance.

Lesson for a Pr



by Stephen Wasylyk

My drive off the ninth tee climbed toward the dark, low-hanging clouds, hooked suddenly into a stand of trees and ended in a discouraging rattle as it ricocheted from trunk to trunk. I swore.

Virgo Fletcher chuckled. Virgo always enjoyed another man's misfortune. Small and wiry, with the beginnings of a sagging potbelly, he wore a golf cap pulled low over his narrow face. Even though we spent almost every afternoon

together on the course, the outdoor hours and the sun didn't do much to tighten the sagging jowls and the puffy eyes. Virgo destroyed whatever good the exercise did with a little too much drinking and too many women.

I picked up my tee. "See if you can do better," I said.

Virgo planted himself firmly, waggled his driver and swung. The result was a straight-as-a-string drive down the fairway, at least two hundred and fifty yards. He chuckled again, increasing my dislike for him that had been growing for weeks. I hoped that I

could stop playing with him soon. Virgo would do anything to win, even to shaving a stroke whenever he thought he could get away with it.

I forced myself to get into the golf cart alongside him and he headed down the fairway.

He was president of the local bank, a position he used to advantage with the young women the bank hired, another facet of his personality I found abhorrent. He was a pincher and a patter, and many of the young women who weren't flattered by his attention quit after a few days. Some stayed, because there was no understanding women and particularly Virgo's wife, who knew of his escapades yet still clung to him as if he were something valuable.

I had been playing with Virgo for months now, not because I enjoyed his company but because of his position. I had come to this Midwestern town to lie low after pulling a bank job in another state, and had met him on the course. When I found out just what he did for a living, I couldn't resist cultivating him. The money from my last job wouldn't last forever, and it seemed to me that playing golf with Virgo would give me an insight into the bank's operations.

It did, but not quite enough as yet. I was still probing for an angle.

Virgo cleared his throat. "There's a new girl at the bank. Her name is Olivia and she seems quite receptive. I am doing quite well with her."

"Why tell me?" Virgo thought I was a footloose swinger who had settled in town to recuperate from an operation and he was always trying to impress me.

"I'm looking for advice. My wife has seen her and suspects I am interested. I am. In fact, I would consider marrying Olivia if I were free. I finally asked my wife for a divorce. She said no, not under any circumstances." Being free was a constant theme of Virgo's conversation.

"All right, then," I said. "You're stuck."

He sighed. "I would certainly like to get rid of her."

Irritated, I snapped, "There are many ways."

"You mean kill her?"

"It's done every day."

"I wouldn't be capable of something like that."

"Then hire someone."

He stopped the cart in the middle of the fairway. "Can that be done?"

"There are people around who make it their business."

"I wouldn't know where to begin."

An idea flickered in the back of my mind. I'd been looking for a way to take Virgo's bank. Perhaps he was handing me the combination to the vault.

"Would you know where to find someone? You don't talk about your past, but I get the impression . . ." His voice trailed off.

I stepped to the ground and grabbed a couple of irons. "I'll think about it. Right now I'm going to play my second shot," I said.

I left him sitting there while I searched for my ball. Virgo wanted his wife dead and was willing to pay for it. I could give him the names of several men, but what was in it for me? There should be a way I could convert that wish of his into profit.

I found my ball. There was no choice but to chip out to the fairway and waste a stroke. I swung halfheartedly, more important things on my mind.

Also no longer thinking of golf, Virgo had driven over to his ball, his thin face turned to me.

I took a five iron and hit a sweet shot that clung to the green as if it had been coated with glue, waved off Virgo and the cart and started walking.

Virgo drove his next shot over the green into a sand trap, something that he never did. It was clear that Virgo was hooked. All I needed to do was to reel him in. By the time I reached the green, I had worked it out.

Virgo looked at me, wanting to talk, but I waved him off. "Play your shot," I said.

He nervously blasted out of the trap onto the green just as a light rain began to fall. We both putted out and headed the cart toward the refreshment stand.

"Beer," I said to the attendant. When we were served, we moved away from him and the other golfers. I looked out over the rolling green hills and smiled slightly. I intended to find out just how serious Virgo was, and this was a good place to discuss it. No one could overhear or suspect any collusion between two men out for an afternoon of golf.

The other golfers headed back toward the clubhouse, leaving us alone except for the attendant, who picked up a paperback and began to read. The rain came down harder, pattering against the shingled roof of the shelter.

Virgo cleared his throat. I looked away from the pleading in his eyes, wanting him to stew a little more, to beg a little. There was no one I would rather fleece

more than this jittery Virgo.

"We were talking," he said.

"We were talking about killing your wife," I said brutally.

He seemed to shrink a little.

"Doesn't sound pleasant when you come right out with it," I said.

"No, it doesn't sound pleasant," he admitted. "You said I could hire someone."

"The money could be traced and you would be the first suspect."

"Then what—"

"I have a plan," I said. "I'll take care of everything. There would be no way to suspect you."

His face lightened. "You're sure?"

"Positive. Don't you want to know the price?"

"I guess so. How much?"

"All the cash in your vault."

He looked as if I had hit him. "I don't understand."

"All right. Listen carefully," I said slowly. "We will handle it exactly as though the main purpose was to rob the bank, not to kill your wife; therefore no one will suspect the real reason. But to make it come off so that there are no questions, I will actually rob the bank. I will use the money to pay the man I hire, and keep the rest as my payment. It will not cost you a cent personally and in-

surance will cover the bank loss. You don't have to do a thing except what I tell you to."

His voice sank to a whisper. "What is your plan?"

"I will hire a man to do the actual job. Don't ask me who he is or how I know where to find him. He and I will come to your house early in the morning. He will hold your wife as hostage while I take you to the bank. You will open the bank and the vault for me, supposedly to protect your wife. I'll take the money, leave and pick up my man. By that time, your wife will be dead and you will never see either of us again. When you report it, it will look like another bank robbery where something went wrong. No matter how much you are questioned, your story will sound real. The only thing you will have to do, which I am sure you will handle admirably, is to act properly shocked and grief-stricken after your wife is found. Now, you can back out and we will forget the whole thing, or you can nod and I'll go ahead. Think it over. Once you commit yourself, you don't turn back."

Virgo's conversation had indicated that he had wanted for a long time to be free, but I was asking him to commit himself to murder. It was one thing to talk

about it, another actually to do it. I wondered if Virgo had the nerve.

He lowered his chin, then raised it slowly.

"You agree?" I asked.

He nodded firmly. "When will it be?"

I leaned back and finished my beer. The rain was coming down hard now, mist masking the landscape. I had the feeling that I should move fast, to pin Virgo down before he had time to change his mind.

Today was Tuesday. I would have to do some driving and some telephoning, and it would take a couple of days to import the man I needed. "Friday morning," I said.

I could see him relax and I knew why. Playing with him every day, I had learned it wasn't the kind of town that dealt a great deal in checks and charge accounts. Cash flowed pretty freely and most of it ended inevitably in the bank. Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, an armored car picked up any excess cash on hand and traded new bills for old, to maintain an even balance in the bank. That meant the money in the vault on Friday morning would be at its lowest ebb. Virgo liked that. He would lose less money that way.

"How much will be in the vault?" I asked.

He thought for a moment. "Perhaps fifty thousand."

It sounded low to me but it was a small town with no big Friday payrolls to consider. "Make sure it isn't less than that," I told him. "The man will probably want ten and I see no reason for me to go through with this for less than forty."

He nodded. "Fifty thousand will be there."

"Fine," I said. "We won't be playing golf anymore. Just go about your business for the next few days and forget this conversation. Don't try to get in touch with me." I looked at the rain, debating a dash to the clubhouse. "Would you like another beer?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I don't think I could stomach it."

I sat there, sipping my beer and wondering if Virgo would back out. It was a possibility to be considered and something that had to be forestalled. I would move immediately. If he had no way to get in touch with me, he would have no way to jam the wheels I intended to start rolling.

I checked out of my hotel as soon as I got back and drove to a motel on the outskirts of another town about twenty miles away.

That evening, armed with a handful of change, I began making phone calls from the pay booth on the corner.

I located Snick Gator in Chicago, only a short overnight hop away. He listened and declared himself in. I gave him directions to a local motel, hung up and continued dialing.

Virgo was under the impression I was going to hire one man because that was the plan I had explained to him, but I hadn't told him everything. I needed one more specialist and it took some time to find Pete Matso in a bar in St. Louis. He agreed to drive up and meet me at noon the following day.

I went to bed that night content. Things had started to move.

Wednesday morning, using a false name and address, I picked up a battered, nondescript, used sedan with a good engine. If it ran for two hours it was good enough for me, since I intended to use it only for the robbery. I buried it in an obscure corner of the motel parking lot and went to meet Pete.

He was in the bar when I got there, a tall, thin, long-haired type with a face that seemed to bear a perpetual grin, probably because to Pete life was one big lark, especially if he were behind the

wheel of a reliable fast car.

He nodded. "You said you had something big, Griff."

I slipped into the booth opposite him, ordered a beer, and waited until the slim waitress left, Pete's eyes following her swinging hips. "It's big," I said.

"You want me to be a wheel man?"

"Nothing that simple. The job I have for you can be dangerous and you can turn it down with no hard feelings. If you take it on, I'll pay you five thou, half now and half afterward."

The waitress dropped off the beer and moved away after giving Pete a big smile.

"Lay it on me, man," Pete said.

"I want you to stage a collision with an armored car."

His grin grew wider. "You want to heist it?"

"Nothing like that. I just want it out of commission for a few hours."

"What's the pitch?"

"It picks up money at a bank I intend to take Friday morning. If it doesn't make the pickup, chances are that all that money will be waiting for me."

"Maybe I should get more than five thou."

"Take it or leave it," I said. "I will also go for the cost of a used car you can use."

"No point to wasting money. I'm a little tired of the wheels I'm using now. My insurance will cover something new. Rather have my own anyway because I know how it handles. You have a spot picked out or do I set it up?"

I took him about ten miles outside of town to a straight stretch of road the armored car followed on the way to pick up the cash at Virgo's bank. I knew it always took the same route and always passed at the same hour every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, because I had scouted it thoroughly for weeks while looking for an angle to take Virgo's bank. Intersecting the straight stretch, another road came out from behind a grove of trees. From a car parked there, you could see the truck coming, but the trees would hide the car from the truck. The car could pull out suddenly, so suddenly an accident would be unavoidable. The truck could swerve but there was really no place to go. I explained it to Pete.

"It can be done, man," he said, "but it's a little hairy. A guy could get hurt."

"I pay all hospital expenses," I said. "It's part of the deal."

He thought for a moment before his grin became wider. "You're on, man. I don't get too many chances to mess up an ar-

mored car. I'll stop it for you. How will you know if it works?"

"I'll swing in behind it a few miles down the road, holding far enough back so I don't get into trouble." I pulled out my roll and dealt out his twenty-five hundred dollars in big bills.

Pete grunted. "Don't you have anything smaller?"

I grinned. "Not until Friday. You want to wait?"

He folded the money and slipped it into his pocket. "Not likely, but if I don't pull this off right, money isn't going to mean a thing. I'll look for you tomorrow."

I took him back to town and dropped him off. I wouldn't be seeing Pete again until the accident.

My other man was due in that night, which would give us time for a dry run in the morning. After dinner, I waited for his call in my motel room, sitting in a soft chair, my feet propped on the low cooling unit before the window, watching the passing traffic and thinking of Virgo Fletcher.

I didn't trust him. He hadn't asked enough questions about me or my past for an operation as important as this. He had simply accepted me and my plan. I wondered if Virgo had been doing a little investigating and planning on his own.

If I were caught, I'd be locked in all by myself. No one would believe that Virgo had been part of it.

The phone rang harshly and I looked at my watch. Snick was in town.

A half hour later, I was in his motel room.

Snick was a big man, broad through the shoulders and thickening through the middle, the battered face and puffy ears leaving no doubt as to how he had once earned a living. I had known many ex-fighters, most of them no longer with it. Not Snick, he looked cold and vicious and mean, still alert and sharp, and his one big asset was that he would follow orders faithfully as long as the pay was right.

I paced the small room while I explained it all to him.

"It sounds simple," he said.

"We'll use two cars," I said. "We'll meet at the house. I'll take the man to the bank while you take care of his wife. When you're through, you'll leave and meet me later. If they tag me and I don't show, you'll be able to get clear. Tomorrow morning, I'll pick you up and we will go over the layout so that you'll know exactly what you're doing. It leaves just one question. How much do you want?"

"Five. G's," he said promptly. "All in advance. If they finger you, I don't want to be stuck. My end will be done."

"Fair enough," I said. "You could have asked for more. But I'll pay you half now and half Friday morning."

"I could lose on a deal like that."

"If anything happens to me, I'll see that you get your money." Again I peeled twenty-five hundred from my roll. "You can't spend this in two days even if you hit the bottle real hard. Stay out of sight. You're the kind of man people remember."

I left him then. There was a movie down the street from my motel, so I parked my car and decided to kill a few hours. The movie wasn't good. X-rated flicks were still a novelty in this town so the place was crowded. I left halfway through the film. If I wanted to see a nude doll parading around, I preferred her in the flesh in my motel room rather than bigger than life-size on the screen in full color, but the way I was situated at the moment, women were out—until Friday.

The next morning I picked up Snick and took him out to Virgo's house, which was a stone-rancher surrounded by trees, and outside of town so there were no close

neighbors to become curious or to hear anything strange. From there, I took him to a small dirt road about five miles away, where I intended to pay him off.

When I was certain he knew the layout and wouldn't get lost, I dropped him and headed for Pete Matso's motel. I had no real qualms about Pete doing his job, but a man has been known to change his mind if something that seemed a little more important appeared. In Pete's case, it would be a woman. He had money in his pocket and I had noted him eyeing the waitress in the bar, but what made me a little nervous was the way she had traded looks with him.

I needn't have worried. It was well into the afternoon when Pete came out, the waitress on his arm. He gave her a friendly pat and climbed into a bright yellow fastback parked in front of his room. I followed as he drove off.

He had allowed himself plenty of time. I made sure he was headed in the right direction, then turned off and went directly to the next town to see if the armored car were on schedule. It was. I picked it up on the outskirts and settled back a good distance away to tail it. The last thing I wanted was for the driver to look into his rear-view mirror

once too often and see the same car, but the Thursday-afternoon traffic gave me a hand, weaving in and out, passing both of us so that the pattern of cars behind the armored car was constantly changing. As we approached the road where Pete was waiting, I closed the distance a little.

We were indicating close to fifty when I saw the flash of bright yellow scream out of the side road and knife into the front of the armored car. The big steel box swerved and rocked, narrowly missing oncoming traffic, while the yellow car spun, tires screeching.

I pulled over and stopped, joining the other drivers who were pouring out of their cars. I sprinted to the armored car. If it weren't disabled, Pete had wasted his time.

He had done well. The right front wheel was smashed in at an awkward angle, the tire flat, and the coolant poured steadily from the radiator. I went back to Pete's car.

He had said he needed new wheels. He would get them. The yellow fastback was totaled, the left front mashed flat, the whole front of the car out of line with the body. Several men were lifting Pete out of the car. He had a gash on his forehead, was clutch-

ing his ribs, and his left leg was bent where there should be no bend. They laid him on the roadside grass.

I pushed close. He looked up and saw me and in spite of the pain, one eye closed in an elaborate wink.

Pete was a good man.

I got out of there before someone decided I would make a good witness, and drove back to my motel. Locating Pete to give him the rest of his money and something extra for his medical bills would be no problem. There was only one hospital to which they could take him, and before I left the next day I would go there as a visiting friend. I grinned as I drove off. Pete would have one faithful visitor. The waitress would be around. I was sure of it.

There was nothing to do, then, but wait until Friday morning.

I treated myself to a big steak dinner, picked up a half dozen bottles of beer and spent the evening before the TV, watching some sort of detective story that I couldn't quite follow, much less understand how the guy solved it just before the final commercial. I fell asleep during the late news, the feature story of which was the armored-car accident, complete with a film clip of Pete being wheeled into the hospital.

I woke at six on Friday morning to a dull, overcast day that hinted at rain, slipped the silencer on my pistol and dropped it, together with two stocking masks, into my attaché case among several rolls of wide adhesive tape.

I was to meet Snick in front of Virgo's house at seven. He was there when I arrived. I handed him a mask. Snick was too easily recognized to take any chances. My description, on the other hand, could fit dozens of men. We walked up to the front door and rang the bell.

Virgo's wife swung the door open. Before she had a chance to realize what was going on, Snick had clamped a hand over her mouth and hustled her into the house. I followed, my gun in my hand. It was just possible that Virgo might have had a change of heart and I would have to straighten him out.

He was at the breakfast table. He looked up with a strange expression on his face as if he couldn't believe I was there, but he made no move.

I leveled the gun at Mrs. Fletcher's head. "Don't say a word," I told her.

Her face was white and her blue eyes wide. She didn't understand, but she obeyed. It was the first time we had met and I could

understand Virgo's desire to get rid of her. She was a prim-looking woman, with a harshly-boned face that was emphasized by an expensive hairdo that might have looked good on a younger woman. I had no doubt she made life miserable for Virgo.

I tossed Snick a roll of tape. "Hands and feet, and one strip across the mouth."

I waited until he was finished. "Now you," I said to Virgo. "Let's go." I nodded to Snick. "You know what to do."

His mouth twisted in what passed for a smile.

I hustled Virgo out of the front door and behind the wheel of my car.

Virgo's voice was low. "That's the man who will do it?"

"He's the only one I brought," I said.

"Now that it is happening, I find it hard to believe."

"Believe it," I said. "We just teed off on the eighteenth in the most important game of your life and taking a bogey can kill you. From here on, we play par or we're in trouble. Be prepared to do some Academy Award acting. The people at the bank will be around to act as witnesses."

"I'm not sure—"

"It's too late for you not to be sure of anything." I held the gun

to his head. "From now on, you have nothing to say. Drive, and do it carefully."

The bank had a side door on a parking lot that the employees used before opening time. While Virgo fumbled for the key, I slipped the stocking mask over my head and followed him inside. Two women were already there and their vocal cords became paralyzed at the sight of me and the gun. I had Virgo tape their ankles and wrists together, hands behind their backs, and slap a strip of adhesive across their mouths. I dragged them out of sight behind the counter.

"The vault," I said to Virgo.

"The time lock—" he began.

"It had better be open."

"It has a minute to go."

"You'd better hope no one else walks in here during that minute."

I held my wrist out, eyes fixed on my watch. So far, things had gone smoothly but I still didn't trust Virgo. Maybe he had fixed the time lock on the vault so that it wouldn't open and I'd be stuck here with no way to get at the money.

The clock clicked very nicely at the end of the minute.

"Open it," I said to Virgo.

His hands trembled and there was a sheen of perspiration on his pudgy face as he worked the com-



ination. I heard the tumblers click as he hit the last number. If he were acting for the benefit of the two women, he was doing an excellent job.

"Open it," I said again, waving the gun under his nose.

Virgo was no longer pale. His face had acquired a light tinge of green, and he was really beginning to worry me. He opened the vault as if he were an old man with palsy.

I yanked the door wide.

The vault was big and square, cabinets along one wall evidently containing the bank's valuable papers. The other wall held shelves—empty shelves. Where there should have been money, there was none.

Virgo didn't have to tell me what had happened to it. Now I knew why he was green, why he was so frightened. *He had taken it himself.*

It was beautiful. With the money gone, only I could be accused of taking it. Why else had I come to the bank and forced Virgo to open the vault? No one would suspect him. He would not only have his wife dead but he would also have all that money to help him enjoy himself with Olivia.

He hadn't been acting at all. Virgo had been frightened and for

a very good reason, I knew now.

He had taken the money from the vault before I got there. I had no time to look for it, no time to force the hiding place from him. About all I could do at this point was to kill him.

I grasped him by the collar and slammed him into the vault, backing him up against the shelves and jamming the gun hard under his chin. "Where is it?"

"Gone," he gasped. "Where you can't find it."

I could feel the perspiration trickling down my neck. I had to do something. The other employees would be arriving, the bank was due to open soon.

I thought of Pete smashing that armored car and ending in the hospital. I had been proud of that idea, but all it had done was give Virgo more money. He had been way ahead of me, his brain working much faster than mine.

I backed off and lifted the gun. Virgo started to shake, sure I was going to kill him, but I had to give the little man credit for having a great deal of nerve. I knew it hadn't been only the money, or getting his wife killed at no cost. It was simply that Virgo *had* to win, had to beat me. I should have realized that after playing golf with him.

Still, I owed Virgo something

that would make him remember me.

I squeezed the trigger, the silenced gun louder than usual in the small vault. Virgo spun and fell to the floor, whimpering in surprise when he found he was still alive.

I had put a bullet into his thigh. It would be some time before he played golf again. I moved fast then, out the door, stripping my mask off as I went, hopping into my car and high-tailing it out of town.

Snick was waiting for me. He held out his hand.

I handed him the money. "You did what I told you to?"

"No problem at all. She'll be in good shape as soon as they take off the tape."

I grinned. Score one for my side. Virgo would be very surprised to find his wife still alive. From the beginning, I had no intention of killing his wife for him. Why should I do Virgo a favor?

"You clean out the bank?" asked Snick.

"There isn't a dollar left in the vault," I said truthfully.

"Next time you need some help, call me," he said.

"I'll do that," I promised.

His wheels threw gravel as he took off. I abandoned the used car within walking distance of my

motel and picked up my own. I still had to pay Pete.

No one at the hospital stopped me even though it was too early for visiting hours. I stepped into Pete's room.

He had a bandage around his head and his leg was in a cast.

"I knew you'd show, Griff," he said. "How did you make out?"

"No problem," I lied. I peeled off the money I owed him and added five hundred. "Here's your cash."

"Listen," he said. "I think maybe you did me a favor."

"Getting you smashed up? You look like a disaster."

"That's the idea. Some lawyer was in here this morning. He says I can sue that armored-car company and collect."

"How much?"

"He figures a hundred thousand."

"He'll take half."

Pete shrugged and winced. "So I'll be fifty thousand ahead. Anytime you have something like this going, call me."

"You'll be the first," I promised.

I walked out of the hospital, thinking that Pete would probably end up making more out of this deal than anyone.

I checked out of my motel, slung my bags into the trunk and headed out of town, pulling up at

a service station and diner on the outskirts.

"Fill it up," I said to the attendant in the station, watching the woman crossing the macadam from the diner.

She was tall and well-built and dressed for traveling in pink hip-hugger slacks, light blue pullover jersey and a white scarf around her head. She wasn't what you would call beautiful but she had a nice, lean body, a wide mouth and long-lashed eyes that could speak a language all their own.

I knew Virgo liked the type. That's why I had imported her to try to get an angle on breaking open Virgo's bank. I hadn't expected him to want to marry her.

"Hello, Olivia," I said.

"No problems?" she asked as she handed me her suitcase.

I sighed. "Plenty. Virgo turned out to be a very sneaky little guy." I placed her suitcase with mine.

"I knew that the first time he propositioned me," she said. "What happened?"

I told her about it as we drove.

It had started to rain and the windshield wipers clicked monotonously.

She let quite a few miles speed by before she started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"You and Virgo," she said. "Each trying to double-cross the other. I think he came out slightly ahead."

"Not really," I said. "He may have the money but when he gets over the shock of finding his wife is still alive, he will realize he can't use it. If he turns up with a great deal of cash, she will be very suspicious. Besides, when he finds you gone, he will suspect that you left with me. That will bother him for a long time."

"You make it sound simple," she said, "but you are forgetting you are out more than ten thousand dollars."

I grinned. "It was worth it. Even an old pro like me can learn something from a potbellied, small-town banker."

"What's that?"

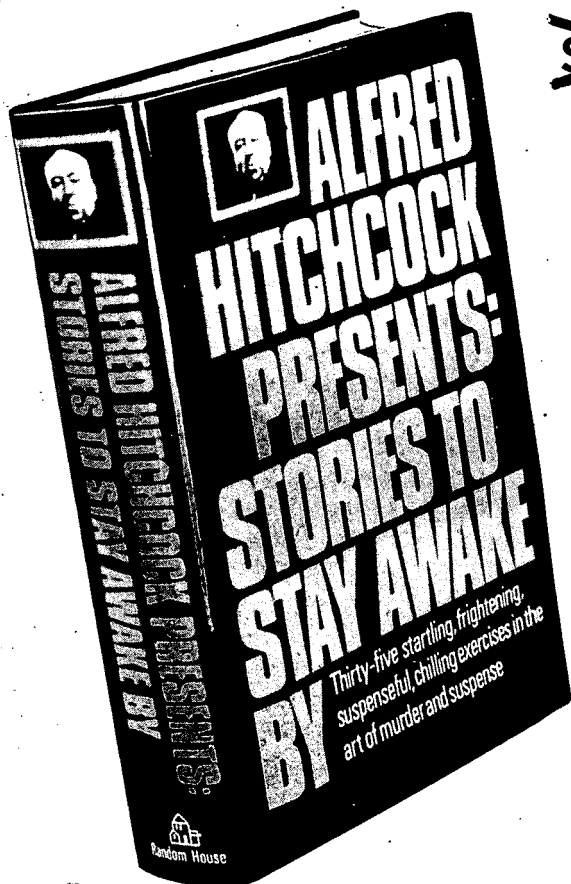
"A man who will cheat at golf will cheat at anything," I said.



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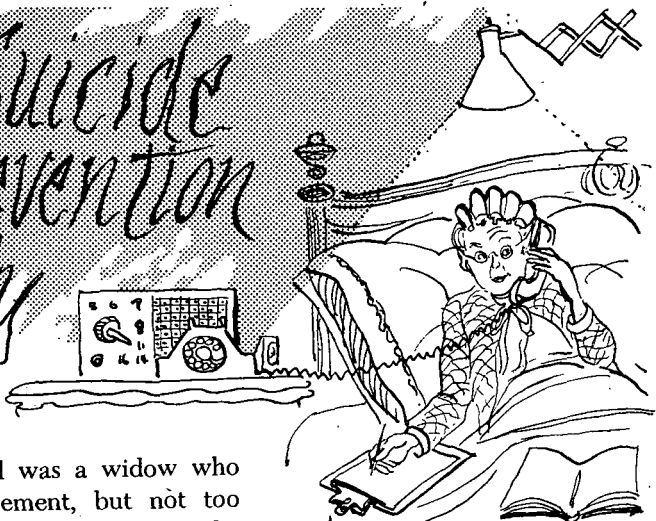
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The Suicide Prevention Lady



by
Pauline C. Smith

Mrs. Marshall was a widow who wished involvement, but not too close; a vicarious involvement, she supposed.

As a volunteer on the Suicide Prevention line, she had found her niche. Not a comfortable one, but exciting; well away from the action which terrified her, close enough so that she could be fearfully stimulated without encountering danger.

She had attended the Training Program and, in the beginning, all the meetings. She had listened and absorbed but had not always agreed; particularly with the Reli-

gious Angle. Mrs. Marshall could not and would not subscribe to the tenet that a volunteer bring religion, God, and the probability of afterlife into her telephonic rhetoric. To do so, she had concluded, was not only against her principles, being agnostic, but against her desires. For if there were life after death, it meant she

must look again upon Mr. Marshall, might even be reunited with him, and that she could not endure.

There was, therefore, no after-life.

She duly informed her callers that they had this life only, nothing more; so they had better clutch it tightly and not experiment with the variables. Thus she had been remarkably successful in her efforts to swerve them from pill-taking, gun-shooting, plastic-bag smothering, jumping out of windows, drowning in pools and all other known means of self-destruction but, always, on her 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. duty, she felt this quaking anxiety: would she be able to swerve the next person who called in the dead of night?

It became a game, a form of expiation.

She not only served regularly on those most difficult Saturday nights when loneliness grew within the hearts of the forsaken but, having no family herself, could also be relied upon as a substitute to serve on holidays when most of the volunteers gathered within family circles, leaving lonely those who had no ties and were apt to become callers on the line.

This was a holiday to Mrs. Marshall, for it was the anniversary of her

husband's death she celebrated.

She had spent it satisfactorily, feeding fish emulsion to her begonias for which she was locally famous, also clipping here and clipping there among her fuchsias and roses. Mrs. Marshall was a gentle and cultured woman and her garden was a delight.

At four o'clock she entered her house, heated water in a rare old teakettle and spooned instant coffee into a thin china teacup. She then walked into her small but perfect parlor and sipped her coffee while sitting on a tufted velvet Victorian couch, waiting for five o'clock.

The moment the Westminster chimes sounded the hour, she moved sedately toward her telephone in the hallway and called the answering service.

"This is Mrs. Marshall signing in on the Suicide Prevention line," she announced in her well-modulated voice, and gave her telephone number.

Now she felt alive and alert. Her nerves became taut, her flesh tingled. She faced fifteen hours, from this moment until eight o'clock the next morning, in beautiful battle against death.

There were no calls until ten o'clock.

By then, Mrs. Marshall had switched off all the lights through-

out the house except for the reading lamp in her bedroom. She was in her nightgown, her hair on rollers. The telephone was on the night table at her elbow. Next to it a small radio, tuned to an FM station, breathed forth faint music. Upon the twin bed next to hers, where once Mr. Marshall had lain his body, rested Mrs. Marshall's Suicide Prevention Manual, open to the report sheets, with a ball-point pen lying in readiness.

She had propped herself against the pillows and was reading the Encyclopedia of Gardening when the phone rang. She turned the book facedown. Her heart began to race as she picked up the phone.

The operator spoke: "I have a call for you, Mrs. Marshall," and Mrs. Marshall said "Hello."

The voice was young and spoke hysterically of a boyfriend on his way to Vietnam, of the hopelessness of war and the vastness of pollution, and what was the use?

As Mrs. Marshall listened attentively, she drew the Suicide Prevention Manual from the adjoining bed to hers, picked up the ball-point pen to write the word FEMALE in the Sex Information Box on the report sheet and to cross out the section on Lethality, for this girl was thinking of guns in connection with war only, and

plastic-bag smothering as applied to smog.

The voice remained on the line from ten until ten-twenty, duly noted by Mrs. Marshall on her report sheet, and became calm at last with Mrs. Marshall's murmured placebos of hope offered soothingly and in accurate doses.

By ten-thirty-five, with the report completed and ready to be mailed to the coordinator, Mrs. Marshall turned to her own private page of records, marked off with two columns of short lines like squadrons of soldiers in upright groups of four with a fifth prone across each group, forming platoons of success under headings titled: LETHAL CALLS SAVED and UNLETHAL CALLS COMFORTED. Each mark represented a survival or revival and the counting-off in groups of five looked like a game score sheet with Mrs. Marshall the general and winner.

Under a third and much narrower column, headed simply: LOST(?), stood a lone soldier, a single digit of failure. However, since it was not the caller who died, but her husband, Mrs. Marshall considered the game half-won, having directed the wife-caller toward the Suicide Prevention Program as a solace and a surcease from guilt, and the

widow-volunteer had proved herself an excellent worker. Almost as good as Mrs. Marshall, but not quite, for Mrs. Marshall was penitentially dedicated to her cause.

The radio poured out a recording of Spontini's *La Vestale* and Mrs. Marshall moved her head slowly in musical appreciation while she read on about the care and feeding of bromeliads from her Encyclopedia of Gardening.

At eleven o'clock the phone rang again.

She laid her book aside, leaned forward to turn down the volume of sound to a whisper, settled her Suicide Prevention Manual on her lap, picked up her ball-point pen in her right hand and the handset in her left.

"I have a call for you," came the voice of the operator.

"Hello," said Mrs. Marshall.

Then she alerted. Her shoulders moved from the soft support of the pillows to hold her at upright attention. "Yes," she said, listening with care to a voice stretched tight in panic.

Words piled up at the other end of the line, forming an explosion of sound to burst through the receiver and assault Mrs. Marshall's eardrum. Words side-stepped and backtracked, they fumbled and raced, with sobbing interludes, so that only through in-

tense concentration was Mrs. Marshall able to piece together the urgent story.

The caller stopped for breath.

Mrs. Marshall seized her advantage.

"Your husband—your *estranged* husband you say—phoned from out of town. Fifteen minutes ago? He is now on his way—" A tiny frown appeared among the hair rollers as Mrs. Marshall waited while the caller interjected a stanza of hysteria.

"But if he has fifty miles to drive," encouraged Mrs. Marshall, busily jotting down some careful figures, "even by freeway it should take him an hour, so there is plenty of time for planning." Then she admitted, reluctantly, that there *was* that fifteen-minute delay in calling, and rapidly recalculated. Mrs. Marshall did not wish to be hurried and the caller was hurrying her. "And he never drives within even the freeway speed limits?" She clicked her tongue and lopped off another ten minutes, coming up with the possible time element of slightly more than a half hour.

She began to tremble, knowing that next she must call out the crisis team to deal with a possibly determined suicide as well as with an emotionally involved wife, but she had to get some definite infor-

mation in order to know how to cope. She had to keep her head.

"All right." She smiled in order to give her voice an added serenity. "What, exactly, did your husband tell you over the phone and how, exactly, did he say it?"

As always, her itemized calm had its desired effect. The woman at the other end of the line drew in her breath audibly. Then her words, strangled with effort but with more coherency, answered the questions in careful continuity.

Mrs. Marshall nodded, jotting down in her own personally devised speedwriting the most important of the facts being related to her:

Can't live w/out wf.

At end of rp.

Wants die.

W/drive to wf.

There shoot self.

Mrs. Marshall flinched. "Does he have a gun?" she asked, her voice rising.

Mrs. Marshall hated a gun . . . It had seemed such a fraud at the time, held dramatically to the head, warning of self-destruction; such a deception merely to prolong an impossible situation. Mrs. Marshall had told her husband so, at the time. She had explained how mismatched they were, how dreadfully mismated, without actually spelling out his crass

boorishness in opposition to her nurtured culture. Even with her certainty that the threat was a spoof, she had been careful while he held the gun to his head, tactful as his finger quivered against the trigger, pointing out only that he would be happier without her. She indicated, without once becoming explicit, that the woman for him was one who could and would descend to his level, which she never could or would. The entire scene had been played with grace and style.

Mrs. Marshall hated a gun, so noisy when fired and, finally, so distressingly messy. She glanced into the shadows along the edge of the rug at the bedroom doorway where the pattern remained forever darker, and knew again the relief that the rug was a good Oriental so that the cleaned stain did not show unless someone were looking for it.

She attended once more to her caller's words, a tumbling explanation of a husband's license to carry the gun, therefore his habit of having it in his pocket, in a drawer close by, in the glove compartment of his car, or in his hand.

Mrs. Marshall shuddered, hating the gun.

The caller worked herself into hysteria once more with her de-

scription of the gun, her estranged husband's affiliation with it, and the shortening of the time span . . .

"Yes," said Mrs. Marshall briskly, "you need help. You need someone with you when your husband arrives. You need someone to talk sense to him, to talk him out of his terrible desire for self-destruction. We have a crisis team . . ."

Ambivalently, the caller gasped, horrified at the word "crisis," yet relieved by the word, "team."

"These people," Mrs. Marshall continued, "are qualified volunteers, trained to handle all situations. I shall have to phone . . ." She glanced at the clock on her bedside table to note that twenty-five minutes of time remained; should the caller be correct in her speed evaluations. "And then, to notify you, I will need your number . . ."

This was followed by the moment of silence Mrs. Marshall expected. Callers always hoped to retain their nonentity. Then the number was given, which Mrs. Marshall duly noted. "Your address," she gently persisted, with another reluctant space of time before disclosure; "and name," thus ripping the last of anonymity from her caller, and thereafter having a name to use to establish further rapport and trust.

She said, with smooth efficiency, "I'll do all I can to help you, Janice. Now be calm and wait."

Mrs. Marshall cradled the phone, turned up the radio volume just enough to recognize a score from *Fidelio*, and dialed the operator at Mental Health to ask that the crisis team be sent in answer to an emergency call.

"They're on their way back from a call right now," informed the operator. "If you will tell me where they're to go next, I'll give them the message as soon as they arrive . . ." The voice hung on a high note as if it were poised with a pencil.

Mrs. Marshall considered the length, breadth and intricacy of the message she had to convey and decided that she would rather explain directly, so gave her own telephone number, instructing the operator to have a member of the crisis team call her as soon as possible.

She cradled the phone and sat back against the pillows, nodding her head, partly in tune with her decision and partly in time with the radio music.

She glanced at her clock, which was serenely ticking out the minutes left, and discovered that there were only twenty—perhaps less than twenty—until the man

with the gun might arrive to blow out his brains . . .

Abruptly, she sat stiffly upright. And maybe the brains of his wife!

She had not yet thought of this possibility, probably because, in her own case, it had seemed so unlikely. She glanced again at the very faint stain on the Oriental, barely picked up by the slanting rays of the lamp, to remember her own husband's personal despair as he held the gun to his head—a total despair, disparaging of self, unlaced with anger at her . . . but perhaps *this* man on his way to *his* wife was filled not only with self-destruction but the urge to destroy.

Mrs. Marshall quaked. She checked the phone number, dialed it, and heard again the breathless, anxiety-clogged voice. "Are you frightened, Janice?" she asked. Then, with a slight impatience, "Of course, I know you are frightened *for* your husband—your estranged husband—but are you frightened *of* him? Might he turn the gun on you? To murder? To take you along with him?" and waited for the torrent of expostulation. "Yes, I phoned. Unfortunately, the crisis team is out on a call, but expected back momentarily. They will arrive, my dear, in plenty of time. I *know*," she said, almost to the point of ex-

asperation, "that time is growing short, so let me improve it by finding out more about you and your estranged husband."

She picked up her pen to jot down, in abbreviation, the more salient points of Janice's marital history:

Incompat. for yrs.

Jan had enuf.

Sep. sued for div.

Husb. wants back.

As soon as she had written down the last, she asked, "Do you want *him*?" and weighed the long pause which was heavy, then further weighed the following loud protestations which were light, and knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, because she had lived through this very incident, that the caller didn't care if her husband lived or died, just so he lived or died at a distance without involving her.

Husb. weak, she wrote down. *A leaner.*

"He leaned on you?" she asked.

She looked at the clock to discover five more minutes had ticked away, and probably the crisis team was back by now, perhaps attempting to ring her for directions. The team members were very efficient, very dedicated to their cause, and they would try desperately to get through in order to save a life.

"You know, of course," said Mrs. Marshall into the phone, "that you would be sacrificing yourself to a lifetime of holding him up should you tell him now that you would take him back and love him if only he would stay alive."

She listened a moment, pursing her lips primly and with disbelief at the mouthpiece as her caller explained that she *would* love him, promising to love and cherish and be his prop, to love him to her dying day if only she could keep him from dying now, adding that she would never be able to bear the guilt of his blood on her hands.

Mrs. Marshall's pursed lips softened with understanding. She knew how to take care of *that*.

The caller pleaded for help, to prevent the husband from, doing what he planned to do tonight. She didn't know if she could handle it alone. She needed moral suasion. She needed numbers of people. She needed a prop, as she had been a prop to him.

The clock informed Mrs. Marshall that ten minutes were now in the past with only another ten minutes in the future. "All right," she said, "I will contact the crisis team. I'll call you back, Janice, or they will arrive."

She cradled the phone and

pushed it away, turned up the volume on the radio so that *Fidelio* rang out with gusto, and Mrs. Marshall savored the tones.

She waited another five minutes of solid enjoyment before turning down the volume and dialing the number of the Mental Health office.

"Mrs. Marshall again," she said quietly. "Has the crisis team returned from its assignment?"

"Mrs. Marshall!" The operator's voice was uneven with frustration. "They *came* back. We've been *trying* to get you. Your phone has been *busy*. Then another call came in. They're *gone* again."

"Well," and Mrs. Marshall's controlled reply put the other's capricious emotionalism to shame, "there is nothing to worry about. I will handle it. Thank you," and pushed back the phone.

She devoted a few more listening moments of pleasure to *Fidelio*, before she snapped off the radio, readjusted the pillows behind her back, tightened a hair roller that had come loose, and dialed the number she now knew by heart.

The clock had ticked away all the time.

"Janice?" she said into the phone, then leaned back to let the questions, the ejaculations, the raucous vehemence and sobbing

insistence clatter against her eardrum.

"Working yourself into such a state," she advised, "will certainly not help you to cope with the situation. Now, he has not arrived as yet. If he drives the way you say he does, he might already have crashed on the freeway and accomplished what he set out to do." She heard no breathing at the other end of the line.

The complete and relief-filled silence moved Mrs. Marshall's eyes toward the very faint stain on the rug that gave her a sister-alliance with the woman she would save tonight.

"On the other hand," she said, noting the clock that had ticked all the minutes away and was now ticking off minutes that were no longer left, "he may still be on his way and will arrive shortly, so you must be prepared."

There, that brought the breathing raggedly alive again.

"No," Mrs. Marshall said, "the crisis team is out on a call. You will have to handle it alone . . ." She listened a moment, sat up straight and said briskly, "Of course you can. You want him to live, don't you? You want to help him. No, no, no! Help is *not* a promise to love and stay together. That is not what he is asking for."

She nodded. "Absolutely. He is

asking for you, but more than that, he is asking for your strength, not to prop him up but to help him to stand alone. That is what he's *really* asking for."

She listened. "Yes, really."

Mrs. Marshall now kept her eyes steadfastly away from the stain on the rug. In order to do so she had to turn her shoulder against the pillows. "You must make him a man, Janice. This is his chance and your opportunity," and wondering if this woman could do it as she listened to the exhausted sobbing.

Mrs. Marshall's own long-ago words came back to her, turned inside out, as she advised, "Now, when he arrives, Janice, do not *believe* in the gun he places at his temple, which is simply a dramatic plea for help. Help that only you can give him, not to lean again, but to become strong and stand alone. Explain to him that you are mismated, explain that he doesn't need *you* as his strength, but a weak woman, so that *he* can be strong."

Mrs. Marshall glanced at the clock to note the minutes that were gone, and the time perhaps still remaining.

"Will you do that, Janice?" she asked, then listened. "Yes, I do think it best. I think it the *only* way."

Now Mrs. Marshall turned her shoulders squarely against the pillows once more and allowed herself a long look at the spot on the rug. *It had been the only way; allowing a life of gentle freedom in which to offer restitution.*

"Janice!" she called into the phone. "He is? You are sure? Janice! Remember what I told you!"

A dull thud rapped her ear.

"Janice," she called into the phone, then realized that the sound she had heard must have been the snap of the receiver dropped to a table.

Janice was there somewhere in a melee of muffled din.

Mrs. Marshall heard a faint blast and identified it as a slammed door. Her ear was pelted with murmured voice corruption—raised, lowered, pleading, adamant, weak, strong—a vibrating confusion of emotion, a backdrop of mixed-up sound that leveled, undulated, evened, leaving a space, a breathless vacuum, an emptiness suddenly filled with the roar of an explosion.

Mrs. Marshall stiffened, the sound being a remembered echo, thinned by a telephone wire, lengthened with time, filling her

with agony, filling her, too, with remorse.

"Janice?" she called faintly into the mouthpiece.

Then she heard the cry . . . She remembered that too—the cry that reached the heights of triumph and fell to failure.

She cradled the phone and stared at the spot on the rug.

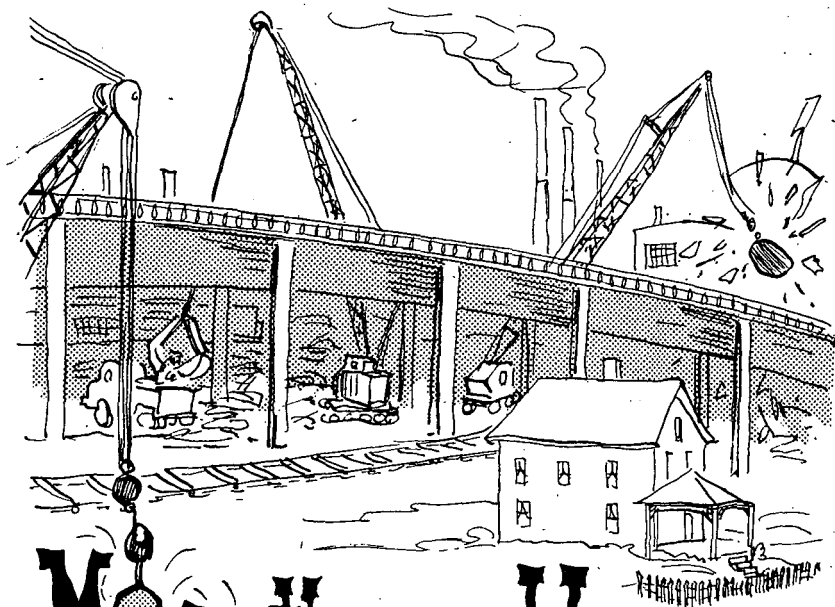
The clock ticked out its brand-new, fresh minutes.

Mrs. Marshall raised the phone, thinking she must contact the crisis team now; Janice would need the crisis team, not to prevent a suicide but to aid a suicide's widow. The phone squealed an electronic protest that the line was in use but not being used, so the connection had not been broken.

Mrs. Marshall cradled it, then drew her private page of records close, and under the column headed LOST(?) she added a second soldier to the first, thinking that she would phone Janice sometime soon—tomorrow, the day after or, perhaps, the day after that—for Janice would make a fine Suicide Prevention Lady.

She would understand suicide, and try to prevent it—in most cases.

It is often found that maternal intuition is not as alien to rational discernment as one might suppose.



More than a Home

by
Donald Olson

In good weather and bad, Momma made the long trip to the state prison to visit her son Bo, who was doing seven years for armed robbery. In the summer, Momma's old friend Francine often drove her up in her battered sedan; in winter she had to go by

bus. She didn't mind; she would rather be sitting on the bus than sitting at home alone, plagued by her sorrows. Furthermore, traveling by bus involved a curious sort

of timelessness conducive to day-dreaming and Momma would sit back with her eyes shut and think about the old days, the old neighborhood as it used to be when Poppa was alive and Bo was a lively youngster whose angelic face and mild manner gave no clue to the essential lawlessness of his nature.

Now, Poppa was gone, Bo was gone, and in another year the neighborhood itself, that raffish triangle of decaying buildings called the Flatiron, would be gone. If it were not for Bo, Momma would just as soon have gone to sleep and never awakened; the only world she could ever relate to with any degree of happiness had all vanished. From her little house by the railroad overpass she could hear, day after day, the dull boom of the wrecker's ball as it razed houses and factories at the far end of the Flatiron, doomed in the name of urban redevelopment.

Amid all the calamities of past and present, Momma clung obstinately to her faith in Bo's innocence. A local hood had implicated Bo in the payroll robbery of Pelletier and Wainwright; a third man fingered had been killed in a shoot-out with the police. A jury had convicted Bo on scanty but damaging evidence. The money,

however, had not been recovered.

"Swear to me you had nothing to do with it," Momma had pleaded. "Swear to me you are innocent and I'll stand by you."

Bo had sworn, and Momma thereafter had lost every cent she had been able to beg and borrow, on futile maneuvers to win a new trial for Bo.

At first Momma had not taken the talk about urban renewal seriously. No one did. It was political double-talk. Nobody, Momma told Francine, would ever touch the Flatiron; at least, God willing, while she was alive.

She laughed when she told Bo about it during one of her visits. To her surprise he didn't think it was funny.

"And you won't either," he told Momma, wounding her with a reproachful flash of his handsome dark eyes, "if they come and tell you you gotta move."

"It won't happen, Bo. Not in my lifetime."

When she was ready to leave, settling the shiny black straw hat on top of her soft white hair, Bo said, "You better check out that urban renewal stuff, Momma."

Surprised by hope, she blew him a kiss through the grille. "Would you care, darling, if they knocked our old house down?"

She watched him timidly, ex-

pecting a sneer. He had vowed never to return to the Flatiron to live! He was going west: Vegas, L.A., where the big action was.

"Sure. I think about the old dump a lot."

This was the very first hint that Bo's imprisonment might be having a salutary effect, that his values might be changing. Momma felt a warm glow all the way home on the bus, but when she reported the happy news to her friend, Francine stuck out her lower lip and seemed to debate the wisdom of speaking her mind.

"Bo care two pins about this dump? Momma, they could bulldoze it off the face of the earth tomorrow and he wouldn't shed a tear."

"He said he cared, Francine. Why would he lie to me?"

Francine had some thoughts about this, but kept them to herself. Momma was a gentle creature, a real saint. Why disillusion her?

Soon after this, a man representing something called the Relocation Office came to see Momma and asked a number of questions which made her wonder if she had been wrong about the situation. She was as evasive as possible with the man, bluntly refusing to answer most of his questions.

She and Francine had a long talk with Monsignor after Mass one morning. Monsignor was an intelligent and farseeing man; there was nothing hidebound about him; and he admitted he was skeptical of the city administration's motives. There were areas more depressed than the Flatiron, if not so ethnically isolated, and the fact that the mayor was Harold Pelletier's cousin and that the Pelletier family, besides controlling Pelletier and Wainwright, owned a vast portion of the land that would be available for lucrative industrial development did not reassure him. More to the point, he was less than happy with the sum the city was prepared to reimburse to the parish for its appropriation of church property. At today's construction costs, it would not begin to pay for a new church and parish house.

"Then it's true, Monsignor?" Momma asked him. "They're going to destroy the church?"

"St. Hedwig's goes under the wrecker's crane the first of the week."

Momma felt as if the earth beneath her feet were about to crumble. If the church could not stop the demolition, then no one could. Sooner or later the machines and men would reach her

own humble little back street.

She could scarcely believe the news could have such a telling effect on Bo. His face went quite white.

"Bo? You all right, honey?"

He pushed his face close to the grille. "Momma, listen to me. You can't let 'em take our house. You hear? You can't let 'em. There must be some kind of law."

She wished Francine were with her. That Bo could feel such emotion about his home brought the tears rushing to her eyes and she looked down so he wouldn't see her crying. Furtively, she blew her nose.

"Bo, does it really mean so much to you? I mean, I never thought you cared. You never wanted to stay home. You couldn't get out of the house fast enough after a meal. How often was you ever home?"

His long lashes dropped. "Momma, you think I don't know that? You think I don't kick myself a dozen times a day for the way I was? I tell you, Momma, you don't know how often I think of that old house of ours. If anything happened to that place while I was in this hole—"

"It won't, Bo!" Momma was already sorry she'd mentioned it, especially since she had done so deliberately; she had wanted to test

the strength of that emotion Bo had revealed on her last visit; she'd had to know if it were real. Now there was no doubt in her mind and she was both happy and anxious.

"Promise me that, Momma? Give me your word they won't touch that house?"

Her word? Could she do that? After all, what could one old woman do to stop the machines of progress? Her word was sacred; she couldn't give it casually, even to Bo.

"I promise you I'll do all I can, Bo. But I don't know. Francine, she says they got a right . . ."

"Momma, you listen to me. If I thought I wasn't never gonna see that house again. I'd bust outa here. I mean it, Momma. Or maybe I'd kill myself. Yeah. Why not? What have I got to live for?"

Momma nearly fainted. "Bo, honey, don't even think such crazy things. You got only eight months left. Think of that."

"I meant what I said, Momma."

She drew herself up and looked him straight in the eye. "Then I promise you, Bo. I give you my word. Nobody's going to take our house away from us. They'll have to drag me out first."

Bo gave her a warm but shaky smile that went straight to her heart.

"You won't be sorry, Momma. When I get outa here we're gonna have a real home. I'm gonna give you things you never dreamed of—"

"Bo, don't. Don't talk foolish. I just want you home, that's all."

Momma couldn't stop crying on the bus, but they were tears of rapture, and when she wasn't crying she was murmuring prayers of gratitude.

Francine was still skeptical. "Momma, if they wanta take your house there ain't a blessed thing you can do about it. It's the law."

"We'll see about that. Bo will do something terrible if he can't have his home to come back to. You shoulda seen his eyes, Francine. You shoulda heard the way he talked."

"All I can say is he musta changed an awful lot since he's been up there."

"He has. He's learned to appreciate the simple things."

In the following weeks Momma prayed that the Redevelopment Board would run out of money, or the administration be run out of office, or that God in his mercy would make all the big machines break down. Meanwhile, the officials who tried to deal with her became less patient and more aggressive. It was not politically wise to antagonize the populace,

but where Momma was concerned they were beginning to realize she was more than just a stubborn old woman. There was something wily and fanatical in her determination to save her house. As fall approached, there were only five houses left in the Flatiron; then four; then three—and still Momma made no move to pack up and get out.

"They gave up before they got near us," she told Bo with a bravely manufactured smile. "They ain't comin' any closer than Rubicoff Street."

"You sure about that, Momma?"

"Would I lie to you, Bo?"

Francine was worried. "Momma, the house has gotta go. You gotta come to terms with those politician ratfinks sooner or later. You better face up to it."

"Bo mustn't find out, Francine. He meant what he said. He loves this place now. More than either me or Poppa ever did. He'd break outa there, or try to, and get himself killed if he thought they was gonna take our house. I can't let that happen, Francine. I can't let him do something foolish."

However, her conscience was troubled by telling Bo such outright lies, so she spoke to Monsignor about it. He said something about venial sins, which she didn't altogether understand but which

made her feel better. Monsignor was a wise man, worldly enough to understand practical matters, yet holy enough to appreciate the perils of practicality. He agreed, in substance, that nothing should be told to Bo that might endanger his chances of getting out of prison at the appointed time.

No frontier home had ever been defended against marauding savages as fiercely as Momma defended her modest home against the incursions of the Flatiron Redevelopment Commission. All manner and persuasion of bureaucrats were pitted against her, while she—feigning madness, illness, confusion—delayed the threatened expulsion until finally, in that muddy waste of the Flatiron, hers was the only edifice still standing. At last the administration lost all patience and abandoned even a pretense of humanity. It issued an ultimatum: either she was out within a week or she would be physically evicted.

Knowing when she was licked, Momma began the tedious job of packing; into boxes and crates and bags went the accumulated treasures and trash of fifty-seven years. She started in the attic and worked downward to the basement.

Francine came to see her the day she finished cleaning out the

basement. "Momma, what's the matter?"

Slumped in a rocking chair and looking more dead than alive, Momma clutched her rosary and quietly wept. She motioned to a long-necked green bottle encrusted with dirt and spider webs.

Francine's dark eyes expanded with alarm. "Momma! You been drinkin'?"

Momma shook her head in a mournful arc. "Poppa made it. During prohibition."

"Ah . . . you been thinkin' about Poppa."

"Hid them. Bottles. Secret place in the cellar. Bo, he used to help. Didn't know what he was doin', but Poppa let him help."

"Momma, you shoulda let me give you a hand with the packin'. Stop cryin' now, Momma. It ain't gonna do no good. Listen, Momma. You gonna be real happy in the new house. A dishwasher! Imagine. And a big kitchen like you said you always wanted. And that *bathroom*, Momma."

Momma didn't respond. Her face was gray with an inexpressible misery.

"Momma, listen. You know what day it is? Just three months from today. Three months, Momma. You gotta get hold of yourself. You gotta make the new house shine for Bo. Oh, take my

word for it, Momma, he'll soon enough forget about this old shack."

Momma could not be consoled. Francine felt a tigerish anger at the city fathers. Bah! Fathers, indeed. Cruel little children is what they were, playing their stupid games and not caring what happened to the folks and their memories.

She sputtered to Momma in this vein for several minutes, trying her best to rouse her friend from her bleak depression, but it was no good; Momma continued to weep.

Francine did more than her share of work in settling the new house for Momma, who seemed to have no spirit or energy left. Somehow they managed to have it looking presentable by the time Bo's release was scheduled.

Francine drove Momma up to the state prison on a beautiful day in June. They arrived after sunset and spent the night in a motel in town. Next morning they were at the gates when Bo came out.

Bo slept most of the way home. Momma was silent and Francine, getting little response, soon ran out of small talk. She sensed there was something wrong with Momma, assuming she was worried what Bo would do when he found out she'd been lying to him

about the old house. Francine had urged Momma to tell him the truth before they got home, but Momma, offering no explanation, had refused.

When they reached the city, Momma said, "You come home with us, Francine. For coffee."

"No, Momma. I gotta get home."

"Ain't nobody waitin' for you."

Bo gave a short, irritated laugh. "What's with you two? You act like I was just goin' in, not gettin' out."

Neither woman replied. Momma's hands, buried in her lap, were busily telling her beads.

"Hey!" Bo suddenly sat up straight. "Where you goin'? This ain't right."

"It's right." Momma turned away so Bo couldn't see her face.

"You can skip the grand tour. I know this hick town like the back of my hand. Just get me home."

"We're almost there, Bo." Something in Momma's voice made Francine give her another funny look. She turned the corner and parked at the curb.

"Here we are, Bo." Momma's voice was a whispered prayer.

"Here we are where?"

Francine tried to help. "Surprise, Bo. The old neighborhood's gone. The whole Flatiron. Urban renewal, like Momma told you."

Momma could feel the tension break in Bo and she made a slight recoil as if he had slapped her.

"You get the hell over to Higgins Avenue! I ain't in no mood for jokes."

"Bo, it ain't no joke," Francine said.

"Move!"

"Bo, it's gone." Then she saw the look on his face and decided she'd better humor him.

No one made a sound as the car passed through the quiet streets. When Francine got to what used to be the parking lot of Frascati's Delicatessen she stopped the car. What had been the congested squalor of the Flatiron looked now like nothing so much as a battlefield on which no tree or building had been left standing.

"Judas Priest," said Bo softly between his teeth. Then he exploded. Francine had never heard such language.

"You lied!" His eyes blazed at Momma. "You came up there and looked me in the face and swore!"

Momma, oddly unmoved, looked at him without apology. "Like you swore to me once, Bo. Yes."

Francine looked from Momma to Bo, then back at Momma. There was an undercurrent that she couldn't understand but could feel.

"You told me they wouldn't

touch it. You said that, Momma."

"I tried, Bo. Francine can tell you how hard I tried."

"But if you'd only *told* me—"

Francine guessed she must have been wrong about Bo after all. There was no doubt he felt genuinely distressed.

"You would have done something bad," said Momma. "You said you would. You said you'd break out of jail. Kill yourself, you said. I was just trying to protect you."

His face seemed grayer than it had in prison. "All that time. All those filthy weeks. Just waitin'. And now—" He swore again, even more viciously.

"You'll like our new house, Bo." She turned to Francine. "But first, take us to the church."

"Drop me at Gino's," muttered Bo.

"It's gone," said Francine.

"To church," repeated Momma. "I want Bo to see the new church."

When they got there, Momma said, "Come in with me, Bo."

"Forget it, Momma. I ain't in the mood."

Momma shrugged and got out. Two enormous marble angels guarded the doors.

Francine didn't speak at first, busy trying to put together fragments of conversation. She didn't

understand what was going on between Momma and Bo, but she didn't dare ask questions, not the way Bo was scowling.

She finally ventured an innocent remark. "Isn't it a beautiful church, Bo? Twice as big as the old one."

Bo regarded the building with smug contempt. "Monsignor musta really put the screws to you suckers."

"We all gave what we could. But I think the rumors must have been true. If anyone asks Monsignor, he just smiles."

"What rumors?"

"That some anonymous person sent Monsignor a bundle of money for the building fund."

"A bundle?"

"An awful lot. Nobody knows just how much."

Francine didn't like the way Bo was looking at her. She was glad when Momma came back to the car. The old woman looked more tranquil; she looked like one who had run out of tears and, no matter what the rest of life brought, would never be able to cry again.

When they got back to the new house and she and Bo were alone together for the first time, Bo said: "I ain't goin' in, Momma. I ain't stayin'."

Once more Momma shrugged. "No. I didn't guess you would."

"Listen, Momma. Before I go, you got somethin' you wanta tell me?"

"What do you mean, Bo?"

"You know what I mean."

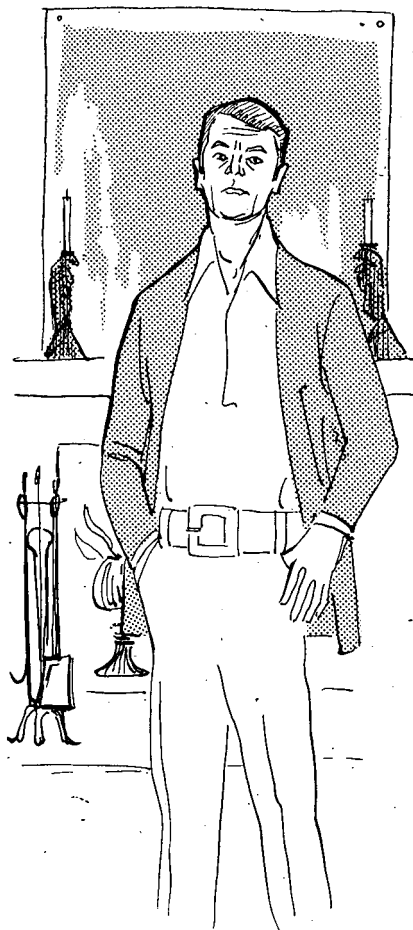
Momma stared at him with unflinching hardness, "It all depends, Bo. Have you got something to tell me?"

His eyes held hers for a full minute, then dropped away. "No, Momma. I ain't got nothin' to tell you."

Momma made a little hopeless gesture of dismissal, unlocked the door and went inside without looking back. Bo stood irresolutely on the sidewalk for a few seconds and then, as if realizing for the first time that all the landmarks of his past and all the gaudy dreams of his future were gone and there was no place else to go, followed her into the new house.



Superfluity is not necessarily disassociated from brevity.



Hand in Glove

The man was a blackmailer," said Inspector Graves, wrinkling his nose in distaste. "There's nothing nastier. Therefore, in my opinion, the person who killed him deserves a vote of thanks, not censure and a possible prison term."

Golightly, standing with his back to the fireplace and jingling his change in his trousers pocket, looked at the inspector with surprise. "A blackmailer?" he inquired. "The newspaper report of the murder made no mention of that."

"Naturally not," said the inspector, "since it was one of the few clues we had to work with in the case. Releasing it to the press would have complicated matters enormously."

"I can understand that," said Golightly. Then, curiously, "What I *can't* understand is how you concluded Clifford was a black-mailer."

The inspector said, "Quite simple, really. We found a list of his victims in a wall safe behind a painting in his bedroom—with the amount of blackmail each one had paid to Clifford, and at what intervals. It was a very revealing document."

"I daresay," Golightly nodded agreement. "It also answers a question that has puzzled me ever since you knocked at my door a few moments ago, Inspector."

"Why I am here, you mean? Yes, Mr. Golightly, your name is on Clifford's list. He was into you for a rather staggering amount, wasn't he?"

"You could say so." Golightly

looked bleakly about his once luxurious flat. Everything had a slightly shabby and uncared-for look now. "I make no secret of the fact that Clifford's murder made me a happy man."

"As it did every other victim on his list," acknowledged the inspector. "And all have admitted it readily, once they realized we were onto Clifford's dirty work. We have, of course, contacted them all. They comprise a ready-made list of suspects, as you will appreciate."

"But you have not been able to discover the murderer?"

"Each of Clifford's other blackmail victims has an unshakable alibi for the evening of Clifford's murder, as it happens," said the inspector sadly. He gave Golightly an expectant glance. "Are you also provided with one, Mr. Golightly?"

Golightly seemed taken aback. "For last Saturday evening?"

"Friday evening. From ten to midnight, approximately."

"Friday, yes, let me see." Golightly frowned in the act of memory, then smiled. "As it happens, I, too, have an alibi, Inspector. I would prefer, however, not to give you her name except in the ultimate extremity. She is what Clifford's blackmail demands on me were all about. I can tell

by James
Holding

you this much: she is a lady of high station and—thus far—unblemished reputation. Do you see my dilemma?"

The inspector sighed. "Perfectly," he said. "Yet if our other line of investigation proves a dead end, we may very well come to your ultimate extremity, Mr. Golightly. It is only fair to warn you."

"Thank you." Golightly bowed. "You do have other clues, then?"

"Only one. A full set of bloody fingerprints on the sill of the rear window by which the killer made his exit from Clifford's home."

"Bloody fingerprints, you say?"

"Yes. As the newspapers reported, Clifford was stabbed with a paper knife, a letter opener. There was a great deal of blood about."

Golightly looked baffled. "Perhaps I am dull," he said, "but if you have a set of fingerprints to work with . . . Aren't they infallible in establishing identity?"

The inspector nodded. "If they are clear and unsmudged, they are infallible. But our bloody fingerprints were far from clear, I regret to say. They were badly smeared. Even without the smearing, they presented certain difficulties."

"What difficulties, Inspector, may I ask?"

"Whoever left bloody fingerprints on Clifford's windowsill was wearing gloves."

Golightly started. "Gloves! Then no wonder it was impossible to learn anything from the prints."

"I said difficult, not impossible," murmured the inspector. "As a matter of fact, I was able to deduce certain basic information from the prints, even though the fingers that made them, were gloved."

"I shall never cease being astonished at police technology," said Golightly. "What could you possibly deduce from prints made by gloved fingers?"

The inspector ticked off his points on his own fingers. "One, I deduced that the gloves worn by Clifford's murderer were of a type that would be very expensive. Under high magnification, the prints showed that the gloves worn by the killer had been string gloves—you know, the woven or knitted type. And not just knitted of the ordinary kind of cotton, but of fine silken thread. Two, some seam stitching showed quite plainly in one of the glove prints, and it was so fine and so carefully contrived that our laboratory had no hesitation in pronouncing that the gloves had been handmade; custom-made, if you prefer. And by a very expensive glove-maker."

"You astound me, Inspector."

"I sometimes astound myself," the inspector said comfortably. "In any event, these and other characteristics of the glove smudges indicated to us that they might provide a feasible, even a fertile, field of inquiry."

"And you followed it up?"

"Just so. I, myself, after a city-wide search, unearthed a custom glover in a byway off Baker Street, Mr. Golightly, who admitted to producing gloves of this particular kind. His testimony is available if needed."

"He must have made such gloves for scores of clients," Golightly suggested.

Inspector Graves shook his head. "Such was not the case. This glover had made only a single pair of gloves like the ones

I described to him. One pair only. Several years ago. Yet by great good luck, his records still contained the name and address of that client."

"Indeed?" said Golightly. "That was good luck, Inspector. For you, if not for me." He shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose," he went on with a wry smile, "that your investigation's success now depends rather heavily upon a show of hands, does it not?"

Inspector Graves nodded regretfully. "If you please, Mr. Golightly."

Golightly stopped jingling his coins. Slowly he withdrew his hands from his trousers pockets and held them out for Graves' inspection.

His right hand had six fingers on it.

» » » » » » » » WATCH OUT « « « « « « « «

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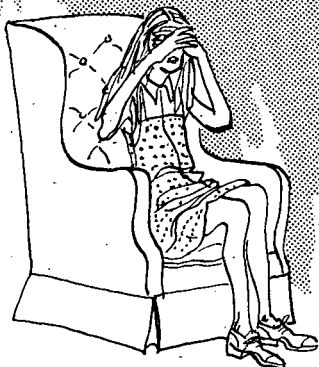
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This is hardly the way hide-and-seek was meant to be played.



The Girl Who Found Things

It was dark by the time Lucas stopped his taxi in the driveway of the Wheeler home and lumbered up the path to the front entrance. He still wore his heavy boots, despite the spring thaw; his mackinaw and knitted cap were reminders of the hard winter that had come and gone.

When Geraldine Wheeler opened the door, wearing her lightweight traveling suit, she shivered at the sight of him. "Come in," she said crisply. "My trunk is inside."

Lucas went through the foyer to the stairway, knowing his way around the house, accustomed to its rich, dark textures and somber furnishings; he was Medvale's only taxi driver. He found the heavy black trunk at the foot of the stairs, and hoisted it on his back. "That all the luggage, Miss Wheeler?"

"That's all, I've sent the rest ahead to the ship. Good heavens, Lucas, aren't you *hot* in that outfit?" She opened a drawer and rummaged through it. "I've prob-

ably forgotten a million things. Gas, electricity, phone . . . Fireplace! Lucas, would you check it for me, please?"

"Yes, Miss," Lucas said. He went into the livingroom, past the white-shrouded furniture. There

He picked up the light body without effort and went through the screen door of the kitchen and out into the back yard, straight to the thickly wooded acreage that surrounded the Wheeler estate. When he found an appropriate

A Novelette by Henry Slesar

were some glowing embers among the blackened stumps, and he snuffed them out with a poker.

A moment later the woman entered, pulling on long silken gloves. "All right," she said breathlessly. "I guess that's all. We can go now."

"Yes, Miss," Lucas said.

She turned her back and he came up behind her, still holding the poker. He made a noise, either a sob or a grunt, as he raised the ash-coated iron and struck her squarely in the back of the head. Her knees buckled, and she sank to the carpet in an ungraceful fall. Lucas never doubted that she had died instantly, because he had once killed an ailing shorthorn bull with a blow no greater. He tried to act as calmly now. He put the poker back into the fireplace, purifying it among the hot ashes. Then he went to his victim and examined her wound. It was ugly, but there was no blood.

place for Geraldine Wheeler's grave, he went to the toolshed for a spade and shovel.

It was spring, but the ground was hard. He was stripped of mackinaw and cap when he was finished. For the first time in months, since the icy winter began, Lucas was warm.

April had lived up to its moist reputation; there was mud on the roads and pools of black water in the driveway. When the big white car came to a halt, its metal skirt was clotted with Medvale's red clay. Rowena, David Wheeler's wife, didn't leave the car, but waited with an impatient frown until her husband helped her out. She put her high heels into the mud, and clucked in vexation.

David smiled, smiled charmingly, forgiving the mud, the rain, and his wife's bad temper. "Come on, it's not so bad," he said. "Only a few steps." He

heard the front door open, and saw his Aunt Faith waving to them. "There's the old gypsy now," he said happily. "Now remember what I told you, darling, when she starts talking about spooks and séances, you just keep a straight face."

"I'll try," Rowena said dryly.

There was affectionate collision between David and his aunt at the doorway; he put his arms around her sizable circumference and pressed his patrician nose to her plump cheek.

"David, my handsome boy! I'm so glad to see you!"

"It's wonderful seeing you, Aunt Faith!"

They were inside before David introduced the two women. David and Rowena had been married in Virginia two years ago, but Aunt Faith never stirred beyond the borders of Medvale County.

The old woman gave Rowena a glowing look of inspection. "Oh, my dear, you're beautiful," she said. "David, you beast, how could you keep her all to yourself?"

He laughed, and coats were shed, and they went into the livingroom together. There, the cheerfulness of the moment was dissipated. A man was standing by the fireplace smoking a cigarette in nervous puffs, and David was

reminded of the grim purpose of the reunion.

"Lieutenant Reese," Aunt Faith said, "this is my nephew, David, and his wife."

Reese was a balding man, with blurred and melancholy features. He shook David's hands solemnly. "Sorry we have to meet this way," he said. "But then, I always seem to meet people when they're in trouble. Of course, I've known Mrs. Demerest for some time."

"Lieutenant Reese has been a wonderful help with my charity work," Aunt Faith said. "And he's been such a comfort since . . . this awful thing happened."

David looked around the room. "It's been years since I was here. Wonder if I remember where the liquor's kept?"

"I'm afraid there is none," Reese said. "There wasn't any when we came in to search the place some weeks ago, when Miss Wheeler first disappeared."

There was a moment's silence. David broke it with, "Well, I've got a bottle in the car."

"Not now, Mr. Wheeler. As a matter of fact, I'd appreciate it if you and I could have a word alone."

Aunt Faith went to Rowena's side. "I'll tell you what. Why don't you and I go upstairs, and I'll show you your room?"

"That would be fine," Rowena said.

"I can even show you the room where David was born, and his old nursery. Wouldn't you like that?"

"That would be lovely," Rowena said flatly.

When they were alone, Reese said, "How long have you been away from Medvale, Mr. Wheeler?"

"Oh, maybe ten years. I've been back here on visits, of course. Once when my father died, four years ago. As you know, our family's business is down south."

"Yes, I knew. You and your sister—"

"My half sister."

"Yes," Reese said. "You and your half sister, you were the only proprietors of the mill, weren't you?"

"That's right."

"But you did most of the managing, I gather. When your parents died, Miss Wheeler kept the estate, and you went to Virginia to manage the mill. That's how it was, right?"

"That's how it was," David said.

"Successfully, would you say?"

David sat in a wing chair, and stretched his long legs. "Lieutenant, I'm going to save you a great deal of time. Geraldine and I

didn't get along. We saw as little of each other as both could arrange, and that was *very* little."

Reese cleared his throat. "Thank you for being frank."

"I can even guess your next question, Lieutenant. You'd like to know when I saw Geraldine last."

"When did you?"

"Three months ago, in Virginia. On her semiannual visit to the mill."

"But you were in Medvale after that, weren't you?"

"Yes. I came up to see Geraldine in March, on a matter of some importance. As my aunt probably told you, Geraldine refused to see me at that time."

"What was the purpose of that visit?"

"Purely business. I wanted Geraldine to approve a bank loan I wished to make to purchase new equipment. She was against it, wouldn't even discuss it. So I left and returned to Virginia."

"And you never saw her again?"

"Never," David said. He smiled, smiled engagingly, and got to his feet. "I don't care if you're a teetotaler like my aunt, Lieutenant, I've got to have that drink."

He went toward the front hall, but paused at the doorway. "In case you're wondering," he said lightly, "I have no idea where

Geraldine is, Lieutenant. No idea at all."

Rowena and Aunt Faith didn't come downstairs until an hour later, after the lieutenant had left. Aunt Faith looked like she had been sleeping; Rowena had changed into a sweater and gray skirt. In the livingroom, they found David, a half-empty bottle of Scotch, and a dying fire.

"Well?" Aunt Faith said. "Was he very bothersome?"

"Not at all," David said. "You look lovely, Rowena."

"I'd like a drink, David."

"Yes, of course." He made one for her, and teased Aunt Faith about her abstinence. She didn't seem to mind. She wanted to talk, about Geraldine.

"I just can't understand it," she said. "Nobody can, not the police, not anybody. She was all set for that Caribbean trip, some of her bags were already on the ship. You remember Lucas, the cab-driver? He came out here to pick her up and take her to the station, but she wasn't here. She wasn't anywhere."

"I suppose the police have checked the usual sources?"

"Everything. - Hospitals, morgues, everywhere. Lieutenant Reese says almost anything could have happened to her. She might have been robbed and murdered;

she might have lost her memory; she might even have—" Aunt Faith blushed. "Well, this I'd *never* believe, but Lieutenant Reese says she might have disappeared deliberately—with some *man*."

Rowena had been at the window, drinking quietly. "I know what happened," she said.

David looked at her sharply.

"She just left. She just walked out of this gloomy old house and this crawly little town. She was sick of living alone. Sick of a whole town waiting for her to get married. She was tired of worrying about looms and loans and debentures. She was sick of being herself. That's how a woman can get."

She reached for the bottle, and David held her wrist. "Don't," he said. "You haven't eaten all day."

"Let me go," Rowena said softly.

He smiled, and let her go.

"I think the lieutenant was right," Rowena said. "I think there was a man, Auntie. Some vulgar type. Maybe a coal digger or a truck driver, somebody without any *charm* at all." She raised her glass in David's direction. "No charm at all."

Aunt Faith stood up, her plump cheeks mottled. "David, I have an idea—about how we can find Ger-

aldine, I mean. I'm certain of it."

"Really?"

"But you're not going to agree with me. You're going to give me that nice smile of yours and you're going to humor me. But whether you approve or not, David, I'm going to ask Iris Lloyd where Geraldine is."

David's eyebrows made an arc. "Ask who?"

"Iris Lloyd," Aunt Faith said firmly. "Now don't tell me you've never heard of that child. There was a story in the papers about her only two months ago, and heaven knows I've mentioned her in my letters a dozen times."

"I remember," Rowena said, coming forward. "She's the one who's . . . psychic or something. Some sort of orphan?"

"Iris is a ward of the state, a resident at the Medvale Home for Girls. I've been vice-chairman of the place for donkey's years, so I know all about it. She's sixteen and amazing, David, absolutely uncanny!"

"I see." He hid an amused smile behind his glass. "And what makes Iris such a phenomenon?"

"She's a seer, David, a genuine clairvoyant. I've told you about this Count Louis Hamon, the one who called himself Cheiro the Great? Of course, he's dead now, he died in 1936, but he was gifted

in the same way Iris is. He could just *look* at a person's mark and know the most astounding things—"

"Wait a minute. You really think this foundling can tell us where Geraldine is? Through some kind of séance?"

"She's not a medium. I suppose you could call her a *finder*. She seems to have the ability to *find* things that are lost. People, too."

"How does she do it, Mrs. Demerest?" Rowena asked.

"I can't say. I'm not sure Iris can either. The gift hasn't made her happy, poor child—such talents rarely do. For a while, it seemed like nothing more than a parlor trick. There was a Sister Theresa at the Home, a rather befuddled old lady who was always misplacing her thimble or what-have-you, and each time Iris was able to find it—even in the unlikeliest places."

David chuckled. "Sometimes kids *hide* things in the unlikeliest places. Couldn't she be some sort of prankster?"

"But there was more," Aunt Faith said gravely. "One day, the Home had a picnic at Crompton Lake. They discovered that an eight-year-old girl named Dorothea was missing. They couldn't find her, until Iris Lloyd began screaming."

"Screaming. . . ?" Rowena said.

"These insights cause her great pain. But she was able to describe the place where they would find Dorothea; a small natural cave, where Dorothea was found only half-alive from a bad fall she had taken."

Rowena shivered.

"You were right," David said pleasantly. "I can't agree with you, Auntie. I don't go along with this spirit business; let's leave it up to the police."

Aunt Faith sighed. "I knew you'd feel that way. But I have to do this, David. I've arranged with the Home to have Iris spend some time with us, to become acquainted with the . . . aura of Geraldine that's still in the house."

"Are you serious? You've asked that girl *here*?"

"I knew you wouldn't be pleased. But the police can't find Geraldine, they haven't turned up a clue. Iris can."

"I won't have it," he said tightly. "I'm sorry, Auntie, but the whole thing is ridiculous."

"You can't stop me. I was only hoping that you would cooperate." She looked at Rowena, her eyes softening. "You understand me, my dear. I know you do."

Rowena hesitated, then touched the old woman's hands. "I do,

Mrs. Demerest." She looked at David with a curious smile. "And I'd like nothing better than to meet Iris."

Ivy failed to soften the Medvale Home's cold stone substance and ugly lines. It had been built in an era that equated orphanages with penal institutions, and its effect upon David was depressing.

The head of the institution, Sister Clothilde, entered her office, sat down briskly, and folded her hands. "I don't have to tell you that I'm against this, Mrs. Demerest," she said. "I think it's completely wrong to encourage Iris in these delusions of hers."

Aunt Faith seemed cowed by the woman; her reply was timid. "Delusions, Sister? It's a gift of God."

"If this . . . ability of Iris' has any spiritual origin, I'm afraid it's from quite another place. Not that I admit there is a gift."

David turned on his most charming smile, but Sister Clothilde seemed immune to it.

"I'm glad to see I have an ally," he said. "I've been telling my aunt that it's all nonsense—"

Sister Clothilde bristled. "It's true that Iris has done some remarkable things which we're at a loss to explain. But I'm hoping she'll outgrow this—whatever it is,

and be just a normal, happy girl. As she is now—”

“Is she very unhappy?” Aunt Faith asked sadly.

“She’s undisciplined, you might even say wild. In less than two years, when she’s of legal age, we’ll be forced to release her from the Home, and we’d very much like to send her away a better person than she is now.”

“But you *are* letting us have her, Sister? She can come home with us?”

“Did you think my poor objections carried any weight, Mrs. Demerest?”

A moment later, Iris Lloyd was brought in.

She was a girl in the pony stage, long gawky arms and legs protruding from a smock dress that had been washed out of all color and starched out of all shape. Her stringy hair was either dirty blonde or just dirty; David guessed the latter. She had a flat-footed walk, and kept twisting her arms. She kept her eyes lowered as Sister Bertha brought her forward.

“Iris,” Sister Clothilde said, “you know Mrs. Demerest. And this is her nephew, Mr. Wheeler.”

Iris nodded. Then, in a flash almost too sudden to be observed, her eyes came up and stabbed them with such an intensity of ei-

ther hostility or malice that David almost made his surprise audible. No one else, however, seemed to have noticed.

“You remember me, Iris,” Aunt Faith said. “I’ve been coming here at least once a year to see all you girls.”

“Yes, Mrs. Demerest,” Iris whispered.

“The directors have been good enough to let us take you home with us for a while. We need your help, Iris. We want you to see if you can help us find someone who is lost.”

“Yes, Mrs. Demerest,” she answered serenely. “I’d like to come home with you. I’d like to help you find Miss Wheeler.”

“Then you know about my poor niece, Iris?”

Sister Clothilde clucked. “The Secret Service couldn’t have secrets here, Mrs. Demerest. You know how girls are.”

David cleared his throat, and stood up. “I guess we can get started any time. If Miss Lloyd has her bags ready . . .”

Iris gave him a quick smile at that, but Sister Clothilde wiped it off with, “Please call her Iris, Mr. Wheeler. Remember that you’re still dealing with a child.”

When Iris’ bags were in the trunk compartment, she climbed between David and his aunt in

the front seat, and watched with interest as David turned the key in the ignition.

"Say," she said, "you wouldn't have a cigarette, would you?"

"Why, Iris!" Aunt Faith gasped.

She grinned. "Never mind," she said lightly. "Just never mind." Then she closed her eyes, and began to hum. She hummed to herself all the way to the Wheeler house.

David drove into town that afternoon, carrying a long list of groceries and sundries that Aunt Faith deemed necessary for the care and feeding of a sixteen-year-old girl.

He was coming out of the Medvale Supermarket when he saw Lucas Mitchell's battered black taxicab rolling slowly down the back slope of the parking lot. He frowned and walked quickly to his own car, but as he put the groceries in the rear, he saw Lucas' cab stop beside him.

"Hello, Mr. Wheeler," Lucas said, leaning out the window.

"Hello, Lucas. How's business?"

"Could I talk to you a minute, Mr. Wheeler?"

"No," David said. He went around front and climbed into the driver's seat. He fumbled in his pocket for the key, and the sight of Lucas leaving his cab made it

seem much more difficult to find.

"I've got to talk to you, Mr. Wheeler."

"Not here," David said. "Not here and not now, Lucas."

"It's important. I want to ask you something."

"For the love of Mike," David said, gritting his teeth. He found the key at last, and shoved it into the slit on the dashboard. "Get out of the way, Lucas, I can't stop now."

"That girl, Mr. Wheeler. Is it true about the girl?"

"What girl?"

"That Iris Lloyd. She does funny things, that one. I'm afraid of her, Mr. Wheeler, I'm afraid she'll find out what we did."

"Get out of the way!" David shouted. He turned the key, and stomped the accelerator to make the engine roar a threat. Lucas moved away, bewildered, and David backed the car out sharply and drove off.

He got home to find Rowena pacing the livingroom. Her agitation served to quiet his own.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"I wouldn't know for sure. Better ask your aunt."

"Where is she?"

"In her room, lying down. All I know is she went up to see if dear little Iris was awake, and they had some kind of scene. I caught only

a few of the words, but I'll tell you one thing, that girl has the vocabulary of a longshoreman."

David grunted. "Well, maybe it'll knock some sense into Aunt Faith. I'll go up to see her, and tell her I'll take that little psychic delinquent back where she came from—"

"I wouldn't bother her now, she's not feeling well."

"Then I'll see the little monster. Where is she?"

"Next door to us, in Geraldine's room."

At the door, he lifted his hand to knock, but the door was flung open before his knuckles touched wood.

Iris looked out, her hair tumbled over one eye. Her mouth went from petulant to sultry, and she put her hands on the shapeless uniform where her hips should be.

"Hello, handsome," she said. "Auntie says you went shopping for me."

"What have you been up to?" He walked in and closed the door. "My aunt isn't a well woman, Iris, and we won't put up with any bad behavior. Now, what happened here?"

She shrugged, and walked back to the bed. "Nothing," she said sullenly. "I found a butt in an ash tray and was taking a drag when she walked in. You'd think I was

burning the house down the way she yelled."

"I heard you did some fancy yelling yourself. Is that what the Sisters taught you?"

"They didn't teach me anything worthwhile."

Suddenly, Iris changed; face, posture, everything. In an astonishing transformation, she was a child again.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered. "I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Wheeler. I didn't mean to do anything wrong."

He stared at her, baffled, not knowing how to take the alteration of personality. Then he realized that the door had opened behind him, and that Aunt Faith had entered.

Iris fell on the bed and began to sob, and with four long strides, Aunt Faith crossed the room and put her plump arms around her in maternal sympathy.

"There, there," she crooned, "it's all right, Iris. I know you didn't mean what you said, it's the Gift that makes you this way. And don't worry about what I asked you to do. You take your time about Geraldine, take as long as you like."

"Oh, but I *want* to help!" Iris said fervently. "I really do, Aunt Faith." She stood up, her face animated. "I can *feel* your niece in

this house. I can almost hear her—whispering to me—telling me where she is!”

“You can?” Aunt Faith said in awe. “Really and truly?”

“Almost, almost!” Iris said, spinning in an awkward dance. She twirled in front of a closet, and opened the door; there were still half a dozen hangers of clothing inside. “These are *her* clothes. Oh, they’re so beautiful! She must have looked beautiful in them!”

David snorted. “Has Iris ever seen a photo of Geraldine?”

The girl took out a gold lamé evening gown and held it in her arms. “Oh, it’s so lovely! I can *feel* her in this dress, I can just *feel* her!” She looked at Aunt Faith with wild happiness. “I just know I’m going to be able to help you!”

“Bless you,” Aunt Faith said. Her eyes were damp.

Iris was on her best behavior for the rest of the day; her mood extended all the way through dinner. It was an uncomfortable meal for everyone except the girl. She asked to leave the table before coffee was served, and went upstairs.

When the maid cleared the dinner table, they went to the livingroom, and David said, “Aunt Faith, I think this is a terrible mistake.”

“Mistake, David? Explain that.”

“This polite act of Iris’. Can’t you see it’s a pose?”

The woman stiffened. “You’re wrong. You don’t understand psychic personalities. It wasn’t *her* swearing at me, David, it was this demon that possesses her. The same spirit that gives her the gift of insight.”

Rowena laughed. “It’s probably the spirit of an old sailor, judging from the language. Frankly, Aunt Faith, to me she seems like an ordinary little girl.”

“You’ll see,” Aunt Faith said stubbornly. “You just wait and see how ordinary she is.”

As if to prove Aunt Faith’s contention, Iris came downstairs twenty minutes later wearing Geraldine Wheeler’s gold lamé gown. Her face had been smeared with an overdose of makeup, and her stringy hair clumsily tied in an upsweep that refused to stay up. David and Rowena gawked at the spectacle, but Aunt Faith was only mildly perturbed.

“Iris, dear,” she said, “what have you done?”

She minced into the center of the room. She hadn’t changed her flat-heeled shoes, and the effect of her attempted gracefulness was almost comic; but David didn’t laugh.

“Get upstairs and change,” he



said tightly. "You've no right to wear my sister's clothes."

Her face fell in disappointment and she looked at Aunt Faith. "Oh, Aunt Faith!" she wailed.

"You know what I told you! I *have* to wear your niece's clothes, to feel her . . . aura!"

"Aura, my foot!" David said. She stared at him, stunned.

Then she fell into the wing chair by the fireplace and sobbed. Aunt Faith quickly repeated her ministrations of that afternoon, and chided David.

"You shouldn't have said that!" she said angrily. "The poor girl is trying to help us, David, and you're spoiling it!"

"Sorry," he said wryly. "I guess I'm just not a believer, Aunt Faith."

"You won't even give her a chance!"

Aunt Faith waited until Iris' sobs quieted, her face thoughtful. Then she leaned close to the girl's ear. "Iris, listen to me. You remember those things you did at the Home? The way you found things for Sister Theresa?"

Iris blinked away the remainder of her tears. "Yes."

"Do you think you could do that again, Iris? Right now, for us?"

"I—I don't know. I could try."

"Will you let her try, David?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I want you to hide something, or name some object you've lost or misplaced, perhaps somewhere in this house."

"This is silly. It's a parlor game—"

"David!"

He frowned. "All right, have it your own way. How do we play

this little game of hide-and-seek?"

Rowena said, "David, what about the cat?"

"The cat?"

"You remember. You once told me about a wool kitten you used to have as a child. You said you lost it somewhere in the house when you were five, and you were so unhappy about it that you wouldn't eat for days."

"That's preposterous. That's thirty years ago—"

"All the better," Aunt Faith said. "All the better, David." She turned to the girl. "Do you think you can find it, Iris? Could you find David's cloth kitten?"

"I'm not sure. I'm never sure, Aunt Faith."

"Just try, Iris. We won't blame you if you fail. It might have been thrown out ages ago, but try anyway."

The girl sat up, and put her face in her hands.

"David," Aunt Faith whispered, "put out the light."

David turned off the one table lamp that lit the room. The flames of the fireplace animated their shadows.

"Try, Iris," Aunt Faith encouraged.

The clock on the mantelpiece revealed its loud tick. Then Iris dropped her hands limply into her lap, and she leaned against the

high back of the wing chair with a long, troubled sigh.

"It's a trance," Aunt Faith whispered. "You see it, David, you must see it. The girl is in a genuine trance."

"I wouldn't know," David said.

Iris' eyes were closed, and her lips were moving. There were drops of spittle at the corners of her mouth.

"What's she saying?" Rowena said. "I can't hear her."

"Wait! You must wait!" Aunt Faith cautioned.

Iris' voice became audible. "Hot," she said. "Oh, it's so hot . . . so hot . . ." She squirmed in the chair, and her fingers tugged at the neckline of the evening dress. "So hot back here!" she said loudly. "Oh, please! Oh, please! Kitty is hot! Kitty is hot!"

Then Iris screamed, and David jumped to his feet. Rowena came to his side and clutched his arm.

"It's nothing!" David said. "Can't you see it's an act?"

"Hush, please!" Aunt Faith said. "The girl is in pain!"

Iris moaned and thrashed in the chair. There were beads of perspiration on her forehead now, and her squirming, twisting body had all the aspects of a soul in hell-fire.

"Hot! Hot!" she shrieked. "Behind the stove! Oh, please, oh

please, oh please . . . so hot . . . kitty so hot . . ." Then she sagged in the chair and groaned.

Aunt Faith rushed to her side and picked up the thin wrists. She rubbed them vigorously, and said, "You heard her, David, you heard it for yourself. Can you doubt the girl now?"

"I didn't hear anything. A lot of screams and moans and gibberish about heat. What's it supposed to mean?"

"You *are* a stubborn fool! Why, the kitten's behind the stove, of course, where you probably stuffed it when you were a little brat of a boy!"

Rowena tugged his arm. "We could find out, couldn't we? Is the same stove still in the kitchen?"

"I suppose so. There's some kind of electronic oven, too, but they've never moved the old iron monster, far as I know."

"Let's look, David, please!" Rowena urged.

Iris was coming awake. She blinked and opened her eyes, and looked at their watching faces. "Is it there?" she said. "Is it where I said it was? Behind the stove in the kitchen?"

"We haven't looked yet," David said.

"Then look," Aunt Faith commanded.

They looked, Rowena and Da-

vid, and it was there, a dust-covered cloth kitten, browned and almost destroyed by three decades of heat and decay; but it was there.

David clutched the old plaything in his fist, and his face went white. Rowena looked at him sadly, and thought he was suffering the pangs of nostalgia, but he wasn't. He was suffering from fear.

In the beginning of May, the rains vanished and were replaced by a succession of sunlit days. Iris Lloyd began to spend most of her time outdoors, communing with nature or her own cryptic thoughts.

That was where David found her one midweek afternoon, lying on the grass amid a tangle of daisies. She was dissecting one in an ancient ritual.

"Well," David said, "what's the answer?"

She smiled coyly, and threw the disfigured daisy away. "You tell me, Uncle David."

"Cut out the Uncle David stuff." He bent down to pick up the mutilated flower, and plucked off the remaining petals. "Loves me not," he said.

"Who? Your wife?" She smirked at him boldly. "You can't fool me, Uncle David. I know all about it."

He started to turn away, but she caught his ankle. "Don't go away. I want to talk."

He came back and squatted down to her level. "Look, what's the story with you, Iris? You've been here over a week and you haven't done anything about—well, you know what. This is just a great big picnic for you, isn't it?"

"Sure it is," she said. "You think I want to go back to that sticky Home? It's better here." She lay back on the grass. "No uniforms. No six a.m. prayers. None of that junk they call food . . ." She grinned. "And a lot nicer company."

"I suppose I should say thank you."

"There's nothing you can say I don't know already." She tittered. "Did you forget? I'm psychic."

"Is it really true, Iris," he said casually, "or is it some kind of trick? I mean, these things you do."

"I'll show you if it's a trick." She covered her eyes with both hands. "Your wife hates you," she said. "She thinks you're rotten. You weren't even married a year when you started running around with other women. You never even went to the mill, not more'n once or twice a month, that was how *you* ran the business. All *you*

knew how to do was spend the money."

David's face had grown progressively paler during her recitation. Now he grabbed her thin forearm. "You little brat! You're not psychic! You're an eavesdropper!"

"Let go of my arm!"

"Your room is right next door. You've been listening!"

"All right!" she squealed. "You think I could help hearing you two arguing?"

He released her wrist. She rubbed it ruefully, and then laughed, deciding it was funny. Suddenly she flung herself at him and kissed him on the mouth, clutching him with her thin, strong fingers.

He pushed her away, amazed. "What do you think you're doing?" he said roughly. "You dumb kid!"

"I'm not a kid!" she said. "I'm almost seventeen!"

"You were sixteen three months ago!"

"I'm a woman!" Iris shrieked. "But you're not even a man!" She struck him a blow on the chest with a balled fist, and it knocked the breath out of him. Then she turned and ran down the hill toward the house.

He returned home through the back of the estate and entered the kitchen. Aunt Faith was giving

Hattie some silverware-cleaning instructions at the kitchen table. She looked up and said, "Did you call for a taxi, David?"

"Taxi? No, why should I?"

"I don't know. But Lucas' cab is in the driveway; he said he was waiting for you."

Lucas climbed out of the cab at David's approach. He peeled off the knitted cap and pressed it against his stomach.

"What do you want, Lucas?"

"To talk, Mr. Wheeler, like I said last week."

David climbed into the rear seat. "All right," he said, "drive someplace. We can talk while you're driving."

"Yes, sir."

Lucas didn't speak again until they were out of sight of the estate; then he said, "I did what you told me, Mr. Wheeler, 'zactly like you said. I hit her clean, she didn't hurt a bit, no blood. Just like an old steer she went down, Mr. Wheeler."

"All right," David said harshly. "I don't want to hear about it anymore, Lucas, I'm satisfied. You should be, too. You got your money, now forget about it."

"I picked her up," Lucas said dreamily. "I took her out in the woods, like you said, and I dug deep, deep as I could. The ground was awful hard then, Mr.

Wheeler, it was a lot of work. I smoothed it over real good, ain't nobody could guess what was there. Nobody . . . except—"

"Is it that girl? Is that what's bothering you?"

"I heard awful funny things about her, Mr. Wheeler. About her findin' things, findin' that little kid what fell near Crompton Lake. She's got funny eyes. Maybe she can see right into that woman's grave . . ."

"Stop the car, Lucas!"

Lucas put his heavy foot on the brake.

"Iris Lloyd won't find her," David said, teeth clenched. "Nobody will. You've got to stop worrying about it. The more you worry, the more you'll give yourself away."

"But she's right behind the house, Mr. Wheeler! She's so close, right in the woods . . ."

"You've got to forget it, Lucas, like it never happened. My sister's disappeared, and she's not coming back. As for the girl, let me worry about her."

He clapped Lucas' shoulder in what was meant to be reassurance, but his touch made Lucas stiffen.

"Now take me home," David said.

He worried about Iris for another five days, but she seemed to

have forgotten the purpose of her stay completely. She was a house guest, a replacement for the missing Geraldine, and Aunt Faith's patience seemed inexhaustible as she waited for the psychic miracle to happen.

The next Thursday night, in their bedroom, Rowena caught David's eyes in the vanity mirror and started to say something about the mill.

"Shut up," he said pleasantly.

"Don't say another word. I've found out that Iris can hear every nasty little quarrel in this room, so let's declare a truce."

"She doesn't have to eavesdrop, does she? Can't she read minds?" She swiveled around to face him. "Well, she's not the only clairvoyant around here. I can read her mind, too."

"Oh?"

"It's easy," Rowena said bitterly. "I can read every wicked thought in her head, every time she looks at you. I'm surprised you haven't noticed."

"She's a child, for heaven's sake."

"She's in love with you."

He snorted, and went to his bed.

"You're her Sir Calahad," she said mockingly. "You're going to rescue her from that evil castle where they're holding her pris-

oner. Didn't you know that. . . ?"

"Go to sleep, Rowena."

"Of course, there's still one minor obstruction to her plans. A small matter of your wife. But then, I've never been much of a hindrance to your romances, have I?"

"I've asked you for a truce," he said.

She laughed. "You're a pacifist, David, that's part of your famous charm. That's why you came up here in March, wasn't it? To make a truce with Geraldine?"

"I came here on business."

"Yes, I know. To keep Geraldine from sending you to prison, wasn't that the business?"

"You don't know anything about it."

"I have eyes, David. Not like Iris Lloyd, but eyes. I know you were taking money from the mill, too much of it. Geraldine knew it, too. How much time did she give you to make up the loss?"

David thought of himself as a man without a temper, but he found one now, and lost it just as quickly. "Not another word, you hear? I don't want to hear another word!"

He lay awake for the next hour, his eyes staring sightlessly into the dark of the room.

He was still awake when he heard the shuffle of feet in the

corridor outside. He sat up, listening, and heard the quiet click of a latching door.

He got out of bed and put on his robe and slippers. There was a patch of moonlight on his wife's pillow; Rowena was asleep. He went noiselessly to the door and opened it.

Iris Lloyd, in a nightdress, was walking slowly down the stairway to the ground floor, her blonde head rigid on her shoulders, moving with the mechanical grace of the somnambulist.

At the end of the hall, Aunt Faith opened her door and peered out, wide-eyed. "Is that you, David?"

"It's Iris," David said.

Aunt Faith came into the hallway, tying the housecoat around her middle, her hands shaking. David tried to restrain her from following the girl, but his aunt was stubborn.

They paused at the landing. Iris, her eyes open and unblinking, was moving frenetically around the front hall.

"What did I forget?" the girl mumbled. "What did I forget?"

Aunt Faith reached for David's arm.

"You're late," Iris said, facing the front door. "It's time we were going. . . ." She whirled and seemed to be looking straight at

her spectators, without seeing them.

"We have to be going!" she said, almost tearfully. "Oh, please get my luggage. I'm so nervous. I'm so afraid . . ."

"It's a trance," Aunt Faith whispered, squeezing his hand. "Oh, David, this may be it!"

"What did I forget?" Iris quavered. "Gas, electricity, phone, fireplace . . . Is the fireplace still lit? Oh!" She sobbed suddenly, and put her face in her hands.

David took a step toward her, and Aunt Faith said, "Don't! Don't waken her!"

Now Iris was walking, a phantom in the loose gown, toward the back of the house. She went to the kitchen, and opened the screen door.

"She's going outside!" David said. "We can't let her—"

"Leave her alone, David! Please, leave her alone!"

Iris stepped outside into the back yard, following a path of moonlight that trailed into the dark woods.

"Iris!" David shouted. "Iris!"

"No!" Aunt Faith cried. "Don't waken her! You mustn't!"

"You want that girl to catch pneumonia?" David said furiously. "Are you crazy? Iris!" he shouted again.

She stopped at the sound of her

name, turned, and the eyes went from nothingness to bewilderment. Then, as David's arms enclosed her, she screamed and struck at him. He fought to drag her back to the house, pinning her arms to her side. She was sobbing bitterly by the time he had her indoors.

Aunt Faith fluttered about her with tearful cries. "Oh, how could you do that, David?" she groaned. "You know you shouldn't waken a sleepwalker, you know that!"

"I wasn't going to let that child catch her death of cold! That would be a fine thing to tell the Sisters, wouldn't it, Auntie? That we let their little girl die of pneumonia?"

Iris had quieted, her head still cradled in her arms. Now she looked up, and studied their strained faces. "Aunt Faith . . ."

"Are you all right, Iris?"

There was still a remnant of the sleepwalker's distant look in her round eyes. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I'm all right. I think I'm ready now, Aunt Faith. I can do it now."

"Do it now? You mean . . . tell us where Geraldine is?"

"I can try, Aunt Faith."

The old woman straightened up, her manner transformed. "We must call Lieutenant Reese, David. Right now. He'll want to hear anything Iris says."

"Reese? It's after two in the morning!"

"He'll come," Aunt Faith said grimly. "I know he will. I'll telephone him myself; you take Iris to her room."

David helped the girl up the stairs, frowning at the closeness with which she clung to his side. Her manner was meek. She fell on her bed, her eyes closed. Then the eyes opened, and she smiled at him. "You're scared," she said.

He swallowed hard, because it was true. "I'm sending you back," he said hoarsely. "I'm not letting you stay in this house another day. You're more trouble than you're worth, just like Sister Clothilde said."

"Is that the reason, David?"

She began to laugh. Her laughter angered him, and he sat beside her and clamped his hand over her mouth.

"Shut up!" he said. "Shut up, you little fool!"

She stopped laughing. Her eyes, over the fingers of his hand, penetrated his. He put his arm to his side.

Iris leaned toward him. "David," she said sensuously, "I won't give you away. Not if you don't want me to."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said uncertainly. "You're a fraud."

"Am I? You don't believe that."

She leaned closer still. He grabbed her with brutal suddenness and kissed her mouth. She moved against him, moaning, her thin fingers plucking at the lapel of his robe.

When they parted, he wiped his mouth in disgust and said, "What part of hell did you come from anyway?"

"David," she said dreamily, "you'll take me away from that place, won't you? You won't let me go back there, will you?"

"You're crazy! You know I'm married—"

"That doesn't matter. You can divorce that woman, David. You don't love her anyway, do you?"

The door opened. Rowena, imperious in her nightgown, looked at them with mixed anger and disdain.

"Get out of here!" Iris shrieked. "I don't want you in my room!"

"Rowena—" David turned to her.

His wife said, "I just came in to tell you something, David. You were right about the walls between these rooms."

"I hate you!" Iris shouted. "David hates you, too! Tell her, David, why don't you tell her?"

"Yes," Rowena said. "Why don't you, David? It's the only thing you haven't done so far."

He looked back and forth between them, the hot-eyed young girl in the heavy flannel night-dress; the cool-eyed woman in silk, waiting to be answered, asking for injury.

"Damn you both!" he muttered. Then he brushed past Rowena and went out.

Lieutenant Reese still seemed half-asleep; the stray hairs on his balding scalp were ruffled, and his clothes had the appearance of having been put on hastily. Rowena, still in nightclothes, sat by the window, apparently disinterested. Aunt Faith was at the fireplace, coaxing the embers into flames.

Iris sat in the wing chair, her hands clasped in her lap, her expression enigmatic.

When the fire started, Aunt Faith said, "We can begin any time. David, would you turn out the lamp?"

David made himself a drink before he dimmed the lights, and then went over to the chair opposite Iris.

Aunt Faith said, "Are you ready, my child?"

Iris, white-lipped, nodded.

David caught her eyes before they shut in the beginning of the trance. They seemed to recognize his unspoken, plaintive question,

but they gave no hint of a reply.

Then they were silent. The silence lasted for a hundred ticks of the mantelpiece clock.

Gradually Iris Lloyd began to rock from side to side in the chair, and her lips moved.

"It's starting," Aunt Faith whispered. "It's starting . . ."

Iris began to moan. She made sounds of torment, and twisted her young body in an ecstasy of anguish. Her mouth fell open, and she gasped; the spittle frothed at the corners and spilled onto her chin.

"You've got to stop this," David said, his voice shaking. "The girl's having a fit."

Lieutenant Reese looked alarmed. "Mrs. Demerest, don't you think—"

"Please!" Aunt Faith said. "It's only the trance. You've seen it before, David, you know—"

Iris cried out.

Reese stood. "Maybe Mr. Wheeler's right. The girl might do herself some harm, Mrs. Demerest—"

"No, no! You must wait!"

Then Iris screamed, in such a mounting cadence of terror that the glass of the room trembled in sympathetic vibration, and Rowena put her hands over her ears.

"Aunt Faith! Aunt Faith!" Iris shrieked. "I'm here! I'm here,

Aunt Faith, come and find me! Help me, Aunt Faith, it's dark! So dark! Oh, won't somebody help me?"

"Where are you?" Aunt Faith cried, the tears flooding her cheeks. "Oh, Geraldine, my poor darling, where are you?"

"Oh, help me! Help, please!" Iris writhed and twisted in the chair. "It's so dark, I'm so afraid! Aunt Faith! Do you hear me? Do you hear me?"

"We hear you! We hear you, darling!" Aunt Faith sobbed. "Tell us where you are! Tell us!"

Iris lifted herself from the chair, screamed again, and fell back in a fit of weeping. A few moments later, the heaving of her breast subsided, and her eyes opened slowly.

David tried to go to her, but Lieutenant Reese intervened. "One moment, Mr. Wheeler."

Reese went to his knees, and put his thumb on the girl's pulse. With his other hand, he widened her right eye and stared at the pupil. "Can you hear me, Iris? Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir, I'm all right."

"Do you know what happened just now?"

"Yes, sir, everything."

"Do you know where Geraldine Wheeler is?"

She looked at the circle of

faces, and then paused at David's.

His eyes pleaded.

"Yes," Iris whispered.

"Where is she, Iris?"

Iris' gaze went distant. "Someplace far away. A place with ships. The sun is shining there. I saw hills, and green trees . . . I heard bells ringing in the streets . . ."

Reese turned to the others, to match his own bewilderment with theirs.

"A place with ships . . . Does that mean anything to you?"

There was no reply.

"It's a city," Iris said. "It's far away . . ."

"Across the ocean, Iris? Is that where Geraldine is?"

"No! Not across the ocean. Someplace here, in America, where there are ships. I saw a bay, and a bridge and blue water . . ."

"San Francisco!" Rowena said. "I'm sure she means San Francisco, Lieutenant."

"Iris," Reese said sternly. "You've got to be certain of this, we can't chase all over the country. Was it San Francisco? Is that where you saw Geraldine?"

"Yes!" Iris said. "Now I know. There were trolleys in the streets, funny trolleys going uphill . . . It's San Francisco. She's in San Francisco!"

Reese got to his feet, and scratched the back of his neck. "Well, who knows?" he said. "It's as good a guess as I've heard. Has Geraldine ever been in San Francisco before?"

"Never," Aunt Faith said. "Why would she go there? David?"

"I don't know," David grinned. He went over to Iris and patted her shoulder. "But that's where Iris says she is, and I guess the spirits know what they're talking about. Right, Iris?"

She turned her head aside. "I want to go home," she said. "I want Mother Clothilde . . ." Then she began to cry, softly, like a child.

It was spring, but the day felt summery. When David and Aunt Faith returned from the Medvale Home for Girls, the old woman looked out of the car window, but the countryside charm failed to enliven her mood.

"Come on, you old gypsy," David laughed, "your little clairvoyant was a huge success. Now all the police have to do is find Geraldine in San Francisco—if she hasn't taken a boat to the South Seas by now."

"I don't understand it," Aunt Faith said. "It's not like Geraldine to run away without a word. Why did she do it?"

"I don't know," David replied.

Later that day he drove into town. When he saw Lucas standing at the depot beside his black taxi, he pulled up and climbed out, the smile wide on his face. "Hello, Lucas. How's the taxi business?"

"Could be better." Lucas searched his face. "You got any news for me, Mr. Wheeler?"

"Maybe I do. Suppose we step into your office."

He clapped his hand on Lucas' shoulder, and Lucas preceded him into the depot office. He closed the door carefully, and told the cabman to sit down.

"It's all over," David said. "I've just come from the Medvale Home for Girls. We took Iris Lloyd back."

Lucas released a sigh from deep in his burly chest. "Then she didn't know? She didn't know where the—that woman was?"

"She didn't know, Lucas."

The cabman leaned back, and squeezed the palms of his hands together. "Then I did the right thing. I knew it was the right thing, Mr. Wheeler, but I didn't want to tell you."

"Right thing? What do you mean?"

Lucas looked up with glowing eyes, narrowed by what he might have thought was cunning. "I fig-

ured that girl could tell if the body was buried right outside the house. But she'd never find it if it was someplace else. Ain't that right? Someplace far away?"

A spasm took David by the throat. He hurled himself at Lucas and grabbed the collar of his wool jacket.

"What are you talking about? What do you mean, someplace else?" Lucas was too frightened to answer. "What did you do?" David shouted.

"I was afraid you'd be sore," Lucas whimpered. "I didn't want to tell you. I went out in the woods one night last week and dug up that woman's body. I put it in that trunk of hers, Mr. Wheeler, and I sent it by train, far away as I could get it. Farthest place I know, Mr. Wheeler. That's why Iris Lloyd couldn't

find it. It's too far away now."

"Where? Where, you moron? San Francisco?"

Lucas mumbled his terror, and then nodded his shaggy head.

The baggagemaster listened intently to the questions of the two plainclothesmen, shrugged when they showed him the photograph of the woman, and then led them to the Unclaimed Baggage room in the rear of the terminal. When he pointed to the trunk that bore the initials G.W., the two men exchanged looks, and then walked slowly toward it. They broke open the lock, and lifted the lid.

Three thousand miles away, Iris Lloyd sat up in the narrow dormitory bed and gasped into the darkness, wondering what strange dream had broken her untroubled sleep.



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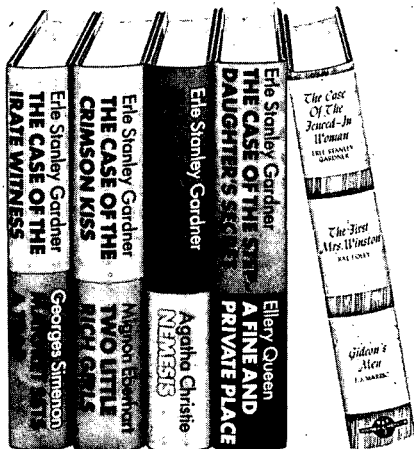
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