

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

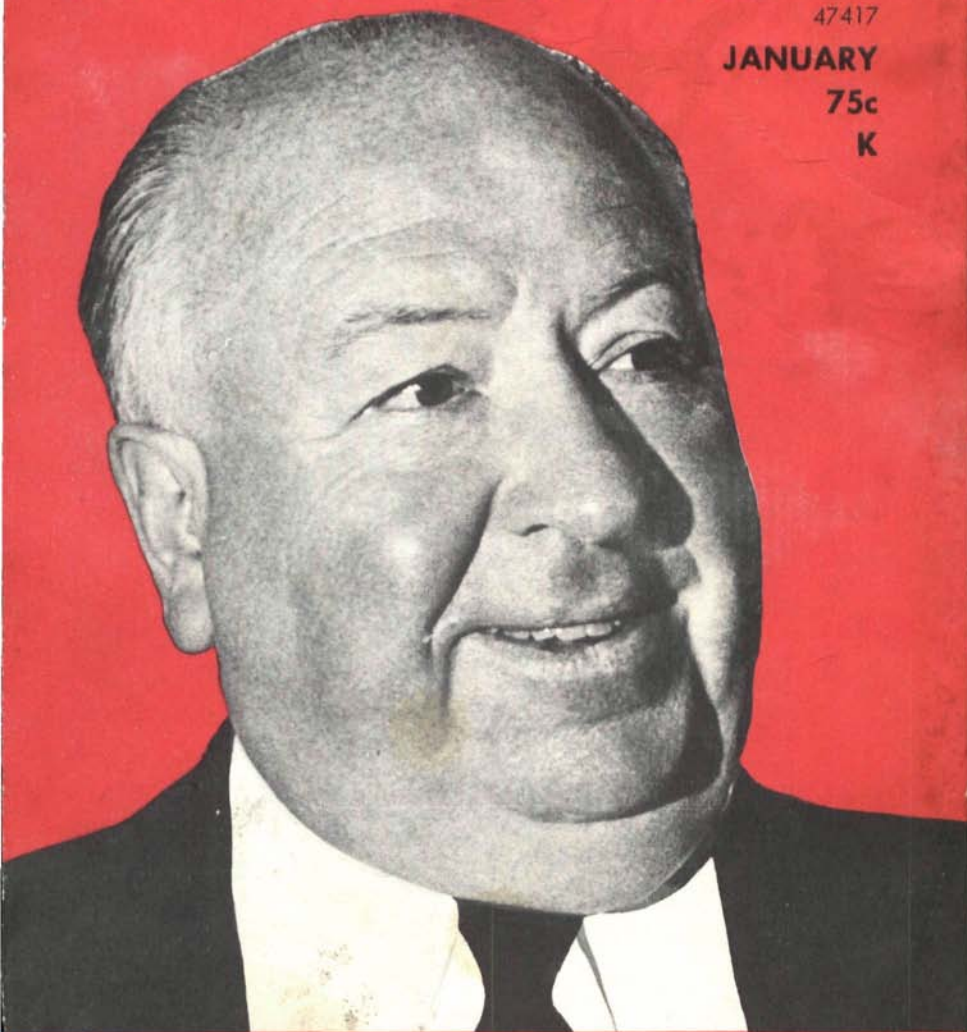
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW stories presented by the MASTER OF SUSPENSE



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Christmas
and Happy
New Year
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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Even with Women's Lib in the ascendancy, the best-laid plans may "Gang aft a-gley."



It was a New Year's Eve party, though the weather was almost springlike, and most of the guests were friends of my wife. They were the neighbors she'd grown to know in the months since we'd

bought the house in Westwood, but to me they were only faces glimpsed briefly in the yard or at the station.

Presently, when I tired of being introduced to each group as "Bill Hutton, Nancy's husband," I lodged against the flocked wallpaper with drink in hand and decided to ignore them all. That was when a dark-haired beauty I'd met earlier appeared from somewhere to rescue me.

"Bet you've forgotten my name already," she challenged, leading me off to a drafty but deserted stairwell that led down to the side door.

I smiled and sipped my drink, weakened now by the melted ice cubes. "You're the wicked witch of Westwood, and I'm in your clutches."

"I'm Sara Tracy, and I win my bet."

"I was never good on names, but it won't happen again."

"You met me with my husband when you first arrived. He was the tall man with the bald head. Charles."

I was beginning to enjoy her.
"And where is Charles now?"

"Gone home. He can't stand late hours anymore. He gets nosebleeds."

"What?"

"Really! When he stays up late and drinks he gets nosebleeds. The doctors can't begin to understand it, but they tell him 'no drinking.'"

"That must be unpleasant for you."

She smiled up at me from the step below. "Not really. In fact, I sort of look forward to it sometimes—like tonight. My husband is a—"

The rest of her sentence was cut off as the bulky host of the party appeared in the stairwell with a drink in each fist. "None of this, now," he cautioned. "It's not even midnight yet."

I accepted the drink with reluctance and was sorry after the first sip. I'd been drinking rye and this was Scotch, a drink I tried to avoid. After that we were separated for a time by the crush of guests. I went back upstairs and

found Nancy deep in conversation with a man who proved to be the local druggist. It was that sort of gathering, that sort of town. I was a bit out of it only because I spent my daytime hours in the city, slaving over a desk in a publisher's office.

I tried to talk to Nancy, to join in things, but before I knew it somebody shouted it was midnight and there was a lot of noise and kissing. My stomach began to churn.

I remembered returning to the kitchen for another drink, some cheap Scotch that I usually wouldn't look at twice. Then, for a brief span, I remembered nothing but a maze of noise and lights and laughing women. Presently I was outside, feeling the night wind chilling my face, and ridding myself of the last several drinks into some bushes I couldn't clearly see.

While I leaned weakly against the house, trying to control the spasms that heaved at my stomach, someone stepped from the shadows. It was Sara Tracy, and before I could say a word she was kissing me. "Let's go for a drive," she said.

So we went for a drive.

The moon was full and round, a big orange ball on the horizon. I watched it through the windshield

by Edward
D. Hoch

as my stomach gradually settled back into shape. Presently I turned to look at her, hunched intently over the wheel.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"Just driving, till you feel better."

"I should get back. Nancy will be wondering where I am."

Sara Tracy laughed shortly. "I doubt if she'll even miss you in that mob."

Then she slowed the car and pulled off the road. She seemed about to turn and start back, but instead she turned off the engine and twisted around in the seat to face me. "I need help, Bill," she said quietly, seeming suddenly sober.

"I don't give that kind of help," I told her, remembering the kiss. My stomach still felt queasy.

"It's my husband."

"Isn't it always?" I stared through the cloudy windshield. "Look, we hardly know each other. This whole thing is foolish."

"Let me explain. You don't know how things are in this town—you're away all day; and if I talked to any one of those women there tonight, it would be all over town by the next day."

"All right," I sighed. My stomach was feeling a bit better. "But why me? Why kiss me like that to get me interested and then bring

me out here to talk about your husband's problems?"

"You're an editor. I know your company has done some books on odd subjects."

I turned and smiled at her in the darkness. "You mean the sex books? I meet more girls that way. Actually another editor handles them."

"I mean the ones on witchcraft."

I had edited a collection of writings on the subject, and even spoken on it once, but it was about the farthest thing from my mind at the moment. "Oh? I really don't—"

"Come home with me now. I want to show you something."

"Your husband . . . Didn't you say he was home with his nose-bleeds?"

"That's another story, a story he told me once when I found blood on his shirt. We won't find him at home."

It seemed an odd way to be spending New Year's Eve, but I had little choice. I was in it then, and I had to admit she'd aroused my curiosity. If it was to be a plain seduction, she was surely the most imaginative seductress in many a moon.

Sara and Charles Tracy lived in a low, sprawling ranch that seemed somehow too big for just

the two of them. I approached it with a sense of trepidation, like a burglar on his first job. She led me through the darkened rooms, snapping on only a single night light, shedding her shoes so she moved with a sort of stealth over the dark pool of fuzzy rug beneath our feet.

Presently we reached a room at the back of the house, an extra bedroom used for storage, perhaps a room meant as a nursery. I could see, by the window's moonlight, a crazy procession of tigers and giraffes that marched across the walls, a remainder from some previous owner.

"This trunk," she said, and opened it. The odor of spices assailed my nostrils.

We sat cross-legged on the floor, like a couple of kids on a rainy day, while she brought the carefully wrapped items from the trunk and spread them at my feet. She lit a small table lamp, and the tigers seemed for a moment almost to catch the running giraffes. Yes, and there was a candle, a saltshaker, incense, a bell—and the whip, of course—a small black thing that coiled like a sleeping serpent.

"What do they mean?" she asked.

"I don't know," I lied.

"He has books on witchcraft.

Even your book. Then I found these."

"Put them away," I told her. The room was very cold. Perhaps they didn't heat it.

"He scares me sometimes."

I tried to remember the image of the man I'd met earlier that evening, but it was only a blur, a tall, balding man whose face eluded me. "What does Charles do for a living?" I asked.

"He has an office in the city. Some sort of importing. I was never too interested. It's in the Tower Building."

"I should go," I told her at last, rising to my feet. "Nancy will be wondering."

"Can you find out what he's doing?"

"Don't worry."

She led the way out, back to the car, and I commented on the house.

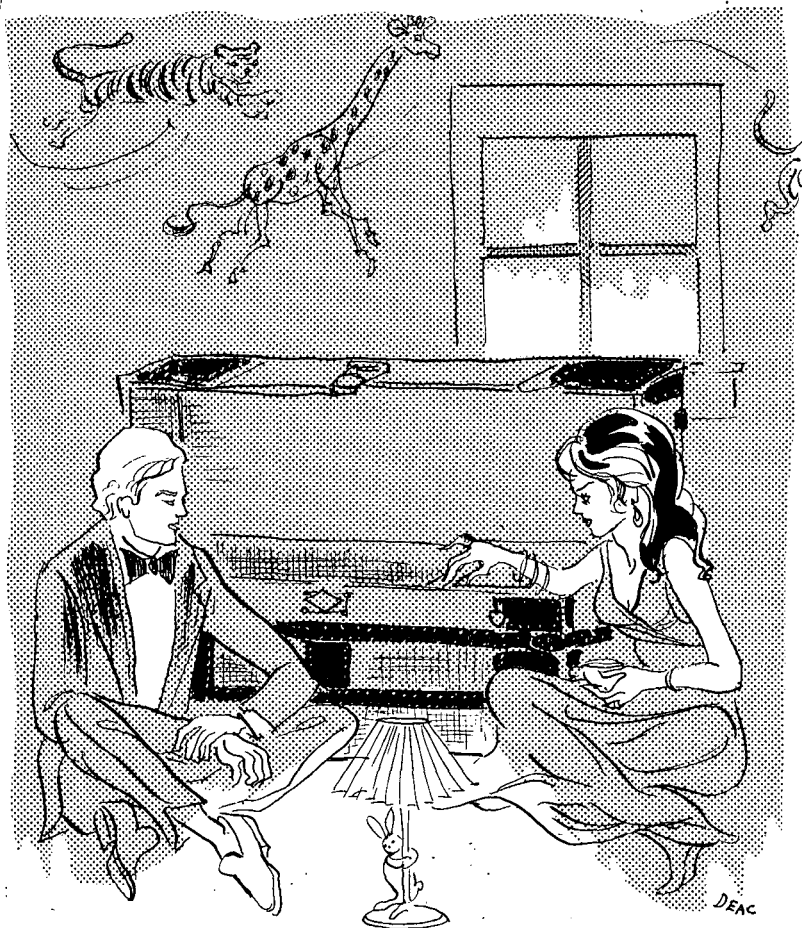
"We had it built a few years ago," she said.

I remembered the tiger and the giraffe. "Built? That room . . ."

"There was a child." She looked away as she spoke. "He died."

"I'm sorry."

She drove him back to the party in silence. When they reached the driveway she said good night. "I'm not coming in. He'll be coming back to the house soon."



"All right, then," I told her.

"Help me if you can, please. Find out what I need to know."

I leaned down and looked in the window at her. "I'm not sure I understand what that is."

"Do what you can." She started

backing the car out of the driveway. "And Happy New Year."

"Sure. Happy New Year."

I went inside, where the party was thinning out, and found Nancy deep in conversation with our host. "Where have you been,

Bill? I was looking for you. Ready to go home?"

"Ready."

She curled up on the seat and chatted during the drive home, reviewing the night's activities. I grunted once or twice and tried to convince myself that I wouldn't have a hangover in the morning. I didn't tell Nancy about the drive with Sara, or the darkened house, or the five objects in the trunk. Perhaps if I had, the rest would never have happened.

For several days I thought no more about Sara Tracy and her husband, until, nearly a week later, she phoned me at the office. Her voice was tense and just a bit harsh, and it brought back to me in an instant the vision of us sitting cross-legged on the floor of that nursery, fingering the terrible toys of one man's religion.

"Have you learned anything?" she asked.

"To tell you the truth, I've had a very busy week."

"There was blood again last night. All over his handkerchief."

"Another nosebleed?"

"So he said."

"Perhaps you could believe him for once."

"He went out last night. He took the things from the trunk."

I studied the appointment pad on my desk. The afternoon was

fairly open. "Can I call you later? I'll see what I can do."

"I'll be in all afternoon."

I hung up and left for lunch a short time later. The streets were sunny and fairly warm for January, it was being a pleasant winter for a change. I walked the three blocks to the Tower Building and located Charles Tracy's name on the lobby directory. What I would say to him was something else, but at least I would see him. Maybe we could talk about the weather.

Tracy Imports was painted on the frosted glass, with fancy gold lettering. I pushed open the door and went in.

The office was empty; no desk, no phone, no nothing—just an empty room.

I phoned Sara Tracy later and arranged to meet her at a little cocktail lounge near my office. She was dressed for a day in the city, with hat and gloves and a fur-trimmed coat, all very proper. She was a very striking woman, not just dark and lovely, but with something more, something that lurked just out of sight in the depths of her eyes, something a bit wild.

"Did you go to his office, Bill?" she asked, settling into the padded booth.

"I went. It's nothing but an

empty room with no one in it." Maybe not. I would hope not."

"Empty!"

"I talked to the building superintendent. He says your husband rents the office but never uses it. Usually the door is locked."

"But what—where does he go every day?"

"That's a good question."

The drinks came and she sipped hers, frowning at the purple tablecloth. "Those things in the trunk. You have to tell me what they mean!"

I sighed and lit a cigarette. "If you'd read that book I edited, you wouldn't have to ask, so I suppose I might as well tell you. They represent the five senses of man, and they're often used as part of a Black Mass or other Satanic rite. The lighted candle is for sight, the salt for taste, the incense for smell, and the bell for hearing. The whip is for the sense of touch."

"How . . . awful."

"Not in the abstract. People buy books on witchcraft the same way that they read true-crime magazines and listen to neighborhood gossip. It's nice to imagine we live in a sinful world, and to sin a little yourself, as long as you're not sinned against."

"But nothing like this could be happening in Westwood."

"The perfect American suburb?"

Maybe not. I would hope not."

"Charles is my husband. I've known him a long time. I couldn't imagine . . ."

I lit another cigarette. "You were the one who first mentioned witchcraft, that night at your house."

"You must meet him. You must tell me what he's up to, or I think I'll lose my mind."

"I met him, at the party."

"But really meet him! Come to our house for dinner Saturday night. Bring your wife."

It was an odd sort of invitation, and I hesitated before accepting it. Somehow it did not have the makings of a pleasant evening.

Nancy had a dozen questions and at least that many suspicions. "You ran into her in the city and she invited us to dinner?" She had a habit of tossing her blonde head as she spoke, a habit that had first attracted me to her in those impressionable days just after college when I was making my way in the big city for the first time. "That seems very odd to me. I didn't even know you knew the Tracys."

"I met them at the New Year's Eve party. You introduced us, for heaven's sake! Why make some big thing out of it?"

"It seems odd she didn't phone

me." Nancy tapped a pencil against her front teeth, thinking about it. "Some of the girls have told me things about Sara and Charles."

"What sort of things?"

She gave me an evil smile. "I thought you didn't like gossip!"

"I don't. But you brought it up."

"Oh, just the usual suburban things, I suppose. That he's never home, that he plays around in the city. Anyway, it seems odd they should invite us, of all people. Wonder what it's all about."

"Let's go and see," I suggested.

Going there with Nancy made the house seem somehow less sinister than on my first visit. Of course the lights were on now, and cheerful flames danced in the fireplace. It might have been any small suburban dinner party on a Saturday night.

Sara and Charles Tracy greeted us like old friends, serving cocktails around a marble coffee table as they chatted about the January weather and the latest world crisis. At one point I took the opportunity to wander over to our host's well-stocked bookshelves and let my eyes wander over the collection of last year's best sellers, expensive art books, and obscure classics. It was a good collection, and I saw my own volume

tucked tightly in the middle of one shelf.

There was a lull in the conversation, so I commented, "I see you're interested in witchcraft and such."

Charles Tracy turned his deep-set eyes in my direction. He was a striking man, tall and almost bald, with a booming voice that seemed designed for the pulpit of a church or rostrum of a political convention. "I'm interested in many subjects," he replied. "I've read a few books on black magic and such, including the collection you edited, of course."

I tried to keep it casual. "What's your thinking about it? Do you believe in things like Satanism and Black Masses and witchcraft?"

He picked up his drink and moved toward me across the room. "I believe that others believe, and I suppose that's the most important thing, isn't it? If a substantial body of people believe—really believe—in Satanism, then it's a fact of life, whether I specifically believe in it or not."

"That's an interesting theory," I admitted.

"Do you believe in it? After all, this is your book."

"I suppose I'd have to answer about the same as you," I said.

The girls came to join us then,

and the conversation drifted into a discussion of recent movies. Dinner followed, a candlelit affair that was enjoyable without being anything special. At one point I asked Charles Tracy what he did. "Import-export," he answered blandly. "I have an office in the Tower Building."

I could hardly challenge the statement, so I said nothing. After that, the evening ran slowly downhill to the decided anticlimax of looking through a photo album at pictures of the Tracy vacation the previous summer. Nancy and I left before midnight. I felt certain that the whole thing had been a failure from Sara's viewpoint though I couldn't have said exactly why.

She phoned me on Monday at the office, sounding concerned. "This is Sara. Can you talk?"

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"He was out last night. He had another nosebleed."

"What?"

"He went out somewhere, and the things were gone from the trunk, and when he came home, after midnight, there were specks of blood on his hands, his shoes. He said he'd had another nosebleed."

"Probably did."

"Then why wasn't there any-

thing on his clothes? It was almost as if he had them off—or covered by some sort of robe."

I chuckled a bit. "You've got quite an imagination."

"Could you come over tonight? I need someone."

"What'll Nancy think?"

"You can find some excuse. He'll be working till late."

"In that empty office?"

"I don't know! That's what's so terrible!"

"All right," I sighed. "I'll stop for ten minutes. No more."

It was a mistake and I knew it. The thing should have been cut off then, but I went anyway, on the off-chance that Charles Tracy might really be a Satanist, or that Sara Tracy might really be a woman in fear.

I told Nancy I was working late, and swung by the Tracy home a bit after six. Sara was alone, as she'd promised, wrapped in a blue robe that was just a bit provocative. "I'm glad you could come," she greeted me.

"I can't stay long."

She brought me a drink and settled down next to me on the sofa. "Something happened last night. Besides the nosebleed. I think he's got another girl, someone he uses in his . . . ceremonies."

"A girl is used in Black Masses," I said, going along with

her for the moment. "Her naked body becomes the altar for the sacrifice."

"How terrible!"

"The unknown is always terrible. Why do you think there's a girl?"

"I found this, with some blood on it." She held out a crumpled ball of handkerchief.

Yes, there was some dried blood, and more—the odor of a vaguely familiar perfume. "There could be any number of explanations," I reasoned.

"But he took the things in the trunk!"

"Are they back today?"

"Yes. I looked."

"I'd like to see them."

She led the way to the musty nursery once more, where the wallpaper animals still cavorted and the great black trunk still waited to be opened. Once more I fingered over the candles; burnt down a little farther now, and the bell and the whip and the rest of it. Was there a bit of dried blood on the tapered end of the whip, crusted to the coiled length? I couldn't be certain.

"You still say I'm imagining it all?" she asked.

"I don't know. I just don't know."

She touched my arm with her hand, very softly, like the flutter-

ing of a bird's wing. "Protect me from him, Bill. This thing is driving me out of my mind."

I stood up, reluctantly, and turned away. "Could you call the police?"

"And tell them what? A lot of crazy suspicions? For all I know, it's not even against the law to worship the devil in Westwood."

I thought about that all the way home. Was it against the law? Did places like Westwood ever make laws against the more fearful reaches of man's dark mind?

When I reached home Nancy was preparing dinner, humming softly to herself while she checked the progress of a roast in the oven. "How was work?" She asked, in the same tone she always used. It didn't really interest her, but she felt obliged to ask.

"Busy today. I didn't think I'd ever get away." We exchanged a few more remarks and I went to wash up for dinner.

In the bathroom I felt the handkerchief again in my pocket—the wadded, bloodstained thing that Sara Tracy had forced upon me. I was about to throw it away when the scent of it came to me once more, and now, in the familiar surroundings of my bathroom, I recognized it at once. The perfume was Nancy's, the same scent she used.

Coincidence. An odd coincidence. I was about to take the handkerchief out, to tell her about it, when I smoothed it out instead and saw the familiar little cross-stitch design.

It was Nancy's handkerchief, one of a half dozen I'd given her myself one Christmas, Nancy's handkerchief, with Nancy's perfume—and Nancy's blood?

She didn't say much for the rest of the evening, and I found myself unable to confront her with the handkerchief. I was certain she had no connection with Charles Tracy's weird rites—certain, that is, until I really began to think about it. How much did I actually know about Nancy's daily activities in Westwood? How much did I know about the way my own wife spent her days—and nights?

Sara said that Charles Tracy had performed his odd rites on Sunday night. Nancy was usually out on Sunday nights, attending a weekly discussion group at church. I'd never questioned it before, never given it a second thought. Now, against my better judgment, I found myself running over every little detail in my mind.

Lying next to her in bed, I asked, "How was the discussion Sunday night?"

"What? I was half-asleep.

What did you just say to me?"

"The discussion. How was it?"

"Fine. Why? You never asked before."

"Just wondering. What was it about?"

She seemed to think for a moment before replying. "Sin. The devil. That sort of thing."

I nodded into my pillow and drifted off into a troubled sleep, full of vague dreams and uncertain alarms.

The following day I telephoned Sara Tracy from my office and asked her what time her husband had been away on Sunday evening. The time corresponded almost exactly to the hours that Nancy had been away from home. It meant nothing, nothing at all, but I had an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"What's the matter?" Sara asked over the phone, suddenly aware of my silence.

"Nothing. It's foolish."

"If it's about Charles and this awful business, I have a right to know."

After a moment's further hesitation I asked, "How well does Charles know my wife?"

"Nancy? I can't imagine. They were chatting at the New Year's Eve party, and of course last Saturday. Why do you ask?"

"No reason." I didn't trust her

or myself enough to put my suspicions into words. "I'll talk to you later."

That night I walked the streets of Westwood alone, passing the lighted houses and listening with half an ear to the occasional distant shouts of mothers seeking their tardy children. I'd wanted the good life out here, wanted it for myself and Nancy, and our family.

Once, when we'd first been married, Nancy had strayed, involving herself in a brief but shabby affair with a fellow editor. We never spoke of it anymore, because it might have belonged to another life, another existence, but of course it was not the sort of thing one ever forgot; not completely.

I tried to conjure up a vision of her with Charles Tracy, locked in some unspeakable ritual, but the vision would not come. Not Nancy. No!

I went home and kissed her and said nothing about it.

On Sunday afternoon I asked her casually, "Going to your discussion club tonight?"

"Sure. I go every Sunday, don't I?"

"Maybe I should come along sometime."

Nancy tossed her head and chuckled. "The church would fall

down if you ever went inside it."

"Why don't you skip it tonight and stay home?"

She gave me an odd sort of look. "Why should I?"

"Because I'm asking you to."

"That's foolish, Bill."

It was and I admitted it. She went off to her meeting on schedule. A while later, after eight, I got out the other car and drove down to the church. Her car was in the parking lot and I drove back home, satisfied. It wasn't until much later that I realized the car in the lot proved nothing. He might have picked her up there, and brought her back afterward.

I went back to the empty office one morning that week, and tried the door. This time it was locked, but I could see mail protruding from the slot. Tracy must certainly come every morning to pick it up. I stationed myself down the hall, around a corner, and decided to wait a while.

It was almost an hour later when Charles Tracy appeared, walking casually up to the office door and unlocking it. He scooped up his mail and locked the door once again. I couldn't take the same elevator down, and by the time I reached the street I thought I'd lost him. Then I spotted him a half block away, just entering a cigar store. I

walked by rapidly, but didn't see him. He'd vanished somewhere into the rear of the place.

It was another dead end, and I went home that night to brood about it. Nancy was out, attending her biweekly bridge club. I prowled the empty house for a time, searching for I knew not what, pulling out drawers at random, venting my suspicions on piles of scented clothing and half-forgotten trinkets.

The telephone rang and it was Sara, and she said, "Bill, I've found proof, pictures, everything. It's Nancy, just as you suspected. Bill, I think she's coming here tonight!"

"Tonight? But she's at her bridge—"

"He's sending me out. Says he has a business meeting. But I saw him at the trunk, and I heard him phoning Nancy earlier today."

"I can't believe . . ." I began, but then realized that I could believe it, all too well. "I'll come right over."

"Meet me at the corner of my block. I'll be parked there."

I went out and got the other car from the garage. The night was chill, with snow in the air, but my hands were sweaty on the steering wheel and I drove almost blindly toward my destination. I had the feeling that something

was ending, drying up inside me, leaving me helpless against the tide.

She was waiting where she said she'd be, half-hysterical in the front seat of her car. As I came up to it, she pulled me inside. "Bill, you look awful! What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Go up there and see about it, I guess."

"He might do something. He might kill you."

"I don't think so." I started to get out.

"Take this with you," she said, suddenly pressing a small automatic pistol into my hands. "I'm afraid."

"I don't—"

"Take it! He might do anything if you interrupt him!"

I stuffed the gun into my pocket and left her there, driving up to the sprawling ranch on the hill. The house seemed completely dark, but as I neared it I saw the flicker of candles through a window. Then I saw Nancy's car in the driveway, and I knew this was it. All the devils and darklings I'd written and read about, the Satanic rites and the mystic symbols were here.

The front door was unlocked, and as I stepped into the darkened hallway my hand went to the gun in my pocket. I brought

it out, holding it before me as I walked quietly toward the flickering candlelight.

They were there, Charles Tracy and Nancy, in the room with the animal wallpaper. He turned toward me, the candlelight flickering in his eyes, and raised the whip. I pointed the gun, my finger tightening on the trigger.

Some time later I walked down the driveway and around the corner to where Sara Tracy waited in her car. "It's over," I told her, sliding into the seat next to her.

"Over? You killed them?"

"No. I didn't kill them." I sighed and thought about all the evil in the world. "I didn't kill them because that's what you wanted me to do."

"What!"

"Your damnable plan misfired, Sara. I guess I just couldn't kill a person like that, especially not Nancy. I hesitated an instant, and then of course the truth came out."

"Bill, Bill, I love you . . ."

I pushed her hand away. "I'm not doing your murders for you, Sara. I almost fell for the whole thing, but not quite. Charles was never practicing Satanism, he was never guilty of anything more than taking bets on horses and selling a few numbers. That was

the reason for the phony office at a respectable address while he operated out of a cigar store down the street. You knew that, of course, but since you'd decided to involve me in your plot you needed a story that was a bit more exotic. You found it in that book I'd edited. You found everything there, even the props you hid in the trunk. You knew that talk of witchcraft would be the way to grab me, to hold my interest while you wove your web of lies."

"I . . . Bill, I told you I love you. If you had killed them, we could have gone away together."

I ignored her and kept on talking. There was so much to say, so much truth to smother her lies. "You stole the handkerchief from Nancy's purse when we were over for dinner that night, then gave it back to me two days later with bloodstains on it. I'll admit that was quite effective in awakening my suspicions. And then tonight, you phoned Nancy and said you had to see her for some vague purpose. She skipped her bridge club and came because you sounded so urgent. You implied that you and Charles were about to break up, then left her talking to him while you went downstairs and blew the fuses, darkening the house. You had to go after new

fuses at the drugstore, leaving them alone by candlelight. You'd produced the whip to show Nancy on some pretext, and you gave me the gun to carry. Naturally I was attracted toward the room with the candles, naturally Charles raised the whip to defend them when he heard an intruder in the darkened hallway. I was to walk in with the gun, see them together with the candles and the whip and all the rest of it, and kill them both. Only I didn't."

"Why not, Bill?" she asked. "Why not?"

"I suppose I wouldn't have, anyway. It takes a special sort of man to kill his wife, even under the circumstances you'd presented. But they were only standing there, fully dressed, looking no more sinister than friends at a cocktail party. Then, as soon as they saw it was I, the truth came out quite quickly."

Nancy and Charles had followed me from the house, and now they came into view. "What are they going to do?" Sara gasped.

"You need help," I told her. "A psychiatrist, perhaps."

"No!"

She saw them getting closer, and in the street light's glow they must have looked to her like avenging furies. She was out of the car in an instant, running from them, from me.

She'd almost reached the next corner, running down the middle of the street, when a truck came out of the darkness with screeching brakes to topple her. She screamed just once, and it was over.

"She must have been mad," Nancy said later, "to have come up with a scheme like that."

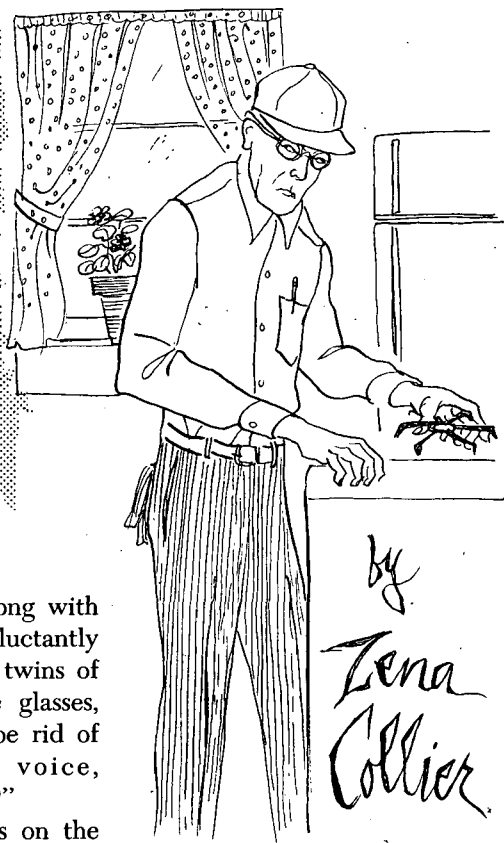
I nodded. "She counted on my killing you both before you had a chance to talk. Then she'd have been rid of the husband she hated, and if I didn't get sent to prison for it she'd have me instead." I turned away and stared off at the gently falling snow, remembering the party where I'd first met Sara Tracy. "I guess she really was the wicked witch of Westwood."



There is much to be said about a peculiar kind of fear that is called courage.



Trial by Night



by
Zena
Collier

There was something wrong with his eyes. She looked reluctantly into those dreadful pools, twins of shapeless evil behind the glasses, and said, her anxiety to be rid of him showing in her voice, "Haven't you finished yet?"

He replaced the flanges on the stove, taking longer than was nec-

essary; his movements were slow, his hands awkward. He looked at her again, though the effect was that he looked over her shoulder, all around her, anywhere but at her, although the eyes faced her directly, and said, "Now I have."

They flicker, she decided; they flicker slyly behind his glasses.

"Well, thanks," she said. "I'm sure it'll be all right now."

"All right now," he repeated. "Nothing but the pilot."

He continued to stand there.

She wondered why he didn't go. What, for heaven's sake, was he waiting for?

Perhaps she ought to tip him. It might start him moving, but did one tip the janitor for doing what was only his job? Anyway, the thought of even the minimal contact necessary to put money in his hand was distasteful to her.

He stood still and looked all around him—at the walls, the floor, the ceiling. He examined the ceiling minutely. "Patch up there," he said, pointing. He had a way of investing with significance every trivial word he spoke.

"Yes, there was a leak or something last year," she said. Frantically, she searched for something that would get him out, and decided finally to be blunt. "If you'll excuse me," she said, "I have to get on with my work."

He simply stared at her without moving, so she went to the door and opened it. Then he left, a man in a cap, passing her softly, saying nothing.

She was unusually glad to see the mailman when he came an hour later, a fat hearty man, full of the miles he had walked in the fall sunshine.

There was a letter from her husband; he would be home in three days. Jim was a salesman, away from time to time. She dreaded his absences. Each time he left, it was as though he had never been away before. Now, even after four years of marriage, she was no more resigned to staying alone than she had been in the beginning. He had tried, at first, to laugh her out of it, but had finally ended by lecturing her earnestly.

"You're a grown woman," he had said, "with a three-year-old child. You can't go on like this all your life, afraid to spend an occasional night on your own."

She had drawn a deep breath. "Jim, wouldn't you ever—please—think about changing?"

"Be reasonable, honey. I'm only gone one week out of four. And it's not as though you were a helpless invalid, or stuck out in some isolated spot in the country."

"No," she'd said miserably. It was true; here she was, young and healthy, in an apartment in the suburbs, people living all around and above her.

"Even if I changed my job," he said, "that wouldn't solve anything. A truck could run me down the following week, and you'd be left on your own, and then what would you do? Think of all the women whose husbands have to travel constantly—and widows and single women. They all seem to manage, somehow."

She had stopped arguing finally, knowing he was right, but she had never really conquered her nervousness.

Now, with this business of the janitor, she wanted Jim's calm, solid presence in the apartment, his practiced whistle in the mornings, the cheery advent of his arrival home—but there were three days yet before he'd return.

Sighing, she went to get Kenny ready to go to the park.

The following afternoon, as she came up the walk to the apartment house, her arms full of groceries, Kenny just behind her on his tricycle, she felt all at once that she was being watched. She looked around, feeling exposed, vulnerable. There was no one in sight. Still, the feeling was unmistakable. The sun flashed on a sec-

ond-story window and, glancing up, she saw him there, a quick glimpse only but it was he, Nagle. He stood at the window, regarding her openly; there was no pretext of switching his attention elsewhere.

Out there in the sunlight she shivered, and hurried to get into the apartment and close the door behind her—behind her and the child.

She turned on the record player while she prepared dinner, till the sound of the symphony filled all the rooms. Kenny kept time by banging his fork against his spoon, shouting exuberantly, and she welcomed the clangor. She remembered with pleasure that tonight the nursery school committee was meeting here, at the apartment.

Sitting with the others in her livingroom that evening, discussing playground equipment, the curtains drawn cozily across the windows, Kenny sleeping soundly in the next room, she felt fine. *Jim's right* she thought. *It's simply a matter of taking myself in hand.*

Yet, when it was time for the others to leave, she hated to see them go. She had not lived long in this city, none of these women were particularly close to her, but at that moment she found herself wishing they were, so that she could turn to them—to one of

them, anyway—and say, with no need of explanation, “Stay here with me tonight, or let me bring Kenny and come with you.” That was absurd, of course, and she called brightly, “Good night . . . Good night . . . Yes, at Edith’s on the fourteenth.”

It was good to wake next morning and know that the night was behind her. Time passed. Each of her days was like a wheel turning, spoke by spoke. There was the reassurance of routine, and there was the knowledge that very soon, now, in just one more day, Jim would be home.

Then it was Wednesday. This was her day to do the laundry in the basement, using the communal machine. It always took her at least an hour, and today, the weather being unusually warm, she wore shorts and a shirt.

The basement was large and dim, lit with infrequent bulbs, clean, but with an inevitable dankness. Nagle lived down there, with his wife and children, in an apartment that went with his job. Sometimes she had occasion to pass their door, but she avoided it whenever possible. The wife, the boy and girl in their early teens, all skinny, pallid, sharp-featured, reminded her of nothing so much as a pack of starved rats, and the idea, to her secret shame, per-

sisted. She never glimpsed them outside the basement; of course they must have left it at times, but Nagle was the only one she ever saw upstairs, on his way to an apartment to fix something for a tenant or deliver a package.

She picked up the first load of washed clothes and started to sort them for the dryer. Suddenly there he was, though she had not heard him approach. It was as though he had swum soundlessly out of the basement’s dark aquarium depths.

He stood barely a yard away. “Washing today?”

“Yes.” She got on with it, carefully not looking his way. With her back to him, she found herself regretting the shorts. Kenny yanked his wagon around and around energetically, making a clatter.

Nagle stood there, watching.

She wanted to turn around and say, “Go away,” but dare she? She was not afraid of offending him; she was only afraid that she would say it and he would ignore it as though she had not spoken, or as though he were deaf.

Anger began in her. I’ll complain, she decided. I’ll call the owners and tell them.

What would she tell them? That he had been disrespectful? That he had attacked her, or

harmed her in some way, or wrongfully entered the apartment, or stolen from her? She could hardly say, "His eyes are strange," or, "He looks at me." They would only laugh, designating her in their minds with a certain label.

Giving up the idea, she shrugged slightly, unconsciously.

"Are you cold?" he asked. She pretended not to have heard him. "I'd turn on the heat," he said, "but they won't let me, the days are still too warm."

At that, she was contrite. He only meant to be helpful, and here she was imagining—heaven knew what. So she smiled at him quickly, though falsely and with effort, and said, "No, I'm not cold, though it is a little damp down here."

She put the clothes in the dryer, called Kenny and went upstairs, leaving the man still standing there. The kitchen was a relief after the basement—full of bright woodwork and gingham curtains and a pot roast simmering lazily on the stove. She drew a deep breath and savored the sunny, good-smelling place—and Jim would be home tomorrow.

Late that evening, long after Kenny had gone to sleep and she sat reading, there was a knock on the door. At first she told herself she had imagined it. It was ten-

thirty, after all. Then, afraid, not of the knock but of the fact that she had tried to pretend she hadn't heard it, she went to the door and opened it.

He stood there.

"Do you want something?" she said, making her voice sharp. "Because I have company and I—"

"Here . . ." He held out something, a handkerchief. "You dropped it," he said, "this morning, from your laundry basket."

She forced herself to put out a hand and take it. "Thank you," she said.

"It didn't get dirty," he said. "I keep those floors clean."

"Good night," she said, starting to close the door, her hand trembling slightly on the knob.

"I work hard on those floors," he said again, with an intensity that did not fit the words.

She thought, *if he doesn't go I'll scream. Just one more minute and I'll yell out loud till the neighbors come running.*

"Well, I'd better get back to my guests," she said. "Good night, and thanks again."

She closed the door and then sat down in the nearest chair, shaking. If only she could call up her mother, saying casually, "I feel lonesome; come on over and stay while Jim's gone—" but her mother lived ninety miles away.

You could not pick up your child at this hour of night and drive ninety miles to your mother, saying, "I'm afraid. The janitor looks at me. I'm afraid." Perhaps she could telephone? Not at this hour. Her mother wasn't well, and a late call would startle her. Anyway, how would calling help?

The neighbors? She had not lived there long enough to get to know anyone in the building, apart from formal "Good mornings" on the stairway, in the courtyard. She rarely saw any of them and, in any case, what on earth could she say? What could she complain of without sounding foolish?

No, she was alone, except for Kenny. Rather, she was alone *with* Kenny, and that was an extra worry. She *was* worried, it was useless to try to talk herself out of it. Tomorrow Jim would be home; yes, tomorrow, but meantime . . .

She got up and moved about the room, replacing a book, straightening an ash tray. She twitched the curtain aside and stood at the window, looking out, to where the dark courtyard contained only the moonlit night, the fall night which, despite the warmth of the day, was cold now. This is his element, she mused, this kind of night. He, from the dark places below, he knows

about darkness. She thought of the slime of swamps, of morasses where things unspeakable crept and crawled, and suddenly she dropped the curtain back across the window and went to get ready for bed.

She wished with all her heart that she had a sleeping pill, so that she could fall immediately into dreamless oblivion, but the best she could do was a glass of warm milk, which she forced herself to drink though she hated milk when it was warm. In bed, she pulled the covers high around her shoulders and at last fell asleep.

How long she slept, she did not know. She only knew that one moment she was asleep, and the next she was abruptly wide-awake, quivering, and the sound that had wakened her was the sound of a key in the lock; the apartment door was being opened softly, softly, with infinite care. Then there was silence, utter silence, but the feeling of a presence which waited only for the right moment.

She lay there, listening. It's a dream, she told herself frantically, a dream, a nightmare. Any moment now, I'll wake, I'll open my eyes to daylight, the sun will be streaming in at the window . . .

The presence approached

silently, and stood at last in the open door to the bedroom. The room was dark, but her eyes, straining in the darkness, saw the faintest outline in the doorway, blackness just a little blacker than the rest. She tried to scream, but her throat constricted; her heart, it seemed, no longer beat; her pulse had stilled, her hair, her fingernails, ceased their growth in that instant, all with fear.

Now he came forward, a step at a time; a step, a pause, step, pause . . . Now he stopped, a yard away from the bed. She could hear his breathing—and she could see what he held in his hand, as he stood there . . .

The silence was pierced by a strange, shrill sound. For a moment she thought that the sound was hers, until she realized that it was Kenny, crying out in his sleep. *Kenny!*

Oh, please, please, God, help me, she thought, with Kenny there in the other room, and this man with that thing in his hand . . .

A sleepy whimper came from the other room. For an instant, she saw Nagle turn his head, listening. Then he turned and walked out of the bedroom, going toward the other room, and suddenly with the fear she felt something else—a mixture of hatred and fury more violent than any-

thing she had ever known before. With it came strength.

She stretched out her hand to the lamp and switched it on.

"Mr. Nagle," she called brightly, "won't you come in and talk to me? I hoped you would come, I've been wanting to talk to you . . ." She knew she must go on talking at all costs, must bring him back to her and away from Kenny somehow, somehow.

She leaped from the bed, snatching up her robe, and walked quickly after him, wanting to run but knowing she must not, knowing that her movements must be calm and deliberate.

There he was, just outside Kenny's door.

She stood smiling at him. "Let's go into the livingroom," she said. "We can sit down comfortably in there and talk."

He turned away from Kenny's door and looked at her. She pulled the robe about her, shivering.

"It's chilly here in the hall. Much warmer in the livingroom." Her face would surely crack with the effort of her smile.

Her back, between her shoulder blades, felt numb as he followed behind her, walked soft-footed behind her.

"Now," she said cheerfully, "this is much better, isn't it? We'll

be more comfortable in here.”

He stood there, his head lowered slightly, bull-like, the eyes behind the glasses fixed on her.

She knew that if she stood there for just two more seconds with him looking at her like that, she would scream. She would scream and then it would all be over, he would come at her with that thing in his hand. Almost—she swayed very slightly—almost it would be a relief, but there was Kenny . . . Again, suddenly, came the strength-giving fury.

“A cup of tea?” she said. “Wouldn’t you like a cup of tea? Or coffee?” He did not answer her, just stood there, looking. “I’ll go to the kitchen and make us both a cup of coffee.” Her lips, smiling, felt as though they were made of cotton; with supreme effort she puffed through the cotton the sounds that were words.

He followed her into the kitchen silently, and stood in the doorway watching her as she set the percolator on the stove.

“Now . . . two cups,” she said companionably, and got out the cups. “And two saucers.” She got the saucers. “And two spoons . . .” She moved over to the drawer where she kept the cutlery, the spoons, and the forks . . . and the knives.

She put her hand on the drawer

and pulled, but it refused to open. The drawer had stuck, as it sometimes did. She stood there, pulling at it. The more she tugged, the harder it stuck. Finally, her hair clinging wetly to her forehead, she gave it up. “Well,” she said, lightly, “we’ll just have to manage without spoons, won’t we?”

Lightly, lightly, keep it light now, she thought; *don’t look at him too much, and don’t, whatever you do, look at his right hand . . .*

She poured the coffee. “Here we are,” she said. “Let’s take it into the livingroom, shall we?” *Keep moving, don’t stay still for an instant, keep moving, talking . . .* Quite a lot of the coffee spilled from the cups into the saucers as she carried them into the livingroom.

“Why don’t you sit on the sofa?” she said. “That’s the most comfortable.”

She sat in the armchair farthest away from the sofa, facing him, her back to the door.

The door, so near but so far; did he realize, she wondered, that he need not worry about her running away, because she could not possibly leave the apartment with Kenny still there?

He kept ignoring the cup before him.

What now? She must talk, say

something, anything, quickly . . .

"The handkerchief," she said. "It was my favorite. I'm so grateful to you for finding it, for—"

Somehow, the words spilled out while her mind raced. The clock on the mantelpiece said three-thirty. Three-thirty. She could not keep talking forever. He would grow tired of this, and then he would—

She stopped talking for a second as he moved slightly, there on the sofa, and his hand came forward and lay in his lap, his thumb fingering the razor's edge.

She shook her head slightly to clear away the blackness that had come before her eyes. Her glance fell on the record player.

She jumped to her feet. "How about some music?" she cried, very blithe, very vivacious. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

He only looked at her, the thumb feeling the razor gently, carefully . . .

She went over and put a record on the turntable, not seeing or caring what she chose, unable in any case to read the words, with the dark spots jumping in front of her eyes.

The music began. "Oh, listen—the Surprise Symphony!" She managed, even, to turn a little toward him, beating time with one hand to the music, airily. "Do

you like Haydn?" Did he like Haydn, oh, what was she saying, she must be mad, as mad as he.

Again, she looked at the clock. Four o'clock. Against the Haydn, another tune ran crazily through her brain: *Four o'clock in the morning, we danced the whole night through* . . .

Then, suddenly, the idea was born.

She felt her limbs tremble at the thought of it. Dare she try? She must. It was the only chance.

Now, in tune with the Haydn, she hummed a little. "Isn't that delightful?" she cried, standing by the record player. Casually, her hand went out and turned a knob, increasing the volume slightly. Careful now—her hand shook, she stared at it, fascinated—careful, very gradually now . . . If she did this too quickly, and he guessed . . .

She risked a glance at him as he sat on the sofa. His head was weaving slightly in time to the music. His eyes were fixed on her, his head wove like a snake. His hand, holding the razor, moved a little.

She thought she would choke with terror, and heard with amazement her own voice against the music, high, shrill beyond all belief: "Do you know why it's called the Surprise Symphony? It's

called that because when Haydn composed it, he—" On went the strange, shrill voice, explaining about the music, about the composer, about the surprise that was supposed to wake up the audience . . . Wake up the . . .

Realizing all at once what she had said, her voice trailed off. She watched him fearfully. Had he guessed?

He continued to sit there, weaving, but now there was a change. Now there was a smile on his face, vacant, happy, and his hand, holding the open razor, cut the air in time to the music, like an erratic baton. She saw the difference in him: his eyes were no longer focused with quite the same intensity; he appeared to be in some kind of trance.

Her thoughts, over which she seemed to have only sporadic control, took a turn for the poetic: *Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast . . . Round and round in her head, over and over again: To soothe the savage breast . . . the savage breast . . . to soothe . . .*

Now, she thought, putting out her hand and turning the knob slowly, slowly, smiling at him all the while. Now.

Madly the music filled the room, crashing, thundering, and still he only sat there, weaving, smiling the vacant smile—and then at last she heard it, the pounding on the door, the voices shouting angrily.

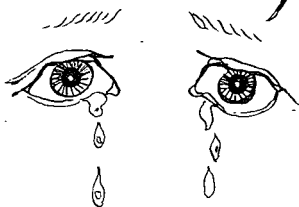
Quickly now, because it was her last chance, she turned her back to him and walked unsteadily across a mile of gently heaving carpet toward the door, thinking numbly that if she came through this, she could come through anything, handle anything, need fear nothing ever again . . . She reached the door at last and flung it open, and saw them standing there, her neighbors, with angry faces, with blessed angry faces. She had just time enough to see the anger change to something else as they glimpsed over her shoulder the sight in the room beyond, before everything went rapidly and silently away from her, and she slid to the floor.



Frequently it is the things one encounters on the way which one must transcend in order to attain his objective.



Finnley



by

Miel Tanburn

Finnley Reiser was big and strong for a fourteen-year-old, and he had a look in his eyes you sometimes see in a wounded buck. It's when he's had it, and he knows he's had it, and he's too tired and hurt to run anymore. So he looks at you with his big, sad eyes, trembling all over, not knowing why you picked *him* out to tor-

ment, and waits for a short, quick one between the eyes.

I hated to think of Finnley Reiser waiting for me like that. Finnley wasn't the brightest kid in the county, but he wasn't a troublemaker, either. He was just a dull, oversized farm boy trying in vain to make some sense out of a confusing world. Finnley had been adopted when he was five, and the psychologists say by that time a kid's personality and intelligence are pretty much established for the rest of his life. In Finnley's case, there hadn't been a lot to work with.

"He said I could be anything I wanted to be, Sheriff Webb," Finnley told me, talking slowly. "He always said that, and he told me to remember it."

That would be Jeb Reiser, Finnley's adoptive father. A gaunt, hawk-nosed string bean, Jeb had come to Oxbow a dozen years earlier and managed, with back-breaking hard work, to wring a living out of that rock pasture he called a farm. I'd hate to exist that way. God knows how many

seasons he'd weathered of cramped muscles and torn knuckles and sheer, bone-melting weariness at the end of a day's toil—Jeb and his wife, Abigail; and Finnley, too, after he was brought home from the state's orphanage and had grown big enough to do a day's work.

There was a streak of the fanatic in Jeb Reiser, and no humor. He paid his bills, slaved like an animal, and believed in the work he did. If Jeb thought some people were put on this earth to enjoy life, he knew he wasn't one of them. Any rewards you got, you worked for; Jeb and Abigail knew that, and they taught it to Finnley.

Okay, Jeb beat the kid. I knew that. But he never drew blood and he never broke any bones, and that made it none of my affair. At least not officially, even though Cassie Winfield, the schoolteacher, tried to make it my business.

"Webb, I've seen the welts," Cassie told me, on more than one occasion.

"It's legal for fathers to discipline their children," I said. "Jeb Reiser's stricter than most. Maybe because Finnley's bigger than most."

Cassie made a face. "It has nothing to do with discipline, Webb. He whips that poor boy

because Finnley doesn't get good grades."

"Jeb's frustrated. He wants the kid to amount to something."

"But you can't beat intelligence into someone," Cassie said. "Nobody believes that now. The sad thing is that Finnley *does* study. And he does learn . . . simple things—things he's capable of doing. But he doesn't have much ability. Aren't his life and his future bleak enough without his being punished for something he can't control?"

Bleak. I guess that was a good word to describe Finnley's life.

Finnley tried to run away from home once, but he didn't get very far. I ran into him about four miles out of town, sitting on a boulder on the side of the road.

"Where you going?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "I don't know anymore."

I pushed open the passenger door. "Well, hop in. I'll take you there."

That occasion was the closest I ever came to having an actual conversation with Finnley Reiser. It about broke my heart.

"I can't do anything my pop wants me to," he said.

I tried to sound convincing, without much luck. "Sure you can, Finnley. Jeb just wants you

to do your best, that's all. Try."

"I study. But I can't do good, like he tells me I can."

Did you ever see a 250-pound kid cry?

That was a couple of weeks ago. I wish I'd been able to do something.

Cassie got the idea that the football team might be the logical place for Finnley to find some kind of success. The coach was doubtful, because Finnley was such a slow thinker, but he went along with the suggestion when Cassie told him the background. Jeb Reiser nixed that idea, too. He said he wasn't going to let Finnley shirk his schoolwork in order to play games. He told Cassie that come hell or high water, Finnley was going to achieve his potential. He said Finnley could become someone, if he'd keep working at it.

The football coach didn't give up easily, though. He's the one who called me a while ago. He went back to the Reisers this evening, to have another go-round with Jeb, and when he found

what he found, he phoned me.

The coach was sitting on the front porch with Finnley when I got there. Finnley didn't look like a frightened, gut-shot buck, the way I was afraid he would. He looked relieved.

One look inside told me most of what I needed to know. The parlor looked like a slaughterhouse.

"Why did you do it, Finnley?" I asked. The coach's shrug had already told me he'd drawn a blank from the kid.

Finnley screwed up his face, trying to find the right words. Finally he said, "He always told me I could be whatever I wanted to be, Sheriff Webb. He said it was in my power to do that. He said it was the most important thing I could ever learn. He said it a lot."

"But why did you do this? What is it that you want to be?"

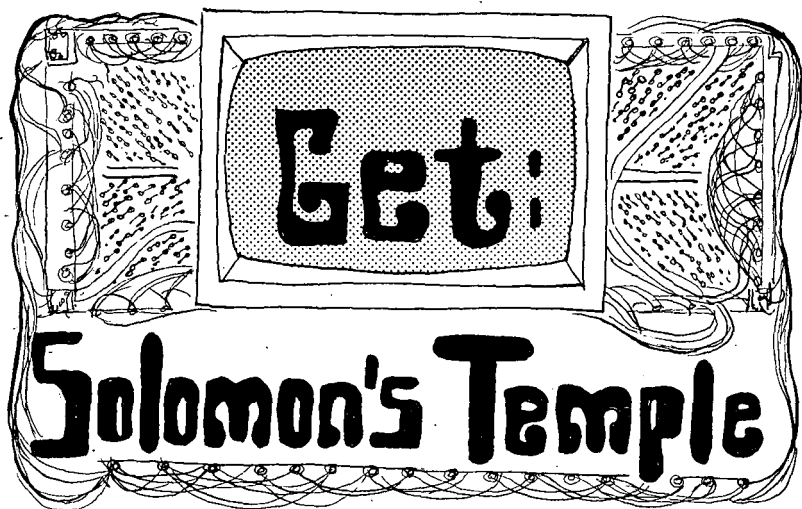
"What I was supposed to be all the time," Finnley said earnestly. He looked surprised that I didn't understand.

"What's that?" I asked.

Finnley gave me a smile. "An orphan," he explained.



The taking ways of a token female may point the way to maximum security.



The secret account came to Mary Claire's attention by accident. As a systems analyst for the Rond Corporation she periodically conducted random query searches [RQS] to determine that the company's worldwide computer network wasn't being subverted.

Her procedure during RQS was simply to type a GET demand for data pertaining to whatever subject that was in her mind at the moment. While driving to work

the morning of her discovery, she daydreamed about a trip to Latin America. Costa Rica was a delightful name for a country, so on her console she input GET: COSTA RICA.

The initial printout was predictable—geographical, economic and political data, with reference to climatological and agricultural information of interest to demographers.

The last glowing line which ma-

terialized on the screen was something different, however. The futuristic typeface spelled out: SEE ALSO SOL TEMP.

Thinking it was further data dealing with weather, Mary Claire almost turned to a new random subject—almost—but then she did not, because her mind was still in Latin America. So she typed GET: SOL TEMP.

WARNING/WARNING—TOP SECRET DATA TO FOLLOW, appeared upon the viewer.

She was cleared to TOP, largely because much of the classified data was in code, so she instructed the computer to proceed.

SOL TEMP SEE ALSO COSTA RICA began the readout, which was followed by another TOP SECRET warning and then:

SOLOMON'S TEMPLE KEY NAME; CALL NAME SOL TEMP. FUNDS ALLOCATED FOURTEEN MIL; FUNDS USED AS OF THREE SLASH SEVEN THREE ZERO; FUNDS AVAILABLE FOURTEEN MIL. END.

Mary Claire scanned the display twice. Her fingertips rested upon the keyboard, the machine below

purring softly, awaiting her instructions. At the moment she had none.

She reviewed the situation. Random search turned up a secret account designated SOLOMON'S TEMPLE. Yes, but what was it?

She input GET: DESCRIPTION SOL TEMP.

The printout read:

SOL TEMP KEY NAME SOLOMON'S TEMPLE, TOP SECRET FUND FOURTEEN MIL, INITIAL RESPONSIBILITY OSS. RESPONSIBILITY SHIFT ONE NINE FIVE FIVE CIA; INDEX MCBRIDE. END.

So the account belonged to the Central Intelligence Agency. Nothing uncommon about that. They had many accounts around the world; but who or what was McBride?

MCBRIDE CIA STRUCTURE SOUTHEAST ASIA. END.

Mary Claire knew there were many such structures in that area. What she needed now were details, so she typed in GET: ONGOING DATA MCBRIDE. The display cleared, then:

ONGOING DATA MCBRIDE CIA STRUCTURE SEA; ESTABLISHED ONE NINE FOUR SEVEN OSS. MISSION POLITICAL ACTION REDIRECT FRENCH GOV EFFORT. END.

"Redirect" was another way of

by W.S.
Doxey

saying subvert. Mary Claire pondered this response for a moment, then changed the bent of her investigation. What had the McBride structure accomplished? The computer's answer to that question was brief:

REVIEW MCBRIDE STRUCTURE SEA; NO MISSIONS REPORTED, NO SPECIFIC RESULTS REPORTED. END.

Mary Claire was puzzled. The structure, established in 1947 under the Office of Strategic Services, and apparently still on the books under the CIA, had done nothing at all? But what about the money?

MCBRIDE STRUCTURE FUNDS VIA SOL TEMP [REF COSTA RICA]; INITIAL [CORRECT] ONLY ALLOCATION FOURTEEN MIL; EXPENDITURES AS OF THREE SLASH SEVEN THREE ZERO. END.

Mary Claire read and reread the letters glowing on her console. The ramifications of this discovery were staggering. Apparently there existed a sum of fourteen million, set aside in 1947 for covert action, but never used. Its existence had, somehow, been overlooked; if there really were such a sum; if it didn't exist only on paper in some long-forgotten budget. Should that be the case, the allocation would

have ceased on the budget expiration date. Some programmer erred in not clearing the data.

However, suppose there were fourteen million. Was it in gold? Cash? Diamonds? Securities? Real estate? She asked the computer.

MCBRIDE STRUCTURE FUNDS US CURRENCY; DEPOSIT ON CALL AS OF THREE SLASH SEVEN THREE, BANCO NACIONAL DE COSTA RICA, SAN JOSE COSTA RICA. END.

The money existed! It was a tangible something that could be spent for other tangibles, not just an idea that came momentarily into being via circuitry, then faded into gray memory banks. In Costa Rica, at this instant, was a fortune, one known perhaps only to her.

She tried visualizing fourteen million dollars. As a publicity stunt a Los Angeles bank once exhibited a million in cash. It made quite a pile. This was fourteen times greater, and probably too much for one person to carry away. Suppose it could be managed, what about customs? They wouldn't let such a sum pass without questions, and—

"Hey, asleep?"

The voice at her shoulder refocused Mary Claire's eyes on the console. She turned her face, at the same time hitting the CLEAR



button to blank out the screen.

"Sorry to wake you," said a smiling young man. "Thought maybe you'd like coffee."

"You caught me in a crucial decision-making process," she replied.

He was Eddie Ferguson, a com-

puter technician. She had been out with him several times. He was a nice enough guy, but there didn't seem to be anything *real* between them, at least not so far as Mary Claire was concerned.

"Okay, but I could've sworn you were dozing. Out late last night?"

She shook her head. Eddie had asked her for a date the day before but she refused because she didn't feel like going anywhere. She'd stayed at home, read a little, and turned in early.

"What about coffee?" he asked.

Mary Claire got her handbag and they went down the steps to the first floor, walked through the lobby and out along the promenade leading to the garden cafe.

The place still amused her. Within the modernistic building where her office was located was a world of abstractions—of ideas—which ultimately would affect the course of mankind, be it in terms of war or of peace. Here, in the cafe, was another world; one of greenery, flowers, and fountains. No doubt the Rond Corporation psychologists dreamed up such a layout because those who wrestled with ideas needed a dramatically different environment in which to refresh themselves.

Still, Mary Claire was aware of a strong conflict when she moved

from one world to the other. Though she changed environments, she could not forget the one she left. Now, as she and Eddie sat at a pleasant little white table by a pond of Japanese goldfish, her mind was back in her office facing the computer display.

"One thing I've learned," Eddie was saying, "is they have no soul. You listening?"

"You said they have no soul."

"What has none?"

"What? Oh, sorry—guess I was daydreaming."

"At last you admit it. Confession's good for the soul. You've got one. Computers don't."

"But who said they do?"

Eddie grinned. "You'd be surprised the way some brains around here look at hardware. Man, it's strange."

"For example?"

Eddie lowered his voice. "You've been here only six months. With me, it'll be three years next June."

"What does this have to do with whatever you're intimating?"

"Maybe nothing, but who knows? That's the point. The people running this show are very grim, uptight." He glanced over his shoulder at the flower beds, then, "They like to know everything. I wouldn't be surprised if we aren't being observed right

now," he told her in a low tone.

Mary Claire exclaimed, "Eddie, you're joking. Who cares what people like us talk about on a coffee break?"

"Glad you asked that. Relates to the old computer soul. The big grim guys are so into mechanical intelligence they think like machines."

"That's not possible."

"Of course not, only it is up to a point. The machine's strength is its speed and capacity, right? It handles millions of bits of data quickly. Okay, the big guys are trying to do the same. So far they can only accumulate data. That's why I'm convinced we're all under surveillance." Now he whispered: "I'm not the only one who thinks so."

Mary Claire wondered just what Eddie was up to. Was this story an extra security check? She had TOP SECRET clearance. Was he after something?

"Dreaming again?" Eddie asked.

"No, thinking."

"You don't believe me?"

"It's not a matter of belief. Suppose you're correct and they *are* spying on us. Maybe they have a right. Rond handles secret data. The government's deeply involved."

"Damn, listen to her!"

"Yes, listen. Why are you both

ering me with all this now?"

She started to rise. Eddie caught her arm and asked her to wait.

"All right, for a minute, but that's all," she said.

"That's long enough. I didn't want to tell you this, but you deserve to know."

"They think I'm a spy? How absurd!"

"No . . . worse. One of my buddies cut into a bug placed in a big guy's office by—get this—another big guy. They don't even trust each other. Anyhow, your name came up."

Mary Claire laughed. "That's ridiculous. The big guys—as you call them—don't know I exist."

Eddie shook his head. "They know plenty. For example, they know you've been out with me. They know we had the veal parmesan at Paolo's."

"What?"

"They also know you're dating beneath yourself in the Rond hierarchy. See, I'm a dirty-fingernail mechanic because I play with the guts of these think machines, not their divine intellects. Anyhow, when one Mr. Big said that about us, and wondered what should be done, another Mr. Big said nothing because it doesn't matter. Know why?"

"No, why?"

"This'll break your heart, hon.

But, like they say, the truth'll set you free. It doesn't matter that you go out with a mechanic because, according to Mr. Big, you're just one of those 'damn broads hired to keep the Feds off our tail.' Or, in plain computerese, you're a token female input. Got it?"

Mary Claire got it—loud and clear.

She tried to laugh it off, but settled for a smile—a weak one at that. Deep within, she was mad as well as hurt. She excused herself and hurried through the garden to the rest room by her office.

She thought tears would come then, but they didn't. She was too angry to cry. "Don't be surprised at this," she told her reflection in the chrome-framed mirror. "It's happened before!" Through college and grad school, in fact. The creeps were out to get her, one way or another. Show a little intelligence and they laughed away your good work by whispering that the prof had an eye for the girls.

Still, she'd earned every A she made, every damn one, and there were a lot of them! So when Rond made her an offer, she supposed it was based on performance, not sex.

Mary Claire took a last look in the mirror. "Supposed—that's your

mistake. All this time with computers and you forget a basic principle: supposition isn't valid input."

She had some ice water at the fountain and by the time she returned to the office her anger had subsided, to be replaced with disappointment mixed with doubt.

It was sad, really, to think top executives hadn't shed their prejudices against women. Yet, could she trust Eddie? What was his motivation? She'd been out with him several times; however, there wasn't anything between them. He was nice enough, but suppose he simply liked her as a person?

"There you go, supposing again," she told herself.

First, check out Mr. Edward Ferguson, then suppose.

She put a GET: PROFILE. The printout indicated a pretty ordinary guy. Eddie was twenty-eight, a veteran, and single. He had a BA from Oregon State in philosophy. He had gained his computer expertise via an IBM training program with support courses at Purdue. Background was middle class: father a printer, mother a housewife with some part-time clerical employment. He was an only child.

The logical conclusion to be drawn from this data was that Eddie was a regular sort. If he had

any ulterior motives, his background didn't indicate them—if the input were accurate and unbiased. It would be impossible to check out, except perhaps through comparison. She put a GET: PROFILE for herself.

CONFIDENTIAL PROFILE MILLS, MARY CLAIRE, ASSISTANT SYSTEMS ANALYST, BORN FRESNO CAL EIGHT SLASH TWO THREE SLASH FOUR NINE. FATHER MILLS, CHARLES EDWARD DECEASED ATTORNEY. MOTHER MILLS, CLAIRE BLACKWELL ELEM TEACHER.

The data following traced Mary Claire's career through UCLA and Cal Tech, recapitulating her excellent record. On the evidence of her profile it would seem that, regardless of her sex, she was totally qualified for her position.

This thought reassured her; but then a SEE ALSO FED SEVEN ZERO FIVE FOUR THREE flashed upon the screen. It was with some trepidation that she put a GET for that data.

FED 70543 pertained to the Equal Employment Opportunity Act. There were several categories: Blacks, Chicanos, American Indians, the handicapped, Women. Her name appeared in the latter, with a tag indicating her profile had been forwarded to the De-

partment of Labor in Washington.

Her reaction was shock, even though she immediately wondered why she should feel this way. Certain groups *were* discriminated against in American society. The Employment Act was a damn fine attempt to end that discrimination!

This was what reason told her. From the pit of her stomach another voice spoke; that of anger brought on by inbred fear which, regardless of her successes, was always lurking to whisper: *this time maybe, but you're bound to fail.*

After all, what could a person like herself do? She was weak—alone. They were strong—united. In their eyes she was perhaps a competent worker, but in the long run she was not to be taken seriously.

Yet, she was not without some strength. The computer put her on a momentary equal footing—and a moment was all she needed, silly and childish as it sounded, to teach them a lesson.

Mary Claire put a GET for information concerning how to expedite SOLOMON'S TEMPLE.

SOLOMON'S TEMPLE ON CALL BANCO NACIONAL DE COSTA RICA; EXPEDITE VIA NUMBER SERIES THREE SEVEN ONE ONE ONE ZERO; EXPEDITED ON DEMAND IN

PERSON OR VIA CABLE. SEND
QUOTE MCBRIDE NUMBER
MCBRIDE END QUOTE. END.

After recording this data on a memo pad, she cleared the console and settled back to do some real daydreaming.

First problem: how to transfer the fourteen million from Costa Rica to—where? A Swiss bank?

Sure, take it from San José and put it into a numbered account. "Only," she mused, "I don't know anything about Swiss banks."

An easily rectifiable shortcoming. She keyed the Rond CENTRAL INFORMATION STATION [CIS] in St. Louis and put a demand:

GET: HOW ESTABLISH
SWISS NUMBERED ACCOUNT.
END.

The screen blinked clear, then filled with data. After digesting the facts, Mary Claire realized how much liberty Hollywood took with covert banking. While it was true that Swiss law protected a depositor's anonymity, bankers did not accept money without asking questions as to its origin and the depositor's true identity. One had to appear in person to open accounts of more than fifty thousand dollars.

In her meditative state of mind, Mary Claire envisioned herself deplaning in Geneva, tending to

her business, and returning to California. Her savings were enough to finance the trip. It would be very simple, yet . . . What about a passport? She had none, and if she applied, surely Rond would find out. If questions weren't asked, at least they'd know she was planning to leave the country.

"People do take vacations," she whispered. "All the way to Europe for an afternoon?"

She made a rapid calculation and discovered she had accumulated the grand total of four days' leave time. Europe was out—but there must be another way.

Did the Swiss banks have branches?

She asked CIS.

The printout was quite long. One listing in particular caught her eye: the *Union Crédit Suisse* maintained offices in Mexico City.

Mary Claire had been to Mexico several times. One didn't need a passport, only a birth certificate and a tourist card, which could be picked up at the airport before boarding.

Now in her mind's eye she saw her drama unfold. Today was Tuesday. She would fly to Mexico City Thursday night. Friday morning she'd open an account in a Mexican bank, cable San José, and have SOLOMON'S TEMPLE

transferred. Then she'd call upon her Swiss banker.

Her Swiss banker. The phrase was exciting—no, more than that; it gave her self-confidence. She knew she could do it!

Again reason spoke: "But what if you're caught?"

This time she was ready with the perfect reply. "My assignment is to check the Rond Corporation computer systems. If this isn't a real check, please tell me what is."

Then, to check out things for herself, she ran through all the SOL TEMP data again. There was no variation in output; but when, as a backup procedure, she demanded information via OSS, one additional detail came to light.

SECURITY SOL TEMP VIA INFRA CORP NETWORK CONTINUING CONTRACT; IMPLEMENT PROCEDURE: VIA PHONE OR CABLE [INFRACOP], IDENTIFICATION QUOTE MCBRIDE SEVENTEEN END QUOTE; FOLLOW WITH DETAILS; CLOSE, QUOTE SEVENTEEN END QUOTE. END.

Mary Claire realized that SECURITY had a multitude of definitions. She copied this information on her memo pad as a matter of course, then shut down her console and proceeded to make flight reservations. Before leaving

for the day, she stopped by the section office and told the secretary she would be using one of her vacation days on Friday.

The woman said, "Very well," and made a note. Had there been any questions, Mary Claire would have replied she was driving over to Fresno to see her mother. That was what she told Eddie the next day when he asked her for a date.

"Well, okay," he said with a grin, "but don't count me out. I'll see you later."

The gentle but persistent buzz of the telephone awoke her. A low, masculine voice said, "Señorita Mills, it is nine o'clock."

Mary Claire thanked the clerk, then rose and opened the draperies. The sky which greeted her was a cool blue. Sunshine splashed across the carpet to the foot of the bed. From this fifth floor room of the Delgado Hotel she looked down into the huge green trees of Alameda Park, through which were visible glimpses of the golden walls of the great cathedral. Traffic was heavy on the Avenida Juárez, but no sounds reached her.

Her first impulse was to dive back into bed and enjoy the luxury of the hotel. After all, the flight from San Francisco and the limo in from the airport were ex-

hausting. Yes, she'd sleep till noon, have brunch sent up, then dress and go sightseeing.

She laughed away this pleasant fantasy. It would have to wait. Now she had to tend to business.

Thirty minutes later she emerged from the Delgado wearing a tailored navy suit with white blouse and matching accessories, which made her appear reliable, responsible. She proceeded down Avenida Juarez to an American-looking cafe where she had juice, toast and coffee. As she ate at a table by the window she spotted a bank in the next block. After paying her check, she crossed the Avenida and entered the Banco San Martin.

The receptionist who greeted her spoke English. She led her to a Señor Alvarez, a pale, middle-aged man whose English contained a British flavor. After introductions were completed, Mary Claire came to the point.

"I wish to transfer a sum of money from the Banco Nacional de Costa Rica," she said. "Can you help me?"

"But of course, this is our business," he replied. "How large a sum?"

"Fourteen million dollars," Mary Claire said with an inward shudder, suddenly realizing this was the first time she had spoken

those words aloud to another person.

Alvarez blinked. Then he leaned back in his swivel chair and said, "How is this transfer to be effected?"

"By cable. I have an arrangement."

He took a form from his desk and said, "Very well. Give me your name and address and we will open your account."

Mary Claire showed him her tourist card, and after filling out the form, Alvarez said, "Should you now wish to send your cable, Miss Ruiz will direct you to our telex operator."

She followed the receptionist to a small office toward the rear of the bank. First glancing at the memo pad in her purse, she printed on a cable form:

IMMEDIATELY EXPEDITE
SOLOMON'S TEMPLE. SEND
TO ACCOUNT OF M. C.
MILLS, BANCO SAN MARTIN,
MEXICO D. F. MCBRIDE
THREE SEVEN ONE ONE ONE
ZERO MCBRIDE. ACKNOWLEDGE.

She checked the message twice for errors. There were none, unless sending it were considered. Should she really go through with it? If she tore up the form she would be guilty of nothing more than wishful thinking. Couldn't be

prosecuted for that, or everyone would be in jail.

Her resolution wavered—she almost said forget it—but the desk at which she sat was positioned so that she glanced straight into the bank vault. As she tried to make up her mind, an employee came through the steel doors, pushing a metal cart. Upon it were stacks and stacks of colorful currency.

Mary Claire gave the form to the operator.

The telex chattered; bells rang. The employee pushing the cart passed by so close she could have reached out and touched the money. How much was there? A great deal, but certainly not fourteen million. Señor Alvarez's blink came to mind. He dealt with vast amounts daily. Still, that much in the hands of a young woman shook him. Mary Claire smiled.

The telex chattered again. More bells. Now the operator gave her a square of yellow paper:

ACKNOWLEDGE REQUEST FOR SOLOMON'S TEMPLE. REPLY AFFIRMATIVE. FUNDS TO FOLLOW VIA SPECIAL TELEX VOUCHER. STOP.

Alvarez received the message with a toothy smile and an invitation to join him for "refreshments." Mary Claire declined. She placed the receipt for her account in her purse and went out to the

street, hailed a cab, and asked the driver to take her to number 417 Paseo de la Reforma.

It was a short but pleasant drive. The cab went west on the Avenida Juarez past the Gallery of Modern Art, then turned left at the statue of Charles IV, down the broad Paseo which was divided by neat parks. Flower vendors sold their bright wares at intersections, bringing a sweetness to the bitter smells of traffic. They passed Sanborns Restaurant and, farther on, the statue of Columbus. Beyond the Monument to Independence the cab pulled over to the curb. The driver opened the door and said, "Numero 417, señorita."

Mary Claire paid what he asked without haggling, and added such a generous tip that the cabby said "Gracias!" as though he really meant it.

As the cab rejoined the flow of traffic Mary Claire devoted her full attention to the three-story building before her. Built of tan brick, it stood quietly, unpretentiously, its small windows and narrow door seeming to look upon the passing world with the same wisely patient expression of a person who has seen everything.

She climbed the steps, pausing on the last one to read the brass plate to the left of the door, which stated, simply, "Union

Crédit Suisse, Mexico, D. F.”

Had she looked back, she might have noticed a green car parked at the curb and the shadowy figure behind the wheel who seemed to be interested in her. However, Mary Claire’s thoughts were focused ahead, not behind, to what awaited beyond the door that opened to her touch.

She checked her watch again. Fifteen minutes had passed. The office in which she sat was small and simply furnished, yet the oil paintings—a landscape of alpine peaks, a still life of apples and pears—appeared of some quality. The elderly man who had met her at the door with the frank request that she state her business, had brought her here and informed her that a Mr. Ernest would be with her shortly.

“Then where is he?” she whispered. “Mexico’s a land of mañana, but this is—”

Or—was the delay on purpose? Did it have something to do with SOLOMON’S TEMPLE?

She considered leaving, but where would she go? Thus far the plan was working. There was one detail she had to tend to when the money was safe. She’d send a final message to San José, via the secret number, instructing the bank to destroy its records of SOLO-

MON’S TEMPLE. Since it was a covert fund they’d comply, otherwise the next time they might not get such an account.

The office door opened and a slender young man came in rather out of breath. “I am Karl Ernest, Miss Mills,” he said. “Forgive the delay. This morning I discovered that my automobile does not function as advertised.”

He took a seat behind the desk in front of which Mary Claire sat, and said, “Now, then, how may the Union Crédit Suisse be of service to you?”

“I’ve come into a sum of money, fourteen million dollars to be exact.” The words did not startle her now. “I want your bank to handle it.”

“I see. But there are banks in the U.S. Why us?”

“I’d rather my financial affairs be private.”

“For what reason?”

Mary Claire answered deliberately. “I’m a relatively young woman and up till now my life has been pretty ordinary. I’d prefer it remain so, at least until I get used to being rich.”

“Yes. And how did you acquire these millions?”

Mary Claire hesitated, as though this request surprised her, then said, “You certainly ask a lot of questions.”

"We have our reputation to consider. You do not wish to answer?"

"To the contrary. I have nothing to hide. The money was put in a special fund in 1947 by my uncle."

"You have identification?"

Mary Claire gave him her birth certificate and tourist card. He looked at them, at her, back at them, then returned the documents, smiled and said, "How much do you know about our banking policies?"

"A little."

"Do you desire a numbered account?"

"Is it advisable?"

Ernest shrugged. "That depends upon the depositor's circumstances. To remain completely anonymous, yes."

"Then I'll have one."

"Very well. Now, shall we invest your money or simply hold it? If you choose the latter, we will charge you. The former, you will increase your holdings."

Mary Claire smiled. "That's really not a choice. I want you to invest as you see fit."

"Fine. However, according to agreements with the United States we must annually compute a fifteen percent tax on your gains." He paused. "Of course, Swiss law forbids us to reveal these figures

to anyone except the depositor."

Mary Claire nodded. Ernest gave her an identification form to fill out. She told him of her arrangement with Señor Alvarez. On another sheet of paper he wrote a request that the Banco San Martin transfer her account to the Union Crédit Suisse. She signed this also.

"Miss Mills, everything is now in order," Ernest said, "except your number. Do you have one?"

SOLOMON'S TEMPLE had brought her this far. She took the pen he handed her and wrote the fund number in reverse: zero, one, one, one, seven, three.

The world had changed!

It was the same, but it wasn't. The cool blue sky still shone above, the little parks along the Paseo de la Reforma were still crisp and green. As usual the traffic was busy. Yet . . .

Mary Claire threw herself across the bed in her room at the Delgado. When she left the Union Crédit Suisse she was so excited that she walked back to the hotel. The shops she passed sold the fine things of life—silver, jewels, furs, china, antiques, Paris gowns—and she was light-headed with knowing she could have any of them she wanted. It gave her a curious sensation of total fullness. Giggles

escaped her lips like bubbles from champagne.

A knock sounded at the door.

The fullness vanished, its mass replaced by a burden of terrible weight. Who was it? She hadn't called room service. No one, except Alvarez and Ernest, knew she was here.

The knock sounded again, louder. She rose from the bed and cracked the door.

Greeting her was an immense bouquet of flowers, so large that it hid from view the head and shoulders of the bearer. A voice behind the blossoms said, "*Señorita Mills, por usted.*"

Half from surprise, half from curiosity, Mary Claire opened the door and said, "What is this?"

"Flowers for milady," said a voice she recognized. The bouquet moved aside and she looked into Eddie Ferguson's smiling face. "Said I'd see you later. Ask me in?"

"What are you doing in Mexico City?"

He closed the door behind him. "It's a long way from Fresno. I might ask you the same."

There was something in the tone of his voice. He offered her the flowers and when she did not accept them, he tossed them onto the bed, saying, "They're just a little something to celebrate your

success. Can't treat it casually."

"What success?"

"Don't play games, hon. You know."

"I don't!"

He dropped into the armchair opposite the window. "In that case, I'll explain. You've come into some money. I want my share. It's that simple."

"That's not simple!" she replied. "I don't—"

"Don't get cute. I set you up, all the way."

"You?"

He laughed. "Sure. Remember my little sermon on bugging and surveillance? Well, I'm the guy who was doing it to you, not Mr. Big. You're frowning. Okay, I'll give you more input.

"When I was in the service I discovered the CIA banking system—you know, putting out big secret accounts payable on demand via numbers? I also learned they were supervised through the Rond Corporation. I figured the thing to do was beat the boys at their own game. So—" he spread his hands, "I went to IBM school, got my mechanic's job, and here we are with fourteen million bucks."

It was a moment before Mary Claire could speak. Then, "All that about my being a token female at Rond was a lie?"

"Not exactly. They do have to meet the Fed requirements."

She shook her head. "I still don't see how you did it. I mean, at least three other people run checks like I do. And why not somebody else anyhow?"

"Answer number one is, I had an associate. He monitored the bugs."

"You said *had*?"

Eddie grinned. "Yeah, darnedest thing—the poor guy had an accident. People say the L.A. traffic is bad; well it isn't any better in San Francisco. Now only you and I know about SOLOMON'S TEMPLE. Isn't that cozy?"

Mary Claire ignored this remark. "But why me?"

"Simple. Like my dad always told me—wanting something and getting it are two different things. I figured to let you run with the ball, and if you scored—well, here I am."

"And if I didn't?"

"We've talked enough for now," Eddie said, rising from his chair. "Let's have a little fun; we deserve it. Tell you what, get dressed in something more casual and I'll take you to Xochimilco for a boat ride and lunch." He glanced at his watch. "Meet me in the lobby in half an hour."

"You're staying here in the Delgado?"

"Where else? Got to keep both eyes on you, don't I?"

"But suppose I don't go along with you? The money's in my account. I have the number."

"You won't do that," he said. "You're too vulnerable. You're an attractive young woman with a long life ahead of her. And there's also your mom in Fresno. Besides, who cares about a lousy fourteen mil? That's pocket change to the guys who've blown over a hundred billion in Vietnam."

Mary Claire wanted to run. She'd catch the next plane to San Francisco and tell Rond what happened. They'd protect her.

Or would they—*could* they? Eddie meant business. That partner of his *didn't* have an *accident*!

She paced the floor. There was no way out. She'd have to play ball with him. And sooner or later he'd—

"Why did I do it?" she exclaimed.

She knew. It was the money and the excitement, the adventure.

Her watch showed fifteen minutes had passed. Fifteen more and she'd be with Eddie again. Whatever she decided, it had to be now.

If only Eddie weren't involved!

Her pacing halted.

The solution was obvious: dis-

involve Eddie. Yes, but easier said than done, unless . . .

She dumped the contents of her purse on the bed. The memo pad was there, beneath her wallet. Mexico City was the hub of Latin American undercover activities. If Infra wasn't here it wasn't anywhere. She grabbed the directory, fluttered the pages to: INFRA CORPORATION, 565 Durango.

But the phone, was it bugged? She'd have to take the chance. The hotel operator dialed the number, and after two rings a woman's voice said, "Infra Corporation, *diga*."

"Listen carefully," Mary Claire said. "This is McBride Seventeen."

The woman switched to English. "Yes, McBride Seventeen. Go ahead."

"Serious threat to security by one Edward Ferguson, male, American, late twenties, average height and build, brown hair. Staying at Hotel Delgado, perhaps under alias."

"Can you be more specific?" she asked.

"Yes. In several minutes he is taking me to Xochimilco. I will be wearing a yellow blouse, white slacks, and a bright red scarf."

"We will be there."

"I warn you, he's highly motivated and very dangerous!" She ended her communication with

just one word: "Seventeen."

Now, ten days later, Mary Claire sat at her console, recalling their drive out to the famous gardens of Xochimilco. Eddie said she looked very smart in her blouse and slacks. He didn't like the scarf, though.

That remark made her fear he'd bugged the phone, but when he didn't insist she remove the scarf, there seemed no need to worry.

In fact, there wasn't—except for the way he acted. He kept putting his arm around her, intimately, as though he figured a girl who'd steal fourteen million had no scruples at all.

She didn't let her revulsion show. She smiled at his jokes, ignored his advances, as they navigated the canals in a gondola-like craft, and managed to make it through the afternoon.

Later, when he left her at her room, he said, "Pick you up at eight. We'll have a few and then get some dinner. After that, we can try the night life."

The way he said this she knew it would be no use to refuse, but she had to do something! Where the hell was Infra? Did they spot him or not? Right now he was playing it cool. When he got the number he wouldn't need her!

She was ready at eight, but he

didn't show. By nine she knew something must've happened. At ten she went out to eat by herself.

There were no messages when she returned at eleven-thirty.

By ten the next morning Mary Claire still hadn't heard from him, so she booked space on the afternoon flight.

From San Francisco International Airport she drove directly to her mother's in Fresno and spent a nervous Sunday. She wanted to warn her mother, but that would mean confessing all, and she wasn't ready for that. Perhaps she'd never have to tell her.

She left Fresno early Monday morning, and on the way to work she stopped to send the data-destroy cable to the Banco Nacional de Costa Rica. As the telex chattered she felt a great sense of relief. "Whatever happens now, happens," she told herself. "I've done all I can."

So she did nothing, except work and look over her shoulder. Eddie did not appear. Infra must've got him. Or . . . Curiosity almost overpowered good sense, but vi-

sions of the Union Crédit Suisse made her resist asking about him.

Now she decided it was safe to take a chance. She input a GET for his profile.

The printout showed the same data she had scanned before—his age, background, etc. However, there was one new bit of information:

TERMINATED THREE
SLASH TWO FIVE SLASH
SEVEN THREE, KILLED AUTO
ACCIDENT MEXICO CITY.
PROFILE CONCLUDED AND
STORED CIS. END.

A trick?

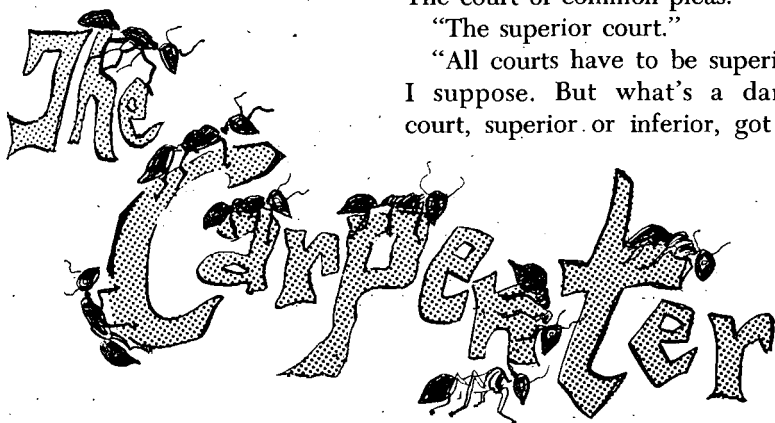
She double checked with PAYROLL and learned death benefits were being paid his parents.

For a moment, as the console lights winked up at her, she felt a tinge of remorse; but only a tinge and for only a moment.

SOLOMON'S TEMPLE was hers now, all hers. In three or four months she'd take a Swiss vacation and check her holdings. A smile illuminated her face. Thank goodness Rond was an Equal Opportunity Employer.



A sense of accomplishment can surely be expected to lead one to greater heights.



Good morning, Homer. You're looking well this morning."

"Who the hell told you to address me as Homer?"

"Sorry. You prefer Mr. Price, then?"

"That's what passing strangers normally call me. Who are you, anyway? Another doctor?"

"That's right. I'm Dr. Nichols."

"Nickels and dimes. They all add up to dollars. So you're another doctor, are you? Who sent you?"

"The court sent me, Mr. Price."

"Which court is that? The ten-

nis? The squash? The probate? The court of common pleas?"

"The superior court."

"All courts have to be superior, I suppose. But what's a damn court, superior or inferior, got to

do with me? Now that the ants are pretty much wiped out, who requires a court?"

"The ants?"

"I guess I haven't told you about the ants, have I? I've told everyone and his brother about them. But not you. How come?"

"This is our first meeting, Mr. Price. Maybe that's how come."

"You shrinks are all beginning to look alike to me. You sound alike too. Nichols, you said. All right, Dr. Nichols, I'll go into the ant situation all over again, just

for you, if you're seriously interested."

"I'm definitely interested. That's why I'm here. To listen to your views on ants and anything else that comes to mind."

"I'm ready. If that's what turns you on. How old are you, by the way?"

"Thirty-six."

"You look every day of it. Still you're probably too young to appreciate what the ants can do to a man of my age. The ramifications are beyond belief. You've got to be over fifty to grasp the full significance of these devilish ants."

"The records show you to be fifty-seven, Mr. Price."



"So they're keeping records. The no-good rats."

"Purely routine."

"They began to keep records on me at the agency toward the end. Did you know that?"

"The agency?"

"The advertising agency. Young, Gray and Balding—an account executive's progress in capsule form.

Only in advertising could you get away with a firm name like that."

"Well, I'd hardly call you bald, Mr. Price. A touch of gray, yes. But that's to be expected."

"I always figured that Matt Young and Chet Gray must have scoured Madison Avenue for years in search of somebody with a name like Tim Balding. Gim-micky, sure, but what else is new? The firm name was no coincidence. Lay odds on it, Doc. You won't lose."

"I can well believe it."

"Tim Balding brought nothing to the firm but his name and an underarm deodorant account, which we lost to J. Walter two or three months later, leaving us with nothing but the dubious asset of Balding's name. Now he's the senior partner."

"Balding?"

"None other. After Matt Young keeled over with a coronary, it was just a matter of time before Tim Balding eased out Chet Gray. The process took less than a year. The writing was on the wall for any fool to read. The old order changeth, yielding place to the

new. The button-down shirt gradually gave ground to the turtle-neck sweater. Pretty soon creative cats, so-called in a self-stylish way, were abandoning the time-honored Brooks Brothers suit in favor of plaid seersucker. Hirsute copywriters were to be seen with increasing frequency slapping in and out of Forty-second Street saloons in open-toed sandals, tote bags slung from their shoulders. When the agency's new art director attended a staff meeting draped in a printed caftan with a full hood and a lace-up neck, I took a second look at the writing on the wall myself. How does it go? Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin. Or words to that effect. So after twenty-seven years of huckstering and quite possibly just twenty-seven hours ahead of a pointed suggestion from sly Tim Balding, I opted for immediate retirement. Opted. That's exactly what I did. Opted."

"Have you ever regretted that decision, Mr. Price?"

"When you opt, Doc, you should never regret. It's a waste of time. Especially if you opt for the inevitable."

"Am I to understand that immediate retirement was the only option open to you?"

"More or less. Oh, I suppose I could have leaped up on the win-

dow ledge and swan-dived onto the striped awning ten stories down."

"In other words, you didn't really welcome retirement."

"I guess not. I suppose I wasn't prepared for it. Still I might have handled it better, or at least differently, if those damned ants hadn't made such a nuisance of themselves."

"I'm anxious to hear all about those ants, Mr. Price, but first there's one other aspect of the case I'd like to go into. The matter of your wife. How did she take your retirement?"

"In stride. Never faltered for a second in the daily pace of her social activities."

"I see. Your wife, in other words, had many interests of her own. That is, apart from any you had in common."

"We had practically nothing in common. Nothing. Not in a long time. The only interests Meg had were all her own. Take my word for it, Doctor, we've been running on separate tracks for years. Mentally, physically, spiritually. Physically, I rode out of her life every morning, five days a week, at eight twenty-one on the Commuter's Special. I rode back into it again on the five thirty-three, frivolously called the Martini Mainliner, unless some dire busi-

ness emergency kept me in the city. Meg never asked me how I spent the day. After a while I treated her with the same discreet lack of interest."

"What did you talk about? You must have talked about something."

"Let's see. Oh yes. Crabgrass was a fairly constant subject. Fungus in the swimming pool. The voracity of gypsy moths. Things like that. Oddly enough, ants never crept into our conversation. Why not, I wonder? Even then, during my last days with Young, Gray and Balding, the ants must have already begun to infiltrate our neo-Dutch Colonial. Burrowing into the woodwork, consolidating their forces in preparation for the big push. That's how they are."

"You and your wife were childless, I understand."

"So we were. And just as well. But what's that got to do with anything?"

"Every detail sheds light."

"All right. Jot this down in your notebook then. I bought a dog once. Twice. They failed to thrive. The first one—I named it Jerry—refused to eat dog food. However, he was nuts about truck tires. A delivery van finally flattened him for good. I can't remember the second dog's name.

Possibly I never named it. It was with us less than a week. Whining pitifully all night, barking at nothing all day. Meg hated it. I didn't like it too well myself. One day at dusk I let it off its leash for a free run. It ran across the Harringtons' lawn, across the Durfees' lawn and past the Novaks' weeping willow, and for all I know it's still running. Is that the sort of detail you like, Doc?"

"Well, who knows, Mr. Price?"

"If you don't, I certainly don't. There was a time I considered acquiring a kitten. I planned to have it neutered and then train it to curl up beside warm radiators and purr. The idea kind of evaporated."

"Interesting."

"You think so?"

"I do. Now let's test your recollection of something more recent. For instance, do you recall the name of the maid your wife was employing at the time you retired?"

"Not offhand. Better give me a small clue."

"She was German, born in West Germany, in Essen."

"To be perfectly frank, my memory is very spotty on the subject of maids. Meg hired and fired dozens of them over the years. German, you say. Hell, man, I'm sure a lot of them were German.

Sixty Edgemere Road was like the first stop for a United Nations domestic placement service. We had Irish maids, Italian, Hungarian, Jamaican, Puerto Rican, Korean, Polish, Greek. They came and went."

"This maid's name is Gretchen Aldermark."

"Oh, sure. I remember Gretchen. I don't think I ever caught her last name. She helped me a little with the ants. Tried to."

"She did? Well, that's interesting. I think we'd better get right to the ants now. Tell me all about them from the very beginning, Mr. Price."

"You don't want to know *all* about them. Take it from me. I don't know all about them myself. But what I do know I sometimes think is too much. There are twenty-five hundred species of ants in the world. Did you know that?"

"No, I did not."

"They are a social animal. Did you know that?"

"Yes, I know that."

"Not social like us. We're anti-social at times. Most of us. But ants are never antisocial. They're inescapably interwoven. Like the ideal communist society—or the fascist, for that matter—devoid of human flaws. The life of each ant is dedicated wholly to the com-

munity. Besides that, the system is based on an unshakable matriarchy. Forget the male after he's served his purpose. Did you know this, Doctor?"

"Not really, Mr. Price. When did you first begin to, uh, observe the ants?"

"About two months after I'd opted out of the rat race."

"That would be around the middle of March. Is that right?"

"If you say so. You seem to have everything written down in that notebook of yours. But I think it was a little later than the middle of March. More like the middle of April. A nice sunny day. Rather warm. I remember I was sitting out on the patio, still in pajamas and bathrobe, working on a tall glass of grapefruit juice laced with vodka."

"What time of day was this?"

"Morning. Late in the morning."

"Where was your wife?"

"Out. As I remember, it was one of her golf mornings. I thought you wanted to hear about the ants, Doc?"

"I do. Pardon me. Please continue."

"Well, we've dwelled in the Edgemere Road house for sixteen years. Nearly two acres there. Grass, weeds, hedges, bushes, flowers, and a couple of sick

cherry trees, and the myriad pests and insects which accompany such gracious appointments. As a result, I was well aware of the existence of Hymenoptera. That's the Latin for all the billions of bees, wasps and ants inhabiting the earth from Ellesmere Island to Tierra del Fuego. Did you know that?"

"No, I didn't."

"Look it up in your dictionary. Hymenoptera. Refers to the fact that the female of the species—the supreme ruler, that is—possesses an ovipositor which may also serve as a stinger. I suppose you know what an ovipositor is."

"I believe I do, Mr. Price. Yes, I believe I do. May we now return to that morning on the patio?"

"I was wearing moccasin-type bedroom slippers. I was sitting in a rocking chair, the outdoor kind, with aluminum rockers and arm-rests, and my legs were stretched out straight in front of me, toes pointing skyward at a forty-five degree angle. I was studying my slippers when the ants arrived. Dozens of them. Big black ones. Different from any of the ants I'd been stepping on for years. They began to use the side of each slipper as a parade ground, marching alongside the outer heel."

"Just a moment, Mr. Price. When you say these ants were dif-

ferent, what exactly do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Strictly speaking, I suppose I never took much notice of ants until then. I saw them without seeing them. They were around underfoot like ticks or crickets. Who noticed? Who ever bothered to tell one from the other? But on this particular morning I did notice. I realized at once that the troop of ants marching across my slippers in columns of one was a much different breed from the cornfield ant or the pharaoh ant or the little red ant or the little black ant—the ants I'd been generally ignoring most of my life. Brushing them off a trouser cuff, giving them the heel on the porch steps, spraying them with the hose. No, sirree, these ants were big and black and very well disciplined. Carpenter ants, as I learned later. Genus *Camponotus*. Sub-genus, found solely in the United States, *herculanicus pennsylvanicus*. First discovered, I should imagine, somewhere in Pennsylvania, like Mauch Chunk. Have you ever been in Mauch Chunk, Doctor?"

"No. These ants, Mr. Price. Please go on."

"The carpenter ants I encountered on the patio that morning were one and a half centimeters long. That's at least twice as long

as any ants I'd ever met before. I read later that the carpenter ant, the worker, is capable of carrying ten times its own weight up a steep incline without even puffing. Don't ask me how much a normal carpenter ant weighs. I don't know. For what it's worth, the worker is always an infertile female."

"Tell me what you did that morning about these ants."

"Well, the first thing I think I did was to summon the maid. She was pushing a carpet sweeper in the room off the patio, and I asked her if she would mind mixing me another drink."

"This maid was Gretchen Aldermark. Right?"

"So Gretchen's back again. Does she have dirty blonde hair? Ash blonde, they call it. And prominent bazooms?"

"I wouldn't know that, Mr. Price. Gretchen is just a name in the records."

"Who's going to argue with the damn records? Not me. If the records say it was Gretchen, I'll go along. She was German. I remember that much. She addressed me as Herr Prize."

"Did she mix you a drink?"

"That morning? Sure. And many a time after that. But we were talking about the ants, weren't we?"

"Let's get back to the ants, by all means."

"I removed my slippers and shook the damned things off on the patio tile. It took a lot of shaking. They're real clingers, these carpenters. Then, grasping a slipper by the toe, I slapped the black devils to death two or three at a time. The body count was twenty-six. A few may have gotten away. When the maid—Gretchen, if you insist—came with the fresh drink, I drank it with a great deal of enjoyment. With a sense of accomplishment."

"But that wasn't the end of the ants."

"It was only the beginning. I'm an early riser. The next morning I got down to the kitchen at six, with black coffee on my mind. Meg sleeps late. The maid usually came out of her room at seven. I was alone, or so I thought until I cracked open the venetian blinds above the sink. The black pests were back in force, hundreds of them, swarming along the sills, scurrying across the counters. When I opened the dishwasher to get a clean cup and saucer, a regiment of the bloody things was in full possession, cavorting over plates, glassware, knives and forks, everything. It was a terrible way for any man to begin a day."

"What were your thoughts at

that exact moment, Mr. Price?"

"I thought what a terrible way to begin a day. I also thought that the few tricky ones that had eluded my slipper the day before had sure as hell spread the alarm far and wide. I thought I'd better have a drink. Well, they were climbing the vodka bottle in the cabinet where I kept it. The only safe place in the entire kitchen was the refrigerator, the inside of it, not the outside, where the ice cubes were and the chilled grapefruit juice."

"So you mixed yourself a drink."

"I did."

"Did you kill any of the ants?"

"A few. Those in the sink I washed down the drain with hot water. About ten there, all told. I demolished several more with a fly swatter. But it was plain that I was vastly outnumbered. Picking them off one by one was not the right tactic. I wouldn't live that long. Finally I swept a few stragglers off the kitchen table and sat down, with another drink, to plan a strong offensive. By the time Gretchen entered the kitchen I knew what I had to do."

"And what was that?"

"I had to strike at their breeding grounds, annihilate them at the source."

"What did Gretchen say about

the ants? Did she notice them?"

"Gott in Himmel. That's what she said. That's *all* she said, over and over again. A regular katzenjammer kid, this Gretchen baby. I kept asking her if she had any idea where the damn ants were coming from. But her sole response was to tiptoe daintily around their formations, all the time rolling her blue eyes wildly and exclaiming Gott in Himmel."

"Did you lay hands on her, Mr. Price?"

"What the hell do you mean, lay hands on her? Here I am up to my tokus in carpenter ants—two had already drowned in my third drink—and you want to know if I took time out to play around with the sleep-in maid. What kind of a shrink are you anyway?"

"I'm trying to fit the pieces together, Mr. Price, that's all. What did your wife have to say about these ants?"

"Nöt a hell of a lot. For the simple reason that most of them were gone by the time she got up."

"Do you know why?"

"Sure. Forage completed. They carried off what they came after. Crumbs. A crumb of Jewish rye for an ant is like a couple of two-pound loaves. A day is like a year. By the time Meg got up and

came down, they'd left with their booty, settled down, fallen in love, generated pupae and kind of got it together all over again. What Meg said, seeing the handful of skirmishers left, was, 'So what, an ant never killed anybody. Feed them poison if it bothers you. Lay off the vodka. Lay off Gretchen. Pick on somebody your size.' "

"And?"

"She went to rehearse with a choral group. Episcopalians."

"And?"

"Since when did *and* become a question, Nichols?"

"Sorry, Mr. Price. What did you do then? About the ants, that is."

"I took Meg's advice. Poison. Bought a variety of it. Set it out in cute cups. It killed other ants, certain song birds. Allegedly it killed the Harringtons' cat. The carpenter ants it didn't even faze. In fact, it seemed to me they got bigger on it. Anyway, they began to get bigger."

"Literally?"

"Hell, man, they were big as bees in a month."

"And Gretchen was still there?"

"Gretchen was still there. Meg was still there. I was still there. So what?"

"Then what happened?"

"Then I found out where the ants lived, from reading about

their likely habitats. The two rotting cherry trees in the side yard. Carpenter ants like wood gone to hell. When the termites leave they take over. I went down to John's Hardware and bought an ax. Also a gallon of kerosine. I chopped down both trees close to the ground. Hordes of ants surged out, heading in ten different directions. I poured the kerosine over both stumps and set it afire."

"That's how you finally solved the ant problem?"

"Right. I got rid of them. The workers. But the queen, no. They protect her, you know. Apparently she was way down in the stump of one of the trees, surrounded by pupae and whatever else they have down there."

"I see."

"Anyway a few weeks later she emerged. Early in the morning, just after dawn. And was she big!"

"How big, Mr. Price?"

"You won't believe it."

"I'll believe it."

"Big as a—well, big as a small woman."

"That big?"

"That big."

"Where were you when she approached?"

"On the patio. Sitting in the rocker. Having a nightcap."

"You said it was early in the morning, Mr. Price."

"An eye-opener, then, I guess."

"Where was Gretchen at this time?"

"In her room, I guess."

"Isn't it true that she had been discharged by your wife a few days earlier?"

"Could be. Meg sacked a lot of them."

"All right. It's early in the morning. You're sitting on the patio. The record shows you were dressed in pajamas. You were having a drink. And suddenly this large carpenter ant approaches you. Fantastically large. You say as large as a small woman. What makes you say a thing like that, Mr. Price?"

"I'm not blind, Doctor. I see what I see. The damnable thing was five feet long. Antennae like a television set. Compound eyes like Plexiglas. Cold. And the thorax on her—bigger than Gretchen's bazooms. But what finally scared the living gut out of me was the way she poured it on with her stridulatory file."

"Her what?"

"The organ they make noise with. The human ear doesn't pick it up, as a rule."

"But your ear picked it up."

"Don't you forget it."

"And?" the doctor prodded him.

"Conjunction as question again."

"Sorry, Mr. Price. Professional fault. What did you do when you saw this enormous ant?"

"I took another sip of my drink, slid out of the chair and sort of sidled across the lawn to the garage."

"Did this large ant follow you?"

"Like a shadow. Stridulating on high beam."

"Then what?"

"In the garage I found the ax."

"Yes?"

"So I gave it a couple of whacks in the name of Lizzie Borden."

"That's what you remember?"

"That's what I remember."

"You remember nothing about your wife?"

"I remember too much about her. Still and all, I haven't seen her since I've been up here."

"That's because she's dead, Mr. Price."

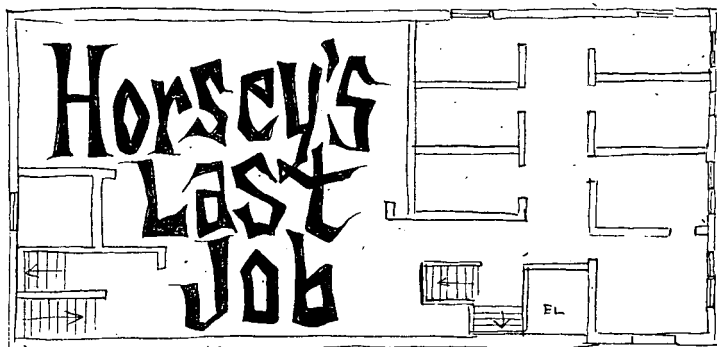
"When did this happen? She looked healthy as a horse the last time I saw her."

"She was murdered most foully, Mr. Price."

"I'll be damned. How?"

"With an ax, Mr. Price."

Cudgeling one's brains may not mend his ways, but it can certainly repair his ego.



Horsey Bucklin and I weren't exactly pals. As a matter of fact, there was a time when I would have skinned him alive and fed him to the crows if I could have got my hands on him, on account of he double-crossed me once in Cleveland. It was a job that cost me a lot of time and some good bucks.

So I was surprised to see him when I answered the door rap at my apartment house one night. There he was, big as life, with a fat grin on his horse-face, and a bottle of booze in his fist.

"Don't hit me, Chick," he said very fast, shaking the bottle in

front of my eyes. "Not till we have a drink . . ."

I let him in. I knew right away what he wanted. He had spotted a fat safe somewhere and couldn't find anyone else to open it for him. I'm one of the best box-busters in the business, if I do say so myself. Nowadays the kids are using burning bars to open the cans, but that takes equipment. I can slip into a building with what I got in my pockets and do the job—without much noise, either.

"I can explain about that Cleveland deal, Chick," Horsey said, eyeing the littered apartment. "I had a mouse on the string, and

man, she was screamin' at me for dough. You know how it is with a dame. I'm gonna make it up to you, pal—ten times over."

"Yeah, sure you are." I looked him over with a certain amount of distaste. I had never really liked

while you worked it, and you couldn't trust him any farther than you could throw the safe itself. Horsey would out-figure you if he could—like he did me in Cleveland.

I watched him prowly my three



Horsey, even before he skipped with all the loot I had got for us. He was a loudmouth, a big spender, and a pushover for women. In the chips, he wore clothes you could see four miles away in a blinding snowstorm. He drove big, flashy cars and had a line of blarney you could cut with a buzz saw.

However, he was a good inside man. He had a positive genius for spotting the good ones, and he could case them too. The problem was, you had to put up with him

rooms and come back to sit across from me, grinning and opening the bottle. He had a quart of the very best. That meant he was serious about needing my talents. I got some glasses and ice from the kitchen and sat back to let him lay it on me. I was going to drink his booze and listen—but I didn't have to buy the pitch.

Horsey was a big guy, about my size, with a red face and red hair and an Irish tongue. He could make any deal sound like plush-lined velvet. I must have had a

suspicious look on my kisser because he put on his Boy Scout face and held up his right hand. "This one is absolutely on the level, Chick. No dame in the deal. This time it's clean and easy." He filled both glasses and touched mine with his. "Cheers, pal."

It was the first good stuff I'd had in months, smooth as the shadow of a fogbank. I said, "What's so easy?"

"This layout. I've got it all planned." Horsey slapped his breast pocket. "It's a pretty one that the two of us can take alone. No third guy in the deal. It's fifty-fifty all the way."

I said, "HmMMM." That was something in his favor. It had been a fast shuffle involving a third guy that had lost me the greenbacks in Cleveland. If it came down to us, man to man, I could take Horsey. Maybe I wasn't bright, but I was strong.

He said, "You wanta listen some more?"

I nodded and held out the glass for a refill. The taste of good stuff was reminding me what I had been missing. The odds had been against me of late—as Horsey could see with his bright little eyes. My apartment was shabby, clothes worn, and I was wearing a heavy sweater because the heat was off in the apartment. I didn't

have to tell him I was on my uppers. I'd even gone straight for a while, working in offices here and there. Nothing steady.

He slid a paper from his pocket and unfolded it. It was a carefully detailed plan-map without any names. I bent over it and saw a floor plan, rooms and hallways, two staircases and an elevator shaft.

"This is the easiest jug you'll ever take, baby," Horsey said, patting the plan, confidence oozing from every pore.

"Uh huh." I studied the pencil drawing. "What is it?"

"Jewelry—diamonds, mostly. Easy to fence. I've got that part of it all laid out already, or you can take yours where you want." He shrugged and grinned, nudging the bottle toward me.

I had another drink, got out a cigarette and tapped it. Horsey clicked a silver lighter. I said, "Go on."

"All right. We go in the building here, from the alley. We go up to the third floor." He tapped the plan. "This is an office suite. Five rooms and a little safe room. I've got the key to the hall door." He winked. "A gal I knew used to work there and I made a switch." He rattled the ice in his glass. "And I know the alarm system." He tapped the end room. "This is

where the safe is. Right there."

"What kind?"

He grinned. "A nice big Spindler. I never saw it but I know it's not new. It's probably ten, fifteen years old—one of the big, heavy ones, so the room is reinforced . . . they tell me."

I didn't ask who "they" was. He had probably bought the info. He wouldn't tell me anyway. I was looking at the hall door. "There's only one way out."

"So? There won't be anyone around to see. Next weekend is a three-day holiday. We hit the safe on Friday night around midnight. That leaves three days to make tracks before they know they've been had."

I nodded, sipping his booze, thinking about him. How could I trust him again? Wouldn't he try to double-deal me if he could? I listened to his chatter. He was telling me there would be a half million in gems in the safe.

"I've cased it as well as a man could. It's a one-in-a-million setup, Chick—just like old times." He shook the bottle. "That's why I come to you. I've got to make up for Cleveland."

I didn't buy all that. I studied the plan and asked more questions, and he had good answers. He didn't seem to be keeping anything back. I had to admit it

looked very good. Horsey said he'd spent a month checking and rechecking, observing and buying a little information. He knew the gems would be there. He knew everything there was to know about the place, down to the last detail.

"I'll tell you one more thing, Chick," he said. "This is my getting-out dough; my last job. This time I take it and run and don't look back. I'm gonna settle down on my ranch—yeah, I got a ranch out in the sticks—and forget the past."

He left the paper with me, and I promised to give him an answer the next day. I would ordinarily jump at a case job like this, but I was nervous about Horsey. I wanted to think some more about how he might slick me out of my half, and about how I could counter him.

The more I thought about it the more I figured he would hijack me in the alley after we had hit the safe. If he had a couple of guys waiting there in the dark . . .

All I wanted was my half, but there was going to be more to it than just opening the safe. So I really cudgeled my smarts. I thought about it most of the night. The next day when Horsey called, I told him, "I'm in."

"You're a smart cat," he said and hung up. Then he came around and penciled in the names: streets, company names on the plan and so on. The building was about two miles from my pad. I could walk to it in a few minutes. We agreed where we would meet on Friday night and he ducked out.

That night I collected some tools and a vial of nitro from a certain party, promising to pay in two days. I got a small attaché case and lined it carefully for the soup, then I bought a secondhand suit and hat. I would look respectable, sort of, if nobody looked too close. A lot of guys work late in office buildings. I knew because I had worked in a few.

Also, I took a walk past the place to look it over. Everything was as Horsey had said; but the alley was something else. It was dark and gloomy—a hundred guys could wait there unseen, waiting for me to come downstairs with a quarter of a million in sparklers. Nothing was going to get me into that alley when I had the loot on me.

We met as planned on Friday night, just before midnight. Getting into the building was no trick. It was a twenty-year-old cracker box, as hard to open as a bag of peanuts. We went up dusty

steps to the third floor, and Horsey took ten minutes to switch off the alarm system—like he had put it in. I was impressed.

He unlocked the door and we went in. He locked it behind us. "It's all yours, pal."

I went directly to the back room where the safe was. They had built it into a kind of closet, just big enough for the safe and nothing else. I thought it would help soundproof it, too. It was the only safe they had, which surprised me. It meant they used it a lot.

Horsey stood around, real fidgety, while I made my examination. I told him he made me nervous.

He asked, "How long?"

"Half, maybe three-quarters. Are you gonna stand there and stare at me?"

He gave me a look, then he shrugged and went into the other room. I found a pile of old cloths and draped them over the single window. I told Horsey I was going to turn on the light and for him to stay out while the door was closed. He said OK. Then I made a very careful examination of the safe and the room. It took fifteen minutes.

I was building my last dam on the face of the safe when Horsey pounded on the door. "Hey, how

long are you gonna be, Chick?"

I turned off the light and let him in. "Stay outa the way, now," I told him. He stood by the door watching me pour in the nitro. I fixed my fuse with finicky care, taking my time about it because I knew he was edgy as hell—which was what I wanted.

Blowing the safe was an anticlimax. We went outside the room and the blast wasn't bad at all. A dull boom, a few clanks as the door swung part-way open, and that was it. Horsey giggled, dashed into the safe room—and almost screamed.

The safe was empty.

I shouted at him, "I thought you said you knew positive!"

For a long minute he was dazed, shaking his head. He couldn't believe it. Then he turned the air blue, swearing he *was* positive! He said it over and over. I could tell he wasn't faking—he was incredulous. It was a terrible shock to him. I never saw anybody so disappointed in my life.

I was pretty downcast too. We

both swore, kicked over chairs and got it out of our systems. Then we bugged out of there.

Horsey had a car waiting. He got in and drove off without even offering me a lift. I had to shag about a mile to an all-night cabstand. The guy took me to the airport.

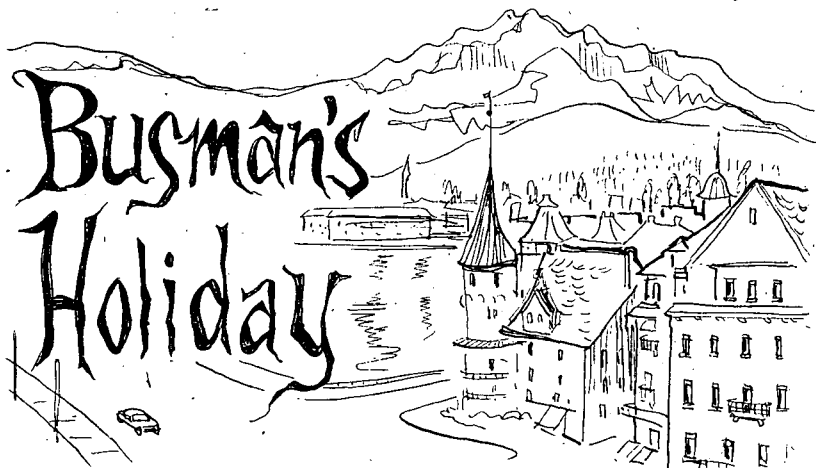
I got out of town on a 747 that was heading south—I didn't really care where. Me and the attaché case. My lengthy examination of the safe and its vicinity had been worthwhile. I had worked in offices, like I said, so I knew what some clerks do. The guy in this office had jotted down the combination in pencil so he wouldn't have to remember it or look it up every time he had to open the box.

I found the combo-written inside a drawer, which made it easy to open the safe and put the gems into the attaché case. Then I proceeded to blow the safe in the regular way—with Horsey watching me.

It sure made up for Cleveland all right.



One can learn a great deal from an amateur—especially how to be a professional.



How do you recognize an answer to a prayer?

I recognized Paul St. Clair, who seemed to be calling himself René Vincent now, by the way he splayed his right foot when he walked. He had shaved off the moustache and imperial that Carl had described to me, but the toed-out foot gave him away.

He arrived at 8:28 p.m. on the train from Basel, and when he came through exit gate 7 into the station proper, I was waiting for him beside the gate. Before he caught sight of the hotel name on

the visor of my cap, I had a moment to look him over.

He was slight in stature, yet carried himself with an air. He wore a dark topcoat over conservatively-cut clothes. I was astounded to note that his gaze, searching the crowd outside the gate, was direct and candid, even naïve.

It was hard for me to believe that he was what Carl said he was; but then, the answer to a prayer is frequently misleading.

I stood quietly, giving no sign of recognition until he spotted my

cap and made his way toward me. Then I moved forward quickly. "For Hotel Minerva?" I said. "Monsieur Vincent? I was told to meet a Monsieur Vincent."

When he nodded, I said, "Welcome to Lucerne." I relieved him of his two bags. "The hotel car is parked outside. Will you follow me, please?" I spoke in French.

He hustled along beside me, his head barely even with my chin. "Whew!" he said. "That's a long train ride from Paris. And do you know, there seem not to be any porters in your Swiss stations? When I changed trains at Basel, I had to handle my luggage myself. And here, too." He obviously wasn't used to that. "I'm exhausted!"

by James
Holding

"You'll be ready for dinner, then," I suggested respectfully. "We serve until nine."

"Good. Am I the only passenger for the Minerva?"

"The only one. It is September. The season is all but ended here."

"That suits me. I'm principally in search of rest and quiet." As he said "rest and quiet," I thought I saw his lips curve slightly in a se-

cret smile. That was a good sign, I felt.

I put his bags in the car and held the door for him while he climbed into the back seat. "Rest and quiet are specialties of the Minerva, you might say, sir." I got behind the wheel.

We left the *bahnhof* and crossed the Seebrücke over the River Reuss. To our left, Chapel Bridge with its water tower angled across the river, only partially revealed by the city lights and the three-quarter moon rising over the walls of the old city. Above it, the towers of Hotel Chateau Gütsch gleamed in their floodlights like a Walt Disney castle.

As I took the turn into Adligenswilerstrasse, Monsieur Vincent leaned back against the cushions. "After those damned trains, this is sheer luxury," he said. "What a comfortable car!"

The hotel car is American-made, a black seven-passenger sedan and a pleasure to drive. I like it far better than the ones used by other deluxe hotels in Lucerne. I said over my shoulder, "Thank you. If you plan to take any sight-seeing excursions while you're here, sir, I can drive you in this car, if you like. It's a hotel service. Goes right on your hotel bill. Far more satisfactory, guests tell

me, than taking the crowded bus tours."

"I'll keep it in mind," Monsieur Vincent said.

"Very good, sir. You can make arrangements with the concierge at the hotel if you want me." I thought I'd let that decision be his. At least, to begin with—until I'd had the chance to observe him more closely.

As it turned out, my luck was in. The next day, Herr Grüber, our concierge, called me and told me Herr Vincent, the guest in Room 424, wanted to take a little drive in the hotel car, with me to drive him, shortly after luncheon.

I felt my spirits lift. "Any particular excursion?" I asked Grüber.

"I thought Axenstrasse would be a good one to begin with. Give him the Wilhelm Tell treatment." Grüber laughed. "The French and the Americans love that. They're so romantic."

"Axenstrasse it is," I said.

I took the hotel car out and got it filled with petrol and was waiting for Monsieur Vincent at the foot of the Minerva's funicular at two o'clock when he came out.

"Good afternoon, Kreutz," he greeted me. "I'm taking your advice, you see. Shall we start?"

We set out. He lounged in the back seat of the car in lonely grandeur. Our route led along the

lake shore through Meggen and Küssnacht. Monsieur Vincent showed faint traces of interest when we passed Queen Astrid's Chapel, but when I made a stop at Tell's Chapel near the Hollow Lane, where William Tell lay in wait for Gessler with his bow and arrow, Vincent didn't even bother to get out of the car. "Let's go on," he said. "I want to see this Axenstrasse your concierge was so enthusiastic about."

We skirted the Lake of Zug, Mount Rigi looming above us, and drove to Brunnen, where the Axenstrasse begins. The Axenstrasse is a narrow road along the edge of the cliffs bordering the lake, tunneled in some places through the solid rock. I gave all my attention to driving until we came to Altdorf.

There, I showed Monsieur Vincent the William Tell monument in the public square and gave him my lecture number three about our national hero. He listened courteously.

At the end, I suggested we repair to the Swan Inn and have cakes and hot chocolate before we undertook the return trip. It was a beautiful clear day, not too chilly, so we sat outdoors under a gilded wrought-iron sign displaying a mother swan and two cygnets.

Afterward, at the car, Monsieur

Vincent decided that he would sit in the front seat with me, if I didn't mind. He felt like a fool, he said, lording it alone in the enormous tonneau. I made no objection, of course. His changed position in the car did not change his attitude toward me, however—that of the well-heeled master toward the faithful but humble chauffeur.

As we entered the village of Vitznau on our way back to Lucerne, I said, "I hope you have found the trip interesting, sir."

"Very," he answered. He lit a cigarette with a gold lighter, his graceful, small-boned hands making the simple action a thing of beauty. "Why?"

"Because," I said, "meaning no disrespect, I think you've been bored stiff the whole time."

He laughed. "What makes you think that, Kreutz?"

"Your lack of the standard enthusiasm, sir. I think you admired the scenery, as who would not? But I suspect you found my lecture on the Axenstrasse and William Tell very dull, indeed. Not so?"

He blew smoke at the windshield. "Since you tax me with it, yes. No fault of yours, though, Kreutz. I heard all that twaddle about William Tell before I was five, of course. And the road along Lake Garda in Italy impressed me

far more than your Axenstrasse. I'm sorry."

I shrugged. "Each one to his own taste," I murmured philosophically. Then, with the air of a man trying his best to please a distinguished patron, I said, "Now that I know what your taste is, sir, I think I can promise you an excursion that you will find infinitely more interesting than this one."

"Oh? And what excursion would that be, Kreutz?"

"To Liechtenstein," I said. "To Vaduz, where the Prince of Liechtenstein's superb art collection may be seen upon request."

Vincent suddenly went very still in the seat beside me. His hand, lifting his cigarette to his mouth, made a split-second pause before continuing its smooth progress.

"Vaduz? An art collection? I care nothing for art, my friend." He was very casual. Too casual?

"Perhaps not," I said, keeping my eyes on the road. "Yet I believe you care a great deal for the money famous art works can bring you."

His body jerked as though an insect had stung him between the shoulder blades. "That is an impertinence, Kreutz," he said coldly. "Stop the car, please. I wish to return to the back seat."

I hastened to apologize. "I have

no wish to offend you, Monsieur St. Clair."

No wince, this time. No sudden stillness. Just a glare of chilly lightning out of his innocent-seeming eyes.

"St. Clair?" he asked. "What name is that?"

"It is yours, sir."

"Ridiculous!"

I didn't stop the car. Significantly, he did not repeat his order for me to do so. I knew now that I was on firm ground.

"With all respect, sir," I said as humbly as I could, "I happen to know that you are Paul St. Clair, the eminent art dealer from Paris, vacationing in Lucerne incognito."

He sucked on his cigarette until it glowed red for half an inch. "How do you know my name?"

I said, without emphasis, "My cousin in Paris telephoned me you were coming here."

"Your cousin?"

"The travel agent through whom you booked your accommodations."

"He was a stranger. He didn't know me. Why would he telephone you?" He spoke with heat, remembering, I was sure, that my cousin in Paris had recommended the Hotel Minerva to him.

"Why did he telephone me? Because he thought you were the right man to help us with a

project we contemplate," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"He recognized you."

"How could he do that?"

"He saw your photograph in the papers."

"Me? He saw *my* photograph in the papers? He was wrong, I assure you. This is all a mistake, Kreutz."

"No, sir," I said. "He remembered the picture very well. You still had your moustache and imperial then. You were being questioned by the police in the matter of an art theft. A very valuable painting, stolen from the Jeu de Paume. Everybody thought you were guilty, apparently, including my cousin. But nothing could be proved."

"You're damned right it couldn't!" St. Clair, touched in his vanity, spoke with pride. "I'm not completely stupid, even though a Frenchman!"

I said, "You are a skillful thief, sir, that's what you are." I took my hands from the wheel for a moment to spread them in a gesture of apology for this blunt statement. "And you decided to leave France until things cooled off a bit. My cousin guessed that, which is why he telephoned me."

"*Alors*, I have stolen no works of art in Switzerland, anyway," he said nastily. "You know that."

"Of course. And that is exactly what I have to offer you, sir. The opportunity to help us—my cousin and me—bring off a truly memorable art theft here."

St. Clair pressed out his cigarette in his ash tray. He said nothing for a moment, yet he seemed vaguely more at ease. Perhaps he was reassured to find he was talking to another thief—would-be thief, rather. "What, if you do not mind my asking, could be worth stealing in this benighted city? You have no art here worthy of the name. A few landscape daubs of the 18th and 19th Centuries in your Kunsthall. Nothing else."

I said, "I mentioned the art gallery in Vaduz, sir. *There*, you will admit, are some paintings worth stealing."

He shrugged. "What paintings?" he asked noncommittally.

"A hundred," I answered seriously. "However, our project contemplates the theft of only two."

"From the prince's collection?" He knew all about it, of course.

"Yes." Then I was silent, letting him sniff the carrot.

At last he asked, "Which ones?"

"The two Meissoniers. You know them?"

"Who does not?" His tone was wistful. "They are known all over the world. Too well known. You could never sell them."

"My cousin and I have given a great deal of thought to that," I said. "It's another reason why we believe you can be enormously helpful to us."

"You flatter me."

"Not at all. When the Meissoniers are in our hands, you will smuggle them out of Switzerland, do you see? And with due caution, you will sell them to a customer or customers of yours. For cash—a great deal of cash. I am sure you know collectors who will not ask embarrassing questions if presented with the chance to acquire an original Meissonier?"

"I have a few connections, yes," St. Clair admitted cautiously.

A few connections! I thought. *He has at least one connection who is willing to buy from him a painting stolen from the Jeu de Paume and ask no questions!*

Thinking about the Prince of Liechtenstein's two Meissoniers, St. Clair flushed slightly, his quickened blood coursing strongly through the little veins just below the surface of his skin. "What are your Meissoniers worth, may I ask?"

"The *prince's* Meissoniers," I said. "They are not yet ours. They are insured for a million and a half Swiss francs." I allowed this succulent figure to hang in the air between us for a moment before I

went on. "And you, with your connections, can probably realize twice that amount."

"To be divided up three ways, eh? You, your cousin and me?"

"Two ways," I said. "Half for you. Half for us. After all, you will do most of the work."

"I begin to realize that."

"Does it sound attractive to you?" I asked.

"It has definite possibilities. I must know more, of course."

"Of course." I overtook a six-wheeled lorry on the outskirts of Weggis, and pulled out to pass. When we were on our own side of the road again, I said, "I happen to know that the prince's two Meissoniers were removed last week from their places in the art gallery in Vaduz for a periodic cleaning by Herr Gustav Mizner. Herr Mizner's shop, where he cleans and restores the prince's art treasures when needful, is a hundred yards away from the gallery on a side street. Herr Mizner is a dedicated craftsman. He is also, thank heavens, a simple and trusting man. When he closes up shop for the night, he locks up whatever valuable paintings he may be working on in his old-fashioned safe, and blithely departs. There are no guards."

"Not even burglar alarms?" asked St. Clair.

"There are alarms, yes. A complicated series of them—of American manufacture, I believe—arranged to alert the police a block away, and Herr Mizner himself at his home, should any attempt be made to force entry into his shop." I paused. "That is mainly why we need you, sir. You must have had wide experience with such electronic devices?"

He smiled for the first time. "I know something of them, it is true."

"And of safecracking?"

"That, too."

"My cousin and I were confident you would."

"But," said St. Clair, "I'll want to examine the situation before we try anything, you understand."

"Perfectly. That's why I think you will find an excursion to Vaduz tomorrow most interesting. You will have a chance to look over the ground. If circumstances seem favorable, we will stay overnight in Vaduz, and you will relieve Herr Mizner of the two Meissoniers during the small hours. We'll be back in Lucerne the following day in time for luncheon at the Minerva."

"You go too fast, my friend," St. Clair said, waving a slender hand in the air between us. "You tell me I'm to smuggle the paintings from Switzerland into France

and sell them to one or another of my clients. Then I send you your share of the money. Is that right?"

"Or turn over our share to my cousin in Paris, if you prefer," I said.

"You trust me to take the paintings out, and send you half the proceeds of their sale?"

"We must trust you, sir. It is all we can do. We cannot overcome the electronic alarms of Herr Mizner's shop without you. Even if we could, we could not dispose of the pictures profitably in Switzerland. They are known here, as you point out. The announcement of their theft will alert every art dealer and collector in Switzerland. So we *must* trust you. You see?"

"What makes you think I won't keep the whole amount for myself?"

"There is honor among thieves, is there not?" I pointed out.

He gave me a surprised look.

I went on. "When my cousin Carl dealt with you in Paris, he judged you to be not only a skillful thief, sir, but a man who would abide honorably by a contract made with a colleague. After spending an afternoon with you, I concur in that judgment. If we are wrong, there is nothing to be done about it."

St. Clair nodded. "You are not

wrong, Kreutz. On the contrary, you are more perceptive than most. I thank you. Yet let us not stoop to sentimentality." He hesitated, reluctant to reveal his curiosity. Then he asked, "What about you and your cousin, Kreutz? Why this attempt to get into the dangerous business of art theft? You are men of education and intelligence. You both have good jobs—"

I interrupted him. "Good jobs? A hotel chauffeur and an underling in a travel agency? For men with master's degrees from the University of Zurich? For men who can speak four languages fluently? Pardon me, sir, but we do not consider our present employment worthy of our talents. It is as simple as that. We mean to remedy our condition as quickly as possible. Three hundred and seventy-five thousand francs apiece should accomplish that for us."

"Well, well. I understand and sympathize, Kreutz. Say no more." He lit another cigarette and this time he offered me one. I took it and for a few moments we smoked in companionable silence. At last St. Clair said, "These two Meissonniers. Tell me about them."

"You know what they are, do you not?"

"Of course. *Napoleon's Retreat*

from Moscow and Marshall Ney Addresses the Troops. But what are the dimensions of these paintings? That is what signifies at this moment. I fear we'll never be able to get them out of Switzerland, once we have them. Or out of Liechtenstein, for that matter."

"Don't worry about Liechtenstein," I said. "Switzerland and Liechtenstein have had a customs and monetary union since 1924."

"Oh? Well, paintings are not the easiest things in the world to smuggle across *any* border."

"I know. There should be no difficulty, however. These paintings, like most of Meissonier's works, are quite small. Twelve by eighteen inches—plus the frames, of course. And we can discard the frames, once we have the paintings."

"Still," said St. Clair, "even small oil paintings present a knotty smuggling problem . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Rest easy, sir," I reassured him. "I have another skill besides driving an automobile. As a hobby, I also work in leather. And I promise you that with the valise I shall supply to replace your present one, you will acquire a foolproof hiding place for the Meissonier paintings."

"I do not understand."

"A suitcase of top-grain leather.

Leather-lined, hand-sewn. Between the outer and inner leather skins, who is to know there lie two priceless Meissonier canvases protected by sheets of lamb's wool? I have already completed this suitcase, sir—in anticipation that we should work together—save for the final edge seams. When we return from Vaduz with the paintings, they shall be sewn into the suitcase walls. I guarantee they will be undetectable by even the most suspicious customs agent."

"Clever," St. Clair said. "That should do nicely. Tell me now about the prince's art gallery in Vaduz, Herr Mizner's shop, and whatever you know about the American burglar alarms that protect it."

I told him with a sense of exhilaration.

In Vaduz, everything went smoothly.

We left the Minerva at nine the next morning and drove in leisurely fashion to Liechtenstein by way of Zug, the Herzel Pass, Rapperswill and the Ricken Pass. White clouds sailed majestically over the high peaks. Bright sunshine warmed the cool September air. We stopped en route at Wendenburg to see the picturesque 14th Century houses, still sound,

still very much lived in today.

We had luncheon in Vaduz. From the restaurant window we could see the prince's castle, perched on a high rock overlooking the town and the beautiful vineyards surrounding it.

Afterward, I drove St. Clair to the art gallery and waited outside with the car while he toured this display of extravagantly valuable art works. When he came out, I drove him the few yards to Herr Mizner's shop which, in addition to restoring and cleaning art treasures for the prince, dealt in the sale of antiquities to tourists as well.

After half an hour, St. Clair emerged from the shop wearing a rather smug smile. He carried an Austrian cross of carved wood he had bought from Herr Mizner.

"Well?" I asked, my voice thin from nervous strain.

"Child's play," he declared, clambering into the back seat of the car while I held the door for him. "We are favored by the gods, Kreutz. The complicated American alarm systems you described are, in reality, obsolete jokes. Laughable. Not even a decent challenge to my abilities."

I released my breath in a sigh of relief. "And the safe? Did you manage to catch a glimpse of it?"

"Even more obsolete than the

alarms," he replied complacently. "You can leave the rest of this little adventure to me, Kreutz." He lit a cigarette. "Let us now check into the hotel. I wish to take a nap before dinner."

I was, of course, enormously encouraged by his cavalier attitude toward the undertaking that lay before him. He was an experienced man, aware of all the difficulties involved. If he regarded them lightly, I could do no less. We checked into the leading hotel in Vaduz—St. Clair into a suite, as befitted a prosperous French tourist—I into a basement sweatbox, as befitted a hotel chauffeur.

After dinner, St. Clair told me airily, "Go to bed, Kreutz, and rest easy. I shall not need you. However, give me the keys to your car."

I gave him the keys and went to bed, after agreeing to meet him for breakfast at six the following morning in order to get an early start back to Lucerne.

"Hopefully," he said, smiling, "before Herr Mizner opens his shop and discovers he has been robbed."

At breakfast, he was, in high spirits. "You slept well, Kreutz?" he quipped.

I hadn't. "And you?" I said, accompanying the query with a smile.

He returned it. "Exceptionally well, thank you. I wakened about four and could not get back to sleep for an hour or so. But all in all, it was a very rewarding night."

I had to be satisfied with that until we were out of Liechtenstein and bowling along the road to Walenstadt. We had decided to return to Lucerne by a different route so that St. Clair, like the avid sightseer he pretended to be, could visit Einsiedeln on the way home.

The skies, with the unexpectedness of mountain weather, suddenly became overcast, turned leaden gray, and opened wide to pour torrents of cold rain upon the countryside through which we drove. The weather, however, could do nothing to dampen our spirits. Once out of Liechtenstein, I stopped the car on a deserted stretch of road and, with St. Clair beaming over my shoulder, looked my fill at the two Meissoniers, resting in their elaborate gold-leaf frames in the dusty trunk of the car.

"You *did* get them, didn't you!" I said.

"What did you expect? Of course I got them!"

I said from my heart, "You are an answer to prayer, Monsieur St. Clair!"

He preened himself slightly, although he probably would have thought it vulgar to gloat.

I took the paintings from their frames and buried the frames in the drainage ditch nearby while St. Clair kept watch for approaching cars.

At Einsiedeln, I began facetiously to give my lecture about the monastery being founded in 835 by St. Meinrad, and the baroque 18th Century church, visited by 200,000 pilgrims a year, being especially notable for its black marble columns.

St. Clair stopped me. "Please do not joke about serious matters," he told me firmly. "This shrine is an architectural marvel worthy of our honest admiration."

This was a side of him I had not suspected. Yet he *was* an art dealer, after all, I reminded myself, albeit a dishonest one. I lapsed into silence and waited in the car while he entered the church, bare head reverently bowed, rivulets of rain running down his cheeks.

True to my promise, we were back in Lucerne in time for luncheon. I let St. Clair out of the car at the Minerva's street entrance, holding the door for him once again. "The suitcase?" he asked me softly as he descended from the car.

"Three o'clock tomorrow morning in your room," I answered. "After the hotel staff has retired."

He nodded and disappeared into the hotel, hugging the two Meissonniers flat against his side under his wet topcoat. It was still raining.

The hotel was like a tomb, fifteen hours later, when I came down the stairs from my sixth floor cubicle to the fourth floor room of Monsieur Paul St. Clair. I had the leather valise in my hand.

There was no need to knock—his door was unlocked. I turned the knob and slipped into the room. A single lamp burned on his bedside table. He was sitting beside it, fully dressed, reading the evening newspaper.

He raised his eyes at my entrance, put down the paper and stood up. His eyes went to the suitcase I carried. "Good!" he said with satisfaction. He went to his closet and secured the two Meissonnier canvases from their temporary hiding place under the spare blankets on his shelf. "Let's get started, then," he said, handing the paintings to me.

I put my suitcase on the bed, wrapped one of the paintings in a thin sheet of lamb's wool, and slid it into the open seam at one side of the case, between outer leather and inner leather lining. Then I

sewed up the seam with the cobbler's thread I had brought with me. The leather was tough, the work went slowly, but when the seam was at length closed, no one without X-ray eyes could have guessed what lay within.

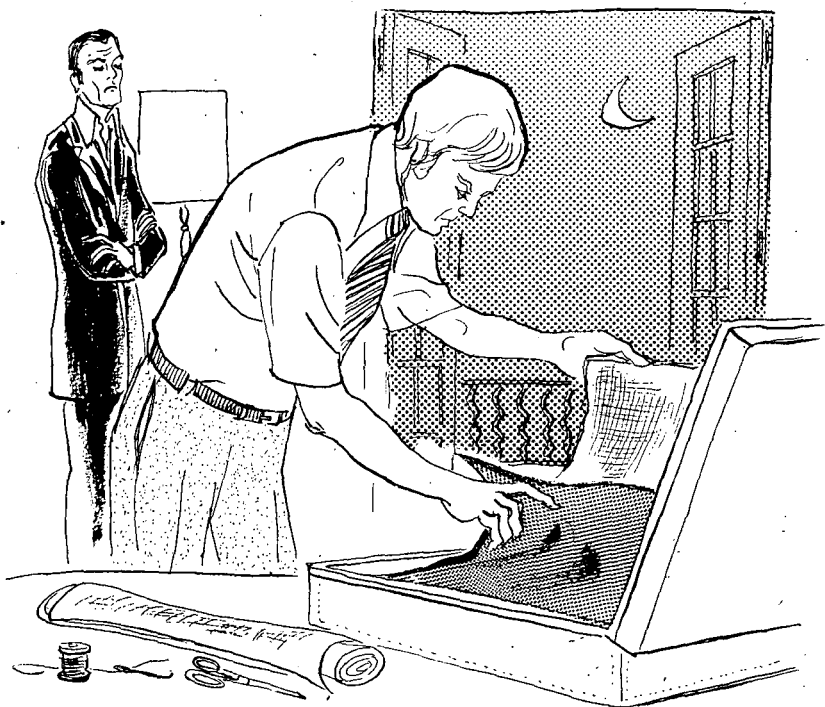
"Can I help?" St. Clair asked, watching with interest.

"No, thanks, sir," I answered without raising my head. I snipped off the thread at the end of the sewn seam. He handed me the second painting and I repeated the procedure. When I finished, I put my leather punch, needle and the remaining thread into my trousers pocket and stood erect, stretching the kinks out of my back.

"Finished," I said. "Are you satisfied with my 'smuggler's friend'?"

"Brilliant, Kreutz," he said. "Both concept and workmanship. I think at this point, we both deserve a drink." He poured champagne from a full bottle he had been cooling in his small refrigerator. "Come out to the balcony, Kreutz."

I followed him through the open French doors onto his small balcony. His was one of the Minerva's deluxe rooms. His balcony overlooked the lake. It held a tiny metal table and two straight chairs.



We didn't sit down. He raised his champagne glass, silently toasting me, and drank deeply. I returned the gesture.

"I shall not soon forget Lucerne," he murmured softly. The rain had almost ceased now and the moon drew a silver path across the placid surface of the Vierwaldstattersee far below us. The view was spectacular. To our right, the twinkling night lights of the city formed a sleepy cluster where the River Reuss

emptied into the lake. Directly across the lake, and three thousand feet above it, the lights of Burgenstock's three hotels were like three new constellations floating low in the southern sky. To the east, the head of Rigi was a blunt silhouette against the sky. Overall, the moonlight made a glory of the distant snow peaks on the horizon.

St. Clair put down his glass on the table with a brittle sound. "I owe you, Kreutz, and Lucerne, a

great debt," he said in a whisper. "I want you to know that."

He had a strange way of showing his appreciation; for when I turned my head and looked at him, he was pointing a gun, fitted with a silencer, at my heart.

"Sir!" I said in surprise. "Monsieur St. Clair! What is this? We are colleagues, partners in an enterprise . . ." I ran out of words. I could see his innocent-appearing eyes glinting with amusement in the moonlight.

"Past tense," he corrected me gently. "We *were* partners. But, as the young people say, who needs you now, Kreutz?"

I looked over my shoulder toward the safety of his room and the corridor outside his door. I looked over the balcony rail at the long drop to the dining-room terrace, four floors below.

"Too late," St. Clair said, not without sympathy. "You understand why I have to kill you, do you not?"

"No," I said, as calmly as I could. "You could get to France and merely keep all the proceeds from the paintings for yourself. Why kill me?"

"I no longer need your amateur help, Kreutz. I am a professional, you see. And no true professional leaves behind him an eyewitness to his crime. Even an amateur

like you should know that." His lips curved in that secret smile I had noticed the night he arrived in Lucerne.

I simply stared at him.

"Give me the keys to your hotel car, Kreutz."

Slowly I handed them over, realizing that he had planned this from the beginning.

"If you shoot me," I argued weakly, "someone will hear you."

"The hotel is asleep. There are no occupants in the rooms immediately around mine. I took pains to find that out. The end of the season, remember? No one will hear me. Especially with this." He touched the silencer on his pistol barrel.

"My cousin in Paris will know you killed me."

"I'll take that chance. You don't think I'm going back to Paris with the paintings, anyway, do you? I'm not welcome there right now, as you know." He nodded at me, pitying my innocence.

"You promised me you would take the Meissoniers to Paris," I said. "And send me our share of the proceeds."

"Ah, yes. Honor among thieves, wasn't that it? Well, I'm driving your hotel car to Zurich presently, and tomorrow I am flying from there to New York. I have even more connections in New York

than in Paris, Kreutz. No one will know you are dead until the chambermaid finally decides, several days from now, to defy the *Do Not Disturb* sign I shall leave on my door. Do you understand?"

"I understand," I said. "For the first time, I truly understand you, Monsieur."

"I warned you that art theft is a dangerous business, you know." He glanced at his wristwatch. "I should say that I can reach Zurich comfortably by dawn, shouldn't you? In your excellent car?"

His finger tightened on the trigger of the pistol. I could see his knuckle go white in the moonlight. I stood like a statue.

"Good-bye, Kreutz," he said. "No hard feelings, you know." He pulled the trigger.

I leaned over, quite slowly, and set my champagne glass on the table beside his. "You have made a fatal error," I said.

He scarcely heard me. He was looking accusingly, incredulously, at the gun in his hand. I saw genuine shock in his eyes. "*Sacré!*" he swore. He pointed the gun at me once more and pulled the trigger rapidly six times. The clicks of the hammer falling on empty chambers were like the clicks a child makes with his tongue when playing a desperado.

"Three nights ago," I said,

"when I met you at the station, you went into the dining room to have dinner immediately upon registering at the hotel. Remember? While I put your luggage in your room? Knowing that I might have dealings with you later, I confess I glanced inside your bags and found your pistol. I removed the cartridges . . . just in case." I gave him a smile. "It seems I was wise to do so, eh?"

He said, "Very wise," still staring down at his pistol. "I called you an amateur just now, Kreutz. I apologize. You are a professional. I salute you. So now we start over, is that it?"

"Not quite. As you so admirably phrased it, who needs *you* now?" I paused deliberately. "You have finished your work. Those burglar-alarm systems—and the safe. To my shame, I know nothing about electricity nor safecracking. But now that the Meissoniers are in my hands, you can see that your usefulness ends, sir."

"You can't dispose of the paintings without my help, Kreutz. You said yourself it would be impossible in Switzerland or Liechtenstein."

"That is so."

"Therefore," he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt, "you'll still be needing me to sell the paintings through my con-

nections, Kreutz. Is this not so?"

"I never intended to sell the paintings," I said.

"What? Then why all this elaborate pretense with the hand-sewn suitcase?"

I grinned. "Merely a homely touch to assure you of my good faith."

"Good faith, indeed!" St. Clair laughed, with a note of hysteria in it. "Honor among thieves!"

I inclined my head, relishing the irony of the thing.

He said, "I suppose your cousin is a myth, too?"

"Not at all. He is my real cousin. And I, instead of you, shall be taking the paintings in my suitcase to Paris on the 11:20 plane from Zurich tomorrow."

"You can't sell them for half their value!"

"I told you. We don't intend to sell them."

He looked at me. "Then why did you steal them?"

"My cousin in Paris," I said, "is also the son of my uncle who works in the claims department of the French insurance company which insures the art treasures of Prince Franz Joseph II of Liechtenstein."

St. Clair's shoulders slumped.

"When any of the prince's paintings are reported stolen," I went on, "the insurance company

in Paris generously offers a reward of ten percent for their safe return, with no questions asked. I happen to know that, since my uncle's firm paid that amount on a previous occasion."

"You mean pictures have been stolen from the Vaduz gallery before?"

"Once before. I arranged that theft, also."

"You collected the reward before?"

"I and my cousin," I said. "It was on the Pieter Bruegel painting you saw in the prince's collection yesterday."

"And you will collect the reward on these two Meissoniers?"

"Yes. Seventy-five thousand francs apiece for my cousin and me."

St. Clair nodded judiciously. "Very neat, indeed," he murmured in the tone of one expert to another.

I said, "My cousin does the difficult part—selecting professional help for us from among the tourists he sends here—as he selected you, Monsieur St. Clair. Of course, we must pay a small percentage to my uncle for his cooperation."

"I am afraid I underestimated you, Kreutz," said St. Clair.

"Yes. But take comfort. You will die gazing at the most beau-

tiful view in all of Switzerland.”

“Diel!”

“What else did you expect? You yourself explained that it is unprofessional to leave a living witness behind you.”

St. Clair reversed the empty gun in his fragile, graceful hand and drew back his arm for a savage blow, intending to use the weapon as a bludgeon. I reached out and took it from him. As I have said, he was slight of stature; physically a child, compared with me.

I put his gun into my jacket pocket with one hand, while with the other, I drew his slight form so tightly against my chest that he had no breath for crying out. I began to lift him upward then, using both hands, onto the wrought-iron rail of the balcony.

I said, “You will be a suicide, my friend. Did you know that for the past three days, as I drove you sight-seeing, you have been telling me with despair of an unrequited love in Paris? The first and only great love of your life? Did you know *that* is why you came to Lucerne? To try to get over your foolish passion for another man’s wife? Anyway, that is what I have been gossiping about

to the hotel staff, sir . . . even to the *herr* director of the Minerva himself.

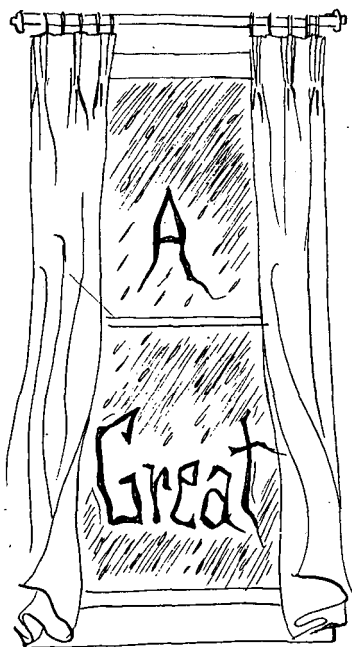
“So no one will think it unlikely that when you gazed at the ineffable beauty of this moonlit scene tonight, realizing your passion was hopeless, you did what many another lover has done . . . leaped to welcome death from your hotel balcony.”

I forced him to look downward at the stone-flagged terrace of the dining room. “Your body will be found there tomorrow morning,” I said, holding his struggling, breathless body on the balcony rail with one hand while I dipped the other into his pocket for my car keys. “I bid you good-bye, Monsieur,” and brought the edge of my free hand, stiffened to a rigid blade, against his Adam’s apple, choking off the shout for help that was at last bubbling in his throat.

Then I pushed him off the balcony rail.

As I watched his body pinwheeling downward toward the stone terrace, it occurred to me that Paul St. Clair, as befitted an answer to a prayer, at that moment actually seemed to be dropping from heaven.

There is always someone on the sidelines ready to make or break one's day.



Day

He forgot the big house on the hill the minute it was out of sight. Forgot it, erased it from his mind. He turned to the driver and said, "It sure is a great day."

"Maybe for you," qualified the

driver as he joggled the windshield wipers into action to catch the first drops of rain.

During the twenty-three miles to town, the man watched the fence-like telephone poles through clearing swipes of the windshield wiper on the passenger side and the green of the fields through mist. *Yeah, it's a great day*, he told himself, not aloud, but deep inside.

They were early for the bus.

The driver walked with him quickly through the rain, from the parking lot into the bus station, spoke briefly with the ticket agent, and found them a bench on which to sit and wait.

"Be about twenty minutes," the driver said. "Want anything? Magazine? Candy bar?"

The man shook his head, listening to the obligato of raindrops

by Pauline
C. Smith

on tin. He drummed his fingers on the bench seat and smiled. A *real great day*, he continued to tell himself.

"You sure you know where you're to go?" the driver asked.

He nodded.

"And the number you're to call?"

Leaning forward, the man reached into his hip pocket to draw out his wallet. It was thin and old. He opened it to show a two-line list, creased within the fold of leather: the address of a hotel in the city and a telephone number below it.

"Okay," the driver said, "see that you go to the right place and call the number. Hear?"

He nodded, tucked the wallet back into his pocket and listened to the rain. It sure was a great day.

The driver checked his watch with the station clock on the wall and looked with disinterest upon the others in the waiting room—there were only three, spaced out on the opposite bench, neutered and without personality during the inaction of being in one place before entering another.

The rain drummed a mournful clatter on the tin roof. The man's fingertips tapped a light accompaniment on the edge of the seat. The driver turned to him. "Sure

you don't want a magazine? Newspaper?"

The man shook his head and smiled. "Great day," he said. "It's a real great day."

The sound of air brakes broke through the monotony and energized the three separate waiting passengers, a man and two women, to their feet and toward the door.

"Well, here it is," said the driver, up and on his way. "The bus. It's here."

The man stood and followed him out to the station platform.

They waited together until the three passengers had filed up the steps of the bus and gone inside, then the driver nudged the man. "Okay," he said, "you're on your way. Good luck."

The man climbed the steps into the bus and walked down the aisle. He found an empty seat and slid over by the window to watch as the driver raised an arm in farewell and turned to plunge into the rain of the parking lot. Then the man forgot him—blanked him from his mind as completely as he blanked out the station as soon as the bus had rumbled from it—and the town, once it was left behind.

Through the mist of rain, during the two-hour trip along the highway, he watched the fence-like telephone poles and green-

wet fields, thinking to himself,
What a great day this is!

The hotel, listed in his wallet, was located near the city bus terminal. He walked the two short blocks over wet cement, under parting clouds, with a rainbow in the west. *It's a great day*, he told himself again, his step jaunty, arms swinging.

He was directed to a room on the seventh floor, where he took off his still-damp jacket, then his shoes and wiggled his toes inside his socks. He lay down on the bed.

The bus trip faded from his mind as if it had never happened. Only the hotel room was real and a part of him, and the bed where he lay, hands clasped behind his head.

The rain began to pour again, it poured and slackened, poured and slackened as if the heavens could not make up its mind. The day did not seem so great, after all, but rather a gray day with the thoughts that had come into this hotel room and onto the bed.

He turned his head within the cup of his hands and watched the rain through sleazy curtains, and supposed his brother, the all-American-boy, was plowing through the mud of a college football field for a touchdown, or running a wet-slick track to win for

dear-old-whatever. He could never remember which school team was to be so honored by his brother's athletic prowess, nor could he keep up with the seasons to be sure what activity might be using his brother's coordinated muscles . . .

Perhaps his brother was, instead, bent over a book in a dim and austere library, studying to weld another diamond in his scholastic crown, and his mother's . . . Oh, his mother was proud of his brother! *Thank God I have Roger to make up for you*, she had often told him. That was when he was young, before he'd gotten into any real trouble . . . *Thank God for Roger*.

There had never been a time without Roger, for Roger was older and a princeling from the first. Furthermore, Roger looked like his mother and his mother's people.

You're just like your father, his mother told him before he knew it was a sin, *and you'll grow up just like him—a no-good, a trouble-maker*.

He knew very little about his father, except for these dropped derogations. There was no portrait, no snapshot in the stately house of his mother . . . He loved the house, with its curved stairway and carved balustrade, its

richness and delicacy—and tried desperately to be not like his father, but he had a talent for touching only to break . . . *You are destructive like your father.*

He lay on the bed in the seventh floor hotel room, and thought of his mother with bereft loneliness.

The rain beat against the windowpane, moving the curtains in ghostly tremor from the crack along the sill, like the draperies of his mother's filmy skirts which always trembled gently over her iron strength.

He tried, as he grew older, to be less like his father and more like his brother whom his mother loved dearly, but he fumbled the ball and fell on the track and mooned over his books, learning nothing. *You are a misfit and a dreamer like your father*, so he tried to fit in without the dreaming, and his mother looked down upon him with contempt, deriding his choice of activity and companions . . . *You will end up behind bars just like your father.*

As she predicted, because he was a weak misfit like his father whom he had never known, and not strong and good as was his deeply loved mother and the brother whom she loved, he was put behind bars.

He moved his head within his

hands and looked toward the window at the rain outside, lulled now to tears along the glass, and realized that his brother would not be touching down on a football field or breaking the tape of a track run, or even studying in a college library, for it was later than he thought.

His brother would be in a courtroom, spreading the gospel of the law. His mother had told him so.

You are back. She spoke sternly from the curve of the stairway. *After all this time and all that you have done and all the ways you are like your father, you are back*, while he stood worshipfully below, gazing up at her, adoring her.

The draperies of her skirts moved gently with outrage just as the window curtains moved with the end of the storm.

Well, you cannot stay, she said with finality. *I say you cannot stay in my house, and Roger, with his legal power, will keep you out.*

She turned then, and started back up the stairs, the folds of her skirts floating, to spread suddenly in agitated motion, swirl, eddy, shift, tremble and drop into stillness . . . like the curtains with the last gust of wind.

He sat up on the bed and swung his legs over the side. He

now remembered there was something he must do. He leaned forward and drew the wallet from his hip pocket and opened it to the slip of paper. The address of the hotel—that part was done, for he was here, in this room, on the bed; the rain over and the day all mixed up, not a great day, not a gray day, but one filled with fog.

The telephone number . . . that was what he was to do—call the telephone number listed on the paper.

He flattened the wallet and the paper on the bed and reached for the phone. With great care he gave the operator the number to dial.

A voice answered.

“Mother?” he said, not realizing at first that it was a man’s voice he heard, not his mother’s.

“Can you tell me where Mother is?” he asked the voice, thinking it might belong to Roger, the football player, track star, student, lawyer, judge and well-loved son. “Roger?”

Unaccountably, the voice ignored his questions, smoothly relating that it belonged, not to Mother nor to Roger, but to a parole officer. “And who is this?” questioned the voice.

He gave his name, his very own name, not a number nor a piece of a name, but the name of his father, hated by his mother, that only his brother had made proud.

“So you’re in town. I have been waiting for your call. You will report . . .” the voice droned on and on, naming places and regular times, offering job-hope and life-hope . . . to which he did not listen.

“I want my mother,” he said, his voice sounding childlike even to his own ears. “Can you tell me where my mother is?”

“Your mother is dead.” The voice spoke in shocked disbelief. “You killed your mother. That’s why you’ve been in prison for the last fifteen years . . .”

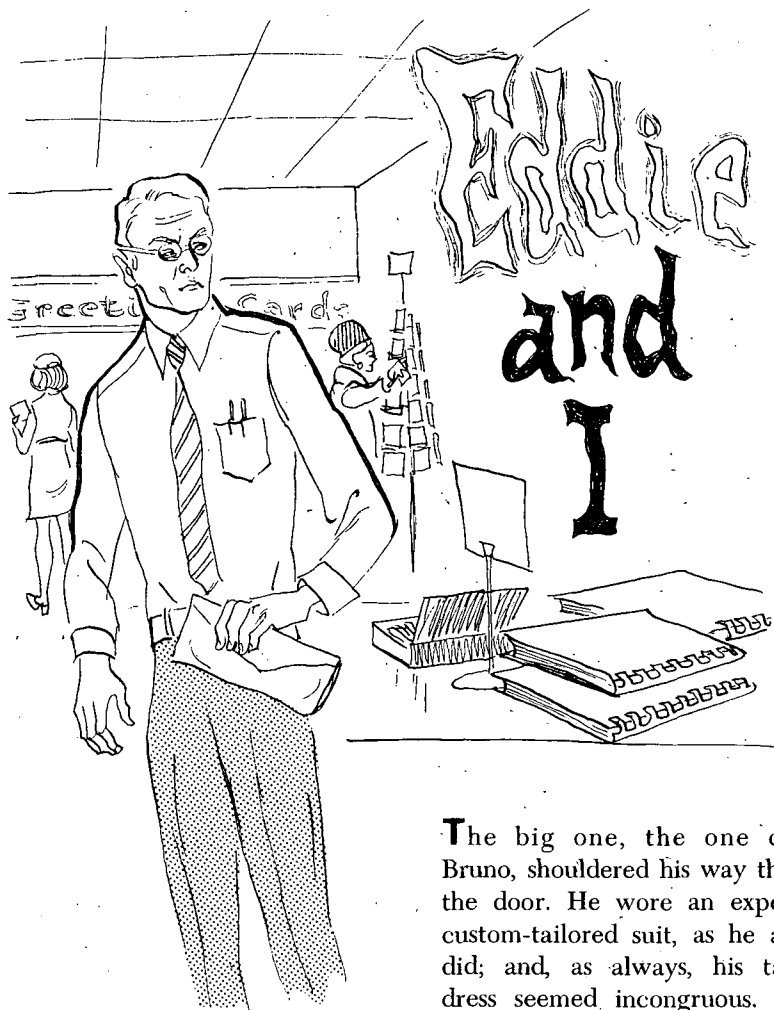
He cradled the phone.

The day was not great with the greatness of freedom, it was not gray with an undefined sorrow, nor was it foggy with forgotten memory; it was, instead, clear with knowledge and sharp with termination.

He walked to the window and raised it. He pushed the curtains aside and climbed to the sill.

He straightened, holding on for just an instant, then let himself fall to the street below.

Some situations demand all the inside help one can muster.



The big one, the one called Bruno, shouldered his way through the door. He wore an expensive, custom-tailored suit, as he always did; and, as always, his tasteful dress seemed incongruous. I was



immediately reminded of a trained ape.

Bruno's partner, the one called Nelson, was right behind him. Nelson was young and good-looking in a pampered way. I was

sure he plucked his eyebrows. He was casually dressed and might have passed for a college student. He never said much, just watched and was content to take his cues from Bruno, but I suspected he was the more intelligent of the two.

I was afraid. Whenever they came I would shake with fear; and on the day when collections were made I couldn't keep food down until it was over.

They sometimes hurt me even though I did nothing to provoke them, and I had a cringing, crippling, physical fear that they would do it again. They were both experts at inflicting pain. They could produce maximum torment with a minimum of effort, and they never left a bruise or other telltale evidence of their violence. They knew where to squeeze, press and twist, and exactly how much to do it.

They paused inside the doorway and swept the store with practiced glances. There were two women examining the racks of greeting cards, and another was trying to decide what candy to buy. Bruno and Nelson wouldn't do anything to me while there were customers in the store. They would simply take the money and leave. I sighed with relief, but my stomach muscles tensed as they

approached the spot where I was standing behind the counter.

"How's it goin', four-eyes?" Bruno asked.

"Well—very well, sir," I answered hurriedly, placing the sealed envelope on the counter between us.

Nelson leaned over, read the figures written on the envelope and raised a thin eyebrow. "You *have* had a good week," he said with mild surprise.

"Give him a receipt," Bruno ordered, cutting the conversation short. He seemed angry to find I wasn't alone and he'd have no sport with me.

Nelson produced a receipt book and filled one out without checking the envelope's contents against the figures written on it. He wasn't worried about being cheated.

"Got a message for you," Bruno said.

"Yes, sir?" I answered politely.

"From now on you buy all your candy from the Aaron Candy Company."

"But—" I started to protest.

"The Aaron Candy Company," Bruno said again, looking at me through narrowed eyes.

"The Aaron Candy Company," I agreed, and felt my legs tremble.

They walked out without look-

ing back. They'd seen enough.

I took care of my customers in a partial daze the rest of the afternoon and evening, while I thought about how I had gotten into the mess I was in, and grieved over the fact that there didn't seem to be any way out.

A year earlier I'd had a successful business, selling candy, cards, and fancy wrapping papers—all items that usually have a high markup. I had wanted to expand, but couldn't get as much bank financing as I wanted. Then a tall, thin, silver-haired man named Carl Harper came to see me with his two flunkies, Bruno and Nelson. He said he'd heard I wanted to make a loan. He was willing to let me have the money, but he wanted over twice the legal interest rate.

We bargained while Harper smoked a few short, black cigars. Finally, it was agreed that I would get the cash I wanted in exchange for signing a note for a considerably larger amount. That way Harper had firm legal assurances that I would pay the amount he wanted in return. It was further agreed that I would make payments amounting to one half of my net profits each week until the note, interest and principal were paid.

The terms were pretty stiff, but

nothing I couldn't handle. I planned to open a chain of small shops, specializing in candy, cards and gift wrap. Each would be in an even better location than my first store, so they were sure to be successful. I figured I'd have the debt paid off in six months.

Which shows how wrong I was. Now, almost a year later, I was having trouble keeping the interest paid, and I hadn't applied anything against the principal in a month. I had failed to take Harper's two strong-arm men and my own cowardice into consideration. Almost as soon as the agreement was signed, they began to pressure me to run the stores Harper's way.

First they told me to hire all my clerks through a specific agency, one that demanded an exorbitant fee. Then I was ordered to contract janitorial services from an expensive cleaning company. Within two months I was forced to buy all my cards and wrapping papers from a wholesaler who allowed me only a 20% markup instead of the 40% to 60% I had been getting. Now I was being forced to purchase candy from a new company, one in which I was certain Carl Harper had a financial interest. My profits would be reduced still further.

I closed the store that evening

when there was little hope of getting another customer. I'd sold my car months before, as soon as it was clear I couldn't afford to put gas into its tank, let alone keep up the payments on it. I walked the eight blocks to my two-room apartment, which was located in a once-fashionable town house that had been partitioned into a number of oddly-shaped units. There were both rats and roaches, but the rent was cheap.

My TV was broken and I couldn't afford to have it repaired. I looked around for something to do until I was tired enough to sleep, and decided to read. There was a crate of books, one of the few possessions transferred from my previous quarters, stored in the tiny apartment's only closet. I dragged it out into the light and was stopped by a tearing sound.

I looked down and saw that a nail from the crate had caught in the old and worn carpet, ripping a foot-long gash. I couldn't have felt worse if the gash had been in me. The threadbare wall-to-wall carpet had little value, but it would cost far more to replace than it was worth.

Dropping to my knees, I examined the torn edges, thinking I might be able to sew them together. It was hopeless—the carpet had begun to unravel. A simple

repair was out of the question.

Then I noticed the floor beneath. It was beautiful. Years before someone had covered a highly polished hardwood floor with drab carpeting. It didn't make sense. It was like putting cheap seat covers in a new car, protecting the original, expensive upholstery for the car's second owner.

The discovery pleased me, though. With luck, I would only have to remove the carpet and dispose of it somewhere. The building's owner would probably never notice it was gone, in which case he wouldn't make me replace it.

I got some tools and pulled out all the tacks and staples along the perimeter of the carpet and began to roll it up. I stopped about halfway to shift the few pieces of furniture from the carpet to the hardwood floor, then continued to roll it. The carpet stuck slightly at one point, but it pulled loose easily.

When I looked to see what had been holding it, I got the shock of my life. On the floor, silhouetted in long-dried blood, was the shape of a man's torso, thighs and one arm. The carpet had been laid while the blood was still wet, and had stuck to the floor.

I stumbled backward and

dropped heavily into an overstuffed chair. I couldn't pull my eyes away from the horrible stain on the floor. Someone, I couldn't begin to guess how many years before, had been murdered in this room. The body had been disposed of somewhere else, then the bloody impression on the floor had been hidden under the carpet. No police investigation could have been completed before the blood had dried.

For the first time in months I was able to feel sorry for someone besides myself. The man who had left his blood on the floor had obviously had more serious problems than mine.

As I stared at the deep maroon blotch, thinking about the man who had lain there, I felt a sharp pain at the base of my skull and had to close my eyes. When they opened a few seconds later, it was almost as though it wasn't I who opened them. I felt like a passenger in a body I didn't control. I was able to listen, and look out through my eyes, but that was all. It was as though someone or something was dictating my actions.

I stretched and did a couple of deep knee-bends. I jabbed my fingers into my midsection and swore when I felt how soft it was. I looked at my hands with their

nails bitten to the quick and swore again.

"What have I gotten myself into?" I asked aloud, then tilted my head back and roared with laughter at some joke I didn't understand.

I went into the bathroom and examined myself in the mirror on the door of the medicine cabinet. I shook my head in disgust and pulled off my thick glasses. As soon as I did, everything went hazy, so I put them on again.

Ten minutes later, dressed in my only suit, I left the apartment. I paused on the front steps, looked up and down the street, then went striding off in the direction of the brightest lights, whistling a wild tune I had never heard before. Several cabs cruised by, but I didn't try to flag one. I was enjoying the sights, sounds and smells too much. It was after midnight, though, so I just knew I was going to get myself mugged. No one in his right mind walked the city streets after dark, let alone after midnight.

Sure enough, two tough-looking teen-agers appeared ahead of me on the opposite side of the street. They stood with their heads together for a moment, then angled across the street to intercept my path.

When they were still five yards

away, I leveled a finger at them. "Don't even think it," I said, with more menace than I had believed my voice could achieve. "*Don't even think it!*"

The two stopped in their tracks, and I stepped between them and continued along the sidewalk without breaking my stride.

I walked for blocks, looking in store windows, running my hand along the sleek sides of parked cars, and generally enjoying the sights. Whenever something was puzzling, I could actually feel my memory banks being searched for the answer.

Finally, we neared the Roaring Twenties Club, a hangout favored by the city's rougher element. More than once I had driven past and found police cars parked in front. Sometimes news broadcasts had included an item about some particularly nasty bit of violence there.

I examined my memories, and they generated the very same feelings as they always had. However, what I had always interpreted as fear and apprehension were now looked upon as excitement and anticipation, emotions to be savored and enjoyed.

The sound of a band playing a Charleston reached me and I picked up my pace. I entered the Roaring Twenties Club without

the slightest hesitation, made my way across the half-empty room, and took a vacant table near the bandstand just as the musicians were leaving to take a break.

A waitress in a short, beaded dress appeared to take my order. I smiled at her. "Surprise me, baby. Bring me anything except gin."

I watched the waitress walk away, then turned my attention to the rest of the room. Half of the tables were unoccupied. The remainder held one or two couples each. The men were invariably overdressed and the women underdressed. Wide-lapeled, double-breasted suits and mini-dresses were the general rule.

The waitress returned with my drink immediately. I paid for it with my only twenty-dollar bill and she made change from a small beaded bag she had hanging from her wrist. I took a sip and closed my eyes. It was foul-tasting stuff. If I'd been in charge, I'd have spit it out. Instead, I handed the girl a generous tip and swallowed slowly.

"Must be right off the boat," I said, and the girl gave me a blank look before moving away.

A large man rushed up to the table and pointed an accusing finger at me. "You've been staring at my girl!"

"Probably," I answered, trying

to look past him. "Which one is she? I've been staring at them all."

My question was answered when a petite blonde came up and took the big man's arm and attempted to pull him away. "He didn't do anything. Roger, so don't you start anything," she told him.

Then she turned to me. "I made Roger bring me here so I could see some real gangsters, but he's been drinking too much and we haven't seen any gangsters."

"I'm a gangster," I said. "They call me Machine Gun Eddie."

The girl laughed and looked at me more critically. "Oh—you *couldn't* be!" she said. "What do you do?"

"Hijack trucks, mostly; kill people once in a while," Eddie answered.

Roger's jaw dropped and he seemed to shrink in size.

The girl's smile faded a bit. She brushed back a strand of her yellow hair, betraying nervousness. "You don't *look* like a gangster," she said.

Eddie tapped my temple with my right index finger. "A disguise," he confided.

The girl turned to Roger and made him bend down so that she could whisper into his ear. When he straightened up he invited Eddie to their table for a drink. Ed-

die accepted without hesitation.

The young woman—Alice was her name—was a goddess. She was a model. I had never known such a beautiful woman, let alone had one sit next to me, hanging onto my every word. I was in love. The emotion Eddie felt was a bit more primitive, but we shared the same goal.

The band returned. In the following half hour, Eddie demonstrated the correct technique for dancing the Charleston and displayed a flawless memory for the words of old songs, including *Lucky Lindy*, which no one else recalled. Once he became used to the limited range of my voice and made allowances for it, he began to sing softly into Alice's ear as they danced to the less frantic tunes. Finally, Eddie dumped a full drink into Roger's lap, apologizing as soon as the glass left my hand.

As far as Roger was concerned, that was all he was going to take. He had been glaring at me while Eddie danced and laughed with Alice. Now he jumped up, purple with rage, dabbing at himself ineffectually with a handkerchief. "I'm going to the men's room," he announced. "When I get back I don't want to find you here."

Eddie looked at Roger's back, then at Alice, then back to Roger

again. He picked up Alice's bag and handed it to her as he stood and pulled her chair away from the table. "You heard the man," he said, pretending he thought Roger meant both of them. "Let's get out of here."

When I awoke in the morning Eddie was gone, and so was Alice. Alice, however, had left a note taped to the door of her refrigerator, saying she'd be back by five and that I should call her.

My head throbbed. I looked at my watch—it was five to twelve. I had already lost nearly three hours of business at the branch store I operated. I hurried from the apartment and was pleased to find that I was only twenty blocks from my business. Cabs cost money I couldn't afford, so I quickened my pace and took longer strides.

I had gone only ten blocks when I felt a sharp pain at the base of my skull and Eddie was back. I was passing an optometrist at the time, and he brought me to a halt in front of the display window. Something about contact lenses had caught his eye. The next thing I knew, I was inside being fitted with contact lenses, and Eddie had thrown away my heavy, horn-rimmed glasses. He had no qualms about offering one of my credit cards when the bill

was presented. He wasn't thinking ahead to the time when I would have to pay.

The delay at the optometrist's cost me more than the price of the contact lenses because my shop remained closed all that additional time. However, instead of opening for business when we finally arrived, Eddie left the door locked and went directly to the small office I had in the rear.

He spent hours poring over my records and probing into my memories. At last he picked up the telephone and canceled all the business arrangements Harper's men had forced me to make. I thought of the future and was scared to death, but Eddie acted so decisively and whistled that cheerful tune of his, he dispelled my apprehension for a time.

The next few days were the wildest in my life. Eddie moved me into Alice's apartment and bought himself an extensive wardrobe, using my credit cards and cash he picked up at my branch stores. Instead of square-toed shoes, which Eddie complained looked weird, he asked for and received shoes with the most pointed toes I'd ever seen. Every evening he took Alice to a different nightclub and threw money away like there was no tomorrow.

Alice was getting serious. She

began to read menus from right to left and once suggested less expensive entertainment. Eddie gazed into her solemn blue eyes and told her that life is too short to worry about money.

Happily, Eddie's attitudes and actions were infectious. Though some things continued to seem serious even when he was running the show, nothing seemed *serious-serious* anymore. In the mornings, when generally he was gone for some reason, I found myself thinking as he might have thought and doing things as he might have done them. Although I wasn't able to convert my fear to excitement when Eddie wasn't around, it somehow was less frightening.

Unfortunately, I couldn't put Bruno and Nelson completely out of my mind. Monday was collection day for the previous week, and every day that passed brought Bruno and Nelson that much closer—and I would have nothing for them. Eddie was spending the business receipts as fast as they came in.

It turned out Eddie had been thinking about Bruno and Nelson, too. On Sunday evening he kissed Alice good-bye for a few hours and we went to my two-room apartment. We hadn't been back since I'd discovered the bloody murder scene, and everything was

just exactly as I had left it.

Eddie sat on the rolled-up carpet, staring at the blotch of dried blood for over thirty minutes. Then he spent another thirty minutes with steel wool and strong detergent, removing the stain. Before, it had seemed Eddie never planned ahead, but simply met events head-on as they occurred. Now, however, the blood seemed to remind him of mortality, and he became grim and deliberate. Not once did he whistle the wild little tune he usually favored.

When the spot was gone, Eddie rolled down his shirt sleeves and left the apartment. He descended the steps to the ground floor. There was a closet located under the stairway and he went directly to it. Using my penknife, he released a hidden catch, and a panel at the rear of the closet slid aside. Behind it was a dust-covered violin case and a stack of small cardboard boxes, each marked: SPRINGFIELD ARMORY—.45 CAL. AUTO.—50 Cartridges 50.

I'd seen enough movies to guess what was in the violin case, and I was right.

Once back in the apartment, Eddie opened the case and removed a Thompson submachine gun. With the degree of sureness one associates with much practice, he broke the body of the weapon

into its two major assemblies, and then into its component parts.

The case contained oil and flannel patches, too. He saw to it that each piece was lightly oiled and that a pair of pads inside the receiver were well saturated. After that he put it all back together again, checked the action, and turned to the weapon's drum-type magazine. He oiled the spring and placed one hundred rounds of ammunition on the spiral track before putting the cover in place and twisting the spring key to put tension on the cartridges. As Eddie packed the weapon back into the violin case, he began to whistle again.

That evening he took Alice out on the town as usual. I didn't get back to her apartment until after three in the morning. Not one to eavesdrop, I went to sleep at once. Predictably, when I awoke on Monday morning, both Alice and Eddie were gone, and it was almost noon. The violin case was on the floor near the apartment door where Eddie had left it.

I didn't know what to do. I hung around the apartment long after I was ready to leave, hoping Eddie would return and take over. He didn't. Finally, I picked up the violin case and took it with me.

I started to walk to my store in a stubborn and inane effort to

save money despite Eddie's extravagance, but soon flagged a cab. That violin case was too heavy to drag through the streets for any distance. It must have weighed twenty pounds. Within three blocks I had begun to shift it from one hand to the other.

When I reached my shop, I put the violin case under the counter out of sight and opened for business. The weapon was useless to me—I didn't even know how to attach the large drum magazine. If Eddie didn't come back before Bruno and Nelson showed up to collect Harper's share of the previous week's receipts, I was in a world of trouble. I tried to keep my mind off the unpleasant possibilities by waiting on customers; however, every time the door opened I expected to see Bruno and Nelson.

They didn't appear until 2:30 in the afternoon, but Eddie still hadn't returned. I was alone in the store. Bruno paused long enough to hang my OUT TO LUNCH sign on the door, then the pair walked back to where I stood, pale and frightened. They couldn't have known I didn't have an envelope for them; so they must have simply decided to have some fun with me.

Bruno pinned my arms behind my back and Nelson stood in front

of me, pressing his thumbs into the nerve centers behind my ears. It was one of their favorite tricks. It left no marks, but the pain was as bad as any I'd experienced.

Then, suddenly, Eddie was back, and I was more than happy to let him take over. He brought my heel down on Bruno's instep with enough force to break several small bones. It made Bruno release my arms and dance backward, holding one foot and hopping on the other. Startled, Nelson jumped away from me, too, but quickly recovered and started to advance toward me again.

Eddie groped inside my pocket, took out my little penknife, and opened the blade. It was only an inch and a half long.

Nelson grinned contemptuously. "What d'ya think you're gonna do with that?" he asked.

In answer, Eddie reached out swiftly and split his nose from bridge to tip, causing a fountain of crimson to gush.

Then, brandishing the tiny knife like a sword, Eddie leaped about, administering kicks to the hoods with the pointed toes of his shoes until they were both thoroughly demoralized and had no fight left. Next, he got the violin case from under the counter and followed them to their car. I sat in the rear while Bruno drove, operating the

accelerator and brake with his left foot; and Nelson sat beside him, trying to stop the flow of blood with his handkerchief. They hadn't been prepared for resistance, let alone violence, and suddenly they had been faced with both.

The violin case was resting across my knees. Eddie sat back full of pleasant anticipation, and whistled cheerfully. From time to time he'd ask Bruno how his foot felt, or ask Nelson whether his nose was very painful, but neither of them mistook the questions for concern. It was clear from my grin that Eddie wanted to be sure he'd done all the damage he had intended.

Carl Harper was sunning himself beside his pool when we arrived at his home in the country. Bathing trunks didn't conceal his age the way a business suit had. He was seventy if he were a day—possibly older. His face, perhaps as a result of face-lifts, was of a man in his fifties. He looked up when Bruno came limping across the grass toward him with the still-bleeding Nelson beside him. He started to say something, then he noticed me bringing up the rear.

Eddie placed the violin case on an umbrella-covered lawn table and unfastened the lid. "Hi,

Harpy," he said. "Long time, no see."

Harper turned angrily to his men. "What did you bring him here for? I've told you never to bring anyone here."

"We had to, boss. He made us," Bruno explained with a whine in his voice.

"He *made* us," Harper echoed sarcastically.

"No use getting mad at them, Harpy," Eddie said, causing Harper to turn to me again. "They're mean enough; they just aren't tough enough."

I now had the Thompson sub-machine gun under my right arm, and Eddie was sliding the drum magazine into place.

Harper's eyes bugged out. "Hey, fella, let's not be hasty. Let's talk this over. I know you figure you have reason to be sore at me, but—"

Eddie shot Bruno and Nelson, placing a five-round burst into the center of each man's chest. The force threw them backward into the swimming pool, and the water around their bodies quickly turned pink.

There was the sound of excited voices, then running feet coming from the house. A high hedge around the pool area effectively screened it from view. Eddie waited until the slap of feet on

flagstone seemed very close, then fired a long burst into the hedge. The running stopped abruptly.

"We can be partners," Harper said hurriedly. "I'll split everything with you right down the middle."

Eddie sat on the lawn table, cradling the big weapon like a baby. "You're kinda hard on partners, Harpy. You like to shoot them with both barrels of a sawed-off shotgun. You make a bloody mess out of partners."

"How did you know about—"

Eddie crossed my legs and began to whistle his crazy little tune.

Harper leaned toward me as though trying to get a better look. "Eddie?" he said. If he had planned to say anything else, the chatter of the submachine gun drowned it out.

That was months ago, and the crime hasn't been solved. The murder weapon was matched ballistically to several famous crimes, but that only added confusion instead of making the job of the police less difficult.

There are many accounts on record, describing men and women who displayed two or more drastically different personalities. The movie *The Three Faces of Eve* dramatized one true case. I figure that's what must have happened to me. Somehow, when I discovered the bloodstain under the rug, the shock caused a part of my mind to open up and release the personality that called itself Eddie. I'm sure that's what happened. It doesn't explain how I knew about the hiding place of the submachine gun, or why Carl Harper and Eddie seemed to recognize each other, but few phenomena can be explained perfectly. I'm not going to let it bother me.

Eddie still shows up once in a while; however, each time he leaves he stays away for a longer period. Soon I feel sure he'll leave and never return. That's okay—I don't need him anymore. I've learned all he had to teach. Alice can't tell the difference between us; and, what's more important, neither can I.





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To a marriage like this must come a bad break or two.

Sorry,
Frank



Mrs. Scoville? This is Memorial Hospital. Your husband was in an accident and I'm afraid he's in critical condition. Could you come down right away? I think you'd better hurry . . .

"Ethel!"

The coffee pot slipped out of her hands, splashing water and carefully measured coffee into the sink and staining her yellow robe.

"I can't find the mouthwash. Where is it? Did you forget to buy it again?"

She closed her eyes and gripped the counter to keep her voice quite detached. "I'm sorry, Frank. I'll get some today."

He stomped into the kitchen wiping the perspiration already filming his beefy face. "Sorry, Frank," he mimicked. "Always excuses. You never remember a thing. Where's my coffee? Didn't you even start it yet?"

Her numb fingers reassembled the coffeepot and plugged it in. She watched nervously as it gurgled, and tried to remember how much coffee she had put in.

"Ethel!"

"Right away, Frank." She hurriedly put his eggs and toast on a plate, wincing at the sight of the egg yolk broken in her haste. He shot her a murderous look but began eating without comment. She went to get his coffee as Janey

by Maxine
O'Callaghan

walked in, smiling a sleepy hello. Ethel opened her mouth in warning, but it was too late.

"Ethel! Look at this kid. Are you letting her go to school looking like that?"

Janey appealed mutely to her mother. "Frank," Ethel began timidly, "all the girls wear short skirts—"

"I don't care what other girls wear. My daughter's not going around looking like that. Why, she might as well go out in her underwear and be done with it. Ethel!"

"Go change your clothes," Ethel said.

"But, Mother—" Tears edged Janey's plea.

"You heard your father," Ethel said harshly, her stomach twisting into knots. "Now go on, do as I say."

"Ethel! For heaven's sake! Where's my coffee?"

She poured it quickly, sloshing some of the hot liquid on her hand and biting her lip to keep from crying out.

He gulped it down, making a face, his complaints cut short by a horn sounding out front. Thrusting the cup at her, he rushed out yelling over his shoulder, "Don't forget to iron some shirts today."

She sank down at the table with tension vibrating her heart like a drum.

Mrs. Scoville? This is Henry Miller down at the plant. I'm awful sorry to be the one to tell you—it's Frank, Mrs. Scoville. He's had a heart attack. They're taking him to the hospital, and, well, it's pretty bad. I think you'd better get over there right away . . .

"Mother," Janey said, "is this okay?"

Ethel nodded vaguely. The red skirt had been exchanged for a blue one just as short as the original. A sly flicker of triumph shone briefly on Janey's face.

Maybe I was wrong, Ethel thought dully as Janey gulped her breakfast and hurried off to school. All these years I stayed with Frank for Janey's sake. She needs a father; but lately . . .

She poured herself a cup of the muddy coffee. Fourteen years ago Frank Scoville burst like an energetic whirlwind into her quiet life, sweeping her into marriage. He radiated self-confidence, and his aggressiveness—well, he needed that to get ahead in the brilliant future she could see as clearly as a road map.

The vision of success faded slowly over the years, the opportunities slipping away from his frustrated grasp. Of course there was always somebody to blame: the boss' brother nosing him out of the promotion, the office man-



ager jealous of Frank's brilliance, and always holding him back was Ethel—a handy scapegoat for all the things that happened with nobody handy to blame. His constant belittlement changed her gentle humor into mute silence and her slight forgetfulness into complete disorganization.

Mrs. Scoville? This is the Los Angeles Police Department. Sorry to have to tell you this, ma'am. A holdup was in progress at the bank this morning when your husband walked in. There was some shooting. He's still alive, but I

think you'd better get to the hospital right away . . .

The telephone rang, jolting her out of the daydream. Her eyes focused guiltily on the clock. "Eleven!" She hurried to pick up the phone.

"Ethel! Where were you? You go back to bed?"

The kitchen littered with dirty dishes, the beds unmade, his shirts left to iron, the shopping to do—all of it began closing in on her. "What is it, Frank?"

"I want you to take the car by the garage and have them check

out the brakes. You understand?"

"Today? But, Frank, I'm supposed to go to school. The PTA Board—"

"Look, hang the PTA. Damn waste of time anyway. I have to use the car tomorrow to call on some customers up in Hollywood and the brakes feel funny. I don't want to drive up and down all those hills without having them checked. Ethel!"

"Yes, Frank," she said tiredly, hanging up the phone.

Another missed meeting, she thought. It had taken all her courage to say yes when asked to serve on the Board, knowing full well they must have been scraping the bottom of the barrel when they called her. She had begun to enjoy it, but now it was just like the Reading Club and the Brownies when Janey was small. Always there was something to keep her away; something for Frank more important than her own pitiful attempts for an outside interest:

"Eleven-thirty!" She started cleaning feverishly. If she hurried—the meeting was at two; maybe, just maybe . . .

The meeting ended late and the drumbeat of tension knotted Ethel's stomach around the half of a sandwich and the coffee she'd gulped before she came. It was

difficult to concentrate on Gladys Webb's remarks about plans for the Sock Hop with the list of things left to do dancing around in her head. Frank's shirts, the car, and—oh, no, she had forgotten his mouthwash. She fought the late afternoon traffic back to the discount supermarket and stood in line for an interminable time.

It was after four as she headed for home, her head aching fiercely and exhaustion making every turn of the wheel an effort. As she sailed past the service station, she remembered Frank's call and hesitated. "No," she thought, "there's not time; and anyway he'll never know the difference." She switched on the radio defiantly and drove home.

A late bulletin. In Los Angeles today a sniper began firing at random into the street, killing four persons and wounding three others. Among the dead are Mr. Frank Scoville of . . .

A blare of rock music roused her in time to turn into her driveway where the car swayed to a stop just short of the garage door. Trembling, she pushed the guilty panic aside and hurried into the kitchen to put the roast in the oven.

For once it was rare the way Frank liked it; but tough, as he proved by elaborate sawing mo-

tions with his knife. She had forgotten all about dessert, and with a martyred air he ate the ice cream she served.

There was a bad moment when he asked about the car, but he accepted her vague answer without question and went to sit in front of the television set. Finally the day dragged to an end.

Fatigue clouded Ethel's mind, but once in bed she tossed fitfully, deep sleep seeming to come only minutes before the alarm rang. She dragged herself into the kitchen and began to fumble with the coffeepot.

"Ethel!" His scandalized voice bellowed. "You forgot to iron my shirts!"

"Yes, Frank, I'll do it right away."

She got a shirt done somehow, took it to him and came back to the kitchen to realize she had forgotten to plug in the coffeepot.

"Ethel! Where's my coffee? Is it too much to ask—hey, look at that kid's hair. I want it cut today, do you hear? Looks like a stringy mop. And I need some foot pow-

der—you'll have to take the bus."

At last he was gone and Janey's wails quieted and Ethel was left to face the dirty kitchen and the weak coffee. She sat down unfeeling, her thoughts drifting, jumbled—*Mrs. Scoville, your husband . . . accident . . . riot . . . heart attack . . . dead . . . dead. . .*

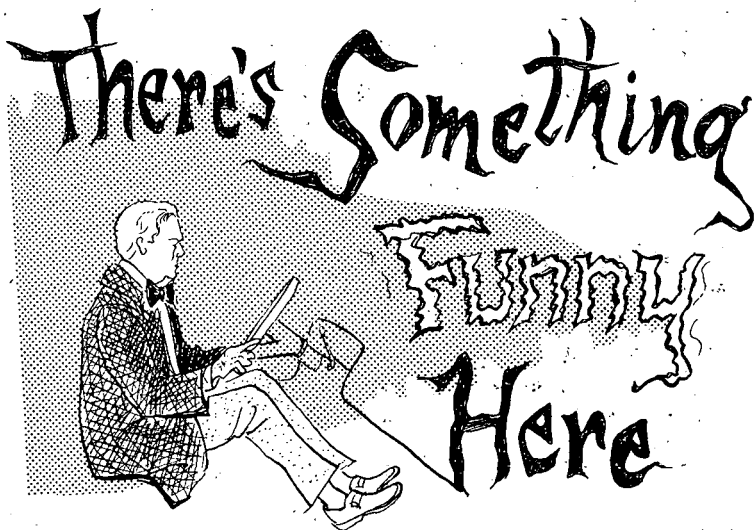
The phone shrilled several times before it penetrated the protective fog. The voice sounded familiar somehow. "Mrs. Scoville, this is Dr. Kline at Memorial Hospital. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but your husband was in an automobile accident, and he's here now in critical condition. A police car is coming to pick you up and bring you here. Mrs. Scoville? Mrs. Scoville?"

She hung up the phone.

Minutes later a pounding on the front door snapped her to her feet. "Eleven o'clock . . ." She stumbled to the sink and began frantically to clean the kitchen. So many things to do . . . the floor . . . how long since she washed it? And Janey's hair . . . maybe if she trimmed it just a little . . .



A few words may be more revealing than a lengthy discourse.



As soon as he pulled into the busy downtown street from the parking garage, Herb Crain knew something was wrong.

The car seemed unaccountably sluggish. Moreover, the ride was springier than it should be, the engine was too noisy, and at the first red light his foot went down too far on the brake pedal.

"What the hell," he said.

Beside him, his wife Rose, a short, dumpy woman, scowled.

"What's the trouble *now*?" she asked. "You've been complaining all night. At the restaurant, the meat was cold. At the theater, we were in a draft. And when we had the after-dinner drink, the service was too slow. I don't mind telling you, I'm fed up. After all, this *is* our 34th wedding anniversary. Why are you spoiling it for me? I think—"

"Yeah, sure," Herb said in an abstracted way. He was a trim,

white-haired, bantam-sized man in his late fifties, with an affectation for the bow ties he'd worn in his young manhood. Over the years, he had grown so accustomed to Rose's constant critiques of his behavior that they now made virtually no impression on him.

"But, there's something funny about this car," he went on. "It doesn't act right."

"Ridiculous. You're so finicky—all those tune-ups, the time you waste poking around under the hood. If you'd spend just half that time thinking about what lies ahead for us . . ."

The light changed. Herb pressed hard on the gas pedal, but again the response was sluggish.

" . . . we'd be better off," Rose continued. "You're retiring soon. Your pension and Social Security won't add up to much. You never did start that investment program you've always been talking about, so we'll have to—"

"I," Herb announced, "am going to stop for a minute."

"That's crazy. This is a no-parking boulevard."

"I don't care. I want a better

look at this car, because all of a sudden I'm not sure it is our car."

Rose was incredulous. "What are you talking about? Five hours ago we drove this car into that garage and they gave us a claim check. Five minutes ago we gave them the claim check and they gave us back the car. The same make, model, year, color, everything. Here . . ." She opened the glove compartment. "Here's all our things, just as we left them. Road maps, the first-aid kit, the flashlight, pennies for the parking meters . . ." She closed the compartment and looked into the back seat. "And there's the old blanket, so the dog won't muddy the upholstery."

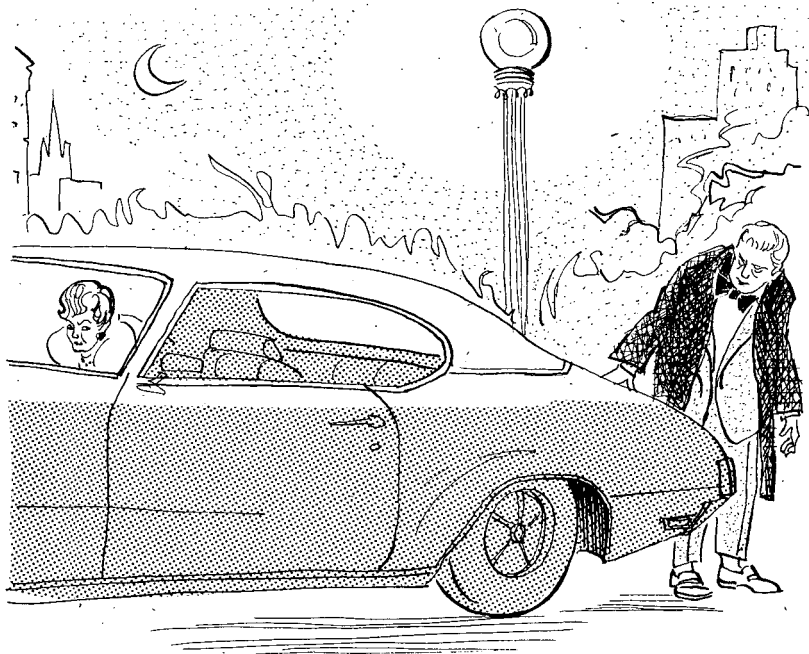
Grim-faced, Herb parked under an arc light and cut the engine.

Rose shook her head in exasperation as Herb flipped on the dome light and examined the car's interior. Yes, it *looked* the same. Still, one smudge on the ceiling seemed unfamiliar . . .

He got out. The license plates were his, all right, and the dent in the left front fender, where someone had banged it in a parking lot, was still there, but was that the exact spot? He recalled it as being a little higher.

Then he found two marks that had *not* been on the car before he brought it to the garage—a long

by James
Michael
Ullman



scratch on the trunk, and a big dent in the rear bumper.

His mind made up, he slipped back behind the wheel, kicked the engine into life and pulled the car into traffic.

"Satisfied?" Rose asked.

"Yes," he replied. "It's *not* our car. The trunk's scratched and the rear bumper is smashed. We're going back."

"Good grief! You can't tell me you remember *every* scratch. And even if they weren't on the car before we left it, they could have happened *while* it was there. Any-

way, why would anyone go through all the trouble of making one car look like another car?"

"That," Herb told her, "is what I intend to find out."

A few moments later he eased the car to the curb in a no-parking zone across the street from the garage, a boxlike, four-story concrete structure.

"If I pull in at the IN ramp," he explained, "they'll take the car upstairs. But I won't give them this car until they give us *our* car, so we'll park this one here. If the police tow it away, I couldn't

care less. Come on," he urged her.

He opened the door, but Rose settled back, arms folded over her chest.

"Even for a million dollars," she said, "I wouldn't go in there to see you make a fool of yourself. I knew you shouldn't have had those highballs and the after-dinner drink. Liquor always did go straight to your brain, but you were never *this* addled before."

"All right, wait here. In fact, that's better. If a policeman asks you to move, tell him where I am, and why."

"I'll do no such thing. He'd just lock you up with the other drunks."

He left Rose fuming, crossed the street and walked into a waiting room in which about a dozen people were lounging.

Behind the cashier's cage, a heavysset, dark-haired young woman with thick, horn-rimmed glasses watched his approach with disinterest.

"Excuse me," he said. "I have a complaint."

"What about?"

"I picked up a car here a few minutes ago, but the hiker gave me the wrong one."

The cashier blinked. Several bystanders turned to stare.

"The wrong one?" the cashier asked. "I don't get it. If the hiker

brought the wrong car, why'd you drive it away?"

"Because it *looked* like my car. It even had my license plates, and my things in the glove compartment. But it *isn't* my car."

"That's the nuttiest thing I ever—"

"This is *not* a joke." Conversation in the room fell away. "I'm a responsible citizen, the cashier of a prominent neighborhood bank. Here . . ." He handed her his business card.

"Where is the car we gave you?" she asked.

"Across the street. My wife's in it, waiting for me."

As they talked, several people walked into the waiting room and got in line behind Herb.

"I've heard of a lot of strange things happening in garages like this," he went on, "tires switched, even engines. But this is the first time I've ever heard of a whole car being switched."

Her eyes narrowing behind her thick glasses, the young woman studied him for a moment. Was it his imagination, or did she suddenly seem apprehensive about something?

She came to a decision and said, "All right, mister. There's nothing I can do, but I'll call Mr. Bland."

"Who's he?"

"The owner. He runs several businesses in this part of town, and he'll probably be in his office now."

She turned her back to him, picked up a phone and dialed. He couldn't hear what she said. Behind him, the people in the line were stirring impatiently.

The cashier looked up and said, "Mr. Bland asked if you could discuss this at his office. It's in a restaurant he owns near here, and—"

"I'm not going anywhere," Herb replied stubbornly. It had occurred to him that his one big advantage was the crowd in the waiting room. The more people who heard him voice his bizarre complaint, the sooner something would be done.

The cashier exchanged more words with Bland and then announced, "Sir, he'll be here in five minutes. So please step aside, so I can take care of these other people."

Herb settled on a bench. Five minutes, the cashier had said—but ten, fifteen, twenty minutes passed, and still no Mr. Bland. Meanwhile, when not taking care of her customers, the bespectacled girl in the cashier's cage seemed unusually busy on her phone.

Finally, nearly half an hour after the girl's call, a big late-model car stopped in the IN ramp and a

tall, well-built man in his forties stepped out. He wore a navy-blue blazer and flared, maroon trousers, and his black hair was elegantly coiffured.

He walked into the waiting room and glanced at the cashier, who nodded at Herb.

"I'm Phil Bland," the man greeted Herb smoothly. "You sure we can't handle this in my office? We'd be a lot more comfortable."

"No," Herb said. "I'd rather talk here."

"Sure." Bland smiled and offered his hand. "Mind telling me who *you* are?"

Taken aback by Bland's cordial approach, Herb shook his hand and stammered an introduction.

"Okay, Herb," Bland went on. "I try to run a legitimate operation, but I'll admit, sometimes things happen upstairs that I don't know about. What's the trouble?"

Herb repeated his story. Again, the waiting room fell silent.

"I see," Bland drawled. "It looked like your car, but it wasn't. I'm not doubting your word, but how could you be so sure?"

"I've *told* you," Herb said. "It didn't handle right. The response, the ride, the brakes, a lot of other things . . ."

"You determined this in just a few blocks?"

"Yes. But the most important

things were the scratch on the trunk and the dent in the fender."

"Dents and scratches?" Bland gazed around the room with a tolerant, we're-in-this-together look. "Usually, people file those claims with our insurance company. But this story about switching a whole car is so good that in your case I'll make an exception. How much you want for those dents?"

"Dammit," Herb replied angrily, "I'm not trying to cheat you. I came back because the car I drove away is *not the car I left.*"

Bland's expression turned somber. "You're not kidding, are you? Okay, I'll try to be reasonable, but just exactly what *do* you want us to do? Assuming that what you say happened really happened?"

A good question. Herb suddenly realized that he didn't know exactly what Bland or anyone else at the garage could do at this hour, and that his coming back so soon might have been an impetuous mistake—but he'd gone this far, so he persisted.

"At the very least," he said, "I want someone to explain to my satisfaction what's going on. Either that, or I'm going up into your garage to look for my *real* car."

"For your own protection," Bland replied, "I can't let you do

that. This is the busiest time of night. The hikers know what they're doing on those ramps, but an outsider wandering around would be almost sure to get hit by a car."

"All right, if you won't let me go up, maybe you'll let the police go."

"Sure," Bland said. "But first, just where is this wrong car you say we gave you?"

"As I told your cashier, it's across the street. My wife's in it, and—"

"I'd like to look it over."

Herb and Bland went outside. A few curious people from the waiting room trailed after them.

The no-parking zone across the street, where Herb had left the car and his wife, was now empty.

Unbelieving, Herb stared at the spot. "I don't understand," he said slowly.

"Your wife drive?"

"Yes. But usually no farther than to the commuter station. She'd never drive in *this* traffic."

"She *could* drive, though. She have ignition keys?"

"In her purse. But—"

"If *her* key worked in the car, then it had to be *your* car, didn't it? How long would it take her to drive from here to your home?"

"Twenty, twenty-five minutes."

"And how long ago was it that

you left her sitting in the car?"

Herb glanced at his watch. "Nearly forty minutes."

"It ever occur to you she'd get tired of waiting? Maybe in a few minutes you should call home to see if she got there safely."

Bland took Herb's arm and led him back to the waiting room. Vaguely, Herb noted that there seemed to be a lot more people lounging around now than there had been earlier.

"Folks," Bland announced, "it seems the mystery car is gone. Herb's wife started it with her own ignition key and drove it away."

"No," Herb said, trying to collect his thoughts. "She wouldn't have done that. Not tonight."

"There was something special about tonight?"

"It's our wedding anniversary."

"What'd you do?"

"Had dinner. And then—"

"Any drinks with dinner?"

"Two highballs, but—"

"You always have two highballs before dinner?"

"Certainly *not*. We went to a show and—well, we stopped in a bar for an after-dinner drink. Just one, though."

"I see. Ordinarily, you never drink. But tonight—"

In the cashier's cage, the phone rang. The bespectacled young

woman picked it up, listened a moment and said, "It's for Mr. Crain. A woman. She says she's his wife."

As the girl shoved the receiver into Herb's hands, all eyes were on him.

"Herb?" Without a doubt, it was Rose's voice. "I'm home," she went on. "I want you to come home too."

"Rose? But why didn't you—"

"Just take a cab. Come home as soon as you can. I don't want to talk about it anymore." She hung up.

Stunned, Herb gazed at the receiver. Could he have been wrong all along? Could those few drinks have so altered his judgment? He'd been so positive it was the wrong car before, but now . . .

Bland asked, "What'd she say, Herb?"

"She drove home. She wants me to go home too."

"Sure. The 34th anniversary, the big dinner, the highballs, the show, the after-dinner drink . . ." He winked broadly at the people in the waiting room. "One, you said. But maybe there were more than one."

"Now, look—" Herb began angrily.

"All right, all right." Bland exuded good-natured tolerance. "We'll call a cab for you. We'll

even pay your fare. Then, in the morning, you take another look at that car. If you think it was damaged in here, we'll make an adjustment. Fair enough?"

Suddenly Herb knew what he had to do. Bland himself had provided the answer. He took a deep breath, straightened his bow tie and tugged at his sleeves, gathering himself for the effort he would have to make.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Maybe I *did* have more to drink than I should. I won't be any more trouble, and thanks for the offer, but there's a cabstand down the block. I'll grab one there. All I can say is—I really *did* think it was the wrong car."

As Herb walked out of the waiting room, a car stopped in the IN ramp. A couple stepped out, their backs to Herb. The car's door hung open and the motor was running.

Quickly, Herb slipped behind the wheel of the waiting car, closed the door and stomped hard on the accelerator. The car shot forward.

Behind him, an outcry arose from the waiting room and some men spilled out after him, but Herb ignored them. His heart pounding at an alarming rate, he steered the speeding vehicle up the ramp toward the second level.

There, a blind corner was marked with a confusing array of arrows and directions. Herb had no time in which to try to comprehend them. His choice was simple—either turn right or left—and he decided to turn left.

That was a mistake. He completed the turn to find himself going the wrong way down a long aisle of angle-parked cars, with another speeding car headed straight for him.

He braked hard. So did the hiker driving the other car. They stopped short of a head-on collision by inches, but in the process Herb's vehicle swerved and banged broadside into some of the parked cars.

As the hiker gazed in astonishment, Herb got out. Still dizzy from the impact, he looked around.

Yes, there it was, tucked in a corner about thirty yards from him—his car, the real one, with its front end bashed in and the windshield a jagged, shattered mess.

Beyond it, moving away from a wall telephone, were two men in business suits, dragging Rose between them.

Herb called out. They turned.

Rose was gagged, and there was a bruise on her forehead.

He edged around the hiker's car, shouted, and ran toward

them, but one of the men pulled a pistol from his belt and aimed. Herb stopped and opened his mouth to shout again, but the gun discharged and all went black . . .

A woman asked, "How do you feel?"

He opened his eyes. He was lying on a hospital bed.

Gazing down at him from behind her thick horn-rimmed glasses was the cashier from the parking garage.

"Terrible," he told her.

"The bullet creased your skull, but the medics say you'll be okay. Your wife's all right too. You'll see her soon, but first, I'd better introduce myself." She showed him a badge.

"I'm detective second-class Sue Marino," she went on. "And on the department's behalf, I want to thank you for being alert enough to notice that the car wasn't yours, and then to drive back to complain. If you hadn't, Bland's gang might have gotten away with it."

"Away?" Herb asked. "With what?"

"The murder of the hiker who took your car upstairs when you left it earlier in the evening. That hiker and I were both undercover police agents. His name was Gowan, and he'd infiltrated Bland's

gang. The garage was a transfer point for big narcotics shipments. The stuff would be hidden in cars driven by couriers. All the hikers were in on it. Before the blowup last night, the department was primed to mop up the whole operation when the next big shipment came in."

"And last night?"

"A new gang member recognized Gowan. Two executioners were waiting when he drove your car upstairs. He spotted them and tried to drive away. They blew his head off with shotguns. Your car's windows were shattered, the inside was splattered with blood and the front was bashed in when it hit a wall—hardly a condition in which they could return the car to its owner."

"Why didn't they just tell me my car had been stolen?"

"That would have brought police into the garage. The gang needed time to clean up the mess upstairs and dispose of your car and Gowan's body, so they used their underworld contacts to order the theft of a car just like yours. In this city, that didn't take long. They hoped that in the dark, you wouldn't notice the difference. They planned to follow you and steal the car later, so you'd never know what happened. You'd merely report a car theft from

your residence, rather than from a public garage where a police undercover agent had disappeared."

"I see. So when I came back with the car, they decided to kill me, and Rose too."

"Yes. At all costs, they wanted to keep you from going to the police last night. They abducted your wife and then tried to lure you away with her phone call. But I was already worried about Gowan. Ordinarily, I'd see him often from my cashier's cage, but he'd dropped out of sight for hours. So when you showed up with your kinky story and Bland agreed to come to the garage to see you, I was pretty sure it had something to do with Gowan's disappearance. Ordinarily, Bland ignored all customer complaints."

"The phone calls you made while I was waiting for Bland—were they to the police?"

"That's right. We packed the waiting room with plainclothesmen. But we still didn't know what had happened to Gowan or how to play the situation, so we couldn't have been happier when

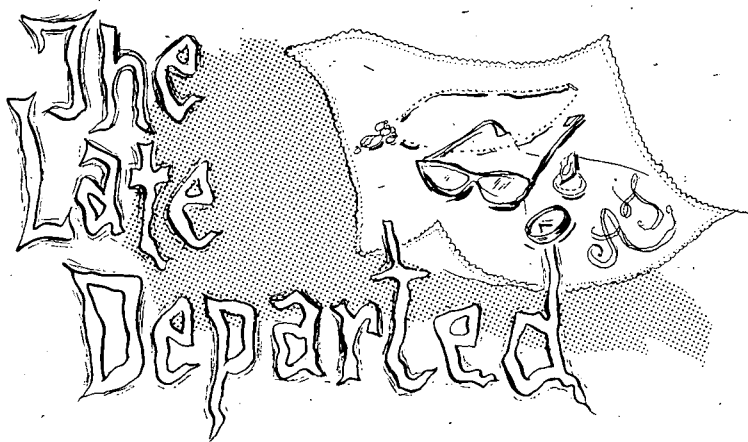
you jumped into the car and drove up the ramp. That broke it wide open. Our men went in after you, rescued your wife and rounded up the whole gang. Enough of them are talking to insure convictions."

She paused. "Just one thing. After your wife phoned, why didn't you take a cab home as she suggested? She told us they were holding a gun at her head during the call, and all she could do was say a few words. She had no way to warn you it was a trap."

"Frankly," Herb said, "that's why I was afraid something had happened to her." He smiled. "If she'd *really* driven home alone, she would have said a lot more than just a few words. But what finally made me decide to steal a car and drive upstairs was something Bland said. He knew it was our 34th anniversary, but I hadn't told him. Obviously, he or someone working for him had just learned that from Rose, which meant he was involved up to his neck in whatever was going on in that garage."



Burying the past may turn out to be as simple as planning for the future.



Angela Talbot looked up from the evening paper as she heard her husband parking on the street, below the drawing room windows. She would recognize the sound of his car anywhere.

Smiling in anticipation, she gazed at the yellow roses in a crystal bowl on the Chippendale table until the front door opened and closed. She waited until Oliver left his hat and topcoat on the hall sofa, as usual, before she put the newspaper aside and removed her spectacles.

"Angela?"

"In the drawing room, dear." She faced the partially closed door as it swung open and he hurried in, still handsome, after all these years, as lean as he had been at thirty, no gray in his hair yet . . .

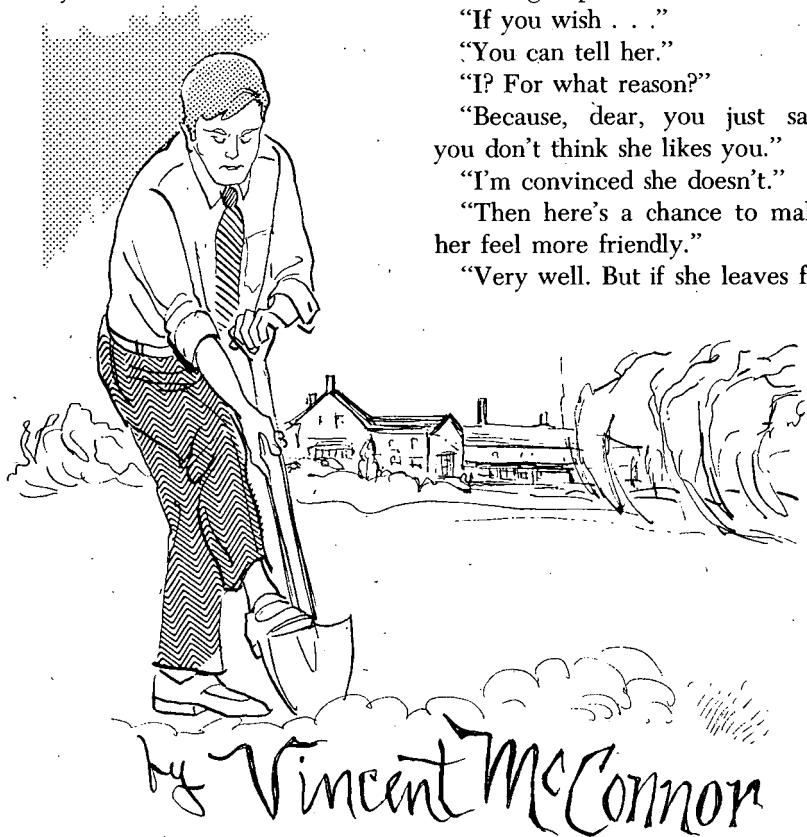
"Sorry I'm late. Detained at the office again."

"You know how Cora hates to wait dinner."

"I know." He went straight to the bar. "Care for a drink?"

"Don't think so, dear. Thank you." She watched him select a bottle and pour his usual large

whisky, adding a splash of soda from a siphon. "Cora's feeling rather miserable, I'm afraid. Been moping about the house all day." She hesitated as he crossed the elegant drawing room to sit on the other sofa, facing her, at an angle to the marble fireplace. The glow from the logs on the hearth reddened one side of his face as he took a large swallow of whisky.



"Cora doesn't seem happy here, does she?"

"Not happy?"

"Matter of fact, I think it's my fault. I've suspected for some time that Cora doesn't like me."

"Nonsense. She's moping because there's illness in her family. Letter arrived in the morning post. It's her father again. Why don't we give her the weekend, so she can go up to Sheffield?"

"If you wish . . ."

"You can tell her."

"I? For what reason?"

"Because, dear, you just said you don't think she likes you."

"I'm convinced she doesn't."

"Then here's a chance to make her feel more friendly."

"Very well. But if she leaves for

the weekend, won't it make things difficult for you? Cooking and all that?"

"I don't mind. Perhaps tomorrow night we could dine out. Been months since we've done that."

"Tomorrow night?" Oliver frowned, staring at his drink. "I may be delayed again in getting away from the office."

"On Saturday?"

"Chap dropping by around five-thirty to discuss our handling several properties in Sussex. Could drag on for a bit."

"Then we'll have a late dinner. I was just reading the evening paper. That actress, Marilyn Monroe, died in Hollywood. Sleeping pills. The police don't seem to know whether it was an accident or suicide."

"Excuse me, Mum . . ."

Angela looked toward the doorway. "Yes, Cora?"

"Dinner's served."

"Thank you." She glanced at her husband. "Oliver?"

"Oh, yes!" He faced the plump figure in the neat apron and uniform. "Cora . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

"Mrs. Talbot told me about your father. How would you like to go up to Sheffield this weekend?"

"I would indeed, sir!"

"You could leave London tonight and return Monday morning."

"Well, sir, I . . ." She turned to Angela. "Would that be all right with you, Mum?"

"Certainly, Cora. If Mr. Talbot wishes you to go off for the weekend I can do nothing but approve."

Oliver finished his drink and set the glass down. "I'll give you a little present, Cora, before you leave. Help pay for your trip."

The housekeeper beamed. "That's ever so kind, sir, I must say."

"Not at all."

"We'll come straight in to dinner." Angela waited until Cora left the room before turning to her husband. "You see! She was delighted. She even smiled at you!"

"I think I prefer it when she frowns. Now, about tomorrow night, I'll do the best I can—try to get home before seven."

"Please don't disappoint me, dear. Been so long since we've dined out together."

Oliver kept watching the ancient clock hanging on the wall of the pub. Six-forty, and he had promised Angela he would be home before seven! He realized that his attention had wandered

from Millicent who, as usual, was chattering. "What did you say, love?" He leaned closer, across the banquette, aware of the delicious scent coming from her blonde hair.

"Really, Oliver! You don't listen to me. I said that I don't know how long I can go on like this."

"Go on like what?" He drank the last of his whisky.

"Seeing you only for a few minutes in some Pimlico pub."

"But this is the only sort of place we're safe. No one I know would ever come here."

"Why can't we spend the evening together? Ring your wife and tell her you have to take a client out for dinner."

"Sorry. Angela has something planned for this evening. Promised I'd be home by seven."

"You're always hurrying home to her." She watched him reach into a pocket and bring out an oblong jeweler's case. "Whatever do you have there?"

"For you." He held it out, across the table.

"Another present?" She set her drink down and snatched the small velvet case from his fingers. "You are a dear!" Her eyes glittered greedily as she snapped it open. "A bracelet? The very kind I wanted! You didn't forget! I could kiss you."

"Not here!" He was aware of a barmaid passing their table with a tray of drinks, watching Millicent lift the bracelet from its case.

"You've even had my initials engraved inside!"

"Do you like it?"

"Adore it!" She clasped the bracelet around her wrist. "Only, all the same, I don't know how long I can go on like this—meeting in out-of-the-way pubs."

"Give me a chance. I'll puzzle out something."

"You've been saying that for more than two years."

"I mean it this time. I'm really going to do something—maybe sooner than you think."

"Oh?" Millicent looked up from the bracelet to study his face.

"We'll be alone in the house this weekend, Angela and I."

"Thought you had a housekeeper."

"She's gone to visit her family. Left last night."

Millicent frowned. "You wouldn't do anything to harm your wife?"

"Harm Angela? What the devil do you mean by that?"

"There was something odd about your voice just now, when you said you'd be alone with her."

"Nonsense! You're imagining things."

"I certainly hope so. I'd want

no part of anything like that."

"Part of what?"

"You know what I mean." She hesitated before she spoke the unpleasant word. "Murder."

"Who said anything about murder?" He stopped as he realized that his voice was too loud.

Millicent touched his arm. "No need to make a scene."

"I'm sorry." He patted her hand. "Trust me, love. Things will be all right, I promise you. Now, I really must get on home."

"Tomorrow's Sunday. Suppose I won't see you again this weekend?"

"I won't be free before the first of the week." He glanced at the clock again. Five minutes to seven. He would just make it . . .

Oliver parked his car in front of the handsome old house on Marsham Street and went up the marble steps to the entrance door. He checked his watch: ten past seven. Angela couldn't complain tonight.

He slipped his key into the lock and swung the door open.

The entrance hall was dark.

Oliver snapped the wall switch, next to the door, and lamps came alive on an antique console table and on a chest in the curve of the staircase. "Angela? Are you there?" He dropped his hat and

topcoat on the sofa, crossed the white and black tiled entrance hall and flung open the double doors on opposite sides, into library and drawing room. Both were dark and unoccupied.

He hurried upstairs and went from room to room. All were dark.

Downstairs again, in the drawing room, he poured himself a large whisky. Nothing in any of the rooms had been out of place. Everything seemed in order, but where was his wife?

If Angela had to go out unexpectedly, why hadn't she left him a note? Where the devil could she be?

Oliver was waiting in the drawing room late Monday morning when a taxi stopped in front of the house. He hurried to the tall windows and, unobserved, watched Cora pay the driver and carry her small bag down the areaway steps to the service entrance. He paced nervously until he heard her coming up from the basement. "Cora? I'm in the drawing room."

She appeared in the open doorway, still wearing her coat and hat. "Didn't expect to find you home at this hour, sir."

"Did Mrs. Talbot say anything about going away for the week-

end, or mention other plans?"

"Not as I recall . . ."

"Did she appear to be worried Friday, before you left? Seem ill? Anything like that?"

"No, sir. She seemed like always." Cora peered around the room suspiciously. "Where is Mrs. Talbot?"

"That's precisely what I'm trying to find out. I've not seen her since I left for my office Saturday morning."

"You haven't, sir?"

"There was no sign of her when I got home Saturday evening."

"There wasn't?" She backed away from him, toward the door, her eyes wide with growing suspicion.

"This house was completely dark. Every room." He followed her into the hall. "Not a light anywhere. Upstairs or down."

"I thought it was strange—" Cora's voice seemed to strangle in her throat. "You tellin' me I could have the weekend off."

"Oh, yes! How is your father?"

"Thought it odd when you paid for my train ticket. You never did nothin' like that before!"

"What are you getting at?"

"You've done somethin' to Mrs. Talbot!" She turned and ran. "That's why you wanted me out of the house!"

"Cora! Come back! Cora . . ."

Her feet were pounding down the basement stairs. Oliver hurried back into the drawing room, snatched up the phone, dialed, and waited impatiently as he heard the bell ringing at the other end of the line.

"Millicent here."

From the sound of her voice he knew she had been asleep. "It's Oliver."

"This is a surprise. You never call at this hour."

"Listen carefully! Angela's disappeared."

"What?"

"She was gone Saturday evening, when I came home. Didn't leave a note or anything . . ."

"Perhaps she's visiting somewhere. Doesn't she have a family?"

"One brother, in Birmingham, but I don't want to call him."

"Your housekeeper may know something when she gets back."

"She is back and she doesn't know a damn thing."

"Maybe Angela's with friends."

"She doesn't have any friends!"

"What're you going to do?"

"Ring up Scotland Yard, of course."

"Oh, no!"

"I've got to report this. Already waited a day and a half."

"I do hope you won't involve me in any way."

"How could this involve you?"

"If you call the Yard they're certain to ask questions."

"But there's nothing else I can do! I've got to find out what's happened to my wife."

"Yes, Oliver, I understand." She hesitated. "When will I hear from you?"

"I'll ring back when I can. From a public phone. And *don't* ring me here."

"I've never called you there."

"I love you, Millicent. Everything's going to work out."

"Certainly hope so. 'Bye, darling."

The connection went dead and he set the phone down.

Suddenly, the drawing room seemed dark and unfamiliar in the gray morning light. No sunlight came through the tall windows. He noticed that the roses in the crystal bowl had withered. Petals were scattered across the table.

Oliver forced himself to pick up the phone again and dial for the operator. When an impersonal female voice answered he tried to keep his own voice calm. "Would you connect me with Scotland Yard . . ."

" . . . and you've no idea where your sister might have gone?"

Oliver, on the other side of the drawing room, studied the tall

man in the gray suit who was speaking quietly into the phone.

"No other relatives? I wonder, Mr. Brandon, could I trouble you to come down to London within the next few days? Would be extremely useful to have you on the scene . . . Tomorrow? Excellent . . . Yes, sir. My name is Trewe. Detective Inspector Trewe . . . Right you are!" He set the phone down and faced Oliver Talbot.

"What did he say?" Oliver asked.

"Mr. Brandon hasn't seen your wife—his sister—in two years. He has no idea where she might have gone."

"Hardly thought he would. As I told you—"

"You and your brother-in-law, I gather, are not on friendly terms."

"That's rather an understatement."

"He wanted to know if you had quarreled with his sister."

"He would!"

"Had you, Mr. Talbot?"

"Certainly not!"

"Seems recently he had letters from your wife saying that you quarreled constantly."

"That's a lie! What the devil are you getting at? All these questions?"

"I'm trying to locate your wife, Mr. Talbot. You say you last saw her Saturday morning at breakfast.

What was her mood? Anything unusual about your final conversation? Any words about burned toast, for instance?"

"The toast was excellent. There were no words about anything."

"I see . . ." Trewé looked toward the open doors to the entrance hall. "Yes?"

Oliver turned to see the young detective who had arrived with the inspector.

"Believe I've found something, sir, in the back garden."

"In the garden?" Oliver moved closer as the detective approached his superior. "What is it? What've you found?"

"There was a spot of earth," the detective explained to Trewé. "Looked as though it had been turned over recently. I dug into it and found these." He held out a folded handkerchief, smudged with dirt.

The inspector took it and carefully opened each fold of the small handkerchief. "Woman's handkerchief. Expensive . . ." He checked the initials embroidered in a corner. "What did you say your wife's first name is, Mr. Talbot?"

"Angela . . ." He realized the young detective was watching him.

"These must be her initials—A. T.—Angela Talbot."

Oliver moved closer until he could see the collection of objects nesting in the handkerchief. "That's her wedding ring!"

"What about the rest of these?" The inspector poked at the jewelry and the spectacles with the tip of his forefinger.

"They all belong to my wife. Those are her glasses."

Trewé folded the handkerchief neatly and handed it back to his assistant. "Better have the rest of that garden dug up."

"Yes, sir." The young detective hurried away through the hall.

Oliver waited, uncertain what to say.

"Mr. Talbot . . ." The inspector's voice was low. "I must take you over to the Yard for some further questions."

"You think I killed my wife, don't you?"

"Let's say that Mrs. Talbot seems to have disappeared under rather curious circumstances. Suppose we let it go at that, for the moment."

Oliver's eyes darted from Madden, his solicitor, seated across the table in the bare visitors' room, to the bars on the high window and then back to Madden again. "But where could she have gone? You can't disappear in London without leaving some trace!"

"People do, Mr. Talbot. Every day."

"Not Angela!"

"The police are trying to prove that you murdered your wife and disposed of the body."

"I know they are." He looked away from the inquisitive eyes, watched a flight of pigeons wheeling against the blue sky.

"Your wife has been missing for three weeks now. I beg you, Mr. Talbot, tell me the truth."

Oliver turned to face him again. "I've told you the truth."

"The whole truth? I've agreed to defend you, but I must have the facts. All the facts."

"I've told you everything I know. You don't believe me, do you?"

"Mr. Talbot, whether I believe you or not is unimportant. But I hope, for your sake, that you are telling me the truth. When you come to trial that is the only thing that can save you. The truth alone . . ."

" . . . and I found Mr. Talbot waitin' when I got back from visitin' my family in Sheffield . . ."

Oliver wondered if that was a new hat Cora was wearing in the witness-box. She looked quite presentable for a change.

"Who told you that you might have the weekend free?" the pros-

ecutor asked. "Was it Mr. or Mrs. Talbot?"

"It was him, sir. I remember 'cause I asked the missus if it would be all right with her."

"Oh? And what did she say?"

"I remember every word! 'If Mr. Talbot wants you to go off for the weekend I can do nothin' but approve.' Like he was forcin' her to let me go. I thought it was peculiar. Most peculiar. 'Specially when he gave me the train fare. Mr. Talbot was never one to throw money around. But then, I guess, 'twasn't his money to throw about . . ."

" . . . my sister had an income from our father's estate. She was financially independent before she married Talbot!"

Oliver knew what Brandon would say next.

"In fact, I can tell you she gave him the money to start his real estate business in London. My sister did not need Oliver Talbot, but he most certainly needed her!"

"You did not approve of your sister's marriage?"

"I warned her before the marriage that Oliver Talbot was after her money. The marriage was not a happy one. They quarreled constantly. All her letters complained about his temper . . ."

Oliver's attention wandered as

Brandon talked. It wasn't possible that the jury would think he had killed Angela. Nobody could believe that . . .

" . . . and Mr. Talbot purchased all this jewelry from my shop. First quality! Mr. Talbot's been a customer for many years."

Oliver stared at the pompous little man in the witness-box, the handkerchief in his plump hand holding the collection of objects from the garden.

"This is Mrs. Talbot's wedding ring. And all these other pieces were bought from me over the years. Mr. Talbot's one of my best customers. In fact, just recently I sold him a lady's bracelet."

Oliver straightened in the uncomfortable chair, beside his solicitor, knowing what was coming.

The prosecutor's question came like a shot. "Did Mr. Talbot mention whether or not this bracelet was for his wife?"

"Not exactly, sir. But he had two initials engraved inside and they were not Mrs. Talbot's."

"What were those initials?"

"They were *M. S.*, engraved in our most elegant script . . ."

"Those are my initials—*M. S.*—for Millicent Sutton."

"When did Oliver Talbot give you this bracelet?" The prosecutor

held it up, dangling it in front of her face.

Oliver waited for Millicent's answer. She looked a bit cheap in the witness-box: very different by daylight—blonde hair too obviously dyed, hat and coat a bit vulgar.

"We were having a drink in a pub. The same evening Mrs. Talbot disappeared."

"Tell me, Miss Sutton, how long have you known Mr. Talbot?"

"Two or three years, I should think."

"And was this the first present he gave you?"

"Well, no . . ."

Oliver looked away as the questioning continued—only there was nowhere else he could look; not a friendly face . . .

The next witness was unfamiliar but, as the prosecutor questioned her, Oliver realized that she was a barmaid from that Pimlico pub.

" . . . an' I 'eard them both say the word 'murder' when I went past their table."

"Think carefully! What were the precise words you overheard?"

"Well, sir, I 'eard the lady say, 'You know wot I mean. Murder.' Then Mr. Talbot said, 'Who said anything about murder?' I remembered wot they 'ad said when I saw in the newspaper that Mrs.

Talbot 'ad disappeared. That's when I went to the police."

Millicent was called back to the witness stand after that and questioned about the conversation . . .

The guard led Oliver through the damp corridors to one of the small visitors' rooms. When the door was opened he saw that his solicitor was waiting. "Madden! Thought I wouldn't see you until court tomorrow." He heard the door close behind him. "You have some news, I hope! Good news?"

"Sit down, Talbot." Madden motioned to a wooden chair.

"What is it?" He sank onto the chair. "What's happened? Have they found my wife?"

Madden remained standing, his back to the high window. "I've come to implore you, Talbot—beg you—to have confidence in me."

"But I do!"

"Then, once and for all, you've got to tell me the truth."

"I've told you everything I know."

"You never told me that you have a small villa near Brighton."

"That's right. On the shore, between Brighton and Hove. My wife bought it years ago. Why?"

"When were you there last?"

"Not in six months. Angela and I drove down one weekend with some furniture we wanted to get

out of the house in town and—"

"Have you been there since?"

"No."

"Did you go there at any time during the weekend your wife disappeared?"

"I've told you I never left the house on Marsham Street."

"Unfortunately you have no proof of that. No witness . . ."

Oliver got to his feet. "What are you getting at? What's the villa have to do with Angela's disappearance?"

"A woman's body has been found in the water. Caught between some rocks, near this villa of yours. The face is battered beyond recognition."

"It couldn't be Angela! They'd be able to tell from her clothes."

"There were no clothes."

"What?"

"The laboratory says the body was in the water from about the time your wife disappeared, give or take a few days. The color of the hair is the same as your wife's. Brown . . ."

"It can't be Angela!"

"The body has been identified as that of your wife."

"Identified? By whom?"

"Your brother-in-law, Brandon."

"I can't believe it!"

"The laboratory says that she was dead before her body was placed in the water. Murdered."

Oliver collapsed into the chair.
"Mr. Talbot, you have no family?"

"No."

"No close friends?"

"Since my marriage I've lost track of my old friends. Angela didn't like them."

"Pity. This is a time when a man needs someone. Family or friends."

"You believe I'm guilty, don't you?"

"What I believe is unimportant."

"I swear I've told you the truth from the beginning. But everything I say is twisted and turned against me. I did not kill my wife. If she's dead, somebody else killed her—not I! I'm innocent. I swear to you before God, I am innocent!"

Oliver Talbot stood in the dock, clutching the wooden railing with both hands, facing the lord chief justice in his elaborate robes and ridiculous wig.

"Oliver Talbot, the jury has found you guilty of the crime of murder." The ancient, blue-veined fingers trembled as they placed a small black cap on top of the white wig. "... my solemn duty to pass sentence upon you." He cleared his throat. "It is the sentence of the court, Oliver Talbot,

that you be taken to the place from which you came, and that you be confined there until the twelfth day of October and that you then be taken to the place of execution and hanged by the neck until you are dead . . ."

Madden did not look up from the document he was reading when someone knocked on his office door. "Yes?" He heard the door open but finished another paragraph before raising his eyes to see one of his clerks in the doorway. "I told you, Simpson, I do not wish to be disturbed this morning."

"But, sir! She's here!"

"Who is here?"

"The late departed! And she's demanding to see you."

"Demanding? Who the devil are you talking about?"

"Mrs. Oliver Talbot."

"Mrs. Oliver—" He let the document slip from his fingers onto the desk. "That's impossible! Show her in—whoever she is."

"Yes, sir." Simpson turned and darted through the long book-lined corridor toward the front of the suite.

Madden waited, impatiently, his eyes on the open door. The woman who followed Simpson down the corridor was dressed in a severely tailored suit and simple

unadorned hat. He got to his feet.

"In here, please." Simpson bowed her through the door.

Madden saw, as she moved into the light, that her hair was black and she was wearing spectacles.

The woman hesitated inside the door. "Mr. Madden?"

"Yes."

"I am Angela Talbot. Mrs. Oliver Talbot."

"Mrs. Talbot is dead."

"Naturally you will want identification." She came forward, opening her handbag.

He saw that his clerk was waiting, eager to hear what would happen. "That will be all, Simpson."

"Very good, sir." He withdrew reluctantly, closing the door.

"Please sit down, Mrs.—uh—Talbot."

"Thank you." She held out several papers in her gloved hand before sinking into the big leather chair.

Madden sat down and glanced through the papers. "These appear to be in order." He handed them back to her, across the desk. "Why have you come to me?"

"You defended my husband."

"Mrs. Talbot, this is a return from the dead. Where have you been?"

"It seems that I have been living in Eastbourne."

"All these months, you mean?"

"So I'm told. Apparently I suffered a complete loss of memory until last week when I read in the newspaper that Oliver had been hanged. Then it all came flooding back."

"If you had returned ten days ago you could have saved him!"

"It was only when I saw my photograph in the paper that I remembered who I was! Our wedding photograph. . . . For nearly a year I have not known my true name. I had no papers—nothing to give a hint of my true identity. I got these papers today, from the house on Marsham Street. There were keys in my purse but, until last week, I had no idea what they were for."

"Why didn't you come forward last week?"

"I thought it wise to wait until I had recovered from the shock of reading about my dear husband's death. At first I had no idea where to go, or whom I might ask for help. Then I decided last night to come to you. I want you to act as my solicitor to help me convince everyone that I am telling the truth."

"Are you telling the truth, Mrs. Talbot?"

"I had absolutely nothing to do with my husband's punishment. Now did I? He was tried and con-

victed. And hanged, wasn't he?"

"What about your wedding ring? Your spectacles and jewelry? Buried in the garden on Marsham Street . . ."

"I must have done that when I lost my memory. All a part of burying my past, I suppose." She smiled for the first time. "I suppose I shall have to be questioned, and examined by psychiatrists. But I assure you my story will be quite clear."

"I can't believe this!"

"You must believe me! Oliver was convicted by two things about which I couldn't possibly have known. That body they found near our villa. Poor woman! I wonder who she was. That's such a dangerous stretch of beach. So many drownings. I'm sure someone will come forward to identify her . . . And that other woman! What's her name? Millicent—Millicent Sutton! I never suspected that Oliver had a mistress!"

"Why did no one recognize you all these months?"

"It seems my hair was dyed. You see, I became quite another person. Even used a different name. You can check the hotel in

Eastbourne . . ." She got to her feet. "Well, Mr. Madden? What do we do now?"

He rose slowly. "I shall have to report to the authorities that you are alive."

"What can they do to me?"

"Very little, I should think."

"You can reach me at the house on Marsham Street."

"You're going to live there?"

He watched her go toward the door.

"Why not? My housekeeper, Cora, is coming back with me." She turned to look at him, one gloved hand on the doorknob. "I suppose I may eventually sell the house—and the villa near Brighton. Too many unpleasant memories . . ."

"Mrs. Talbot, why did you do this terrible thing?"

"I've no idea what you're talking about."

"As you wish . . ."

"Good morning, Mr. Madden." She opened the door.

"Good morning." He watched her go through the dim corridor, walking erect, as though she had just accomplished something very important; finished with it forever—a man's life . . .

Amazing it is, indeed, what a prescience of danger will reveal.



The telephone on his desk jangled insistently several times before Brad Randall could make his way back from the coffee urn in the far corner of the Flight Operations office. Careful not to spill any of its steaming contents, he set the brimming plastic cup down before easing his lanky frame into his chair. Then he jabbed the small button that blinked at the base of the phone and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

"Flight Ops, Randall here," he said easily.

"Pacific-Orient Airlines?" a man's voice asked, "Flight Operations office?" The voice sounded distant, indistinct.

"That's right," Randall replied. "Help you, sir?"

"I have some information I think you'll be interested in," the voice said; it sounded muffled, perhaps intentionally being disguised by its owner.

"Who is this, please?" Randall asked, suddenly alert.

"Who I am is unimportant," the man replied. "Do you want the information I have to offer, or not?"

Randall quickly covered the phone's mouthpiece and called urgently to another man seated at a desk nearby. "Jack! Get a tracer going on this call—line 2." He removed his hand from the mouthpiece, hurriedly flipped a switch on the tape recorder connected to

by R. Traynor Smith

the incoming phone lines, and spoke once more to the strange voice at the other end.

"Uh . . . I'm afraid I don't understand, sir," he said. "Just what sort of information do you have for us?"

"It concerns your Flight 51 from L.A. to Honolulu."

"Go ahead, I'm listening," Randall frowned. Flight 51 had taken off almost two hours ago, would be nearly halfway to Hawaii by now.

"It is too bad," the voice said unhurriedly, "*but Flight 51 will never reach Honolulu!*"

"Look, mister, if this is your idea of a joke, it's not a damn bit funny!" Randall said. He made no attempt to hide the anger that had suddenly welled up inside him.

"I can assure you it's no joke," the man replied. "You might say I'm being *deadly serious*."

"Who is this? *Who's calling?*" Randall demanded.

"I repeat, that is unimportant. What is important is that your Flight 51, 'The Mai-Tai Flight' as you like to advertise it, is due to disintegrate over the middle of the Pacific at 4:30 p.m. local time. Isn't that interesting?"

Randall glanced quickly at the big electric wall-clock. It showed the time to be 4:03 p.m. The muf-

fled voice had sounded confident, assured. Randall felt a shiver run through his body.

"Are you telling me there's a bomb aboard 51?"

"That is exactly what I am telling you," the man said.

"Okay, fella, what's the pitch? How much do you want for telling us where to find it before it explodes?"

Randall knew he had to play along, although now he was reasonably hopeful the threat was phony; the man had not allowed nearly enough time for a ransom to be collected and paid. He glanced at Jack Harris and received a nod and a wink to indicate the call was being traced.

"You misunderstand," the man was saying. "Money is not the object of the game. It is something much more important."

"So what is so important to you that you'd blow up a whole plane full of people?" Randall asked angrily.

"To rid myself forever of a detestable member of the so-called opposite sex! That is most important to me!"

"Good heavens, man!" Randall exploded. "There are other ways, or haven't you heard? Who is it? Why do you want to kill her? Maybe she's not even on that flight!"

"Oh, she's on it, all right," the voice replied softly. "As to who it is, and why she should die—don't worry, *she'll know!*"

"Listen, mister," Randall's voice was becoming frantic, "there are ninety-four people aboard that airplane, and if what you're telling me is true, then—" He heard a click in the receiver. "Hello . . . are you still there? Hello!" he shouted. Furiously he jiggled the little arm in the cradle of the phone. There was no response. The line was dead.

Randall slammed the phone down and turned quickly to the other man. "Are they tracing?" he asked.

"Yeah, they'll call me back," Harris nodded. "Bomb threat on Five-one?"

"Yes, dammit! Jack, call the FBI and the FAA right away, give 'em the word! I've got to get hold of Morgan up in the head shed and let him know."

When he got through to the office of Frederick Morgan, vice-president of operations, the secretary informed him that her boss was talking on another line. It took some time to convince her of the urgency of his call, but at last Randall got her to break into the other conversation. Hurriedly he explained the situation. Morgan reacted with concern, and in-

structed Randall to get on the company radio immediately to advise the captain of Flight 51 of the bomb threat.

It was nearly ten minutes past four when Randall rushed into the small radio room adjacent to Flight Ops and elbowed the regular operator aside with a hasty apology. He flipped the mike switch on and called to the big jet cruising at six hundred miles per hour some thirty-five thousand feet over the swells of the Pacific.

"Five-one, this is Randall, L.A. Flight Ops. Do you read, Five-one?"

There was a momentary silence, then the voice of Captain George Stanfield filtered through the speaker on the radio panel directly in front of Brad Randall.

"Hello, Ops, this is Five-one, the old pineapple express. You're loud and clear. What can we do you for?" Stanfield, one of the company's senior captains, sounded completely at ease, a man in his element.

"Uh, Five-one . . ." Randall hesitated, then seemed to realize there was no way the news he had to report could be broken gently. "George, we just had a call from a guy who said there's a bomb aboard your airplane!"

"Oh, no," the captain groaned, "not again! Anything else, Brad?"

"He said it was set to go off at 4:30, our time."

"Well now, ain't that a bunch of chuckles," Stanfield said without humor. "Kingdom Come in twenty minutes, huh?"

"Listen, George," Randall said, "this guy didn't even ask for any ransom in exchange for telling us where it was hidden—he said he's only interested in getting rid of one of your female passengers."

"You think he was on the level, or just another nut?"

"God only knows," Randall replied, "but you'd better hurry up and shake down the cabin. If it's in there, you ought to be able to find it and dump it."

"Roger. I'll get back to you soon's we've had a look."

"One other thing, George: according to the passenger manifest, there are eleven females aboard, not counting kids, who are traveling unaccompanied by a man."

"So?"

"Well, it's just that one of them is probably the target. When I asked the guy who it was he wanted to kill, and why, he said, 'Don't worry—she'll know.'"

"That's a big help." The captain's voice was filled with sarcasm. "I'll see what I can find out after we've searched the cabins."

Randall sat back to sweat it out. His hand shook as he lit a ciga-

rette. A moment later he heard Harris calling to him from the doorway.

"Operator called back a minute ago, Brad. They traced the call to a public booth in Santa Monica."

"Damn! I guess it figured," Randall said, disappointed.

"I've advised the FBI. They and FAA each have a man on the way over now," Harris added before closing the door.

Alone, Randall frowned at the clock as the second hand swept relentlessly around the dial. It seemed to be moving much faster than usual. He closed his eyes, trying to visualize the gray-haired captain who would now be speaking over the plane's p.a. system, advising the passengers in his most professionally reassuring voice of the bomb threat, requesting their cooperation in searching the 707's cabins, apologizing for the inconvenience. In his mind's eye, Randall saw the other crew members, all trained for this and other types of emergency, moving quickly and efficiently at their assigned tasks; co-pilot checking the galley, then the overhead luggage racks and the space beneath the seats; flight engineer carefully examining the three lavatories, looking into towel and waste containers, and storage cubicles; and the four stewardesses looking into each

piece of carry-on luggage, purses, briefcases, hat boxes, anything that might have room for so much as a large firecracker. Captain Stanfield, meanwhile, would have put the big plane into a steep descent, seeking an altitude low enough to depressurize the cabin and safely open an emergency hatch through which the deadly package, once discovered, could be thrown.

If it's discovered, Randall thought as he opened his eyes. It should be found if it were hidden somewhere within the cabin area; but what if it had been secreted in a suitcase or carton stowed in the baggage compartment below, inaccessible to the crew while in flight? More than likely, he prayed as he stole another look at the clock, the whole thing would turn out to be just another hoax, with no bomb anywhere aboard the sleek jet transport.

Randall's fingers drummed a hollow tattoo on the top of the table next to the microphone. Time was racing by. Staring, he thought now that he could actually detect the movement of the minute hand on the clock. It read 26 minutes and 12 seconds past four when the voice of Captain Stanfield at last returned through the grilled speaker.

"L.A. Ops—Five-one. We've

shaken this old bird's feathers down about as much as we can, and haven't found anything more dangerous than a can of lighter fluid."

"That's good news, George," Randall breathed, partially relieved.

"The passengers took it all beautifully," Stanfield continued. "Most of 'em don't seem very concerned except for interrupting their cocktail hour."

"Double rations for all hands!" Randall grinned.

"That order's already been given," the captain said. "Now, our gals are rounding up those eleven lone women, bringing them up to the first-class cabin. I'm going back to talk to them, see if one of them knows who might be after her hide."

"Roger, Five-one, but . . . Never mind." Randall felt foolish as it occurred to him that, of all people, Captain George Stanfield was well aware what time of day it was.

Randall waited impatiently. The second hand of the big clock completed another revolution. The minute hand was now splitting the number 6 at the bottom of the dial. It was exactly 4:30 p.m. He felt beads of sweat forming on his forehead, his upper lip, oozing under his arms. The room was

deathly quiet, the silence disturbed only by the very faint hum of the radio equipment. It smelled of ozone and warm metal.

Now 4:33 showed on the clock . . . then 4:34. Randall jumped, startled by the sudden sound of the captain's voice coming once again from the speaker.

"Ops, Five-one . . . Do you read?"

"Roger, go ahead, Five-one," Randall acknowledged immediately.

"Listen, that guy wasn't kidding when he said, *'she'll know.'*" Stanfield sounded amused.

"What do you mean by that, George?"

"You ready, friend?" the captain asked. "*All eleven* of those women, plus one of our own 'stews,' think that either a husband or a boyfriend would be more than happy to get her out of the way!"

"*What?*" Randall exclaimed, incredulous.

"That's what the dear ladies told me—but none of them thinks her man would quite know how to blow up an airplane."

Another quick glance at the clock told Randall that it was now 4:35. He felt relief come flooding in to replace the tenseness of his body. "Well, George," he said, "it

looks like you've weathered the storm, thank the Lord!"

"Mmm . . . Just between us, I don't mind telling you I'm getting too old to appreciate that kind of weather!" Stanfield said. "By the way—and this might be a help to the FBI when they start checking things out—I've asked each of those women to write down the name and address of the guy she thinks might like to do her in."

"Hey, that's good thinking," Randall put in.

"Oh, we don't just sit up here reading comic books *all* the time," the captain chuckled. "We're now estimating Honolulu at 18:48 your time, and . . ."

Randall frowned as the pause stretched on for ten seconds or more. He looked nervously at the clock once again; the time was 4:36. At last the quiet became unbearable and he spoke urgently into the microphone.

"Hello, Five-one," Randall called, "do you read? Come in, Five-one!" He waited again, watching the second hand moving around the face of the clock. It seemed to have slowed down. Suddenly, his eyes wide with terror, he grabbed the microphone in both hands and screamed, "*Five-one, come in! George, damn it, answer me . . .*"

A final exam may prove formidable even for the well prepared.

McCreigh's Last Move

by Donald Olson

Make up yer mind, sport. Ya want a lift or don'tcha?"

McCreigh slid in beside the driver, a nattily dressed young pug with know-it-all eyes, plenty of jaw, and a sense of humor to match.

"Man, I didn't know if ya was bummin' a ride or thumbin' yer nose."

McCreigh's inexperience as a thumb-tripper had given him a pedestrian's view of so many towns west of the Hudson that he was more than willing to smile at this jest. He settled back in air-conditioned comfort and proceeded to examine his feet for blisters.

"Where ya from, sport?"

"Near Paterson."

"Jersey, huh?" As if this made



them fellow club members.
"Name's Joe Sherkov. What's yours?"

"Michael McCreigh."

"But nobody calls ya Mike."

"How'd you know?"

"Ya don't look like a Mike. Lemme see now. Gimme time and I'll tell ya what yer line is. Come on, gimme a few clues. Like where ya headin'?"

"Flatford." McCreigh looked out at the rolling Pennsylvania farmland, hoping to discourage conversation.

"Same here."

This would have been good news were it not for the prospect of being quizzed every mile of the way. McCreigh said he'd get out at the next town.

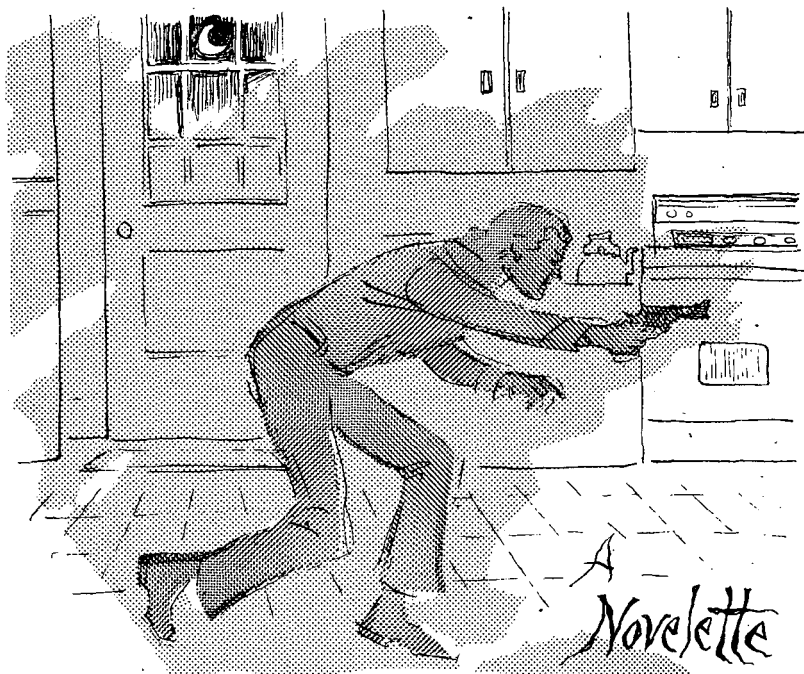
Sherkov's laugh was oddly humorless. "Sick of my company already, sport?"

"No. But I can't afford to pay you."

"So who expects fare from a hitchhiker?"

"I don't know. I've never picked one up."

"Safe enough, ya know how to spot the creeps. Take me. I'm a



whiz at sizin' people up. I can spot a psycho—painter!"

"Pardon me?"

"Nah. Forget it. Not a painter. But whatever yer gig is ya do it inside."

This game might be good for an hour but not all the way to Flatford. McCreigh asked how soon they'd get there.

"Could make it tonight by doggin' it. Better we hole up fer the night. Grab a steak, have a few brews."

McCreigh wondered, with an interior smile, how Spenlove would handle this situation. "Not me. I've got only five bucks to my name. I'll mush on."

"Relax. I'll stake ya."

"No, thanks."

"Jeez, but yer awful damn touchy fer a bum." Then, with that croaking laugh, "No offense, sport. But ya sure look like yer down on yer luck."

McCreigh ran a hand over his two-day stubble and wondered if he smelled as bad as he looked.

Sherkov kept at him. "I don't dig travelin' alone. Bores the hell outa me, ya know?"

"I know what you mean."

"So what's yer beef?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Ya think I'm stupid? Ya think—" Suddenly he slammed on the brakes. "Holy—! I *am* stupid.

That kisser of yours had me fooled." He looked at McCreigh as if his features were only now coming into focus. "Guy talks like a prof, looks like an all-American, and dresses like a skid-row yahoo. Yer on the lam!"

"I'm—"

"Wait a sec. Bank clerk! Right? Bank clerk who sticky-fingered the till. Embezzled that bank in Jersey—where the hell was it?" He had seen a newspaper picture of the embezzler and claimed it looked just like McCreigh—with a shave and haircut.

Since Sherkov was now regarding him with obvious approval, McCreigh wondered if it might not be simpler to let the error stand.

"Look, sport, I'm yer pal, right? I wouldn't fink on ya." He gave McCreigh a wink of friendly complicity. "Believe me, I ain't no angel myself."

Or should I tell him the truth, thought McCreigh, *and really give him a shock?* By now, however, they were driving through a desolate range of hills and it was getting dark, so he said nothing. Sherkov looked very pleased with himself.

When they next stopped for gas Sherkov went to the rest room. McCreigh watched him walk toward the building. He looked

like a professional athlete and talked like a traveling salesman—or perhaps a small-time gambler. Whatever he was, McCreigh was eager to get away from him. He wondered how far they were from Flatford and, thinking there might be a map in the glove compartment, he pushed it open.

The gun dropped neatly into his hand.

He stared at the weapon for a moment, then quickly thrust it back into the compartment.

Sherkov would not hear of his hospitality being refused, and after checking into a motel they went to a nearby roadhouse for dinner. Sherkov began drinking. He had more under his belt in a half hour than McCreigh had drunk in twenty-nine years; and the more he drank the looser became his tongue.

At first it was the same gamy nonsense as in the car, mildly lurid reminiscences of gang life in lower Manhattan where he'd grown up; but then his talk took a less innocent turn. He spoke in innuendos that were vague but scary.

At one point he pulled a snapshot out of his wallet and showed it to McCreigh: a blonde girl, smiling, pretty. He winked at McCreigh. "My ticket to the gold fields, sport."

McCreigh turned it over. A name was written on the back: Doriana Welles, and a Flatford address. Sherkov snatched it away from him.

"Girlfriend?"

Sherkov chuckled. "I ain't never laid eyes on her, sport. But we got a date, Doriana Welles and me. A real heavy date."

"You'll never make it if you don't go easy on that stuff."

"Relax, sport. The boys don't call me Iron Guts Sherkov fer nothin'." He fingered the snapshot, his thumb stroking the girl's image in a way that was obscene and somehow menacing. "I hope the chick's livin' it up tonight, sport. I hope she's havin' herself a ball. This time tomorrow night she ain't gonna have a worry in the world."

It could have been the liquor talking, yet McCreigh kept seeing that revolver in the glove compartment. He tried to pump Sherkov but, though obviously stoned, the man appeared to have a built-in warning system when he'd start to say too much.

"Ain't wise to ask too many questions, sport. Ya don't hear me askin' a lot of questions, do ya? Like how much ya took that bank for? Like where ya got it stashed? Maybe we'll talk about that tomorrow night, huh, sport? After

my date with Doriana Welles. We'll talk about it tomorrow, okay? Now where the hell's that dumb broad of a waitress?"

Not until they were back in the motel and Sherkov lay snoring on the other bed did it occur to McCreigh that Spenlove might have cooked up this whole thing. It was exactly the sort of elaborate monkeyshines that would appeal to the man.

If true, what then? What reaction would be expected of him?

The longer McCreigh thought about it the less certain he could be. Was it all a charade or was Sherkov the real thing, a hired gunman with a contract to kill a woman named Doriana Welles who lived in Flatford?

Two hours before dawn McCreigh slipped silently off his bed, fished the car keys out of Sherkov's pants, made sure the wallet was in the back pocket, rolled up the pants along with Sherkov's shirt and tucked them under his arm—anything to delay pursuit. He stealthily unlatched the door and left. In predawn fog he waited till one of the big rigs thundered by before crossing the graveled lot to the car, then waited till another was passing before starting the engine.

Speeding down the highway he was burdened with a mind full of

doubts. Exactly what *were* his motives? What was he trying to prove? That he could go Spenlove's plan one better? That he was afraid of Spenlove's plan and what it might prove about himself? For weeks he had suspected that Spenlove had doubts about him, wasn't sure he could hack it.

"This is no halfway house for misfits," Spenlove was fond of saying.

McCreigh tried to tell himself that if he believed Sherkov's intentions were indeed murderous he would go to the police, but if he did that, Doriana Welles could be dead by the time the authorities had checked out his story. Moreover, if Sherkov were genuine, as he claimed, he was no amateur. He would have a dozen aliases and a hundred holes where he could hide.

All I can do, McCreigh decided, *is follow my instincts.*

The sun was up by the time he reached Flatford. He parked in a downtown ramp and took time to explore Sherkov's wallet. The roll of bills added substance to the man's story. McCreigh checked the time. He had a good three hours on Sherkov, assuming Sherkov even came—but why wouldn't he? He would take McCreigh's action as proof that he was indeed on the run. He would never ex-

pect McCreigh to head for Flatford.

He left the car in the ramp and walked to a nearby diner for a quick breakfast. Then he stopped at a barbershop for a haircut and shave. By then the stores were open and he lost little time in spending some of Sherkov's wad on a decent suit of clothes, telling himself that all these things were essential if he were to make Doriana Welles believe his story. However, at the same time he was conscious of another impulse at work, an impulse to defy Spence and to push himself closer to that perilous edge of destiny where he must either plunge forward or shrink back.

He remembered the address on Pleasantview Avenue, a street of tidy houses and well-kept lawns. The Spanish-style stucco bungalow looked much too respectable to be the home of a gunman's prospective victim.

He was again full of doubt as he parked behind a rusting VW in the driveway. He walked to the door and rang the bell. No one came. He thought he heard the faint hum of a vacuum cleaner. He knocked loudly and presently the door was opened by a young woman in a blue mini-dress; she was barefoot and wearing dark glasses.

"Are you Doriana Welles?"

"Who are you?"

"He wondered if she always wore dark glasses while cleaning. 'Joe Sherkov.' He hadn't really expected a reaction; there wasn't one.

"I'm Doriana Welles, yes, but I don't know you." She started to close the door.

"Please. It's important."

She made a face and stepped back. The house looked in need of a good cleaning. Through an archway he could see into the kitchen. That was worse. If you'd been looking for anything smaller than the sink you'd have had trouble finding it.

"Okay, so what are you peddling that I don't want?"

She was a very pretty girl in her twenties, natural blonde, stunning figure.

"May I sit down?"

"Why bother? I have an idea it's going to be a short visit."

"Well, the best way to put this is simply that if I really were a guy named Joe Sherkov and you had opened the door to me, you'd probably be dead by now."

Neither laughter nor alarm. She lit a cigarette, then took off the dark glasses. He had expected blue eyes; they were brown.

"If you're selling subscriptions to a mystery magazine that's a

jim-dandy of an opener. If you're being cute, you'll be sorry. Which is it?"

"Neither. My name's Michael McCreigh. I said I was Joe Sherkov because I'm carrying his identification. I bought the duds I'm wearing with his money, and that car out there belongs to him."

She gave him a warning look. "Okay, McCreigh. You wanted to come in, you're in. You wanted to sit down, you're down. You wanted to arouse my curiosity, I'm curious. Now give it to me straight or beat it before I call the cops."

He gave it to her straight—reasonably so—telling her nothing about himself but that he was hitchhiking west when he met Sherkov.

To his amazement she believed him. "Don't ask me why. Maybe because you don't have a liar's eyes."

"Nor an embezzler's?"

"Oh, embezzlers, they always seem such innocent, goofy types. No offense. But what I do find hard to believe is that there could be two women named Doriana Welles in this size town."

"There couldn't be."

"There has to be."

"Not in the phone book. I looked."

"But it's the only thing that

would make sense. Either that or you *are* a liar, with some nasty little game of your own. After all, who'd want to kill me? It's the freakiest thing I ever heard. I'm flattered—sort of, I guess—but it's crazy."

He liked her; liked her cool eyes and salty manner. "No enemies?"

"I've never won anybody's Miss Congeniality award, if that's what you mean. But neither can I imagine anyone sticking pins in a voodoo doll and yelling, 'Die, Doriana, die!' Sorry, McCreigh. Try next door."

He showed her the snapshot. "Anyone you know?"

"Don't be cute."

"Know when it was taken?"

She studied it. "Nope."

"Or where?"

"Downtown, I'd say. That looks like the Griffin Building." She didn't look frightened, but she did look vulnerable, as if she'd scratched her finger for the first time and discovered she could bleed. "I don't like this, McCreigh. It's creepy. Sick. People taking pictures of me when I don't know it. And then—look, if you're *not* on the level, if this is some sort of shakedown—"

"Go to the police, Doriana. Or call them. Right now."

She walked to the phone and

picked it up. She kept watching him. "You really want me to?"

"Yes."

She lifted it halfway. "You'll back me up?"

"No. I can't. I came here to warn you, that's all. I don't want to get mixed up in it."

"Thanks for nothing. You know what the cops are like in this burg? They'd laugh themselves silly."

"Listen, Doriana. I gave myself only so many hours to find you and warn you, then to ditch Sherkov's car and lose myself. I assumed he didn't have any contact here. Now I'm not so sure. Someone took that picture and sent it either to Sherkov or to his employer. That someone might still be here. Maybe Sherkov already phoned him."

"You're determined to scare me out of my wits, aren't you, McCreigh?" She lit another cigarette. "You may as well spill it. Are you on the lam? No, I know you're not a crook. This Sherkov character was all wet there. You simply don't have the face for it. But you're what—twenty-eight—and *just* going west? Thumb-tripping? Yes, I'd say you were on the lam, too, but from what? Wife and kiddies?"

He smiled. "No wife and kiddies. If I'm on the lam it's from

nobody but myself. Believe it."

"Welcome to the club. Hell, welcome to *headquarters*."

"You, too? Tell me more."

"It's too icky-depressing to talk about. Nutshellwise, I found Mr. Right—only he went wrong and I went no place."

"Could he be the one who—"

"Wants me dead? No way. He dropped me, dear boy. So hard my insides are still quivering." She looked away. It was no joke, it still hurt.

McCreigh looked at his watch: an hour already gone by. He had done what he came to do. "Is there someone you can call? Relatives? Friends?"

"No. No one. I haven't lived here long enough to know anyone, except the kid next door. He's going on seven."

There's no one but you, Michael McCreigh. Is that what her eyes were saying? What he wanted them to say? Wouldn't it be a lark if—but forget it. Back off. Not that route again.

Something else bothered him. Something about her reaction to all this. It seemed genuine; *she* seemed genuine; yet there seemed a vague quality of wrongness in her manner. Or was it because he suspected Spenlove's shadowy presence behind all this?

"Well, what are you going to

do? Sit there staring at the vacuum cleaner till Sherkov comes to the door?" he said.

"It might help if you told me what he looks like."

He gave her as thorough a description as possible.

She seemed more confident, regained some of her cheekiness. "At least he'll have to huff and puff and blow the house down if he expects to get in. By then the cops would be here. I hope."

"Call them now, Dorigana. Please."

"I'm not kidding, McCreigh. They'd only laugh. Besides, I want to know what it's all about."

"I've told you."

"You've told me next to nothing. If someone's trying to kill me—well, look, you yourself said *Sherkov's* not out to kill me—he's just the man with the gun. So what if he's caught? Whoever has me on his hate list is still out there, waiting for another crack at me."

She walked swiftly to the door and held it open. Outside, the world was all blue sky and sunshine; nothing bad could possibly happen on such a pleasant, dull street.

"You're a sweet guy, McCreigh. I don't know who you are or what you are, but you're okay. You've given me fair warning. If I

get my throat cut it's not your fault. Well, don't look at me like I'm the first donor in a brain transplant. Maybe I'm nuts; maybe I'm bored; maybe I'm sick of traveling a one-way street. At least I'm back in the game, McCreigh, if only as a pawn."

"Dorigana—"

"Beat it, McCreigh. Bug out. Scram. Take my advice: lose that supercharged dune buggy and then keep going west. Follow your rainbow while you can—they evaporate awful damn fast. Send me a postcard from some Pacific paradise. If I'm still alive I'll answer it."

The phone rang. Dorigana's face went white. Her hand tightened on the doorknob.

"I'll get it," McCreigh said, but she waved him off.

She answered it, then looked at McCreigh. "No one's there." She was frightened now; truly frightened.

He took the phone from her and listened. Whoever it was had already hung up.

"McCreigh, I'm no sissy. I even know a bit of judo. But rotten, sneaky tricks like this I don't like."

"Ready to go to the cops now?"

"Not without something more substantial to give them."

"Like a bullet with your name

on it, is that it?" McCreigh said.

"If necessary."

"Now don't go fatalistic on me. Remember—" but then he stopped. *Don't give anything away. Play fair with Spenlove to that extent. Even if the scene's all wrong, follow the script.* "Look, we can't just sit here like unplugged lamps—"

"You were leaving, McCreigh. Remember?"

"Not without you, I'm not."

"Then what do you suggest? Don't say cops and don't say run. We've no place to run to."

"First thing I've got to do is ditch Sherkov's car. I think maybe we've still got an hour's margin of safety. I'm going to drive it somewhere and dump it."

"Good." The idea of action—or at least movement—heartened them both. "I'll follow you in the bug."

"No. It'll only take a few minutes. You stay here. We'll make sure all the doors and windows are locked."

When that was done he reached into his jacket and handed her the gun. She recoiled. "Are you nuts, McCreigh? I wouldn't even know how to hold it."

"I'll show you. It's just a precaution. Stay here, right by this window. You can see up and down the street. If you see any-

one who looks suspicious, get on that phone and call the cops."

She surprised him with a kiss. "Good luck, McCreigh. Hurry back."

He drove Sherkov's car several blocks past some railroad tracks, left it behind a clump of poison sumac near a gravel pit. Walking fast, he was back at the bungalow in twenty minutes.

Doriana's car was gone.

The street looked the same: same kids playing nearby; same faint sound of radio or TV from the street behind. He hurried up the drive. The doors were all locked, windows unbroken. He felt strangely betrayed. *Was Spenlove behind all this? If so, it wasn't fair, not fair at all.*

He was trying to decide what to do next when the VW zoomed around the corner and swung into the drive. Doriana jumped out, a bag of groceries in her arm, a stricken look on her pretty face.

She gave him a sulky look when he had finished scolding her. "It was only around the corner, and you said we had an hour. After all, you can't expect me to wait for a murderer on an empty stomach. I have a compulsive appetite when I'm nervous."

He carried the bag into the kitchen. She was perched meekly on the sofa when he came back.

Her face, before she became aware of him, looked somehow older, her eyes clouded by a subtle look of indecision and weariness, of life-dissatisfaction which he had too often seen in his own mirror. When she saw him the look vanished and she was all surface again: a pretty blonde, no more, no less. She handed him the gun.

Her tone was breezy. "While we're waiting, you might as well tell me the story of your life, McCreigh."

He stepped toward the sofa, looked down at her. "I've got a better idea."

Not really surprised, she tilted her eyes, smiled knowingly. "McCreigh makes his move."

He sat down beside her, leaned close. "Shall we get started?"

She nodded, lips parting.

What are you up to, McCreigh? he asked himself. *Testing her? Or yourself?* "Then you better put on an apron."

Her eyes opened wide. "Come again?"

"You can't do dishes in that dress without an apron."

The cuddly softness vanished. "Dishes!"

"You got a better idea? It may be a long wait. And let's face it, that kitchen's a disgrace."

Her eyes squared off at him.

"Look, sweetie. Hurrah for the good guys and all that, but you can carry it a bit *too* far."

With a laugh he pulled her to her feet. "I think we'll stay more alert if we keep busy in the kitchen."

Her good humor was quickly restored. "On one condition."

"Name it."

"You tell me about *her*. Miss Wrong. And don't tell me there's not one."

So he told her. He was from Skokie, Sandra was from Evanston. They'd met at Northwestern in his senior year and got engaged shortly after he'd begun working for Nutrifax as a chemical engineer.

"Are you conning me, McCreigh? You look no more like an engineer than a triggerman."

"Nevertheless, I was."

He told her about the stupidly trite disagreement that ended the engagement. Yet there were more fundamental differences. To Sandra, achievement was measurable by only one standard: money.

He was getting edgy as he talked and noticed that she, too, couldn't help taking quick, sniping glances toward the street. By now the kitchen was spotless. Laughing, they started on the livingroom, making a joke of it all, clowning it up, yet both of them

as jittery as the rawest of recruits preparing to defend a fort against imminent siege. When Sherkov came—and after that phone call McCreigh knew he would come—what would they do? He was conscious of the gun pressed hard against his ribs; its presence there seemed to make it hard for him to breathe.

More and more often she interrupted him with remarks about Sherkov.

"Suppose he's not alone?"

"Chances are he will be."

Then, as if she hadn't another thing on her mind: "So what happened next? How come you left . . . What did you call it?"

"Nutrifax. Soybean research. Rather exciting at first. A program to find a soybean nutritional substitute that could eliminate starvation around the world. But something went wrong—with me, I mean, not the program. The satisfactions were too . . . remote."

He stopped when he saw the look in her eyes, not so much curious as questing, delving. *Back up, McCreigh. That's far enough. Don't go into the other thing. She wouldn't understand. I'm still not sure I do myself . . . Or did she already know? In some quiet room had she and Spenlove already met? Had he told her what to say, what questions to ask?*

"Level with me, McCreigh. If this hadn't happened, where would you be right now?"

"Here. In Flatford, I mean."

"But why? What is there here for you?"

"Nothing. That's why I'm here. Until the day before yesterday I'd never heard of the place."

"So why did you come?"

"Same reason Sherkov did, in a way. I was sent." *That's enough.*

He had to get away from those eyes, that voice. *Had* she been put up to it? He said he wanted to check out the upstairs.

As night fell the tension got worse. The knowledge that Sherkov was out there, perhaps a mile away, perhaps only a minute, but certainly nearby, turned the innocently ticking clock into a time bomb; waiting became agony. McCreigh pictured the gunman at some motel in town, lying on a bed, smoking, thinking vengeful thoughts about the man who had fleeced him, but knowing Doriana Welles must be first on his list. He'd made sure by that phone call that she was still at home. Now he lay waiting in the dark.

"Turn off the lights," McCreigh said.

"Do we have to?"

"Everything's got to look normal. He'll see the car in the drive, the house dark. No reason to be

suspicious about that, is there?"

Somewhere near midnight he heard her voice in the darkness, soft and yielding: "McCreigh?"

"What is it?"

"I'm willing to call it quits."

He didn't answer.

She said, "You wanted me to run earlier. I should have. Let's just get in the car, you and me. You and me and the money, and blow this nowhere town. There's still time. Anywhere you want to go. Any direction. No questions asked. You game?"

He smiled in the darkness. A fat bankroll, a set of wheels, and a willing blonde. Once, surely, such an offer would have been irresistible. "It's too late," he said, meaning it quite differently from the way it sounded.

"I never liked the dark," she said. "I had a dream once—"

"Sssh!"

"What—"

"Be quiet."

She heard it then, too. Back of the house. Cat or dog most likely. Or . . .

"Stay here," he whispered.

He moved to the archway between living and dining rooms, paused, listening. It came again, faintly sibilant, scratchlike. Not branches, there was no wind.

Pressed hard against the wall he could feel the throbbing of his

heart as he inched his way toward the kitchen. He wasn't sure, but he thought a shadow passed across the window of the back door. His hands glided smoothly along chrome and vinyl; the room with all its white appliances seemed too bright. He dropped to a crouch. His finger, almost reluctantly, certainly with squeamish distaste, hooked itself around the gun's trigger. Somewhere nearby he thought he heard a car door close.

"McCreigh!"

His body jerked. She was close behind him.

"Upstairs, McCreigh. I'm sure I heard something."

"Get back in the livingroom. Stay close to the door. If I yell, run to your car and get away from here."

Erect now, he moved swiftly to the back door. The nearest street light was a half block away, but there was enough light for him to see there was no one near the house. He checked the windows, moved back into the dining room. He couldn't see Dorian. Good. If he couldn't, Sherkov couldn't.

He gripped the stair railing and started quietly up the steps. His feet on the carpeted treads made no sound. Above him the darkness was much blacker than downstairs. He paused at the top of the

stairs. Sweat glued his shirt to his back like a second skin.

What if he did meet someone? What if he pulled the trigger and killed a man? That would effectively shut a certain door to the future, wouldn't it? No going back then. The decision was taken out of his hands. Is that what he wanted?

He pressed forward, half crouching, hand exploring the frame of the first door he came to. He took a step into that room. One step—

An awareness of the blow, of the impact, rather than the blow itself was all that he was conscious of as he fell.

The man's voice was cutting rather than angry and, more than anything, impatient. McCreigh kept his eyes shut, wanting to listen, to hear what was said. Only by holding onto the words, gripping them with his mind the way one would grip the knots in a rope to pull oneself erect, could he shake off the fogginess that swirled around him.

"You're an idiot, Sherkov, an amateur. And so is Lew for giving you the job. Well, it's too late now to get somebody else. You're going to finish the job and finish it properly."

So Sherkov was here. Sherkov

and someone else. McCreigh tried to open his eyes just enough to see.

Slosh. The cold water hit his face like an angry slap. He cried out, came wide awake.

The face peered down at him, coldly sardonic. "Get up, Sherkov. We haven't got forever."

The man was big, strong-featured, impressively handsome, impeccably groomed. He laughed as McCreigh struggled to his feet. Then he tossed something at McCreigh: Sherkov's wallet.

"I've taken the trouble to remove the money I was foolish enough to allow Lew to advance to you. You'll not get a cent till the job's done."

So that was it. The wallet. Sherkov's credentials. "Who hit me?" The real Sherkov, he assumed, but this character couldn't know that.

"The girl, you idiot, who do you think? If she'd had any brains she'd have taken your gun and blown your fool head off. But as she didn't, you can still use it on her."

"If we can find her," he tried.

The man grinned. "Boys'll pick her up. She can't have got far."

"She's told the cops by now." He found it easy to play along this far.

"She wouldn't dare." He gave a

satisfied chuckle. "It may not matter where she goes. She doesn't know anything, not really. Besides, the old man's dying. By the time we get to the cabin he may be dead."

"Where's my gun?"

The man sneered. "I'll keep your toy for you, stupid, till you're ready to use it."

The car outside, though not quite a limousine, was still big enough to fill most of the short driveway between garage and street. A young tough sat behind the wheel.

"Take us to the cabin, Max. I told the boys to bring the girl there when they catch her."

"Yes, Mr. Hetrick."

Hetrick. Another piece in the puzzle, no more meaningful than the others. However, that whack on the skull had just about eliminated one possibility: Spenlove. Although he was cagey, wily, and the possessor of a most resourceful imagination, his schemes would never include violence.

When they backed out of the driveway and slid forward into the street McCreigh saw the other car parked at the curb, and the man's face behind the wheel: Sherkov.

Max guided the big machine deftly through the city streets, speckled now with a few early risers. They passed through a skid-

row district and McCreigh felt something akin to homesickness. That's where he'd be if none of this had happened; probably mooching a breakfast in that street-corner mission. To think that he had dreaded the prospect of all that. How simple it seemed now—and how right. It was strange that his doubts seemed to have vanished since that bash on the head. Spenlove would appreciate that, attribute all sorts of things to it. McCreigh wondered if he would ever see Spenlove again.

Sherkov was behind them. McCreigh managed an occasional glimpse, wondering what it all meant. All he could be sure of was that Sherkov didn't have Doriana and didn't know who Hetrick was; probably thought Hetrick was a policeman—but the game had to reach a climax soon. Someone would wise up, discover the mistake. Or had they already? Refusing to hand over the gun might signify more than a reprimand.

Max was no slouch. He soon noticed the car behind them. "Some cat's tailing us, Mr. Hetrick."

Hetrick didn't turn around. "You sure?"

"I've taken a few unnecessary turns. He sticks with us."

"Law?"

"I don't know for sure," Max said.

"You could be wrong. Take some back roads."

Hetrick didn't appear seriously concerned until they were heading into the mountains.

"Take a little detour, Max, to Devil's Elbow. You know what to do."

Some of these Allegheny peaks were fairly impressive; not spectacular, but broodingly massive. They drove for another hour, then they were climbing a zigzag, well-graded road that scaled the highest peak. McCreigh felt the change of altitude in his ears. To his left he looked down on a sweeping blue-green patchwork of wooded hills and long, lush valleys.

Presently, rounding a curve and passing a trucker's emergency cut-off, Max swung the long car expertly around, facing down to the slope they had just climbed.

McCreigh didn't quite believe what happened next, and it was over almost as soon as it began. Max was a real pro behind that wheel, his timing accurate to the split second.

Sherkov must have got the shock of his shock-filled life when he saw that sleek black car streaking toward him instead of disappearing far ahead as he came around the curve. It was all done

neatly, with swift, deadly expertise. Hetrick's car on the inside lane made a sort of graceful, shouldering action, sideswiping Sherkov's car and spinning it out of control.

McCreigh caught one fleeting glimpse of Sherkov's stunned white face, and then they were around the curve and out of sight. All they heard behind them was a sound like thunder.

What struck McCreigh as even more gruesome than the act itself was the silent indifference with which Hetrick dismissed it. Max might simply have taken a wrong turn, realized his mistake, and was now heading in the right direction.

Spenlove adored games, yes—but definitely not this kind. McCreigh felt sick, and showed it.

Hetrick sneered. "Lew must have been out of his skull when he sent me a punk like you, Sherkov. He said you'd made fifteen hits. Or was he talking about your Little League batting average? No, punk, I don't think Lew will be using you for any more jobs. Not when he hears about this foul-up." His tone revealed a truly sadistic nature capable of the most subtle tortures wrought with barbarous zeal.

Shortly, they turned off into a rougher side road snaking upward

among limestone boulders and clumps of blooming mountain laurel. The cabin appeared suddenly, unexpectedly, out of the sheltering darkness of soaring pine and hemlock, an A-frame perched near the summit.

When they got out of the car, Hetrick waved perfunctorily to a man standing on a narrow frame balcony.

Inside the cabin, in the one spacious room, McCreigh saw two men, the husky blond to whom Hetrick had waved and a long-necked, pockmarked redhead—and Doriana.

She sat on the far side of the room, her back to them, eyes apparently fixed on the rolling sea of green below her. She neither moved nor spoke when they came in. McCreigh's breath felt suddenly short. She was alive, thank God for that.

"All quiet, Turk?" Hetrick asked.

"Quiet and peaceful, Mr. Hetrick."

"No calls?"

"Not yet."

"Miss Welles?" Hetrick's voice became suave, deferential, the voice of a gentleman, protector, friend. "Join us for a drink, won't you please?"

Doriana very slowly turned her head. McCreigh's insides felt

squeezed into a tight ball. He stared. She was the same height and build, same hair color, same brown eyes—but she was not Doriana Welles. She had been crying but her face was now dry, composed.

He had to say something. "What now?"

Hetrick looked at him. "We wait. What's the matter—scared?"

McCreigh tried to sound convincing. "The guy who followed us might have been a cop. He might have radioed back."

"Rubbish. I know the girl. She wouldn't go near the cops. I spent too many months finding her. I know her inside and out."

Hetrick told Garve, the other man, to mix him a drink. He left the room. McCreigh wanted to walk over to the girl, but knew it was pointless; they couldn't possibly talk. Hetrick came back, glanced at the phone, suggested they play a few hands of poker while waiting.

McCreigh hadn't played poker since college and hadn't been much of a player then; now his every move provoked a jeer from Hetrick. McCreigh assumed they were waiting for the phone to ring, for news that *his* Doriana had been caught. He felt a rime of sweat spread across his forehead and upper lip.

When the phone did at last ring, even though he was afraid of what it meant, his body's response was one of uncontrollable relief.

Garve answered it, then nodded to Hetrick, who very deliberately squashed his cigarette, placed his cards facedown on the table, and moved to the phone.

As he listened, Hetrick's eyes drifted toward the girl, still sitting with her back to them. Then he said, "No. She no longer matters."

The other men all watched him as he hung up the phone. Hetrick smiled at Garve. Both Garve and Turk took this as a cue and grinned broadly.

"The old man's dead."

The news obviously conveyed a portentous message to the others, except the girl. Hetrick had not spoken loudly enough for her to hear.

Now Hetrick was moving toward McCreigh. Surreptitiously he handed him the gun. "It's time for you and our guest to take a little walk in the woods, Sherkov." With a snide chuckle, "Maybe you'd like Garve or Turk to go with you?" He signaled McCreigh to hide the gun, then raised his voice as he turned toward the girl. "Miss Welles, I'm sure you'd like a bit of fresh air and sunshine. Mr. Sherkov will go with you."

The girl gave McCreigh a swift glance of contempt. She was evidently beyond terror by now, beyond easy tears, probably beyond hope, and yet she displayed a proudness of spirit that reminded McCreigh of his own Doriana Welles.

What was it Spenlove had said once: One time in every man's life he is called upon to be a consummate actor, to submerge utterly his own character; to become, in effect, another personality?

He walked behind the girl as she passed through the door and down the wooden steps. He could feel Hetrick and Garve and Turk watching them, but he didn't once look around. The girl paused as if waiting to be told what to do. He was sure she knew what was supposed to happen.

McCreigh's eyes swiftly scouted the area, spotting the jumble of rocks below them to the left and gauging its relation to the road's curve. "Down there," he pointed.

As they passed the two cars, Hetrick's and a station wagon, he pretended to stumble, glanced inside the wagon. No key in the ignition. Rotten luck.

Ordinarily he would have been charmed by this spot: the pleasant nasal sting of pine scent, the profound silence, the spired green

hemlocks against vivid blue sky.

"Stop by those rocks," he ordered.

A thicket of mountain laurel screened them from view of the cabin.

She was pale but composed as she faced him. "Go ahead. Do it. I don't care anymore."

"Now listen. My name's McCreigh. I'm not the hired killer they think I am. Slight case of mistaken identity. Quickly now, who are you and what's this all about?"

For an instant she was speechless, then the words poured out. "I'm Doriana Welles. At least I always thought I was, until they kidnapped me. Hetrick's held me in that cabin for weeks. He told me this fantastic story, that I'm really Janice Allenby. It was a famous case twenty-five years ago. I'd never even heard of it. The Allenby baby was kidnapped, something went wrong—the ransom was paid but never picked up, the baby was never returned. Hetrick's a crook, a big man in organized crime, I gather. He learned that the baby hadn't been killed. He traced her—me—well, he says he's got proof it's me—and he decided to pick up right where everything stopped twenty-five years ago. Only—"

"That's enough for now. You

can tell me the rest if we get out of here." He showed her the gun. "I'm going to fire this twice. The road's straight through there. The minute I fire, you run for the road. But don't come out of the woods till you're far enough down that you can't be spotted from the cabin. Okay?"

She nodded. He smiled. "I'll go back and get one of the cars and pick you up down the road."

"But there's four of them. They all have guns."

"Let me worry about that. Soon as I fire, run."

She was out of sight before the first shot's echo had died away among the pines. He fired again. Then he turned and walked back toward the cabin with the jaunty air of a gunman who'd scored. His composure surprised him; he didn't trust it.

The four men were busy inside the cabin. Garve and Turk were packing suitcases; Max was studying a map; Hetrick had just poured himself a drink and was reaching for the phone.

McCreigh stood in the doorway, the gun pointed at Hetrick.

Garve saw him first.

"Don't move!" McCreigh shouted.

Hetrick swore.

"On your bellies. All of you. Arms over your heads. Get

down!" The gun swept the room.

For the first time, furious as he was, Hetrick looked at him with something like respect.

"Now, one by one toss your guns over here, without raising your chins from the floor. You first, Garve."

As each weapon slid toward him, McCreigh scooped it up and hurled it through the open window out over the balcony.

Hetrick swore again. "You'll pay for this, Sherkov. You double-dealing—"

"Sherkov has already paid, Hetrick. It was Sherkov in that car on Devil's Elbow."

"Then who the hell are you? Fuzz?"

"Never mind who I am. Now, Max, toss those car keys over here like a good boy."

The keys, too, went sailing through the window.

"Now the keys to the wagon. Fast!"

Turk growled, but the keys came spinning across the floor.

"Make sure your bellies stay close to that floor until you hear the engine start. Otherwise you know what happens."

He backed through the door and made a dash for the wagon. For good measure—Max or Hetrick might have a spare set of keys—he shot out two tires on

Hetrick's car. Seconds later he was skidding out of the drive, back wheels spitting gravel against the cabin's foundation.

Far down the road the girl stood waiting.

She had met Hetrick in Sandusky—he had posed as a stockbroker. He was handsome, courtly, a somewhat ripe but nonetheless irresistible Prince Charming. A loner, an orphan, she had been easily lured away from her few friends and dull job; but instead of a glamorous new life in New York, she found herself a prisoner in that mountain cabin. Hetrick showed her legally indisputable proof that she was really Janice Allenby. His plan was to ransom her back to her father, the millionaire Pittsburgh steel magnate, J. Howard Allenby. This was all the girl had been told directly. The rest she had put together from hints and from overheard phone conversations.

Allenby, it transpired, was in no condition to deal with anyone about anything, even the rescue of a daughter whom he had long ago given up for dead. He was in the intensive care unit of a Pittsburgh hospital, victim of a massive coronary. His life hung in the balance. Hetrick had been forced to deal with the nephew, Carson Allenby,

who evidently turned out to be as heartless as Hetrick himself and who wasn't the least interested in saving his cousin's life. Instead, he was more than eager to pay for her death. Only a breath or two away from the Allenby millions, he felt it was no time to rescue a girl who could take it all away from him.

The girl had heard talk about another young woman, but it was not clear to her how she figured in the plot. McCreigh had an idea, but unless he could find *his* Doriana he couldn't be certain if he were right, and God alone knew where his Doriana was by now.

Nor could he go to the police with his own story without first knowing how deeply his Doriana was involved, and so he left the other Doriana at the nearest state police barracks and continued on to Flatford.

He didn't expect to find her; didn't expect ever to see her again. He certainly didn't expect to find her at the bungalow on Pleasantview Avenue. He stopped there only to look for some possible clue to where she might have gone; but she was there.

"Waiting for you, of course," she said simply, as if his question were needless, his surprise uncalled for.

She looked the same, talked the same.

"It was sitting in the dark that did it, McCreigh. Alone there in the dark. I'd been left high and dry so often I felt like a dehydrated steeplejack. I couldn't go through the emotional meat grinder again. If you were a good guy you'd find out sooner or later how I'd lied to you. If you were a rat I didn't want to hang around and find out. When I saw that car stopping up the street, I told you I'd heard something upstairs. I gave you that clout on the bean and then I ran. I figured it was the real Sherkov in that car and that he'd follow me when I drove out. I drove around for a couple of hours. When I realized I wasn't being followed I came back. There was no one here. I didn't dare call the cops. I still didn't know if I'd be doing you a favor or not."

"It's over now," he said. "You're okay. You don't have to tell me anything."

"I should have told you before, but I was too ashamed. I was down and out, McCreigh. Flat broke and fresh out of dreams when I met him—Mr. Right. He wasn't young but he was a beautiful man, and loaded. You couldn't begin to know what it was like when I found out he'd

conned me. I won't tell you what I did for him, how he set me up, framed me, then threatened to blow the whistle on me if I didn't do what he said. I hadn't a clue what it was all about, I swear that, McCreigh. All I knew was that I had to come here, live in this house, pretend I was someone named Dorian Welles. The end of this month I was supposed to be paid off, and be free."

The description tallied. Mr. Right and Hetrick were one and the same. "You'd be paid off, all right," he said. "But you'd be dead."

The pieces all fit. Hetrick had wanted to play it safe. He wanted to collect from young Allenby by satisfying him that Dorian Welles, living in Flatford, was Janice Allenby, and satisfying him further by killing her. However, there was always a chance the old man might pull through. Why throw away that chance? Why kill the real Janice Allenby before he was certain the old man wouldn't recover? All he had to do was find a substitute, and he went to great pains to set one up.

"I don't have to be Dorian Welles anymore," she said. "Now I can be—"

"No." He put his finger against her lips. "Don't tell me. Let it be Dorian Welles and Michael

McCreigh. Let that be sufficient."

She laughed. "I kind of thought that wasn't your real handle. The McCreigh sounded right. But you don't look like a Michael somehow."

"Funny. Someone else told me the same thing, not very long ago."

"You came back," she said. "That's all that matters."

"Other things matter more, Dorian, and now I know what they are."

She got that nowhere look again. "But I'm not one of them. Is that it?"

"You matter, yes. But the games are over for me now. One last move and I'm where I'm supposed to be."

"And where does that move take you, McCreigh?"

He thought of telling her, almost did, then merely smiled instead and said: "Back east."

"To the wife and kiddies?"

"No. I told you the truth about that."

Funny, he thought, how things work out. Spenlove's idea was sound after all. To give each man five bucks, dress him in rags, give him a false name, and send him for two weeks to a strange town. Let him fend for himself as an outcast, one more derelict among the lost souls of some grimy skid

row. Let him learn if he could relate to life in the raw before he took the big last step.

That's the trouble, Spenlove was always saying. We've been too remote from life. We've lost touch with society.

Yes, the theory had been sound. As for McCreigh, Nutrifax hadn't given him what he hankered for, the chance to deal directly, on a person-to-person basis, with man's problems. So he had taken a step that until twenty-four hours ago he still had not been sure wasn't ninety percent whim and ten percent desperation.

Now he knew.

He took her hands in his. "What about you, Doriana? Which road are you taking?"

"West, I suppose. As far as that broken-down VW can take me."

She was standing in the doorway when he waved good-bye, looking as if she truly belonged there, in that vine-covered bungalow on a quiet, respectable street. All she needed was one thing, and he'd be along, of that McCreigh was certain. The real Mr. Right.

He smiled as he drove away. Would the other fellows ever believe him when he told them all this? Father Spenlove would believe. He had a gift for believing, and he knew how to instill that gift in others.

After a while McCreigh stopped thinking about the unlikely series of events that had befallen him and thought about the weeks ahead, the last two weeks before ordination—and about how it would feel to be a priest.

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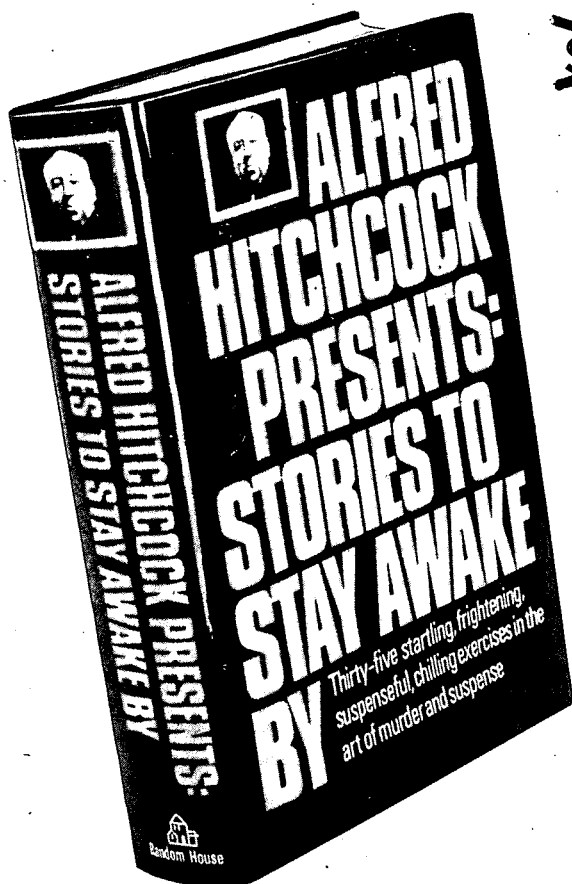
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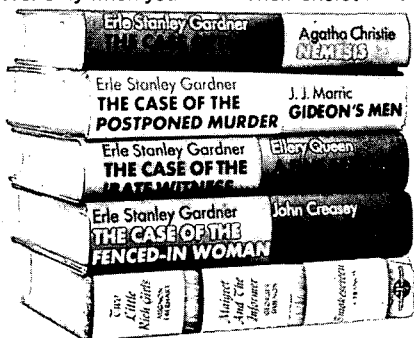
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