ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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

February 1974

Dear Reader:

Permit me to offer you this cleverly disguised Valentine, alias the February issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.* Though it was lovingly prepared, with you in mind, it is in no wise assembled for the sentimental soul—as you no doubt suspected all along—and yet a thread of tenderness does exist in the fabric of particular stories within.

While lace and verse may be absent, the literal heart is not overlooked. Your circulation stands to be improved after moving from *The Iron Cross* by Frank Sisk to the novelette by John Lutz titled *The Lemon Drink Queen.* The lineup is abundantly stimulating.

So resolve, if you have not yet done so, to return each month of the new year, and it may become an exercise in futility to jog around the block. Running through these 160 pages monthly should go far toward filling your days with the breath of life—and, of course, the rattle of death.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 19, No. 2, Feb. 1974. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions $9.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408.

The artistry of nature is admired as a matter of course; on the other hand, the artfulness of man is frequently overlooked.

I first laid eyes on him as he strolled with utmost leisure through St. Stephen's Green in Dublin. He was very observable. His oval-shaped belly was encased without a wrinkle in a crimson vest. A green tam with tassle clung rakishly to the right side of his leonine head. In the left lapel of his tweed jacket he wore some sort of metallic insignia. Carrying his belly with pomp, he paused often, plump hands clasped behind his back, to admire man's artistry with nature—the rustic footbridge over the artificial pond, the graceful silhouette of the tulip tree, the floral circles and triangles of blues and whites and pinks. His name, I learned later, was Padraig McAdam.

A few days afterward I saw him again. He was standing on the first step to the entrance of the

Royal Hibernian Hotel and receiving homage, it appeared, from a man on the sidewalk who perforcedly had to look up in order to support his end of the conversation. As I passed them on my way to the lobby, I noted that the second man, hatless, wore his gray-blond hair combed back tight on his long head. His eyes were covered by rimless glasses and his upper lip by a thin moustache that looked quite white against the deep tan of his skin.

". . . your part, man, and I'll see the bustards don't peck your lights . . ." These words, flecked with levity, came in a soft Irishness from the man I was soon to know as Padraig McAdam.

Ten minutes later he was three stools away from me in the bar and ordering gin and water. After several sidelong glances, I finally identified the insignia in his lapel as a miniature Iron Cross. It didn't surprise me. During the Second World War, Germany was considered a slightly lesser evil than England by thousands of Irish Republicans, but not many ever had done anything positive about it. What had this man done, and why, a quarter of a century after the war, was he still so proud of it? I quit wearing my Purple Heart ribbon in 1947.

During the next few weeks our paths kept crossing. I'm not quite beneath notice myself, and so eventually we began to exchange a nod and a smile as we passed. Then, late one afternoon, we came face to face in Dame Court, which has only two refuges to offer—The Stag's Head or The Stag's Tail. We chose the former.

"You're a Yank, aren't you?" McAdam said as we entered the premises.

"That's right. How can you tell?"

"Faith, it's the way you walk, I suppose, and the cut of your cloth."

"We're conditioned to a kind of canter."

He chuckled. "You say it well. No time at all to get where you're going but here you are." He looked at the bartender and back at me again. "What'll you drink, sir?"

"Well, I've been too partial to Guinness," I said, patting my belly. "I don't know."

"Gin's the tot then, with a spot of water. Nothing like it to shave away the suet."

"I'll go along with that," I said,

thinking that he did not seem to represent the efficacy of his own prescription.

"That's it then, Jerry. Two Corks with water. And, mind you, don't overdo the latter, me boy."

"Ice in mine, too," I said.

"That's the Yank in you right there, if nothing else." He held out his hand. "My name's Padraig McAdam, but join the crowd and call me Paddy."

"Mason Shaw. Or Mac in casual circles."

"Shaw? Do I detect a green corpuscle in your veins?"

"Dozens."

We sat at a table in the corner and started to talk. As it so often happens in pubs everywhere, and particularly in Ireland, one guarded intimacy swiftly leads to one less guarded. It's not drink alone that does it. It's that item called atmosphere. The Stag's Head has a corner on the commodity, going back to the early nineteenth century. One can nearly feel the patina of a thousand conversations darkening its wood paneling. Overhead, the stained-glass windows seemed clouded with endless echoes. The smoke from many tons of tobacco has given an amber tint to the crystal chandeliers, and protruding from the wall above the foggy mirror behind the bar is the stuffed stag's head, its shy brown taxidermic eye sometimes hypnotic.

Within twenty minutes McAdam knew I came from Connecticut and I knew he was originally from Cork. He knew I'd come to Ireland with the capricious notion of acquiring a cottage for future holidays, that I'd searched without result so far, and that I soon must return home to my patient wife who would much prefer to own a holiday cottage in Maine or Nova Scotia.

He knew my age and I knew his, which was the same as mine plus a couple of months. He knew my three children were old enough to be almost self-sufficient. I knew he'd once escaped wedlock by the skin of his teeth and had remained disengaged ever since.

By the time we'd downed the second round I was beginning to treat him to my views on politics, baseball, golf, taxes, and diesel fuel (which apparently had impressed me as Dublin's major air pollutant).

"Let me stop your fine flow a wee moment," he said, "while I go to the bar for more fuel."

"Why not," I said rhetorically.

As he returned to the table with the good Cork gin, my nervous eye spotted that Iron Cross

in his lapel, and I kept looking at it with a kind of stupid fascination. Settling his bulk in the chair, he tilted his head downward into the cushion of double chins and arched an eyebrow in a comic query.

"Pardon me for staring," I said, "but that insignia, it seems sort of out of place. None of my business,

of course, but still it arouses—"

"Go on with you, Mac. That's the reason I wear the bloody thing, to attract a bit of attention."

"You succeed. Matter of fact, Paddy, I haven't seen anyone wearing one since the days of the Third Reich. And then only in pictures. Where'd you get it—in some kraut hockshop?"

He laughed softly. "Kraut hockshop. Ah, you Yankees have a merry way with words. But no, that's not how I got it. No, bedad, I earned it in a sense and that's the holy truth."

"You performed a service for the Nazis?"

"I'd rather say I did a little something for the Germans—in a sense. Mind you now, Mac, not all of them swallowed Adolph's gibberish. Not by a long shot. To be sure, I hobnobbed with a few of them that may have had a swastika tattooed on their tail. Then there was one I knew who would have sucked Hitler's big toe. Ulrich Spinnor he called himself in those brave times. You probably never heard of him but he was a key man in the espionage section of the Abwehr, quite the key indeed." McAdam, jowls tight with delight, took a generous sip of gin. "Spinnor. Ulrich Spinnor. Ah, there's a name to quell the devil himself. In case you don't know it, me lad, *Spinn* means spider in German and *Spion* means spy. So by sort of interweaving the two, old Ulrich managed to be a bit of both. Nowadays he passes himself off as Helmuth Sperling."

I resorted to the gin myself. "You pique my curiosity, Paddy."

"Thank the good Lord for anything that makes a day interesting."

"I don't suppose you'd want to tell me the story," I said.

"Did you ever see an oyster walk up stairs?"

"Signifying what exactly?"

"I'll tell you the tale from beginning to end. I haven't had the pleasure of telling it in years."

Grinning, I got to my feet. "We'll need more fuel, then."

"It won't do any harm, Mac."

Now, I'm not essentially a political creature, Padraig McAdam commenced. Now and then I cast a stone at John Bull, but less so now than when I was a young man. Hence, when I hopped over to Spain in nineteen thirty-nine, a few months after Franco had placed himself in the driver's seat, I didn't know a Falangist from a toreador, and cared not a whit.

The purpose of my trip was strictly business. I was there to sell paint. For houses, you know,

and anything else that might need touching up. Civil wars, as we Irish know so well, always leave the domestic scene rather untidy. I figured Spain was a ready market for a good Cork line of paints, varnishes and lacquers.

Well, anyway, I arrived in Madrid in late April and took a room in a small hotel in the Avenida de Jose Antonio. After unpacking, I went outdoors for a stroll through the neighborhood. The weather was grand. It's always my custom, when I'm a stranger in a city, to survey the ground immediately adjoining my base of operations. What I'm looking for, of course, is a decent pub.

I walked along the Calle de Preciados and then up the Calle de Montera and eventually back along Jose Antonio. At a diagonal from my hostelry I discovered just the place—Los Gatos Negros it was called. I went inside and sampled a sherry, oloroso. There's a golden goodness for you, Mac. Give the dry sacks to creaky old British colonels. I'll take the oloroso every time. I tried a red wine, corriente as they say, which means it's not long off the vine, and it was right up there with many a vintage Burgundy that would have you digging deep in your pocket. I tried the Sangria, of course, and then took a fair taste of Dubonnet, Campari and Fundador. I concluded the session with a jar of Guinness (which, may the Lord be praised, was conveniently on tap) and a double tot of Irish with the barest splash of mineral water.

After that, Los Gatos Negros was my favorite spa.

For seventeen days I remained in Madrid, falling into a comfortable routine. I rose each morning at eight, more or less, and broke my fast with an orange, some cheese, a small loaf of bread and a pot of strong tea. Between ten and twelve forty-five I paid my respects to potential customers—painting contractors mostly. I dined usually at one-thirty in the sort of restaurant that today would rate a listing of three forks. A stew called sopa castellana was a dish I had so often that I still remember it well: ham, croutons, and floating on top, a fried egg. From two to four, taking a page from the native book, I enjoyed siesta. By five I was arriving at Los Gatos Negros in the most expansive of moods, and there I would stay until midnight, mingling with all and sundry, the very broth of a drinking Celt, holding forth with great wit in a mixture of pidgin Spanish and pidgin English that beggars description.

In those days, you'll recall, Neville Chamberlain and his black umbrella were much in the news. The sorrowful old bustard was creating a flight pattern between Downing Street and Berchtesgaden in an effort, as he used to tell rain-soaked groups at Croydon Airport, to find peace in our time. Fat chance, poor old blighter. His Bavarian house painter was giving him even more of a runaround than were mine giving me in Madrid.

Anyhow, when deep in me cups, it was apparently me custom in those hallowed evenings, to issue derogatory comments on the prime minister's pathetic illusions and, to be perfectly frank, I often included every other minister in his bloody cabinet and tossed in the king and queen to boot. If you were to judge my character solely on the basis of me wicked words and dastardly deeds from, let's say, ten o'clock to midnight in Los Gatos Negros, you would unhesitatingly memo me as a fanatically anti-British, card-carrying I.R.A. bomb-maker with no other purpose in life but to see John Bull greedily eating the dirt beneath me feet. And here I was, mind you, Mac, no more than a civil-enough paint salesman gone slightly berserk at the end of a quiet day's work.

On the fifteenth day of my sojourn, early in the evening, while the rein of reason was still holding my tongue in check, a prissy little pelt of a man sidled up to my table and whisperingly introduced himself as Hans Lustmacher. Faith, and I nearly boxed his ears for him, what with that name and his tutti-frutti appearance, but he must have read the impulse in my eye, for he raised a little pink palm and said in quite good English:

"Act not in haste, Mister McAdam."

"And why the devil not?" I asked.

"Something I got to say could interest you," he replied.

"I doubt it," I said. "Now, where'd you get me name?"

"From our esteemed host, Senor Quedado."

"Senor Quedado will hear a strong word from me on the matter," I promised. "So state your business, if you've really got any, and be quick about it."

Well, the little scut wished to sit down at the table. What he wanted to say, he said, must be handled with the utmost confidentiality, bedad. Besides, he's dying to buy me a drink.

—At this moment I interrupted McAdam with the observation that we ourselves were in dire

need of replenishment and implored him to suspend the narrative for the couple of minutes I'd require to go to and from the bar. McAdam gave the suggestion due consideration and then pronounced himself parched.

As I returned from the bar he seemed to be lost in amused contemplation, a wide smile playing with the corners of his mouth. I set a glass in front of him. He bestowed upon it a look of benignity. He lifted it and took a generous sip. He then got going again—

Well, what it all boiled down to, Mac, was that this Hans Lustmacher (and heaven help a sprat with a name like that) was some sort of cat's-paw for German espionage. He didn't put it quite so plain. He dolled it up, he did. Said he was connected with a special department of the German government in a section known as the Wirtschaft. Economics, that is. Seems these Wirtschafters were insatiable for statistics. Couldn't get enough of them on their own. So they were always eager to recruit consultants—English-speaking ones especially. Fees, liberal fees, were paid promptly on finished projects in whatever specie the so-called consultant preferred. Would I be at all interested in exploring the offer further?

"Well, I might be," I said. "I'm a veritable storehouse of production and consumption figures for Beamish stout in Cork as compared to Guinness in Dublin, if that's the sort of thing you're after. Or horses, now—I can name you every stud farm in the Republic and tell you how many thoroughbreds and half-breds they yield in a year. Is that the grist you're wanting, Hans, me lad?"

"Ja, something like that," he said. "Except the Irish Republic is not of immediate interest to us."

"Shame on you, man," I said. "It's the pearl of the world."

"Lovely, ja, so very lovely," he said in haste. "No offense meant, Mister McAdam. But at this time it's British statistics that attract us."

"In that case I can tell you that Belfast has one of the finest cigarette factories in Europe," I said, "but the end product is fit only for a cockney."

"Cockney. That is it." He acted as if I'd invented the strain on the spot. "On this lineage our files are far from complete. We wish to know more."

"I can tell you all you'd care to know about the breed in one hyphenated word," I said. "How about the Welsh?"

"The Welsh?" He pondered this a bit. "Those are from Wales, ja?"

"Right you are, me bravo," I said, enjoying myself.

"Anything on the Welsh would be welcome," he said.

"Then there are the Scots," I said. "I suppose you'd like to know how many bagpipes the bustards possess."

"That, too," he agreed. "No detail is to be considered insignificant. Many parts make a whole."

As you may have noticed, Mac, there's a bit of an imp in me that enjoys a wee conspiracy. It's what I get for not playing chess. Anyhow, the result of my chat with this Wirtschaft cockalorum was to leave the door temptingly open. I told him I was leaving Madrid within thirty-six hours but would be returning again in a month to close some pending business. Meanwhile, I would give serious consideration to his interesting offer.

As fate would have it, I did not actually get back to Spain for several months, and then I went first to Barcelona for a week prior to going on to Madrid. Frankly, I'd nearly forgotten Lustmacher and his cute proposition, but Lustmacher and his people had not forgotten me. Bless their black hearts, they accosted me the second evening I put in an appearance at Los Gatos Negros. The small fruit, first off; seems he was reconnoitering my mood and, finding it mellow, he merged into the background after introducing me to a stump of a man with shoulders like a wrestler and a face like a land mine. His name was Katzwald and he had five British notes of one hundred pounds each in his wallet. He spread the pelf out fanlike on the table as we chatted away. The substance of what he said was that the five hundred was mine free and clear if I would agree to meet a friend of his two days later in Lisbon. Since it's on my way home, I said, I think I can arrange it. The land-mine face exploded in a chortle of delight and Katzwald slid the money across the table to me along with a small envelope the size of a baby's hand.

"Dunt open dat undil zhu aline," he warned me.

I opened the envelope in my hotel late that night. The instructions were terse. After memorizing them I burned the note, as it commanded.

The next afternoon I was on a flight to Lisbon. I checked into a hotel whose name escapes me at the moment, as does almost anything Portuguese. The phone call I was waiting for came through on schedule at six-thirty. After

verifying my name, the man at the other end of the line, using a French accent, gave me a number to phone immediately. I did so. The answering voice was feminine—*femme fatale*, I remember thinking at the time—with a husky German accent, the way Marlene Dietrich handled it. This lady told me to leave the hotel by the main entrance and to turn left and start walking. When I had proceeded fifty metres along the sidewalk I would see a shop window in which rugs were displayed. Wait there at the curb. A limousine will pick you up and transport you to your destination.

Well, faith, and this cloak-and-dagger business appealed tremendously to the imp within. I followed the directions with a higher degree of precision than is customary among us Corkmen. Sure enough, a limousine opened its door to me on the spot that was specified and I was chauffeured in grand style to an apartment building in Rua Alves Correia. The chauffeur—black as the ace of spades, he was—told me in a Jamaican accent to enter the apartment lobby and ride the elevator to the fifth floor. Go to the door numbered 606 and knock thrice, pause, and knock twice again. Would you believe it, Mac? Like Hitchcock and Mata Hari collaborating, is it not, now, really?

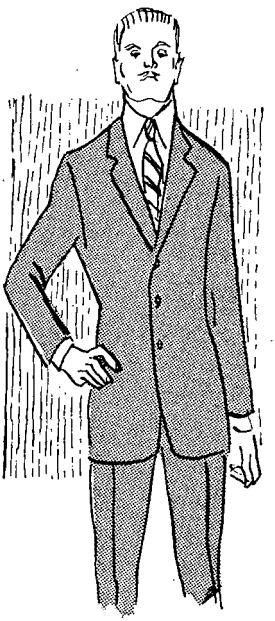
Suffice it to say, when the door to that apartment opened, the person holding the knob was as curvaceous a blonde as you'd ever wish to see. She gave her name as Emma and invited me in. In a large sitting room off the foyer, there stood a man who was introduced as Ulrich Spinnor, whom I've previously mentioned. A first-class Nazi, this bird—the original storm trooper—with *Mein Kampf* on his coffee table and *Die Gotterdammerung* on his phonograph. He damned near gave me the old *Heil* but thought better of it and held out a hard hand. Then he came right to the bloody point.

Der Führer of the Third Reich was gifted with extraordinary foresight. In case of hostilities between Great Britain and the Fatherland, Hitler desired to know as much as possible about the civil and military resources of the foe. To accomplish this, the Third Reich was informally recruiting sympathetic citizens of neutral countries. Ireland was one such country that was high on the priority list because it had suffered greatly for centuries under the hobnailed boot of the English.

At this point I told Spinnor to stow the blarney and get down to the simple case of Padraig McAdam. What in heaven's name

did he think a paint salesman could do?

"First, it is important that you have the volition," he said, ramrod straight, the very image of vo-



lition incarnate and inviolable.

"Say I've got it," I said.

"For the time being we will say that," he said. "Can you operate a wireless, Herr McAdam?"

"Not up to now."

"Can you read a map?" he asked.

"That I can do."

"Can you read a blueprint?" he went on.

"With one hand tied behind me back," I snapped.

I won't try your patience with the entire catechism, but it went on for longer than enough. At the end of it I was somehow accepted as a probationary spy for the Abwehr which, as you may know today, was once the name of Germany's so-called intelligence organization. This Spinnor was the top dog in the branch—Abwehrstellen—that operated from Spain and Portugal.

I left Lisbon the next morning, with a code book in my vest pocket so small it could be read only through a magnifying glass. The date was the first of September. Not one we're like to forget. The news greeted me from all points of the compass as soon as I set foot on this blessed old sod.

The Germans had struck at Poland with their vaunted blitzkrieg. Warsaw was burning. Within a matter of hours France and England were expected to declare war.

How about a drink, Mac? Don't answer that. The question is purely rhetorical.

—Padraig McAdam rose to his feet and moved his bulk without waver to the bar. Returning with full glasses hardly awash, he wore again that expression of inward amusement. Emanating from a source in the folds of his chin, it spread upward in fleshy arcs to his

florid cheeks and then onward to touch his green eyes with a bright sparkle.

I don't know what he may have looked like when Sturm und Drang raged across Europe, but now he certainly looked like no kind of spy. He could pass more easily as a bishop without a diocese and glad of it, or a funeral director with unlimited access to a superior wine cellar; but of course spies are not supposed to look like spies—

"Good health to you, Paddy," I said, hoisting my glass.

"Slawncha," he said, hoisting his.

"You've led a hazardous life."

"You don't know the half of it."

"Ulrich Spinnor got in touch with you then, after your return to Cork?"

"Indeed he did. Before I left Lisbon I'd given him a mail drop to use—a pub in McCurtain Road licensed to a cousin of mine."

"Did this cousin suspect what you were up to?"

"Not in a thousand years. I told the jackeen I'd met a fancy senorita on me travels and didn't want Mother to know I was conducting an amorous correspondence. My female parent was alive at that time, God rest her soul, and I was her sole support and comfort."

"Slawncha," I said, grinning. "Did anyone ever call you incorrigible?"

Slawncha gus sale agut," he said, winking. "Father Mooney often did—a parish priest who taught me a little Latin and a good bit of Irish."

"Tell me, Paddy, were you ever really able to pass on to the Germans information of any positive value?"

"Regularly. Positive and also negative."

"Like what?"

"Well, let's consider my first assignment. I recall it with no trouble at all. It began with a letter from Spinnor. He often signed himself Carlotta and penned a billet-doux that would knock the eye out of your head. Decoded, the message advised me to take up residence in Liverpool within the week. I was to remain there for a month, making a systematic survey of the harbor. What the Abwehr wanted was a report of the number of cargo vessels arriving and departing, the kind of cargo incoming, the daily tonnage, the flags being flown, the number of vessels with naval escorts—data of that stripe."

"And you were actually able to compile such a report?"

"Not only did I compile it, my skeptical friend, but it was so well received by my contact abroad

that I received a thousand pounds for me trouble. How do you like that, now?"

"I'll be damned."

"You really mean *I'll* be damned, don't you?"

"Every man to his own philosophy, Paddy. Somehow, though, you don't look like a Nietzschean."

"Neither, for that matter, did Nietzsche."

I laughed. "How long did you work for them?"

"Oh, until the early part of nineteen forty-four."

"Before the Allies landed in Normandy?"

"That was June, wasn't it? Yes, a few months before that is when I got out—came in out of the cold, as they say nowadays."

"You quit because you foresaw the invasion. Is that it?"

"That's not it at all, at all. Man, but you rate my prescience high. Frankly, I knew less about the coming invasion than the first hundred men you'd meet in a stroll along O'Connell Street when the pubs were closing."

"Some spy."

He let out a roar of laughter, bracing his egg-shaped belly with both fat hands. "You've stuffed it in a nutshell. No, my fine friend, I quit the spy business for a more practical reason than the simple prospect of a military invasion of Europe, which I knew nothing about anyway. I quit as soon as I learned that Admiral Canaris got Hitler's boot in the seat of the pants. You've no doubt heard of the admiral."

"The name rings a bell."

"He was the head of the Abwehr, the so-called master spy of them all. Apparently he was not running a tight ship. Himmler claimed he was politically unreliable. Anyway, he got the boot and in short order there was a general housecleaning. I decided it was a good time to get out, before my own shortcomings were discovered."

"How does one manage to resign from a spy ring?"

"In my case it was done through an obituary that appeared in *The Cork Examiner*. The gist of it was that I'd been flattened by a lorry and had expired en route to the hospital."

"I should think that would have caused quite a stir among your relatives and friends."

"Not a bit of it, for the simple reason that they never saw the notice at all."

"That sounds like quite a trick, Paddy."

"Well, I'll admit some trickery was involved. I had an uncle at the time by the name of Gabriel

Gallagher, and he was composing-room foreman for *The Cork Examiner* and a great power in the union. I'd been a favorite of his since my baby days. I put it to him that a woman in Spain was pestering me by the daily post to take her to wife and that my only hope of escaping for good was to play dead. Being a bachelor himself, Uncle Gabriel was all ears and sympathy. He slapped my obituary into the newspaper at the end of a press run, after lifting out an advertisment for hair oil. Only two copies of that edition carried the sad story of my decease—one for meself as a treasured souvenir, the other to be dispatched to Ulrich Spinnor by one of my agents."

"You had agents of your own?"

"Three of them. Each was recruited over the years because of his special technical ability. The one who was most active bore the code name Cabbage. I developed him, with Spinnor's permission, when the Germans began to seek answers to highly specialized questions about British and American aircraft—infrared equipment, radio frequencies, automatic braking systems on dive bombers. Spinnor was forced to assume that a lot of this stuff was beyond my technical grasp. That's why I put Cabbage on the payroll; and it was Cabbage whom I selected as the man to mail Spinnor the copy of the newspaper that carried word of my untimely end. Thus ended my colorful career as a secret agent."

"Didn't Spinnor ever try to pick up the pieces through contact with Cabbage or the others?"

The makings of a grin flickered at the corners of McAdam's mouth. "That would have been impossible for two good reasons, my friend. First, Herr Spinnor never knew the true identities of these agents. He knew only the code names that I'd christened them with. And second," a grin of great mischief spread his mouth wide, "these busy little agents existed solely as figments of my imagination."

After a moment of shock I began to laugh. McAdam joined me.

"You mean," I said half a minute later, "that you pulled the wool over the Abwehr's eyes for years and they never suspected?"

"Incredible as it may seem, that is true."

"You collected money for the undercover activities of three fictional characters named Cabbage and—"

"Cabbage was a Londoner and concentrated there. My second creation, Potato, worked in and around Liverpool. My third, Tur-

nip, roamed around Scotland. All in all, they were quite a productive trio."

"This must have entailed an enormous amount of work on your part, Paddy."

"There were times when I kept busy. That's no lie. But I did enjoy the game and I was paid well for it."

"Why, just the travel necessary to maintain the illusion of a spy ring operating all over Great Britain must have been utterly exhausting."

"To tell the truth, Mac, I never stirred outside of Cork the whole time, except twice to go fishing in Croom."

I stared at him in amazement. "But you told me that your first assignment took you to Liverpool for a month."

"You heard more than you listened to, Mac. What I said was that Spinnor *advised* me to take up residence in Liverpool for a month. Now, I wasn't the sort of lad to take advice from a Nazi any more than I'd take it from Lord Beaverbrook. So I followed my own advice instead and never left Cork."

"Yet you wrote a report on the traffic in Liverpool harbor."

"Sure I did."

"Well, how did you?"

"The word is getting around that we have a fine harbor in Cork. Sure, and it mayn't have been half so busy as Liverpool's in nineteen thirty-nine. Still, we were handling a fair number of vessels and they flying flags of all nations. What I did was to make a daily tour of my front yard, so to speak, and multiply the ships I saw by two and call the total Liverpool."

"And you applied this rule-of-thumb method to all your efforts on behalf of Germany?"

"As often as not. Of course occasions arose where I had nothing at all to guide me. I remember a request from Spinnor about ammunition dumps in the London area. Attributing the research to Cabbage, I simply copied a map from an atlas in the city library and indicated with red crosses two such imaginary dumps—one in Essex and another in Middlesex, both in what looked to be sparsely populated areas."

"For this they awarded you the Iron Cross," I said, laughing.

"Well, no, now. Officially I was never awarded this decoration. Spinnor was so impressed by my ability as a spy that in nineteen forty-two he recommended me for it—the Iron Cross, second class—but was turned down on the grounds that this honor can be conferred only on a citizen of the

Third Reich." McAdam looked at the clock behind the bar and then checked it with a thin gold watch that he pulled by a leather fob from a pocket of his vest. "Ten minutes of seven. How the time flies when a man's enjoying himself! As much as I dread it, I've got a meeting with a school committee at eight o'clock sharp, and so I'd better be getting along to freshen up."

"Which way are you heading?"

"For the Shelbourne. I keep a room there as a convenience."

"I'm planning to sup at the Russell."

"Then we'll toddle along together."

Not much the worse for the gin we'd downed, McAdam and I left The Stag's Head and walked the short length of Exchequer Street and on into Wicklow. He did all the talking. By the time we reached Grafton Street I'd learned that he was a painting contractor who made a specialty of public and parochial buildings—schools, churches, hospitals, post offices. He no longer handled the brushes himself but devoted his energies to finding the jobs and estimating the costs. He employed four darling old boys, sober a good deal of the time, who hadn't missed a full week's pay in all of two years. Business hadn't always been so bright. There'd been lean days, never doubt it, very lean days indeed, but that was before the good Lord brought him to Bantry Bay.

"Actually I drove down there at the behest of an innkeeper who wanted me to paint some semi-detached guest houses that stood on his grounds." Again that self-satisfied expression of amusement drifted across his face. "As I was traversing a putting green on my way to the guest houses, I passed a man and a woman who were dining alfresco under an orange-colored umbrella. A certain something about the man caught my attention. To this day I can't for the life of me say what it was. But I felt I knew him from another place, another time. Discreet inquiry of the innkeeper disclosed the following:

"The man's name was Helmuth Sperling. The lady with him was his wife. Sperling was the proprietor of an extraordinarily prosperous importing firm that dealt with, among other items, wines and cordials. He had just recently completed construction of a residence as large as some castles. It had a gorgeous view of the Bay.

"A little later, with the cost estimates in my pocket and the innkeeper somewhere else, I started for the orange-colored umbrella.

This time it was the woman who faced me, pink gin in hand. Time had converted her curves into lumps of fat and her hair was not blonde now but more the shade of the umbrella which she sat under. It was Emma, though. I stopped at the table and addressed her by name. Her eyes opened wide and her smile was surprised.

"Old Ulrich jumped into the breach by getting to his feet and declaring me to be out of order. I did not know his wife and how dared I to accost her? He didn't recognize me at all, for I was five stone heavier than when we'd last met and somewhat longer in the tooth. I hastened to correct his oversight by calling him Spinnor and identifying myself.

"His face fell a foot. As you know, I was supposed to be long dead and safely buried, and now the uncivil spalpeen began to wonder aloud why I was still among the quick. Well, I thought it best to get under his skin fast, so I drove the point right back at him. Ulrich Spinnor must also be considered dead, I remarked, and therefore beyond the vengeful reach of many people. Otherwise why was he masquerading as Helmuth Sperling on the southwestern coast of me beloved country?

"He turned a bit pale under the Bantry Bay tan. Emma's mouth fell open and she filled it with a great swallow of pink gin.

"Faith, and he changed his attitude in a hurry. Invited me to sit down. Beamed at me. Grasped me hand like a comrade in arms. But I was having none of it. Giving him the old basilisk eye—and I do it well when I'm in the mood—I explained to the man the salient differences in our positions. I was an Irish citizen standing on Irish soil and using me own name, and my past was an open book. He didn't realize how damned open, of course, because he still considered me as clever a spy as you're apt to find in any recent wars.

"Well, if that's the way the wind was blowing, Herr Sperling wanted to know what would induce me to keep his little secret. I realized then that I'd caught him well by the fundament. I replied that I would give his status due consideration and reach a decision on the matter within the week."

"Don't tell me you're blackmailing him?"

He awarded me a smile of gracious aplomb. "I've never looked at it in that light meself. Indeed, I prefer to think of it as an arrangement of mutual benefit, not counting the untold good it's doing for certain impoverished elements of Irish society."

"You make it sound like downright charity," I said.

"Judge for yourself. The life of a painting contractor is no bed of roses. I must keep four married men fully employed in order that they may provide properly for their families. This is a great moral responsibility. Until I made the arrangement with this wealthy Nazi I couldn't always hold up my end, outside jobs being scarce in the winter and inside jobs being bid keener than a shaved penny.

"Now what do I do when work slackens? I visit a school or a hospital, some such place as is supported by gift, grant or taxes, and which is badly in need of paint but even in worse need of money, and I offer to do a decent job for them at the cost of a single Irish pound—a hundred bloody pence—and the dear people jump at the deal, no questions asked."

"And this bird Spinnor or Sperling pays you the difference."

"That he does."

"Not too cheerfully, I should imagine."

"I've detected a mean glitter in his eyes on occasion."

"Aren't you afraid he might try something desperate?"

"Not a bit of it. I informed the gent upon the renewal of our association that I'd placed a letter in my solicitor's safe as a form of life insurance. He took the thought to heart."

We were entering the north sector of St. Stephen's Green, not far now from our separate destinations.

"Paddy," I said, "do you realize you still haven't told me how you acquired that Iron Cross?"

"So I haven't. Thanks for reminding me. And I'd best divest meself of it for the evening. Father O'Meara—he'll be at the school committee meeting tonight—is death on anything German, from sauerbraten to sauerkraut." He removed the insignia from his lapel and slipped it into his pocket. "I obtained the thing by means of simple thievery. The occasion was a visit I made to the Sperling residence with that enjoyable view of the Bay. Master and mistress were not present when I arrived but were momentarily expected, and a trusting colleen who served them as a housekeeper let me in and sat me down in himself's private study. She was sacked for it the following day.

"Well, in the quarter of an hour I had to myself I let my curiosity off the leash. In a locked desk drawer, which yielded to one of a dozen keys I often carry, I discovered this little memento of happier days—" he patted his pocket proudly, "together with a glowing

citation signed by none other than A. Hitler. I filched the works."

"You're a rascal, Paddy."

"I try to be."

"Didn't Sperling ever demand that you return these items?"

"Never. He's seen me sporting the decoration up and down the countryside with his own two eyes, but he always pretends he doesn't see it. He looks everywhere but at it. Perhaps you can account for his actions, or lack of them, by the fact that the citation that accompanied the cross uses his real name, which is neither Spinnor nor Sperling."

"Paddy, who in hell is this man anyway?"

"Speak of the devil," McAdam said.

Looking ahead, I saw approaching us briskly, as if on parade, the man I'd noticed conversing with McAdam a few weeks earlier in front of the Royal Hibernian. His rimless glasses picked up the westering light and deflected it in tiny flashes. He was nearly abreast of us before, with an unpleasant start, he recognized my Irish friend as my walking companion.

"A good evening to you, Mister Sperling," McAdam said, coming to a stop.

Sperling stopped too, but reluctantly. The white moustache twitched.

"Are you in a hurry, now?" McAdam asked. "Because I'll take but half a minute of your time."

"I do have an appointment, Mister McAdam."

"That makes two you have," McAdam said blithely. "The second is with me tomorrow morning. Say, breakfast at nine."

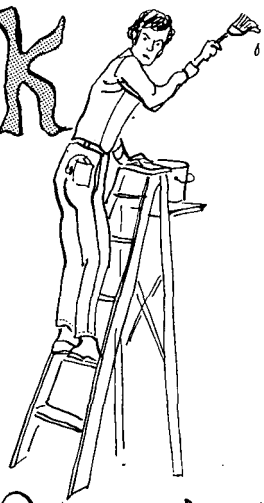
"You're still at the Shelbourne?"

"A veritable fixture." McAdam laid a hand on my shoulder. "By the way, Mister Sperling, it's a pleasure to introduce you to an old friend of mine from back before the last war—Mister Max Finklestone—just in from Tel Aviv to transact a bit of business."

Sperling offered me a limp hand. He didn't look me in the eye. Instead, his gaze wandered to McAdam's bare lapel and clung there as if the sight of it was beyond human endurance.

How true it is: if you can't beat them, join them.

Icky Pink



by Donald Olson

The house came to him that fall in Aunt Ethel's will: a big white frame house with black shutters and spacious veranda flanked by twin catalpa trees. Aunt Ethel had occupied the large downstairs flat and rented the two upper flats. She had often told Carl that the house would comfortably augment his income when it was his. She had advised him to stay where he was when the time came and to rent out all three apartments. He had agreed. He was cozy enough in his tiny apartment and rented an adjacent garage where he conducted his furniture-restoring business.

As it happened, this garage was sold at about the time he inherited the house, so he decided to move into the large flat himself

and work out of the basement. Thus he would be able to keep some of Aunt Ethel's fine antiques and have enough room to display some of the good pieces of furniture that came into his hands in the course of his business dealings.

The one upper flat was already rented to an elderly, retired schoolteacher named Eva Hultquist, while the other smaller flat, recently vacated, needed considerable renovation.

The downstairs needed only painting and papering and, since it was early summer, he embarked upon this task with all the doors and windows wide open. This was not intended as a public invitation to inspect his work and consequently, in the midst of painting the L-shaped livingroom, he was startled to hear a queer little cough behind him. Looking down from the ladder he got his first glimpse of Miss Croomb and Gildy.

"We don't like that color, Mister Man. Not one little bit. Do we, Gildy?"

Miss Croomb's voice was oddly emphatic, yet tiny, like the rest of her. She wasn't five feet tall, a frail creature of indeterminate age—fifty-five? . . . seventy?—with a small brown face so puckered with wrinkles it would seem that once it must have been twice as large and had shrunk, a wizened prune of a face with raisin eyes, all in a nest of weedy gray hair. One thought of pygmies and monkeys.

Gildy, a mixture of Pomeranian and something else, fawn-colored and aged, had huge, glassy, blind blue eyes; there was an uncanny similarity in their looks, those small brown faces and bright moist eyes, the kind of likeness one often notes in a man and wife who have lived together for years.

"We *detest* pink! Don't we, Gildy?" She spoke with the stormy petulance of a little girl, which, because of her age, was curiously disconcerting.

Carl laughed. "It's not pink. It's Mauve Mist."

The monkey face scrunched itself into a grimace. "It's *what*?"

"Mauve Mist."

"Is that what *you* call it? Well, I'm just thankful poor little Gildy is blind and can't see that awful color. She'd throw up." Spying rolls of wallpaper, she added, "Where you gonna put that? Is that pink, too?"

Carl got a bit annoyed. The woman had her nerve barging in without a word and criticizing his taste, but before he could think of a proper put-down she walked over and unrolled enough of the paper to see its design. "Where's

this stuff going, Mister Man?"

"Behind you. On that long wall."

"You mean to tell me just that one wall's gonna be papered and all the others painted that awful icky pink?"

Carl was getting red. "Yes, if you don't mind."

Sarcasm was lost on her. "Well, we *do* mind. Don't we, Gildy? Who wants to live in a place with icky pink walls?"

"No one's asking you to, lady."

"We are too going to live here. Ethel said so."

This left Carl speechless; but then something about the woman jogged his memory. Of course! "It's Miss Croomb. Right? I recall my aunt speaking of you."

"She was my nearest, dearest friend. We were closer than sisters, Ethel and me."

He knew this wasn't true. Whenever Aunt Ethel mentioned Miss Croomb it was more often with exasperation rather than fondness. They had worked together years and years ago as telephone operators at Birnbaum's Department Store. Mousy and friendless, Miss Croomb had played upon Aunt Ethel's soft heart. The strange little creature lived alone at the time with an eccentric father in a tumbledown house on English Hill. The friendship, as Carl recalled, had come to an end shortly before Aunt Ethel died, when she had been forced to employ more candor than her gentle nature preferred in discouraging Miss Croomb's intention of moving in with her.

Well, he certainly didn't want to be bothered with her. "It so happens I'm going to be moving in here myself."

Miss Croomb's jaw shot out. "Ethel said *I* could live here after she was gone."

"Maybe she thought you could rent it from me. But, like I say, I've decided to live here myself."

He climbed down from the ladder, put his brush back in the can of paint and rubbed his hands on a rag. "If you don't mind now, I'm kind of busy."

"You're rude! That's what you are. Beats me why Ethel was always bragging about you."

A precise definition of Miss Croomb's oddness eluded him. It wasn't the way she was dressed, or the words she used; it was some fundamental quality of wrongness that he couldn't yet put his finger on. He wished she would go. Her presence made him jumpy and ordinarily he wasn't a jumpy person. He turned away from her and fumbled with the ladder.

She made a sound and, unbe-

lieving, he looked at her. She was! The wretched woman was actually crying, and the sight of that monkey face awash with tears was infinitely grotesque.

"Look, I'm sorry. Now cut that out. It's nothing to get so worked up about."

She stamped her foot. "Sorry! Oh, yes, that does me a lot of good, don't it? Ethel was *sorry*, too. What am I supposed to *do*?"

"I thought you had a house. I'm sure I remember Aunt Ethel saying you owned a house on English Hill."

"Not anymore I don't. They're taking it away from me. *I* can't pay all those back taxes." Tears continued to gush along the cracks and channels of her face. "Everybody's so spiteful! Tell you one thing and mean another. I don't under*stand*. Ethel said I could live here."

She wasn't mad; nothing so simple as that. Her voice and expression betrayed the panic of the lost and the desperate. Carl found himself weakening, feeling guilty.

"Nobody *wants* us," she blubbered. Even the dog, Gildy, had a forlorn look.

"Look, Miss Croomb, even if I *were* renting this flat the rent would be too steep for you, I'm sure."

This appeared not to have occurred to her, or even to have mattered. She still felt betrayed. She stood there, mute, lips trembling, tears pouring down her face.

Carl wanted nothing so much as to get her out of there. "Listen, upstairs I've got this little two-room flat. It needs a lot of work. When it's ready maybe you could have that."

Self-pity changed in a flash to pique. "Thank you, no. Who wants some inky-dinky two-room flat?"

Gildy made a thin, piping sound. Carl didn't like to look at the animal; its eyes were like blue marbles rimmed with a milky fluid.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That's all I can offer."

Now a furtive look spread over her face. She wiped her sleeve across inflamed eyes which made her look more than ever like a monkey, and scooped the dog into her arms. Then, instead of moving to the door, she marched calmly toward Carl and deliberately upset the can of paint with her foot. The viscid lavender paint spread like a monstrous orchid pancake over the hardwood floor.

Miss Croomb's head twitched back and forth and she stuck her tongue out at Carl. Then, looking at the spreading paint as if it

were spew, she spoke two words with a grimace of utter disgust: "Mauve Mist!" With that she stalked out.

Carl discovered his heart was beating much too fast. He had to sit down and rest awhile before cleaning up the mess.

A month later he had finished renovating the two-room flat and was debating which of two prospective tenants would be more suitable. He was in the basement stripping varnish from a walnut commode when he heard a terrific rapping on the door to his apartment. He went up. It was raining hard and when he opened the door there stood Miss Croomb, drenched and streaming, and in her arms an animal looking more like a sopping white rat than Gildy.

"Well, happy day, Mister Man! Thought we'd be drowned by the time you decided to let us in."

Carl felt a squirmy uneasiness. "What do you want?"

The tiny voice was primly indignant. "We're here to look at that inky-dinky flat."

"It's been rented."

"That's a lie!"

"Starting the first of the month."

"But you promised *me*."

"You said you didn't want it."

"I did not!" Her lips thinned to the vanishing point; abruptly, the tears started again. She stood there, lost and silent, her eyes streaming.

He wished he could slam the door in her face. "Now look here, Miss Croomb. There's nothing I can do about it."

Her appearance was both grotesque and pathetic. "What am I supposed to do? Sleep in the street?"

Her simplemindedness, whether feigned or genuine, made him squirm. "Don't you have any relatives? Friends?"

"Just Gildy." The dog whimpered and licked her doll-sized fingers.

Suddenly he knew what was wrong with her. The wrinkles and gray hair and old-lady clothes had disguised until now the fact that Miss Croomb was actually a child! Her sudden shifts of mood, her gestures, the quick malice and easy tears: a child in all but years. He should have spotted the truth when she upset the paint; it had been the spiteful act of a child.

Now, most men might have coped with the situation more sensibly than Carl. He was reclusive by nature, not very complex, and inclined to steer clear of emotional situations. To be confronted suddenly by such an irreg-

ular personality destroyed his judgment and caused him to react too impulsively. He took the easiest way out: acquiescence.

"I suppose I could let you have the flat temporarily. Just till you find something. Is that clear? I've promised it to someone starting the first of next month. If you were going to have it permanently you'd have to get rid of your dog. That's a house rule: no pets. Mrs. Hultquist, in the other flat, had a Persian cat to which she was very attached. I made her get rid of it. So you'd better start looking for something right away. You wouldn't want to part with Gildy, I'm sure."

"Oh, noooooo," she crooned, nuzzling the sopping head. "Gildy's almost as close to me as Ethel was."

So that afternoon Miss Croomb moved in, bringing with her nothing but a bulging shopping bag filled with the ragtag relics of her life.

Carl explained to Mrs. Hultquist that Miss Croomb was only a temporary lodger; hence, the dog. The lady made no fuss, merely remarking that Miss Croomb was a "peculiar-looking little thing."

The words she used the following morning were not quite so charitable. She told Carl that Miss Croomb kept banging on her door all evening complaining that Mrs. Hultquist's television was disturbing her sleep. "My goodness, it was only eight o'clock. Nobody but a child would go to bed at that hour."

"Just try not to pay any attention to her."

"I did, but it didn't work. You'd better come up and see what she's done."

Carl followed her upstairs. Scrawled in messy black crayon across Mrs. Hultquist's white-painted door were the words: BEWARE OF WITCH.

"Now I ask you, Carl, what sort of woman would do a thing like that? I'm surprised you'd let her stay here."

He tried to explain that Miss Croomb had been a friend of his aunt's. He promised to wash off the offending words and to reprimand Miss Croomb.

Miss Croomb, however, denied responsibility. "Wasn't me. Was it, Gildy?" Carl detected a childlike slyness in Miss Croomb's moist eyes. "Some bad boys must have come in from the street and done it. I saw some bad boys hanging around out there. I did, really."

Since it was true that the outside hall door at the foot of the stairs was never locked, conceivably pranksters could have done the deed. Even though he didn't

believe it, Carl tried to persuade Mrs. Hultquist that that's what had happened.

The following afternoon Miss Croomb came knocking at Carl's door. "You seen Gildy, Mister Man?"

He said he hadn't.

She frowned. "I saw the little rascal go downstairs." She eyed him narrowly. "You *positive* you haven't seen her?"

"Why would I lie about it?"

Without answering, she went out in the street and called the dog's name, and kept calling her for the next hour. Once he happened to look out the window as she spotted a small white animal far up the street. With a shriek she took off after it, and there was something unsettling to the mind in the way she scampered up the sidewalk like a child.

That night he heard her sobbing in her rooms. So did Mrs. Hultquist. "It nearly drove me batty, Carl. Finally I went over and tried to comfort her. Why, she carries on like a child over that animal. You know how I adored my Han Chi, but I didn't go to pieces when I had to give her up."

Carl was pleased to observe this further evidence of Miss Croomb's devotion to Gildy. If he insisted the dog had to go, she would have very little choice but to follow.

This ace in the hole was lost when he went into the garage to get a steak from the freezer, which, because of its size, couldn't be kept in the kitchen.

When he opened the freezer door he found the missing Gildy, her glacial blue eyes staring out at him with a passive, rigid blankness. Carl sprang back because the lifelessness of the animal was not at first apparent. It was only when he noticed the dried ribbon of blood on the dog's muzzle and the stiffness of its limbs that he began to shake. He slammed the freezer door and locked the garage.

He tried to anticipate Miss Croomb's game, but this required him to reason as a child would. Having no sympathy with children nor any experience whatsoever, he could not imagine what she meant to accomplish by this cruel stunt. However, it did fortify his resolve. Miss Croomb, dog or no dog, must go.

He waited till after midnight, then stole into the garden and dug a deep hole near the chestnut tree. Then he whisked Gildy out of the freezer, carried the stiff body outside, wrapped it in aluminum foil, and buried it in the hole. While doing this he felt a recurring spasm of horror, but at the same time a childish naughti-

ness, a one-up-on-you sort of black joy. He would show her that two could play the same game.

The following day, running into Eva Hultquist at the garbage can, he noted a frostiness in that lady's manner.

"Feeling better today?" he inquired jauntily. The disposal of the dog had given him a sense of assurance and purpose. No more pussyfooting. Miss Croomb was being tossed out before another day passed.

"Hardly," Mrs. Hultquist said. "Not after last night."

"Miss Croomb again?"

"You might say that."

"Don't worry. I'm throwing her out this morning."

Eva Hultquist seemed anxious to get away. "Don't bother on my account. I've had word my sister's ill. I'm going out to Michigan and live with her."

"You're giving up your apartment?"

"Yes."

Carl didn't believe for a minute the story about the sister from Michigan. She simply didn't think he was serious about getting rid of Miss Croomb. Well, he'd show her.

As it turned out, it was easier said than done. Not that he minced words with Miss Croomb. He told her straight out that she'd have to go. "I can't afford to lose good tenants on your account."

Miss Croomb didn't seem at all abashed. "You mean that old hen, Eva? It's not on my account she's getting out of here."

"I happen to believe it is."

"I woke her up last night and told her what you were doing. We watched you from her bedroom window, burying poor little Gildy."

"Did you tell her why I was burying her?"

"She could *see* Gildy was dead."

It made him queasy to look at her. "Aren't you ashamed? Killing your own pet."

"Not me, Mister Man. You killed her."

"Why would I do that?"

"Don't ask me."

"Well, now that we're being blunt about things, you may as well know I want you out of here this afternoon."

She gave her head a smart-alecky twitch. "Not going."

"Oh, no? We'll see about that."

"I don't have a dog no more, so I can stay."

She walked boldly past him into his own apartment where she sat down in Aunt Ethel's Victorian needlepoint armchair.

"She used to tell me I couldn't sit in this chair. Said I was too

messy. Said I'd drip chocolate-covered cherries on it. She loved chocolate-covered cherries. So do I. You got any?"

"No."

"I guess you knew she liked chocolate-covered cherries. You were always bringing her some."

He didn't answer. His heart was acting funny again.

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Always bragging about you, she was. I was just as nice to her, but she never liked me."

"I'm sure there was a reason if she didn't."

"Reason was y-o-u, Mister Man. Hadn't been for you she would have liked me. Then I would have got this house and you would have been out in the cold. But she said I could live in this flat when she was gone."

"She had no right to say that—if she did."

"Get some."

"What?"

"Chocolate-covered cherries, stupid."

"Get your own. After you've packed your things and got out of here."

Prepared for another flood of tears, he was caught off balance when she giggled. "When we was watching you bury poor little Gildy, wrapping her all up in tinfoil and popping her into the ground, I put a bug in that old Eva's ear. About you and Ethel."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"All those chocolate-covered cherries. Everybody knew about those chocolate-covered cherries you kept bringing her, greedy old thing that she was."

Carl began to sweat. "I don't get what you're driving at."

"Plain as day, it was. You did the old lady in. Your own flesh and blood."

"That's crazy!"

"I suppose *you* think it was me. Suppose you think I had a chocolate-covered cherry stuffed full of arsenic or something when I'd come to see her. And sneaked it into her box that you brought her."

"Aunt Ethel died of heart failure." His own heart was thumping with a crazy rhythm.

"Maybe. Maybe if they was to dig her up and study her insides and was to dig Gildy up and study her insides they wouldn't find no arsenic in either of 'em. Then again, maybe they would. And if they did and that old Eva told 'em about seeing you burying poor little Gildy, well . . . I guess that would fix your wagon, Mister Man."

How could she have known? It was insane—she couldn't possibly

know—but even to have guessed . . .

Then all at once something even more inconceivable sent an icy tremor through his body. Was it possible that she was trying to frame him for Aunt Ethel's murder with no idea that he really had committed it? Did she think *she* had killed Aunt Ethel? Suppose, unknowingly, each of them . . . but what would have been *her* motive? Surely no one would kill a person simply because she wanted to come and live in a certain apartment. No one would be that vindictive.

No one, that is, except a child.

Miss Croomb looked around the room. "I still hate this awful icky pink. I want something with ivy in it. At home we always had ivy-patterned wallpaper. It was pretty."

"I've heard all I want to hear, Miss Croomb. Now, pack up and get out."

She stood up. "Oh, stop fussing. I'm going. But I'll be back."

At the door she looked around at him. "And don't you forget—*ivy*," she reminded him sharply.

Carl sat down as soon as she was gone. His heart still raced. Once more, he tried to think as a child would; a grown-up child. It was hopeless. He stared glumly at the walls. Mauve Mist: it had a pretty sound, but like the misleading labels on food boxes, like everything calculated to soothe or excite the adult mind, it had an absence of candor, of the candor existing only among children. The color was as false as the name. She was right, of course. There was a truer description: icky pink.

Perhaps he would do it over. The longer he looked at it the less he liked it.

Ivy. It did sound fresh and frank and cheerful. With these somber mahogany ceiling beams it was just what the room needed.

Not that he thought she'd really come back, any more than Aunt Ethel would. Nevertheless, just to be on the safe side, he stopped at the wallpaper store when he went to town the next morning. Then on the way home, he bought a box of chocolate-covered cherries.

In retrospect, perhaps it's wiser to circumvent an obstacle than to meet it head-on.

The Seersucker Heart

by Henry Slesar

Actually, Jack Levitt thought Gil Crown wrote good, foursquare copy on the accounts to which he was assigned, so when their mutual boss, Maxfield, dropped the adjective "pedestrian" at lunch, Levitt made a weak defense. "I dunno," he said, breaking a salt stick, "maybe some ad copy *should* be pedestrian. I mean, a lot of ads sound like they're running. What's wrong with some that just *walk*?"

Maxfield didn't think that was so clever. "Matter of fact," he said, picking his teeth with a matchbook, "Gil's going to get the ax, first of the month. Don't quote me, but that's the word."

"Fired? Gil?" Levitt was genuinely shocked. "He's only been

here two months. You know the kind of *hell* he went through before he got this job?"

"Laid off almost a year, wasn't he?"

"A year, nothing. Seventeen months without a pay check. How's that for a record?"

"Maybe that was the trouble," Maxfield said. "He must have gotten rusty, lying around the back yard like an old teakettle." Maxfield wasn't exactly smirking, but he seemed pleased by his imagery.

Levitt enjoyed a healthy flush of hatred for his supervisor. Then he ate his meal, smacking his lips over the London broil and the rissolé potatoes and the chocolate éclair. After lunch, he and Maxfield strolled over to the pool parlor on the Avenue of the Americas and shot a gentlemanly game of eight ball.

When Levitt returned to the office, limping slightly as he went down the corridor, he passed the little cubicle where Gil Crown was hunkered over his creaky noiseless, making the machine go chukka-chukka as he wrote still another piece of good, foursquare, pedestrian copy.

Levitt went inside and closed the door. "Gil," he said, "can you stand a moment of truth?"

Gil Crown turned to him, hands still held pawlike in typing position, adding to his bearish look. He was a big man with shaggy gray edges. He gave Levitt an apologetic smile, the only kind he could manage. "Why not?" he said. "You know what they say about the truth, it sets you free."

Levitt cleared his throat. "Speaking of being set free . . ." he said. Then he told him.

As Gil listened, his half-smile faded imperceptibly, two round spots of color appeared under his cheekbones, and he made a sound that startled Levitt and caused him to regret his decision to be the tidings-bearer. It was a low, elemental, animal sound.

"Maybe I shouldn't have told you," Levitt said hastily. "You know how things are, one day they're canning you, the next day you're vice-president in charge of paper towels." Then he saw tears in the big man's eyes.

"I'm sorry," Gil said, swiveling, sparing Levitt the sight of his face. "It's a hell of a thing. I'm sorry. If you knew what this job meant—"

"Sure I do."

"I was out almost a year and a half. I crawled to everybody in this town, crawled on my hands and knees until I made people hate me for making them feel ashamed. I got five kids, you know—a skinny little wife and five

skinny little kids—all good as dead."

"You're a good writer," Levitt said. "I mean that. You're good. You'll get something else."

"The hell I will. The business is overrun with smart youngsters, clever headlines bursting out of their mouths every two minutes. This was the job I had to keep, you know that." He put his head on the desk. "Mother of God," he said, "how do I go home and tell my wife?"

Levitt wanted to leave, but he was pinned to the seat by an unabsolved guilt. After a while, he said, "Anything can happen, Gil, anything. You never know about business; it has a peculiar kind of heart."

"*Heart?*" Gil looked at him with a wild face. "What are you talking about, *heart*? Where do you get that stuff, off the Good Ship Lollipop?"

"I mean it, no kidding. It's not entirely selfish, but you *gotta* have a heart in business; if people think you don't, your name stinks, your image suffers. Listen, I know. I went through exactly what you're going through now."

"You?"

"Yeah," Jack Levitt said. "Sure I did. Not so long ago, either. Listen, you ever notice my gimpy leg?"

Gil Crown said, "What's that bum leg got to do with anything?"

"Plenty." Levitt took a cigarette from the pack on Gil's desk. He had quit for the third time that year, but he needed a smoke now.

"It was three years ago," he said. "I was working in the grocery products division of the agency. The group head was a ratfink named Simpson who was sick with hepatitis or something when I was hired and had no say in the matter. Naturally, he hated my insides for that, and pushing a piece of copy through him was like putting your hand in a meat grinder. It didn't take me long to guess that Simpson would be working to get me canned. About two weeks before Christmas, a media rep I used to be friendly with gave me the tip. Simpson had won his point with the brass of the agency, and I was due to be poleaxed right after Christmas.

"You see what I mean by heart? They couldn't dump me right before the jolly season, could they? How would that look to the rest of the business world, kicking the Christmas spirit right in the teeth? Oh, no. DS&B was going to wait until December 26 to wave bye-bye.

"Well, there wasn't much I could do about it. I started making discreet inquiries about jobs,

but the trail was as cold as a witch's Maidenform. It was one of those baddy years. The big agencies had been chopping off heads by the dozen. The small shops were scared. I began to worry. I got stomach pains and thoughts about ulcers.

"Two days before Christmas, I stayed down late at the office, working over my résumé, organizing my proofbook. By the time I left, the regular elevators weren't operating and I had to use the night cars. You know that old building DS&B used to be in before they moved here? Well, they ran two stinking night cars and they had a habit of breaking down simultaneously. Finally, one of them arrived, and I got in. I pushed the button for the lobby floor and the doors closed, but only about halfway. It started down just the same, who knows how. It gave me a funny feeling, seeing the raw brick innards of the building when the elevator descended. I don't even remember thinking that the damned cage was moving faster than usual—all I recall was a sudden awareness of weightlessness, then I hit bottom and the jolt was like having my leg bones jammed into my head. I remember thinking that I didn't *need* that kind of pain, I didn't need any more misery than I already had. Then I simply fainted.

"The truth is, I was lucky. I had busted one leg and cracked a pelvis and nonkilling things like that. I was put in the hospital and the building management was stuck with the fees, but don't think the agency just stood around looking sheepish. They showed heart. They kept me on full salary for the entire five months it took me to knit back to one piece. They sent the agency newsletter to me every month like clockwork, and I even got visits from some of the brass. My birthday came when I was in the hospital, and I got sent a gift by the president, Joe Flimmer. It was a leather travel bar with four bottles of good stuff, and I think Flimmer's secretary wrote the poem that went with it. I still remember it. It said, *'When you come out, we'll give a shout of happiness and glee. In case you didn't know, we miss you so, at good old DS&B.'*

"But here's the topper. When I got back to the agency, all mended except for this limp, they completely forgot about canning me. In fact, by that time the group head, who hated my guts, had moved on to another shop. By the next Christmas, I not only had my old accounts back, I had a two-grand raise. So you see what

I mean, Gil? About the heart?"

Gil Crown was looking at his big hands. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks for telling me, Jack. Listen, when did Maxfield say this was going to happen?"

"First of the month, according to him. That doesn't mean—"

"Sure," Gil said, getting a glazed look. "Hey, I'd better finish up this piece of copy. I'm still on the payroll, check?"

"Check," Levitt said.

On Monday morning, Maxfield rang Jack Levitt's phone and asked him to come to the corner office. Levitt figured he wanted to see the ice-cream layouts, so he brought in the whole bundle and was prepared to do argument about the cartoon treatment versus the appetite photos Maxfield favored. However, Maxfield wasn't ready for the ice-cream meeting; he had something else in mind.

"You were sort of chummy with Gil Crown, weren't you?" he said. "I mean, close as anyone got to him."

"I wouldn't exactly say chummy. I did go to his house one night for drinks and potato chips."

"Then you met his wife, right?"

"Something wrong about his wife?"

"Oh," Maxfield said. "I guess you didn't hear about Gil's accident."

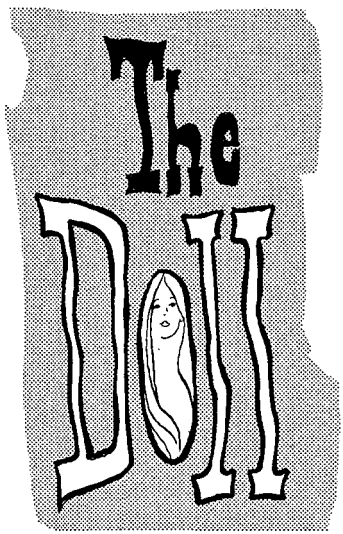
"Accident?" Jack Levitt said.

"Happened Sunday afternoon. He hit a tree off the parkway. It was a freak thing. He wasn't going very fast. It was only a 25-mile zone and the cops said he was going even slower than that, but he ended up with the engine in his lap." Maxfield clucked and said, "Boy, the things that happen."

"How is he?" Levitt asked, getting cold around the stomach. "How's his condition?"

"He's dead," Maxfield said. "That's what I wanted to ask you, whether you'd be the agency's emissary to his widow. DS&B want to give her something, a few grand. What the hell, he worked here; it's the least they can do. You've got to have a heart, right?"

If one is patient, there may be a way to satisfy almost everyone.



I figured Cindy Lou for trouble that first spring day she came into the shop and Tommy took his head out from under the hood of the jeep to prance, splayfooted, right in after her.

I could see why, all right. Cindy Lou is startling, like a field full of spring flowers bursting forth color; a beautiful child, and a troublesome one, I feared, as Tommy, who usually pays no attention to anything that comes within the periphery of his vision unless it's another jeep, backed off into a corner of the shop and stood, statue-still, never taking his unblinking gaze off of her.

I came out from behind the china cupboard I was polishing to customer-brightness and suggested, through my teeth, that he march right back outdoors and shine up his jeep engine some more.

"It's all shined, Mom," he answered promptly without taking his eyes off Cindy Lou.

Now, it isn't that I am a mother who wants to keep her big eighteen-year-old son a female-free little boy forever, it is that I am the mother of a little boy who happens to be a big eighteen-year-old, and I've thought and worried a lot about what might happen if or when that big eighteen-year-old body would want something with

by Pauline C. Smith

which the little eight-year-old brain couldn't cope.

It scares me!

I turned to the girl and plucked the afghan off her arm. One glance at the crocheted flower in each square center and I knew it to be the work of Mrs. Libby Lowe, whose name the hill folk say all together, like this: *Libbylowe,* as if the first and last were one, and since their vernacular was once mine, I find myself slipping back into it. "Mrs. Libbylowe must have sent this over," I said, "and you must be the granddaughter, Cindy Lou, who's come to live with her."

She agreed with lackluster enthusiasm and sent a slanted blue-eyed glance Tommy's way.

That turned me quickly busy with pencil and consignment receipt in order to send this vision of loveliness immediately on her way and get Tommy's head back under the hood of the jeep. "There," I said, handing her the receipt and adding a complimentary phrase about the afghan. Maybe there isn't any real significance to my mental association, but I have the feeling that Mrs. Libbylowe specializes in fluffy, flower-sprinkled afghans to wrap up warmly and florally her guilt complex after sending her only daughter out into the cold world 17 years ago the minute she discovered the girl was about to have Cindy Lou; although she didn't know it was going to be Cindy Lou, of course. She probably didn't know *what* the poor daughter had out of wedlock until

that telegram came from the city that the daughter was now dead and Cindy Lou was being shipped to her grandmother.

Cindy Lou turned with a flirt of her short skirt and a flip of her long corn-silk hair, and at the door she executed a deft switch of her hip just before she pushed through to the road, with Tommy in splayfooted attendance right behind her. She headed toward the end of town where Mrs. Libbylowe lives in the parsonage by the church, and Tommy, after one last longing look at her, raised the hood of the jeep and buried his head in the engine without even hearing the triumphant blast of Miss Mary Applegate's Model A as it nosed right up behind the jeep and settled down.

Miss Mary, who is 55 if she's a day, leaped agilely from her high perch in the Model A, made a brief but attentive study of Cindy Lou as she switched down the road, reached back for her shoe box and came into the shop just as I finished draping the afghan tastefully over the back of a Shaker rocking chair. There it would await the glad cry of a tourist willing to leave the fast traffic of the superhighway to slow down for the old Mountain Hollow Road and visit the Jane Flagg Old Time Store.

The minute she sprang across the doorsill, her bright sparrow eyes spied the Libbylowe afghan and she sat down on it, wiggling around in the Shaker rocker until a corner of it fell over the arm and dragged in the dust on the floor.

"I see Mrs. Libbylowe brung in her newest," she said with a sneer and a flick of her fingertip. Miss Mary Applegate and Mrs. Libbylowe have had a fierce but gently silent feud in progress ever since Mrs. Libbylowe married the young and fiery Reverend Lowe when Miss Mary Applegate wanted him. One would think that after all these years, with the Reverend long dead and buried, and the daughter long gone in disgrace, the feud would be over, but it is not, and Miss Mary was burning as she rocked the edge of the afghan back and forth in the dust.

"Mrs. Libbylowe didn't bring in the afghan," I told her. "Cindy Lou did."

"Cindy Lou?" she asked, rocking more violently.

"Mrs. Libbylowe's granddaughter. The one who was sent here from the city because her mother died and she had nowhere to go."

"She won't have nowhere to go again once she's here for a while,"

declared Miss Mary. "She'll get throwed out like her mama if she's anything like her mama and she sure looks like her . . ." Miss Mary's eyes softened. "Just like spring flowers and summer wheat fields and sun-ripened peaches." Then, realizing that it was Mrs. Libbylowe's granddaughter of whom she spoke, she rocked harder and added spitefully, "Those girls must have got their looks from the Reverend. The only looks Mrs. Libbylowe has got to give is a lot of fat from the soles of her feet to the top of her head with a couple of beady eyes stuck in front like raisins in dough."

With that she stopped her rocking, lifted the lid of the shoe box, unveiled her latest doll, and I drew in my breath with admiration. Miss Mary's dolls are exquisitely made little characters, with faces of smooth white kid, beautifully molded, delicately painted and dressed in calamanco gowns, embroidered bonnets, with mittens on white kid hands, and on the stumpy little kid feet socks that she must have knitted from gossamer floss, using all but invisible needles. She is an accomplished artisan, with talent that seems to run through both branches of the family, the Applegates and the Biddles; for Billy Dean Biddle, the twice-removed cousin or once-removed nephew, whichever, is a wood-carver of remarkable skill.

Just as I have a theory about Mrs. Libbylowe's afghans, I also have one about Miss Mary Applegate's dolls. I think they are the babies she was sure she would have had if Reverend Lowe hadn't gone and married Miss Libby. She looked down at the doll with a maternal glow, her thin lips softened and curved, her bright brown eyes lidded with tenderness. Then, almost as if she were shaking off such foolish sentimentality, she flounced from the chair, handed me the box and shook her skirts into place, managing to whip the afghan off the slippery seat of the rocker with a careless hand so that it landed in a heap on the dusty floor.

At the door, she made her last prediction. "Mark my word," she said, "that pretty girl and her grandma just won't mix. The girl'll run away or somebody'll carry her away or she'll make a misstep like her mama and be throwed away." Then Miss Mary sprinted through the door.

Well, I marked her word and kept my eye on Tommy, who kept his head under the hood of the jeep except for those routine times he drove it up the moun-

tainside to pick up Miss Mattie Jackson's monthly quilt, or to Pearly Purcell's in the Upper Valley or Old Man Hardwicke's place on South Ridge—those and others—the regular trips that were Tommy's responsibility.

Just the same, Cindy Lou disappeared on a hot summer day not more than two Mattie Jackson quilts, four Miss Mary dolls and about ten Billy Dean carvings after that first and only time she came into the shop.

I heard Mrs. Libbylowe almost from the moment she lumbered from the parsonage and started her wailing waddle along the road toward the center of town. I dashed out of the shop about the same time as Addison Wills sprang from his tonsorial parlor and Mr. Purvis and Ellie Evans jostled each other through the double doors of the General Store. Mrs. Milton Kearney emerged a sedate few seconds later from the post office, and we all stared toward the impending Mrs. Libbylowe, an awkward pink craft kicking up lazy waves of dust.

It wasn't until she had almost borne down upon us, that her undulating message could be understood. She seemed to be crying out that Cindy Lou was lost, and at first I thought she meant her soul—that Cindy Lou had lost her soul—since Mrs. Libbylowe so often dwells upon the subject matter of lost souls. Then I knew . . . Cindy Lou was gone—vanished—and I clutched my heart to whirl and stare sickly at the empty place in front of the shop where Tommy and the jeep were not.

Shading my eyes from the blazing sun, I looked back along the road that bent around the mountain and sharply up out of sight. There was nothing on it except the lumber truck, a cigar-store Indian and a dusty, caved-in car. All the newspaper items I had timorously read, from the time Tommy reached the chronological age of thirteen, flipped their scareheads through my brain: the rape items . . . knifing, strangling, killing items, senselessly done deeds without sense . . . manbody acts performed by childbrains . . . weak minds guiding strong hands . . . *Oh, no!* I thought. *Oh, no!*

I turned back just as Mrs. Libbylowe, panting, clutching her ample bosom, took her last staggering steps diagonally and sank to the General Store bench. Now that she had arrived, more people gathered in the sun from houses huddled between business emporiums, from the tavern, the feed store and hardware. Hill folk,

even those in town, are reluctant to intrude upon trouble. They wait politely until they are asked, and then do what they can, sometimes ineptly.

Each head turned away for a courteous moment while Mrs. Libbylowe mopped her brow with the hem of her dress. After a few raspy breaths and several waves of her hand to fan her face, she began the explanation of her loss. Mrs. Libbylowe conducts Sunday Meetings in the church when there is no minister to preach the sermon, which is most of the time, due to the fact that there is no parsonage available for a minister because Mrs. Libbylowe lives in it, having declared it hers after Reverend Lowe's death by right of long-time occupancy during his lifetime . . . and with all that Sunday Meeting exercise behind her, eloquence did not desert her now as she held the close attention of everyone in the blaze of that sunny road except me.

In frantic worry, I listened for the jeep, trying to fight those scareheads that flipped through my brain while Mrs. Libbylowe described the disappearance of her granddaughter from the gardens behind the church and parsonage where she was supposed to be at work. "Busy hands don't find time for mischief," she interposed.

I thought of the beautiful child who looked like flowers and wheat and peaches all in season as she stood in the shop that spring day, flipping her hip and slanting her blue blue eyes so that for the moment, and that moment only I prayed, Tommy abandoned the love of his jeep to stand in statue-like adulation before the girl.

Perspiration sprouted hotly on my forehead and turned to drops of ice.

Mrs. Libbylowe was saying something about *modesty being a candle to merit* and *goodness being a virtue greater than rubies* in explaining what she had tried to make of the girl. Then she added in a voice of pious failure, *how sharper than a serpent's tooth had been her thankless grandchild,* and dropped her head and wiped her brow again on the hem of her dress while every face turned decently away.

I heard the jeep as soon as it hit the planking that marked the turn from the mountain road to the town road, and while Mrs. Libbylowe was lowering the hem of her dress to a decorous point, I slipped across to the shop, and the minute Tommy braked the jeep to a halt I yanked him from the seat and pushed him inside.

"Where have you been?" I cried as soon as I had pulled

down the front shades. In that cool, dim, almost dark light, I repeated, before he had a chance to answer, "Tell me this instant, where have you been?"

He stared at me, gazing down with childish uncertainty from his man-height, confused by what he had done or perplexed, perhaps, by the barked question that suddenly struck his sluggish mind.

"Tell me!"

His head trembled with a giant effort to gather itself together and *think!*

"Tommy!" Then I reached out and patted his arm, wanting to weep over and with my son . . . "Tommy," I said, this time gently, "Tommy, baby, where have you been all afternoon?"

"Why, Mom," he said, breaking into a smile, "I was up at Miss Pearly's house. This is the day for Miss Pearly . . ." and it was. If Tommy said so—Tommy who has a calendar in his head—it was Miss Pearly's day all right and, as if to prove it, he took from his pocket a tissue-wrapped petit point medallion.

Pearly Purcell's legs may be crippled, confining her to her small house and patch of garden in the Upper Valley, but there is nothing wrong with the fingers that stitch these miniature works of art *or* the eyes that see the woods' creatures she copies in tapestry.

Then I remembered that the Upper Valley looked over, at its far end, the parsonage and church down below—and the gardens and the girl. "Tommy, did you see Cindy Lou today?" I cried, my voice a thin thread of sound.

Tommy's face turned blank.

"Where is she, Tommy?"

"Where is who, Mom?"

The medallion was damp, crumpled wool in my fist. Opening my hand, I let it drop to the table and looked up at this poor, stupidly lovable lunk of a son with his pale-blue eyes of shining innocence, and tried to speak slowly and clearly. "Cindy Lou," I said, "Mrs. Libbylowe's granddaughter . . . a girl . . ." and the words stuck in my throat as I remembered the flowers-wheat-peaches girl who flipped her hips and slanted her eyes.

"Who, Mom?" he asked again and I wanted to shake him, shake some sense into him, some reasoning, shake forth answers even if the answers left us both desolate.

I swallowed the terror and held back the tears. "Cindy Lou, son. She was in the shop one day. A pretty girl," I carefully explained. "You followed her in. You stood over there." I pointed out the shadowed corner. "You watched

her all the time she was here. A very pretty girl. She is gone. Where is she, Tommy?"

He shrugged and added a worried, "Mom?" to the shrug. He did not or could not remember Cindy Lou. At least he did not or could not remember according to my worded description, so he would not or could not tell me what had happened to her.

"Oh, no," I moaned under my breath and turned away just as the front door burst open to let Mr. Purvis importantly through.

He ignored me to speak to Tommy, *the best jeep driver around,* according to Mrs. Frankie Mae Pangborn and according to the sheriff, *a young man with a brain and a half on him* after Tommy had solved the puzzle of Miss Mattie Jackson's mixed-up quilt. So Mr. Purvis approached him man-to-man. "Tommy, we need you. Mrs. Libbylowe's Cindy Lou has disappeared and we'll need you and the jeep to scour these hills before night falls," and Tommy, in his height of glory, straightened from the slump of bewildered incomprehension to which I had reduced him and marched toward the door, an indispensable requisite at last, in a search he could not understand.

I don't know what I expected when the search party returned at dark. My nerves, my dry mouth and clammy hands expected a body, I think; one found where Tommy would have blithely led the searchers. Against my will, I thought of it that way in a frightened series of shocking pictures, as Mrs. Libbylowe rocked in the Shaker chair and loudly asked the ceiling what she had ever done to deserve such trouble.

As the heat of afternoon shadowed and cooled toward evening, women gathered in the shop from the town and lower foothills, spilling over into the living quarters at the rear while their menfolk searched the mountain and valleys and Mrs. Libbylowe told again and again of how she had taken that thankless girl in, out of the goodness of her heart, trained her rigorously, taught her the virtue of being worth her keep, and watched her vigilantly as she toiled in the gardens. Wouldn't they think, Mrs. Libbylowe asked her audience, that just because the weather turned hot and humid, forcing her to lay her massive bulk on a couch in the cool of the parsonage and nap away the heat of the days . . . well, wouldn't they think that the girl, after being so well trained, would be willing to stay put between the beet rows and not make a straight

dresstail right out of there?

Some thought so. Some thought not.

They each indulged in personal conjecture; then, combining forces, broke into factions of group belief, there being those who thought that Cindy Lou, weary in the parsonage garden and unwatched, simply ducked across the road into the brush, through the trees and over the hills to the superhighway and a passing car. Of these, some blamed Mrs. Libbylowe, but only by innuendo, for shutting her eyes instead of keeping them peeled.

These hill people are great storytellers and each knot of notion elaborated and embroidered a graphic tale. The unmarried ladies, and widows without sons, held close to the rape and murder theory, as they cast sidelong glances toward those others who had husbands, sons, even grandfathers who might be guilty.

By the time twilight had purpled the shop, the women were gone to make supper and wait for news, still talking about Cindy Lou and this exciting happening in Mountain Hollow; still talking, I am sure, if only to their small children, or to themselves, or perhaps to their ceilings as did Mrs. Libbylowe.

I, too, waited in the shop, but not talking, not wanting even to think, afraid of thoughts surrounded as I was by old-fashioned quilts, handmade bedspreads, crewel work, carving, needlepoint, all the gentle old arts and crafts of my people. I call them *my* people even though I was gone for many years and they have not quite accepted me back into the fold, not as they have accepted Tommy . . .

Maybe I shouldn't have brought him here.

Brian, Tommy's father and my ex-husband, had wanted to hide him. "Put him away," he said, "where he can be with his own kind," so I brought him here to Mountain Hollow, where he would not hamper the business and social rise of an executive father, where he could live and grow in his own way and at his own rate so that I could love him for what he was and not resent what he was not.

I was afraid, as I waited for the sound of the jeep in the darkness, that the time had come to resent what he was and love what he could not be.

No Cindy Lou body was found that night nor was a live Cindy Lou discovered during the following weeks of search. Tommy, puffed with pride at his role of

jeep driver, had no idea of what was being searched.

The mountain, gulches and the valleys, dense with the growth of brush and trees, might hide anything—and forever.

"Are you making a careful search, Tommy?" I asked him.

"Golly yes, Mom," he answered, wide-eyed.

"Do you go into any of the houses and cabins?"

"Gosh no, Mom," he answered, shocked by my question. With hill folk, one does not enter a home. One stands in the brushed dirt yard and imparts news, relays messages, speaks of health and the weather, and one waits politely for answering health news and additional weather items, and in between this exchanged repartee, one discovers what one came for—sometimes.

However, everyone soon learned of Cindy Lou and each gave a share to the search; even Old Man Hardwicke, out on the South Ridge, shuffled through the scrub oak around his cabin, and Pearly Purcell hobbled along the Upper Valley, peering under plantain leaves and poking her cane in the oxalis that grew rank.

"Tommy," I asked him, "you were gone a long time that day at Miss Pearly's. What did you do there?"

He told me of the pet squirrel and the family of wild rabbits Miss Pearly allowed him to view . . . the lemonade she made that he sipped under a shade tree. He told me the names of the birds, as she had told them to him, that flew down to the bath she had made by sinking a galvanized tub in the ground. He told me how Miss Pearly spoke to the birds, using their individual calls so that they cocked their heads and posed.

"Yes," I said. "But, Tommy, did you go to the far end of the valley where you can see over the town?" I swallowed. "Down on the church and parsonage below."

"Why, Mom?" he asked.

"Well, did you?"

He looked at me as if he thought me retarded and said, "Gosh no, Mom. Why should I, Mom?"

"Which way did you go when you started out for Pearly Purcell's that day?" I asked, and his face became a confusion.

Tommy always *comes* from the mountain road after his errands, down the mountain with a right turn over planking and along the town road. My shop, being on the left from that direction, all Tommy does when he reaches it is to swerve from the right side of the road, or the middle, wherever

he might be, to the left. There are no traffic regulations in a town such as Mountain Hollow for the reason that there is no traffic, so the parked jeep always faces the wrong way and Tommy often takes off in the direction it is headed, making his U-turn where the road ends in rocky foothills. "Tommy," I asked tensely, "how did you start out to Pearly Purcell's? Did you go down past the church and parsonage or did you turn right out in front?"

"Gosh, Mom, I don't remember," he said, and neither did I.

Ever since the shop episode when he had seemed so stunned by the girl, I had tried to direct him away from the church and parsonage where she might be in the gardens with her eyes slanting, her hips switching, and her grandmother sleeping in her own fat. "Make the turn in *front*," I instructed him time and time again . . . and he did . . . when I remembered to tell him. I could not now remember whether I had told him that day. I could not remember when he left, nor in what direction.

"Yes," I said helplessly. "Tommy, did you see the girl? Think. Did you see her?"

"What girl, Mom?"

So I stopped the questioning.

The search, which had begun with such energy, grew sporadic until it, too, ceased.

All those leaning toward the rape-murder theory came to concur with the others who believed that Cindy Lou had simply ducked across the road into the brush, through the trees and over the hills to the superhighway and a passing car.

With the whole thing settled in the minds of the people, the town settled back against its hills and the hot summer continued into hot autumn as if nothing had happened.

Tommy made his regular trips up the mountain, taking off the wrong way each time.

Mrs. Libbylowe's gardens wilted the months through while her afghans, as if to compensate, flourished flowers; and young Billy Dean Biddle, Miss Mary Applegate's twice-removed cousin or once-removed nephew, whichever, turned out his finest work.

Billy Dean does primitive wood carvings for the shop—miniature birds, small animals, pastoral figures. My customers, many of whom are collectors of Americana, say that his work is reminiscent of Wilhelm Schimmel, and he might, some day, be great. I am fond of the boy, who is shy as are many of the hill folk, but with a wish to soar, I think, to the

heights. The very breath of his loneliness, also his wish, is there in his little elfin characters, always in pairs and groups with the solitary birds in flight.

Like a goat, he scrambles down the side of the mountain to the far end of Upper Valley, picks his way through the rocky foothills by the church, and lopes along the road to the shop once a week with several of his little wooden creatures packed in grass. Miss Mary, his twice-removed cousin or once-removed aunt, whichever, wouldn't think of offering him a regular ride in her Model A; as a matter of fact, they do not acknowledge each others' existence simply for the reason that an Applegate, being a member of the "good" branch of the family, quite naturally looks down on a Biddle as belonging to the "bad" bunch.

But, no matter, because he is kinfolk Miss Mary allows him to live in one of the falling-down ells of her house on the mountain, which is where he carves his lovely things for my shop, using only a common pocketknife and bits of glass to polish down the knife marks.

It was during the summer that his work achieved a new quality; an ethereal, joyous kind of air. As one of my customers said, "Less of Schimmel now and more of the delicacy and grace of a Samuel McIntire," and another that the little figures had such "happy faces." What *I* thought was that Billy Dean was getting ready to fly right out of Mountain Hollow's loneliness and find his place in life. That is what the little carvings said to me.

So the summer blazed on, with afghans from Mrs. Libbylowe, petit point from Pearly Purcell, quilts, carvings, dolls—and Cindy Lou forgotten, except for the shadow of her and the worry in the back part of my mind. I had not forgotten, nor had some others, I guess.

It was a red-gold autumn day with the sky a sheet of aluminum heat that Miss Mary Applegate brought in the shoe box. It was her day for a doll, so I was not surprised to hear the clatter and final explosion of the Model A out in front of the shop where Tommy, head and shoulders inside the engine of his jeep, was shining it up for his trip to Pearly Purcell's, it being *her* day for petit point.

Miss Mary swept in as usual and darted her sparrow eyes around the shop to see if she could spy a flowered afghan, which she did, hung on a coat rack all fanned out for display, and she surprised me. Instead of

moving toward the rack and accidentally brushing by the afghan so that it would slide, huddled, to the floor, she smiled sweetly and said blandly, "I see Mrs. Libby-lowe brung in another'n. Mighty pretty, too," crossed to the Shaker rocker and sat delicately down, cradling her shoe box.

She spoke of the weather, stating the well-known fact that it was hotter down here in the lowlands all hemmed in by hills, than up on the mountain where she lived with *the air stirrin' little whuffs of wind now and then. Up in God's country,* she went on, *where people get to be like people, lovin' one another and all that,* which certainly didn't sound like Miss Mary, whose tongue, say the townsfolk, has got a real mean sawtooth edge.

Then she opened up her shoe box and displayed her newest doll, looking up with pride to measure my reaction. I drew in my usual breath of admiration, but this time in stairsteps of new and startled wonder as I gazed down at the

exquisite doll—little gloves covering delicately fingered hands, cobweb socks shading the shapely sculptured feet, and just as she must have used all but invisible needles and gossamer floss for the knitting, Miss Mary must have had a miniature wheel and an even finer floss for spinning the golden Rapunzel hair.

She handed me the box and stood, smoothing down her skirts, and walked to the door and out before I could find the exclamatory words for the beautiful doll with dancing feet and fairy hands and its smiling kid face framed in gold.

I heard the sputter of the Model A engine and looked up to see the cloud of dust form a horseshoe in the road as Miss Mary took off for the mountain.

I stood there for long minutes, the shoe box in my hands. Then, with careful thumb and forefinger, I lifted the delightfully lovely doll from the box and propped it on a table against an Old Mr. Hardwicke spool cabinet.

I didn't touch the dainty hands and feet, nor the hair, the long, golden, Rapunzel hair that hung to the waist of the shining calamanco gown. Why had Miss Mary allowed Billy Dean to carve the hands and feet, and where had she found the hair?

The Cindy Lou hair perhaps?

I backed off, staring at the doll, and felt the blast of hot air from the outside as the door opened and Tommy entered, all energetic and responsible now that his jeep engine was shined to timepiece brightness and he was ready to take off—the wrong way—to Pearly Purcell's for her latest petit point.

The door closed behind him and, without seeing anything, not me or anything else in the shop, Tommy splayfooted his way toward the rear living quarters to pick up the weekly supplies he delivers to Pearly.

Midway he stopped abruptly, his sneakered feet hard on the floor. He twisted flatly, rubber squeaking, and dropped to a squat before the doll, becalmed in catatonic attention.

Tommy, who is halted by nothing but another jeep on the road, except for the slanted eyes and switching hips of a pretty girl in the shop, was halted by the doll; mesmerized, immobilized, in stooping genuflection, and the pictures flapped through my brain again, mixing news items with old suspicions and now the new.

"Tommy," I said.

He didn't hear, he didn't move.

I walked across the bare floor, the soles of my shoes making

tired, dragging sounds in the silence. I reached him and stooped by his side. "Do you remember the girl, Tommy?" I said and touched his shoulder. Then louder, "Tommy, do you remember the girl?"

He dragged his eyes away from the doll. "What girl?" he asked and looked back at the doll.

"The girl, Tommy," I persisted. "The very pretty girl," and I thought of flowers, wheat, and sun-ripened peaches all in season. "The girl," I said. "The girl with hair like that," and held a finger over the doll.

"Golly yes, Mom," he said suddenly as he rocked back on his heels. "Here, in the shop. She had hair like sunshine. Like the doll's hair." His smile of remembrance was like sunshine too as he looked at me and back at the doll. "Could you keep the doll in the shop forever, Mom, so I could look at the hair? I won't touch it. I just want to look at the hair sometimes," and he reached out a hand that hovered but did not touch.

I hugged him, but briefly, because he was always embarrassed by any show of affection. It had been only Cindy Lou's hair that held him statue-still that spring day in the shop—only her hair, not her swivel hips or slanted eyes . . . not that she was a girl, a pretty girl, only that she had hair as bright and shining as the sun, and he wanted to look at her hair—not to touch, only to look.

I rose. "Yes, Tommy," I said, patting his shoulder, "we'll keep the doll. We'll keep it right here. And you can come in and look at it every time you get tired of polishing your jeep engine." Then I reminded him of Pearly Purcell and he went into the back to pick up her week's supplies and out again, with one loving glance toward the doll, and packed the supplies in the jeep and took off—the wrong way.

I backed away from the doll and walked toward it. I studied the hair from one side and then the other, without touching. The Cindy Lou hair. Well!

I would have to find out where Miss Mary Applegate found the Cindy Lou hair to stitch so beautifully on the little kid head of her newest doll. I hung the CLOSED sign in the window, but did not lock the front door. Nobody in Mountain Hollow locks doors. Then I went through the living quarters, out back, and climbed into my Volkswagen. If Miss Mary Applegate could drive a Model A down the mountain to bring me a doll wearing Cindy Lou's hair, I could surely drive a Volks up the

mountain to find out where she got that hair.

The car was like a steam room and dust spread in clouds. I left the windows rolled up and drove through the sleepy little town, clattering over planks, to rise almost immediately on the old mountain road, all closed in hotly with growing suspicion and magnified conjecture. Miss Mary Applegate had, indeed, gone crazy after all her years of hating Mrs. Libbylowe for cheating her out of being Mrs. Marylowe so that she had to make her babies with her heart instead of with love. I reached a hairpin turn and eased around it. So Miss Mary Applegate killed Cindy Lou and snipped off her hair to make real Lowe babies.

The air, just as Miss Mary had described, was cooler, fresher and clearer up along the mountainside. I stopped the car for a moment, rolled down the windows and mopped my face with a tissue—but how could Miss Mary *find* Cindy Lou to kill her out of years'-long spite and cut off her hair for the doll? How could ninety pounds of age kill a hundred and twenty pounds of youth? She couldn't. She simply could not.

I crossed through the edge of the Upper Valley where Tommy was probably crouched in wonder over a new nest of wild rabbits, or listening with interest to Pearly's birdcalls, or adoringly feeding the pet squirrel—anyway, something innocent, as innocent as a child-like admiration for sun-filled hair . . . *Billy Dean did it!* I almost went off the road.

Braking the car, I mopped my face and thought of Billy Dean's weekly trips down the shortcut side of the mountain to the far end of Upper Valley and the rocky foothills *just beyond the church and parsonage.*

I let off the brake and pressed the horn as I rounded a blind curve. Billy Dean, lonely and frustrated . . . Billy Dean killed her out of love and rejection, or fright or anger—or something; and his twice-removed cousin or once-removed aunt, whichever, found out . . .

I was sweating in the now-cool mountain air and the breeze caused by movement . . . Miss Mary had snipped the hair and forced Billy Dean to carve the hands and feet in order to tell the town and Mrs. Libbylowe that a Biddle wood-carver, whom she looked down upon, had killed Cindy Lou, and she was just too nice to say it out loud.

I was almost there. I would be able to see Miss Mary Applegate's

place if it weren't for the sorrel and oxalis and the thick scrub oak that hid the scrambled building set in the center of a narrow shelf of land. As I made a sharp turn to enter the valley and drive into Miss Mary's carefully swept dirt yard, I didn't believe any of the suspicions I had formed on the way up, nor a single carefully worked-out conjecture.

I stepped from the car exhausted.

The Applegate family, one of the oldest on the mountain, built the original house generations ago, and it is now a hodgepodge of newer additions built against old structures never torn down. Miss Mary sprang forth from the central structure the minute my Volks settled in a cloud of dust.

I walked the required distance toward her and stopped a decent space away from her, a hill-folk custom that allows a formal measure of privacy. I spoke of the weather, the dryness of the oak and sorrel, while she solemnly agreed and offered her own amenities.

"The doll," I said, breaking all the rules. "The doll, Miss Mary. I came to ask you about the doll . . ." and found I didn't need to. She gave me the answer by stepping aside to allow Cindy Lou through the door, followed by Billy Dean at her footsteps.

The flowers-wheat-and-peaches girl who had been in season in the early summer, was now in the fall, not only ripe but bearing fruit and carrying it proudly under the waist of her dress, her hair cut in chopped-off bangs across her forehead. Billy Dean, the proud father-to-be, had soared only as high as he wanted to go and was no longer lonely, I could tell by the way he formed an arch of triumph above her.

"We'll be naming it Lowen if it's a boy," announced Miss Mary, "and Lowena if it's a girl," and crossed her arms contentedly over her skimpy breast as if she were holding the baby she had always wanted with the name she had always felt should be hers. "Biddle," she added, in total acceptance of the "bad" branch of the family.

"They'll be wed as soon as a proper preacher can edge into the church long enough to say the words," and Miss Mary Applegate smiled the smile of a late winner by default.

I left them there, a family group—an Applegate, Biddle and a Lowe—and drove on down the hill, wondering what Mrs. Libby-lowe would say when she heard. I thought I knew. She would probably say, "like mother like daugh-

ter," and crochet another flowered afghan.

I suppose, long ago, I should have been able to figure out what really happened that early summer day when Billy Dean took Cindy Lou's hand and led her up the rocky foothill. Their getting together was practically a prophetic certainty, with the girl trapped in a garden, switching her hips and slanting her eyes to get free, and with Billy Dean, hungry and lonely, seeing her there every blessed week.

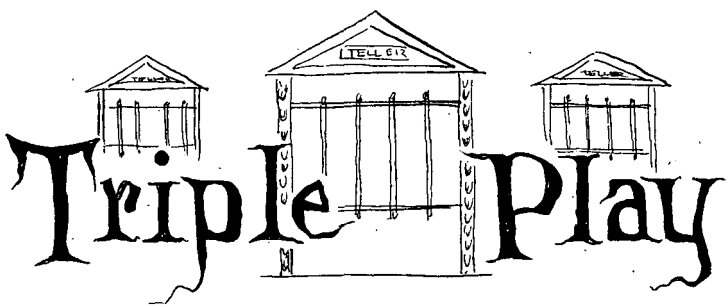
I should have known too, that Billy Dean would hide her in his broken-down ell, that Miss Mary would find her without too much trouble and know exactly what to do with her—and when. I should have known that the summer perfection of Billy Dean's smiling little figures didn't mean that he was wanting to soar to the heights, but that he had already soared, settled and was satisfied.

I should have deduced what had happened and interpreted it instead of falling apart with panic that poor Tommy's child-brain had led his man-body into tragedy. I should have known, but even though I was born in these parts and lived here until I left for college, I cannot understand my hill people—their stark simplicity, their devious obliquity and the beauty of their symbolism.

I can only spread the news about Cindy Lou and let them take over, which they will do simply, by finding a preacher; and deviously, by naming Miss Mary "Grannymary;" and symbolistically, by hand-turning cradles instead of spool cabinets and petit-pointing babies instead of bunnies.

I reached the edge of the Upper Valley just as Tommy swung out and onto the mountain road. I followed him down and he never knew I was behind him, for Tommy has a one-track mind which was then on the road before him. He will clatter over the planks into town and swerve to the left for the shop, open the hood of the jeep and polish the engine without remembering the doll—not until the engine shines bright and he enters the shop and the sight of it stops him in his splayfooted tracks and holds him in catatonic attention because of the hair . . . just because of the hair.

Silence may be harder to swallow than the bitter truth.



If you walk west up State Street from the First National Bank building, you pass Harrison Savings and Loan in the middle of the next block. If you keep walking west for another hundred yards, you come to the North Side Mall, which is a big shopping center containing seventy-one stores and shops of various kinds, including the North Side branch of Peoples Bank and Trust Company.

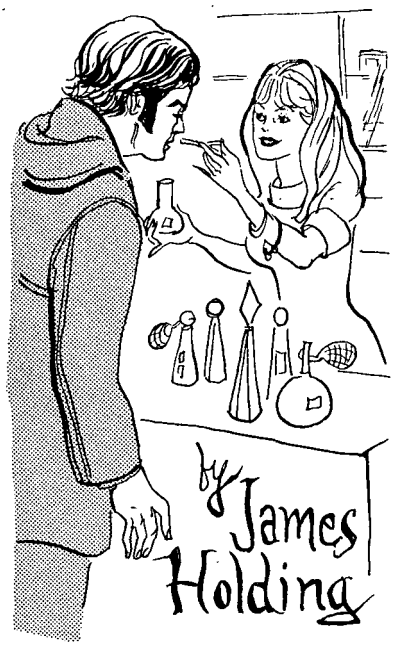
You see? Three financial institutions within two blocks of each other in the busiest part of town; and one rainy Thursday, Earl Shedd robbed them all, in a total elapsed time of fifteen minutes. He would have got away clean with forty-three thousand and some-odd dollars if it hadn't been for Mildred del Rey and possibly Gloria Colton.

He had everything worked out neatly beforehand, even to the stop at the drugstore in Morningside where Gloria Colton worked behind the cosmetics counter.

He dropped in there at 11:40 and wandered to the back of the store like any tall, spectacularly handsome, devil-may-care young man intending to buy his girl or his mother a present of a new lipstick, or powder compact, or something of the sort for her birthday, perhaps. He looked just the slightest bit embarrassed, but eager, too, if you can picture that combination.

The eagerness was for Gloria—

the embarrassment was strictly an act—for Gloria was standing behind her cosmetics counter with every cell of her superb body exuding animal magnetism. Her lovely face was only partly screened from Earl's gaze by the rack of hair nets, emery boards and plastic combs that occupied



the end of her counter. Gloria was blonde as well as billowy, and her blue eyes held an acquisitive glint that told a lot more about her than her beauty or her beguiling air of innocence. Gloria was an ambitious girl—ambitious to get her hands on what she called "important money" (as compared to the unimportant salary she made as a drugstore clerk)—and she didn't care how she did it. Which accounts, perhaps, for her willingness to fall in with Earl's plans although, in all fairness, it must be said that Gloria didn't find Earl himself in the least objectionable. With his looks, what woman would? In fact, she told herself, Earl would be the swinger of her dreams as soon as he had money.

There were no customers at her counter when Earl arrived there, so they could talk with comparative freedom. They kept their voices low. From time to time, Gloria would draw a small glass stopper out of a sample bottle of perfume and wave it professionally under Earl's nose as they talked, thus making it immediately evident to any observer that she was merely helping him to select a suitable scent for his girl or his mother.

"Today, baby," Earl said to her, "today. It's rainy, the streets will be crowded at the lunch hour. I'm going to try it today."

"Good!" she said. "I'm tired of waiting around."

"Me, too." He pushed back the hood of his waterproof jacket and pulled the zipper down a few inches. The jacket was too big for him; it hung almost to mid-thigh.

"You going to steal a car like you said?"

"Better than that. I'm using Mildred's."

"Mildred's!"

"Sure." He laughed at her surprised expression. "Why not?"

"Does she know what you're using her car for?"

He nodded, pulling his head back from the perfume sample she was waving under his nose.

Gloria frowned. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not a bit. Look, Gloria, I told you all about Mildred. She's a real slob—too dumb to come in out of the rain—but she loves me. *Loves* me, you dig? She'll do anything for me, as long as she thinks I'm going to marry her. And she thinks I am." He laughed. "How about that, Gloria? She doesn't even know my right name and she thinks I'm going to *marry* her! Me, the total stranger she met in a singles bar two months ago and fell deeply in love with. You know something, Gloria? Mildred's so lonely she'd fall deeply in love with a *parrot* if it said hello to her."

They both laughed at this wicked, malicious statement. Then Gloria sobered. "She'll still talk, Earl, dumb or not, when she finds you've gone for good."

"Not before Sunday night, she won't. Because she expects to meet me in Philadelphia Sunday night and get married. And by Sunday night, you and I will be living it up in Vegas, baby."

"Earl!" Gloria couldn't help smiling. "That's really a mean thing to do to her!"

"The hell with her. She was okay till I met you. Now she's nothing but a dumb, crazy-jealous broad with an available getaway car."

"What does she think about me?" Gloria asked. "Or haven't you mentioned me to her?"

"You think I'm nuts? Jealous as she is? She doesn't even know you exist!"

Gloria turned thoughtful. "If you stand Mildred up in Philadelphia, how do I know you won't stand me up in Las Vegas? In favor of some girl you're meeting in Montreal, maybe?"

Earl snorted. "Don't *you* go jealous on me, now! Mildred's all the jealous I can take. You still got the plane fare I gave you?"

"Right here." She tapped her splendid bosom with one forefinger. Earl's eyes followed the gesture appreciatively.

"That's proof I'm meeting you, isn't it? Giving you flying money? I didn't give Mildred any, I'll tell you that. She's using her own dough to go to Philadelphia."

Gloria said, "Where do I meet you?"

"The Azure Sky Motel in Vegas, sometime Saturday night. I'll be there by Saturday afternoon, even if I stop to ditch Mildred's car along the way. So tell 'em you're my wife at the motel, okay? I'll have signed us in already."

"Fine," Gloria said. "I'll buy my ticket during my lunch hour today." She held out another perfume sample on its glass stopper for him to sniff. He bent his head to it, still the undecided customer, just as a stentorian voice from the front of the store yelled, "Gloria!"

Gloria's arm jerked in surprise. "Yes?"

"Woman on the phone wants to know if we sell Caron's *Fleurs de Rocaille.*"

"Tell her no!" Gloria shouted back.

Earl pushed her hand away and said, "Wish me luck, baby. Saturday night in Vegas. Okay?"

"Okay," Gloria murmured. "Azure Sky Motel." Then she couldn't help adding, "Get as much as you can, Earl. Get a lot!"

He nodded, smiling at her, and said in a loud voice, "I'm afraid to make the decision myself. I guess I'll have to check with her to see which perfume she likes best," and turned around and left the store, smug and satisfied.

Gloria looked after him.

From the drugstore, Earl walked through the rain down Pontasset Street to the beat-up half-a-duplex occupied by Mildred del Rey.

Mildred was a lush, steamy brunette with the last clinging vestiges of a Spanish accent, giving her simplest statement an insidious charm. Earl thought she was more Mexican than Spanish. She was a night operator at the telephone company and, as Earl had told Gloria, probably the loneliest girl in the city . . . until the night she'd met Earl in a singles bar, just before going on duty at the telephone company.

Now her life was a song; she had found a man she loved. She was almost deliriously happy at the prospect of marrying him, even if he had confessed to her that their marriage would have to be funded in a rather unorthodox way. By bank robbery, not to put too fine a point on it. Still, marriage, Earl, and Philadelphia, in that order, beckoned ineluctably to Mildred. When Earl rang her doorbell at five minutes to twelve, she was dressed, made-up and scintillatingly ready for him.

"Earl!" she cried, drawing him into her livingroom and closing the door behind them. As soon as

he pushed back his rain hood she threw her arms around his neck and nuzzled into his shoulder. "Oh, it has seemed so long since last night!" she said. She drew her head back and looked at him. "You're in a brown study over something. What is it? Oh, Earl, is today to be zero hour?" She was full of stupid expressions like that, and Earl had grown to hate them. "The car is ready when you are, darling. I had it serviced yesterday. It's full of gas and oil. Ready to be the sweet chariot that will bring you to me in Philadelphia!"

Sweet chariot! Earl grunted. "Great, Mildred. Because this is the day. Steady rain, big crowds on the streets with umbrellas and rain hoods, and bound to be plenty of parking spaces at the Mall."

"What time do you want the car? And where exactly shall I leave it?" Mildred spoke like a woman who is already married and obeys her husband's slightest wish. She nuzzled Earl again.

Earl looked at his watch. "Twelve-twenty-five at the very latest. Half an hour from right now. Park as close to the Sleepy Goods Store as you can. Back the car into the curb, facing out, so I won't have to waste any time turning, and leave the motor running. Okay?"

"I'll have it there, don't you worry, darling. And Earl, be *careful*, won't you? I can hardly *breathe* thinking of the *danger* you'll be in!"

"No danger, baby," Earl remonstrated. "Just a simple little heist. Don't *you* worry. I'll be in Philadelphia by Sunday night, and we'll get married. The high point of my life."

"I don't know," Mildred said, suddenly feeling depressed. "I can't believe you're marrying *me* when every girl who looks at you would commit absolute *murder* to marry you."

"Hey!" Earl said, patting her arm. "Bad-mouthing yourself again! I don't like that, Mildred. I love you, baby. So forget about other girls and just simply meet me in Philly on Sunday night. Okay?"

"Have you ever been in Philadelphia before?"

"Never."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Why?"

"I just wondered whether you knew any girls there. Girls who might try to take you away from me."

"Nobody's going to take me away from you, baby." He drew her to him and kissed her with impressive passion.

"I love you, Earl," she said,

with the corny Spanish accent coming through strong. "I don't know what I'd do if you fell for some other girl."

Earl glanced at his watch. "I got to be moving. You have the bags?"

"Of course." She ran across the room and got three paper bags out of a table drawer. "Here, darling. And please, please, be careful."

"I'll be careful. Sunday night in Philly, remember. You know the place?"

"The Greenwich Motel on City Line Avenue. Yes. I'll be there when you arrive. I'll take the bus tonight."

"Fine," Earl said. He kissed her again.

She looked up for a moment into his eyes and then returned his kiss. "Don't worry about the car," she murmured. "It'll be there when you need it."

He folded the three paper bags into a compact bundle, put them under one arm beneath his jacket, zipped up the jacket and went out her front door to the street, pulling the rain hood over his head. He turned north, lifting one hand in a touching gesture of faith and courage to Mildred, who watched from her doorway.

When he was a little way up the street, Mildred put on her raincoat and transparent plastic rain hood, went out to the carport and started up her 3-year-old car. She headed for the North Side Mall, hoping she could find a parking place in front of the Sleepy Goods Store. She still had twenty minutes before Earl would need her car. Plenty of time.

The bank robberies went smoothly.

In the First National, Earl walked calmly to a teller's window where no other customers waited, pushed his crudely lettered notice through the slot and waited, half-smiling inside his rain hood while she read it: HOLDUP. FILL THE BAG WITH MONEY OR YOU'RE DEAD.

The teller didn't hesitate. Her eyes widened in sudden terror, but her hands were quite steady as they scooped the money from her drawer into the paper bag he pushed through the window to her.

Earl knew her instructions for holdups. They all got the same ones. Play it cool; do what the man says, until after he leaves your window; then be a heroine, if you must, but remember, we're insured. Earl also knew that by touching a concealed button under her counter, she could activate the cameras that would take his pic-

ture. But who can recognize anybody from a picture that only shows a featureless pale blob of face, far back in the shadows of a too-big rain hood?

He took the bag of cash the teller pushed over to him, along with his holdup note, said, "Thank you, Miss," in a polite voice, and walked out the door of the bank. He was on the sidewalk before the teller could turn in the alarm. There were hundreds of people passing along State Street, many with umbrellas and rain hoods, many carrying packages and shopping bags. Earl merged into the sidewalk crowd like another pea in a pod, as Mildred would have put it. By the time First National's bank guard ran out onto the sidewalk to see if he could spot the holdup man, Earl was already pushing through the revolving door of Harrison Savings and Loan. After all, where's a safer place for a bank robber to be when the chase begins than inside another bank?

In Harrison Savings and Loan, Earl repeated his procedure, right down to the "Thank you, Miss," vaguely pleased with the thought that they might dub him "The polite robber" or "The grateful thief" when they reported his thefts in the newspapers.

This time, when the alarm was sounded, Earl was already entering the North Side branch of Peoples Bank and Trust. He wasn't even breathing fast. As he sauntered into the Mall, he'd seen Mildred's car parked just where he wanted it—in front of the Sleepy Goods Store, with the motor running. Through the misty rain, he could see the drift of pale exhaust smoke coming from the car's tail pipe.

Again, he noticed, the sidewalks along the Mall were nicely crowded with people in rain gear. This is a breeze, he mused—no sweat at all—and probably the first triple robbery in the city's history. The thought caused him to put genuine feeling into his "Thank you, Miss," at Peoples Bank.

Two minutes later, he was striding down the Mall with his three paper bags of money stowed out of sight in the specially-sewn pockets inside his too-big jacket.

He stepped into Mildred's car without drawing a single suspicious glance, and pulled out into State Street just as the sirens began in earnest. He felt excited, proud and happy, all at once, as he turned west on State Street. He'd brought it off, a triple play. He was safe, he thought triumphantly, and he was also rich. There was a small fortune in

his three paper bags if he were any judge—and he was.

He drove westward toward the Interstate that would take him swiftly out of town. His headlights were on, as the state law required them to be when rain was falling. His windshield wipers thudded solemnly back and forth. He drove as sedately as a dowager on her way to church, avoiding any appearance of haste, keeping well within the posted speed limit; a solid citizen, going about his lawful business.

That's why he was so surprised to see a police car pull up behind him when he stopped for a red light at State and Amberson. A coincidence, of course. Still, it made him uneasy. He felt even more uneasy—in fact, definitely startled—when another patrol car spilled out of Amberson on the green light. Wild panic squeezed his heart when the patrol car, coming out of Amberson, stopped in the middle of the intersection exactly in front of his car, less than two feet from its nose.

He was boxed in—he saw that instantly—a sitting duck. He thought of putting his foot down flat and plowing into the police car ahead. Stupid. Mildred's car couldn't crash a small child's red wagon without falling to pieces on the spot. He considered jumping out and running for it. Too late.

Four policemen, two from each car, converged on him like homing pigeons, as Mildred might say, unsnapping their pistol holsters. So, when he was sternly ordered to get out of the car and put his hands on the roof, he did just that.

What else was there to do?

At his trial, Mildred testified under oath that she'd been making out a deposit slip in Peoples Bank and Trust's North Side branch when, happening to lift her eyes from her slip, she'd noticed this man in a rain jacket and hood, pushing a paper bag through a teller's window. She thought the teller looked dreadfully pale and upset, so, out of curiosity more than anything else, she had watched the rest of the drama unfold. She couldn't, at first, actually believe that she was witnessing a holdup, and that explained why she followed the man out of the bank before giving the alarm. The man had reconnoitered the cars parked nearby in the parking lot, and finally, to her horror, he had climbed into *hers* in front of the Sleepy Goods Store and driven away!

Then she was sure, all right!

Yes, she admitted, it was careless of her to go into the bank and

leave her engine running, but it was a rainy day and she intended to be gone only a few minutes. Yes, she had instantly run back into the bank when the robber appropriated her car. What did she do then? She told the bank guard to telephone the police at once that a bank robber, who had just been seen holding up the teller at window four, had stolen her car from the parking lot and was now heading west on State Street. She reported the make and license number. Naturally, it didn't take them long after that to catch the robber. Yes, that was the man, all right, sitting there in the dock. No, she had never seen him in her life before he held up Peoples Bank and Trust.

Well, that did it for Earl, of course. Not that her testimony was needed. The three bags of money under his jacket were evidence enough, and the toy pistol in his outside jacket pocket.

After he went into federal prison, Mildred came to see him on the first visiting day. She gave him her dumb smile and touched his hand, which was resting on the heavy wire mesh between them. "Hi, darling," she said. Then, predictably, "Long time no see. Are they treating you all right here? I just want you to know that I'll be waiting for you when you come out. We can still be married."

Earl shuddered. "I don't want you to wait for me, Mildred. All I want from you is one little thing."

"What's that?" she asked, although she already knew, of course.

"I want you to tell me why the hell you set me up for the cops? You said you loved me. You were willing to marry me. Bank robbery didn't put you off—you knew about that all along."

"I *did* love you, Earl. I still do." She was earnest.

"Then why did you set me up?"

"Because I will not stand for my fiancé," she pronounced it in her la-de-da way, "paying attention to another woman! That's why!"

"What made you think I was playing around with another woman, for cripe's sake?"

"The shoulder of your jacket smelled unmistakably of perfume when you kissed me good-bye that day. Chanel Number Five, I think."

Earl nodded. He'd guessed that was it.

"So I decided you'd just have to be taught a little lesson," Mildred went on. Then, rather anxiously, she asked, "You *did* see another woman that morning before you came to my house, didn't you?"

"Sure," Earl said. "Her name is

Gloria Colton and she works in a drugstore on Pontasset Street. At the cosmetics counter. And I had promised to meet *her* in Las Vegas with my stolen money."

"Earl! You didn't!"

"I did. Just like I promised to meet you in Philadelphia."

Mildred's eyes went sick for a second before hot anger kindled in them—a flare of jealousy that made her seem really quite Spanish. "You . . . you . . . Bluebeard!" she choked out. "Conscienceless Bluebeard!"

Bluebeard? Well, Earl thought, *he got away with it. I didn't.* The only question nagging him now was strictly academic. Yet he wished he knew the true answer to it.

Had Gloria touched that perfume stopper to his shoulder on *purpose* so that Mildred would know he'd been with another woman? Realizing that Mildred might do something violent to him out of jealousy? Why would Gloria do such a thing? Earl sighed. Unless she was jealous, too, and didn't trust him as far as she could see him. That must be it. So she'd settled for the airplane fare. He'd been stupid to give her any money at all, but he'd wanted both Mildred and Gloria out of town for a few days after his heist.

Mildred spoke in such a fierce voice that the guard at the door raised his eyebrows. "Which one of us were you actually going to meet, Earl? This . . . this Gloria person, in Las Vegas? Or me, in Philadelphia? Which? I've got to know!"

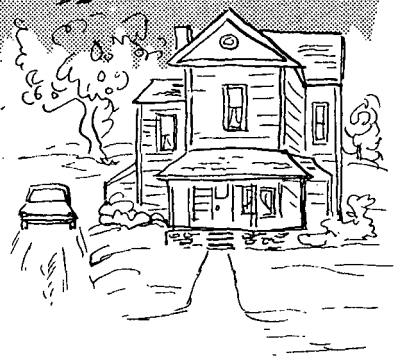
Poor lonely, jealous Mildred. After what she'd done to him, why should he tell her anything? Let her stew. Earl looked her straight in the eyes through the wire mesh and said, "Eat your heart out, baby. You'll never know."

Which was just as well for Mildred, because the truth was that when Earl started out of town with his bank loot, he hadn't been going to Philadelphia *or* Las Vegas.

He'd been heading for Laredo, Texas where, now that he had money again, he could move back in with Verna La Rue, a topless nightclub waitress from his high school days.

Experience does count—even in callousness.

Fool Me Twice



The generator stopped running early this morning. I had grown so accustomed to its distant hum that I awoke with a start and probed the darkness for the cause of my uneasiness. When I finally identified the silence, it was with relief, rather than sadness or regret. My hand crept up to touch the key that hung from a chain at my throat. It was just over four weeks since that day when I decided to lock Roger Hartley in the fallout shelter. It has been an agonizing time for me but now it is over, or nearly so.

I sit in a comfortable chair, thinking back to its beginning—and even before the beginning.

I scarcely remember my mother. She went away when I was a baby, and I knew only that there was something shameful about her going. Whether that was the cause of my father's misanthropy or possibly a result, I will never know. Whichever it was, Father was the central and almost the only figure in my life. He disliked and distrusted every-

one, and attempted to shape my mind in the image of his own. I never questioned his attitude, and grew up with only as much contact with other people as he could not prevent. I regarded my teachers and schoolmates more with indifference than suspicion—they hardly existed for me, and only that until legal requirements were satisfied.

Father used to boast to me that he had rarely been cheated in his life, and never twice by the same person. "Fool me once, shame on you," he would say. Then he would pause and finish very deliberately, "Fool me twice, shame on *me*."

We have always lived out here, miles from town and almost as far from the nearest neighboring farm. We had our own orchard, a large garden, raised chickens and, before Father's death, two or three calves for butchering each year. We lacked for nothing but a few staples, which were supplied by a trip to the nearest town once in three months or so.

In the years after the war, he grew increasingly distrustful and suspicious. He became obsessed with the inevitability of nuclear war, and grimly set about making us even more self-sufficient.

There was, in the yard near the back of the house, what we used to call a cyclone cellar. It was a

by Virginia Long

sort of dugout where we could take shelter from tornadoes. He enlarged it, shored up and sealed the walls and heaped soil high over its original contours. He removed the weathered wooden door and hung a heavy, insulated door from an old walk-in freezer, with a rubber seal around the edges to make it airtight when closed. He installed a small, compact generator to power the shelter's lights and ventilation system, fitting the latter with filters to remove dust or any radiation-carrying pollutant, and buried an enormous fuel tank in the ground nearby.

He laid a system of pipes to collect ground water, providing an independent water supply. The water dripped into a tank high on an inner wall of the shelter, then settled slowly through layers of charcoal and sand to produce perhaps a gallon of water per day—insufficient for hygienic purposes but adequate for survival. He built bunk beds against one wall, carried out several items of furniture from the house, and it was done.

We stored a large supply of food, books, linens, candles, matches and toilet articles on the shelves, and we were ready for the nuclear holocaust that never came.

Father died eighteen years ago, still believing it was only a matter of weeks or months until the world blasted itself to radioactive ash. If the urgency of his conviction has faded for me, the habit of caution has persisted. Twice a year I have inspected and rotated the food supply, washed and aired the linens, run the generator to test its operating condition and arranged by mail for someone to come and replenish the fuel reserves. I have reduced the emergency food by half, as there is only myself now, but otherwise all is as it was when Father was alive.

I still have a few fruit trees near the house, but I sold the orchard and adjoining fields soon after Father's death, as I was unable to tend them and unwilling to hire anyone to help. I insisted on payment in cash, since Father—and therefore I—have never trusted banks. I suppose there must be a great deal of money in various safe places around the house, but I have no idea what the total might be. I need little for the few purchases I make.

I have kept a garden, and chickens to provide me with meat and eggs. The highway is a quarter of a mile away, and every few months I leave a grocery order and money in my mailbox there, and the mail carrier obligingly

leaves the box of necessities by my mailbox the next day.

I suppose people call me a recluse, but the word carries connotations of rejection and bitterness which I do not feel. Perhaps it might have been applied to Father, but in my case it is simply that I have been content. His company was enough for me, and since then my own has sufficed. Until—

Ah, *now* we have come to the beginning!

I was working in the garden one afternoon, gathering the vegetables that were ready for canning, when I saw Roger Hartley for the first time. He was a tall man, who moved with an easy, animal-like grace. He carried his jacket slung over his shoulder, and his face was flushed from the August heat. I watched him curiously as he approached, wondering at my own lack of uneasiness at seeing a stranger appear from nowhere.

He was about forty, I judged—a year or two younger than I—and as his face creased into a smile, I was aware of a completely new sensation. Beautiful is not a word ordinarily used to describe a man, but beautiful he was, with his dark hair, white teeth and broad shoulders above a flat stomach and narrow waist.

His car had broken down on the highway, he told me, and he had followed the lane from my mailbox to the house in order to ask the use of my telephone. He seemed not at all disturbed to learn I had no telephone, and accepted my awkward offer of a glass of iced tea. I had never been schooled in the art of hospitality, but he seemed so hot and tired, I spoke without thinking.

He carried the baskets of tomatoes and green beans to the kitchen for me, talked animatedly over several glasses of tea, helped me with the kettle of hot jars I was sterilizing, accepted my hesitant offer to share a simple supper—in short, he never left. When I think of that night, and all the ones that followed, I find my hand gripping the key painfully. How could such beauty come to this ugliness?

The next day, he borrowed my father's old toolbox and walked back to repair his car, driving it in to park it near the house when it was once more in operating order.

I have said I was content with my life, but now I knew that there is a vast difference between contentment and happiness. And I *was* happy—deliriously so for a few weeks before the lingering pall of my father's stern morality

made me insist, however fearfully, on the legalization of our union.

Roger seemed delighted, as he seemed to delight in everything I said and did. He drove to town to make arrangements, and those arrangements brought a minister and the necessary witnesses to my—to *our* house the next day. The ceremony was simple and unexpectedly brief, but it was all I wished.

Nothing in my life had prepared me for the depth of feeling Roger Hartley had surprised in me, and nothing in my life had ever called forth the hatred I felt when I discovered his treachery.

Habit dies hard, and although Roger's car stood by the side of the house, one morning just a month ago I strolled out to the mailbox to leave my grocery order. I found the flag already up and peered into the box. A letter lay there and, realizing that Roger had written it, I picked it up and studied it.

It was addressed to a Miss Doris Beekman, and as I turned it back and forth curiously in my hand, I noticed that it was insecurely sealed. I suppose I must have reasoned that we were truly one now, and that what was his was mine, as I certainly considered all that was mine his, and I opened it. Remembering now the paralyzing pain it brought to me, I wish I had not. And yet—"fool me once, shame on you."

For he had fooled me. The letter assured an unknown "Dodie" that all had gone according to plan, including the services of old "Parson" Carmichael, who no one would ever have suspected of being anything but a real clergyman. It wouldn't be long until he found all the cash—he'd already collected almost twenty-five thousand dollars from various hiding places around the old house. So hang in there, baby, we've just about got it made . . .

I tore the letter into tiny bits and let them slip from my fingers as I walked numbly back toward the house. It was ashes I was strewing along my path, and the taste of ashes was bitter in my mouth.

It was then that I decided on the method of my revenge, but it was midafternoon before I felt calm enough to suggest a tour of the old fallout shelter. I went to the pantry for the key on its long chain, and walked ahead of Roger to the structure, insulated by pain against the charm of his conversation.

Yes, I answered his incredulous questions, I had actually kept it stocked and in readiness all these years. Yes, it would sustain two

people for about ten days, one person for perhaps as long as a month if necessary.

I unlocked the heavy padlock, leaving it hanging open on the door, and slipped the chain holding the key around my neck. The door was wide, and we walked in side by side. I pointed out the water supply and food shelves, and touched the switch that brought the generator shuddering to life.

How simple it was with such an unsuspecting victim! How callously one can walk out, slam the heavy door and snap the padlock into place!

And how clear in my mind is the emotion that accompanied the passing of those weeks! At first, thinking it a prank or a temporary chastisement, the prisoner chooses favorites from the canned food, selects a particular book to read to pass the time.

As time goes by, however, the thought of rationing the food arises. The hours are endless, the days are individual, living deaths. The dozen or so books are read indiscriminately, then reread desperately in an effort to avoid the thought that this is not a prank after all, not a passing pique.

Yes, it is all so easy to imagine—the hopeless pacing up and down, back and forth, the pitiful groping for comfort—*nobody* would do this to a loved one! At any moment now, the door will open—

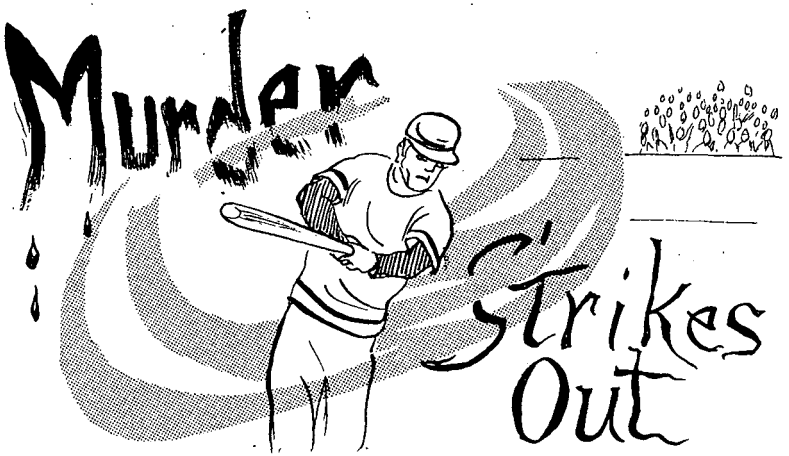
But the door does not open. Four weeks and two days have passed, and my neck still feels the weight of the only key swinging from its chain.

The generator stopped running early this morning. The air has grown stale and dead. The candle consumes precious oxygen, but its flickering light gives a last little comfort.

Now I will stop this ridiculous business of explaining, put aside my notebook and get up from the comfortable chair my father brought out here from the house so long ago.

There is a single tin of corned beef and a small jar of peaches left. At least I will not die hungry.

Again we must acknowledge the truism that the game is never over until the last out.



That Friday evening I was at the high school covering a meeting for my paper, the *Beaver City Gazette*. It was a routine get-together between the high school faculty and the county school board and, for the first hour or so, it was all pretty dull. Then, around nine o'clock, there was a coffee break.

The forty or fifty people in the auditorium barged out to the first-floor corridor and attacked a huge coffee urn set up there, plus some trays of soggy doughnuts. I drank coffee, yawned at the pages of scribbled notes I'd made, and thought about ducking out the nearby front entrance; then a sudden series of echoing pops made me change my mind.

Everyone looked at everyone else with "What the hell was *that*?" expressions. The high school principal growled, "It sounds like kids with firecrackers down in the gymnasium."

Several of us headed for the stairs leading to the basement. It was dark down there, except for a gleam of light in an open doorway on the far side of the gym. I went that way while the others

sprayed out in all directions, turning on the gym's overhead lights, yelling back and forth—everyone glad for a little excitement.

I reached the open door and looked into a cluttered little office used by the school's phys-ed instructor. I noticed a thin haze of smoke in there, an acrid smell and, as I stepped inside, a faint whiff of a much nicer aroma—perfume.

Then I glanced to my right and forgot about smells and smoke and kids with firecrackers.

A man was standing with his hands braced against the top shelf of some kind of display case against the wall. He was coughing and choking on the blood that trickled from his open mouth. There were red blotches on the front of his shirt.

For a moment I just stood there, gawking.

The man ignored me, his eyes fixed on the clutter of items on that shelf. Then he brushed aside a couple of metal trophies, some other things. His hand closed on something. Just as I moved toward him, he turned.

by Richard M. Ellis

With a terrible urgency he breathed, "She—*she* . . ."

Then he pitched forward into my arms. I managed to break his fall, ease his limp body to the floor.

People were crowding the doorway behind me now. Someone asked in a high, shrill voice, "What's happened in here? What's the matter with Ray?"

The matter with him was that he had three bullet holes in his chest and he was quite thoroughly dead.

His name was Raymond Harris; he'd been the physical education instructor at Beaver City High since the beginning of the school term a few months before. He'd come to Beaver City from someplace back east. I knew him slightly, from seeing him at parties and around town, and he'd been likable enough, if maybe a little too impressed with himself.

He was about my age—in his mid-twenties—all flashing white teeth, bulging biceps, and boyish charm. He'd been a big hit with the ladies; in fact, he'd quickly established himself as the local Don Juan.

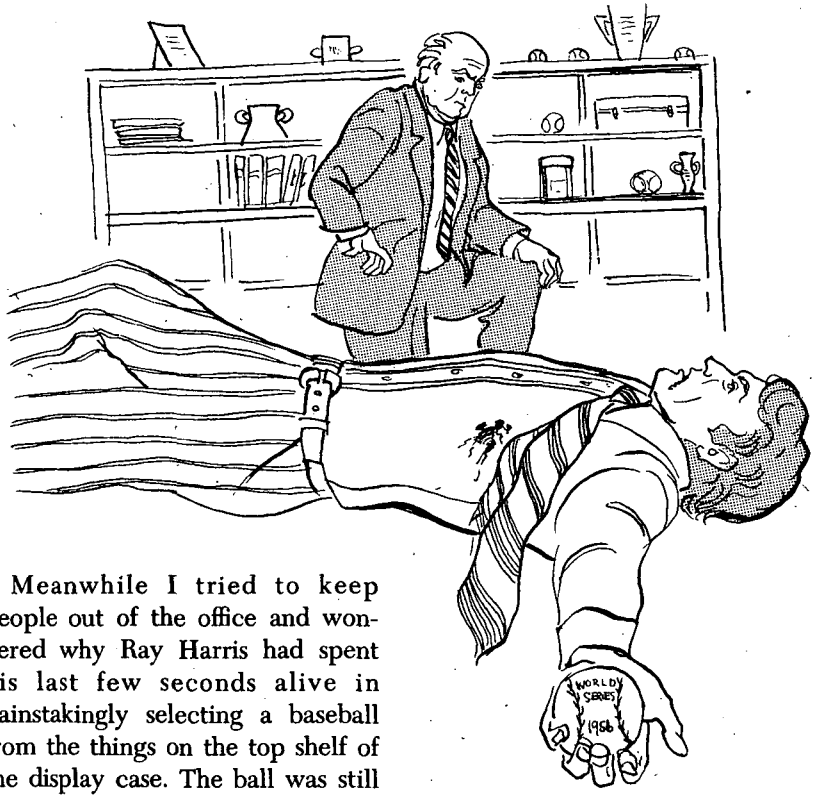
However that might be, he was now dead, and it appeared that one of his girlfriends was responsible. I got to my feet and glanced around the cubbyhole office.

There was a desk, a couple of chairs, filing cabinets, and the display case that held a motley collection of sports mementos.

I used the desk phone to call the cops and then the *Gazette*. Luckily, the editor was still there, getting ready for the big six-page weekend edition.

minutes later and knelt by the body.

Chief Parker pried the ball out of Harris' hand. It wasn't a regulation baseball, but one made of molded plastic, yellowed with age. Stamped on it were the words: *Souvenir of Yankee Stadium, World Series 1956, Yankees vs Dodgers.*



Meanwhile I tried to keep people out of the office and wondered why Ray Harris had spent his last few seconds alive in painstakingly selecting a baseball from the things on the top shelf of the display case. The ball was still clutched in his fingers.

I had no idea, and neither did Chief of Police Simon Parker, when he got there a couple of

The chief grunted dubiously. "Mebbe it was just the first thing that come under his hand, when he started to fall."

"I don't know—he seemed to know what he was doing," I said.

Parker squinted at the display case. There were several other baseballs, tarnished metal trophies, and photographs of Ray Harris in gym shorts and in baseball uniforms.

"Well," Parker shrugged. "He grabbed this ball—for whatever reason, if any—then he said 'she' once or twice, and keeled over. That it?"

I nodded. "Only trouble, he didn't say who 'she' was."

"Yeah . . . I better talk to those folks out there in the gymnasium. Doc? Can you tell me anything, first?"

Dr. Johnson, who had arrived with the chief and his two uniformed cops, glanced up from the body on the floor.

"Uh huh," he said. "This feller's dead. He might've lived over one bullet, or even these two—but the third one went direct to his heart. Hard to believe he was able to move around, once that hit him."

"He did, though," I said.

The doc blinked thoughtfully. "Must've been somethin' he wanted to do awful bad, then."

Chief Parker frowned at the souvenir baseball that he had placed on the desk. He said, "Could be."

"Heck, if he wanted to leave a clue to who killed him, all he had to do was yell out the name," I said. "There were half a dozen of us crowding around him."

"You ever been shot, son?" the doc asked me.

"Shot at—but never hit."

"Uh huh. Believe me, a man full of lead don't necessarily act in a sane and logical manner. At least, not from a bystander's point of view."

Chief Parker nodded. "But from his *own* point of view—"

"Who knows?" the doctor sighed.

Parker nodded again, and went out. I stayed in the little office long enough to phone in an update to my editor. Then I followed the chief.

He was standing with the high school principal, and a group of subdued teachers. Quite a few of the people had left.

The principal was wielding the whitewash brush: "No, Mr. Harris was a fine, hard-working young man, highly thought of and respected by the students and by his fellow faculty members. I can think of no possible motive for anyone to—to harm him."

A couple of the younger women

dabbed at their eyes with their hankies. One of them—a fluffy little blonde named Ruth Peterson—gulped, "It must have been an accident of some kind."

Chief Parker said something equally plausible about stray tramps, or maybe a sneak thief.

I offered, "Don't overlook the chance of an escaped lunatic."

The chief eyed me without favor. I shrugged and turned away to light a cigarette.

Murder was rare in Beaver City—population three thousand and some odd—and there was seldom any mystery about the few that did occur, but this business tonight was something else. Frankly, I doubted that Chief Parker could handle it.

Now another of the teachers, Ladonna Larson, said in a rather hoarse voice, "Please, can we go home now? I feel—"

"Yes, of course," the chief said. "No reason for you all to stay around. If any of you think of somethin' that might help, give my office a call."

The group of teachers broke up and headed for the stairs.

"Just like that?" I asked Parker.

He shrugged and took a comfortable puff at his ever-present cigar. Then he waddled over to talk to the doctor, who was ready to cart away what was left of the ill-fated Raymond Harris.

I just stood there, shaking my head sadly.

Another half hour went by in futility as the chief's men searched the school building and the grounds for the murder weapon, or anything else in the way of a lead. Nothing.

A few minutes before ten, almost an hour after the shooting, I called my editor again, to report that there was nothing to report.

"I think it's time to get the sheriff over here from the county seat," I added. "Chief Parker's a nice old guy and all that, but—"

"Yeah, well," the editor said. "By the way, I have an item you can pass on to the chief."

It seemed that just minutes ago, a woman with a curiously muffled voice had called the newspaper, wanting information concerning an engagement party that was supposed to take place during the upcoming weekend.

She didn't know where the party was to be, or the name of the girl getting engaged, though she did know that the man involved was Raymond Harris. What she wanted was the name of the girl.

"Did she get it?" I asked.

"Not from us," the editor said. "Haven't got anything on any such party. I told the dame I

doubted that there'd *be* any party, since Raymond Harris was in no shape to attend. She brushed that aside, and repeated she wanted—had to have—the name of the girl. Then she hung up."

"Any idea who she was?"

"Nope. She was obviously disguising her voice by talking through a wadded handkerchief or something."

"All right," I said. I hung up, and went looking for Chief Parker. I found him in the little office off the gym in the high school basement. By then he had sent his minions on various errands, and he and I had the building to ourselves except for the janitor, who was wandering around somewhere upstairs.

The chief was perched on a corner of the desk, studying the souvenir baseball he'd pried out of Harris' hand. He looked up at me and frowned.

"I was hopin' you'd gone home," he said.

"Fat chance. Listen—" I told him about the woman's phone call to the *Gazette*, then said, "You see the implications?"

Parker didn't answer at once. He sat there, a middle-sized, middle-aged man with a bland round face and double chins, blinking at me through silver-rimmed glasses. What little hair he had left was standing out in all directions from his habit of running his stubby fingers through it.

Finally he said, "You happen to notice that there's four or five more baseballs on the top shelf of that display case? All of 'em autographed by New York Yankees of one era or another. Young Harris must've been a Yankee fan."

I stared pityingly at the old boy. Now he was down to trying to change the subject whenever anything with a direct bearing on the murder was mentioned.

"Yeah, no doubt," I said. "Fact, I heard that he had a tryout with the Yankee organization a few years ago—he thought he was a pitcher—but he couldn't hack it. Big deal. Now, look, the sheriff can get here in an hour's drive. It's no disgrace to call for help, for gosh sake."

Parker absently brushed a scatter of cigar ash from the jacket of the seedy blue suit he was wearing. He blinked at me with a mournful air, and said, "You mentioned somethin' about 'implications.' I reckon you mean the lady that called your paper might be the killer. That mebbe she met Harris down here tonight, and he told her he was gettin' engaged and whatever had been goin' on between him and her was all over. She didn't take kindly to the no-

tion of bein' dropped—and pulled a .25 and filled Harris full of holes. Now, she wants to find the girl and sort of finish the job. That it?"

"Yes," I said with some impatience. "The thing is, we need to find the woman before she—"

"Uh huh." Parker blinked some more. "You don't know of any special friend Harris had? Someone who could tell us somethin' solid about his private life?"

I shook my head. "He was pretty much of a lone wolf. With emphasis on the 'wolf.'"

"I believe it. I been sort of waitin' to hear from my office, that somebody had phoned in a tip or two—but no soap. Nobody concerned is sayin' anythin'."

"What'd you expect? People like these don't want to get tangled up in a messy situation. About calling the sheriff—"

Parker grunted. "Mebbe later on. Not just yet. But I'm wonderin' about this mess of notes you give me a while ago—the notes you made durin' the shindig in the auditorium. You figger you got the names of most of the folks who was there?"

As he spoke, the chief hauled the notes in question from a side pocket of his jacket.

"Most of them, yeah," I said. "But you could get the complete list by asking the school principal—everyone at the meeting was either a teacher or a member of the school board. Maybe one or two strays, like myself."

Craning my neck around to look over Parker's shoulder, I saw that he had circled in pencil the names of all the women that I had listed.

"Uh huh," he muttered.

"Kind of locking the barn door, though, isn't it?" I asked with some sarcasm. "I mean, you let them walk out—"

"What would you've done?"

"Just for starters, I'd have searched every last person in the joint. Then grilled them one by one, where they were and what they were doing when the shots were fired. Then check and cross-check their stories. Sooner or later discrepancies would've turned up."

The chief puffed thoughtfully at his cigar. "I see."

"And don't give me any nonsense about tramps or sneak thieves," I continued.

"All right," Parker said mildly. "Appears like all the doors to the buildin' was locked, anyways, except the front door. And the janitor sort of hung around there all evenin' to keep tabs on who come in. He claims nobody set foot inside the buildin' who wasn't sup-

posed to be here on business."

"Well then?" I snapped. "Obviously—"

"You know the janitor? Cranky old cuss named Shelby. I'm inclined to take his word—about some things."

"Yeah, yeah," I said impatiently.

"You was at the meetin' yourself, and you're kind of a trained observer," Parker mused. "How about you tellin' me when Raymond Harris sneaked away to come down here? And who follered him out?"

I blinked at the bland old codger. "You kidding? People were coming in and going out all the time. Then there was the coffee break, everyone milling around—"

"Hmm. But of course you *can* tell me who was where, and who wasn't, when you all heard the shots and come downstairs here to find Harris? Who was actin' suspicious? Not to mention who all left the buildin' and went elsewhere durin' the ten minutes or so between the time you found Harris and the time me and my boys showed up. Well?"

"Hell, it was mass confusion," I grumbled. "Okay. Okay, you made your point. Maybe questioning everyone wouldn't have turned up anything, but—"

"As for runnin' a search," the chief broke in, his faded blue eyes taking on a nasty twinkle, "I make it that you got about forty, forty-five names listed here—and more than half of 'em women. Now, how d'you figger I'd go about gettin' all those ladies to strip down for me? Even if they was all still here—which they wasn't."

"All right!" I yelled. "You made your point."

The chief shrugged. "As I started out to say, I been goin' over the names you took down. Of course, I know a lot of them, but not all. For instance, I crossed off several of the ladies—folks like Miss Glenn here, and Mrs. Dawes, who're both pushin' seventy."

I took the list and frowned at it. "You do agree that the killer was a woman, then?"

Parker shrugged again. "Got to start someplace. And ever'thin' so far kind of points to a woman."

"Oh, come on," I snorted. "Harris told us that much."

"By groanin' 'she' a couple of times? He could just as easy been tryin' to say a man's name—Shelby, for instance. Not that I think he was. I can't quite see old man Shelby wearin' perfume, and unloadin' a .25 pistol at a man from a range of a very few feet—and only hittin' him three times. The other three slugs are scattered

pretty good over the wall yonder."

"Well . . . if we're right in thinking the killer was a woman that Harris had been playing around with, she's almost sure to be one of the young, good-looking high school teachers—and that cuts the list down quite a bit."

Using my ball-point pen, I drew a line through several more feminine names.

"This one definitely doesn't go for men—no way; and this one—I was admiring her legs upstairs in the corridor, just before we heard the shots . . . This one is much too plain for Harris' taste," and so on.

When I finished, I copied onto a fresh page the names that were left: eight women who, as far as I knew at the moment, might possibly fill the bill. A couple of them I had dated myself; and another had turned me down, at one time or another.

"Here," I said, handing the notes back to Chief Parker. "But remember, this wasn't a complete list to start with."

He nodded, reading the names: Mary Tyler, Janice Cartwright, Ruth Peterson, Carolyn King, Ladonna Larson, Betty Ann Summers, Celia Pearce, Katherine Mantle–she was the buxom redhead who had turned me down for a date.

I shook my head. "Hard to believe that any of them—"

"Uh huh," said the chief. "I know. But somebody did."

He picked up the baseball that he had placed on the desk when I came in a few minutes ago, and read aloud: "Souvenir of Yankee Stadium, World Series 1956, Yankees versus Dodgers. Now what—"

"Wait a moment," I said suddenly. "Yankees—Babe Ruth—*Ruth Peterson*!"

I expected Parker to jump through the ceiling; instead, he muttered, "Yankees—Mickey Mantle—Katherine *Mantle*. Or Babe Ruth—the *King* of Swat. Or baseball itself—the *Summers*' Sport . . . Huh uh. I'd thought of those."

I was pacing back and forth in the cramped area between the desk and the door to the gym. Now I wheeled around and pointed a forefinger at the chief. "For crying out loud, Mickey Mantle probably *played* in the '56 series!"

"Yeah. Only, amongst those autographed balls on the shelf there is one signed by Mantle. And another'n has Babe Ruth's moniker on it. If that's what Harris meant, why didn't he pick up one with the right name on it? You said yourself he took his time at it—appeared to be pickin' out a

particular ball—and chose this one."

I groaned. "This is all fantasy, anyway. You were likely right in the first place. He just happened to grab that ball as he started to fall over."

"I can almost see it," he said. "Right on the tip of my tongue . . . The 1956 Series. Durn it, what—" Abruptly he raised a palm and slapped it across his wrinkled forehead. He snapped, "Of course! Harris was a would-be pitcher—a Yankee fan—that must be it!"

"What—who?" I stammered.

The chief was busily drawing heavy pencil circles around a name on the list of women.

I squinted at the name he had circled. I still didn't understand. I'm a sports fan—more or less—but at the time of the '56 World Series I was about seven years old.

Now Parker asked, "What's the number of that sorry newspaper you work for?"

I told him absently, and while he snatched up the phone from the desk and dialed the number, I wandered over to a shelf that held a row of battered sports volumes. Among them was this year's almanac. I took it down, looked up *Baseball*, and under that heading, *World Series Records*. I turned pages till I reached the 1956 series and almost at once came to an account of the game on October 8th, the only perfect game ever pitched in World Series history, by a guy named *Don Larsen* . . .

I looked up at Parker. He had finished his phone call.

He nodded. "Uh huh. She spells her last name with an *o* instead of an *e* but—"

"Ladonna Larson," I said hoarsely. "Hell, I dated her a couple of times. She was a little too prim and standoffish for my taste. I don't—where're you going?"

The chief was at the door and picking up speed.

I hurried after him. Minutes later we were in his car speeding through the dark and deserted residential streets west of the high school.

"Miss Larson has an apartment a few blocks from here," Parker told me. "We'll meet my scout car there."

I braced my hands against the dashboard as we skidded around a corner. Then Parker slowed the car to a crawl; he stopped and switched off the headlights.

He nodded toward a two-story brick building just down the street on our right. There were lights showing at several windows and at the front entrance.

I said, "Yeah, that's where La-

donna lives. But what the heck, you can't barge in there and arrest her just on the strength of a theory—and a crazy theory at that."

"Don't intend to," the chief said, leaning forward over the steering wheel to peer toward the apartment house. "Any minute now, your boss at the paper is goin' to phone Miss Larson. He's goin' to tell her he still ain't found out who Raymond Harris was plannin' to get engaged to—but he's workin' on it."

I thought about it. "Oh. She'll think that she gave herself away somehow when she called the *Gazette*."

"Mebbe. *If* all the speculatin' we been doin' is right. And *if* she loses her nerve, just mebbe she will come runnin' out that door to go around to the garage where she keeps her car. And since we didn't find that gun, just mebbe she'll have it in her purse. Lots of *ifs* and *mebbes*."

I spotted the shadowy shape of Beaver City's one black-and-white scout car easing to the curb, several houses in front of us, to wait.

At ten-thirty-one by my watch, I saw movement in the lighted entrance of the apartment building, the outer door flew open and Ladonna Larson flew out.

We met her on the front lawn. It wasn't pleasant.

She did have the gun, a .25 Beretta automatic, in her handbag, and once she realized it was all over, she went to pieces.

It was about the way Chief Parker had figured. Ladonna and Ray Harris had been having a secret affair. Tonight Harris had told her it was over. She hadn't liked the idea.

That was that.

Later on, I stopped by the chief's ramshackle office at headquarters for a moment, before going across the town square to write my story at the *Gazette*.

Parker looked at me somberly and said, "You know, in all the excitement, I plumb forgot to call the sheriff to get hisself over here and help me out."

"Never mind the wisecracks," I told him. "Just—skip it."

Trust, like anything else, is curable if the medicine is potent and appropriate.

You're Dead!

by Margaret E. Brown

Amelia Turner, still trim and petite at fifty, capped the bottle of pale-pink enamel which she'd been applying to her nails and shivered deliciously as the heroine on the TV screen walked down a dark alley where her father's murderer lurked. Background music, apprehensive and staccato, tensed Amelia's nerves unbearably. Forgetful of wet polish, she pressed a thumbnail to her teeth and willed the girl to turn and run. Too late! A dark hulk lunged out at her. The girl screamed, shots rang out,

spotlights flared and the murderer sprawled on the pavement to gurgle a dying confession as the heroine collapsed on the young detective's shoulder. Triumphant music; fade-out; commercial.

Amelia released the breath she'd been holding, flicked off the television and began repairing her damaged thumbnail. With the television silent, all the small familiar noises of the old house crept back: the grandfather clock on the landing; the clicks and sighs as the furnace cooled in the cellar; the gentle scratch of a tree limb brushing an upstairs window; the creaking plank between the kitchen and dining room . . .

Amelia froze. That plank never creaked by itself; only when someone stepped on it. The kitchen door! As if in televised instant replay, Amelia saw herself taking her dinner scraps out to the garbage pail earlier *and leaving the back door unlocked when she returned!* Silently, she raged at her carelessness and her terror mounted when the plank creaked again, released from the intruder's weight.

Newspaper headlines detailing unmentionable crimes flashed through her mind, and the telephone seemed miles away as she forced her trembling legs to carry her across the room. As she reached for the receiver, the dining room door was flung open and a harsh voice snarled, "Touch that phone and you're dead!"

Whirling to face her assailant, Amelia was struck by laughter. "Oh, Amelia." The woman standing there giggled. "If only you could see your face!" But when Amelia, pale and trembling, sank down on the telephone bench, the woman's giggles changed to remorse.

"Oh gee, honey, I really scared you, didn't I? Gee, I'm sorry, but you've got to be more careful about locking up. Think of that woman over in Ripton last week who had someone walk in her open front door and murder her right there in her own vestibule." Chattering nonstop, the woman bustled into the dining room and returned with a small glass of sherry for Amelia.

Clara Demarest was also in her early fifties, but fighting every month of it. Where Amelia was soft white curls and delicate pastel dresses, Clara was blue rinse and vivid pants suits which overemphasized her hips. "I only meant to show you how easy it is for someone to break into a big barn of a house like this," Clara said righteously as Amelia's color returned. "I could have been a murderer—or worse!"

"That's the first time in months I forgot to lock the door," Amelia protested.

"Once is all it takes," Clara said darkly, and her eyebrows knit in a facial expression so like Henry's that Amelia's heart turned over. Clara's brother had been dead ten long years and they really hadn't looked alike, yet any memory of Henry's dear, earnest face could still evoke that aching sense of loss.

To cover it, Amelia busied herself with assuring Clara that she was all right now. Mechanically, she went through the motions of hospitality, but her thoughts still strayed to Henry and those lost days of innocence.

Theirs had been a leisurely, old-fashioned courtship; a love discovered and blossoming in middle age when both had outgrown the painful shyness of youth. She had been too much under her father's autocratic thumb to encourage a lover, even if one had existed in their small town with eyes to see the untouched emotions concealed beneath the guise of a dutiful spinster daughter.

Henry, too, had suffered from self-consciousness as a youth and had hidden himself in the bank's Estates and Trusts Department, where his years of careful attention to detail were eventually rewarded by a vice-presidency. At the death of Amelia's father, it was Henry who had guided her through the minor intricacies of the old man's estate. If she called at the bank too frequently at first for his advice on this or that investment, he never made her feel unwelcome. Soon it had been *he* calling *her*, and without any pretext of banking or estate matters.

"I think I *will* have a glass of sherry," Clara said, and her words brought Amelia back to the present, since Clara seldom accepted spirits of any kind. "One lush in the family's enough," she often told Amelia with coarse irony.

Amelia supposed it was better to laugh than cry about Henry's weakness; and, to do her credit, Clara never made the remark to anyone else, yet Amelia couldn't help wincing whenever she said it. If Henry had to be dead, then let his faults rest in peace, too. Remember only the good.

And he had been good, Amelia thought, as she brought Clara sherry and watched her plump fingers lift the glass daintily. Even Clara, who couldn't resist occasional innuendos about Henry's alcoholism, remembered her brother's generosity with gratitude: the way he'd stood by her

when her husband died, leaving her penniless and on the edge of a nervous breakdown; how Henry had arranged for her recovery at a decent rest home and later brought her to share his own house.

Over the years, Clara had told Amelia all the details, but at the time, Amelia had sensed Henry's embarrassment over his sister's misfortunes and she had asked no questions. Henry had been grateful for her tact, and Amelia remembered the hopefulness with which he had introduced her to Clara. He had so wanted them to become good friends.

Were they good friends? Amelia wondered now, watching Clara finish her sherry with unwonted relish. Certainly Clara was all that remained to her of Henry. Only with her could Amelia openly remember what might have been, even though Clara had treated their romance with amused contempt at the time.

"Poor thing. You were so naive," Clara always said. When she dwelt too long on Henry's drinking, Amelia almost hated her; but then Clara would remember how Henry had saved her from widowed penury and both would mourn his loss.

Now Clara set down her glass and hoisted herself from the chair, saying cheerfully, "Well, I'd better be getting behind locked doors myself while the night's still young."

Amelia returned her smile. "You sound as if the streets were crawling with muggers, Clara. We don't have many crimes here."

"One's all it takes," Clara said meaningfully as she paused in the doorway. "Now, you be sure and lock this door after me, you hear? And don't forget the back door, either."

"Oh, Clara, stop it," Amelia said, suddenly tired of the older woman's patronizing airs. "You always think the worst."

"Better a live coward than a dead fool," Clara snapped; but then she turned and said earnestly, "I'm sorry, honey. I don't mean to treat you like a child, but you're my only friend in this one-horse town and you're so trusting—there I go *again*, for Pete's sake!" Once more her eyebrows furrowed like Henry's. "All I mean is that I'd hate for anything to happen to you."

Impulsively, Amelia clasped her hand and squeezed it warmly. "I'll lock up," she promised.

Putting on the night latch after Clara had driven away, Amelia thought again of her words. Perhaps she was an innocent, naive, trusting fool. She *did* take people

too much at their words. Hadn't she believed Father when he told her it was best to devote her life to him? And hadn't she taken Henry at face value? Assumed his lavish use of after-shave lotion and breath mints were signs of personal fastidiousness and not for masking alcoholic fumes? Hadn't she believed him the many times he'd broken their dates, claiming another bronchial attack?

"Drunk as a lord, usually," Clara had told her after his death. "Not that he didn't have a weak chest, too—it runs in our family, you know," and Clara would touch her own buxom chest.

At least that much had been true about him. If his chest had been stronger, perhaps he wouldn't have died. Poor Henry! Always so respectable. Amelia was sure no one in town suspected that he had drunk, nor why he'd been out that raw night ten years ago in the freezing rain. Never once had anyone slanted their eyes at her and made her feel that the shameful story was buzzing around behind her back.

Over and over, Amelia wished that even she didn't know. Of course, that was impossible. Clara was the type who simply had to unburden herself to someone. "Out of whiskey, he was," Clara had wept afterwards. "You never saw him when he was drinking, Amelia. He was completely different then. I got him up to his room and thought he'd passed out; but when I checked on him later, he was gone. If only I hadn't hidden the car keys! He tried to walk—on a night like that, with his weak chest—to buy another bottle, but he passed out at the end of our driveway, soaked to the bone and half-frozen. I got so drenched helping him back up the drive it's a wonder I didn't die, too."

Clara escaped with only a light chest cold, but Henry had developed bronchial pneumonia and had died two days later, under an oxygen tent in the town's hospital.

Amelia moved through the empty rooms, straightening up and clicking off lamps as she went. In the kitchen, she recklessly threw open the back door and stared into the night. She'd never before feared the dark, but now she shivered, closed the door and rammed the bolt home, feeling vulnerable and exposed. Clara was right: times had changed and, after all, she was a woman alone with no one to protect her. Of course, the Higgins boy from across the street was on the police force now and he patrolled their street at least twice a night, but

how could he prevent someone from sneaking across the dark yards and breaking a cellar window? She propped a chair under the cellar doorknob and decided to buy a hasp for it tomorrow—and perhaps she could locate Father's old pistol. She remembered seeing it and a box of cartridges last spring when she cleaned the attic.

Suddenly, Amelia was furious with Clara. Blast the woman for arousing fears which had never existed before. She deserved a good shaking!

Thus, it was with the idea of paying her back that Amelia hid in the shrubbery under Clara's window the next night. She'd parked her car down the street and crept in through the back gate. Stealthily, she tried the doors, but all were firmly locked. Through a slit in the curtains she saw Clara idly leafing through a magazine, with a glass of iced tea on the table beside her.

There was a guilty sense of power in secretly watching someone, and Amelia was fascinated at first. Eventually, though, she became annoyed at Clara's equanimity and the smug, unworried manner in which she sipped her drink and turned the pages. She'd come to frighten Clara, somehow to make her admit that she, too, was as much a potential victim as Amelia. But how? The doors were locked and Amelia did not feel equal to climbing through windows.

Should she just knock on the door and take her by surprise? No, Clara always looked before opening up. Inspired, Amelia suddenly remembered Clara's bitter complaints about a neighborhood dog which kept tipping over her garbage pails. She even kept a supply of small rocks on a shelf by the back door with which to chase it. Quietly, Amelia found a long-handled rake; then, hiding in the overgrown bushes, she gave a strong shove to the rake and one of the garbage pails clattered to the ground.

Almost immediately, a dim light clicked on beside the door. She crouched lower in the bushes as Clara peered through the window. With the rake handle, she nudged a tin can and sent it rattling along the walk.

Goaded, Clara flung open the door and walked threateningly down the steps. "Git!" she cried and strode past Amelia to fling a handful of rocks in the direction of the noise.

Stepping out from her hiding place into the light, Amelia triumphantly called, "Surprise, Clara! You've just been mugged!"

She laughed at the expression on Clara's face. "There's no point in locking your doors if you can be tricked into coming out so easily," she teased, as Clara stood there looking first stunned, then angry. "You're not going to be mad, are you?" Amelia asked uncertainly. "After all, turnabout's fair play and you started it." She stretched out her hand, but Clara waved her back.

"Get away from me!" she gasped. "Coming here, spying on me, turning over my garbage!"

"Not spying," Amelia protested. "No more than you did to me." Hurt, she righted the pail and began picking up the debris.

"Oh, stop it!" Clara ordered sharply. "Just leave it alone! I'll clean it up tomorrow. Serves me right for being so dumb." Avoiding Amelia's bewildered face, Clara brushed by her heavily and went up the steps. "Good night, Amelia."

Feeling like a chastened fool, Amelia turned and fled. In the darkness, she didn't see the tin can lying on the path, and as it slipped away under her foot, her ankle took a sickening twist. By the time she'd reached the car, it throbbed unbearably. Painfully, she managed to drive as far as Dr. Sorkin's house.

The old man had given up most of his practice the year before, but he still maintained his old-fashioned office at home and would treat the minor ailments of such long-time patients as Amelia. Soon her ankle was comfortably taped and Dr. Sorkin brought her a glass of rosé while they waited for the pain injection he'd given her to take effect.

In retirement, the old doctor had grown garrulous and Amelia had always been a favorite of his, so he was happily prepared to turn her mishap into a sociable visit. "Turned your ankle coming down Clara Demarest's path, eh? How *is* Clara these days?" He poured himself another glass of wine.

Much later, as she let herself into the house, Amelia could hear the phone ringing endlessly. Without haste, she carefully closed and bolted the door before answering it.

"Amelia? Thank goodness! I was just about to call the police and have that Higgins boy go looking for you! Where *were* you?" Clara's voice sounded hoarse over the wire.

"I turned my ankle when I left your house," Amelia explained coolly, "and I stayed to talk with Dr. Sorkin after he took care of it."

"That old windbag! No wonder

it took you so long to get home. Listen, Amelia, I just wanted to tell you—that is—well, gee, I'm awfully sorry I was such a lousy sport tonight. I mean, you really got my goat the way you suckered me outside; and on top of everything, I'm coming down with another rotten chest cold. I really wasn't myself tonight, but I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. You got me fair and square."

Amelia allowed her voice to soften. "That's all right, Clara. I'm not angry."

At the end of the week, when Amelia's ankle was on the mend and Clara had decided she didn't have a chest cold after all, Amelia invited her over for lunch. It was a beautiful fall day and they ate on the back terrace under spreading trees which had just begun to change color. Clara seemed quite recovered from her chagrin of the other night and only laughed when Amelia teased her about being fooled so easily.

"You have to admit you played dirty, though," Clara defended herself. "A real intruder wouldn't have known about the dog."

"Nonsense," Amelia said. "I should think it an obvious trick. Everybody's had a dog knock over a garbage pail occasionally, and with that much noise anyone would think it *was* a dog. No one expects a burglar to raise an uproar. It was perfectly legitimate and it proves that in your own way, you're just as much of an innocent as you always accuse me of being!"

Clara pursed her lips but she refused to take umbrage, even when Amelia kept needling her.

As the afternoon drew to a close, a cool breeze sprang up and the two women began clearing things away. "I'll stick the chairs in the cellar for you," Clara volunteered, as Amelia wheeled the serving cart into the house.

"Oh, thanks," Amelia called, "and would you lock the door for me when you've finished?"

"Sure thing," Clara said as she disappeared down the shrubbery-hidden steps with the wicker chairs.

As soon as Clara had driven away, Amelia went around to the cellar door. As expected, the lock was open; Clara still thought she was a trusting fool. "Surprise, surprise!" Amelia thought wryly.

At full dark, she switched on all the downstairs lights and drew the curtains too tightly for anyone to see through. Leaving the radio playing softly, she then went upstairs and sat motionlessly by a back window in a dark bedroom. It was almost ten before her patience was rewarded and she'd

had time to relive the conversation in Dr. Sorkin's office over and over, beginning with his words, "How *is* Clara these days? Going a little easier on the whiskey than she used to, I hope?"

At that, the distortions which Amelia had somehow sensed all these years suddenly gave a half-turn and everything fell into sharp perspective. She really hadn't needed to question nor even hear the rest of the old doctor's meanderings. It was as if she'd known all along. ". . . a real saint, that Henry. Taking her in when her husband got fed up with her d.t.'s and kicked her out . . . Waste of money drying her out in that sanatorium. At least when Henry caught pneumonia from pulling her in out of a sleet storm, his death shook her up enough to make her stay home when she's drinking."

Amelia had hardly heard him. She'd been remembering the "iced tea" in Clara's hand earlier that evening and her overly-angry reaction to Amelia's trick. Had there been any liquor bottles in Clara's overturned garbage pail?

Now Amelia waited until she saw Clara's blocky shape merge with the darkness of the cellar steps. Moving noiselessly, she slipped from the bedroom and down the stairs.

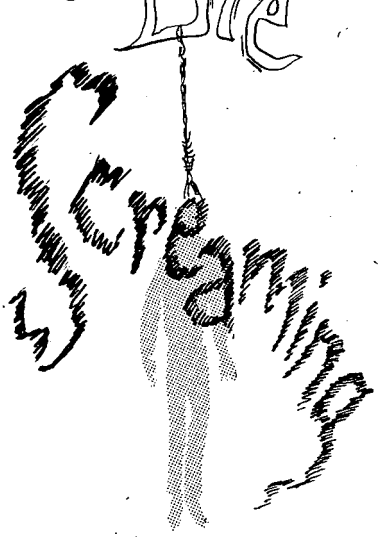
Strange that Clara had always jeered her for being too trusting and naive. Of all the lies which she, Amelia, had ever believed, Clara's were the most heinous. Not only had Clara caused the death of the only person she'd ever loved, she had also cheated Amelia out of the comfort of his memory—forced her to believe that Henry's love had been shallow and flawed.

Long-frozen passions had been thawing in her veins all week, but she was calm as she crossed the kitchen and opened the cellar door. On the stairway below, Clara blinked as sudden light hit her eyes; but nevertheless, she gaily pointed her finger at Amelia and chortled, "Bang! You're dead!"

"No, Clara," Amelia said as she aimed Father's pistol, "*you* are."

It is said that courage is a virtue only in proportion as it is directed by prudence.

He Can't Die Screaming



The gate in the high stone fence surrounding the estate was securely locked. On the grounds bulky figures, each with a suspicious bulge under the left armpit, prowled in silence, their eyes watchful for any movement in the deepening shadows of dusk.

Inside, in the huge, oak-paneled dining room, the chieftains of the Gatrow family were holding a strategy meeting.

Halfway down the length of the long table sat Peter Gatrow, a slim, darkly-handsome man in his early thirties. His was the job of finding legal ways of transacting the family's business. Opposite him was his brother Michael, heavily-muscled and resembling a half-finished statue carved from granite. Michael was in charge of enforcement on those rare occations when legal means were not enough to gain the ends the family sought.

At the head of the table sat a little gray-haired woman—Katherine Gatrow—whose tiny figure was dwarfed by the two men. At the death of her husband Arthur, she had picked up the reins of the family enterprises in her tiny hands, running them with a strict efficiency which immediately dis-

couraged outsiders from trying to move in on the Gatrow empire.

For twenty years the Gatrow family had held the entire city in thrall, buying their way into power with money if possible, and with beatings, bombings and even murder when necessary. Myriad businessmen poured money into the family's coffers, and any action which might disturb the status quo, be it a municipal employees' strike, the handling of a choice bit of political patronage, or even major crime, would first be brought to the Gatrows' attention for approval.

Katherine Gatrow seemed too frail and weak to be the cornerstone on which the family's power was built—until one saw her eyes. Cold and blue they were, glittering like flint; as merciless as an open grave. Katherine Gatrow might be small, but every nerve, every fiber of her being was made of chilled steel.

"The Supreme Court ruled that nobody can be executed anymore," she said in a voice that cut through the stillness like a knife. "And yet in a few short days, your brother Nickie will be hanged. Is this why I sent you to law school, Peter?"

by William Brittain

"Mama, the Supreme Court decision was in 1972, almost six years ago, and it only just passed. The vote to strike down the state laws on capital punishment was five-to-four. As close as you can get."

"But the laws were abolished, yet my son is to die."

Peter tapped a cigarette into quivering fingers. "Two of the justices who voted to abolish capital punishment never argued that the death penalty was completely wrong. They only said it wasn't administered fairly, that the rich and influential could escape it while the poor could not. Many lawyers argued that a law which gave the same punishment for all would be upheld, even though the punishment was execution."

"So after Nickie knifed that man, they changed the law again, is that it?" asked Katherine. "Just so they could get one of the Gatrow family."

"Mama, please." Peter was on the verge of telling his mother that she was wrong, but thought better of it. "The law in this state was passed before the mur . . . Before Nick did what he did. It said that anyone convicted of first-degree murder of a policeman would have to be executed. The

judge was given no choice whatsoever. And the new law was never tested in the courts until Nick's case came up."

"But why him? Just because his name is Gatrow?"

"It's the times, Mama, that's all. With the political scandals of the early '70's, the country was screaming for strict enforcement of laws. Then two of the Supreme Court justices resigned. They were two of the three that voted against capital punishment as a matter of principle. The men who replaced them tended to interpret the laws more harshly."

"Besides, Nick was a damn fool!" Michael Gatrow looked at his mother from under bushy brows. "The cop only pulled him over because he thought Nick was drunk at the wheel. But before my idiot brother even listened to what the guy had to say, he panicked and pulled a knife. He must have stabbed the cop at least a dozen times. Hacked him to pieces. Stupid jerk. The drunk-driving charge could have been hushed up for a hundred or two."

"And remember, Mama," Peter added, "Lowery—the policeman—had a wife and four kids. The stabbing made headlines all over the country. From a strictly political angle, Nick had to be sentenced to die, since the law was on the books. The people would have lynched any D.A. who asked for something less than murder one. The verdict was appealed, of course, but with the new men on the Supreme Court, there was really no chance of a reversal."

"For one of the few times in your life, you are right, Michael," Katherine said. "Nickie was stupid. He deserves to die, for idiocy, if nothing else. Things would be so simple if he were dead right now."

Her two sons looked at her uncomprehendingly. "I . . . I don't understand, Mama," Peter said. "If you want him dead, why are we—"

"You are my sons," rasped Katherine. "Strong, you are. You would not have been foolish enough to kill that policeman if you had been in the car. Unlike Nickie, you have been the sturdy oaks to which I can cling in time of trouble."

She seemed to collapse within herself, growing even smaller in the chair. "But if you are oaks," she continued, "Nickie is a weed. A weakling. When you fought as boys, you would take your hurts in silence, but Nickie would come whining to me like a sick puppy. I was ashamed of him even then. The stink of fear was with him everywhere he went. His father

and I paid many times to get him out of difficulties he was too afraid to handle by himself, even with the Gatrow name to help him. But the killing of the policeman was too much. Nickie is no longer a son of mine."

"Then why not just leave him to the hangman?" asked Michael callously.

Katherine turned to Peter. "Will there be reporters at the execution?" she asked.

"Yes, I expect there'll be one or two, at least. They'll give their stories to all the news services. The first legal execution in years will make headlines all over the country."

"That is the problem, you see. For Nickie will not go to the gallows like a man. He will be blubbering and screaming for mercy the whole way, no matter what kind of tranquilizers they give him. And that is how the story will appear in the newspapers—that a member of the Gatrow family died with no more grace and dignity than a wounded rat squealing out its life in a gutter. Can you imagine the dishonor it will bring to the family? To say nothing of what our enemies will make of any sign of weakness among the Gatrows."

Katherine's head drooped forward, and her face twisted into a grotesque mask. Suddenly she cried out in a shrill voice: "He can't die screaming! For the sake of my dead husband's honor, this must not be!"

Then, just as abruptly she sat up in the chair, composing her face and body with a visible effort. "Forgive me," she said in a voice that was deadly calm. "We must not give way to emotion. Instead, we must find some way to remedy this matter. I am open to suggestions."

For several minutes the room was silent as the three considered the problem. Finally Peter spoke.

"It's no good making the usual contacts. They wouldn't want to get near a prison, and they wouldn't know what to do when they got there."

"The best plan would call for a single individual," Katherine said. "Someone with an unusual way of thinking which would allow him to look at this project from a new angle that the rest of the world would not even consider."

Peter looked from his mother to Michael and then back again. "Shandy," he whispered slowly.

"That screwball," growled Michael.

"Maybe. But in his day he worked some of the most imaginative con games in the business."

"Look, he's so old he'd fold up

and die at the first sign of any real action. Besides, I wouldn't trust him any farther than I could throw this house."

"The point is, he can make people trust him. That's why, in his time, he was the greatest bunco man around. If anybody can do something about Nick, it's Shandy."

"There's something else. He's into us for over five grand he owes on the numbers, and I've been pressing him for payment. He and I aren't exactly the best of friends."

"Then, Michael," Katherine said, "if he is the only one who can help us, you and Shandy will become friends."

The little man in the grubby apartment at the edge of the city's slum area had been expecting a call from Katherine Gatrow—if not today, then tomorrow or the next day; sometime, at least, within two weeks—because in two weeks Nick Gatrow would be executed, unless something were done.

He saw the black limousine glide to the curb beneath his window and watched Peter and Mike get out. They shouldered aside a bum who was weaving along the sidewalk, and then Peter returned to the car and escorted his mother up the old apartment house steps.

A buzzer rasped in the little man's apartment, and he pressed the button to release the latch on the front door. He met the Gatrows in the hallway and ushered them inside. Then, as the three looked about the room distastefully, he sat down in the single overstuffed chair and gazed at them expectantly.

Michael Gatrow walked over to him, reached down and grabbed a handful of shirt. "Up, Shandy," said Mike, lifting the man to his feet as easily as if he were a rag doll. "Nobody sits while my mother is standing."

The man called Shandy brushed long gray hair out of his face with one hand and then arranged his shirt. "A thousand pardons, Mrs. Gatrow," he said with a trace of a bow. "My manners are abominable, a fact of which your son is continually reminding me." He felt his back gingerly. "The last time he reminded me, I was bedridden for a week."

"You were late with your payment," Mike growled.

"Please sit down, Mr. Shandy," Katherine said. "I am not here to discuss the money you owe me. Except, perhaps, to suggest a way in which the entire debt might be wiped from the books."

"Of course," Shandy said. "You

wish me to do something for you, is that not so?"

"How did you know that?" Mike muttered.

Shandy didn't take his eyes off Katherine. "My dear lady," he said, as if she had asked the question, "I know everything about the Gatrow family. That's the single reason this thug you call a son hasn't had me done away with months ago."

Mike Gatrow growled deep in his throat, but Katherine motioned him to silence.

"You wish to see if I can devise some way so that the execution of your son Nicholas won't embarrass you and your family. Isn't that it?"

Katherine Gatrow nodded. "Can you do it?" she asked.

"Perhaps. Did you have any specific method in mind, or will that be up to me?"

Katherine Gatrow considered this question for a moment. "If he were somehow to die before the execution . . ." she began.

"Out of the question, madam. Warden Halsey and his staff are not fools. Besides, Nicholas is

closely guarded during exercise periods, and except for that, he's never out of his cell. His food is especially prepared, and all visitors are searched within an inch of their lives, as you well know. Murdering him would be an impossibility, unless the killer were to lay down his own life in the bargain. And I'm afraid I'm not willing to go that far."

"Could he be gotten out some way?" Peter asked.

"Difficult, but nowhere near as impossible as killing him," Shandy replied. "But you really haven't given the method much thought, have you?"

"No. That's why we're here," Katherine said. "I understand you have a way of accomplishing the impossible, Mr. Shandy."

"Your confidence is not misplaced, dear lady. It is quite possible for me to spare you any shame due to the execution of your son."

"Good. Then—"

"A moment, Mrs. Gatrow. I said that it is possible. Whether I choose to do it is another thing. After all, your son Michael has not always treated me with respect, as valuable as I have sometimes been to your family. He has beaten me, he has referred to me by lewd names, and now that he holds me in financial bondage—"

"The debt would be canceled," Katherine said. "You would never see Michael again."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere."

"I know that arranging a prison break requires a great deal of money," Katherine went on. "All expenses will be taken care of and, of course, there will be a little something extra for you."

"Better and better. But assuming there is a successful escape, there is the problem of what to do with Nicholas afterward. Every policeman in the state will be looking for him."

"The devil can take him for all I care. I never wish to see him again. You can throw him in the river if you like—he was always too frightened to learn to swim. My only concern is that he does not dishonor the Gatrow name by sniveling and crying like a baby when he goes to the gallows, so that our family appears ridiculous in the newspapers."

"Very well, the deal is made. And for doing this, I will receive. . ." He paused, grinning.

Katherine took several thick wads of bills from her shoulder bag and tossed them to Shandy. "There's ten thousand dollars. If you need more, just ask for it. All I want is results."

"There is just one more thing,

madam, that I would ask of you."

"What is it?" Katherine asked, a note of annoyance creeping into her voice. "Your debt is canceled, you have money. What more is in my power to give?"

Shandy turned toward Mike, his eyes flashing. "Before I do this thing for your family, I want your son to say 'please.' "

A strangling sound came from Michael Gatrow's throat. "Why you little—" he began.

"Michael! Do as he says!"

Michael looked from his mother to Shandy and back again. He shook his head slowly. The woman advanced on him, her small fists balled. "Do it!" she snapped.

Mike stalked toward Shandy on stiff legs and stood glaring down at the little man. Twice he opened his mouth, but no words came forth. His third attempt was successful.

"Please," he said as if some uncontrollable force were dragging the word out of him. Then he turned and stomped out into the hallway.

"I just can't resist such pleading," Shandy said. "It will be done as you ask."

On a Monday, four days before Nicholas Gatrow was to be executed, a strange little figure appeared at the gates of the Taborville State Prison. He wore the high, starched collar of a cleric. His gray hair flowed in soft waves over the back of his black jacket, and in one hand was clutched a Bible. The suit he wore was rumpled and wrinkled as might befit a man who had no wife to care for him.

Shandy had bought the whole outfit from a religious supply house; there would be no tracing it back to a costume-rental firm. Even the shoes had been borrowed, to present a well-shined but properly run-down appearance. The cost had hardly made a dent in the ten thousand dollars. A shave and a night in a Turkish bath had given his face the proper ruddy and well-scrubbed appearance.

It took only a minimum of pleading with the guards at the prison gate to be escorted to Warden Halsey's office. With his bumbling manner, hesitant speech and eyes blinking myopically behind thick spectacles, Shandy seemed hardly the type to be challenging the walled, stone-and-steel compound that was Taborville Prison.

"I'm the Reverend Winchell," Shandy told the warden, "a friend of the Gatrow family." He extended a card to Halsey. "Since Mrs. Gatrow heard I would be

traveling through Taborville, she asked if I'd see her son. Offer him spiritual solace in his final hours, as it were."

"That's not as easy as it sounds, Reverend," answered Halsey. "You see, he's under special guard, and all his visitors are very closely screened."

"Yes, of course. Well, you see I have this letter from Mrs. Gatrow giving me permission to see Nicholas, as well as a letter of identification from my bishop, but if you feel they aren't enough . . ." He turned to walk away, a harmless little man, badly equipped to cope with the evils of the world.

Hell, Halsey thought, *what would be the harm? Okay, it wasn't strictly according to the rules, but if Winchell could get Gatrow calmed down even for a little while, it would be worth it. The guards were getting sick of that moaning all the time. Besides, if they didn't want him to make a few decisions on his own, why had they made him warden?*

"Wait a minute!" he called. "Would that be Bishop Cochrane?"

Shandy turned. "Yes it is. Do you know him?"

"We went to school together. Let me see that letter."

"It merely serves to identify me." Shandy handed it to the warden. He had no fears. The stationery had been stolen from the chancery office, and Bishop Cochrane's signature was the best that money could buy.

"How's he doing lately? It's been a long time since I've seen him."

"Fairly well. Oh, his bad knee is giving him a bit of trouble. He's getting treatment in the hospital." Shandy chuckled inwardly. That statement would not only prevent Halsey from calling the bishop, but it happened to be perfectly true.

"Yeah, he got that knee playing football in college," the warden said. For a long moment he considered the little man. "Look, Reverend Winchell," he said finally, "I'm going out on a limb. Nick Gatrow's been giving us an awful time, carrying on about how he's going to die. Maybe you could help him get hold of himself. Of course you'll have to be searched and examined to see you don't accidentally bring something into the cell that he could use to escape, but you look all right to me. I guess I can cut a little red tape to do a favor for old Jack Cochrane if I want to."

Fifteen minutes later, Shandy was sitting in Nick Gatrow's cell, vigorously trying to brush his hair with his fingers. His comb had

been taken from him and left in the warden's office for safekeeping. "I thought the guards were going to remove my liver and hold it until I got back," he said, shaking his head.

Nick Gatrow, who had been sitting on the bunk holding his head morosely in his hands, looked up suddenly. "You don't sound like any sky pilot I ever heard," he said.

Shandy got up from his stool and walked to the barred door. The guard was down at the far end of the hall, having a cigarette. "Call me Shandy," the little man said. "And I'm not about to pray over you. I've come to get you out of here."

Nick opened his mouth wide, but Shandy slapped a hand across it, muffling him. "Keep it down, and watch for the guard. If he comes near, pretend I'm talking about your family."

Nick nodded, and Shandy removed the hand.

"Your family doesn't think much of you right now," Shandy went on, "but they're not about to let you die."

"If we're gonna make a break," whispered Nick, "let's go. I want out of here."

"So you're going to walk out the front gate with me just like that, eh? No dice. There's still a lot of planning to do. The break will come the day they're supposed to hang you."

"What're you getting at, Shandy?"

"All right, listen, because I'm not going to repeat myself. You're due to make the drop at midnight Friday. Here's what will happen. At about eleven o'clock the warden, the chaplain and a couple of guards will come for you. The chaplain will hear any last requests—letters you'd like him to write and that kind of thing. Then he'll start doing a lot of praying and talking about your soul. In the meantime, the guards will be strapping you into a harness. It's got leather cuffs on it that'll hold your arms against your body so you can't reach up and grip the rope when you drop.

"Once you're ready, you'll be taken down to the main floor and put into a car that will drive you across the yard to the building where the hangings take place. When you're inside, the building's doors will close, and you'll get out of the car."

The look of horror was in Nick Gatrow's eyes as he stared at Shandy. The little man ignored it.

"When you get out, the scaffold will be right in front of you. It's a platform about eight feet high, with the crossbar above it. The

sides of the platform are covered with black cloth. Remember that. It's important.

"On your right will be a bunch of folding chairs. The official witnesses, the prison doctor and any reporters they allow in will be seated there. Stationed around the sides of the building will be about ten guards. The hangman will be in position to adjust the noose and then spring the trap."

"All this talk about hanging is driving me up the wall," whispered Nick. "Get to the escape, will you? How am I gonna get out of there with that many people looking on?"

"I'm getting to that. The warden will read the judge's sentence, and then you'll be led up onto the scaffold and positioned over the trap. The hangman will put a black hood over your head. That's the really frightening part, but you'll have to keep control of yourself. Then when he's ready, the hangman will adjust the noose and wait for a signal from the warden. When he gets it, he'll pull the lever, and the door will drop away beneath you."

"And I'm dead," whimpered Nick. "A great escape that is. Get out of here, will you? I can't take any more of this talk."

"Sorry about your nerves," Shandy said unfeelingly. "But the fact is that on the day of your execution you're going to have to stand on the trap with the rope around your neck. Then you're going to make the fall. You've got to be ready for that. The single difference is that you're not going to die."

Nick stared at Shandy as if he were a madman. "Not going to die," he repeated slowly. "What's going to prevent it?"

"Eighteen inches, my boy," Shandy said with a chuckle. "Eighteen inches."

"Dammit, Shandy, stop talking in riddles. What are you getting at?"

"Hanging is a very scientific process, did you know that, Nick? The length of the drop is all determined mathematically, according to the condemned man's height, weight and physical condition. Look at you, for example. You're quite tall, but you're thin and light. On the other hand, your muscles are well-developed, especially in the chest and neck. Oh yes, Nick, you'll take a very long drop. As a matter of fact, if it's done properly—and it will be—your feet shouldn't be more than about six inches from the building's floor when the rope finally pulls up tight."

"Six inches," groaned Nick. "It might as well be a mile."

"No, the six inches are important. For consider, my boy. What would be the result if there were eighteen extra inches of slack in the hanging rope?"

"Why . . ." Nick considered this for a moment. "Why, my feet would touch the floor before the rope got tight enough to break my neck."

"Precisely."

"But the only one who could arrange that would be the hangman himself, and . . ." Nick stopped and stared at Shandy, who was grinning hugely.

"You're beginning to see it, aren't you?" Shandy said. "The hangman is an old-timer, one of the few left in the country who knows his business. Fortunately for you, his morality was for sale. His dream is to own a little place on an island in the Caribbean where he can live out his years. Your mother plans to buy it for him right after the execution. He came cheap. The doctor was higher."

"The prison doctor?"

Shandy nodded. "He had to be approached more carefully—ethics and all that. But we found he'd been dismissed from a hospital back east under suspicious circumstances. Threat of exposure, plus the promise of financing a clinic with his name on it, finally brought him around. Because your family was able to buy these two men, you will not die on Friday.

"Now, let's get back to where I was before you interrupted, Nick. The trap will be sprung, and you'll fall. Reach out with your feet as far as you can. Remember, you've only got eighteen inches of extra rope. That's all the hangman could arrange without it looking suspicious. I expect when your feet do hit, you'll fall sideways. You'll probably have your wind cut off a bit by the noose until you recover your balance, and you'll be sporting rope burns for a few weeks, but at least your neck won't snap. However, you will have to maintain enough weight on the rope to keep it tight so the witnesses will think there's a dead body on the end of it."

"But won't the witnesses see I'm still alive?"

"No. The cloth around the scaffold will prevent that. Its real purpose, of course, is to keep them from getting sick at the sight of a dead body hanging there. All they have to see is when you drop. The doctor alone goes behind the cloth to pronounce you dead, and the beautiful thing is that he also has the responsibility of removing your body from the prison. In that, he's assisted by the hangman."

"So I'll be alive when the doc-

tor examines me and the hangman cuts me down."

"Sure. But you'd better practice playing dead. After all, they'll have to carry your 'body' right past the guards and witnesses to put it in the hearse. After that it's just a matter of driving you out through the gate. Nobody'll examine you closely then, the doctor will see to that. Once you're outside, you'll be given some money, a change of clothes and a passport. The name on it isn't yours, but the picture is. We've already arranged transportation to an out-of-state airport where you'll get a plane ticket. Get out of the country fast, before anybody discovers you're not really dead. And don't plan on ever coming back. Your mother will do this one thing for you, because your name is Gatrow, but she's threatened to have you killed if you ever try to come home."

"Jeez, you've got it all worked out, haven't you?"

"That's what I get paid for." Shandy got up and called to the guard. Then he opened the Bible. When the guard reached the door he saw only the Reverend Winchell reading a prayer over a condemned man who was trembling as he sat on his cot. He could hardly know that the shaking was due to relief, not fear of the horror of the impending hanging.

The night of the hanging was hot and sultry. Pale wraiths of water vapor surrounded the floodlights that lit the prison yard. It was a few minutes after eleven when the warden, accompanied by Chaplain Franks and two guards, reached Nick Gatrow's cell.

"It's time, Nick," the warden said. "I can call the doctor to give you something if you think you're going to break down."

"Nah, Halsey," Nick replied with a small grin. "Guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be." *Stupid jerk,* he thought.

The chaplain sat on the cot beside Nick and read from his Bible. Nick considered the paper slippers he'd been forced to wear ever since entering the prison.

"Is there any message you'd like to leave behind?" asked Franks finally. "Anyone you'd like to say a last word to?"

"I don't think so. Look, I knifed the cop by myself. I guess I can take the rap the same way." He turned aside and smirked at one of the guards.

The harness was fitted into place. The guards guided straps over his shoulders and buckled them firmly in back. "Hey, not so tight, you guys," Nick said. "You

wouldn't want to stop my breathing before the hangman gets a chance, would you?"

The cuffs were fitted securely around his wrists, and clamped to the front of his body.

A telephone in the hall buzzed. The guard at the door went to answer it. "The car's ready, sir," he said to Halsey.

Nick walked calmly downstairs and got into the car. The harness threw his balance off, and he almost rolled into the rear seat. He made a joke about it to the guard on his left. As the car started forward he could see wide doors opening in a building at the far end of the yard. The car glided slowly into the building, and the doors closed silently behind it. A guard opened the rear door of the car and helped Nick get out.

Directly in front of him, the scaffold reared upward, surmounted by the crossbeam from which hung a rope of yellow hemp. The hangman, who wore neither tie nor jacket, was examining the noose and its knot. Nick counted the steps to the scaffold. There were thirteen. He wondered if this were traditional.

At one side, the witnesses and reporters sat, looking at him solemnly. Hampered by the harness, he still managed a slight bow to them.

Hell, it was going to be easy. Eighteen extra inches of rope. Instead of hanging in mid-air with his feet six inches above the floor, he'd have a full twelve inches of slack after he touched the floor to take up the shock of the fall. He knew he could manage it even though, as Shandy had said, it wouldn't be easy—but dying wasn't easy either.

The warden began to read from a paper in his hand. "Nicholas Howard Gatrow, you have been convicted of the crime of murder in the first degree against the person of . . ."

Finally it was time for him to climb the steps. The hangman positioned him over the trap and tied his ankles with a bit of rope. He noted approvingly that the rope was left quite loose.

"Nick, this is your last chance," the warden called up to him. "I don't like to do this thing to any man. If you have any final words, I'll hear them now."

"I have nothing to say," Nick replied. A half-smile played about his lips. With a little luck the warden and all the witnesses would go to their own graves believing he had died this night. "Hang me high, and be damned to you!"

The hood was lowered over his face. He felt the roughness of the

rope as the noose went around his neck and the massive knot was positioned at his left shoulder.

In that moment of waiting he could hear a loud thudding. It was several seconds before he realized it was his heart beating. *Get on with it,* he thought. *Just get me out of this place.* Then he chuckled loudly at his own nervousness.

The floor on which he stood parted, and for an instant his feet were on nothingness. Then he rocketed downward, his toes reaching for the floor below.

The end of the rope was reached.

The knot was yanked viciously around under his chin. It jerked upward and slammed against the point of his jaw. Held in the noose, his head was driven back.

In that final fraction of a second, Nick Gatrow knew that Shandy had played him false. He tried to shout, but there was no time.

His neck snapped like a dry twig breaking.

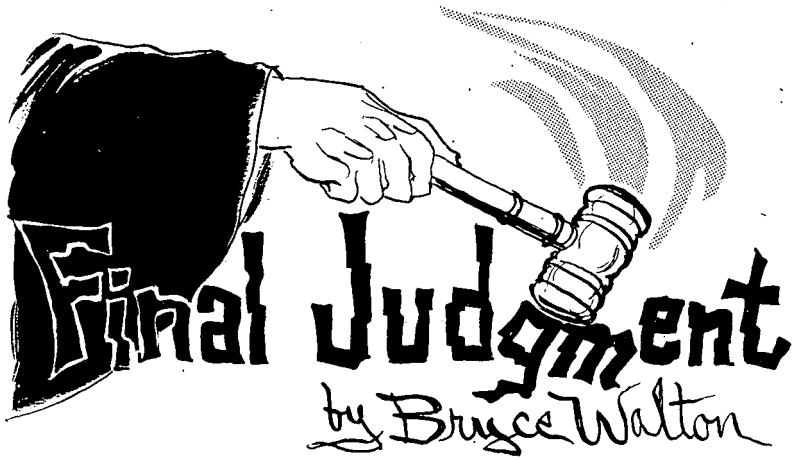
A hundred and twenty seconds later the prison doctor entered into the gloom under the scaffold, closing the curtains behind him. He held a stethoscope to the dangling man's chest just below the pinioned arms and, hearing nothing, he pronounced Nick Gatrow dead. The hangman helped him cut the body down, and with the help of guards they carried it to a waiting hearse for removal to a place of burial.

Early the following morning, a butler escorted Shandy into the livingroom of the Gatrow mansion. "You have done your job well," Katherine Gatrow told him. "In death, at least, my son has made me proud of him."

Shandy felt he had done better than Mrs. Gatrow would ever suspect. His debt to her was canceled, and even after expenses, he had over nine grand left from the money she'd given him. He looked down at the newspaper on the ornate coffee table and began to read to himself the smaller print under the headline: KILLER EXECUTED.

"Those who knew him say he whined and sniveled his way through a coward's life," the story began. "But at least on this one night—the night he knew he was to die—Nicholas Gatrow found somewhere the courage to be a man."

A judge may one day find the death sentence more imperative than ever.



Martin Elliot was not surprised when he was tagged one of the three best criminal lawyers in the country. He had planned it that way.

As a tough product of the East Side's concrete jungle he became a tough, brilliant, ambitious student slugging his way through law school by working as a law clerk.

His fellow students and instructors sneered at him for wanting to be a criminal lawyer. They called him a fool. Criminal law was a shady, undesirable side-street of the profession. Its practitioners were often in the pay of underworld characters; but mainly the pay was bad. Most defendants accused of felonies are poor, and poor people do not stimulate effort from ambitious young lawyers. Not when the big easy money waits in problems of equity, corporation law, and real property.

So a felon whose life is at stake in the criminal court is too often represented by disinterested youths and elderly, cynical, incompetent hacks. Knowing this, Elliot focused his attention only

on criminal law. Instead of torts, he studied Darrow and Liebowitz and the psychology of human perversities. He reasoned that his unquestioned brilliance would shine even brighter in a field with little competition. Quick notoriety would be followed by fame and wealth. He was ready.

First, he needed a client, just as one needs a proper suit of clothes to make a favorable impression on important functionaries. He didn't want the usual thieves or perverts handed over to beginners for practice. He needed a murderer.

Poor felons, unable to afford better, are usually represented by lawyers appointed by the court. So Martin Elliot bulled his broad six-foot way into the chambers of Judge Lawrence Langston one cold Monday morning, and demanded a client as if he were exacting a desirable table from a headwaiter.

Judge Langston raised a gray eyebrow. He had achieved judicial eminence, not by intelligence or respect for the law, but by unquestioned loyalty to the political party which had been in power for twenty years. Young Elliot's attitude impressed him as up-and-coming.

"When would you like your client, Mr. Elliot?" he asked with a trace of amused sarcasm.

"Now if possible. At once."

"Do you have any special preference in clients?"

"I would like a murderer, sir."

Judge Langston's eyes widened. "Your first case, and you want a homicide?"

"Defending a thousand petty thieves and drunks won't make me better qualified to defend a murderer."

Judge Langston grinned wryly. "And of course you want to be a crusader and enter the lists against injustice."

"Yes, sir."

"And of course murder always gets headlines, and that is important too, isn't it?"

"Murder is always dramatic, sir. And if it isn't, a good lawyer can make it so. Murder is, or should be, the most colorful and fascinating business ever devised by man."

"Yes—uh—any particular type of murderer, Mr. Elliot? Sex preference, age—?"

"It seems there's quite a selection this morning."

"At the moment the docket is overloaded." Judge Langston sighed. "You came to see me at an opportune time. You probably learned somewhere that every mid-July in this city, the court has more felons than it can find room or counsel for."

"I did learn that very thing, sir."

"I presume not just any sort of felon will do, Mr. Elliot? You have something special in mind?"

"A man charged with first-degree murder, sir. One who isn't given a Chinaman's chance to escape the chair."

Judge Langston chuckled. "I have just the client for you, Mr. Elliot. A gentleman of Chinese extraction. And he seems not to have a chance."

Elliot blinked.

"Five witnesses saw him beat another man to death with a wine jug down on the Bowery. The killer has signed a full confession. There's no question of his having committed an act of cold-blooded murder. There are no extenuating circumstances. He says he killed the man to rob him of wine, his money, the few clothes still on his back. He has not shown any inclination to deny his confession. The DA's office is, of course, going for a first-degree conviction. The defendant is certain to get the chair."

"Beautiful!" said Martin Elliot.

Elliot stepped into the prisoner's cell, briefcase in hand, and studied his client. The thin, ageless-looking Chinese lay on the bunk, gazing disinterestedly at the ceiling. He wore a stained, faded, denim shirt; soiled, shapeless pants; shoes with holes in the soles; no socks. His thin hands lay folded on his chest as if he were prepared for burial. His face was gaunt and unwashed. His black hair was unkempt and his expression one of resigned melancholy. He did not look at Elliot but once.

Elliot said he was there to serve as legal counsel. The prisoner seemed not to hear.

Elliot asked him his name. How old was he?

The Chinese seemed voiceless and incomprehending.

Elliot held out a page of print. "Will you read this?"

The man stared silently at the ceiling.

Elliot put a pencil in the man's hand, asked him to write on a pad. He made a meaningless scribble and stopped.

Elliot left the cell. "He won't say or write anything," he said to the guard.

"Never has, as far as I know," the guard said. "Maybe he can't."

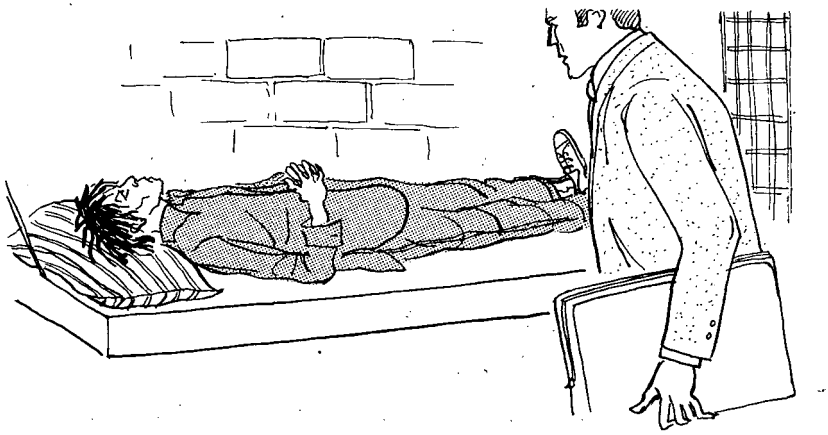
"Maybe," Elliot said cheerfully and hurried out. He never said good-bye or looked back at his client.

In preparing and conducting his client's case, Elliot set the tone and pattern of his future spectacular courtroom successes. He

planned carefully. He explored every personality and circumstance bearing on the case. He interviewed all witnesses for the prosecution. He made every attempt to find witnesses of his own. There were none.

"Maybe," Elliot said cheerfully. He sent a physician to examine the client. The doctor reported that aside from malnutrition he was not physically ill, and showed no sign of brain damage.

Elliot sent a psychiatrist over.



He got a Chinese student he'd known at law school to question his client. "Find out anything you can about him. He had no identification. He won't speak or write. Is he an alien? Find out about his family."

The client refused to speak to the Chinese law student. "Furthermore," the law student reported back to Elliot, "this one is an oddball as far as our people go. You just never find a Chinese bum on the Bowery. We take care of our own. That's all I can tell you. He—he doesn't trust me. Maybe he's crazy."

He got nowhere. The client refused to talk or cooperate in any way. The psychiatrist's guess was that he was a mental case, possibly a form of catalepsy, or amnesia.

Elliot went briskly about his business, all of which was unknown to and unsuspected by the prosecution. The client was nobody, nameless, a voiceless nonentity. His victim was just as unimportant, a nobody they called the Duck. The DA's office did not even bother to prepare its case, which was considered open-and-shut, run-of-the-mill. Five wit-

nesses had testified, and would repeat their testimony under oath. They had seen the murder and robbery in an alley off of Houston Street. The accused had seemed eager to confess. He had no money, no name, no family, no home, no importance whatever. Nor had his victim. So the prosecution assumed that no lawyer assigned by the court would bother with any attempt at a viable defense. They gave themselves a day to wrap this one up. A bored, young, or incompetent hack assigned to the defense would immediately, as usual, enter a plea of guilty of murder in the first, and throw the accused like a bone to the so-called mercy of the court.

Instead, they got Martin Elliot. Elliot knew very little about his client. That the prosecution knew even less delighted him. The less anyone knew or cared about him the better. Of course no one did care about him, except as a means to desirable ends. Everyone knew he was a desirable end to the prosecution. They needed him on an impressive list of first-degree murder convictions. Such a record would have political muscle at a time when the hue and cry was "Law and Order."

What they didn't realize was that the client was also a means to Martin Elliot's end, and he exploited the situation to the hilt.

Four days after the prosecution expected to have gotten rid of the case, Elliot was still selecting a jury. Elliot began putting the prosecution, the court, then the city's police department on trial. Scores were rejected from the jury box as incompetent and unsuitable. Elliot asked everyone if they harbored feelings of prejudice against people of Oriental extraction. He implied that the prosecution did. He made a point of arousing the interest of the press in a case that would not ordinarily have rated three lines on page ten. By the time the jury was selected, black headlines were screaming Elliot's indignant accusations. He never denied that his client had murdered the Duck. He never bothered to cross-examine the witnesses for the prosecution. He raised repeated accusations of injustice to the poor, violations of human rights, police brutality, forced confession, prejudice.

He displayed bruises on his client's body and swore they were the result of police brutality, to force a confession.

He claimed that his client was mentally defective, incapable of standing trial, unable to distinguish the difference between right and wrong. He was a pitiable,

mentally deficient wretch being ruthlessly exploited for political purposes.

Elliot finally scraped up witnesses for the defense. An ex-cop testified to the brutality he and his comrades on the force had used to beat confessions out of the unfortunate. He examined the bruises on the defendant and said they were the type often inflicted by rubber hoses. He himself had inflicted such bruises until, sickened by his actions, he refused to continue, whereupon he had been falsely accused of taking bribes and booted off the force.

The presiding judge, a political appointee, and the three young prosecutors, were at first flabbergasted, then outraged, finally panicked. They found a doctor who testified that most Bowery bums had bruises similar to the accused, from repeatedly falling down drunk. No one seemed moved by this testimony.

Elliot had obviously hooked the jury in his favor, but he didn't let up. He brought in a psychiatrist who made a living testifying in trials. He said the accused might very well have the mentality of an eight-year-old child; that he suffered from some form of deteriorative psychosis, a mental disorder with a tendency to progressive loss of mental functions. He should be sent to a hospital for further diagnosis and treatment.

Then Elliot called his client to the witness stand for the *coup de grace.*

He flourished the signed confession before the defendant. The defendant stared at it with glazed and unseeing eyes.

"Is this the so-called confession you signed?"

No answer.

"Can you read this?"

No answer.

"Did you sign this?"

No answer.

"Is this your signature?"

No answer.

"Can you read?"

No answer.

"Can you write?"

No answer.

Then Elliot suddenly shouted. "*Nay hoh mah?*"

The defendant jumped. His eyes sparked for an instant, and he mumbled something that sounded like, "*Ngau hoh, nay yau-sum—*" Then he slumped back. His eyes glazed over. His mouth clamped shut.

"Are you well?" Elliot said. He said it louder, "Are you well?"

The accused sat staring with blank incomprehension.

"You speak Chinese, yes? But you don't understand or write English at all, isn't that correct?"

Elliot turned triumphantly toward the judge and the jury.

"You have heard testimony that the accused is mentally incompetent to stand trial. But I say that he is also incapable of speaking or reading or understanding or writing English. He has never responded to any question put to him in English. But when I just asked him in Cantonese if he were well, he answered at once, 'I'm well, thank you.' If the court demands more proof that this unfortunate man can speak, read or understand only Chinese, I'll present it. However I swear to this court that the accused cannot read or understand English—*and therefore could never have read this confession and signed it!*"

The prosecution asked for a recess. Taking Elliot aside, they begged him to settle for murder in the second degree. Elliot refused. Not guilty by reason of insanity was all that he would settle for. His client, he said, would not be crucified as a common criminal when he was, in fact, insane.

The prosecution had to agree.

Elliot had won his first sensational case. He had launched his spectacular career. His fame as a defender of the underprivileged and of harassed minorities was on its way.

No one noticed the anonymous and voiceless defendant being led away.

No one even remembered him.

Twenty-five years later, Judge Martin Elliot, an even more striking figure with iron-gray hair and skin tanned by Barbados sun, frowned across his imported teakwood desk at a .38 revolver.

The revolver was held in the peculiarly gaunt, claw-like hand of an uninvited guest who had crept in through the French windows that afternoon and waited in patient silence for hours until Judge Elliot entered his home study and sat down.

Judge Elliot blinked at the revolver. Then he looked at the cadaverous yellowed face of the uninvited guest.

"What do you want? Who are you?" he asked calmly.

"I must shoot you," the visitor said in a cracked whisper. It was hard to see his eyes. They were deep in dark sockets that were like holes in a desiccated mask.

"Why?"

"Vengeance. And peaceful rest."

"Whose vengeance?"

"Mine."

"Who are you?" the judge asked again.

"Your first client," the visitor said.

Judge Elliot stared for a long time. Something that held his face together loosened and his muscles sagged.

"What?" he whispered. There was a long, long silence that filled the room like some alien kind of sound. "But I saved your life. They would have electrocuted you. I saved your life. I don't understand."

"You never did understand me. You didn't try to. You didn't care. You never even saw me, did you?"

Judge Elliot's heavy face worked. A drop of sweat ran down the side of his nose. Something, a tiny nerve, wriggled beside his mouth.

"You cared nothing for my guilt or innocence," the visitor said. "You have never cared. You never cared about me. I knew you didn't care. That is why I never spoke to you, never revealed the truth."

"You could speak!" Judge Elliot said hoarsely. "You spoke English then, too! Why—why didn't you—"

"I was not insane. I could speak and understand a little English. But I was guilty. I killed a blameless man. It was an act of deliberate evil. I deserved to die for it. I wanted to die for it. But you weren't interested in my guilt or my desires. Nothing of the sort."

"Why, then—why didn't you speak up?"

"I had no one I could trust with the truth. Least of all you."

"What truth?"

"My identity. Once I spoke out—admitted that I could speak and understand—it would have been only a question of time until they found out my name, about those who smuggled me from the ship, and about my family at home. So I refused to speak because I did not want my identity known. I did not want my relatives and then my family to learn of my deed and be dishonored."

Judge Elliot stared in partial comprehension of something he could never fully understand. "How was I supposed to know? You didn't—"

"I would have told you. But you didn't care. You would not have cared what I wanted. And I wanted to die. I was guilty. But you made it impossible for me to pay in kind for my guilt. Do you know how long it is—twenty-five years in an insane asylum? Terrible punishment, yes. But I have not paid in kind for the ultimate sin of murder. You prevented that. That is why I escaped during a transfer of inmates and found my way here."

Judge Elliot shook his head

slowly from side to side, twice.

"This time there will be no question of my guilt. No one to deprive me of proper punishment. For having killed I shall be killed—as I wanted to be killed twenty-five years ago."

"But they'll simply send you back to the asylum."

The visitor made a gesture of denial.

"And even if they didn't," Judge Elliot said unevenly, "even if you were tried and sentenced for first-degree murder, you wouldn't be executed—if that's what you're saying you want. Don't you know that? There is no more capital punishment in this state and—"

"No," the visitor said. He reached under his worn jacket and pulled out another gun and slid it butt-first across the teakwood desk. "I search only four houses to find these weapons. They are so plentiful now."

Judge Elliot blinked at the gun very slowly, three times.

"This time I make sure," the visitor said. "This time *you* will give me the punishment I deserve. Or I kill you."

Judge Elliot rubbed his hands together. He coughed. He cleared his throat. He looked at the gun centered on his chest.

"I give you one minute," the visitor said, "by the clock there on the wall. I wish to go to my ancestors and I am tired."

Judge Elliot watched his right hand creep across the desk top, hesitate, then close on the gun, lift it and level it.

"There will be no problem," the visitor said. "Self-defense?"

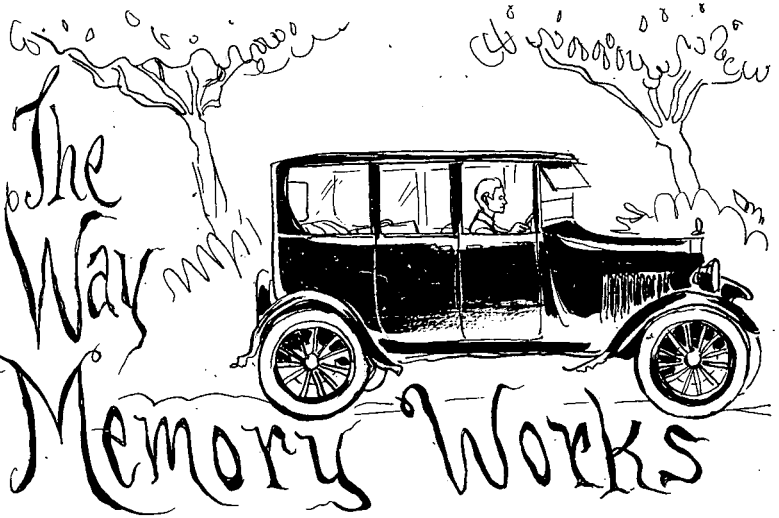
Judge Elliot nodded. He clasped his right hand with his left to steady it. His voice quavered. "I—I'm sorry about those long years in that place . . ."

"You will have time for more sorrow."

Judge Elliot squeezed the trigger.

The visitor stumbled back and lay on the thick maroon rug. He folded his hands across his chest. He stopped breathing. His eyes stared unblinking at the ceiling. On his lips was a fixed smile.

I suppose that it is a very rare individual who has not one great regret over the past.



It's odd the way memory works. We may have experienced something a hundred times, but we always remember the first time. Our first time in an airplane, our first love, our first failure or success, all seem to be tattooed across our minds; we couldn't forget them if we wanted to.

I associate the spring of 1940 with a lot of firsts. I had graduated from high school the year before, my parents had been killed in a traffic accident, and I was on my own for the first time. My people had never owned much except the small insurance policies they had paid toward each week, so there hadn't been a lot left after the burial expenses were paid. However, there was enough to pay for an old, square-bodied, 1924 Dodge, so I piled my few belongings onto the rear seat and left town.

I didn't really have a destination in mind. I remember I headed north along narrow high-

ways and dirt roads, looking for adventure, but not certain I'd recognize it if I saw it. I slept alongside the road or in farmers' fields, and sometimes stopped to earn a few dollars by helping a farmer or storekeeper for a day or two. Because I didn't know where I would eventually find myself, I wasn't in any particular hurry to get there.

Not that the old Dodge was capable of hurrying. Its engine was just about shot, and all four tires were as smooth as my 19-year-old cheeks. The body had more rust than paint, and one running board had fallen off, allowing the fenders on that side to shake wildly

by A.F. Oreshnik

whenever the engine was idling. When the car was actually moving it sounded like a can of bolts being kicked down a flight of stone steps.

Despite all the car's faults, I always sat erect and gripped the large wooden steering wheel proudly. I was a tall, blond, wide-eyed youngster getting my first taste of self-reliance, and my first look at the world beyond my birthplace—and the old Dodge was my first car.

I met Jack Gotkind and Ruby Aldiss in northern Missouri, not far from the Illinois state line. I was chugging along the road toward Hannibal and saw a brand-new Chevy coupe pulled up on the road shoulder. It was grass-green in color and was shining like it'd just been waxed. The rear deck was open, and a pretty woman in a yellow dress stood beside it.

I pulled up behind the Chevy and climbed down. That's when I saw the man. He'd been bent over with his head and shoulders inside the engine compartment, and he straightened up when he heard me stop. He was wearing expensive-looking sharkskin trousers and a vest, but his jacket was draped over the back of the car seat. He'd loosened his necktie and rolled up his sleeves, and there was a dirty oil smear across his forehead and a dark streak in his sandy hair. I guessed he was in his late twenties.

Whatever I noticed about the man must have been out of the corner of my eye because it was the woman who had my attention. I'd never seen anyone like her. Her shoulder-length hair was so black it reflected blue in the sunlight, and she was pretty enough to be in movies or on magazine covers. She appeared to be about

my age, but at the same time gave the impression of being older, much older. I can't explain it.

"Hey, kid, you know anything about automobiles?" the man asked, dragging my attention away from the girl.

"A little bit," I acknowledged.

"That's swell. Maybe you can help me get this heap goin' again."

"Sorry, mister. I can't help you there."

In no more time than it takes to snap your fingers his temper flared. "What the hell do you mean you can't help me? You just said you know something about cars, didn't ya?"

"Sure, but your car's thrown a rod," I said. "There's pieces of your engine block in the road a hundred yards back and a trail of oil all the way to here."

"Oh . . ." That stopped him. "How could that happen? This is a new car."

"Maybe you tried to break it in too fast," I offered.

The girl giggled, and he turned on her. "You just shut your mouth, Ruby. This ain't a bit funny."

She stood her ground. "I think it is. That salesman told you to take it easy for the first five thousand miles, but you wouldn't listen to the man. You knew it all."

He rubbed his forehead wearily, smearing the oil that was there. "Shut up, Ruby. Do yourself a favor. Don't get me riled unless you want to get your head whipped."

I didn't think he should talk that way to a lady, but I didn't say anything.

We stood there for a while without anyone talking. The man wrinkled his brow like he was thinking hard. Finally, he said, "You can give us a lift to the next town." It wasn't a question.

He got their luggage from the Chevy. All they had was one suitcase for the two of them and a large carpetbag. The carpetbag was a surprise because it made a clanging sound like it was full of hammers and other tools when he put it on the rear floor; but he wasn't a mechanic. Anyone who didn't even know when his car had a hole in its engine couldn't have much use for tools, I figured.

There was no room for anyone in back, so we all sat in front. I drove, and Ruby sat in the middle. I tried to avoid it, but I couldn't keep from touching her leg when I shifted gears. She didn't seem to notice.

"Where ya headed, kid?" the man asked.

"Nowhere particular," I answered. "I'm looking for adven-

ture—something kind of special."

The man let out a dirty kind of laugh and gripped Ruby high up on her thigh. "You hear that, honey? He's lookin' for adventure."

Hard as I tried, I couldn't find anything to like about that guy.

"Well, kid," he said to me, "you've found your adventure. I'm Jack Gotkind and this's Ruby Aldiss."

He kept looking at me after he said it, like he was expecting something, so I said, "Pleased to meet you."

"Hey, kid. I said *Jack Gotkind* and *Ruby Aldiss*. Don't that mean nothin' to you?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Where you from, kid?"

I told him.

"Don't you have newspapers or radios there?"

"Sure we do," I said defensively. "There's close to five thousand people in the county."

"Well, if you'd been reading the papers or listening to the radio, you'd know about us."

He was holding his suit coat on his lap. Now he opened it to show it had been wrapped around a revolver in a shoulder holster with heavy leather straps. He must have removed the weapon when he took off the coat back at the Chevy.

"Know what this is?" he asked.

"A pistol," I answered.

"Show the kid your gun, Ruby," he ordered.

The girl opened her purse so I could look at the tiny, pearl-handled automatic she had. "See?" she said.

I licked my lips. "Are you two bandits?" I asked.

"Nope, but you're close. We're burglars," he said. "You scared?"

"A little," I admitted.

"Good. Maybe you're not as stupid as you look."

We rode in silence for a few minutes. A state police car passed us, and my stomach got tense, but the troopers gave us hardly a glance.

That pleased Jack because he let out that laugh of his again and grabbed at Ruby. "Did ya see that, honey? Those dumb cops didn't give us a second thought. They're lookin' for two people, not three. Say, I just had an idea, kid, how'd you like to team up with us? I guarantee you'll have adventure. Ruby and me are just like Bonnie and Clyde."

I didn't know who Bonnie and Clyde were, either, and I guess my face showed it.

Jack looked like he was about to get mad at me again, but thought better of it. Instead, he nudged Ruby with his elbow and

intimated she should take over.

Ruby turned on the seat and hugged my arm to her. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Herbert—Herb," I said. I could feel my face getting hot and realized I must be blushing.

"You want to come with us, don't you, Herb? I wish you would. The three of us can have some great times together." Her eyes were wide and innocent.

"Okay . . . Sure, I'll come with you."

"That's fine," Jack said. "Just remember one thing—if you ever try to hold out on me or cheat me, I'll blow your head off."

"Okay," I said. "I'll remember." Jack was a prince.

The first thing Jack said when we reached Hannibal was that he wanted to buy another car. Mine wasn't good enough for him, and he had a wallet stuffed with greenbacks. I thought it was pretty strange for a professional thief to pay for his cars instead of stealing them, and I told him so.

Jack shrugged instead of getting mad. That was a switch. "I wouldn't know how to go about stealing a car," he confessed. Then he tried to make a virtue of his ignorance. "I never learned to steal small," he said.

We rented a couple of cabins at a tourist court, and Jack went into Hannibal to get a car. He was back in an hour and a half with a jet-black '39 Ford sedan. It had Missouri license plates and he'd even stopped at a drugstore and bought himself a Missouri driver's license for 25 cents.

"What'll I do with my car?" I wanted to know.

"Just park it somewhere and leave it. It's not worth anything. And don't bother unloading all that junk of yours. You're gonna have to learn to travel light, and now's the time to start. Don't keep any more clothes and things than you can carry in one suitcase."

"Okay," I said, but I didn't like it.

I went out to the Dodge and spent a couple of hours trying to decide what to keep and what to leave. It was hard to do. I had already done that before leaving home, and I'd thought everything I brought with me was important. Now I had to leave most of it behind.

I ended up settling for my best clothes, a wedding picture of my parents in a gilt frame, and my dad's pistol. I felt like marching right into the cabin where Jack and Ruby were and showing them that I had a pistol, too, but I decided against it. Dad's gun was an old single-action Colt .45, manu-

factured about 70 or 80 years before. Even though it worked well, and Dad had taught me how to use it, they wouldn't have been any more impressed with it than they had been with the Dodge. I figured I'd get laughed at if I showed it to them. It would have been bad enough to have Jack laugh, but Ruby's laughter would have been worse.

I got permission from the people who owned the cabins to leave the Dodge parked in the rear. I locked it up and put the key in my billfold in case I could come back for it. I couldn't very well forget it—it was my first car. Then I carried my suitcase to the cabin I was staying in. The cabins were spaced fairly far apart, but Jack and Ruby kept me awake half the night with their carrying on.

In the morning, with me behind the wheel of the Ford, we crossed over into Illinois and drove to Springfield. That night I went with Jack on my first burglary and watched him open the safe in the office of a lumber company. He may not have understood much about automobiles, but he seemed to know safes. He knocked the dial off with three blows of a small sledgehammer, then put a long punch against the end of the spindle and pounded some more. In less than five minutes he had the safe open, and we emptied it into a pillowcase from our hotel.

Ruby was our lookout, circling the area in the Ford. She picked us up as soon as we stepped outside. The whole thing had gone so smoothly that I was almost ashamed I'd carried my dad's gun under my jacket. But Jack Gotkind had carried his pistol, too, so it couldn't have been such a bad idea.

Once back at the hotel, we divided the loot. It came to an even $1500, giving us each $500 as our share. Somehow the loot seemed like less than it had when we were taking it from the safe, but $500 was still far more than I'd ever had at one time in my life. There'd been whole years when my dad hadn't earned that much.

We had a party later, celebrating our good fortune. We sat around, drinking store-bought whiskey, telling stories and listening to music on a Victrola Ruby had bought. I learned that Bonnie and Clyde had been a pair of bandits who'd been killed several years earlier. They'd once helped a man named Ray Hamilton escape from the Eastham Prison Farm in Texas, and Ruby had helped Jack get away from that same prison farm. That's why Jack thought that he and Ruby were

like the earlier pair even though Jack and Ruby weren't as well known, or wanted as badly by the police.

To hear Jack tell it, he was the wildest, smartest, bravest criminal since Dillinger, and he was pleased to find I knew who *that* was. He spent a lot of time telling me what I had to do to be a good criminal—how I should walk and talk, act and think. Then he fell asleep and Ruby tried to teach me to dance and other things.

We left Springfield the next day and moved east. Jack and I burgled a safe almost every night. Sometimes we got only a few dollars, sometimes several hundred; but none of the safes held as much as the first one, and none were as easy to open. Jack explained how safes of different manufacture required various methods to open them. He also told me how to recognize the different kinds of safes by the shape of their wheels, hinges and handles.

I noticed that the size of a score seemed to shrink between the time we took it from a safe and when we divided it, but I was never sure it didn't just look like more in the excitement of the burglary. Then one night in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, I took a bundle of twenty-dollar bills from a safe and dropped it into the sack. It had a thick red rubber band around it, so it was easy to identify. Later, when we all sat down to make the split, that bundle was missing.

I didn't say anything right then, but when we were traveling the next day I turned to Jack. "What would you do if you caught a partner cheating you?" I asked.

He gave me a real hard look. "I told you that when you joined up with us. Don't you remember? I said I'd blow his head off."

"That's what I thought," I said, and let it rest.

From then on I kept a watchful eye on the sack of loot. I guess Jack took the hint because he never tried to get alone with it anywhere before the split, and the size of the loot no longer seemed to change. I was sure glad to see that happen.

Unfortunately, it didn't last long. Within three weeks, Jack began to find errands for me to take care of before the loot was divided, and the size of the sack began to shrink again. Then one morning after a particularly difficult job, we pulled into a roadside picnic area to eat and make the split. I wondered what Jack was going to find for me to do this time.

"Hey," Jack said as soon as the

car stopped rolling. "I noticed we have a slow leak in the left rear tire. Better change it right away, Herb, so we can move on out of here in a hurry if we have to."

"Okay," I said, and got busy with the tire, keeping an eye on them all the while.

Ruby spread our picnic blanket on the grass under an elm tree, and Jack carried the sack of loot from the car. He opened it up and dumped the money onto the center of the blanket. It was an hour after sunup, so we had the spot all to ourselves.

"We'll just divide up this swag while you're workin'," Jack called.

"No," I called back. "Wait for me to be there."

"We don't need you to cut up a score," Jack retorted with a nasty tone in his voice.

Ruby had lowered herself to the blanket and sat cross-legged facing me. Jack knelt down with his back to me and reached out for the money.

"Yes, you do need me," I yelled, hurrying to put the new tire in place. Then I repeated forcefully, "Yes, you *do* need me."

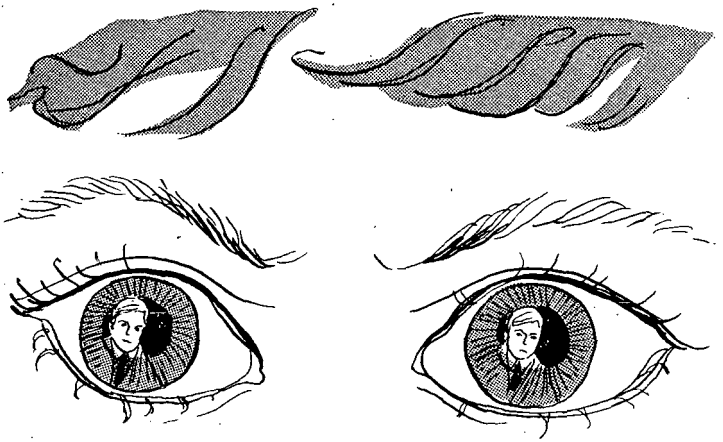
I straightened up in time to see Jack toss some bundles of bills to Ruby and saw her stuff them out of sight into her purse.

I walked over to the blanket very slowly. No criminal worth a dime would let a partner get away with that. That was breaking the code, the same as informing. When I got to Jack I reached down and grabbed his hair with my left hand and pulled his head back. With my right I pressed my dad's old .45 against his temple and pulled the trigger. Blood and brains splattered all over the grass, and he stiffened up, then went limp. I pushed him away so he wouldn't leak all over the money.

I'll always remember Jack because he's the first person I ever killed. Ruby was the second one because of all her screaming and such, but, of course, I have other reasons for remembering her.

I never did go back to get my old Dodge, and I've felt badly about that ever since. It's funny the way memory works.

Eyes that look their last may stab more pointedly than one's conscience.



The Accusing Eyes

Arthur Hamlin, realtor, swung the car into his driveway at exactly ten minutes before noon and brought it to a halt in the garage. He felt certain that no one had seen his arrival, for the area was a new development and, as yet, there were no near neighbors.

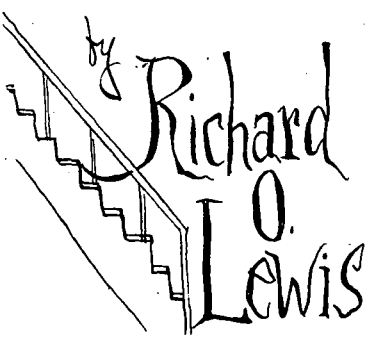
Nerves taut and quivering, he went directly through the breezeway and into the kitchen. His wife Alice was standing at the head of the basement steps, two baskets of laundry at her feet. It was just the way he had pictured it as being. Even though she had a

new washer and dryer in the basement, she would spend the entire day dawdling with the wash, a chore that shouldn't take her more than a couple of hours. Then she would complain about all the work she had to do and would have a list of tasks a mile long for him to do when through at the office, things she could very well accomplish by herself.

She turned toward him, her mousy hair as yet uncombed. "The basement needs scrubbing," she said, her long face quickly hardening into domineering lines. "I've told you and told you . . ."

That was it! The last straw! Never before during his two years of married life had he ever come home at lunch time. Yet, now, she hadn't even wondered if his sudden appearance might be due to illness, disaster, or some other kind of crisis. Oh, no; just, "The basement needs scrubbing."

She stooped, picked up one of the baskets, and turned toward the basement stairs. "And another thing . . ."



Hamlin didn't wait to hear what the other "thing" was. He had been planning this for weeks, and the time to act had come. Leaping suddenly forward, he placed the heels of his palms against her shoulders, closed his eyes, and launched her into space.

There was a short scream, followed by a thud, then silence.

Hamlin opened his eyes and peered down. Alice was lying on her back on the cement floor, her neck twisted slightly to one side, the heel of one foot resting on the bottom step. The basket she had been carrying had overturned, spewing its contents about, and one sheet was draped over the lower part of her body like a partial shroud.

Now that the job was done, a feeling of relief and satisfaction crept over him. He was now free, free to keep his luncheon engagement at the Diamond Inn with the two Harper boys, free to sign with them the contract that would put him on the high road to success, for he was certain that, thanks to the double indemnity clause in Alice's life insurance policy, he would be able to lay his hands on the extra $20,000 well within the sixty days of grace that

would be stipulated in the contract. So far, things had gone exactly as he had planned, and all he had to do was to get into his car and drive to the Diamond Inn.

His thoughts were suddenly broken when a slight movement below caught his eye. As he watched, Alice's foot slowly slid from the bottom step to the floor.

A wave of panic coursed through him. What if she were still alive, only stunned by the fall! Maybe paralyzed! There would be hospital bills, doctor bills, maybe a wheelchair! She could even charge him with attempted murder . . .

He fought down an impulse to flee, knowing that flight could not solve his problem. He couldn't leave until he knew for sure, until he was certain.

Slowly he made his way down the stairs and stepped over her prone body. He could detect no further movement, no sign of breathing. Hesitantly, he leaned over her and extended a hand in search of a possible heartbeat. It was then that the eyes flicked suddenly open to stare directly up into his, and those eyes were filled with a burning look of intense hate and accusation.

Involuntarily, he leaped back and away from them. They did not follow him. They remained open, staring fixedly into space, still filled with their terrifying, accusing light.

With a low, inarticulate cry escaping his lips, Hamlin leaped across the prone body to the stairs and went scurrying up them on all fours like a frightened animal.

By the time he drove into the parking lot of the Diamond Inn, at exactly ten minutes after twelve, Hamlin had succeeded in getting his jangled nerves under reasonable control again. It was over, and the road to success lay directly ahead, wide and clear.

There were only a few cars in the parking lot, and the red convertible of the Harper brothers was not among them. This, too, he decided, was good. He could say that he had arrived at the inn promptly at twelve, thus establishing that it had taken him only fifteen minutes to drive from the Ferguson apartment to the inn rather than the forty minutes it had actually taken him.

The red convertible slid to a sudden stop beside his own car, and the two heavyset, dark-complected Harpers, along with the slim, long-haired lawyer, got out. They were dressed in sport clothes and seemed to be in high good spirits.

"Been a change in plans!" shouted one of the Harpers.

"We're all going out to Elm Hill Fairways; new place, just opened. We'll have lunch there, get our business over, and play a round."

"We tried to get in touch with you," said Greg Bender, the lawyer, "but your office girl said you were out with some clients. Plenty of time for you to go home, get your clubs—"

"Not necessary," Hamlin put in quickly. "I always carry my clubs in the trunk of the car during the season. Slip away from the office once in a while, you know." It now suddenly occurred to him that, from this day on, he could play golf whenever he wanted to do so. He was a free man! "Ride along with me," he invited Bender. "I've never been to Elm Hill."

Hamlin arrived back home at ten minutes past five, drove his car into the garage, killed the engine, and sat for a moment in contemplation. So far, things had gone just as he had planned, perhaps even better than he had dared hope. All that remained to be done was to "discover" the body, put in a frantic call to the police . . .

He entered the kitchen and paused, his eyes riveting on the open door to the basement. Those hate-filled, accusing eyes had been haunting him all afternoon, nearly destroying his golf game. He was now afraid to look into them again lest they follow him in nightmares for the rest of his life—but perhaps in death they had closed . . .

He went slowly forward, step by step, as if drawn by some compelling, magnetic force. Reaching the door, he gave a quick glance downward. Then he turned pale, froze in his tracks, and clutched the sides of the doorway for support.

Alice's body was no longer lying at the foot of the stairs! It was nowhere in sight in the basement, and the spilled wash had been picked up from the floor and replaced into the clothes basket!

Trembling violently, he shoved himself back and away, then went rushing through the livingroom to fling open the doors to the two bedrooms. "Alice," he called, softly at first. Then, frantically, *"Alice! Alice!"*

There was no answer—only a terrifying, deathlike silence.

He stumbled to the livingroom table and slumped down into one of the chairs beside it, his brain in seething turmoil. Had the fall only stunned her? Had she, through force of habit, returned the scattered wash to the basket and then called an ambulance? Was she still alive? Where?

He had put up ten thousand dollars—money borrowed on his assets—when he had signed the contract with the Harpers. Now, if he couldn't lay hands on the extra twenty thousand from Alice's life insurance, the surety bond of ten thousand would be forfeit, leaving him in debt! Too, there would be doctor bills, hospital bills, an invalid wife . . .

What if she had talked with the police, accused him of attempted murder? Perhaps, even now, the police were searching for him, ready to place him under arrest.

As if in answer to his thoughts, the doorbell rang. He hesitated a moment, then got slowly and unsteadily to his feet, walked to the door and opened it. A tall man with a long, deeply-lined face stood there. "Detective Sergeant Miller," he said, flashing identity. "May I come in?"

Hamlin nodded and backed awkwardly away toward the table. This was it! Alice was alive and had talked!

Sergeant Miller indicated one of the chairs. "Perhaps you should sit down, Mr. Hamlin," he suggested. "I am afraid I have some very bad news for you."

After Hamlin had eased himself into the chair, Sergeant Miller seated himself in a chair across the corner of the table from him and took a notebook from the pocket of his coat. "To put it bluntly, Mr. Hamlin, your wife had a serious fall. Down the basement stairs."

"She—she's dead?"

Sergeant Miller nodded. "Sustained a broken neck. She died instantly, as far as the medical examiner could determine. We have her body at the city morgue."

Hamlin did not have to pretend that he was in partial shock. The disappearance of his wife's body, plus the arrival of the sergeant, had taken care of that. He hoped that the sigh that suddenly escaped his lips would be interpreted as a sigh of deep remorse rather than as one of relief. Alice was dead! She hadn't talked! Everything had worked out perfectly, just as he had planned!

"Here are the details we have found thus far," Sergeant Miller said, opening his notebook. "Your wife's automatic washer must have broken down sometime this morning. She called a repairman at eleven-thirty. He arrived an hour and a half later—at approximately one o'clock this afternoon—and discovered the body at the foot of the stairs. We came immediately in answer to his telephone call, made the usual examination, and tried to get in touch with you. Your office girl tried to find you

but didn't know where you had gone. Under the circumstances, there was little else to do except to take your wife's body to the morgue. I have been patrolling the area ever since, waiting for your return."

Hamlin let another sigh escape him. "Then—then she must have accidentally fallen down the stairs."

"It would seem so." The sergeant flipped a couple pages of his notebook and placed it flat on the table. "I hate to trouble you at a time like this," he said, "but there are certain routine questions, just for the record." He took a pencil from the breast pocket of his coat. "I'd like to have a brief account of your activities from the time you left the house this morning until your return just now."

Hamlin nodded. "Certainly. I arrived at my office at nine o'clock, as usual, and went over some contracts with my secretary until an elderly couple, the Fergusons, arrived by taxi. I took them out to look at a house they were interested in buying and then took them back to their apartment at eleven-forty-five. After that, I drove directly to the Diamond Inn where I had a business-luncheon engagement with some associates, the Harper brothers, and Greg Bender, a lawyer," he explained.

"You ate luncheon at the Diamond Inn?"

"No, the Harper boys suggested we go directly to Elm Hill Fairways for our luncheon and a round of golf afterward."

"You came home for your clubs?"

"No, they were in the trunk of my car."

"Then you drove your car out to Elm Hill Fairways?"

"Yes. Greg Bender rode along with me to keep me company."

"I see." Sergeant Miller flipped a page of his notebook. "Then the only time during the entire day when you were not actually in the presence of someone else was when you drove from the Fergusons' to Diamond Inn?"

"Right." So far his alibi was holding up nicely. "A fifteen-minute drive, from eleven-forty-five till twelve noon."

"Which corresponds to the precise time when your wife must have met her death," said the sergeant.

Hamlin felt sudden fear lay hold of him again. "Now wait a minute! Surely you don't think that I—I . . ."

Sergeant Miller shook his head. "I'm not accusing you of anything. Just trying to get all the facts straight." He folded the

notebook and returned it and the pencil to his coat pocket. "Now, just a couple more questions, Mr. Hamlin. Did your wife carry life insurance?"

"Yes, we each carried a policy of ten thousand dollars, each naming the other as beneficiary."

"And was there a double indemnity clause in each? Double payment in case of accidental death?"

"Why—why, yes," Hamlin said, as if he had just now remembered it.

Sergeant Miller drummed long fingers on the tabletop for a moment or so. "You might have some difficulty in collecting the double payment," he said, finally.

"But I thought you said that her death was accidental!"

"I said that it *seemed* so. Come. I'll show you something."

Sergeant Miller led the way down the stairs to the cement floor of the basement. "Your wife's body was found here," he said, indicating an area at the foot of the steps. "We know that she was carrying a basket of wash when she fell, for bedding was strewn about on the floor and one of the sheets lay half over her body. We also know that someone approached her body immediately after—or shortly after—her fall, someone who, for some reason, did not report the incident."

"But—but I don't understand . . ."

Sergeant Miller took a white handkerchief from a hip pocket, unfolded it, and laid it carefully upon the floor. "Fortunately for us, Mr. Hamlin, your basement floor has not been scrubbed for some time, and the accumulation of dust, clinging to the rubber heel of a shoe, left a perfect imprint on some of the bedding we took along to headquarters. Now, Mr. Hamlin, please place the heel of your right shoe carefully on the handkerchief. Just for the record, you know."

Hamlin's face went suddenly white, as white as the sheet on which he had inadvertently stepped when he had leaped back and away from the terrifying look of hate and accusation that had stabbed up at him from the eyes of his dead wife.

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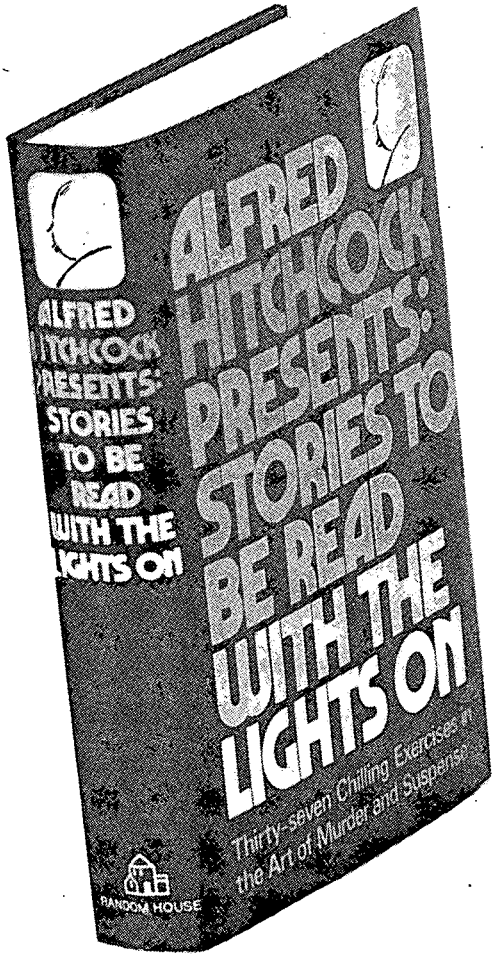

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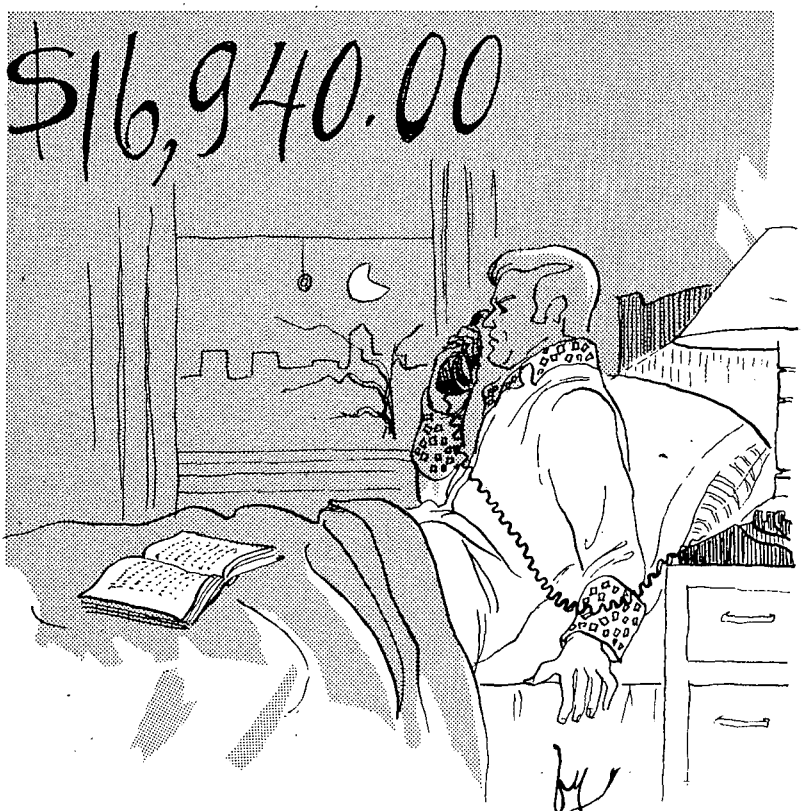


by Larry Niven

When the phone rings late at night, there is a limit to who it can be. I had three guesses as I picked it up: a wrong number (all wrong numbers are the same per-

son), or Lois, or—I didn't bother to think his name. It isn't his, anyway.

"Hello?"

"Hello," he said. "You know who this is?"

"Kelsey." It's the name he tells me. "What is it, Kelsey? You're not due for another four months."

"I need an advance. Are you sitting down?"

"I'm in bed, you—" Reading a book, but I didn't tell him that. Better he should be off balance.

"Sorry. I just wanted you braced. I need sixteen thousand—"

"Bug off!" I slammed down the phone.

There was no point in picking up the book. He'd call again. Sometimes he waits a few minutes to make me nervous. This time the phone started ringing almost immediately, and I snatched it up in the same instant and held it to my ear without saying anything. It's a kind of bluffing game, one I always lose.

"Kelsey again, and I'm not kidding. I need sixteen thousand, nine hundred and forty dollars. I need it by the end of the week."

"You know perfectly well I can't do that. I can't make that much money disappear without somebody noticing: Lois, the bank, the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Dammit, Kelsey, we've worked this thing out before."

"The best laid plans of mice and men—"

"Go to hell." Something hit me then. "That's a funny number. As long as I can't pay anyway, why not make it seventeen thousand, or twenty? Why, uh, sixteen thousand, nine hundred and forty?"

"It just worked out that way." He sounded defensive.

I probed. "What way?"

"You aren't my only client."

"Client? I'm a blackmail victim! At least be honest with yourself, Kelsey."

"I am. Shall I tell you what you are?"

"No." Someone might be listening, which was the point he was trying to make. "You've got other clients, huh? Go to one of *them*."

"I did. It was a mistake." He hesitated, then went on. "Let's call him Horatio, okay? Horatio was a bank teller, long ago. He owns a hardware store now. I've known him about five years. I had to trace him myself, you understand. He embezzled some money while he was a teller."

"What did he do, die on you when the mortgage was due?" I put sarcastic sympathy in my voice.

"I wish he had. No, he waited for my usual call, which I make on April Fools' Day. Not my idea;

his. I call him once a year, just like you. So I called him and told him he was due, and he said he couldn't afford it anymore. He got kind of brave-panicky, you know how it goes—"

"Don't I just, damn you."

"—and he said he wouldn't pay me another red cent if he had to go to prison for it. I got him to agree to meet me at a bar and grill. I hated doing that, Carson. I thought he might try to kill me."

"Occupational hazard. I may return to this subject." I had threatened to kill Kelsey before this.

He sounded dispirited. "It won't help you. I'm careful, Carson. I took a gun, and it was a public place, and I got there first. Besides, there are my files. If I die the cops'll go through them."

I was going to need that information someday, maybe, but it wasn't fun to hear. "So you met him in this bar and grill. What then?"

"Well, he had the money with him. He put it right out on the table, and I grabbed it quick because someone might be watching. Someone was, too. I saw the flashbulb go off, and by the time my eyes had stopped watering, whoever it was had gone out the door. Ra—" He caught himself. "Horatio stopped me from getting out. He said, 'Do you know what the statute of limitations is for embezzlement?'

"I remembered then. It was seven years, and Horatio had me in a box. Blackmail. He figures I've taken him for sixteen thousand nine hundred dollars and no cents, plus forty bucks for the guy with the camera. He wants it back or he turns me in to the police, complete with photographs."

Kelsey had never heard me laugh before and mean it. "That's hilarious. The Biter Bit bit. If you turn in your files it'll only be more evidence against you. You'll just have to fight it out in court, Kelsey. Tell 'em it's a first offense."

"I've got a better idea. I'll get the money from you."

"Nope. If I make that much money disappear, too many people would start wondering why. If they find out, I'm dead. *Dead.* Now I want you to remember that word, Kelsey, because it's important."

"Files, Carson. I want you to remember that word, because it's important to you. If I die, somebody will go through my files and then call the cops."

Well, it hadn't worked. Poor hard-luck Kelsey. "Okay, Kelsey. I'll have the money. Where can we meet?"

"No need. Just get it to me the usual way."

"Now, don't be a damn fool. I probably can't get it until Saturday, which means I'll have to get it to you Sunday. There isn't any mail on Sunday."

He didn't answer for a while. Then, "Are you thinking of killing me?"

I kept it light. "I'm always thinking of killing you, Kelsey."

"Files."

"I *know*. Do you want the money or don't you?"

I listened to the scared silence on the other end. Dammit, I didn't want him scared. I was going to have to kill him, but I'd have to find out where the files were first, and for that I'd have to have him alone, somewhere far away, for several hours. He was going to be too wary for that. I could sense it.

"Listen, there's a third way," he said suddenly. "If you move the money, someone's likely to notice. If you kill me someone's *sure* to notice. But there's a third way."

"Let's hear it."

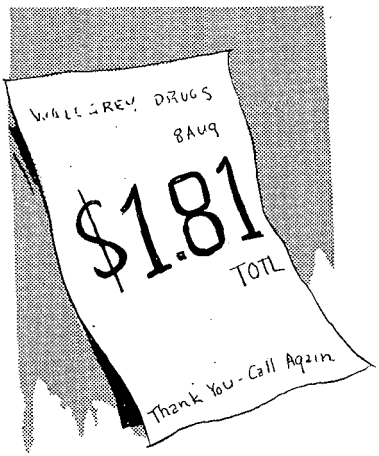
"Kill Horatio."

I yelped. "Kelsey, what do you think I am, Murder Incorporated? I made one mistake. *One*."

"You're not thinking, Carson. There's no connection between you and Horatio. None! Zilch! You can't even be suspected . . ." He went on and on, but I was way ahead of him. If I could get the file Horatio had on Kelsey, I'd have Kelsey. No more payments. We'd have each other by the throats.

Poor hard-luck Horatio.

There may be a definitive alternative to living with what one creates.



She breathed on the window, then drew on the mist with her fingertip. She made an oval and inside it she dotted two eyes and a nose and curved a lopsided smile. Her own face turned hard, and she slashed two crossbones below the foggy face. She saw an overlay of her own face dimly reflecting on the crude skull.

The hardness in her face would not have come out so readily if the ordeal she had lately undergone had not thinned her to the bone, hollowed her cheeks, deepened her eyes. Before her trial for murder her face had been soft and sweet. She had thought the acquittal and the remarriage would have smoothed over the ravages.

But the nightmare was with her yet and the honeymoon was still young. It would take time. Her face softened. Reno had told her she looked even lovelier now, fined down by the fires of adversity. Quickly she wiped it all out.

She dried her hand on her house dress. She froze that way, hand on hip, and stared out through the picture window. She knew what they said behind her back about her and her new husband: that he had put his life on the line in marrying her.

She gazed out at the lesser homes below her on the hill and smiled a lopsided smile. Their numbers did not trouble her, nor the staring eyes of their windows. As long as she was Mrs. J. Reno

by Edward Wellen

Palmateer they would all remain at her feet.

She heard movements overhead, feet on the stairs. Reno was coming down. She started guiltily. She flushed to think of Reno finding her idling their precious moments away when she should be in the kitchen plugging in the coffeemaker and getting out the orange juice and the bacon and eggs and bread and butter and jams. She whirled toward the kitchen. In her hurry she knocked an ash tray to the floor. It shattered.

It was not one she prized or even liked, but it was the one Reno used most often.

She heard Reno pause halfway down.

"Something, dear?"

Strange how colorless his voice was outside the courtroom.

"Nothing, dear."

She shoed the bigger pieces out of sight under the drapes. She flushed again. Why had she lied? Why was she hiding the evidence? She drew a deep breath and strode to the kitchen. She would sweep up the pieces later and spend the morning looking in the stores for an ash tray just like the one she had broken.

The coffeemaker plug was eluding the socket when Reno came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her. She turned her face to his for a lingering kiss whose pressure lingered.

Leota liked these cook's-days-off. It made her feel more the loving wife to be doing for her husband with her own hands. Then, too, she was happy to be without the third pair of eyes for a while. The cook was quiet and efficient and kept herself and her soul thoughts to herself, but she was a person and had her own ideas, however hidden. Leota had a notion what those were from catching the cook's quickly hooded eyes on her.

Along with everyone else the cook believed Leota Rohan had murdered Grady Rohan, and wondered how long it would be before Leota Palmateer murdered J. Reno Palmateer.

Leota's hand shook as she poured. She had suddenly found herself trying to read in Reno's eyes if he too wondered when she would get around to doing him in by poison or other means; but he was kind and smiling and loving—still honeymoon-struck, as he put it—and ate with oblivious relish whatever she put before him.

The radio news was the usual bad news and the weatherman spoke happily of icy conditions. Reno smiled and Leota smiled with him. Reno was good at driving, as he was good at everything

else. No doubt of that at all.

After another lingering kiss Reno went upstairs to brush his teeth and finish dressing. Leota listened, then hurried back into the livingroom with broom and dustpan to sweep up the pieces of the ash tray. On his way out Reno would likely pause by the picture window to survey his world in the frame of his success. He might easily step on a shard and then the kindly cross-examining would begin. She did not want him to catch her in a lie, however small. Their whole relationship hung on his continuing to trust her.

She swept up swiftly but thoroughly, making sure she left no telltale bit behind, and carried the broom and laden dustpan back to the kitchen. The garbage pail was full and they were out of spare liners. She turned to the shelf of the broom closet.

Reno had got into the bachelor habit, before their marriage, of saving paper bags and storing them neatly in the broom closet. She smiled. Another of his careful foresighted ways. Reno made a better housekeeper than she was or ever would be. She took down a paper bag and shook it open to receive the pieces of ash tray.

She caught sight of a short strip of cash register tape at the bottom of the bag. Sometimes a checkout clerk folded the strip of register tape over the mouth of the bag and stapled it to seal the purchase, and sometimes a clerk simply dropped the strip of tape into the bag along with the purchase. The latter was what had happened here. For no reason but idle curiosity Leota reached in and plucked out the tape.

The purple figures leaped out at her: $001.81 TOTL.

It was the price of the bottle that was State's evidence in the case of State v. Leota Rohan for the murder of Grady Rohan.

The date on the slip was nine months old but it was a date she knew. It was the day before Grady's death.

The ink was faint, but Leota made out the name and address of a discount drugstore just over the line in the neighboring state.

Why had Reno driven out of the state to buy $1.81's worth of drugs?

Reno had been to the Rohan home the evening before Grady's death. Reno had had every chance in the world to steal into her and Grady's bedroom sometime during the evening on the pretext of going to the bathroom.

The slip trembled in her hand. It was too much of a coincidence to be one.

Leota remembered now how

uneasy Reno had always made her by the intent way he eyed her whenever they met at parties. He had wanted her and he had got her. What could be more natural after Grady's death and her indictment than to turn to the one famous trial lawyer she knew?

She almost burst into a hysterical laugh thinking how grateful she had been to Reno for saving her, how fond she had been of him for willingly risking his life in marrying a woman the world still believed a murderess; J. Reno Palmateer, the bold knight championing her cause in the tourney of law.

The prosecution—the *persecution*, Reno kept miscalling it till the judge admonished him and he apologized with a wink at the jurors he'd had a careful hand in selecting—had based its case on

circumstantial evidence. The prosecutor had witnesses—guests at the dinner party the night before Grady's death—who had overheard Grady and Leota "quarreling." Leota could not prove that the quarrel had not been a quarrel. She had been trying to keep Grady from overtaxing his poor worn heart. He had wanted to show off their new swimming pool by taking a high dive into it and she had urged him not to do it.

The prosecutor had evidence to show premeditated—and *premedicated*, he added, but his humor did not come off anywhere nearly as well as had J. Reno Palmateer's—murder. Grady had died of a heart attack when the nitro tablets he relied on proved not to be nitro tablets. Leota could not deny that Grady's heart-drug bottle tested out to contain not nitro tablets but harmless nonprescription sedatives looking enough like the nitro tablets to fool a man desperately fighting off a seizure. She could not deny that a half-filled bottle of the sedatives had been uncovered in the drawer of her night table, or explain how it had got there, though she denied having bought it or having known it was in the house.

When you could not disprove the evidence, Reno told her, you worked on the emotions of the jurors relentlessly, zealously.

J. Reno Palmateer took out a pocketful of change and counted out seven quarters, a nickel, and a penny.

"One dollar and eighty-one cents. That's the price stamped on the bottle of sedative tablets."

He tossed the nine coins on the table so that they bounded and slid toward the prosecutor, who in spite of himself reached out to keep them from falling off. J. Reno Palmateer shook his head and smiled sadly.

"Not even thirty pieces of silver. The persecutor—sorry, your Honor—the prosecutor banks on one dollar and eighty-one cents' worth of evidence to send the sorrowing widow to prison for life. Look at her, ladies and gentlemen, and weigh the pitiful evidence carefully. Will you sell her life for one dollar and eighty-one cents?"

He went on in this mood, the veins in his temples standing out as he soared to emotional heights. Yet he never soared too high for the eagle eye to take in the jurors' responses.

It had worked. He had got her off.

Leota still had need of shelter from the sensationalizing press and the scandal-loving public that would not let go. To them she was still the treacherous blonde,

with the added spice that she had got away with murder, but Reno had been right there, loving and understanding. He came high and could have taken her for much of the estate Grady Rohan had left her, but he had not asked for a cent. He loved her—enough to put his life on the line by marrying and living with a murderess. It was that more than anything that had moved her to say yes.

She looked up at the ceiling, hearing Reno move competently, confidently around. A flash flood filled her eyes.

The nightmare was lifting but its pressure remained—a vast sense of loss and waste and bitterness. The worst of it was not Reno's putting *her* life on the line. The worst of it was not pinning on her the lifelong label "murderess"—a word made for whispering. The worst of it was his making her believe Grady, her beloved Grady, had for some twisted reason turned against her and given up on the life he had clung to; the worst of it was his making her believe Grady had killed himself and framed her. The worst of it was—

How could Reno have done that to her?

She was about to let love for Grady flow back into her heart and hate for Reno flood out. Then she stopped.

Reno *had* killed for her, and he *had* gotten her off. She couldn't fail to consider that. Reno loved her enough to do his worst and his best, loved her enough to be indifferent to the world's whisperings.

All trace of her tears had vanished and she had composed herself by the time Reno came downstairs again. How dapper and cocksure he looked. He paused by the picture window to survey his world in the frame of his success. He gazed at her in the glass and their eyes met in that misty space.

She smiled. She saw how her smile warmed him, and she felt the warmth of her smile herself. Maybe in time she would come to love Reno as much as he loved her.

If not, there was always time to become a murderess in fact.

Even in the most cut-and-dried cases, the identity of the victim may be questionable.

The Lemon Drink Queen

a Novelette by John Lutz

She almost begged to be kidnapped, so I intended to oblige. Thana Norden was her name, the wife of Norman Norden, the millionaire lemon drink king. Old man Norden—about seventy years old—kept to himself in their big house on Florida's ocean coast, while his young wife Thana kept the bartenders busy in the big hotels up and down Collins Avenue.

Norman Norden worshiped his wife, and in the news releases concerning his civic activities, and in the society page write-ups, he never failed to mention the fact. "Worth all my money," he had said of her in one TV interview. That had stuck in my mind.

Thana acted the part of something worshiped. She was a very well-built brunette, of medium

height and weight, about thirty, with large, slightly tilted brown eyes, long legs and a flaunting elegance about her. Her specialty, the way I heard, was to lead men on and then not deliver. She might not have been rare that way, but she was rare in a lot of other ways, and she loved to bring it to everyone's attention. I sat and heard her hold court with her bought friends in a lounge one evening. "My jewels . . . my car . . . he'd do anything for me . . . flying to Paris next Tuesday . . . why, he'd give a fortune to kiss my hand . . ." Those were the sort of remarks that dotted her conversation.

After watching Thana for a few weeks, I found that her favorite pastime also fitted in with what I had in mind. She liked to take long, solitary nighttime walks on the beach. I'd sit concealed in my old car and watch her stroll in the moonlight, and I'd consider the possibilities. I was almost forty now; the big break had never come. Everything I'd ever done had always started sweet and ended sour. Was I considering something stupid out of some mounting desperation, or had I realized finally that I had to take a chance?

I can't say I made up my mind all at once, or even consciously, but one day I realized that I *had* made up my mind.

So that night I took one final draw on my cigarette, took one final look through the windshield at the small figure of Thana Norden below me on the beach. She was walking barefoot in an evening dress, about to disappear around a gentle rise of sand. A long swelling wave rose from the dark ocean and rolled toward her to sigh and splay gently about her feet. In the moonlight she glistened like pure gold.

The kidnapping itself would be the easiest part; but where would I hide a package like Thana Norden?

I figured the answer to that would have to come later. The thing for me to do now was to learn all I could about Norman Norden himself. That way I'd know better how to proceed, and how much to ask for ransom.

It was easy to find out what I wanted to know about Norden—so easy it kind of scared me. He was more important than I'd thought, worth more than I'd thought. He'd inherited over a million dollars and the Norden Lemon Drink Company from his father, Milton Norden. Then, with the increasing popularity of concentrated frozen lemonade, he'd built his father's business to ten times its former

size and branched out into manufacturing other food products. Alone, without an heir until Thana, Norman Norden had acquired a huge home in New England, a plush New York town house, two swank penthouse apartments in Miami and a vacation "cottage" in the Bahamas. He spent ninety-nine percent of his time in the sprawling mansion in Miami Beach, and from his office there he conducted his vast business.

On a particularly broiling, humid afternoon I lay on my back in bed and decided after some deliberation to ask $250,000 ransom for the precious Thana. With that figure in mind, I fell asleep listening to the rain begin to fall.

That evening, before it began to get dark, I had a quick snack, then drove to look over Norden's Miami property. I'd learned that both penthouses were used for business purposes only, and that they were seldom used at all. If someone very important came to town on Norden business, the larger penthouse with its pool atop the Brently Building was opened and put at the client's disposal.

I parked near the Brently Building and looked up at its top floor. According to the business-magazine article I'd read at the library, this, the more used of the two penthouses, was occupied for only a few weeks out of the year.

Squinting up into the sunlight, I could make out long rows of draped windows. A little casual conversation with the doorman told me the penthouse was unoccupied now, and the tiniest seed of an idea began to sprout in my mind.

When I saw the site of the second penthouse, smaller and less expensive than the first, on the top of the twenty-story Martinaire Hotel, that seed took root. The Martinaire was part of a section of older buildings, onetime fine hotels that depressed economic conditions were forcing out of business. What interested me most about the old but stately Martinaire was the vacant west wing. That wing, I discovered, was being remodeled to contain fewer but larger rooms. The front of the building was a sheer twenty-story rise, but the west wing rose only twelve stories to stair-step into the main section of building. I investigated further, then walked back to my car, smiling.

I had everything planned and was ready to act two evenings later. I tried to make up my mind when to perform the actual snatch, and as I followed a slightly drunk Thana Norden out

of a bar that night about eleven o'clock, I decided then was as ripe a time as any if she were heading for her late walk on the beach.

Thana must have been drunker than usual, for I had some trouble keeping my old sedan up with her fast and reckless driving. She pushed her little red sports car so hard it was almost suicidal, her dark hair whipping behind and around her in the wind. She was something, Thana Norden was, like a heroine from a book.

Finally she parked the car where she usually did, ran down to the beach and bent gracefully sideways to remove her shoes. I parked down the road about a hundred yards in the direction I knew she'd be walking and sat waiting, my hands clenched on the steering wheel.

After what seemed a long wait, I saw her below, walking slowly and carrying her shoes in one hand, looking out as she often did to the rolling dark sea. I got out of the car, shutting the door softly behind me, and watched her walk past before I started down toward her.

The sighing of the waves kept her from hearing me as I approached from behind, and when I touched her shoulder she whirled with a startled look on her pale face. "Thana Norden?"

"Yes . . . ?" she said, frowning as if I'd interrupted her from complex thought. "What do you want?"

"You're coming with me," I said, watching her eyes for the fear that would allow me to manage her; but there was no fear—only annoyance, indignation.

"You must be out of your mind!" she snapped.

"*You* must be. A solid-gold girl like you, in the habit of walking alone on the beach at night. You were bound to be stolen."

"Stolen?" Now she looked at me curiously. "You're *kidnapping* me?"

"You've guessed it."

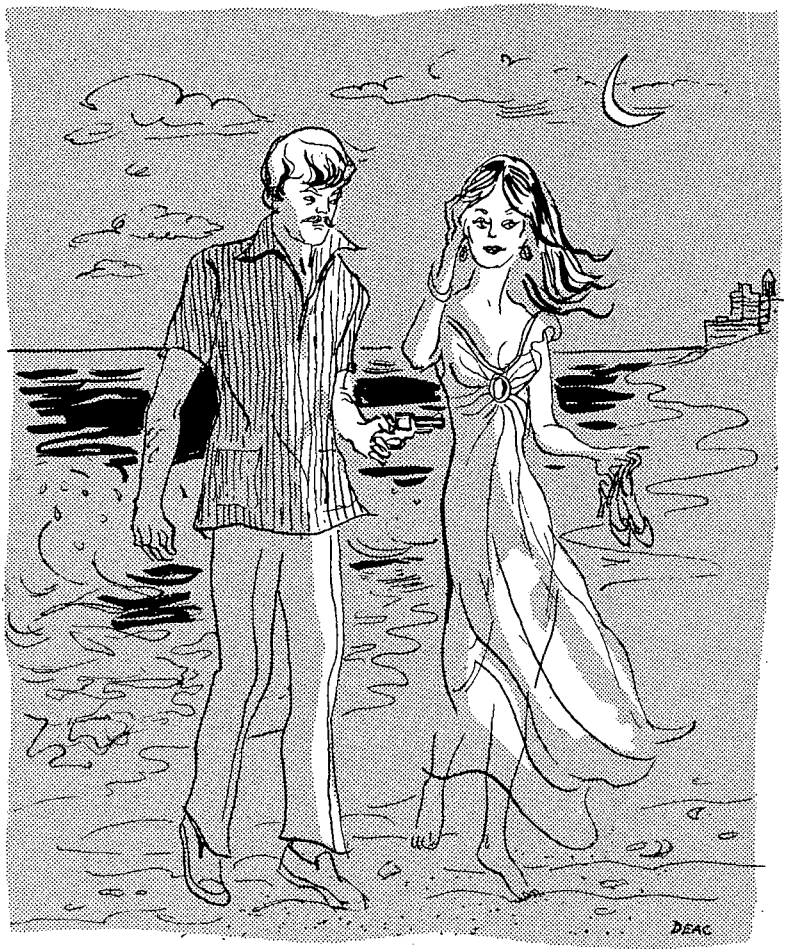
"You're serious?"

I nodded, drawing the small .32 revolver from my belt.

She looked up at the stars and laughed. "All right," she said when she was finished, "I'm kidnapped. You go ahead and call the shots."

"Walk along with me," I said, motioning with the revolver, and side by side we began the walk toward my car. Thana didn't seem frightened at all, didn't even seem nervous, though in a way she seemed excited, almost like a pretty girl embarking on a much anticipated date.

When we reached the sparsely-



grassed earth we stopped so she could put her high-heeled shoes back on. Then I prodded her ribs with the gun and we walked on faster toward the car.

I let Thana drive while I sat beside her with the revolver leveled at her side. I was glad to see that in the confines of my car she seemed more frightened than before.

"Back to the city," I ordered her.

"My makeup is in my car," she said as we passed her parked red convertible.

"It stays there. It won't matter what you look like for the next few days."

She drove on, staring ahead at the curving dark road.

"How much ransom are you going to ask?" she said after a while.

"More than you're worth."

"I'd like to say you can't get away with it, but you probably can. My husband will pay plenty to have me back."

"Thanks for the moral support. Now be quiet and drive."

"I'm not stupid, you know," she said lightly, "even though I am beautiful. I know I'm worthless to you dead, so don't bother with your threats."

"A lot can happen to you without your dying," I told her. That seemed to get to her, and I saw her jaw muscles tense as she tried to concentrate on the road.

"I said I wasn't stupid," she remarked after a few minutes. "After you get the ransom money I will be worthless to you, and you've let me see your face. You know I'll be able to identify you."

"Sure you will, only you'll never see me again, and I can change myself enough so no one will be able to identify me from your description." What I told her was true. Acting had been one of my many short-lived careers that had turned out to be something other than I'd thought, so the art of altering my appearance wasn't new to me. My normally sand-colored hair was dyed black now and combed low over my forehead, and the shape and thickness of my eyebrows were subtly changed by dark pencil. The fashionable dyed moustache I wore would also go when the time came. Naturally I wouldn't be seen anymore at my usual haunts, because my old life as a self-described beach bum would be over.

A tractor-trailer whined past us with difficulty, doing over seventy. I cautioned Thana to stay below the speed limit. Death-defying driving seemed to be a habit with her.

When we reached the Martinaire Hotel I had Thana drive around the block and park in the alley alongside the vacant west wing. I moved quickly, with the smoothness and economy born of careful planning.

After reaching into the back seat and grabbing the duffle bag I'd brought, I shoved Thana roughly from the car, following her with the gun pressed against her. Through a lockless wooden door I took her inside the empty wing to a small room that probably had been used to store linens or cleaning equipment. A light in that room couldn't be seen from outside, and by the glow of my flashlight I bound Thana tightly to a metal support and pressed adhe-

sive tape over her mouth. She sat limply without a suggestion of struggle, and her dark eyes were trained on me as I took one final look at her by the flashlight beam, then walked from the room and closed the door behind me.

Within twenty minutes I was back, and when I opened the door to the small room and switched on the flashlight, Thana was looking at me as she had when I left. I'd parked my car ten blocks away in the garage I'd leased and taken a cab back to within two blocks of the Martinaire Hotel. From there I'd walked the rest of the way.

I untied Thana but left the tape across her mouth, and jabbing the small of her back with the gun barrel, marched her outside again into the alley. With one deft toss I looped a thin, weighted rope about the bottom rung of the counterbalanced steel stairs of the old fire escape and pulled them down. Then I slung the duffle bag over my shoulder and motioned Thana to climb ahead of me.

It seemed like an hour, that climb. We passed darkened window after darkened window as we rose. During the day this part of the building would be teeming with workmen, but at this time it was completely deserted and ideal for my purpose.

We were both breathing hard when we reached the top window. I'd taken care of the latch earlier, and I slid the window open and pushed Thana inside, cursing softly for her to be silent. I used my flashlight with a dark handkerchief over the lens to guide us, but I knew where we were going, could have stage-directed the whole thing in my mind even in the dark. I let Thana, struggling for air, lean against the elevator well as I pressed the button. She didn't seem afraid, and from time to time her frantic breathing even seemed to take on the aspect of exhilarated laughter behind the adhesive tape.

Now the riskiest moment: we had to negotiate a short stretch of hall that passed occupied rooms.

The elevator doors slid open onto the empty hall, and we moved through the door at the end of the hall and up the narrow, steep stairway to the roof. Now I felt sure we'd make it as I gripped Thana's elbow and walked with her across the tar and gravel roof of the twentieth story of the Martinaire Hotel, the roof of Norman Norden's penthouse apartment. Near the center of the roof, we stopped.

I bound Thana's hands behind her, and crossed her ankles and bound them tightly. Then I took a

longer piece of rope from the bag, looped it beneath her arms and tied it behind her.

I'd already forced the lock on the small opaque skylight to Norden's apartment, and I raised it and propped it open carefully. After dropping my duffle bag through the opening, I gently lowered Thana into the darkness below. The lack of vibration in the rope told me she was completely relaxed and cooperative. I tucked my flashlight downward through my belt so I could see below, then hung by my hands from the skylight for a moment before dropping to crouch beside Thana on the floor.

I'd brought it off! It would have been impossible to get to the penthouse unseen through the main part of the hotel, past doormen, guests and an army of bellhops. Yet here I was, in the least likely spot. While Norden fretted and sent out his private searchers, or even if he called the police, here I would be above it all in the plush penthouse of the lemon drink king himself. The irony of it really got to me, made me feel terrific. I almost laughed out loud as I straightened and moved the soft beam of the shielded flashlight about the room. Thana was sitting awkwardly cross-ankled, staring up at me, her idle hands still bound behind her.

After making sure the heavy, lined draperies were completely closed, I turned the lights on low. Very, very nice. The large livingroom we were in was furnished modern and plushly carpeted in beige, with a jagged stone fireplace on one wall. The whole thing was in the subdued taste of extreme wealth.

I walked over and untied Thana's ankles, then helped her to her feet and removed the long rope from beneath her arms. After promising to knock her unconscious if she screamed, I peeled the tape from across her mouth.

"Ever been here before?" I asked her.

She nodded her head yes, working her lips together to ease the sting from the peeled-off adhesive tape. "A few times."

"Plush," I said admiringly. "And private."

"Now what?" Thana asked, walking as if to loosen a stiffness in her legs, moving her slender shoulders as if they ached. "Am I supposed to spend the next several days with my arms tied behind me?"

"Not if you behave."

"It would be foolish of me even to consider misbehaving."

"I'm glad you see it that way," I said, but I wondered if she

really did. I couldn't trust her.

I walked around, getting the layout of the apartment set in my mind: two gigantic bedrooms, two baths, a large kitchen, a dining room with an oversize chandelier, and the room we were in, spacious and glassed-in on three sides hung with heavy draperies.

I untied Thana and told her to sit on the long, modern sofa. Then I disappointed her by showing her the simple device I intended using to limit her movements: a pair of handcuffs I'd bought at a magic shop. I snapped the cuffs about her right wrist and a polished wood arm support of the heavy sofa. Then I removed her gold wedding ring and dropped it into my shirt pocket.

"I have some gold fillings, too," she said.

"I'll remember." I patted my pocket and walked over to slouch in a soft chair.

In the early-morning hours, after tying Thana firmly to the sofa and gagging her, I climbed back up onto the roof and left the same way I'd gotten into the Martinaire. I wore dark coveralls now, lettered 24-HOUR SERVICE across the back, so I'd attract a minimum of attention and be difficult to remember if someone in the hotel did happen to glimpse me.

From the phone booth on the corner I made the call to Norman Norden's residence. At first, whoever answered wouldn't put me through to Norden, but when I mentioned Thana's name and said it concerned her safety, Norden was on the line in ten seconds.

Norden sounded anxious, overwrought. When I told him I was holding Thana for ransom he let out a long, old-sounding sigh, as if he'd expected something like this to happen and now his fears were realized.

When I told him how much it would cost to get her back, he simply said, "Very well," without even hesitating. I admired him then, and felt a little sorry for him, until I thought about his money. He asked me how he could be sure I had Thana. I told him not to worry, that I'd prove it to him, then contact him later. The agreement was the standard one, that he wouldn't call the police and I wouldn't harm Thana. He wanted to talk some more, get more assurance that his young wife wouldn't be touched, but I hung up on him to keep the conversation short. After slipping the gold wedding ring into the stamped envelope I'd prepared with Norden's address typed on it, I dropped the envelope into a mailbox near the phone booth. I bought a detective novel from a

big all-night drugstore across the street, then went back to the dark alley fire escape of the Martinaire Hotel's west wing.

Thana was awake and uncomfortable. When I removed the tape from her mouth it released a stream of curses and complaints.

"Take it easy," I said. "You wouldn't talk to me like that if I had a million bucks."

"You'd need two million!" she told me, chopping the words off angrily. "What did Norman say?"

I looked up at her as I was untying the rope about her ankles.

"That *is* where you went, isn't it? To telephone your demand for ransom?"

I nodded, unwinding the rope and standing. "Your husband's worried about you, and he didn't seem to think a quarter of a million was too high a price to get you back."

"Just the way you planned, hmm?"

"Just," I said, untying her arms, then handcuffing her right wrist to the sofa arm in such a way that she could stretch out and sleep.

"Don't think I'm not aware of what else you plan." She was glaring up at me with a dark, almost-a-dare defiance in her eyes, and I realized what she meant. "After all," she said, "rape carries the same penalty as kidnapping."

"Maybe you're flattering yourself," I told her.

"I know better!" she spat out at me. It was almost as if she were trying to argue me into it to prove she was right.

I stood looking down at her and she met my gaze without blinking. "You're a means of making a quarter of a million dollars," I said. "You don't have to worry about being molested by me—if you *are* worried."

I walked to the other side of the room where slanted morning light was beginning to edge in around the heavy draperies. When it was light enough out, they could be opened. That shouldn't be noticeable or remarkable from twenty stories below in the street, and I was beginning to feel like a prisoner in the apartment myself. Thana had been right to an extent. Desire for her would intrude itself into any man's mind after a while. However, one of the main reasons I never actually considered touching her was that I knew if I did, Norman Norden would never rest, would never let himself die, unless I'd preceded him. The money he could spare and forget, but I knew he had to have his wife back "as was."

I stretched out in one of the bedrooms and slept for a few hours. Afterward, I arranged

things in the apartment so Thana would have a little necessary freedom of movement. First I closed and locked the kitchen and bedroom doors, then I checked in the hall bathroom and removed anything she might use for a weapon, then broke the lock on the polished gold doorknob. The telephone was my big worry; Thana had only to lift the receiver from its cradle to indicate to the hotel below that someone was in the penthouse. The phone was on a very long cord, though, so I set it high up on the top wall bookshelf where she couldn't reach it. I fastened the receiver down with adhesive tape so that even if Thana pulled the phone down by the cord it would hold firm. She thanked me when I freed her from the sofa and let her walk about with her wrists handcuffed before her.

Most of the day she just roamed around the apartment, sitting now and then to read part of the paperback detective novel I'd bought. I watched her try and fail to concentrate on the book.

"You have lousy taste in literature," she said at last, giving up and throwing the novel across the room.

"I bought it for you," I said, getting up and walking to the long window overlooking the street. The draperies were open more than halfway and the view of the city was impressive. Below me I could see the ant-like cars feeling their way though heavy traffic to the stop sign at the intersection, where they paused and seemed to consider which way to go next before moving on straight or turning.

"This is intolerable," Thana said behind me.

"Be quiet and I'll fix supper," I told her without moving.

"Fix what for supper?"

"Bologna sandwiches."

"That was lunch."

"It'll be breakfast too," I said, and it was.

I listened to Thana complain the rest of the next day, then late that night I bound her to the sofa again and went out to make my second telephone call.

Norden had already received the wedding ring in the mail.

"I want this to be over with," he said in a shaky voice. "I have the money ready in small bills. I took the liberty of assuming you'd want it that way."

"And the police?"

"I swear I haven't talked to them, to anyone!"

"Tomorrow night," I told him, getting to the point to shorten the call, "send your chauffeur in your blue limousine, carrying the

money packed in one suitcase. Have him turn north on Route Seven from Highway Y at exactly eleven o'clock, and tell him to drive at exactly forty miles an hour. When he sees the flash of a blue light, he's to pull to the side of the road immediately, dump the suitcase and drive on. Understood?"

"Understood," Norden said. "What about Thana? Is she—"

"She's fine," I said, "and if everything goes right she'll be back to you in no time. *If* everything goes right."

"You can trust me," Norden said. "I swear it. But you mustn't harm her."

"I don't want to, Mr. Norden," I said, and hung up.

Of course it was true, I didn't want to harm Thana; and for some reason I believed I *could* trust Norman Norden not to bring in the police at this point. The old man, in my brief but tense conversations with him, had shown an admirable self-control and concern for the safety of his wife. I guess you'd say, a certain class.

I got back to the penthouse and untied, then handcuffed Thana to the sofa so she could sleep, and so I could sleep without worrying about her getting to the telephone or hurling something through a window at this stage of the game.

"I think our worries are about over," I told her. "Your husband's going to pay off tomorrow night."

She sneered up at me. "Did you think he might not pay to have me back?"

"Not for a second. I'm beginning to think I should have asked for more."

"You underestimated my value."

"Or Norden overestimates it."

She spat at me then, but I moved back and she missed.

"How's it feel to be set up for life with millions of dollars?" I asked.

"It feels great! It's a feeling you'll never know."

"You sound like you're trying to convince both of us."

She laughed, a quick humorless laugh that was more a reflex from a touched nerve than anything else. The swiftness of her mood changes was startling, though for some reason the changes seemed to be only on the surface.

"You're partly right." She lay back and rested her head on the sofa arm. "It gets boring after a while . . . like anything else. You might find that out. You're the same unhappy you, with or without money."

"But it beats starving," I said.

Thana shrugged. "I guess anything beats that. Except maybe

sleeping stiff as a board on this damned couch."

"One more night," I said, "and you can be free to recuperate on your yacht."

I turned my back on her and went into the bedroom where I began going over the way I had things planned for the next night's pickup. I'd turn north onto Route Seven two minutes after Norden's chauffeur had entered it, and drive the legal limit of sixty. Route Seven wasn't heavily traveled at that time of night, and if I did pass any cars between us I could look them over to make sure they weren't police. Our respective speeds would bring the cars together at the right spot. Then I would accelerate close to the limousine, blink my blue-lensed flashlight through the windshield, and drop back to wait for the chauffeur to pull to the side and dump the suitcase. I'd park well back of him with my headlights on, and when the limousine drove off I would speed forward, pick up the money, and a third of a mile down the road turn onto the cloverleaf and maze of roads at the heavily traveled state highway. A quarter of a mile from that cloverleaf was another one. If anyone were trying to trace me he'd have to reckon on the possibility of me traveling in any of eight directions, and Norden's chauffeur wouldn't even be able to identify my car. I wouldn't return to the penthouse. I'd check the money, then phone Norden and tell him where to find Thana. It seemed foolproof; as foolproof as you can make something like that.

As the next day dragged by, the waiting began to play on my nerves. Still, there was that feeling of anticipation—a good anticipation—because, unlike so many of my schemes, I was somehow sure the whole thing would work as planned.

Thana's nerves seemed to be wearing thin, too. She paced the large, luxurious livingroom, absently raising and lowering her handcuffed wrists before her as if completely absorbed in whatever she was thinking. The way she was acting kind of surprised me. I was sure she was convinced I didn't mean to kill her when I had the ransom money. She should have been feeling a pleasant anticipation too, an anticipation of freedom.

I tried to ignore her endless pacing, tried to ignore my own nervousness, and I made a good try at reading the paperback novel I'd bought three nights before, but the words were only words, nothing more. I set the

book aside and checked my watch. Five o'clock. I decided it might be a good idea to try to get whatever rest I could before tonight's activity, so I handcuffed Thana to the sofa arm and slouched on the other end of the sofa myself. After what seemed like an hour, I dozed off lightly . . .

"Who the devil are you?"

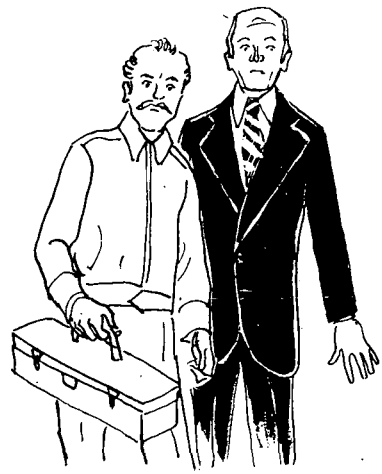
"I'm his prisoner! He's kidnapped me and he's holding me prisoner!"

The question, asked in a man's incredulous voice, stirred me from sleep. The answer, screamed in Thana's shrieking voice, made my eyes open with a start.

There were two men, an older man in a well-cut, dark suit, and a short, moustached man in work clothes, carrying some kind of long metal toolbox.

I stood, not really knowing what to do, and I saw that I'd drawn my revolver and was aiming it unsurely at them. They both backed away slowly, then the moustached man suddenly hurled his toolbox at me. I raised my hands but not in time. The heavy box struck me full on the chest and I staggered backward. The gun roared in my ear and I found myself sitting amidst wrenches and lengths of cut pipe, the toolbox open and lying across one of my legs. The two men were gone.

I kicked the toolbox away with a clatter and stood up, trembling, wondering what had happened, how it *could* have happened. Thana was staring up at me from the sofa, her features set in a



strange-looking sort of defiance.

As I walked toward her I saw blood on my hand that was still holding the gun. Something had cut my arm badly and the blood was running down in a thick, red current.

"Who were they?" I asked in a shaken voice, but Thana only stared at me with that same rigid look on her features. I backed away from her and went toward the bathroom to wash some of the blood from my arm and try to stop the bleeding.

Halfway down the hall, I knew.

I heard it first, rather than saw it. Then I stopped and looked down at the inch-deep pool of water I was walking in. I sloshed the last ten feet to the bathroom door and went in.

The cold-water tap in the washbasin was barely turned on, the water running silently in a twisting, steady stream that had filled the washbasin and caused it to overflow. As I went to pull the plug I saw that toilet paper had been stuck into the overflow drain at the back of the basin. Thana had engineered this earlier in the evening to signal for help. The water had finally run through to the floors below and was brought to the attention of the hotel management, who had brought it to the attention of a plumber.

Cursing the first time I'd ever seen Thana Norden, I splashed water over my throbbing arm, ripped off my shirt sleeve and made a tourniquet of it that helped slow the flow of blood from the jagged cut near my elbow. I'd known from the beginning there wouldn't be time to descend twenty stories to the street if the police were called, and as I walked back into the livingroom I could already hear the screams of faraway sirens.

Thana was sitting on the sofa calmly now, staring up at me with certainly more defiance than fear.

"You fool!" I almost screamed at her. "Why did you do it? You knew it was almost over, you were almost free! Why did you mess up the whole thing?"

Her face shone with intensity. "Did you think I believed what you told me about not killing me? Believed anything you said?"

"It was true! I thought you knew it was true!"

The sirens were much louder now, and some of them stopped directly below. I ran to switch off the lamp in the corner near the fireplace, and the room was snapped to near total darkness.

The telephone rang. I walked to it, my numbed legs moving jerkily, and untaped and lifted the receiver.

"I advise you not to harm the girl," a slow but tense, deep voice said in my ear. "Have you?"

I waited a long time before speaking, listening to the even breathing on the other end of the line. "No," I said. "She's all right. I was never going to harm her."

"Then you're smart. You should be smart enough to know the only thing for you now is to come down unarmed and turn yourself over to us."

I thought about that while I squeezed the receiver so hard my hand ached. The penalty for kid-

napping was death; I could be turning myself over for death.

"The building and the entire block are completely surrounded," the voice said. "There's nothing else for you to do but surrender. It will go easier on you since you haven't harmed Mrs. Norden."

I hung up.

There had to be something I could do. *Something!* Escape down the fire escape would be virtually impossible—but what else was there? One other possibility: I could use Thana as a hostage and make them let me out, make them give me a car and a head start.

Yet I knew that was almost no possibility at all.

Powerful spotlight beams hit the windows then, bathing most of the room in a chalky white light, changing night to fierce day outside the top floors of the Martinaire Hotel. The draperies were opened wide, and I moved along the wall to their edge and stared down, but all I could make out were the incredibly bright lights aimed up at me.

"Your whole idea's turned rotten on you, hasn't it?" Thana said behind me.

The telephone rang again, and I went quickly to answer it.

"I thought you were smart," the voice said. "Do the smart thing now."

"Maybe I'm not as smart as you think," I answered. "And I wouldn't try to come up if I were you. Mrs. Norden might get hurt." I knew that Thana was my only card left to play. If the little fool hadn't blown everything . . . just when I'd almost brought it off!

"Hello . . ." It was another voice on the phone, a familiar voice.

"Norman Norden?"

"It is," the voice said. "Listen to me before you do anything else. Will you agree to that?"

"If you talk fast," I said.

"Fast and to the point," Norden answered. There was a decisiveness in the aged voice that hadn't been there in our earlier conversations. "We both know your situation is almost hopeless; your only chance of escape is to use Thana as a hostage, and that would be a slim chance. A deal is what I offer. I have money, power, influence—you have my wife. If you bring Thana down, unharmed, and release her, I'll see that you get a car and four hours of immunity from the law."

I tried to consider the angles to that sort of offer, but my arm was bleeding again and I felt faint. It was hard for me to concentrate on anything.

"I can offer something else," Norden said, taking my hesitation

for consideration. "If you are apprehended later, I'll pull every string to see that you get off lightly."

"Why would you do that?"

"Why shouldn't I? I'm considered by some to be a mercenary man. In my youth I was even more mercenary. I can understand what you did and why you did it, so I bear you no personal animosity. And I've never broken my word on a business deal. My only concern is for my wife, can't you understand that? Please bring her down safely and I'll see that you're given a car, four hours, a chance! Please!"

"Can you really do it?"

"Of course I can. Thana's safety is the prime concern of the police, too. If I effect a deal to get her back unharmed, they'll go along with me."

I was sitting on the floor now, looking at Thana and thinking more clearly. "I want something else."

"Something else . . . ? All right, yes, you have it. I intended giving it to you for Thana in the first place. It was the hotel manager who recognized Thana and called in the police. The money will be in the car."

"Along with an electronic device so the police can trace me."

Anger and frustration welled up in Norden's voice when he answered. "Isn't there anything I can do to get you to *believe* me?"

I was surprised myself to find that I did believe him, that I trusted his word. I believed he'd do anything for Thana, and he and I both knew that what he offered was my only real chance.

"How soon can the car be here?" I asked.

"It's already here and waiting for you. The money will take half an hour."

"We have a deal," I said, and hung up. I made it to my feet and said to Thana, "I wish I had your kind of luck."

"What does that mean?" She was sitting very straight, glaring at me contemptuously.

"It means you're part of a trade. Your safety for mine. Your husband's down below worrying about you."

Thana didn't bother to answer, just stared at me for a long moment, then turned her head to watch the slight play of the bright spotlight beams over the wide windows.

I went into the bathroom again, found some gauze and bandaged the cut on my arm. Then I washed my face and hands in cool water and fixed my rumpled and bloodstained clothes so they looked almost passable. Then I

waited for everything to develop.

A half hour hadn't passed when the telephone rang again. I got assurances from everyone: Norden, the hotel manager, the police captain in charge of operations below. A gray car with its motor idling would be parked directly outside the lobby entrance.

I told them I was coming down, and went to get Thana.

"Come on," I said, unlocking her handcuffs and holding her by the wrist. "We're going downstairs." As I pulled her to her feet her face was impassive, her body tense.

"Do you really think I believe you're turning me free?" she said. She gazed out the windows again at the brilliant white light sent up from the scene of excitement and turmoil below. As I saw the glazed shine in her dark eyes I knew for the first time that in a way she was enjoying being the center of it all.

Suddenly, with more strength than I thought she had, she jerked her wrist loose and was free of me. She snatched up a long-necked glass vase from a coffee table and backed away.

"Listen," I pleaded, "there's no reason for this now. What I told you is true. You can talk to your husband on the phone if you like."

"It's a lie! It's all a lie!"

"Don't be crazy." I moved toward her, not understanding why she wouldn't believe me. "It's over. You're safe. You're going home."

She slashed the air with the long vase and I stepped back. We were near the windows now, and I had to shield my eyes from the light. I could hear Thana's breath hissing through her teeth. Then, when I saw the glinting, half-secret grin on her face, I realized that she *did* believe me.

I drew the gun from my belt. "No games now," I said, waving the barrel at her. "There isn't any reason to be afraid. All I want to do is take you downstairs. Now walk to the elevator." I motioned with the gun toward the entrance to the private elevator, but Thana moved the other way.

I lunged then and grabbed at her wrist, grasped it for a moment. She lashed down at me with the vase and I raised my other arm in defense. The vase glanced off my shoulder, and at the same time Thana twisted, twirled from my grip. I grabbed at her waist, felt the smooth material of her dress slip painfully from my fingers as she hurled herself out into the blinding light beyond the glass that had shattered behind her.

After the sound of splintering glass came her scream, a long,

shrieking scream, a scream of terror to others who might have heard it. From where I stood paralyzed, however, the sound was different: it was a high, triumphant scream, a scream of deliverance.

In the echo of that scream I suddenly understood about Thana, about the reckless way she lived. I understood her fast and dangerous driving, her relentless drinking, her long nighttime walks looking out to sea. Yet here, twenty stories high and the focal point of concern, excitement, a thousand upturned eyes and dozens of brilliant, probing spotlights, I was the instrument she'd chosen.

I meant her no harm at all; I'd have done anything to save her and myself. That's the way it's been all my life. They say you learn from experience, but sometimes the trouble with that is, by the time you've learned, the experience is over and it's too late.

The arrest, the trial, the sentence—I went through the whole formality in a kind of detached haze. The upright citizens of the state would execute me a dozen times if they could. Murder, kidnapping, and the wrath of Norman Norden—I had about as much chance of surviving as Thana Norden did after flying through that plate of glass into the sultry Miami night sky. So the electric chair's waiting for me, and I'm waiting for it. I'll have to agree with the judge that in the penthouse that night a murder was committed, only there's some confusion in my mind as to who was the victim.

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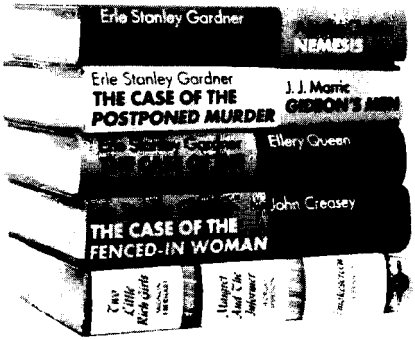

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