ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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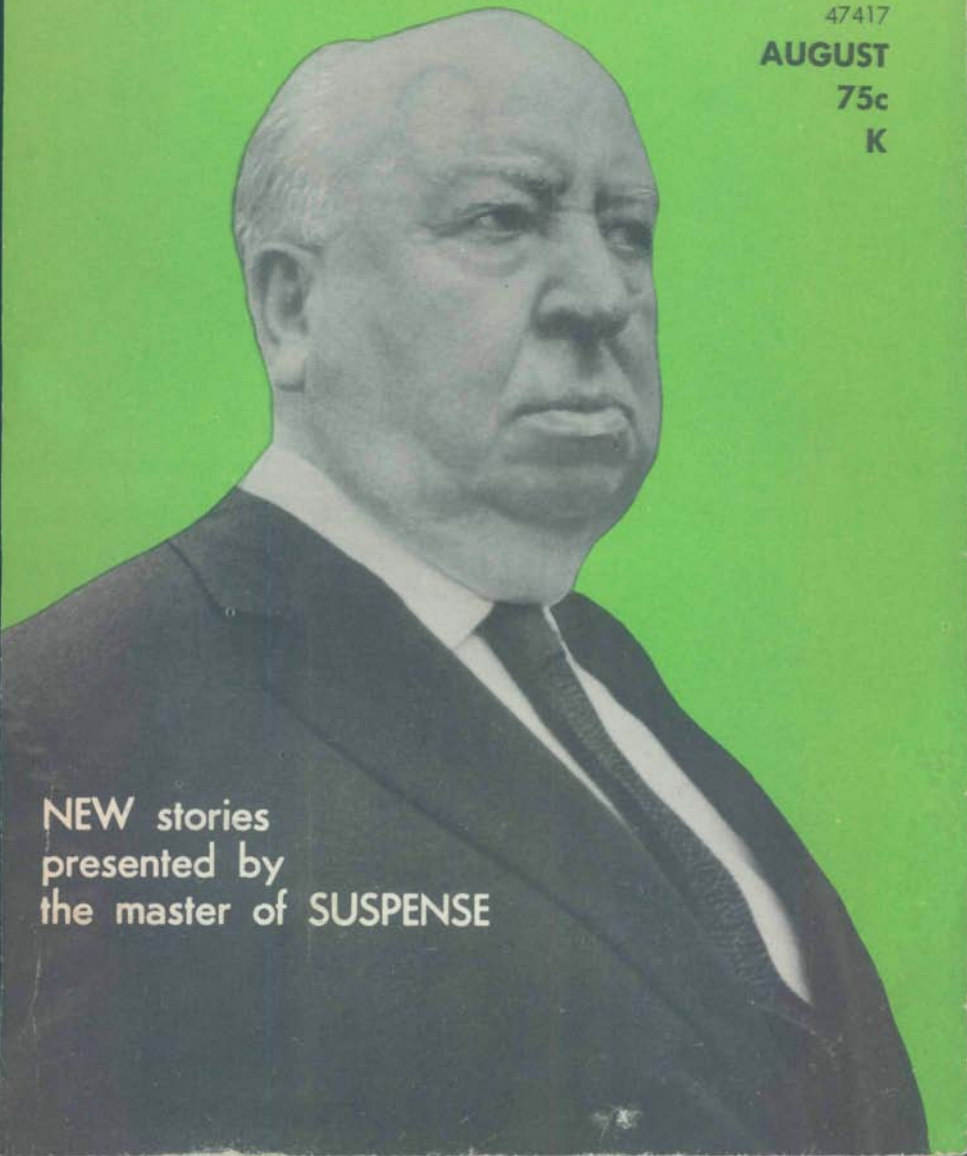

NEW stories
presented by
the master of SUSPENSE

August 1974

Dear Reader:

Another incomparable lineup has been mustered for your (literary) feasting this month; a lineup of souls whom in many cases you will never encounter again, for one very good reason.

Speaking of entering the Hereafter, did you hear the one about the healer who was jailed for murder? No, of course not. It is a new story as are all others in this magazine. Now you can read it—*The Healer* by George C. Chesbro—and then move through the rest of this fascinatingly varied parade of bizarre tales to the novelette by John Lutz titled *All of a Sudden.*

In summers past you may have been east to the Empire State Building and west to the Golden Gate Bridge, but you've never read the following stories before. Whether or not you are vacation-bored, I have a strong conviction that you will find page after page of

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 19, NO. 8 AUGUST 1974

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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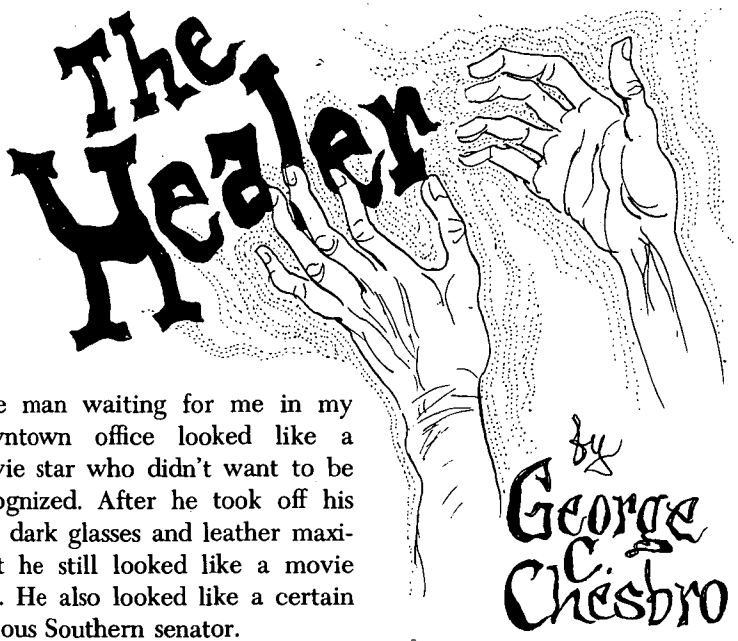
SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 19, No. 8, August 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. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of address should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408.

One may have to expose his own aura to satisfy the disbelievers.



The man waiting for me in my downtown office looked like a movie star who didn't want to be recognized. After he took off his hat, dark glasses and leather maxicoat he still looked like a movie star. He also looked like a certain famous Southern senator.

"Dr. Frederickson," he said, extending a large, sinewy hand. "I've been doing so much reading about you in the past few days, I feel I already know you. I must say it's a distinct pleasure. I'm Bill Younger."

"Senator," I said, shaking the hand and motioning him toward the chair in front of my desk. I had a sudden, mad flash that the senator might be looking for a new campaign gimmick, like an endorsement from a dwarf criminologist-college professor-private detective. Those are the kinds of mad flashes you get when you're a dwarf criminologist-college professor-private detective. I went around to the other side of the desk. Younger, with his boyish, forty-five-year-old face and full

head of brown, modishly-cut hair, looked good. Except for the fear in his eyes he might have been ready to step into a television studio. "Why the background check, Senator?"

He half-smiled. "I used to take my daughter to see you perform when you were with the circus."

"That was a long time ago, Senator." It was six years. It seemed a hundred.

The smile faded. "You're famous. I wanted to see if you were also discreet. My sources tell me your credentials are impeccable. You seem to have a penchant for unusual cases."

"Unusual cases seem to have a penchant for me. You'd be amazed how few people feel the need for a dwarf private detective."

Younger didn't seem to be listening. "You've heard of Esteban Morales?"

I said I hadn't. The senator seemed surprised. "I was away for the summer," I added.

The senator nodded absently, then rose and began to pace back and forth in front of the desk. The activity seemed to relax him. "Esteban is one of my constituents, so I'm quite familiar with his work. He's a healer."

"A doctor?"

"No, not a doctor. A psychic healer. He heals with his hands. His mind." He cast a quick look in my direction to gauge my reaction. He must have been satisfied with what he saw because he went on. "There are a number of good psychic healers in this country. Those who are familiar with this kind of phenomenon consider Esteban the best although his work does not receive much publicity. There are considerable . . . pressures."

"Why did you assume I'd heard of him?"

"He spent the past summer at the university where you teach. He'd agreed to participate in a research project."

"What kind of research project?"

"I'm not sure. It was something in microbiology. I think a Dr. Mason was heading the project."

I nodded. Janet Mason is a friend of mine.

"The project was never finished," Younger continued. "Esteban is now in jail awaiting trial for murder." He added almost parenthetically, "Your brother was the arresting officer."

I was beginning to get the notion that it was more than my natural dwarf charm that had attracted Senator Younger. "Who is this Esteban Morales accused of killing?"

"A physician by the name of Robert Edmonston."

"Why?"

The senator suddenly stopped pacing and planted his hands firmly on top of my desk. He seemed extremely agitated. "The papers reported that Edmonston filed a complaint against Esteban. Practicing medicine without a license. The police think Esteban killed him because of it."

"They'd need more than thoughts to book him."

"They . . . found Esteban in the office with the body. Edmonston had been dead only a few minutes. His throat had been cut with a knife they found dissolving in a vial of acid." The first words had come hard for Younger. The rest came easier. "If charges had been filed against Esteban, it wouldn't have been the first time. These are the things Esteban has to put up with. He's always taken the enmity of the medical establishment in stride. Esteban is not a killer—he's a healer. He couldn't kill anyone!" He suddenly straightened up, then slumped into the chair behind him. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I must seem overwrought."

"How do you feel I can help you, Senator?"

"You must clear Esteban," Younger said. His voice was steady but intense. "Either prove he didn't do it, or that someone else did."

I looked at him to see if he might, just possibly, be joking. He wasn't. "That's a pretty tall order, Senator. And it could get expensive. On the other hand, you've got the whole New York City Police Department set up to do that work for free."

The senator shook his head. "I want one man—you—to devote himself to nothing but this case. You work at the university. You have contacts. You may be able to find out something the police couldn't, or didn't care to look for. After all, the police have other things besides Esteban's case to occupy their attention."

"I wouldn't argue with that."

"This is *most* important to me, Dr. Frederickson," the senator said, jabbing his finger in the air for emphasis. "I will double your usual fee."

"That won't be nec—"

"At the least, I must have access to Esteban if you fail. Perhaps your brother could arrange that. I am willing to donate ten thousand dollars to any cause your brother deems worthy."

"Hold on, Senator. Overwrought or not, I wouldn't mention that kind of arrangement to Garth. He might interpret it as a

bribe offer. Very embarrassing."

"It *will* be a bribe offer!"

I thought about that for a few seconds, then said, "You certainly do a lot for your constituents, Senator. I'm surprised you're not President."

I must have sounded snide. The flesh on the senator's face blanched bone-white, then filled with blood. His eyes flashed. Still, somewhere in their depths, the fear remained. His words came out in a forced whisper. "If Esteban Morales is not released, my daughter will die."

I felt a chill, and wasn't sure whether it was because I believed him or because of the possibility that a United States senator and presidential hopeful was a madman. I settled for something in between and tried to regulate my tone of voice accordingly. "I don't understand, Senator."

"Really? I thought I was making myself perfectly clear. My daughter's life is totally dependent on Esteban Morales." He took a deep breath. "My daughter Linda has cystic fibrosis, Dr. Frederickson. As you may know, medical doctors consider cystic fibrosis incurable. The normal pattern is for a sufferer to die in his or her early teens—usually from pulmonary complications. Esteban has been treating my daughter all her life, and she is now twenty-four. But Linda needs him again. Her lungs are filling with fluid."

I was beginning to understand how the medical establishment might get a little nervous at Esteban Morales' activities, and a psychic warning light was flashing in my brain. Senator or no, this didn't sound like the kind of case in which I liked to get involved. If Morales were a hoaxer—or a killer—I had no desire to be the bearer of bad tidings to a man with the senator's emotional investment.

"How does Morales treat your daughter? With drugs?"

Younger shook his head. "He just . . . *touches* her. He moves his hands up and down her body. Sometimes he looks like he's in a trance, but he isn't. It's . . . very hard to explain. You have to see him do it."

"How much does he charge for these treatments?"

The senator looked surprised. "Esteban doesn't charge anything. Most psychic healers—the real ones—won't take money. They feel it interferes with whatever it is they do." He laughed shortly, without humor. "Esteban prefers to live simply, off Social Security, a pension check and a few gifts—small ones—from his friends. He's a retired metal shop foreman."

Esteban Morales didn't exactly fit the mental picture I'd drawn of him, and my picture of the senator was still hazy. "Senator," I said, tapping my fingers lightly on the desk, "why don't you hold a press conference and describe what you feel Esteban Morales has done for your daughter? It could do you more good than hiring a private detective. Coming from you, I guarantee it will get the police moving."

Younger smiled thinly. "Or get me locked up in Bellevue. At the least I would be voted out of office, perhaps recalled. My state is in the so-called Bible Belt, and there would be a great deal of misunderstanding. Esteban is not a religious man in my constituents' sense of the word. He does not claim to receive his powers from God. Even if he did, it wouldn't make much difference." The smile got thinner. "I've found that most religious people prefer their miracles well-aged. You'll forgive me if I sound selfish, but I would like to try to save Linda's life without demolishing my career. If all else fails, I will hold a press conference. Will you take the job?"

I told him I'd see what I could find out.

It looked like a large, photographic negative. In its center was a dark outline of a hand with the fingers outstretched. The tips of the fingers were surrounded by waves of color, pink, red and violet, undulating outward to a distance of an inch or two from the hand itself. The effect was oddly beautiful and very mysterious.

"What the hell is it?"

"It's a Kirlian photograph," Dr. Janet Mason said. She seemed pleased with my reaction. "The technique is named after a Russian who invented it about thirty years ago. The Russians, by the way, are far ahead of us in this field."

I looked at her. Janet Mason is a handsome woman in her early fifties. Her shiny gray hair was drawn back into a severe bun, highlighting the fine features of her face. You didn't need a special technique to be aware of her sex appeal. She is a tough-minded scientist who, rumor has it, had gone through a long string of lab-assistant lovers. Her work left her little time for anything else. Janet Mason has been liberated a long time. I like her.

"Uh, what field?"

"Psychic research: healing, ESP, clairvoyance, that sort of thing. Kirlian photography, for example, purports to record what is known as the human *aura*, part of the energy that all living things radiate. The technique itself is quite

simple. You put an individual into a circuit with an unexposed photographic plate and have the person touch the plate with some part of his body." She pointed to the print I was holding. "That's what you end up with."

"Morales'?"

"Mine. That's an 'average' aura, if you will." She reached into the drawer of her desk and took out another set of photographs. She looked through them, then handed one to me. "This is Esteban's."

I glanced at the print. It looked the same as the first one, and I told her so.

"That's Esteban at rest, you might say. He's not thinking about healing." She handed me another photograph. "Here he is with his batteries charged."

The print startled me. The bands of color were erupting out from the fingers, especially the index and middle fingers. The apogee of the waves was somewhere off the print; they looked like sun storms.

"You won't find that in the others," Janet continued. "With most people, thinking about healing makes very little difference."

"So what does it mean?"

She smiled disarmingly. "Mongo, I'm a scientist. I deal in facts. The fact of the matter is that Esteban Morales takes one hell of a Kirlian photograph. The implication is that he can literally radiate extra amounts of energy at will."

"Do you think he can actually heal people?"

She took a long time to answer. "There's no doubt in *my* mind that he can," she said at last. I considered it a rather startling confession. "And he's not dealing with psychosomatic disorders. Esteban has been involved in other research projects, at different universities. In one, a strip of skin was removed surgically from the backs of monkeys. The monkeys were divided into two groups. Esteban simply handled the monkeys in one group. Those monkeys healed twice as fast as the ones he didn't handle." She smiled wanly. "Plants are supposed to grow faster when he waters them."

"What did you have him working on?"

"Enzymes," Janet said with a hint of pride. "The perfect research model; no personalities involved. You see, enzymes are the basic chemicals of the body. If Esteban could heal, the reasoning went, he should be able to affect pure enzymes. He can."

"The results were good?"

She laughed lightly. "Spectacular. Irradiated—'injured'—enzymes break down at specific rates in

certain chemical solutions. The less damaged they are, the slower their rate of breakdown. What we did was to take test tubes full of enzymes—supplied by a commercial lab—and irradiate them. Then we gave Esteban half of the samples to handle. The samples he handled broke down at a statistically significant *lesser* rate than the ones he didn't handle." She paused again, then said, "Ninety-nine and nine-tenths percent of the population can't affect the enzymes one way or the other. On the other hand, a very few people can make the enzymes break down *faster.*"

" 'Negative' healers?"

"Right. Pretty hairy, huh?"

I laughed. "It's incredible. Why haven't I heard anything about it? I mean, here's a man who may be able to heal people with his hands and nobody's heard of him. I would think Morales would make headlines in every newspaper in the country."

Janet gave me the kind of smile I suspected she normally reserved for some particularly naive student. "It's next to impossible just to get funding for this kind of research, what's more, publicity. Psychic healing is thought of as, well, *occult.*"

"You mean like acupuncture?"

It was Janet's turn to laugh. "You make my point. You know how long it took Western scientists and doctors to get around to taking acupuncture seriously. Psychic healing just doesn't fit into the currently accepted pattern of scientific thinking. When you do get a study done, none of the journals want to publish it."

"I understand that Dr. Edmonston filed a complaint against Morales. Is that true?"

"That's what the police said. I have no reason to doubt it. Edmonston was never happy about his part in the project. Now I'm beginning to wonder about Dr. Johnson. I'm still waiting for his anecdotal reports."

"What project? What reports? What Dr. Johnson?"

Janet looked surprised. "You don't know about that?"

"I got all my information from my client. Obviously, he didn't know. Was there some kind of tie-in between Morales and Edmonston?"

"I would say so." She replaced the Kirlian photographs in her desk drawer. "We actually needed Esteban only about an hour or so a day, when he handled samples. The rest of the time we were involved in computer analysis. We decided it might be interesting to see what Esteban could do with some real patients, under medical

supervision. We wanted to get a physician's point of view. We put some feelers out into the medical community and got a cold shoulder—except for Dr. Johnson, who incidentally happened to be Robert Edmonston's partner. I get the impression the two of them had a big argument over using Esteban, and Rolfe Johnson eventually won. We worked out a plan where Esteban would go to their offices after finishing here. They would refer certain patients—who volunteered—to him. These particular patients were in no immediate danger, but they would eventually require hospitalization. These patients would report how they felt to Edmonston and Johnson after their sessions with Esteban. The two doctors would then make up anecdotal reports. Not very scientific, but we thought it might make an interesting footnote to the main study."

"And you haven't seen these reports?"

"No. I think Dr. Johnson is stalling."

"Why would he do that after he agreed to participate in the project?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's had second thoughts after the murder. Or maybe he's simply afraid his colleagues will laugh at him."

I wondered. It still seemed a curious shift in attitude. It also occurred to me that I would like to see the list of patients that had been referred to Morales. It just might contain the name of someone with a motive to kill Edmonston—and try to pin it on Esteban Morales. "Tell me some more about Edmonston and Johnson," I said. "You mentioned the fact they were partners."

Janet took a cigarette from her purse and I supplied a match. She studied me through a cloud of smoke. "Is this confidential?"

"If you say so."

"Johnson and Edmonston were very much into the modern big-business aspect of medicine. It's what a lot of doctors are doing these days: labs, ancillary patient centers, private, profit-making hospitals. Dr. Johnson's skills seemed to be more in the area of administration of their enterprises. As a matter of fact, he'd be about the last person I'd expect to be interested in psychic healing. There were rumors to the effect they were going public in a few months."

"Doctors go public?"

"Sure. They build up a network of the types of facilities I mentioned, incorporate, then sell stocks."

"How'd they get along?"

"Who knows? I assume they got

along as well as any other business partners. They were different, though."

"How so?"

"Edmonston was the older of the two men. I suspect he was attracted to Johnson because of Johnson's ideas in the areas I mentioned. Edmonston was rumored to be a good doctor, but he was brooding. No sense of humor. Johnson had a lighter, happy-go-lucky side. Obviously, he was also the more adventurous of the two."

"What was the basis of Edmonston's complaint?"

"Dr. Edmonston claimed that Esteban was giving his patients drugs."

I thought about that. It certainly didn't fit in with what the senator had told me. "Janet, doesn't it strike you as odd that two doctors like Johnson and Edmonston would agree to work with a psychic healer? Aside from philosophic differences, they sound like busy men."

"Oh, yes. I really can't explain Dr. Johnson's enthusiasm. As I told you, Dr. Edmonston was against the project from the beginning. He didn't want to waste his time on what he considered to be superstitious nonsense." She paused, then added, "He must have given off some bad vibrations."

"Why do you say that?"

"I'm not sure. Toward the end of the experiment something was affecting Esteban's concentration. He wasn't getting the same results he had earlier. And before you ask, I don't know why he was upset. I broached the subject once and he made it clear he didn't want to discuss it."

"Do you think he killed Edmonston?"

She laughed shortly, without humor. "Uh-uh, Mongo. That's your department. I deal in enzymes; they're much simpler than people."

"C'mon, Janet. You spent an entire summer working with him. He must have left some kind of impression. Do you think Esteban Morales is the kind of man who would slit somebody's throat?"

She looked at me a long time. Finally she said, "Esteban Morales is probably the gentlest, most loving person I've ever met. And that's all you're going to get from me. Except that I wish you luck."

I nodded my thanks, then rose and started for the door.

"Mongo?"

I turned with my hand on the doorknob. Janet was now sitting on the edge of her desk, exposing a generous portion of her very shapely legs. They were the best looking fifty-year-old legs I'd ever

seen—and on a very pretty woman.

"You have to come and see me more often," she continued evenly. "I don't have that many dwarf colleagues."

I winked broadly. "See you, kid."

"Of course I was curious," Dr. Rolfe Johnson said. "That's why I was so anxious to participate in the project in the first place. I like to consider myself open-minded."

I studied Johnson. He was a boyish thirty-seven, outrageously good-looking, with Nordic blue eyes and a full head of blond hair. I was impressed by his enthusiasm, somewhat puzzled by his agreeing to see me within twenty minutes of my phone call. For a busy doctor-businessman he seemed very free with his time—or very anxious to nail the lid on Esteban Morales. He was just a little too eager to please me.

"Dr. Edmonston wasn't?"

Johnson cleared his throat. "Well, I didn't mean that. Robert was a . . . traditionalist. You will find that most doctors are just not that *curious*. He considered working with Mr. Morales an unnecessary drain on our time. I thought it was worth it."

"Why? What was in it for you?"

He looked slightly hurt. "I considered it a purely scientific inquiry. After all, no doctor ever actually *heals* anyone. Nor does any medicine. The body heals itself, and all any doctor can do is to try to stimulate the body to do its job. From his advance publicity, Esteban Morales was a man who could do that without benefit of drugs or scalpels. I wanted to see if it were true."

"Was it?"

Johnson snorted. "Of course not. It was all mumbo jumbo. Oh, he certainly had a psychosomatic effect on some people—but they had to believe in him. From what I could see, the effects of what he was doing were at most ephemeral, and extremely short-lived. I suppose that's why he panicked."

"Panicked?"

Johnson's eyebrows lifted. "The police haven't told you?"

"I'm running ahead of myself. I haven't talked to the police yet. I assume you're talking about the drugs Morales is supposed to have administered."

"Oh, not *supposed* to. I *saw* him, and it was reported to me by the patient."

"What patient?"

He clucked his tongue. "Surely you can appreciate the fact that I can't give out patients' names."

"Sure. You told Edmonston?"

"It was his patient. And he insisted on filing the complaint himself." He shook his head. "Dr. Mason would have been doing everyone a favor if she hadn't insisted on having the university bail him out."

"Uh-huh. Can you tell me what happened the night Dr. Edmonston died? What you know?"

He thought about it for a while. At least he looked like he was thinking about it. "Dr. Edmonston and I always met on Thursday nights. There were records to be kept, decisions to be made, and there just wasn't enough time during the week. On that night I was a few minutes late." He shook his head. "Those few minutes may have cost Robert his life."

"Maybe. What was Morales doing there?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Obviously, he was enraged with Robert. He must have found out about the Thursday night meetings while he was working with us, and decided that would be a good time to kill Dr. Edmonston."

"But if he knew about the meetings, he'd know you'd be there."

Johnson glanced impatiently at his watch. "I am not privy to what went on in Esteban Morales' mind. After all, as you must know, he is almost completely illiterate. A stupid man. Perhaps he simply wasn't thinking straight . . . if he ever does." He rose abruptly. "I'm afraid I've given you all the time I can afford. I've talked to you in the interests of obtaining justice for Dr. Edmonston. I hoped you would see that you were wasting your time investigating the matter."

The interview was obviously over.

Johnson's story stunk. The problem was how to get someone else to sniff around it. With a prime suspect like Morales in the net, the New York Police weren't about to complicate matters for themselves before they had to, meaning before the senator either got Morales a good lawyer or laid his own career on the line. My job was to prevent that necessity, which meant, at the least, getting Morales out on bail. To do that I was going to have to start raising some doubts.

It was time to talk to Morales.

I stopped off at a drive-in for dinner, took out three hamburgers and a chocolate milk shake intended as a bribe for my outrageously oversized brother. The food wasn't enough. A half hour later, after threats, shouts and appeals to familial loyalty, I was transformed from a dwarf private

detective to a dwarf lawyer and taken to see Esteban Morales. The guard assigned to me thought it was funny as hell.

Esteban Morales looked like an abandoned extra from *Viva Zapata.* He wore a battered, broad-brimmed straw hat to cover a full head of long, matted gray hair. He wore shapeless corduroy pants and a bulky, torn red sweater. Squatting down on the cell's dirty cot, his back to the wall, he looked forlorn and lonely. He looked up as I entered. His eyes were a deep, wet brown. Something moved in their depths as he looked at me. Whatever it was—curiosity, perhaps—quickly passed.

I went over to him and held out my hand. "Hello, Mr. Morales. My name is Bob Frederickson. My friends call me Mongo."

Morales shook my hand. For an old man, his grip was surprisingly firm. "Glad to meet you, Mr. Mongo," he said in a thickly-accented voice. "You lawyer?"

"No. A private detective. I'd like to try to help you."

"Who hire you?"

"A friend of yours." I mouthed the word "senator" so the guard wouldn't hear me. Morales' eyes lit up. "Your friend feels that his daughter needs you. I'm going to try to get you out, at least on bail."

Morales lifted his large hands slowly and studied the palms. I remembered Janet Mason's Kirlian photographs; I wondered what mysterious force was in those hands, and what its source was. "I help Linda if I can get to see her," he said quietly. "I must touch." He suddenly looked up. "I no kill anybody, Mr. Mongo. I never hurt anybody."

"What happened that night?"

The hands pressed together, dropped between his knees. "Dr. Edmonston no like me. I can tell that. He think I phony. Still he let me help his patients, and I grateful to him for that."

"Do you think you actually helped any of them?"

Morales smiled disarmingly, like a child who has done something of which he is proud. "I know I did. And the patients, they know. They tell me, and they tell Dr. Edmonston and Dr. Johnson."

"Did you give drugs to anybody?"

"No, Mr. Mongo." He lifted his hands. "My power is here, in my hands. All drugs bad for body."

"Why do you think Dr. Edmonston said you did?"

He shook his head in obvious bewilderment. "One day the police pick me up at university. They say I under arrest for pretending to be doctor. I no under-

stand. Dr. Mason get me out. Then I get message same day—"

"A Thursday?"

"I think so. The message say that Dr. Edmonston want to see me that night at 7:30. I want to know why he mad at me so I decide to go. I come in and find him dead. Somebody cut throat. Dr. Johnson come in a few minutes later. He think I do it. He call police . . ." His voice trailed off, punctuated by a gesture that included the cell, and the unseen world outside. It was an elegant gesture.

"How did you get into the office, Esteban?"

"The lights are on and door open. When nobody answer knock I walk in."

I nodded. Esteban Morales was either a monumental acting talent or a man impossible not to believe. "Do you have any idea why Dr. Edmonston wanted to talk to you?"

"No, Mr. Mongo. I thought maybe he sorry he call police."

"How do you do what you do, Esteban?" The question was meant to surprise him. It didn't. He simply smiled.

"You think I play tricks, Mr. Mongo?"

"What I think doesn't matter."

"Then why you ask?"

"I'm curious."

"Then I answer." Again he lifted his hands, stared at them. "The body make music, Mr. Mongo. A healthy body make good music. I can hear through my hands. A sick body make bad music. My hands . . . I can make music good, make it sound like I know it should." He paused, shook his head. "Not easy to explain, Mr. Mongo."

"Why were you upset near the end of the project, Esteban?"

"Who told you I upset?"

"Dr. Mason. She said you were having a difficult time affecting the enzymes."

He took a long time to answer. "I don't think it right to talk about it."

"Talk about what, Esteban? How can I help you if you won't level with me?"

"I know many things about people, but I don't speak about them," he said almost to himself. "What make me unhappy have nothing to do with my trouble."

"Why don't you let me decide that?"

Again, it took him a long time to answer. "I guess it no make difference any longer."

"*What* doesn't make a difference any longer, Esteban?"

He looked up at me. "Dr. Edmonston was dying. Of cancer."

"Dr. Edmonston told you that?"

"Oh, no. Dr. Edmonston no tell anyone. He not want anyone to know. But I know."

"How, Esteban? How did you know?"

He pointed to his eyes. "I see, Mr. Mongo. I see the aura. Dr. Edmonston's aura brown-black. Flicker. He dying of cancer. I know he have five, maybe six more months to live." He lowered his eyes and shook his head. "I tell him I know. I tell him I want to help. He get very mad at me. He tell me to mind my own business. That upset me. It upset me to be around people in pain who no want my help."

My mouth was suddenly very dry. I swallowed hard. "You say you *saw* this aura?" I remembered the Kirlian photographs Janet Mason had shown me and I could feel a prickling at the back of my neck.

"Yes," Morales said simply. "I see aura."

"Can you see *anybody's* aura?" I had raised my voice a few notches so that the guard could hear. I shot a quick glance in his direction. He was smirking, which meant we were coming in loud and clear. That was good . . . maybe.

"Usually. Mostly I see sick people's aura, because that what I look for."

"Can you see mine?" I asked.

His eyes slowly came up and met mine. They held. It was a moment of unexpected, embarrassing intimacy, and I knew what he was going to say before he said it.

Esteban Morales didn't smile. "I can see yours, Mr. Mongo," he said softly.

He was going to say something else but I cut him off. I was feeling a little light-headed and I wanted to get the next part of the production over as quickly as possible. I could sympathize with Dr. Edmonston.

I pressed the guard and he reluctantly admitted he'd overheard the last part of our conversation. Then I asked him to get Garth.

Garth arrived looking suspicious. Garth always looks suspicious when I send for him. He nodded briefly at Esteban, then looked at me. "What's up, Mongo?"

"I just want you to sit here for a minute and listen to something."

"Mongo, I've got *reports*!"

I ignored him and he leaned back against the bars of the cell and began to tap his foot impatiently. I turned to Esteban Morales. "Esteban," I said quietly, "will you tell my brother what an aura is?"

Morales described the human

aura and I followed up by describing the Kirlian photographs Janet Mason had shown me: what they were, and what they purported to show. Garth's foot continued its monotonous tapping. Once he glanced at his watch.

"Esteban," I said, "how does my brother look? I mean his aura."

"Oh, he fine," Esteban said, puzzled. "Aura a good, healthy pink."

"What about me?"

Morales dropped his eyes and shook his head mutely.

The foot-tapping in the corner had stopped. Suddenly Garth was beside me, gripping my arm. "Mongo, what the hell is this all about?"

"Just listen, Garth. I need a witness." I took a deep breath, then started in again on Morales. "Esteban," I whispered, "I asked you a question. Can you see my aura? Can you see my aura, Esteban? Damn it, if you can, say so! I may be able to help you. If you can see my aura you have to say so!"

Esteban Morales slowly lifted his head. His eyes were filled with pain. "I cannot help you, Mr. Mongo."

Garth gripped my arm even tighter. "Mongo—"

"I'm all right, Garth. Esteban, tell me what it is you see."

The healer took a long, shuddering breath. "You are dying, Mr. Mongo. Your mind is sharp, but your body is—" He gestured toward me. "Your body is the way it is. It is the same inside. I cannot change that. I cannot help. I am sorry."

"Don't be," I said. I was caught between conflicting emotions, exultation at coming up a winner and bitterness at what Morales' statement was costing me. I decided to spin the wheel again. "Can you tell about how many years I have left, Esteban?"

"Five," Morales said in a choked voice. "Maybe six or seven. Why you make me say these things?"

I spun on Garth. I hoped I had my smile on straight. "Well, brother, how does Esteban's opinion compare with the medical authorities'?"

Garth shook his head. His voice was hollow. "Your clients get a lot for their money, Mongo."

"How about getting hold of a lawyer and arranging a bail hearing for Esteban. Like tomorrow?"

"I can get a public defender in here, Mongo," Garth said in the same tone. "But you haven't proved anything."

"Was there an autopsy done on Edmonston?"

"Yeah. The report is probably

filed away by now. What about it?"

"Well, that autopsy will show that Edmonston was dying of cancer, and I can prove that Esteban knew it. I just gave you a demonstration of what he can do."

"It still doesn't prove anything," Garth said tightly. "Mongo, I wish it did."

"All I want is Esteban out on bail—and the cops dusting a few more corners. All I want to show is that Esteban knew Edmonston was dying, fast. It wouldn't have made any sense for Esteban to kill him. And I think I can bring in a surprise character witness. A heavy. Will you talk to the judge?"

"Yeah, I'll talk to the judge." Again, Garth gripped my arm. "You sure you're all right? You're white as chalk."

"I'm all right. Hell, we're all dying, aren't we?" My laugh turned short and bitter. "When you've been dying as long as I have, you get used to it. I need a phone."

I didn't wait for an answer. I walked quickly out of the cell and used the first phone I found to call the senator. Then I hurried outside and lit a cigarette. It tasted lousy.

Two days later Garth popped his head into my office. "He confessed. I thought you'd want to know."

I pushed aside the criminology lecture on which I'd been working. "Who confessed?"

Garth came in and closed the door. "Johnson, of course. He came into his office this morning and found us searching through his records. He just managed to ask to see the warrant before he folded. Told the whole story twice, once for us and once for the DA. What an amateur!"

I was vaguely surprised to find myself monumentally disinterested. My job had been finished the day before when the senator and I had walked in a back door of the courthouse to meet with Garth and the sitting judge. Forty-five minutes later Esteban Morales had been out on bail and on his way to meet with Linda Younger. Rolfe Johnson had been my prime suspect five minutes after I'd begun to talk to him, and there'd been no doubt in my mind that the police would nail him, once they decided to go to the bother.

"What was his motive?" I asked.

"Johnson's forte was business. No question about it. He just couldn't cut it as a murderer . . . or a doctor. He had at least a dozen malpractice suits filed

against him. Edmonston was getting tired of having a flunky as a partner. Johnson was becoming an increasing embarrassment and was hurting the medical side of the business. Patients, after all, are the bottom line. Edmonston had the original practice and a controlling interest in their corporation. He was going to cut Johnson adrift, and Johnson found out about it.

"Johnson, with all his troubles, knew that he was finished if Edmonston dissolved the partnership. When Dr. Mason told him about Morales, Johnson had a notion that he just might be able to use the situation to his own advantage. After all, what better patsy than an illiterate psychic healer?"

"Johnson sent the message to Esteban, didn't he?"

"Sure. First, he admitted lying to Edmonston about Esteban giving drugs to one of Edmonston's patients, then he told how he maneuvered Edmonston into filing a complaint. He figured the university would bail Esteban out, and a motive would have been established. It wasn't much, but Johnson didn't figure he needed much. After all, he assumed Esteban was crazy and that any jury would know he was crazy. He picked his day, then left a message in the name of Edmonston for Esteban to come to the offices that night. He asked Edmonston to come forty-five minutes early, and he killed him, then waited for Esteban to show up to take the rap. Pretty crude, but then Johnson isn't that imaginative."

"Didn't the feedback from the patients give him any pause?"

Garth laughed. "From what I can gather from his statement, Johnson never paid any attention to the reports. Edmonston did most of the interviewing."

"There seems to be a touch of irony there," I said dryly.

"There seems to be. Well, I've got a car running downstairs. Like I said, I thought you'd want to know."

"Thanks, Garth."

He paused with his hand on the knob and looked at me for a long time. I knew we were thinking about the same thing, words spoken in a jail cell, a very private family secret shared by two brothers. For a moment I was afraid he was going to say something that would embarrass both of us. He didn't.

"See you," Garth said.

"See you."

Getting in the last word may enliven things the hard way.

Do Not Bend, Etc.

by Frank Sisk

"They want one of us at the morgue," Detective Sergeant Laidlaw said as he hung up the phone.

"They're not getting me yet," Detective Garvey said. "I'm still warm."

"Now that you mention it, Mike," Laidlaw said, "you're just the man to go."

"Thanks, Sarge. What's it all about?"

"Old man Semple says there's something funny about one of his customers. Thinks we ought to take a look."

"What the hell could he have down there anyway? A corpse that tells jokes?"

"The old boy was stingy with detail."

"Do you want me to take off now?"

"I think you'd better, before he goes over our head and calls the captain."

The morgue resembled the kind of library that Carnegie money was beginning to build after the turn of the century. It masqueraded under the name *Municipal Vault & Laboratory* which was incised in the stone arch over the entrance and blurred with soot.

Garvey had visited this place on

police business more often than he cared to recall. Even at this time of the year, early September, the echoing lobby was unseasonably cold. Behind a green metal desk, bare except for a black telephone, an elderly flitch of a woman sat bundled in a heavy brown sweater. Her blubbery cheeks were slightly purple—not from the cold, as Garvey had long been aware, but from the secret intake of antifreeze. This was Miss Ivory.

"Good afternoon, Detective Garvey," she said, simpering at something perched on his shoulder. "Mr. Semple is expecting you. A most important matter. Let me inform him of your presence."

Garvey watched patiently as Miss Ivory lifted the phone with one plump hand and pressed one of two buttons with the other. He wondered what that second button connected to—the men's room?

Miss Ivory murmured confidentially into the instrument and then hung up. "Mr. Semple will see you in a few minutes. You arrive at one of his busy moments. He is such a busy man. Eddie is coming to fetch you. You're acquainted with Eddie, aren't you?"

Garvey nodded and got a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

"No smoking," Miss Ivory said brightly. "We have strict rules about that, Detective Garvey."

"I nearly forgot," Garvey said.

On the bones of trivial simplicity old Semple had somehow contrived the illusion of an important bureaucracy engaged in momentous endeavor. Through the means of his own private protocol he had transformed the management of a comparatively small morgue, a morgue which rarely held more than three bodies at any given time, into an operation as seemingly complex as, say, the U.S. State Department's or IBM's. THIMK signs on all of the walls were not an inconceivable manifestation to Garvey. In fact, he expected to see them there any day now unless old Semple exercised his long-deferred option to retire from public service.

A sickly green door opened behind Miss Ivory's desk and Eddie shambled into the room. He was as knock-kneed as a newborn colt. Under an unkempt head of whey-colored hair his pale face was sorely pimpled. Eddie was in his early twenties, according to Garvey's information, and related distantly to Semple—a great-nephew once removed or something like that.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said, running a finger around the inside of his loose collar. "Nice outside, ain't it?"

"Nicer than inside," Garvey said.

"I bet. Well, Mr. Semple's about ready for you. So just follow where I go."

Of course none of this was necessary. Garvey could have found his way to Semple's office blindfolded, but he fell in behind the shambling Eddie and went through the green door. The corridor was also green and the skylight running half its length was painted green too, making it opaque. It was even chillier here than in the lobby.

The door to Semple's office was blue (which always made Garvey wonder whether shortages were developing in the green-paint market) and identified as such in hand-lettered white:

A. S. SEMPLE
Gen'l Superv
Vault & Labo

Judging from the abbreviations, there wasn't much white paint around either.

Compared to all other areas of the building, Semple's office was rather warm because of sunlight pouring through a west-facing window. The busy gen'l superv was sitting behind a large mahogany desk, dating back to his WPA days, as police gossip had it, and wholly occupied in lighting a meerschaum pipe shaped like a saxophone. Overlooking the scene from the rear wall was a framed photograph of a toothy President Roosevelt—Theodore, not Franklin.

Garvey often wondered whether Semple had been a Roughrider. He seemed almost old enough.

"So it's you again, Garvey," the gen'l superv said between puffs of smoke. "I thought Laidlaw might come himself this time."

"He wanted to, but at the last minute he—"

"Eddie, we're going to be examining the subject in Vault Number Five. Will you get it ready, please."

"I sure will. You want I should turn it over on its side?"

"That's right. The left side now."

"You want the left side down and the right side up. Is that how you want it?"

"That's how I want it, Eddie."

Eddie wobbled off.

This interchange intrigued Garvey in spite of his built-in aversion to Semple's bureaucratic ways. "What have we got here anyway?"

"We've got here a dead man."

"I kind of assumed that. What's so special about him? And what's all this business about rolling him over?"

"It'll open your eyes, Garvey.

Come along." The old man laid the pipe in a big amber-tinted ash tray and got to his feet. "Smoking's not permitted anywhere outside this office and I try to set a good example."

"Gets the cadavers coughing, does it?"

The old man, perhaps deafer than he liked to admit, made no comment. Tall, spare, spine curved forward, he headed into the corridor.

The so-called Cold Room was no colder than most other parts of the building. The real refrigeration was confined to a bank of six vaults at the far end. Eddie had already slid out the Number Five drawer and was in the act of flipping down one of the sides in order to get at the contents.

"How many on file today?" Garvey asked for lack of something better to say.

"Just this one," Semple said.

"Anyone we know?"

"A wino. One of your traffic patrols found him last night in a doorway on Water Street. Name's Maurice McGrotty."

"Saucy Maurice. Poor devil. So he's tilted his last bottle."

"Filthy cuss when they brought him in. Of course we strip them to the pelt and wash them right down as soon as they're ours."

"What kind of detergent do you use?" Garvey asked facetiously.

Still no comment. The old boy was probably stone-deaf.

"When we got a body spick-and-span," Semple continued, a man wholly absorbed by the technical aspects of his work, "we slide it inside a clean canvas sack, zip it up and place the package on ice. There it stays, trim and tidy, until somebody with a legal right comes to claim it. If nobody claims it at the end of thirty days after receipt, we notify the burial detail at Welfare to come and collect. Yes, sir, Garvey, that's the way we run things here—clean, tight and right."

"I'll say this, Semple, we've never heard a complaint."

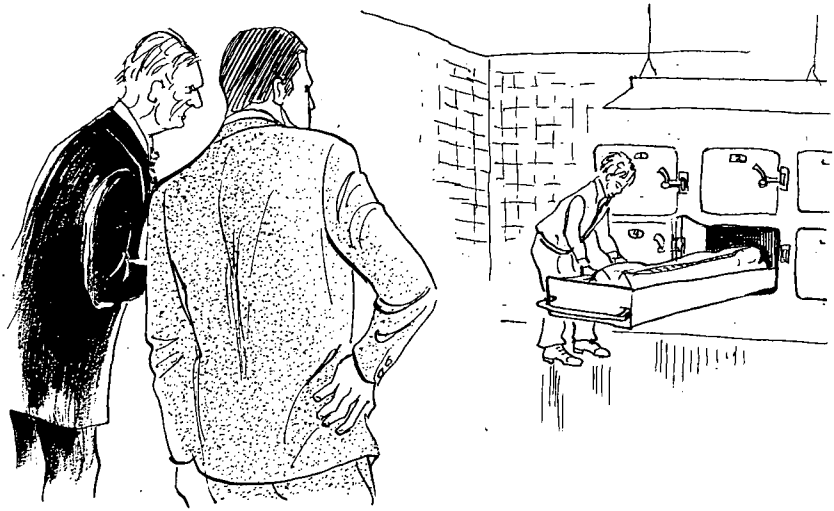
"Now this package in Number Five—this McGrotty—is a case we don't run across very often. I guess it's safe to say we've never run across it before. Not while I been around anyway, and I been around—"

"All right, let's get to the point."

"—thirty-nine years, come the first of November. That's a long time in any man's book, Garvey. Thirty-nine years. Well, to get to the point, after Eddie had hosed this package down—"

"That's how you clean them—with a hose?"

"What did you say, Garvey?"



Semple cupped a grayish ear with a bony hand.

"A *hose*," Garvey said, raising his voice. "So you use a *hose* to wash down the bodies."

"Only to rinse off the suds. We use a sponge and a bucket of warm soapy water for the washing. With disinfectant in it."

"All right, all right."

"Well, this morning when Eddie finished rinsing off McGrotty, I came out here to make my usual inspection. That's my practice. A corpse must be spotless before I give the order to package it. Spotless. I practically go over it inch by inch. A good thing too, considering what I found on McGrotty. You got any idea what I found, Garvey?"

"Not a one."

"Show this detective what I found, Eddie."

"If you'll step a little closer, sir."

Not liking any of this, Garvey moved closer. The canvas sack had been zipped wide open and its waxen contents turned on its left side. Garvey glanced at the ragged fringe of gray hair at the back of the bald head. Then, reluctantly, he allowed his eyes to travel downward from the cold-looking shoulders. McGrotty was probably cleaner than he'd been in many years.

"See it?" Semple asked. "There, at the back of the right knee. What the medical examiner is always calling the medial condyle area. See it now?"

Garvey saw it. Stamped in

green ink between two flaccid tendons was the block-letter admonition DO NOT BEND.

"Well?" Semple's voice was both accusatory and demanding.

Garvey looked at the old man. "You mean that's it? You called me all the way over here to show me that?"

"That's right."

"I'll be damned."

"Don't you think it's kind of peculiar?"

"About as peculiar as a wart. Why in hell didn't you just wash it off and forget it?"

"Indelible ink," Semple said, underlining the phrase with a click of his false teeth.

"So what?"

"The only way to remove that ink is to sand it off. Abrade the skin. That ain't our province, Garvey—blemishing a body any more than it's blemished when it gets here. Am I right, Eddie?"

Eddie nodded obediently.

"I don't think McGrotty would mind," Garvey said.

"You seem to be missing the point, Garvey," Semple said. "There's something very peculiar about a *Do not bend* thing stamped behind a dead man's knee. I think it means something. A clue to something else. It ought to be looked into. That's why I called Laidlaw."

"Listen, Semple. McGrotty was a confirmed alcoholic. He hardly knew what he was doing most of the time. The only reality he recognized was a jug of muscatel. To get a jug he sometimes resorted to petty pilferage. Very likely he lifted a rubber-stamp set in the five-and-dime, thinking he could swap it for a few swallows from another juicehead's jug. That's the way these derelicts operate."

"So you think he stamped himself?"

"It's possible. Or one of his wino pals might have stamped him for chuckles."

"This is what you call police work," Semple said.

Garvey gave the old man a hard look. "Call us when you really need us, Semple. Goodbye."

One morning a few weeks later Laidlaw clapped his phone back in its cradle and turned smilingly to Garvey. "That was Semple on the horn. He says he's got another green-stamp case on his hands."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. This time I think I'll go along for the ride."

"Another juicehead?"

"He didn't say. He *wouldn't* say. The old boy plays his cards pretty close to the chest."

Miss Ivory announced their

presence. Knock-kneed Eddie ushered them along the green corridor. Semple, sitting behind his meerschaum pipe, greeted them with a narrow grin of triumph. "Well, it's happened again," he said. "And this time it's a case you're probably already investigating."

"Break it to us slowly, Semple," Laidlaw said.

"Eddie," Semple said, "slide out Number Two. Me and these doubting Thomases will be along in a minute."

"We're all agog," Laidlaw said, "so give out, *please*."

"The package this time is Gaetano Negrelli," Semple said from behind a curling cloud of pipe smoke.

Gutsy Negrelli, a numbers runner, had stopped running two nights ago. A milkman had discovered him at dawn sitting in the back seat of a stolen car with a bullet in his head. Both detectives displayed mild interest.

"Tell us a little more," Laidlaw said.

Semple nested the meerschaum in the large ash tray and got to his feet. "I'll do better than that. I'll show you."

Eddie was standing dutifully beside the open Number Two drawer from which rose a faint breath of mist. Inside, facedown, lay the naked remains of Negrelli. The right buttock bore in green ink the words PAST DUE.

"Interesting," Garvey said.

"Very," Laidlaw added. "I wonder why the medical examiner failed to mention this in his report."

"I'll tell you why," Semple said. "If a body's got a fatal hole in the head the M. E. ain't going to check much else. The city don't pay him enough. We've got bodies in here—one in particular comes to mind—which succumbed to an ice pick through the heart, but also suffered a broken leg that the M. E. never knew about. Am I right, Eddie?"

"That's the honest truth," Eddie said.

"So much for that," Laidlaw said.

"What do you mean, so much for that?" Semple's old wattles quivered indignantly.

"Keep cool, Semple," Laidlaw said. "We're already in the process of investigating Negrelli's murder, just as you assumed. That's routine police business. This, ah, rubber-stamp thing is something else altogether."

"The first time it happened," Semple said, "I thought it was kind of peculiar. But this time it's more than that. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know what to think," Laidlaw said, grinning.

"It's more than a coincidence. That's what I think. It ought to be looked into."

"We'll look into it," Laidlaw said.

Garvey was finishing lunch at the counter of the City Hall Diner when Laidlaw entered, countenance forlorn.

"It's Semple again," he said, dropping to a stool beside Garvey.

"A rerun of the stamp act?"

"Nothing else but. Only this time he got to the captain with it."

"Meaning?"

"We've got to look into it and write a report."

"Who's the stampee this time?"

"An O.D. A girl about twenty. They found her in a flop on East Main with the needle still in the vein."

"Any I.D.?"

"Yeah. The captain is better at twisting old Semple's arm than I am. Name's Stella Kossuth. No known relatives as yet."

"Where was this one stamped?"

"On the soles of both feet."

"And the message?"

"Fragile. Handle with care."

Nearly a month after relatives had come down from Buffalo to claim the girl's body, Detective Sergeant Laidlaw was still working intermittently on a report of the morgue matters for Captain Howard. In the top drawer of his desk were several penciled beginnings on numbered sheets of yellow ruled paper:

1) Since 4 September and up to the present date (18 Oct.) verified complaints have reached this department that three bodies (two male, one female) were delivered to the city morgue bearing . . .

2) As of this date, 26 Oct., A. S. Semple, Gen Supt. of the Municipal Vault & Laboratory, has notified this department on three separate occasions that cadavers delivered into his custody are marked with . . .

3) Under the date of 5 Nov., I hereby submit three instances which would indicate that person or persons unknown are running amok among candidates for the city morgue with a pad of indelible ink and a set of stamping devices reading DO NOT BEND, PAST DUE etc Oh dammit to hell . . .

Captain Howard called a small conference in his office at 8:15 a.m. It was the week before Christmas. The conferees were Laidlaw and Garvey.

"Guess what I heard on my

alarm-clock radio this morning?" Howard began grimly.

Laidlaw shrugged. Garvey looked blank.

"Well, it wasn't 'Jingle Bells,'" Howard said. "It was something fresh from the morgue, a story released by that senile jackass over there. What's his name?"

"Semple?" Laidlaw asked.

"Right. Semple. Simple-minded senile dodo. He's got another of those damn stiffs over there and he's making a public issue of it. On the radio with the seven-o'clock news. Probably on the tube at eight—I haven't looked. Be in the afternoon papers, bet on it. Laidlaw, weren't you supposed to have this whole damn business nailed down in an intraoffice memo weeks ago?"

"I'm still working on it, Captain."

"What's this latest development, sir?" Garvey moved into the strait breach.

"Another body with a rubber stamp on it. It ceases to be funny. This latest is a college kid. He's hitching a ride home for the holidays. He's a hit-and-run victim out on Route 95. The ambulance takes him to the hospital. He dies. This was a couple days ago. Seems the hospital jerks can't locate his parents right away. They live in Chicago or some such place, so the body's sent to the morgue for safekeeping. And this feebleminded Semple finds the chest stamped with something like Void After Ten Days and calls a press conference. Fills in the background with the previous stiffs and their markings and says there's something criminal going on but the police prefer to ignore it."

"Between you and me, Captain," Laidlaw said, "I doubt it's a crime—or much of a one—to stamp somebody's skin with a rubber stamp."

"That's how much you know about it, Laidlaw. If the person who gets stamped does not want to be stamped, then it's a case of criminal assault."

"But what if it happens when the person's dead?" Garvey asked.

"The lawyers—the prosecutor and his staff—they got an answer for that too. Tampering with state's evidence. All these stiffs could be mute evidence in a future criminal trial."

"I suppose so," Laidlaw said.

"You better believe it," Howard said. "The chief got me at home this morning, right in the middle of breakfast, and he chewed me out for a fare-thee-well."

Laidlaw said, "Frankly, Captain, I find it just about impossible to find a connection among the

four bodies that have turned up with these things stamped on them."

"You better find a connection," Howard said. "I want you to assign a detective full-time to the morgue. And if another rubber-stamped body shows, that detective better have an explanation. I won't let Semple make us the laughingstock of the media. Understand?"

Outside the captain's office Laidlaw winked at Garvey. "You heard what the man said."

"You mean me?"

"Who else?"

Head aching with unuttered profanity, Garvey entered the cold lobby of the morgue and caught Miss Ivory hurriedly capping a pint bottle and returning it to her desk.

"Good morning, Detective Garvey," she said. "I'm afraid there's nobody here."

"Not even anybody on ice?"

"Well, we do have young Mr. Donohue. But that's all."

"Is he the one who's marked Void?"

"Void after ten days. Yes. Isn't that simply terrible?"

"Where's your boss?"

"Oh, he's come down with a terrible cold. Head all stuffed up. The poor man could hardly breathe. Eddie drove him home an hour ago."

"Sorry to hear that. Who else works here?"

"Mr. Novanski."

"I don't think I've seen him around."

"That's probable. He's our night watchman."

The outer door opened and a gray-uniformed deliveryman entered. In one hand he carried a clipboard, in the other a package. "Morning, Miss Ivory," he said. "Something from Carson's."

"Our new letterheads."

"If you'll sign here."

Miss Ivory signed the invoice on the clipboard.

"And here's your copy," the deliveryman said, detaching a duplicate. "Merry Christmas, in case I don't see you again."

"Same to you."

As the door closed behind the deliveryman Miss Ivory took from a desk drawer an ink pad and a wood-handled rubber stamp. Adjusting the dating band, she pressed the rubber dies onto the pad and then sharply stamped the invoice.

Garvey approached the desk for a closer look. The squared impression read *Received 19 Dec 73.* The ink was green. So was the door at Miss Ivory's back. So was the corridor behind the door. So was the

skylight above. The same green.

"Where does Mr. Semple live?" Garvey asked.

"Nineteen College Street," Miss Ivory replied.

"Thanks."

The house was a well-kept wooden structure in a neighborhood of brick. It was painted green.

Garvey rang the front doorbell. In half a minute Eddie opened up. His pale face was stricken.

"Uncle Amos is dead," he said.

"Uncle Amos?"

"Mr. Semple."

"Dead? What do you mean, *dead*? Miss Ivory said he had a bad cold and that's all."

"He had a bad heart too, sir. He could hardly breathe with the cold. I guess it was too much for him. I put him on his bed. He seemed all right for a while. Then a few minutes ago he sort of gasped a couple of times and died."

Garvey followed Eddie's shambling gait to a bedroom. Fully dressed, Semple lay outstretched atop the bedspread, open eyes fixed on the green ceiling. In the center of his forehead was a circular marking in green ink which read *Filed 19 Dec 73.*

Garvey looked at Eddie. Eddie nervously ran a finger along the inside of his shirt collar. The finger bore a smear of green ink.

"Why did you stamp him?" Garvey asked.

"He made me promise to do it."

"Did you stamp all the others, Eddie?"

"Oh no, sir, no sirree."

"Who did, then?"

"Uncle Amos, I think. All but the first one."

"McGrotty?"

"Yes. McGrotty was already stamped when we received him. It was something a little different. It kind of broke up the routine. Uncle Amos wanted to make it into something interesting. But when you came down and kind of laughed it off, I think he got the idea of really stirring things up."

"I guess he made his point all right," Garvey said. "The hard way. Where's the phone?"

There is something to be said for declaring oneself's mission in life.

Frank Sylvester was a thick, grizzled slab of a man, scarred from years of hard-muscled living. He drank himself into a stupor whenever possible, cursed with a limited but admirably abused vocabulary, and fought and loved with the same indiscriminate ferocity. He had a brutal past and not much of a future, and seemed proud of the fact.

Eric Haig couldn't have cared less. He had his own past, and judged a man by how strong he was at present. He trusted no one, no matter how honorably appearing, and was bigger and perhaps meaner than the black-haired man. What appealed to him was that Sylvester was welcome relief to his loneliness. If he'd known how dismal winters halfway up the Sierras could be, he'd never have leased the ramshackle two-pump service station and garage three months before. Then the mountainous, forested countryside had been teeming with campers, hunters, and fishermen, keeping him busier than he really wanted to be. Now there were only a few skiers, pausing on their way to higher elevations, to occupy him—they, and the town of Turret seven miles south, a bulge in the road consisting of a grocery store, bait shop, another service station,

and the DewDrop Inn. By this time, he'd had all he could stomach of the DewDrop, so mostly he stayed in his apartment above the station, watching very poor television.

Sylvester had arrived in a decade-old Ford during a snow flurry, limping in on three bald tires and one which was half flat. He wasn't going anywhere in particular, and wasn't even going there until he got another tire, for which he was willing to work. Haig replied that there wasn't enough business to keep himself going until spring, when he could sorely use an extra hand. They reached an understanding of sorts over a bottle of cheap bourbon, and Sylvester moved into the stock room behind the narrow office.

The arrangement fared better than Haig had a right to expect. There were times when Sylvester would disappear for days at the DewDrop, or go off chasing a girl for another type of companionship; but on the whole he served well, knowing almost as much about cars as Haig, his cruel laughter and savage wit a good balance to Haig's sullen, cold manner. They had their differences and a few scuffles, but they also shared more than that first bottle together, and there were instances where there seemed to be a friendship of sorts between them.

Weeks passed. Bloodroot, dogwood, Indian pipe, and lupine began to sprout; oak, mountain ash, and hawthorn started to bud. The nearby streams swelled with melting runoff, and the vacant meadow across the road from the station waxed green, then turned brown beneath the trample of camping fishermen.

The day Ormand showed up, Haig was lounging in the office's swivel chair, chewing lazily on an unlit cigar. A relatively new station wagon stopped beside the pumps, dust-encrusted and so loaded with baggage that it sagged on its springs. Haig stepped from the office and approached the wagon from the back, absently noting the Washington State plates. The driver had got out and was flexing his shoulder muscles, a gaunt and scrawny figure dressed in wrinkled suit pants and an old blue Windbreaker over a still older red shirt. His face was

pinched and weary, but his eyes were like black granite marbles that moved darkly and deliberately over Haig.

Haig paused by the gas-tank flap on the rear fender. "What'll it be?"

"My name is Ormand," the man said. "Percy Ormand."

Haig didn't find much in that to answer, and moved the cigar to the other side of his mouth.

After a brief moment, Ormand asked: "Is this your station?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm not buying anything, though."

"I'm not a salesman. You run it all by yourself?"

"No jobs open either."

"Not looking for work."

Haig began to feel nervous and slightly angered. He didn't like the man's questions, or the way he just stood there beside the open car door. He started wondering if Ormand was one of those nuts who'd suddenly pull a gun and try robbing him, and his own old revolver was back in the office. "Frank!" he called over his shoulder. "Come here, will you?"

Sylvester walked from the garage, wiping his greasy hands on a mechanic's rag. "Yeah? What is it?"

"I'm not sure."

Sylvester stopped a few paces behind Haig and frowned, seeming to catch the faint tenseness to the air. He looked at the man, and the man stared back with his brooding intensity. "Somebody trying to give you trouble, Eric?"

"Not yet."

The man said to Sylvester, "I'm Percy Ormand."

"So?"

"Listen," Haig said, "you want some gas or what?"

"My car's fine."

"Then use it."

Ormand didn't move, except to glance about. "I like it here."

Sylvester clenched his teeth. "Not here, you don't."

"Looks like some good land right across the road from you. I think maybe I'll camp over there awhile and keep close by."

"Just so's you clear off my place," Haig said sharply.

Haig had no idea why Ormand thought his name so important, or why he seemed intent on staying near the station, but as long as Ormand posed no crazy threat, he wasn't interested in finding out. The man was a momentary annoyance on a nice spring day; he meant nothing to Haig one way or another. Yet Haig could sense that already Sylvester was thoroughly antagonized, seeing the pursed lines and leaden glare to his eyes, and the way his calloused fingers kneaded the rag slowly and

methodically. Tired of Ormand and half afraid Sylvester would be the one to start something foolish, Haig turned to walk away, then turned back again to add: "Only you better keep out of both our ways, mister."

"Yes," Ormand said casually, as if to ignore Haig's threat, "I think I might stick around for quite some time."

"Suit yourself," Haig snapped disgustedly, and motioned to Sylvester. Together they went back into the dim garage, leaving the odd little man standing alone beside his car . . .

Ormand stayed. Frequently he could be seen driving back and forth from Turret with supplies, or walking through the buckeye, sugar pine and creeping sage which grew in a crescent behind the station. He made his camp directly across from and in plain view of the pumps, shunning the many fishermen grouped at the far end of the broad meadow where it banked Elkhorn Creek. There in his camp he could be seen most often, sitting on a three-legged stool in front of his small tent, or leaning against the rotted fence which ran alongside the road shoulder, or hunched over a camp stove, cooking something he'd bought. In sight or not, Ormand's presence could still be felt; it was an intangible thing that irritated Haig and gave Sylvester the creeps.

Haig refused to do anything about Ormand. There wasn't much he could do, other than to go over and shoot him, and it would only have added to the frustration to chase him away, only to have him return. Besides, Ormand didn't provoke him all that much, and he figured that if ignored, the man would tire of whatever game he was playing and leave of his own accord.

Ormand, however, proved persistent. He seemed to thrive on watching them from his camp, or tramping noisily through the brush out back of the station, or suddenly and unexpectedly appearing in their midst, his features grim and purposeful. He gradually began to spend less time bothering Haig, which pleased Haig, and concentrated more on Sylvester, which appealed to Haig's perverse sense of humor. There was a kind of black mirth to Sylvester's building exasperation, and in the way Ormand would stand just far enough away so Sylvester couldn't reach him, his eyes ranging over Sylvester as though measuring the seething reaction.

It drove Sylvester nearly out of his mind. He grew increasingly restless, his actions quick and ner-

vous as he worked, his laughter grimmer and his rages louder and more profane. He drank more, both at the station and down at the DewDrop, and sleep became a sometime thing. He would roll and swear between his blankets, searching for a comfortable position he could never seem to find. All of it was Ormand's fault.

"He's got to go!" Sylvester would rant, and Haig would say: "I don't own the field where he's camping. Nothing I can do about it." Sylvester would rave, "I can't stand it any longer!" Haig, still vaguely irked by Ormand's presence, nonetheless remained amused by Sylvester being frazzled by a man half his size, and would reply: "Talk to him, not to me."

"He's up to something! I know he is!" Sylvester would say, but when he couldn't answer what, he'd petulantly fume, "He'll get his. He'll get his . . ."

One morning Ormand did get his. Haig was upstairs in his apartment at the time, washing the sleep out of his eyes, and Sylvester was where he'd left him, snoring off a drink too many on the cot in the stock room. The pink early dawn was filtering through the trees beside the station, throwing shadows across the road like black, bushy-helmeted soldiers. It was all very peaceful, until suddenly there rose from the rooms below a terrible crash, followed by frightful bellowing and the splintering of wood. Haig ran out without bothering to dry his face, down the outside stairs and around to the office. He shouldered open the door, sending it wide.

"What the hell . . . ?"

Sylvester was in his shirt and work pants, the way he'd sacked out the night before—but the shirt was half unbuttoned, the open ends flapping as he knelt in the doorway of the stock room and rhythmically beat Ormand's head against the linoleum floor. His face was congealed with the anger and frustration which had been rising toward the man whose skinny neck he clutched in his massive hands.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

Ormand hawked and gasped, writhing vainly in Sylvester's impossible grip. His slender hands and legs floundered, his face turning a waxy magenta, but his eyes stared fixedly up at his tormentor with implacable hatred.

Haig rushed forward and caught Sylvester by the hair. He yanked him upright and back into the office, the abrupt attack startling Sylvester into releasing Ormand. "Stop it!" he snapped.

"Hell I will! Woke up to find him trying to snatch the shirt right off my back! I'll kill the runt for this!"

"You're not killing anybody in my place!"

Ormand was on his haunches now, massaging his throat with thin fingers. "The mark," he said in a hoarse whisper, and for the first and only time, Haig saw him smile. It was a bleak, vengeful smile, matching his depthless eyes. "He's got the mark."

"I'll mark you, you—!" Sylvester lurched forward, but Haig swerved into him, toppling him off balance.

"No *more*, Frank, you hear me?"

"But that son of a—"

"Ormand!" Haig said, swinging around. "What's this about a mark?"

Ormand was no longer in the office. Only the slight movement of dust outside the door told of the direction he'd taken.

"Now look what you've done!" Sylvester was yelling behind him as he got up. "You let that lousy thief get away!"

Haig stared out at the gathering sunshine and wondered just how much of a thief Ormand had been. The man had picked a time when he'd have to have known Sylvester was nearby, instead of waiting for the middle of the night or when both of them were busy elsewhere. If he'd been after money, he'd have logically headed for the office cash drawer, and avoided Sylvester in the stock room. Further, he hadn't been carrying any kind of weapon.

Haig turned to Sylvester then, and watched him rebutton his shirt over his thick chest. He happened to catch sight of a puckered scar, like a round indentation, below the right collarbone, one of the many scars he knew Sylvester carried. Ormand's words about a mark were recalled, and Haig dug a cigar out of his breast pocket and thoughtfully bit it with his teeth.

"Forget Ormand," he said quietly after a moment. "We've got plenty to clean up."

Sylvester did not forget. Later that same day he came to Haig, who was cleaning a carburetor in the garage. "Your friend is gone," he said sourly.

Haig put down the carb. "Not surprising."

"He pulled camp and everything. No sign of his car."

"He won't be back."

Sylvester cursed, spat, and drank for the rest of the day, pacing around like a caged wildcat. He continually complained about Ormand's escape, blaming Haig

and calling him a coward. Haig let him, figuring he was working up to something. Along about dusk, Sylvester drove his battered Ford up to the pumps and began filling the tank with gas.

"You're not going to try and find him, are you?" Haig asked.

"What's it to you? Maybe I am, and maybe I just have to get out of this chicken outfit for a while."

"Sure."

"He might not come back, but I am."

Ormand never returned. Sylvester did, in a way.

Trade picked up, keeping Haig busy for the next few days, and not enough time had passed for him to worry about Sylvester when the police arrived. There were two of them in a county sheriff's cruiser, and they looked weirdly alien to the pastoral scene when they strode across the gravel apron in their stiff uniforms, brass, and Sam Browne belts. Haig was in his office making change, and after his customer had gone, the larger of the officers introduced himself as Deputy Kingsley, and said he was looking for one Eric Haig.

"I'm Haig. Why?"

"Do you know a Frank Sylvester?"

"Yes. He's not here right now, though."

"Uh-huh." Deputy Kingsley unsnapped his jacket pocket and took out a cellophane envelope. From the envelope he slid a photograph, which he handed to Haig. "This him?"

"Oh!" Haig said, and dropped the photo to the desk. It was a simple close-up of a man's face, but the face was an ivory grimace, a pale mask of suffering and death. "Yes, that's Frank, but how . . . ?"

"Shotgun, Mr. Haig. Both barrels, almost cut him in two."

"Poor Frank." Haig shut his eyes, shivering, then opened them again, his fingers pressed against the wood of the desk. "But you don't think . . . I mean, that I . . . ?"

"No, Mr. Haig, we have the killer. This is just routine, as unpleasant as it may be. The coroner always takes a picture for the records, but we must ask you to come to the morgue at the county hospital now, for official identification. We've not been able to locate any of his relatives, and you seem to be his only friend. Oddly enough, it was the killer who told us about you."

"Sure, sure I'll go," Haig said, still in a daze. "The . . . killer told you?"

"Man by the name of Percival Ormand. He wasn't very smart

about it, shooting Sylvester in the parking lot of the DewDrop Inn, then attempting to escape in a car a dozen witnesses saw. It's almost as if he didn't care whether he were caught or not, and in a way I can see his point. Seems he was living in Seattle until two years ago, when his wife and only child were hit by a car running an intersection. He saw the whole thing from the curb, and so did a bank guard, who shot at the driver when the car crashed and the man fled on foot. Ormand says it was raining hard and it happened too fast for anybody to get a really decent look at the man, but he saw him stagger and clutch his right shoulder, so Ormand is certain the bank guard wounded him. The car turned out to be stolen; the man got away in the poor visibility and confusion and was never arrested."

"But Ormand decided to track down the driver himself," Haig said dully. "Is that it?"

"He wanted revenge. His daughter was killed outright; his wife is institutionalized, fully paralyzed and mindless, not able to recognize him. Ormand told us he's been following the man's trail ever since, tracing every rumor, dogging every clue, unsure of name or description but positive he could identify him by that gunshot wound."

"The mark," Haig said softly, understanding now why Ormand had been bending over Sylvester that morning, undoing his shirt.

"Took determination, but he finally caught up with him here, not that it'll be doing Ormand much good. First-degree murder, premeditated, and the best he can hope for is to plead temporary insanity."

"Officer," Haig said, his voice thick, "Frank had a gunshot wound, all right. But he got it while fighting in Korea."

"Just a story he wanted you to swallow, no doubt. His reputation's bad everywhere west of Chicago, with a record that took a yard of teletype to print out." Deputy Kingsley tapped his forefinger on the photo for emphasis. "Sylvester got what he deserved."

Haig took another glance at the portrait of his friend, then with both hands he ripped open his gray cotton shirt. He bared his chest, and the small rosebud wound high on his right pectoral muscle.

"Did he?" Haig asked.

When one is immersed in creating, his perception may become faulty.

The Obsessed

by Dan Morgan

"I do appreciate what you're trying to do," Beaufort said, "but I'm afraid you're wasting your time. She's gone, you see."

He was a bigger man than I had expected from the photographs, and his hair was a lot grayer—almost white. His face was tanned to a deep, reddish-brown, but despite the superficial appearance of health it seemed to me that there was something bloated and ghoulish about his features. I wondered if he were perhaps a heavy drinker.

"If that's the case, why didn't you report her missing?" I asked.

He gave me a sort of pitying smile. "You don't understand at all, do you? Her disappearance wasn't something that happened abruptly. It was a gradual process taking some time."

He didn't look like a nut case, and he was hardly in the kind of situation where one makes jokes. "I think you'd better tell me the whole story from the beginning," I said.

"Of course, but I'm afraid you won't believe it."

"Try me," I said, fiddling with the controls of the portable recorder and remembering uneasily that I hadn't replaced the batteries last Friday as I had intended. "I take it you have no objection to my taping your statement?"

"Help yourself," he said, smiling. "I'm pleased to see that your people have got around to using

modern methods at last. All that tedious copying in longhand must have been sheer misery."

He motioned me to a chair and settled down opposite me, with his back to the long window that looked out over the bay. The gull's-eye view from this house perched alone on the cliffs was nice at this time of the year—for someone who didn't mind having to drive five winding miles down into Pendraf for groceries. It was pretty bleak in winter when the rain-bearing westerlies roared in for weeks at a time, but I didn't suppose his plans had included being there then. By late September his kind usually headed south for Spain or Portugal, where they'd sit out the winter drinking cheap liquor and telling each other how the old country was going to the dogs.

I switched on the recorder and gave him the formal caution in my best Mr. Plod-the-Policeman manner, then I handed him the preliminary statement card.

He peered at it. "I'm sorry, just a moment . . ." He reached out and took his glasses from a small, dark-oak coffee table, its surface thick with undisturbed dust. There was a photograph of his wife standing in a gold frame on the table. I had seen her only once, perhaps a month or six weeks previously, but it seemed to me that the black and white of the portrait hardly did her justice.

That day, when I saw her step out of the big cream-colored car in the marketplace, she stood out amongst the local women like some exotic tropical bird in a flock of barnyard chickens. She had long, reddish-blonde hair, green eyes and a creamy pale complexion. She was wearing a turquoise silk trouser suit. She looked beautiful and expensive, the kind of bauble that just didn't belong in the life of a detective-sergeant with a wife and two kids. We Welsh are great romantics, however, and for just a brief moment, when those green eyes met mine, it was enough to send my stupid mind soaring off in a dreaming bubble that didn't burst until I arrived home late that evening and Blodwen contemptuously rejected my plea of late duty when she smelled the whisky on my breath. It was an ethereal quality about her somehow—no, not Blodwen—not at a hundred and fifty pounds! Beaufort's wife was so slim and fragile-looking that you felt she might break in your hands if she were touched too roughly. I didn't touch her. It was just a meeting of the eyes, and I don't suppose she even noticed me, really.

". . . Gerald Beaufort, writer, of Cliff House, Pendraf, hereby acknowledge that I make this statement of my own free will, and that this recording may be used as evidence in any criminal proceedings that may be brought against me with regard to the subject under investigation . . ."

The sound of his voice jerked me out of my reverie and I checked the recording level hurriedly.

"The subject under investigation?" he repeated, looking at me inquiringly.

"The . . . disappearance of your wife, Marie Ann Beaufort," I supplied. That was not going to sound good in court, I decided uncomfortably. I should have explained it to him before switching on the recorder. If I had pressed the Stop button it might still have been possible to avoid the awkward interpolation, but that was strictly out. Once the tape was rolling for a statement of this nature it had to go on until the end. The slightest crackle and the whole thing became useless, because the defence could suggest that the tape had been edited.

Beaufort nodded. "The disappearance of my wife, Marie Ann Beaufort," he repeated, then added, "whom I loved very much . . ." His voice trailed away, and he sat, his gray eyes misted over in silence.

I thought for a moment that he was going to dry up, but he carried on after only a brief pause.

"The first time I noticed anything unusual was one evening about a month after we came here. It was about six o'clock when I put the cover on my typewriter and left the study to find Marie Ann. When I came down the stairs I saw her at this window. It was close to sunset on an almost cloudless evening, and the sea glittered like burnished gold. There was an unbelievable amount of golden light in the air, so that at first I thought that the effect must be some illusion created by my suddenly dazzled eyes. She was standing with her back toward me, looking out over the sea. Normally, I suppose she would have appeared as a dark silhouette, but she wasn't. Instead, she was nothing more than a vague, diaphanous outline, and the sun appeared to be shining right through her. I don't know much about ghosts—in fact I don't think I really believe in them—but if there are such things and they could appear in bright sunlight, I suppose one would look like Marie Ann did at that moment.

"I stood for a few seconds looking at her, blinking in the bright-

ness, then I called her name. The effect was astonishing. I don't know whether you've ever seen one of those reversed film shots of an imploding TV tube, in which all the glittering fragments flow together, coalescing back into solid form. That's the way it was with her, so that by the time she had turned and moved a couple of steps toward me she appeared to be perfectly normal; Marie Ann, beautiful as ever, in a pair of emerald-green slacks and a gold lamé tunic. As I took her in my arms and kissed her I decided that the tunic had probably been responsible for the entire illusion, and I thrust the matter to the back of my mind. I was wrong, of course, but I didn't realize that until later.

"Perhaps it would help if I explained how we came to be here in Pendraf in the first place. Marie Ann is . . . was my third wife. The other two marriages both ended in divorce. I think some women like the idea of being married to a writer—it has a kind of romantic sound perhaps. The crunch comes when they begin to realize that because of your work you spend at least half of your life in a world where they just can't follow. Most women can't take that kind of competition.

"When I met Marie Ann I was in between books and drifting from one casual affair to another. There is no time for such distractions when I'm actually working; then I have to be alone as much as possible. I'm far from being a hermit by nature, but that's the way it has to be if I'm to get anything done. On the other hand, when I'm not involved in a book there's nothing I enjoy more than mixing with stimulating people. Apart from anything else, I think it helps recharge the mental batteries for the next writing stint. I was in one of these recharging periods, living temporarily in London, when I met her. She was, as you probably know, a well-known model . . ."

I hadn't known, but it fitted in with the face, the figure and the carriage. Beaufort must have been thirty years older than Marie Ann, at least . . .

"And naturally she led quite a hectic social life. I'd just sold the film rights to my latest novel, and there wasn't much point in working for the next year or so, because most of what I earned would automatically go to the Inland Revenue anyway, so I was able to join in and enjoy life with her—her kind of life. You know the sort of thing—dinner parties,

receptions, premieres, all that . . ."

Like hell I knew that sort of thing! Perhaps once a week Blodwen's sister Jean would come in and baby-sit for us while we went out to the cinema, or along to the Royal Oak for a couple of beers. That was the kind of hectic social life we led in Pendraf.

"We had a couple of weeks in Bermuda for our honeymoon, and then we came back to London and settled down in a house in Bayswater, overlooking the park. Socially we picked up where we had left off, but we were soon even more involved than before because now we were able to entertain on a fairly large scale, and Marie Ann just loved playing hostess. I had no objection. It was wonderful to see her so happy and beautiful, and apart from that I was having a lot of fun myself, because our house had become a meeting place for some of the most interesting and amusing people in London.

"I was very content with that life for about six months . . . until I woke up one morning with the *feeling*. 'What feeling?' you're going to ask me, and that's not something easily explained. In the early years of becoming a writer the thing that really counts is self-discipline, cultivating the habit of sticking at it and getting the stuff down on paper. There has to be a certain natural talent in the first place, of course, but that's no use without a special kind of applied stubbornness, and a conviction that writing is the most important thing there is, your reason for living. The trouble is that what starts out as a technique of self-discipline becomes a sort of reflex, an obsession even, as the years draw on.

"I've already explained that I wasn't short of cash. From a financial point of view I could well have afforded to loaf around and enjoy myself for another eighteen months at least before starting work again, but that was impossible when the feeling arrived with all its intimations of guilt. There could be no question of enjoying myself again until I had worked it off by writing the book that was kicking at the inside of my skull trying to get out. So I gave in, and started to try and do just that . . . and found it was impossible.

"As I told you, our house had become a kind of social centre. People would drop in at all hours of the day or night, and expect to be entertained. Normally we enjoyed it—particularly Marie Ann. The more people around the better she liked it, and she seemed to blossom like a flower in a party

atmosphere. I've heard all those stories about writers who work on the kitchen table with half a dozen kids running around and the radio going. Perhaps some people really can work like that, but for me it comes the hard way; shut up alone in a room with the typewriter, quiet, undisturbed—or it doesn't come at all. And when it doesn't come, I'm not fit to live with myself or anyone else. Marie Ann did her best to keep people away from me during working hours, but the telephone kept ringing and there was always somebody calling. People will never believe that a writer actually works, you know, so they have no conscience about popping in to see him at any time. And even if they hadn't come to see *me*, I always seemed to be aware when there was someone else in the house and wondering what was going on."

I'll bet, I thought, *with a wife as attractive as that.*

"I kept trying, but at the end of two weeks I had nothing to show for my efforts but a wastebasket full of abortive tries at Page One, Chapter One. Instead of sleeping at nights I just lay there with my mind going like a millrace, churning over ideas that just wouldn't resolve themselves into words. I realized that if I didn't do something soon to break out of the mental deadlock, I was headed for a complete nervous collapse, so I decided that the only thing would be to go off somewhere on my own for a month or two and try to work the book out of my system. I told Marie Ann about this idea, but she wouldn't hear of it. She knew from our previous conversations about my work that once I became really involved in a novel it might occupy me for six months or longer, and she insisted that she couldn't bear the thought of being parted from me for so long. On the other hand, she fully understood the seriousness of the situation, and she made a counter-suggestion of her own. We should find a suitable place a long way from London, and go there without telling anybody our address for as long as was needed to complete the book.

"I knew that it would be a tremendous sacrifice for her to make, to leave London and all her friends, cutting herself off completely from the life she loved, but she was so insistent and my situation so desperate that I had to accept. So we came here to Cliff House, which was ideal for our purpose, isolated but comfortably furnished and near enough to the town for Marie Ann to go in and do any neces-

sary shopping. But most important, no callers, or even passersby to distract me from my work because, as you know, the road ends here."

A big fly came droning into the room like a World War II bomber. One of those revolting, iridescent blue things you see crawling over rotting meat, it lumbered through the air and made a landing on the back of Beaufort's hand. I watched in fascinated disgust as it began to crawl slowly through the pampas of hair on his tanned forearm. He made no attempt to remove it. Incredibly he didn't even seem to notice its existence.

"Oh, it was wonderful!" he continued. "The peace and quiet, with absolutely nothing to interfere with my concentration. You have no idea what a relief it was to get down to work in earnest after all those weeks of vain struggling—and the uneasy, nagging feeling that the real truth of the matter may be that you're losing your grip. However successful you may be, there's always the fear that you might not be able to pull it off again. Each book is a way of proving yourself—a reassurance that you can still do it. And I *could.* In the first week I wrote and polished two complete chapters, and they were the best thing I had ever done. There's a feeling when something is going well, a kind of elation. It's almost like a drug; you don't want to stop, the days just aren't long enough, and every moment away from the typewriter seems a waste of time. Meals, sleep, the natural functions of the body are all things that you do automatically, your mind still preoccupied with the job in hand. It's a kind of creative trance, I suppose.

"Marie Ann was wonderful, she moved about the house so quietly that most of the time I wasn't even aware of her presence. She just faded into the background and did everything she could to make things easy for me. When I wanted food it was always there, magically ready, and if I didn't want it she never complained about an untouched plate. And I—well, I took what she was doing for granted, I suppose." He frowned, an expression of pain passing over his face like a dark shadow. The fly had settled down to preen itself in the crook of his arm, but even in such a sensitive spot he still failed to notice its presence.

"I didn't even pause to consider the kind of price she must be paying. For the first time in her life she was completely cut off from people—she came from a large

family, did I tell you that?—and now just she and I were alone in this isolated house. When I'm deep in the writing process I can hardly be classified as people—I'm more like some kind of automaton. Of course, there are short periods of exterior awareness even in that kind of concentration. Occasionally, in between chapters, I'll surface for a while and take a few bearings on what is happening around me. I did so that evening about a month after we came here. I remember I'd just finished chapter four . . ."

"That was the time when the sunlight appeared to be shining through her?" I asked.

He nodded. "It happened again about a week later. We'd just had dinner, and she went into the kitchen to prepare some coffee. I left the table and sat down in this chair. I suppose it was inevitable that, relaxed as I was by the effects of good food and wine, my mind started to drift toward the beckoning whirlpool of the next chapter. When I did return to awareness of my surroundings and the presence of Marie Ann, she was standing by the table pouring coffee.

"This time there was no mistaking the effect. There was no sunlight, just the glow from that lamp over there with the red shade. And she wasn't wearing the gold lamé tunic, but a plain black dress, with a jeweled gold brooch. The light was shining right through her, as if she were made of glass. Just for a moment . . . Then, as she picked up a cup and saucer and turned toward me, she moved back through translucency to apparent solidity again. She must have seen the shocked expression on my face, because she asked, 'Is there something wrong, darling?' What could I say? That twice she had seemed transparent to my eyes, and twice she had apparently become solid again as I watched? It didn't seem to make any kind of sense. If there were anything wrong, it seemed to me that it was with my mind, or my perceptions—certainly not with her. As if to reassure myself of that fact I stood up and pulled her close, feeling the warm reality of her body.

"I lay awake a long time that night, listening to the sound of her gentle breathing in the darkness, and trying to understand what had happened. Several times when she was unusually quiet I switched on the light again to reassure myself that she was still there. I was half-afraid to go to sleep, but I must have dropped off at last. When I woke up she was no longer in her bed, but the fears of the night dis-

sipated quickly when I smelled the breakfast bacon cooking. I ate a good meal, then went into my study and got to work. I was soon completely immersed again in the process of translating the world inside my head onto the typed page—so immersed that I didn't give a single thought to Marie Ann the whole day. If only I'd realized . . ." His voice trailed away.

"Realized *what*, Mr. Beaufort?" I asked, looking up from my anxious scrutiny of the tape. He was taking longer than I had expected, and I was becoming increasingly uneasy about those batteries.

He stirred irritably. "Good heavens, man! Haven't you been listening? Surely it's obvious!"

The movement was sufficient to dislodge the fly at last. After a preliminary hovering it droned off back from where it had come.

"Mr. Beaufort, I'm just a plain, ordinary policeman," I said. "All I can deal in are facts."

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "After all, *I* was involved, and I didn't realize what was happening until it was too late. I told you earlier about the way in which Marie Ann blossomed and seemed to become more alive when she was in the company of a lot of people. It was as if she drew some kind of energy from their presence, their awareness of her. To carry the flower analogy further, it was as if the attention of other human beings was like sunlight to her. I had taken her away from that source of energy, and to make matters worse, because of my preoccupation with my work, I was even ignoring her existence most of the time myself, cutting off her last tenuous hold on existence . . ." He lapsed into silence, his head hunched forward, brooding.

"But what *happened*, Mr. Beaufort?" I just had to get something positive down on the tape before the recorder gave out on me.

He shook his head brokenly. "It was nearly seven o'clock that evening when I came out of my study. I called her name, casually at first, then in growing alarm as I searched the house. It was over ten hours since I had last seen her at breakfast, ten hours during which she had not seen, or been seen by another human soul; ten hours since I had given the slightest thought to her existence. I blame myself, of course. If it hadn't been for my obsession with my work, my selfishness in bringing her here . . ."

I looked into his lined, brown face. He was obviously sincere about this idea of his wife fading away like one of J.M. Barrie's fair-

ies because no one else had taken sufficient notice of her existence. Fantastic? I suppose so, but don't we all depend on other people to some extent for continual reassurance about our own reality? And as a writer, well, I suppose he did have a peculiar way of looking at things.

"Is there anything else you'd like to add, sir?" I asked. "I think we're getting near to the end of the tape."

I don't think he even heard me. He was slumped in his chair, eyes clouded as he stared into the regrets of the past.

I leaned over the mike. "Mr. Beaufort's statement ends here," I said quietly, and switched off the recorder.

I hadn't noticed my assistant standing by the stairs. He must have realized what was going on and sensibly decided to wait until we were finished.

He came across to me and said, "Jelson wants to see you in the bedroom."

"Right." I went upstairs.

Dr. Jelson was bending over the bed, his tanned bald head glinting in the afternoon sunlight as if it had been French-polished.

"Asphyxia," he said. "Broken hyoid."

"How long?"

"A month, at least," he said. Then his eyes slid past mine.

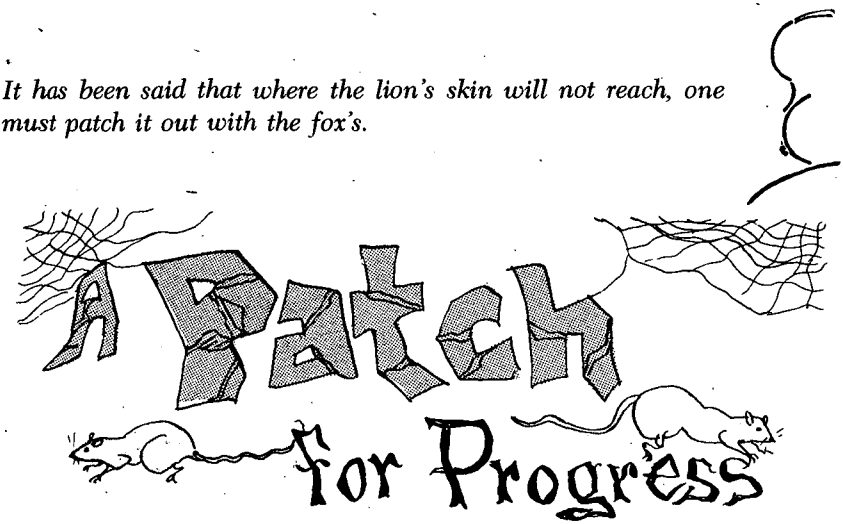
I heard a sound behind me and turned. Beaufort was standing in the bedroom doorway. I tensed. What now? Then I saw that he was smiling.

"I was thinking of making some tea," he said amiably. "Would you and your friends like a cup?"

"No . . . no thank you, sir," I said, choking down nausea. He wasn't acting. He didn't see the corrupt thing on the bed with its reddish-blonde hair . . . or smell it. Just as he hadn't seen it for a month or more, each night when he had got into the other twin bed and slept.

I wondered, had she really been the perfect wife he told me about? Or had she, as I suspected, been a four-wheeled terror, demanding his attention, screaming at him for bringing her to this isolated place, stopping him even here from carrying on with the work that so obsessed him? In the long run, perhaps it seemed to him that the only thing he could do was to rid himself of her, so that he could be alone at last to finish the book that was driving him mad in its struggles to be born. He would be alone now, poor devil, for maybe twenty years . . .

It has been said that where the lion's skin will not reach, one must patch it out with the fox's.



The tarnished numbers above the heavy brass door were right, but the house wasn't what he expected. Henry Garvick stared at the familiar building. That was the trouble, it was too familiar. It was as if he had taken a jet back in time instead of halfway around the world. It had been ten years since he'd seen the house. In ten years, everything *should* change, but the house had survived intact. It was the same brownstone, wedged between its mirror images on either side. Shuttered and drab, it smelled of decay.

Henry started up the worn steps. Behind him, Martha sniffed. She had not spoken since they emerged from the subway kiosk three blocks away but her silence said more than words. She'd begun protesting even before they descended the bowels of Manhattan for the long ride to Brooklyn.

Henry refused to take a cab. The subway was his penance for being gone so long; for being immune to the memory of the years spent in the house on Myrtle Avenue, and for managing to forget.

He pulled the lawyer's letter from his pocket and withdrew the key. His hand shook as he fitted it to the lock and turned the bolt.

by Marilyn Granbeck

The air inside was fetid. Martha coughed into her gloved hand.

Henry closed his mind to the memories that surged. He had to concentrate on *now*. He looked down at the Italian silk suit he wore, the expensive tie, the handcrafted leather shoes. Myrtle Avenue *was* the past. This brief visit would soon be over and he could go back to Rome.

In the light spilling through the open doorway, he glanced around. The sliding door to the livingroom stood open, and he could see the drab overstuffed furniture that Wilma had favored and the linoleum she'd selected for the floor because 'they couldn't afford carpet.' The colors were faded and blurred, like his memories of life here. Down the hall, a narrow passage led to the kitchen. To the right, a dark cubbyhole concealed the stairs to the cellar.

Martha sniffed and coughed again. "Really, Henry, can't we hurry? This place depresses me! I can't believe you actually *lived* here!" Her small, deep-set eyes flitted from the ugly chandelier to the threadbare carpeting on the stairs. "I don't see why we had to come at all," she said for the tenth time.

He knew that New York excited Martha. She liked the plush hotel where they were staying, the fine restaurant where they ate dinner last night, the Broadway opening. She'd loved New York until he had gotten to the purpose of their trip—the visit to the Brooklyn property he owned that was going to be wrecked for a new Thruway access. She'd only consented to come because she was already mentally spending the money the city would pay for it.

He turned. "You can wait outside if you want. I won't be long."

"On that filthy street?" She shivered into her mink jacket. "No, thank you, I'll stay here." She brushed at the sleeve of the blue designer's suit. "I simply can't believe you lived here. It's—it's too absurd."

In her eyes it would be. Since their wedding five years ago, Henry and Martha had lived in a villa in Rome. They had servants, cars, pleasures. The brownstone was ridiculous in comparison.

Henry flicked the light switch but nothing happened. He took a flashlight from his pocket and snapped it on. It sent a finger of light into the shadows. He peered up the stairwell.

"Suit yourself," he told her as he started up the steps.

In the bedrooms, an accumulation of dust and bedding, shredded by mice and rats, littered the floor. In the walls and

ceiling, he heard the furtive sounds of their scurrying. The empty closets yawned. Henry sighed, remembering how he'd packed Wilma's clothes and sent them to the Salvation Army. He'd taken his own things with him.

He'd gone to Boston for three months before going abroad. He needed the time to get over Wilma's death and pull himself together. Wilma had run their marriage and his affairs completely, and being alone so suddenly was a shock, something to which he had to get accustomed. He had to learn again to make his own decisions, tend his own problems and money. Not that money was a problem. The pennies Wilma had pinched for so many years had grown into a decent nest egg. He invested it, wisely, it turned out. By the time he met Martha five years later, he was financially sound, even well-to-do. Life took on new meaning, and Henry lived in a style that would have horrified Wilma's frugal soul.

Martha loved it. She believed life was meant for pleasure and she was ready to have fun at any time. He married her early one morning after an all-night party. The ceremony itself had become part of the merrymaking. They lived in a whirl of gaiety for a long time until very gradually another facet of Martha's personality began to emerge. He wasn't sure when he first realized that she had taken over so many of the decisions and responsibilities. Henry didn't subscribe to the theory that widowers tend to seek the same kind of woman they'd lost in their mates, but when he and Martha had been married several years, he had to admit the similarity between Wilma and Martha was striking. The only difference was that Martha never stinted where her own pleasure was concerned.

He brought his thoughts back to the present. Martha was calling from the foot of the stairs.

"Henry! What are you doing up there?"

He glanced around a last time. "I'm coming." His voice echoed in the musty silence.

Martha sighed impatiently as he came down the stairs. "Hurry. I want time for a nap before we leave for dinner and the opera." She dug in her handbag for a compact and examined her face in the mirror.

He walked past her into the livingroom. The front room, Wilma had always called it. *Keep your feet off the sofa, Henry! I like to have the front room looking nice.* The Morris chair was still near the window which had afforded a view of the street. Now, its gray

stuffing spilled through a split cushion and the upholstery was covered with dust. The window had a crack in the upper pane and a shaft of light came through a hole where the metal shutters had been pried apart. Someone had worked hard to make the dent, but even then they couldn't smash the window.

This house is solidly built, Henry. There's no sense moving out when the taxes are so reasonable and we're so well settled. Wilma had had her way. She'd always had her way.

"Henry, must you stand there so long? For heaven sake, do whatever it is you want to do and let's get out of here." Martha had ventured as far as the doorway.

He walked through the semi-darkness of the railroad rooms. In the second parlor, Wilma's old treadle sewing machine stood in the corner. A length of blue cloth gathered dust on the table. In the dining room beyond, the lace tablecloth hung tattered from the felt pad. "More rats," he muttered. He didn't realize Martha was behind him until he heard her stifled scream.

He smiled. "They won't hurt you. They hide because they're scared."

She drew the mink about her and folded her arms over her ample chest. "I'll wait in the hall. But be quick about it. I can't get out of here soon enough to suit me." She hurried back toward the open front door.

In the kitchen, Henry flicked the flashlight over the ancient refrigerator, the high-ovened gas range that had come from a bygone era, the chipped sink. He didn't bother to open the doors of the cupboards. The dime-store dishes would still be on the shelves where Wilma kept them. Somewhere in the basement, the set of Haviland they'd gotten as a wedding present was packed away because it had been 'too good to use for everyday.' The everydays had added up to twelve years of scrounging and scrimping until Henry had almost forgotten his love of nice things.

In the hall again, the full circle completed, Henry shook his head as Martha started out. "I haven't seen the cellar."

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened. "The cellar? Whatever for?" she demanded. "There isn't anything worthwhile in the entire house, let alone the cellar! Do come on now, Henry." She stepped over the threshold but stopped when he didn't follow. "Henry!" It was a command.

Henry turned to the cubbyhole near the cellar door. Even with

the flashlight, the steps were dark and treacherous. He went down slowly, holding the rail and testing each step before trusting his weight to it. He shone the light over the rubbish bags near the metal fire door that came out under the stoop. A fat gray body darted behind boxes that had been gnawed at the corners. Beady eyes glittered from the coal bin as the rat watched Henry.

He played the light over the monstrous furnace, remembering how Wilma had argued when the repairman said there was no hope for the old coal burner and the furnace had to be converted to oil. Progress was something Wilma neither approved nor desired.

At the rear of the cellar another door was barred against the minuscule back yard. To the side of it was the storage room that Wilma had called the 'fruit room.' He lifted the hasp and pulled the door open. A heavy mustiness filled his nostrils. He'd sent most of the food to the Salvation Army along with Wilma's things, but there were a few jars of home preserves on the shelves, too discolored even to hint at the contents.

Henry aimed the light at the floor. The thick layer of dust was undisturbed. He bent and inspected it to see if he could find any trace of the patch he'd made in the cement ten years ago. He brushed at a spot where the seam should be. Even bending down to it with the light, he could barely make it out. He rose and put his foot over the fingerprints to blot them out. Then he walked around the small room to make the tracks seem random. He didn't bother to close the door when he left. With the wreckers due next week, there was no point to it.

Much as he hated to admit it, Martha was right. There wasn't any reason to come back. He could have written the lawyer and accepted the city's offer, let the house be razed, but he'd wanted to see if anything had changed.

On the surface, nothing had. The house was the same except for the dust and the rats, and under the patch of cement in the fruit room, Henry knew that Wilma's flesh and bones had decomposed in the lye with which he'd covered her so liberally. Ten years was long enough to erase any trace of her. Even if some bones remained, the bulldozer would grind them to unrecognizable dust along with the cement and glass.

It had been a long time since he'd thought about the night he shoved Wilma down the steep cel-

lar steps. He wasn't even sure anymore what she'd said or done that made him do it. Like the straw that broke the camel's back, it was probably only a little thing.

The ease with which he'd made sure she was dead, then selected her grave, was surprising, but he'd disposed of her quickly. They weren't on close terms with the neighbors, so Henry had simply shuttered the house and told the few people who might wonder, that he was leaving for Oregon to join Wilma, who'd gone to care for her ailing mother. A lie, but it forestalled questions. Henry went to Boston, then to Europe. Wilma had gone nowhere.

Above him, Henry heard the impatient stamp of Martha's heels on the floor. With a last look at the fruit room, he headed for the stairs.

"Henry! I'm not going to stay here another minute. This nonsense has gone on too long already!" The irritation in Martha's voice had swelled to full-fledged anger. "Henry, do you hear me?" Her heels stomped on the creaky floor.

"I'm coming." He climbed slowly. The beam of light played over the worn steps and brought to mind an image of Wilma's thin body tumbling down them. In the hall, he closed the cellar door before he stepped out to face Martha.

"It's about time. You must be out of your mind wanting to come here. Let's go. I'll only have an hour before dinner. Really, Henry, you can be so inconsiderate at times." She was already on the stoop.

Henry snapped off the flash and looked around at the thick shadows. Martha's heels clacked on the stone steps outside. She called peevishly, "Come on, Henry."

He pulled the brass door shut and tested the lock. With his hand on the pitted railing, he started down.

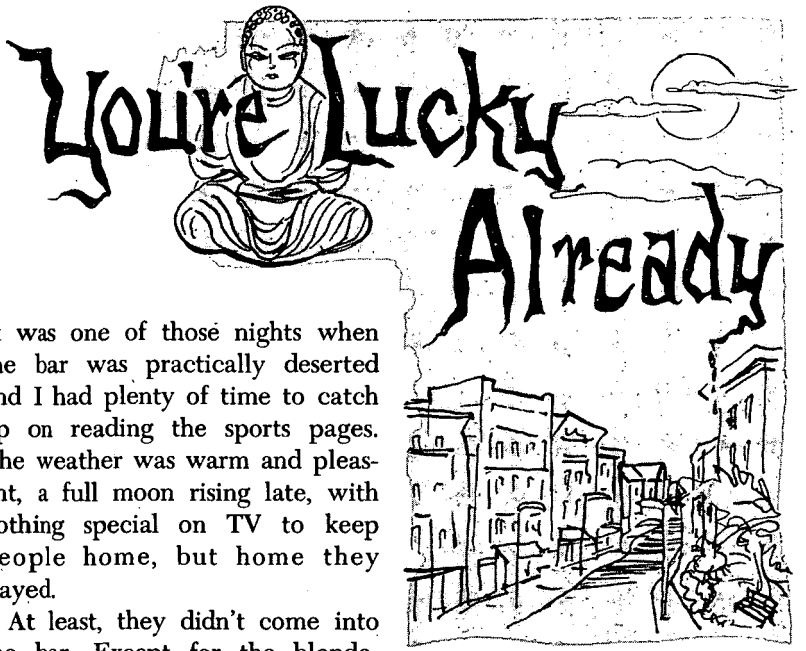
Unbidden, his mind focused on a picture of the stone steps to the wine cellar at the villa in Rome. Like these, they were worn almost smooth. In his mental picture, a plump body in a blue suit tumbled head over heels downward.

"Are you coming?" Martha demanded from the sidewalk.

Henry nodded. Idly, he began thinking about the floor of the Rome wine cellar. The old cracked cement really needed patching.

Purloined luck is not always transferred successfully.

You're Lucky Already



It was one of those nights when the bar was practically deserted and I had plenty of time to catch up on reading the sports pages. The weather was warm and pleasant, a full moon rising late, with nothing special on TV to keep people home, but home they stayed.

At least, they didn't come into the bar. Except for the blonde-haired woman, who sipped her vodka gimlet and stared wistfully at her image in the mirror in back of the bar, as if she were wishing that what she saw wasn't really true. Or as if she saw herself the way she used to look before the years had marked her.

About midnight a man came in, slid onto a stool and ordered a double Scotch on the rocks. In his mid-thirties, tall with black hair and a pleasant face that had been around and showed it, he was no different than a thousand other customers.

The cubes in the tub had melted together slightly and I poked a few loose with an ice pick, placing it on the bar. I poured his drink and leaned back, folding my arms.

He indicated the pick. "Put that thing away."

I slid it beneath the bar.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but those things get to me. I don't think I'll ever be able to look at one again without getting nervous."

I had seen too many like him not to know he had something on his mind and was looking for someone to lay it on. I also had the feeling that he was going to tell it whether I was interested or not.

"It's just an ice pick," I said.

"To you, maybe. Not to me." He indicated his empty glass.

I poured again. It wasn't my job to discourage customers from either talking or drinking. "Sounds like something I've never heard of before," I said.

He grinned. "Wouldn't want to bore you."

I indicated the almost empty bar. "My attention is all yours."

"Do you believe in luck?"

The woman broke her introspection long enough to give a little laugh. "I do. My luck has been nothing but bad for the last three months."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the man said. "I know how it is. I used to feel the same way myself until I picked up this," and he pulled a small jade Buddha from his pocket and placed it on the bar. It was nicely carved and just big enough to fit the palm of his hand.

"Ooooh," cooed the woman. "That's real cute." She reached for it.

He gently intercepted her hand. "I would appreciate it if you didn't touch it."

"That is really nice," she said. "I could have it made into a very smart pendant. Would you like to sell it?"

"Money couldn't buy it," he told her.

"It really can't be worth much," I said. "I've seen others like it."

"Not like this one. This happens to be my lucky piece and it works."

"A real good-luck charm?" asked the woman.

"It has been for me."

"I'd like to have something like that," she said. "I certainly could use one. What makes you think it brings good luck?"

"Ever since the day I bought it in Hong Kong, I've been nothing but lucky. I can't lose at poker, the track, the roulette table. Money has become no problem. And not only money. If it is good, it happens to me."

I had him figured for running some sort of con then, but which of us he was conning, I couldn't tell.

"Where does the ice pick fit in?" I asked.

"That has to do with Billy Joe, my kid brother."

"What happened to him?"

He indicated his empty glass. I filled it. "Do both of you have time to listen?"

"I'm going nowhere," the woman said. She pointed at me. "And he's stuck behind the bar."

"All right, then, I'll tell you. You won't believe it but I'll tell you."

From the moment he had walked in, I hadn't the slightest doubt that he would.

The man was fat and old, he began, so fat and so old I was sure he couldn't have held a job anywhere else. He led me down a long tiled corridor. Above, the

ceiling was lined with long fluorescent tubes, half of them burned out and black. The wall on my left had once been painted yellow. Now it was flaking and grimy. To my right, the barred windows locked out the green lawn in front of the building. It was one of the most depressing places I had ever seen.

The man stopped before a door. "Here," he said.

There was a metal mesh grating about a foot square set into the door at eye level. I looked in. The room was small and bare except for a low cot.

There was no question that the man on the cot was Billy Joe, but it was a Billy Joe I would have had trouble recognizing on the street even though he was my younger brother.

Like all the family, Billy Joe had been tall and straight, his complexion dark, his black hair full and bushy.

The man in the drab uniform who looked up at me now was a pale shadow of all these things. He looked like they had given him a bath, clothes and all, in some sort of solution that had taken all the life and color out of him.

"Lou?" he croaked.

"It's me, Billy Joe," I said.

He crossed the room and pressed his hand against the mesh. I placed my hand against his, the closest thing to a handshake we could manage, but the gesture was there and the thought was there and the steel could not bar those things.

Billy Joe's chin sank and he began to cry. There was nothing I could do about that except watch and curse the mesh that separated us.

"I'm glad you came, Lou," he said.

"I would have been here sooner if I'd known," I said. "I've been out of the country, Billy Joe. I got back yesterday and when they told me I came right here."

He lifted his head. "Tell them to open the door, Lou."

"I tried that already. They won't do it because they say that you're violent. You've been giving them a hard time, Billy Joe."

"I wouldn't hurt you, Lou. Don't they know that?"

"They don't trust you, Billy Joe. You've fought them every step of the way."

He wiped away the tears. "Because I don't belong here, Lou."

"You can't prove it by fighting."

He looked at the floor. "It's the walls. You know I can't stand being cooped up." His eyes lifted. "They shouldn't have put me in

this place, Lou. You know that."

"They say you killed a woman, Billy Joe. You want to tell me about it?"

"It isn't true, Lou."

"From the beginning," I said firmly.

He took a deep breath. "I was doing fine after you left. I had this job on the delivery truck and I was doing all right. You know I always liked to be out in the open. I could never stand working behind four walls. I had this little apartment and my own camper truck and I could go up into the mountains every weekend. I was in good shape. I didn't bother anybody and no one bothered me. Then one night I went out, down to the corner to buy some beer, and the police picked me up. I didn't know why and they wouldn't tell me. They lined me up in a room with some other guys. Afterward, they told me. A woman had been killed in the park and some guy saw a man running. He said it was me."

"They said you killed the woman?"

"Not just one, Lou. Three had been killed, all the same way. Late at night, on their way home. Somebody stabbed them to death with an ice pick and lettered a big 'X' on their forehead with lipstick." His eyes shifted to the floor. He seemed desolate to me.

"It would take more than the man saying you were the one," I said. "They would need evidence."

"I had no alibi for any of the killings, Lou."

"They would need more than that."

"There was a girl named Elvira. She had gone with me into the mountains the weekend before. She left her lipstick in the camper. I put it in my pocket to give back to her when I saw her. They found that. They said it was the same color and brand that was used by the killer."

I felt a little sick. "You told them about the girl?"

"I told them. My lawyer told them. Even though it was the kind of lipstick that could be bought in any drugstore by anyone, they wouldn't listen."

"What did the girl Elvira say?"

His head dropped. "She couldn't swear it was hers or that she had left it in the camper."

"There was more, Billy Joe?"

His head stayed down. "There was the blood."

"What blood?"

"The blood on the woman's dress. She must have fought, scratched the man's hand. They said it was the same type of blood as mine."

"Your hand was scratched?"

"I hurt it changing a tire on the delivery truck."

"That was the whole case? What about a motive?"

"They said a crazy guy doesn't need a motive. There was some talk that I hated women because my mother left me when I was young and I resented all women because of that. I didn't understand what they were talking about but I guess the jury did. They said I was guilty. The judge sentenced me to this place. He said anyone who would kill women like that needed treatment."

I knew there had to be a little more, but what he had told me was enough. With everything against him and nothing going for him, the conviction would have been easy.

I remember fingering that Buddha in my pocket. I needed some kind of help right then but I didn't know where I could get it.

The fat old man nudged me. "Two minutes."

Billy Joe's head lifted. "I didn't do it, Lou."

I nodded.

"You'll get me out?"

"I'll try, Billy Joe. I'll need the name of your lawyer."

"Edwards," he said. "A public defender because I had no money." He gave me the man's address and phone number. His hands tugged at his collar. "I've been in here for six months, Lou. Six months since I could breathe. I don't have to tell you if I don't get out soon, I'll die."

I believed that. Billy Joe could never stand being cooped up. If this hadn't happened, perhaps by this time he'd have found something for himself out in the woods or on a farm somewhere.

"I'm going to die in here, Lou," he said. "I'll go to pieces and then I'll die. They say they're trying to cure me but they're killing me."

"Just hang in there, Billy Joe," I said. "No more fighting. No more violence. You do what they tell you to do."

"I'll try."

"I can't help you if you give them a hard time."

"I'll do anything you say, Lou."

I turned away from the door, knowing he was right about dying if I didn't get him out of that room.

I went back to the doctor's office. He was a middle-aged, mild-looking man named Sciotti, who had told me much the same things as Billy Joe, but I had wanted Billy Joe to tell me himself.

Dr. Sciotti's white smock, heavy glasses and detached manner gave me the feeling that he was more

interested in paper work than patients, that the files in his office were more real to him than the people in the barred rooms.

I tried to get him to transfer Billy Joe to minimum security, to let him walk around the place. He wouldn't buy that because of the way Billy Joe had acted. I pointed out that Billy Joe had acted just like any innocent man who had been locked up for something he didn't do, but he insisted it was because Billy Joe was a psycho-something-or-other and that he had the opinions of three psychiatrists to confirm it. I told him it wouldn't be the first time that head-shrinkers had been proved wrong but he wouldn't buy that either. I guess I lost my temper a little because it ended with him threatening to lock me up in his grimy hospital because I was as unbalanced as Billy Joe.

I went to Edwards, the lawyer, next. He was a young guy with long hair and an expensive suit I knew damn well he couldn't afford on his income. He told me he had filed an appeal but didn't expect anything to come of it because it had been a fair trial. I told him that Billy Joe had said he was innocent all along and asked him why he and the police hadn't made some sort of attempt to find the real killer. That was when he rocked me back on my heels. I mean he really hit me between the eyes.

He said the murders had been done once a month during the full moon before they caught Billy Joe, but after they picked him up, the murders stopped. If Billy Joe were innocent, why had there been no more?

I couldn't answer that.

Edwards had been hoping that another murder would happen during the trial. It would have been all he needed to get Billy Joe released but it hadn't happened, so he had pretty well made up his mind, just as the police had, that they had found the right man.

Maybe Billy Joe said he was innocent because he couldn't remember doing those things, had blotted them from his mind, which was nothing unusual for someone like that.

I had to keep telling myself that Billy Joe was my brother and I had to believe what he said.

I was pretty certain that Edwards could, or would, do nothing for me or Billy Joe.

Before I had left town three years before, I had known some people here and there, so when I left the lawyer's office I went down to the lobby and began making phone calls. It took quite

a few before I found the man I wanted. I took a cab to his place.

It was a dingy apartment house in a run-down section of town, which didn't surprise me at all. The man was in a third floor walk-up and he didn't seem too happy to see me. He said his name was Conrad, but I didn't believe that.

I told him I wanted someone sprung, that I wanted him to fix it, that I had been told he was good at arranging prison breaks.

He asked me what prison.

I told him it was the mental hospital at the edge of town.

He laughed. He said there was no way he was going to arrange for a mental patient to be broken out. Cons were different. You sprung them and got paid and they went their way, usually out of state and far away, but you could never depend on what a sickie would do. Besides, he said, he sure wasn't going to spring a guy that ran around stabbing broads with an ice pick. For *no* amount of money.

That sort of left me high and dry. I couldn't get the doctor to relax a little with Billy Joe, I couldn't get him loose legally, and I couldn't get him out illegally.

Yet I had to get him out. He was my brother, I was responsible for him, and if he died in that hospital, which I knew he would, I'd be responsible for that too.

I went back to my hotel room with a bottle of Scotch to think it over. I sat there for a long time, drinking the Scotch and trying to figure a way out for Billy Joe, when it finally came to me. I told myself later the Scotch had a lot to do with it.

I left the hotel and found a small self-service variety store some blocks away. I walked up and down the aisles, ending with a few items that might have been used for a party, casually placing an ice pick among them. Not wanting to be put in the position of buying a tube of lipstick, I shoplifted what I thought would be a likely shade.

Leaving the store, I removed the ice pick from the bag and threw the rest into a battered trash can.

I walked the streets then, watching the night slide by and the traffic thin and the pedestrians become few and far between, and then I saw her leaving a bus at a deserted corner.

I waited to determine her direction, then slipped away through a dark passageway between two apartment buildings to intercept her.

She was a small girl, thin and light, giving only a small fright-

ened yelp when I wrapped my arm around her throat from behind and raised the ice pick—but I couldn't kill her.

Maybe it was because the Scotch had worn off by that time or maybe it was something inside me I never knew was there, or maybe it was something outside myself.

Something held that arm high and wouldn't let it drop. I had thought it would be easy to plunge the ice pick into her but I just couldn't do it, not even to save Billy Joe.

I let her go and ran, her screams following me down the street.

The police in a patrol car stopped me only a few streets away because I was running and that made me a suspicious character. It didn't take them long to make the connection between a running man and the screaming girl, and a quick frisk found the ice pick and the tube of lipstick.

The detective in the precinct station kept me sitting in the interrogation room while he paced up and down. He was a short, squatty man with a half-bald head, who didn't look like a cop at all. He looked more like a tired businessman who was bored with the whole thing.

"I thought that this ice pick and lipstick business was settled last year when they picked up that nut on the other side of town," he said. "It looks like they had the wrong man."

I smiled. Maybe it would be all right for Billy Joe after all.

"And then again, maybe not."

My smile faded.

I had emptied my pockets and placed the contents on the table. He unfolded my wallet and studied the identification. "That name looks familiar," he said.

He placed a foot on a chair, leaning over the wallet. "I've seen that name before somewhere," he said, "and it's coming back to me. We didn't handle it in this precinct but I would swear that you have the same name as the man convicted of those killings. Now that's quite a coincidence unless that kind of action runs in the family."

I pressed my lips together.

"I wonder," he said. He pressed down on my shoulder. "You stay here and don't move. There will be a man right outside the door."

He went out and I sat, not thinking, not wanting to think because I knew I had fouled up. This wasn't going to help Billy Joe at all.

He came back finally, carrying a file folder. He placed the folder in the center of the table care-

by that cute little trinket?" asked the woman.

"Nothing else can explain it." The man looked at me. "What do you think?"

I shrugged. It was no con. Telling the story had changed his appearance. He looked now as if a load had been taken from his mind. I had seen that happen before, too. They came in, they talked and they went out feeling a great deal better, as if they had confessed something.

Maybe he had been trying to explain it all to himself without succeeding and he needed to put it into words before he believed it.

The little green Buddha meant nothing to me. All of us have our hangups and need something in which to believe. He had found his in the little green good-luck charm.

From the look in the woman's eyes as she stared at the Buddha, so had she.

"Did they let your brother go?" I asked.

"Not yet. It takes a little time to process all the papers and I had to promise that he would get medical attention. Those psychiatrists that examined him weren't a hundred percent wrong. Billy Joe does need some help."

"Funny I haven't seen anything about it in the papers," the woman said.

"Not funny," said the man. "As usual they buried the story on page fifteen because they were real hot after Billy Joe's scalp during the trial and they don't want to admit they made a mistake."

"And there is nothing new on the actual killer?" the woman asked.

"Not a thing," said the man, "but then it was only a month ago. He should be due any day now if he follows his schedule."

The woman shivered. "To think he's still out there somewhere. Why does he do it? What makes him stop, then start again?"

"We won't know that until he is caught." The man picked up the Buddha tenderly and placed it in his pocket, throwing a twenty on the bar. "I'll have to be moving on. Take the drinks for both of us out of that and keep the change."

The woman slid from the stool, threw her arms around him and gave him a big kiss on the cheek. "Thank you very much," she said gaily. "That's the first time in a long time that anyone has bought me anything."

The man nodded and walked out steadily in spite of the load of Scotch he was carrying.

"Nightcap?" I asked the

fully. "It's all there," he said. "That *is* your brother in the state hospital."

He leaned over me. "I guess you thought it was a good idea to kill a woman and mark her so that we would think we had the wrong man. That was a lousy thing even to think of doing. All we would have had to do was compare the killings and we would have known they were done by two different men. The MO wouldn't have been the same. It's a damn good thing you didn't go through with it because all we can hold you for is assault rather than murder and the girl sounds like she won't even sign a complaint, which I can't understand."

All I could think of was how sorry I was for Billy Joe.

When I had emptied my pockets, they had found the Buddha and it sat in the middle of the table. I remember looking [illegible] and thinking what a lousy good-luck charm it had turned out to be.

The detective moved to the window and raised the blind. The sky was light, the sun just beginning to throw long morning shadows.

"I don't know what kept you from killing that girl," he said. "It certainly wasn't brains because if you had any you wouldn't have thought of the idea in the first place. It had to be luck. You were lucky, the girl was lucky and your brother was lucky. After all of that, Lady Luck was spread pretty thin. There just wasn't enough to help that other woman."

I found my voice. "What other woman?"

"The one on the other side of town who was killed at just about the same time you lost your nerve. Stabbed with an ice pick and marked with lipstick and the experts say there is no doubt she was killed by the same man as the others. It looks like your brother is in the clear, and without your help."

He was right. I had nothing to do with it, even though I had tried my best.

Then what had?

The sun, rising above the tops of the buildings, threw a shaft down to the tabletop and hit the Buddha, making it glow. I could have sworn it was smiling.

I'll tell you. There was no question in my mind then and there is no question in my mind now: that lucky piece of mine had brought me the biggest stroke of luck a man ever had.

The man reached for the Buddha and caressed it gently.

"So you think it was all caused

woman. "He left more than enough to cover it."

She nodded, smiling.

I poured her drink.

She sipped at it. "You know, after hearing about that guy with the ice pick, I'm almost afraid to go out there."

"If you want to wait until I close up, I'll walk along with you," I said.

She smiled. "Hey! That will be great."

I killed the lights as I walked around the room, ending back of the bar again. The ice pick was still where I had left it. I slid it into my pocket along with the tube of lipstick I had stolen that afternoon.

The moon was full now and it was time.

Nothing could help her, just as nothing could have helped the others, the ones with the painted faces and the dyed hair who talked too loudly and drank too much. The ones who were like my wife. I had canceled her out a long time ago, but she kept coming back to haunt me, looking different, wearing different clothing, speaking in different voices. There was no telling when I would meet her. She would be walking the street, riding the bus, hurrying through the park—and now, for the first time, she had come into the bar. A year ago, I thought I was finally rid of her, but then last month she had come again. She couldn't fool me. She hadn't fooled me tonight. I had known who she was the moment she walked in.

I would have to cancel her out again.

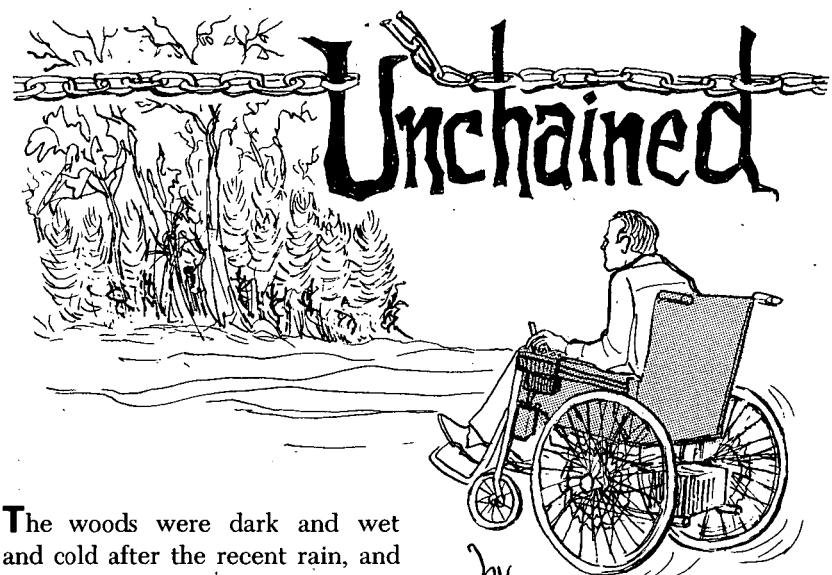
The woman who was my wife squeezed my arm as I locked the door. "Look what I have," she said. She was holding out the green Buddha.

"You took it from him?"

She nodded. "When I gave him that hug. If it is all that he says it is, I need it far more than he does. Like tonight. I'm lucky already. You're walking along with me."

I fingered the cool steel shaft of the ice pick. "Yes," I said. "You're lucky already."

For the impatient, it is not uncommon that awareness of one's true self should emerge under stress.



Unchained

by Bill Pronzini

The woods were dark and wet and cold after the recent rain, and the old man could feel the chill and dampness against his face, against the whole of his left hand–but nowhere else. Except for that left hand, resting on the arm of his wheelchair, he was completely paralyzed from the neck down.

He did not know these woods, even though he had lived at the edge of them for eighteen years. His maiden daughters, Madeline and Caroline, never took him there, but he had sat many times on the rear porch of their house, looking at the unbroken line of green and brown and thinking of what lay within and wishing he could go there—alone. That was the important thing: alone.

Now, today, the opportunity had finally come.

It was Thursday and, as on every Thursday, Madeline had left at 2:00 p.m. to do the week's grocery shopping and Caroline had departed at 2:30 to attend her literary tea; but this Thursday, the remainder of the ritual had been broken: Mrs. Gregor, who always arrived at precisely 2:30 to care for him until his daughters returned at 5:00 o'clock, had not arrived at all.

He didn't know why she failed to come, and he didn't care; he was merely thankful. It had been eighteen years since the accident, when the drunken salesman in a rented car had struck Martha and him down as they were crossing a rain-slick street, killing her instantly and permanently damaging his spine. Eighteen years, and at long last he was *alone;* no one in the next room, listening; no one in the house popping in to see if he needed anything. Alone. Alone!

Getting out of the house had not been easy. All the doors were open leading to the enclosed rear porch, beyond which a ramp had been installed in place of back stairs; but the screen door leading out to the ramp was closed with an eye hook—a barrier, a wall, a simple screen door which he could not open.

Still, he had been determined and he had managed it. The wheelchair was motorized, with a control panel on the left arm so that, by using his thumb on the Forward and Reverse buttons and hooking his ring finger around the specially constructed steering mechanism, he could take himself from room to room and propel himself along the sidewalks when Madeline and Caroline took him out for one of his periodic airings. They had not wanted him to have a motorized chair—they were well-meaning, though he knew they thought of him as a totally helpless child—but he had pleaded and demanded and begged, and finally they had acquiesced. So, from a distance of ten feet, he had pressed down on the Forward button and sent the chair rushing into the porch screen; then reversed to his original position. Each of the first six times the door had held, but on the seventh attempt the eye hook had popped loose and the screen fluttered open. Then he was down the ramp and moving slowly across the rear yard, toward the woods, into the woods.

Now he was deep among the tall trees—he did not know exactly how far he had come or how long it had taken him—and the only sounds were the occasional cry of a bird and the liquid whisper of the wheelchair's rubber tires

tracking through the wet leaf mold; the motor itself was almost inaudible. Ahead was a dense section of forest growth which a man with legs could have penetrated, but which the wheelchair could not. Manipulating the steering mechanism, he went laterally along the growth, maneuvered around an insect-ridden log, and came into a large, high-grassed glade approximately the size of a football field.

It was very still there, serene. The old man smiled vaguely, remembering another glade in another wood decades earlier—and Martha sitting beside him on a blanket, and the touch of her lips, and the softness of her hair. Then the smile faded, because the memory was almost instantly replaced by the still-vivid one of the night they had been shattered by the hurtling, yellow-eyed machine. He blanked his mind; he had become quite adept at blanking his mind over the years.

The old man rolled across the glade, and through the trees on the far side he could see the dull-gray reflection of water. He changed direction, moving diagonally to where the ground sloped upward slightly and the growth was thinner. There he found himself at the edge of a steep, twenty-foot embankment, looking down into a tiny vale that contained an even tinier lake or pond. Three wild ducks floated placidly in its center, like a child's toys in an oversized wading pool, and patterns of leaves and water lilies rimmed its edges.

He sat watching the ducks. One of them raised up finally, spreading wings that slapped and rippled the surface, and soared away into the overcast sky. *Unchained and whole,* he thought, *flying free into the heavens.*

He lowered his chin to his chest, sighing softly. When he raised his eyes again he saw movement far down to his left, in the trees close to the pond. A faint frown creased his forehead. After a moment, a young man and a young woman emerged into clear view, hands clasped, and began circling the spongy shore in his direction.

Lovers, the old man thought immediately—and then realized with alarm that the girl was struggling, that she was trying to free herself of the young man's grip. The youth plodded forward relentlessly, half-dragging her now, and in the forest hush the old man could hear her voice—shrill, frightened—saying: "Please, please, let me go, I won't tell anyone about you. Oh, please!"

The youth turned and caught

her shoulder with his free hand and shook her savagely. "Shut up! You hear me? Keep your mouth shut!"

She had begun to sob, throwing her head from side to side in a swirl of fine blonde hair. "You're planning to kill me, I know you are; when you're finished with me you'll kill me—"

He slapped her openhanded, with enough force that the sound of it reverberated like a pistol shot. "I'll kill you, all right, if you don't keep that mouth of yours *shut.*"

Watching, the old man felt an almost forgotten rage well up inside him; his temples throbbed, his right hand gripped clawlike the arm of the wheelchair. *If I had legs!* he thought impotently. *If I could walk and use my body!* He craned his head forward, opened his mouth and shouted, "You, down there! Leave that girl alone, leave her alone!"

Both their heads jerked around, staring upward, locating him. The girl cried, "Help, help!" not realizing he was in a wheelchair, and the old man strained futilely in the contraption, like someone straining against unbreakable bonds.

The youth's face was darkly-splotched; he released his right hand and hit the girl with a closed fist, brutally. She fell as if boneless, and lay still. He turned then, fumbling under the jacket he wore, and came up with a heavy blued-steel automatic. Brandishing it, he ran to the embankment.

The old man did not touch the chair's control panel. He sat with his lips pulled in against his teeth, eyes bright and hard as they followed the youth's struggles up the rocky, root-tangled slope. In his middle twenties, tall and bony, with a wild tangle of reddish hair—and suddenly the old man knew that he was facing Rusty Jaynes, a fugitive, a killer and a thief, one of two men who had gone on a crime spree in the area. The other one had been captured by state police two days previously, but Jaynes was still the object of an intensive statewide manhunt. The old man knew all of this because one of the few hollow pleasures he had left was television, and Jaynes' photograph had been repeatedly shown on all the recent newscasts.

Jaynes, panting, reached the top of the embankment and stood five paces in front of the old man, holding the gun pointed loosely. He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. "A cripple," he said, "a damned old cripple in a wheelchair. You've got some moxie, grandpa; you like to blew

my mind, shouting at me that way."

"Let the girl go, Jaynes," the old man said grimly.

"So you know who I am. Well hey, man, you understand what that means, right? It means I got to waste you, right?"

"Let the girl go," the old man said again. "Take me as your hostage—that's what you've got her for, isn't it?—and kill me when you're free and clear."

Jaynes laughed shrilly. "Man, you're something *else*. I'm going to push you in that chair? A hostage in a wheelchair? Oh wow!"

"Then shoot me and get it over."

"You bet I will, grandpa; right on," Jaynes said, and leveled the automatic.

The old man pressed down hard on the wheelchair's Forward control button.

The chair moved abruptly, so abruptly that Jaynes was surprised into momentary inaction. When it was almost on top of him he tried to dodge to one side, squeezing the gun's trigger at the same time. An echoing roar hammered in the old man's ears, the bullet went past his head in a rush of wind—and then the chair's raised metal footrest struck Jaynes on one shin and pitched him off balance and backward down the embankment.

He made a screeching sound that cut off when his body jarred into the earth; the automatic popped loose and arced to one side. The old man, braking the wheelchair inches from the edge of the slope, saw Jaynes, unable to slow his momentum, roll and slide down over the rough ground. The youth's head cracked against first one projection of rock and then another, the latter with an ugly splitting sound, and his body slowed and came to a sprawled halt near the bottom. There was blood on the side of his head, blood at one corner of his mouth; he did not move.

Carefully, the old man reversed away from the edge. He sat there stoically in the deep silence, looking toward the girl. There was no way he could get down to her, nothing he could do except wait. Finally, she began to stir. She sat up, cupping her jaw; she seemed dazed and disoriented.

Some of the tenseness went out of the old man. He shouted, "Miss! Up here, miss!"

Kneeling, she turned her head and looked in the direction of his voice. Then she seemed to remember where she was, what had happened to her, her terror; she got jerkily to her feet, poised for flight.

"It's all right," the old man called to her. "He can't hurt you

now, he can't hurt anybody now. You can see him lying there."

The girl stared at Jaynes, stared up at him again. Fear gave way to confusion, and then to a kind of incredulous relief.

"Go for help," he told her. "Get the police. I'll wait here. Hurry, now, run."

She hesitated, as if she wanted to say something to him; then she turned and ran swiftly around the edge of the pond, back into the trees where she and Jaynes had first appeared. The old man watched her until she was out of sight, sighed breathily and allowed himself to relax.

Sitting there, he wondered what the police would say when they arrived, if any of them would recognize his name. Probably not; eighteen years was a long time. The news people would, of course, make the connection: Ben Frazer, the crippled old man who had miraculously saved a young girl's life and brought about the end of a dangerous felon, was the same Ben Frazer who had for twenty-one years been a lieutenant of detectives in the state capital—the officer they had called "The Manhunter" because of his dedication and his uncompromising refusal to quit any case.

Refusal to quit, he thought. *Ironic.* He *had* quit for the past eighteen years. He had lived all that time with but a single thought in his mind: find a way to get out from under the watchful eyes of his two daughters, and then find a way to end what remained of his life. That was why he had come into these woods today; that was what he had been thinking of, sitting there at the edge of the embankment watching the ducks. If it had not been for the arrival of Jaynes and the girl, he would have pressed down on the Forward button and sent *himself* over the edge; it would be himself, not Jaynes, lying broken and bloody down there now.

He thought of the girl, the look on her face just before she'd fled in response to his command, and for the first time since Martha's death and his own paralysis, he knew pride and gratification and felt a sense of usefulness to others and to himself.

A small smile curved the corners of his mouth. There would be no more consideration of suicide, and there would be no more self-pity. He could wait now; he could wait in peace . . .

Inopportunely, Fate may decide to put one of its own plans into execution.

The glory of Greek art, Sinclair Taggart frequently reminded his nephew Dwayne, lies in its perfection of form and line, a lesson brought home most tellingly to that young man when his uncle returned from one of his Middle Eastern art scavenging expeditions with a young bride whose form was indeed perfect and whose lines were superb. While most of the Greek artifacts in the elder Taggart's museum bore only faint traces of the polychromatic coloring which had once embellished them, his bride's form and lines were enhanced by a ravishing complexion of peach and rose, set off by eyes the color of those precious amethyst intaglios displayed among the Hellenistic gems in the museum's Apollo Gallery.

Although Taggart had found this lively addition to his collection among the Aegean ruins, she was only half Greek. Her mother had been English—from whence, Dwayne assumed, came that peach-bloom complexion and her name, Honoria. "But people who like me call me Honey," she had made haste to inform him soon after being ensconced among the other treasures of Arcadia, Taggart's huge estate, one wing of which had been turned into the Taggart Memorial Museum of Greek Art, where Dwayne served as curator—or custodian, as he himself ruefully characterized his position, for he had no say whatsoever in how or where anything should be exhibited.

"You're here to learn, my boy," his uncle had informed him, "so that you'll be equipped to make such decisions when the time

comes. That's why I sent you to the university. Some day all this will be yours. You must be ready to handle the stewardship of these treasures."

As the elder Taggart was close to seventy and hadn't the most robust constitution, it didn't seem likely that the day to which he referred would be too long in coming, and meanwhile Dwayne was quite content to submit to his uncle's wishes. Arcadia was a delightful place to live and Dwayne's fondness for the superb collection under his care was not due solely to the knowledge that it would one day be his—he had also a genuine interest in these cultural legacies of the ancient world and had, under his uncle's tutelage, become something of an expert in the field himself.

Naturally, the arrival of a bride in Arcadia had a most unsettling effect upon young Dwayne, and the spectacle of his old uncle ensnared by a woman less than half his age did not predispose him to treat the new Mrs. Taggart with

more than a frosty politeness. That's when she had made the remark about people who liked her calling her Honey.

The rose lips parted in a fetching smile as she leaned against a bronze Herakles in the Dionysus Gallery where Dwayne was working, and she treated him to the full effect of those amethystine eyes.

"I do especially hope *you*'ll call me Honey."

"If you wish."

She stepped away from the statue and looked from it to Dwayne and back again. "Brrrr . . . I'd almost think *you* were one of these marble laddies—if you didn't have your clothes on."

He ignored this remark with the scorn it deserved.

She giggled. "You really *don't* like me, do you?"

"I hardly know you," he replied coolly.

"Well, that's not my fault. I think a nephew should be on very friendly terms with his auntie. It's only proper."

"And I'm sure you're always proper."

She casually allowed her fingers to trace the curve of the statue's groin. "I'm always discreet, darling. Isn't that all that really matters?"

She gave the bronze form an impertinent caress. As Dwayne watched her glide away he was again reminded of his uncle's admiration for Greek line and form, his throat got a little dry and his lips a little moist and his body temperature rose by a perceptible degree or two.

It's needless to demonstrate the steps by which this emotional equation was resolved. The curvacious Aphrodite's bridegroom was old, infirm, and extremely rich; Honey quickly learned to appreciate the splendors and services of Arcadia and saw no reason why she could not be content there—so long as handsome young Dwayne supplied the necessary amorous diversion. Commendably, he did hold out against his instincts for a month or so, and when he finally yielded he was quick to rationalize his lust by telling himself that the old man deserved to be cuckolded for cheating him out of his rightful inheritance, or a good share of it. That aspect of the domestic situation had not yet been fully clarified.

Arcadia overlooked a wide secluded bay on which the elder Taggart was pleased to enjoy an occasional afternoon's outing aboard his small cabin cruiser, the *Argus*. However, since his only true passion—aside from Honey—was his collection of Greek antiq-

uities, he devoted most of his waking hours to one or another aspect of this pursuit, and most of the cruising that summer was done by Honey and Dwayne—and not all of it on the bay. Quite often they did their navigating right there in the green-and-white boathouse, so snug and sheltered, without all the fuss and bother of putting to sea.

Eventually it was explained to Dwayne that he hadn't entirely lost what had been coming to him. Uncle Sinclair called him into his study one morning and gently informed him that he would be amply provided for and would always have a job as curator of the Taggart Memorial Museum.

"Unless," he added with a twinkle in his pouchy eyes, "my son should have other ideas."

Dwayne swallowed. "Your *son*, did you say?"

Taggart beamed modestly. "My son to be, I should say. It's only natural I should want a son, isn't it? Don't scoff, you puppy. I know exactly how old I am. But it so happens I consulted a famous gerontologist at a clinic in Lucerne, before I married Honey—Honoria. He was most encouraging."

Honey had other ideas. "Take it from me, lover," she told Dwayne later in the boathouse, "it ain't going to happen."

Although by now Dwayne was hopelessly infatuated with his jewel-eyed aunt, he didn't completely trust her.

"These injections he's taking," he pointed out slyly, "rejuvenate the tissues. At least they're supposed to. You know what that means."

"What?"

"He's likely to hang on for years. He'll probably live to be a hundred."

A sobering thought, indeed.

Sinclair Taggart had insisted that Honey spend at least three mornings a week in the museum, with Dwayne as her instructor, hopeful that she might absorb at least the rudiments of Greek culture. On one particular morning Dwayne was trying to arouse her interest in a fragment of a frieze from the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus.

"It's one of our choicest acquisitions," he boasted. "It's the finest one extant outside the British Museum."

"Far as I'm concerned, it's just another hunk of stone."

"That's because you don't know the story behind it. This hunk of stone, as you call it, came from a tomb so magnificent it was deemed one of the seven wonders

of the ancient world. A queen named Artemisia built it for her husband, King Mausolus. And to prove how much she loved him she even mixed his ashes with wine and drank them. Isn't that romantic?"

She made a face. "Ro*man*tic? It's gruesome. Can you see me drinking *my* husband's ashes? There'd be a bigger kick in a glass of buttermilk."

Thus was the subject of the death of husbands introduced into their discussions, a subject that could be treated academically and with strict propriety in this hall of relics. Where before Honey had been interested in only the gaudier artifacts, she now lent a willing ear to Dwayne's lectures on the funerary habits of the ancients, examining with interest the collection of gold death masks from Mycenae and the sarcophagi of polychrome-painted terra-cotta, the porphyry coffins and the marble tombs.

"But this," he said grandly, leading her to a rectangular and very simple stone box with a plain stone lid, "this is one of Uncle's most prized possessions."

"Looks like just another coffin to me."

"Oh, it's much more than that, Honey. Not even the British Museum has one of these. It's much older than any of the others."

"And not half as pretty."

"Perhaps not, but it has other advantages. Do you happen to know what the word 'sarcophagus' means?"

"Sure. A coffin, or tomb."

"I mean the word itself. It comes from the Greek, of course, and it means 'flesh-eating.'"

A spark of morbid interest. "No kidding?"

"And do you know why it means that?" He tapped his knuckles on the heavy lid. "Because this type of very early sarcophagus was made of a certain kind of limestone quarried near the ancient city of Assus in the Troad, which was the area around Troy. It was called 'flesh-eating' because that's literally what it did—the limestone is so active it consumes decomposing matter. It devours the dead."

She tried not to look impressed. "You're putting me on."

"Not at all. Pliny himself vouches for it."

"Never met him."

"He died in the first century A.D. He wrote a monumental *Natural History*."

She looked at him now with a singular frankness. "Prove it."

"Simple. Come into the library."

"I mean prove that it eats the

dead." She drummed her fingers on the stone lid. "Prove that this crazy stone box eats dead flesh. Then I'll believe you."

This discussion could not have remained farther away from even the subtlest declaration of intentions, but it was probably at this point that the psychic groundwork was laid for the planting of the idea soon to flower.

"Can't you take Pliny's word for it?" he teased.

"Historians are nothing but sanctified gossipmongers. Or so I've been told."

Dwayne lapsed into thought. "Suppose I were to kill a squirrel, say. The grounds are infested with them. And put it in the sarcophagus. In a few weeks it'll be consumed. Will that convince you?"

She cocked a playful eyebrow. "I guess it would have to, wouldn't it?"

A joke, a dry academic-type joke, an undergraduate prank, but the following morning Dwayne did indeed trap and bludgeon a squirrel and when Honey came down for her lesson he produced it—or at least gave her a peek into the paper bag containing it. She wrinkled her pretty nose.

He looked around. In another half hour the museum would be open to the public. "Come along," he said, and they passed into the Minerva Gallery where the Trojan Sarcophagus was displayed. "Give me a hand here." The lid could be lifted with some effort by one person, but he was holding the bagged squirrel in his left hand.

Together they raised one end of the lid and Dwayne dropped the squirrel's body into the sarcophagus. They replaced the lid.

Neither of them made any reference to the incident for the next few weeks, during which time their affair continued in all its torrid intensity. Nestled in his arms in the tiny cabin of the cruiser, secure in the locked boathouse, she talked of how wonderful it would be if they didn't have to sneak these moments together.

He agreed. "But there's nothing we can do about it. So let's not waste any of them talking."

"You're right, love. Talking's a waste of time. So's thinking. Action is what counts."

If this remark had more than its immediately relevant significance he chose to overlook it.

Dwayne was looking uncommonly smug one morning when Honey joined him in the Minerva Gallery for a discussion of the influence of the Laocoön on post-Hellenistic sculpture. He led her without a word to the Trojan Sarcophagus.

"When I lift the lid, peek in-

side," Dwayne said with confidence.

"Should I hold my nose?"

"Do what you want with your nose. Just keep your eyes open."

He replaced the lid before speaking. "Well?"

"It's gone." Her voice was husky with awe. "Everything. Not even a bone. Just a sort of—ash, I guess."

"Now do you believe me?"

"But it's weird. Creepy. Wow, leave it to those clever old Greeks."

"They were a very superior people."

Honey stared at the sarcophagus with reflective uncertainty. "Of course, a squirrel—such an itty-bitty thing in that big coffin. I'll bet it wouldn't do that to—something bigger." She gave him an innocent, open-faced smile. "I mean, well, something as big as Ganymede."

Ganymede was Uncle's pet monkey, a lumbering, screechy, thoroughly detestable and smelly beast. Dwayne could never understand his uncle's attachment to the hideous creature.

He grinned. "Only one way to find out."

"You wouldn't."

"*You* wouldn't."

"I would if you would."

"Yes, but how? I'm not about to brain that monkey. It would scream its silly little head off."

She shook her hair back and said breezily, "Nothing so brutal, love. You said you had all that trouble with rats in the basement until you got after them with arsenic."

"Poison Ganymede?"

"Why not?"

He still didn't entirely trust her. "I'll get the arsenic—if *you* put it in his food. That way we're both to blame."

"What does it matter? Nobody's going to know. They'll just think he ran away."

Which is exactly what they did think. A thorough search of the mansion and grounds turned up no trace of the beast.

"And you see," Dwayne said, "nobody in a million years would dream of looking in one of these sarcophagi for him."

"Or for anything else?"

He smiled. "Or for anything else."

"Like a squirrel, I mean."

He smiled again. "Like a squirrel, you mean."

Once more a period of weeks elapsed before the beautiful couple met beside the Trojan Sarcophagus and proceeded to inspect the results of the latest grisly experiment. This time Honey could not stifle a fairly audible gasp, and when she looked

at Dwayne her peach-blossom cheeks were as pale as the marble visage of Aphrodite.

"Gone! The whole wretched, hairy creature! *Gone!*"

"As you said before, Honey. Leave it to those clever old Greeks."

"Not a trace. No evidence. Nothing . . ."

Passionately, they kissed—and kissed and kissed, and he beamed and she giggled and that morning the subject of Greek culture was not even remotely mentioned.

Later, in the deeper privacy of the boathouse, she said, "But, Dwayne, my darling, they're not going to think that *he* ran away."

"Of course not. They're going to think he drowned."

"But how?"

"You're going to report that you and Uncle took a moonlight cruise, that the *Argus* sprang a leak and sank, and that you swam to shore. No trace will ever be found of the old man."

"But how will he—"

"You didn't give Ganymede *all* the poison, did you?"

She pouted. "Sounds to me like *I'm* supposed to do everything."

"Not at all. I'll have to take care of the boat. All you have to do is get yourself wet and put on a good act of being half-drowned. *After* you've poisoned the old gent. I'll take care of him after that."

Dwayne went on to explain that murder itself is simple, it's the disposition of the body that traps most murderers, for the corpse itself is the most telling and vital of clues.

Honey was still skeptical. "You'll drag him down to the museum alone and dump him in the sarcophagus?"

"No problem. He doesn't weigh much over a hundred and twenty pounds. I'll bring one of the dollies up from the museum and hide it in the passage behind your suite. I'll wheel him in that to the lift and whisk him down to the gallery. No sweat."

She gave him a considering look. "Something tells me you've been planning something like this for a long time. Maybe even before I came?"

"Only hypothetically, my love. It'll be a cinch. And do you know how seldom a murder is charged when there's no body? I mean, even if anyone did get suspicious."

Statistics bored her; she dreamed of pleasanter things. "Just think. All this will be ours. I can hardly believe it. I don't dare even *think* about it."

"Actually, it's rather fitting," he said, "that he should end up in the Trojan Sarcophagus. It's one

of his all-time favorite pieces."

"Mine, too," she agreed. "So neat. Like a prehistoric garbage disposal."

Yes, the whole plan was neat, as such plans go, and they lost little time in choosing a night when it should be put into execution. It was then that Fate, that instrument of the gods so beloved by Greek dramatists, upset that carefully arranged plan and substituted one of its own. Early on the evening when he was to have been dispatched to the Hereafter, the old man suffered a stroke and was instead dispatched to the nearest hospital. There, the finest medical brains money could buy labored to rescue him from the same Dark Angel into whose hands his nearest and dearest kin had plotted to deliver him.

Dwayne accompanied his uncle to the hospital and remained with him until his condition was stabilized.

Honey was waiting up for her lover when he got back to Arcadia. "Is he still alive?"

Dwayne nodded. "For the time being, yes."

"Is his condition critical?"

"Critical but not grave." He gave her a satirical smile. They were in the master suite where she had been keeping a bottle of champagne on ice for him. Now she poured him a glass and told him not to fret. "It looks as if nature's going to do the dirty work for us. At least we're alone together. Let's enjoy."

His enjoyment lasted a very short while indeed, only as long as it took the arsenic with which she had liberally spiked his champagne to do its deadly work.

Honey knew exactly what to do, thanks to the plans her lover had already prepared for Taggart, the plans that seemed such a shame to waste. The dolly waited outside the suite and it wasn't too difficult to load Dwayne's already naked body upon it, wheel it to the lift and lower it to the museum. In the Minerva Gallery she propped open the lid of the Trojan Sarcophagus with a small statue of winged Eros, and with a minimum of difficulty succeeded in hoisting Dwayne's body into the ancient receptacle.

Having replaced the dolly where it belonged she returned to the suite, inflicted upon herself the necessary scratches and bruises to lend credence to the story she would tell, stole out of the house and down to the boathouse and took the *Argus* as far out into the bay as she dared without going so far she might not be able to swim to shore, and then she went to work scuttling the cruiser.

Lying on the shore, she screamed until one of the guards heard her and came to her rescue.

The story she told appeared not to arouse anyone's disbelief, only their pity. She said that she had been so worried about Taggart she hadn't been able to sleep and when Dwayne returned from the hospital she had begged him to take her for a short cruise on the deserted bay. The boat had sprung a leak and sunk. She had seen Dwayne go under but it was all she could do to get herself to shore.

It was decided to withhold news of his nephew's disappearance from the invalid, at least until the young man's body could be recovered, but although the bay was dragged for several days the body was not retrieved and was presumed to have been carried out to sea by the tide.

Honey's devotion to her ailing husband was inspiring to say the least. As his condition worsened her attentions became all the more assiduous. She wept more tears than Niobe, and when the old man died a peaceful and natural death there in his hospital suite the sorrow his widow expressed would have moved even Euripides to applause.

When the old man's will was eventually read, Honey Taggart learned that she was to be far richer than she had dreamed, and the disclosure of an unexpected codicil did not alarm her, a codicil added to the will shortly after Taggart had acquired the Trojan Sarcophagus, expressing his wish to be buried in that same rare artifact.

Just prior to the funeral the sarcophagus was moved into the simple Grecian-temple style chapel where Taggart was to be entombed. The service itself was rich in classical allusions, the body lying upon a torchlighted altar in a simple bronze casket. At the conclusion of the service six bearers, each wearing sandals and dressed in a Greek chlamys, grasped the stone lid of the sarcophagus and lifted it off.

Honey, along with everyone else, was baffled when a general outcry of dismay rose from the six bearers, but she did not actually rise from her seat until the officiating minister himself looked into the sarcophagus, blanched, and cried out, "Merciful heavens, it's *Dwayne*!"

Honey did not even try to explain how Dwayne Taggart's body could have got from the waters of the bay into the Trojan Sarcophagus, but she had a great deal to say when a diary was found among Dwayne's effects in which

he recounted seeing his uncle's wife burying the monkey Ganymede in an isolated corner of the grounds (he'd drawn a map of the exact spot), and had later discovered a quantity of arsenic in her possession. He revealed his fear that she meant to get rid of her husband in the same way and declared his intention of keeping a close watch on her until he had gathered positive evidence of her guilt, for without it Taggart would never be convinced.

"Why, that lousy low-down swine! He wouldn't have done a thing to that boat. He would have let me go ahead and poison the old man and then blown the whistle on me. Don't you see?" Honey complained to the public defender appointed to represent her at her pre-trial hearing for murder. "He was going to frame me!"

Her counsel listened politely but found this part of her story no more convincing than the other part: that Dwayne had removed a squirrel and the monkey from a flesh-eating sarcophagus and buried them, planning even then to entrap her.

"My dear Mrs. Taggart," he explained patiently, "the flesh-eating properties of limestone, whether fact or myth, are hardly germane to the issue at hand."

Nor did he care what Pliny had to say on the subject. Pliny's veracity as a witness could hardly be confirmed at this late date. My goodness, the man had been dead for close to two thousand years.

So Honey Taggart went to prison for the rest of her life and the Taggart Memorial Museum of Greek Art is now owned and maintained by the State.

The present curator is an earnest and learned young man whose passions are unaroused by anything later than the Periclean Age. Nor can he understand the morbid curiosity tourists persist in displaying about the Trojan Sarcophagus. Although no one could have had a better opportunity, he himself has never taken even a quick little peek inside.

But then he *is* very young, and he's never met a girl like Honey.

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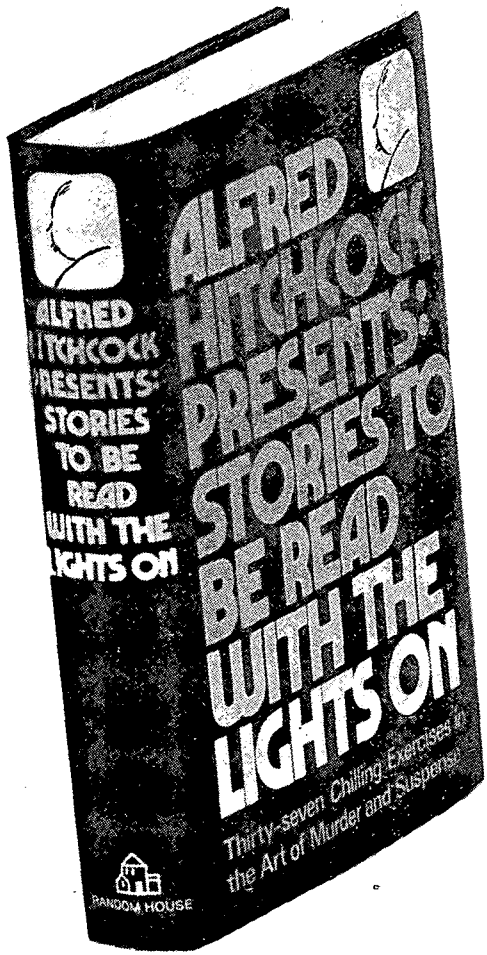

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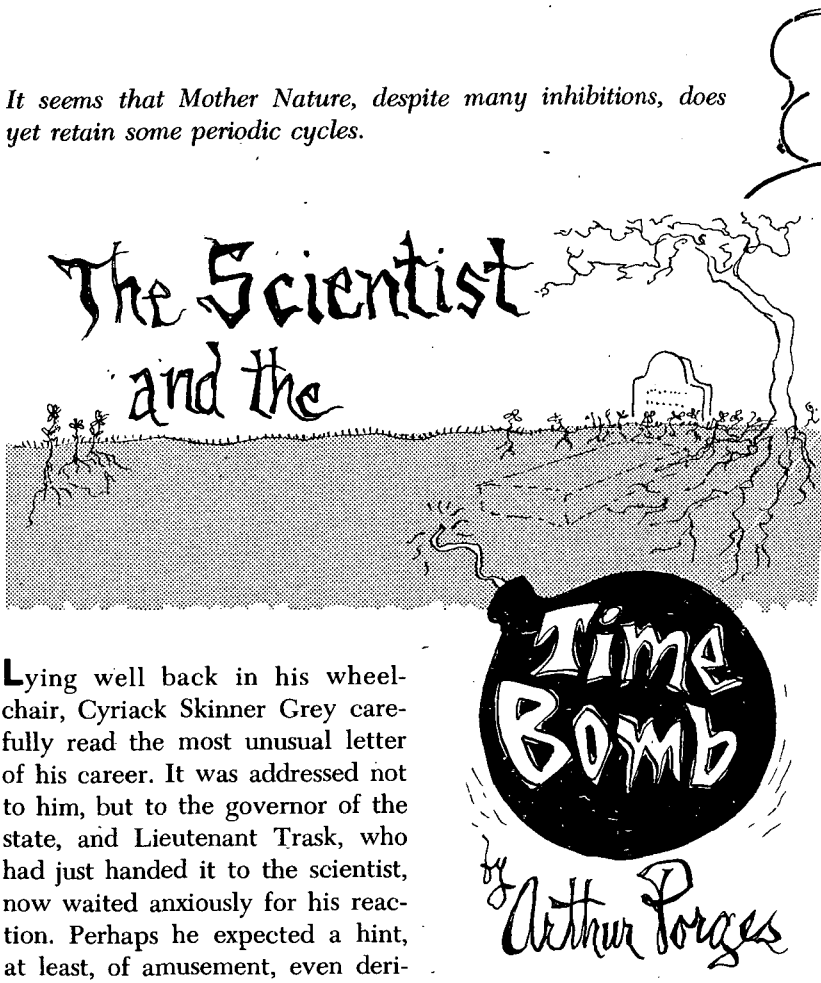
It seems that Mother Nature, despite many inhibitions, does yet retain some periodic cycles.



Lying well back in his wheelchair, Cyriack Skinner Grey carefully read the most unusual letter of his career. It was addressed not to him, but to the governor of the state, and Lieutenant Trask, who had just handed it to the scientist, now waited anxiously for his reaction. Perhaps he expected a hint, at least, of amusement, even derision, but Grey was obviously not responding to a foolish hoax. An odd message, to be sure, but with a tone that implied neither a practical joke nor a fantastic, paranoid threat. The writer seemed deadly earnest, and the personality behind the typed words did not suggest a disturbed mind.

The letter went as follows:

To the Governor and Legislature:
Gentlemen—

This is a warning from beyond the grave. My lawyers, who are

unaware of these contents and have no share in my actions, were directed to mail this letter fifteen years after my death, which is due within weeks, as I am seventy-two years old and have terminal cancer.

This year the covenant made by the state with my grandfather, Jeremiah Coleman, is being immorally, if not illegally, broken, and his historic house, full of valuable and lovely things, is no longer free to the public. In complete disregard of its solemnly-pledged word, this government is about to hand the estate over to a private company that will charge admission; there is even the possibility that the house will become the governor's official residence, barred to the public except on special occasions. Therefore, from across the Styx, I am now going to destroy totally the Coleman Mansion I love. Within a few months, at most, it will be blown apart, and it is your responsibility to clear the grounds at once, and thus save lives. There is nothing you can do to prevent the explosion.

(Signed) Horace Coleman

Grey looked up, a tiny fire blazing in each eye, to meet Trask's inquiring gaze. "Remarkable," the scientist said. It was a word he didn't use lightly.

"Is it possible?" the detective asked. "A bomb with a fifteen-year fuse? Nobody could have planted one undetected in the house since Horace Coleman died. The place has been open to the public daily, guarded at night; tons of priceless stuff in it; fantastic collection, really. A small San Simeon, and well-patronized."

"Offhand I'd say no. But I don't give such hasty opinions to be taken seriously," Grey added with a smile. "You've searched, I'm sure."

"Right. Inside *and* out; there's a lot of thick shrubbery."

"Did Horace have any dedicated, fanatical heirs who might agree with him about a government swindle?"

"None close enough to be affected. The arrangement was that after Jeremiah died the property passed to the state, the only qualification being that his son Micah and grandson Horace live there for life, with no rent or property tax, but allowing the public in free daily. When Horace died fifteen years ago, there were no more Colemans eligible to move in, and the state ran the house as a free museum. But before that, in the sneaky way the letter mentions, the legislature reneged and decided to honor the contract only fifteen more years. So now,

with Horace long gone, the new plan takes effect and the people pay admission. Dirty, but quite legal; they found a loophole of some kind. Probably, too, the taxpayers were unhappy; aren't they always? Anyhow, that's why Horace was burned up and planned this revenge: to destroy the house about the time it goes private. But getting back to that offhand opinion—"

"Just from the top of my head, then," Grey said. "Batteries won't last; they leak, corrode. There are some that keep until started by puncture or particular activation procedures, but that only pushes the problem back a step; what energizes the activator? Acid works quickly or not at all. To have a wire eaten away and release a spring-loaded detonator, how do you open a vial of acid after all that time? A spring-loaded plunger to break the glass—but what releases the spring and what keeps it from rusting away? There's air pressure and temperature. You could count on a high in either in X years, and set a spring detonator to react, but why is X fifteen, and how could anybody guarantee that the barometer or thermometer wouldn't go high enough tomorrow or next week?"

Trask gulped, almost gaping. Grey must work like a giant computer testing for primes, trying hundreds each second.

"You have ideas—possible solutions—I couldn't think of in years," he said. "But you throw them all away."

"Premature, anyway," the scientist said. "I need to know a lot more about friend Horace. What kind of a man was he? Where and how educated, for example. Hobbies, special expertise; you see the point."

"Of course. Well, he was a Harvard graduate and very brilliant. Majored in science, but turned later to biology; invertebrates were his field, which must mean more to you than me. For thirty years, until his death, he was a professor of biology at Hayes Technical College. Lived in the family home-museum, as I've said, but had very little income except from his job; grandfather lived it up while still here and didn't leave much except the house to his heirs. And that only to sleep in, you might say; the state held title; nothing could be sold. One of the Fragonard paintings would have set Horace up, but it seems he wasn't bitter; loved his teaching and was good at it."

Grey jabbed twice at a stud in one arm of the chair, and two cigars rolled out of a recess into his

hand. He tossed one to Trask, and lit his own at a disc that suddenly glowed red near the button.

"Ah," the lieutenant said, "Havana—you smuggler!"

"Not at all," was the bland reply. "I have a Cuban refugee friend who brought out ten thousand of the best, well before our ill-advised quarantine. But back to our moutons. You see, Trask, my ideas won't work—not with the kind of certainty Coleman needs—or needed; hard to remember he's fifteen years dead. But he was filled with a strong grievance, and had quite a while to ponder the matter, so we can't really rule out such a fuse, however improbable it may seem." He puffed furiously for a few moments, then said, "You could take him seriously enough to clean out the house—remove all the art objects."

"Only up to a point," the detective said. "Much of the best stuff is permanent—part of the building. Molded cornices, tiles, archways, stained-glass windows, gorgeous hardwood floors—no end to it. We could save the Renoirs, El Grecos, and such."

"I see. Well, we can't let such a collection get blown up. Give me your data on Coleman and I'll go over them today."

"Got it all right here," Trask said, opening his briefcase. He handed Grey a large, fat envelope.

"This could take some time for even a faint glimmer," the scientist said. "At the moment, I've not an inkling. A fifteen-year fuse, even eighty percent reliable—golly! You've no idea what that implies. Although," he added, "there's silica gel—keeps things dry, unrusted."

"*I* don't have any answers," the detective said smugly. "But you will have; the governor expects it."

"Damn the old mugwump," Grey snapped. "My sympathies are with the Colemans; but this official had no part in the deal. Now clear out of here and let me hallucinate. A fifteen-year time bomb—oh, brother!"

Grinning, the detective left.

Patiently, with his customary thoroughness, the scientist went through the thick dossier. "Began with classics, I see," he muttered. "Hence that crack about the Styx. Then general zoology, and finally the invertebrates . . . arthropods . . . better check his publications . . . never can tell . . . *Respiration in Periplaneta Americana*—there's a fascinating topic!"

He read steadily for two hours, then took up the photos of the house. They were big glossies, microscopically sharp. The crime lab had a Hasselblad and knew how

to use it. Quite a place, all right; baroque but impressive . . . dense shrubbery, particularly along the south wall . . . decades old, he'd estimate . . .

Finally he was finished with the dossier. He pressed a button in the arm of his chair, and a crystal flask of brandy rose up and out of a recess. He sipped it very slowly, thinking hard. The germ of an idea was hovering tantalizingly at the edge of his brain. Suddenly he went rigid, then laughed. Absurd! It was incredible, nonsensical, and yet . . .

He flipped a switch, and the chair, propelled by an electric motor, went smoothly up the ramp to his second-floor library, which housed over five thousand books. With the aid of a long rod that ended in padded tongs, he took down volumes by Fabre, Essig, Lutz, and Imms. He leafed through these eagerly, pausing to scrutinize certain passages. Fabre, that incomparable observer—stylist, too—had it all. But Grey wasn't quite convinced; simply too wild.

He maneuvered his chair to the phone, and questioning his own sanity, put through a call to Harvard. Brian Foote, an old friend on the faculty, was his target. After an exchange of greetings, Grey got to the point.

"Brian," he said, "I'd like you to get me the title of a Ph.D. thesis and maybe a Master's, if any. The name is Horace Coleman; he graduated with a doctorate in zoology in 1922. Could you get me that information right now?"

"Why not?" Foote said. "It takes only a call to the librarian."

Twenty minutes later Grey had the answer, and his eyes widened. The crazy inference—none too plausible—had paid off. Surely this was the heart of Coleman's plan, spectacularly ingenious even with a hint from Nature's own timing and a very useful coincidence. But what about the bones and muscles, the implementing anatomy? He went into deep thought again. Something incorruptible was needed. Nylon monofilament, say . . . maybe gold wire; why not? . . . a heavily-greased sleeve into the big box . . . takes plenty of dynamite, gelignite, plastique, or whatever, to pulverize a large building from the outside . . . In his mind's eye he could now see the whole mechanism, and Grey was consumed with admiration; tomorrow a consultation with Trask . . .

Trask arrived early; in fact, had he dared, the detective would have turned up at sunrise. He sat on the edge of the chair and al-

most groaned with impatience as Grey drew him a cup of black Kona from the recess in his automated chair.

"Relax," the scientist said. "I'm almost afraid to give you my suggestion, it's so wild. More of a guess than a probable inference this time—but it does add up."

The detective sipped the superb coffee and waited. It was Grey's show.

"What you'll need to do," the scientist said, "is probe all the ground around the house—" Here Trask groaned. "—but only up to about ten feet away and twenty or thirty inches deep. You'll be looking for a rather large box, perhaps several feet square. Move the earth away carefully, in small amounts, and be sure to cut any and all threads connected to it."

"What kind of threads?"

"I don't know, but something durable obviously, if they've lasted fifteen years in damp soil. Nylon, gold—something of that sort."

"I don't understand any of this," Trask said. "Tell me before I go nuts."

Grey held up a small bottle full of clear liquid. Inside was a leggy corpse which the detective immediately put in the category: bug, large and messy.

"This," the scientist said, "is the larva of the periodical cicada, also known as the 17-year locust. It's your patient bomber."

Trask seemed unable to speak, but his lips moved soundlessly.

"I'll explain. Imagine a big box full of explosive with a detonator—no, two, for insurance—operated by a small but steady pull on a straight wire of stiff metal. Running into the box, through well-greased sleeves—or one bigger opening, say—very thin, strong threads or wires. These," he said slowly, watching the detective, "would be attached to several larvae of the cicada, carefully, so as not to injure them or even keep them from feeding. Threaded through the chitinous top of the thorax, I'd guess. Now," he added in a brisk tone, "Coleman puts box and larvae deep into the ground among thick shrubbery, on which the insects will feed happily for the fifteen years left of their cycle—they were two years into it, clearly, when he got them. They are not inclined to move—so says Fabre—with plenty of food around. All right. After fifteen years, meaning months from now, they move up to carry out their metamorphosis. Insects, you must know, are enormously strong for their size; some can move, even lift, ten or more times their own weight. You've seen ants go at it. Well, with a dozen of these pull-

ing on their threads, all attached through one hole, or several, to the detonator complex in the box, it's damn near certain the light, oiled metal pin will be dragged loose. That releases the spring, and boom! Scratch one house. Coleman, by the way, did his doctoral thesis on periodical cicadas."

"Joe's dead and Sal's a widder!" Trask muttered, totally unaware of dredging up, after forty years, a favorite cry of wonder used by a maternal aunt, long since dead. "I know you mean it, but—"

"So far, still only a plausible inference—pedantese for reckless guess—but probe anyway; then we'll see."

Three days later the word came. Trask was exultant. "Almost exactly what you predicted," he said. "Big box of dynamite, thirty-two inches underground, and at least eight of the bugs, fat and sassy, with long, thin tethers. Actually they could roam quite a bit without pulling the pins—two of those, each with a detonating spring. Silica gel in the bomb; even greased tubes for the wires. You'll be glad to know," he added, "we didn't kill the cicadas; just cut 'em loose—with a warning!"

Grey chuckled. "You said 'almost' right. Where did I slip?"

"It was platinum wire, but very fine; the lab boys think Horace must have drawn it out from the regular gauge."

"I should have thought of that," the scientist said ruefully. "Common in chemistry classes; gold isn't."

"Too bad about you," Trask said. "Only 99 percent on the beam!"

He came by a month later, carrying a flat parcel.

"The state can't legally give you a Coleman Fragonard," he said, "but Mutual of Maine can buy one, and at my hint, since you saved them about five million bucks in insurance, they did so. I hope you like it. You'd better; not many Fragonards on the open market, so little choice. But it looks good to me."

For once, Cyriack Skinner Grey was speechless.

A blind bogey may be the wedge to a par performance.

Harry Singleton heard Officer Leonard Zollweg to the door.

"I'm afraid I talked your ear off, Len."

"Let's see. No, they're both still here."

Harry laughed. "You know what I mean. A man my age tends to live too much in the past and drag others back with him."

"You didn't hear me kicking and screaming. Look, Harry, I don't want to sound heavy but mankind got where it is by the old passing on what they learned to the young."

"Way the world sometimes appears to be, that could be blameworthy as well as praiseworthy."

"Honest, Harry, that yarn about the couple of years you roamed with the Gypsies, now, was really something. I like to hear you tell about all the different things you did in your time. Not that your time is up."

Harry smiled. "Thanks. For the last most of all."

Len seemed to be shrugging himself carefully into his overcoat. "Come to that, I made you listen plenty to me beef about being out of things till my gunshot wound heals."

"I know how it feels to be out of things."

"I guess you do, Harry. Well, see you again soon."

"Right, Len. And do make it soon."

A strong chill draft blew through as the door opened.

"Whoops, almost got away from me. Good night, Harry."

"Good night, Len."

The door closed and Leonard's car finally started and rattled off and Harry was alone to face the long hours of darkness ahead.

One thing he could do, Harry decided after a half hour of reliving the dead and buried days the evening had reawakened, was make himself a cup of hot cocoa. He smiled wryly as he made his way to the kitchen; a far piece, this, from a Romany campfire.

He measured two heaping teaspoons of instant cocoa into a cup, then half-filled a small saucepan with water, getting it exactly half full by tipping it till he felt the water start spilling over the rim. He set the pan on a burner, then turned the tap. He heard the hiss of gas but not the tiny boom of fire. He turned off the tap and put his palm on the cast iron above the pilot light. The metal was cold. The flame had gone out.

by Edward Wellen

He sniffed the air. He should have caught sooner the odorant the gas company added to the natural gas to give it that warning smell. Not much had escaped, though, as yet. Must've been the draft, when Len opened the front door, that snuffed out the pilot light.

Harry shoved the lower sash of the kitchen window all the way up to let the cold air thin out the unburned gas. The thing, now, was to relight the pilot. Matches—he patted their place on the cupboard shelf—all out of them. He remembered that he had them down on his Braille shopping list for next Monday. That did him a lot of good now.

He sighed. His old neighbors on the left, the pleasant Yoders, were south for the winter months. His new neighbors on the right, the unpleasant or at least unneighborly Venters, were at home. The silence of their dog, a huge savage Doberman pinscher someone had told him, indicated that. It barked, and how it barked, whenever his owners were out and left it alone in the house. He hated to have to turn to the Venters, but they couldn't be so unneighborly as to refuse him a few matches. Besides,

once they had done him this favor they would be likely to look upon him more kindly thereafter. They might even prove, finally, to be good neighbors.

He put on his rubbers, overcoat, hat, and scarf, and lifted his cane out of the umbrella stand. He left his front door unlocked, thinking he'd be gone only a minute or so at most.

No hedge or fence divided the small plots the developer had called spacious lawns but Harry would not dream of cutting across the Venters' lawn. His cane guided him to their front door, by way of his walk and theirs. He settled his dark glasses firmly and squarely on ears and nose, and felt for the doorbell. The dog beat him to the punch.

It was on its way before the chimes sounded. Harry heard the deep growl rush toward him and the click of nails on flooring; then a hammering lunge shook the door and, it seemed, the whole house. The dog must be a monster.

"Down, Tiger," Mrs. Venter commanded.

In her voice, Harry detected a curious mixture of eagerness and fear. He heard the paws slide slowly down the other side of the door. The heavy breathing, the hungry panting, receded a bit, and he could hear the door swing open.

"Did you get it all right, Roy? Oh, you're not Roy. You're the bl—, the man next door."

Harry heard the strain in her voice and the creak of leather as if she were holding the dog's collar. He raised his hand very slowly to touch his hat. "Good evening, Mrs. Venter. I'm Harry Singleton. Sorry to bother you at this hour but my pilot light has gone out and I need matches."

"Your what? Oh, for the gas range?" She sounded quite distracted.

Harry wondered what was wrong as he said, "Yes."

"Well," she said grudgingly, "you'd better come inside so I can close the door. I'll go see if I can find some."

He stepped in and she closed the door. Tiger growled.

"Thank you, Mrs. Venter."

"Don't thank me yet. I don't know if we have a match in the house. We own an electric range and my husband's the smoker. But I'll take a look. Wait here."

Harry nodded, then stood perfectly still while Tiger padded and sniffed all around him.

"Sit, Tiger," the woman called, evidently over her shoulder, as she headed for the kitchen.

Tiger sat, from the sound, then got up again. To forget Tiger,

Harry thought about Mrs. Venter. She wore leather boots, a more supple creak than the dog's collar, and the rustle of layers of heavy clothing seemed to fit outdoors more than indoors. Maybe she was ready to go out and only awaited Roy Venter's coming.

What was it Roy was supposed to be getting? "Did you get it all right?" indicated some element of risk or doubt. A warm milky smell wafted into Harry's thoughts. He smiled. The Venters had seemed to him more gin fizz or bloody mary than warm milk. You never knew.

Tiger backed away a little. Mrs. Venter was returning. A baby cried.

Harry brightened. That explained the warm milky smell. Mrs. Venter had stopped momentarily, then she came on. He smiled at her.

"I didn't know you had a baby, Mrs. Venter."

Her footsteps stopped again, came on again. She halted in front of him. "It isn't really mine, it's my sister's. We're minding it while my sister's in the hospital."

Strange, the words had a rehearsed ring. Why should the woman lie about the reason for having a baby in the house?

"Sorry to hear that your sister's sick. Nothing serious, I hope."

"Yeah, thanks." Impatience gave way to laughter in her voice. "Here I been holding this out to you and me forgetting you couldn't see what I'm holding. I found this here box of old wooden matches way back on a shelf. They don't look so hot. You might have to strike a few before you strike a good one."

"That's just fine, Mrs. Venter. I appreciate this."

He put his hand out to take the matches but drew it back when Tiger growled. Better let the woman hand the box to him—but he waited, forgotten, as the dog suddenly gave a happy bark and launched toward the front door, brushing him back against the wall. A key worked the lock and the door flung open. A heavy presence filled the hallway.

"I got it, Lorraine!" Harry heard the whisper of paper inside the crackle of paper as the man turned to close the door. "I got—" The voice went flat. "Who's this?"

"You know who he is, Roy." The woman's voice was full of hidden gestures. "It's Mr. Singleton, from next door."

"What's he doing here?"

"He came to see if we had any matches. His pilot light went out."

Some people had a way of talking in front of a blind man as if

blindness made him unable to think or speak for himself.

The baby cried.

"I thought I told you to give it that stuff to keep it under." Roy Venter's voice was low but savage.

"I know, but—"

Tiger had evidently grown impatient at inattention, and perhaps jealousy of the baby added to his impatience. Harry heard the dog leaping and licking and the man stumbling back and striking out. This was followed by the sound of tearing—the splitting of a grocery bag?—and the sliding spill and airy thud of many papery objects.

"Damn you, Tiger!"

One of the objects had come to rest on Harry's foot. He bent to pick it up, then found himself fingering a thick bundle of paper currency. As he brought the packet up, Harry wrinkled his nose at a faint smell coming from it, the lingering remains of a strong and distasteful odor. He knew that smell from the past. The words *filthy lucre* came to mind. He held the packet out and it was jerked from his grasp.

Harry smiled and held out his empty hand toward Mrs. Venter, saying, "I'd better take the matches now and get back before too much gas escapes."

"Yeah. Here they are."

"Hold it, Lorraine." Venter's voice came across hard. "Don't give him the matches. We can't let him go now. I can see he knows something's fishy. Even if he doesn't know what it is now, he'll put the money and the baby together when the news breaks."

Harry put the money and the baby together immediately. The money had to be ransom money and the baby had to be a kidnapped baby. He hadn't heard anything on the radio about a missing child, but then that might mean only that the kidnapper—Roy Venter—had told the parents to keep it from the police, the press, and the public.

"But, Roy—"

"Look, Lorraine, we've got to have all the lead time we can get. With the money in our hands, we're so near bringing it off we can't afford to let anything go wrong now."

"What're we going to do with him?"

"Let me worry about that."

And me, Harry thought.

"Whatever you say, Roy."

"First, get the empty suitcase out of the closet and help me pick up the money and put it in. Watch him, Tiger."

Tiger rumbled and Harry felt the hot pulsing breath through his trouser legs. The hall closet opened. There were two thumps, one dull, one hollow.

"Here's my bag too, Roy. I'm all packed and ready to go."

"Fine, doll."

The money was stacked into the suitcase and the suitcase clicked shut.

The woman sighed. "All that green looked beautiful."

"My favorite shade. All set, Lorraine? Then you might as well take off."

"I guess so, Roy." Coat hangers rattled. "Just help me on with my coat. With all that money, you've got to get used to behaving like a gentleman."

Venter laughed. "Yeah, I do at that, don't I?"

Harry heard the fall of heavy cloth and the click of buttons on the floor. Lorraine Venter gave a groan of dismay.

"Sorry, I must be nervous."

The man grunted, picking up the coat and dusting it lightly. "What do you have to be nervous about? All you're going to do is take a plane ride."

"Thanks, you're a real gentleman. All right, I'll calmly walk down to the corner and calmly grab a cab to the airport. But honestly, Roy, do we have to split up now?"

"I'll tell you again. They'll know it took a man and a woman to pull the job and they'll be looking for a couple, a man my age and a woman of thirty—twenty-six, sorry. Got your ticket?"

The sound of fumbling. "Yes. No. Yes. How about you, Roy? Will you be all right?"

"Of course. I'll lock the old guy

in, take the car, dump the baby along the way, and me and Tiger'll meet you Friday, you know where."

"You'll leave it wrapped up nice and warm, won't you?"

"The baby? Sure, sure."

"You won't forget to use a pay phone to tell the parents where to find it?"

"Sure, sure."

Harry went cold. Roy Venter sounded too glib.

"So long, Roy."

"So long, Lorraine."

A wet kiss, then the door opened and closed and her footsteps faded. Harry stirred; Tiger growled.

"What're you planning to do with me?"

"Just you take it nice and easy, Mr. Singleton. We're going to wait a while till she's around the corner, then we're going to take a little walk back to your house. Your pilot light's out, you say?"

"Yes."

"I'll take care of it for you."

Again Harry went cold. The snuffed pilot light had put ideas into Venter's mind. He would open the taps and let the gas fill Harry's kitchen, and so stage Harry's suicide.

Len Zollweg would say that his friend Harry had seemed uncommonly cheerful earlier in the evening—but it was common for a suicide to be uncommonly cheerful just before killing himself; cheerful because he had at last made up his mind.

Harry heard the window curtain rustle.

"Okay. She's around the corner. We can go now. Better take the suitcase along, hey, feller? Don't want to let that out of our sight after all this, do we?" Venter was talking to Tiger.

Tiger growled agreement with his master's tone. The sound of rope smacking wood was Tiger's tail thumping the floor.

A big hard hand clamped on Harry's arm as Venter said, "Let's go."

Harry bent slightly, facing across Venter, and sniffed the air. "Wait a minute."

Venter voiced rough amusement. "What do you smell? The gas leak's in your house, isn't it? Don't tell me you can smell it from here?"

"No, I'm smelling your suitcase."

Venter did some puzzled sniffing of his own. "I don't smell a thing."

"That's just it. Tell me, the bag your wife took and the bag you put the money in—are they matching suitcases?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"She switched them on you, most likely when she dropped her coat and you were busy picking it up."

"You're crazy. How would you know that?" The hand unclamped from around Harry's arm and he heard the sound of unfastening, then a grunt. "She did switch them on me, the little—" Fingers bit into Harry's wrist. "How could you tell?"

"I guess you asked for all old and all small bills."

"You guess right."

"Well, they were old. Old and dirty. I worked in a bank for a little while many years ago and when we opened the vault in the morning the smell of money, dirty paper money, was enough to make you sick. These days I guess they air-condition the vaults, so maybe it isn't the same, but I'll never forget the smell."

The fingers reluctantly gave up their bite on Harry's wrist. "I'm wasting time. She's making it to the airport."

Harry sought to delay him a bit longer. "It could be an honest mistake on her part."

"Yeah. Mistake. I'll show her she made the worst mistake of her lousy life."

Tiger growled. The man, though, fell deadly silent—no doubt thinking what to do with Harry now, in light of this new turn. Harry tightened his grip on his cane. If the man changed his mind about staging Harry's suicide by gas and meant to finish him off here, Harry would at least go down fighting and the man would know he had been in a fight. Then he heard the rattle and tinkle of keys on a key ring, and the testing of the stiff lock on the closet door.

"Yes, it works. All right, old man, into the closet."

A hand twisted Harry around and shoved him backward. The voice and the hand were vicious, as though it were against his will that the man had decided to postpone the final solution to the problem of Harry Singleton. Roy Venter, if that was his real name, had to catch up with Lorraine Venter, if that was her real name, before she boarded a flight to otherwhere. Harry stumbled over a sill and fell back against some clothing that, with a jangle of hangers, yielded to a hard wall. The door slammed and the bolt was harshly secured.

The man's voice came through, just as harsh. "If I was you, I'd forget about trying to break out. I'm leaving the dog on guard. In case you don't know, he's trained to kill." The voice changed to command. "Hold him, Tiger!"

Tiger's growl took on its deepest rumble yet. The outer door slammed shut. Through spaces in Tiger's growling, Harry heard a car pull away.

Harry felt around. The winged knob turned the latch but not the bolt. The keyhole did not reach through to this side of the door, so there went the hope of fiddling the lock with a wire hanger. The hinges were on the outside of the door, so there went the hope of unhinging the door. At least he had learned that the closet door would swing open toward the front door.

He took inventory of the closet. The hangers yielded a heavy woolen sweater and a leather jacket. The shelf yielded a silk scarf and a half dozen hats and caps. There was a pair of galoshes at his feet. A form arose in his mind.

He stuffed the scarf and the hats and the caps into the sweater and the zipped jacket, added his own hat and scarf to the stuffing, flexed the straight section of a wire hanger till it broke, and ruthlessly threaded a still-warm end through material to wire the stuffed sweater and the stuffed jacket together bottom to bottom. The cramped space made a contortionist out of him as he worked out of his overcoat. He wrapped and buttoned his overcoat around the whole, wired the galoshes to the cuffs of the jacket, and had a vaguely human form to share the closet.

Harry's movements inside the closet seemed to drive Tiger wild. Harry could almost feel the hot breath of Tiger through the closet door but he knew that was merely his own body heat building up in the closeness. As Harry drew breath for his next move, Tiger gave a sudden snapping bark.

Harry leaped inside himself, then smiled. "That's right, Tiger. Make me sweat."

He wadded his handkerchief and mopped his face, arms and neck with the balled handkerchief, then stuffed the ball into the figure he had fashioned. It was an old Gypsy trick, the sweaty handkerchief; he hoped it would work.

Now, bracing his back against the wall, Harry thrust his heel at the door where the bolt held. Nothing. He thrust again. A slight splintering.

Tiger raced madly back and forth in the hallway, stopping now and again to rear up and paw at the closet door with terrifying power.

Harry thrust again, then waited, not even breathing, to listen. One more kick, from the feel of it, and the lock would give way. He kept

track of the pacing Tiger and when he heard the dog cross to the hinged side of the door he moved fast.

His last kick splintered the lock free and the swinging door struck Tiger, momentarily stunning the brute and sandwiching it between the closet door and the outer door. The closet door shielded Harry's body while he reached around to open the front door. Then he flung the dummy bearing his scent as far outside as he could. Tiger raced out after it. Harry quickly pulled the front door shut and bolted it.

He leaned back against the door in happy weakness, but not for long. No time to waste. If this layout was anything like that of his own ranch-style house, a good bet since they had the same builder, the first room on the right should be the room where the baby lay; but first, the rear door needed his attention. He ran his fingers along the wall to the kitchen, found the rear door bolted, but made doubly sure by jamming a kitchen chair under the doorknob and wedging it securely.

The warm milky smell alone would have led him to the baby. Reaching out, he led toward the child with the rounded back of his hand: he did not want to poke a finger in the baby's eye or ear.

As he picked up the baby, reaction suddenly hit him and he shivered. The baby cried.

"Shh. It's all right, baby. You're safe now."

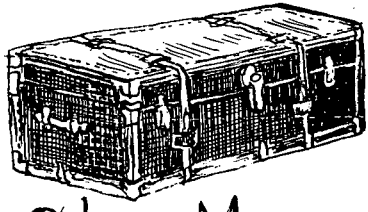
Not yet; neither of them was safe till the Venters were in custody. The baby still in his arms, he hunted the phone.

He started to dial O, changed his mind. It would take too much talking on his part to convince the police he was no crank. "Kidnapping? What kidnapping?"

The police would be readier to believe one of their own. Besides, Officer Leonard Zollweg was impatient to get back into harness, to be in on things. Harry dialed Len's home phone. As he listened to the ringing he sniffed and smiled. He hoped the windup of this case would be a fast one. The baby needed a change.

A helpful gesture may ease one's burdens considerably.

Ultimate Benefit



by Carroll Mayers

When I answer the lobby phone that afternoon, Professor Scribner is calling from his third floor apartment. "Joseph," he says, "can you come up for a moment?"

The management of the apartment complex maintains around-the-clock doorman attendance; we are not supposed to leave the lobby.

"I'm sorry, Professor," I say, "but I'm on duty down here."

"I understand," he tells me, "but this will only take a few minutes. I won't mention I used your services."

Professor Scribner is a fine gentleman and I like him a lot. He's not above stopping and talking every now and then, and from bits he mentions I gather Mrs. Scribner is somewhat of a cross he has to bear, browbeating him and calling all the signals in his domestic life. That's where I figure we have a sort of affinity because, while my Agnes doesn't exactly nag, she always stresses how she's smarter, more intelligent than I am; that I never understand the true nature of anything.

When we watch those murder stories on TV, for instance, she laughs at me when I don't guess the plot in advance, as she does. (When she's wrong, it doesn't faze her.)

Anyway, because of my regard for Professor Scribner, I yield to his request. "All right, sir," I say, "I'll come right up."

He gives me a quiet smile as he admits me to the apartment; it appears Mrs. Scribner isn't home. "I do appreciate this, Joseph." The professor is a mild, slight individual with pleasant, open features and he chairs the philosophy department at State University.

I say, "Whatever it is, I'm glad to help, but I have to get back pretty quick."

"You will," he assures me. We move through the foyer and he gestures toward a sizable steamer trunk in the center of the livingroom. "I'd like you to help me carry that down the fire stairs to my car," the professor explains. "I called the express company but they can't arrange for pickup until tomorrow. I want it shipped out tonight, so I'll drive it over there myself."

I step forward, start to maneuver the trunk to the door. Professor Scribner helps me. It's not easy—the trunk is heavy. I grin and say, "All the family heirlooms, sir?"

He smiles again. "Hardly. I'm exchanging some of my books with a colleague upstate. He's quite anxious to receive the shipment, and to get mine off in return."

Clearing the apartment door is a bit difficult, but after that we have no problems. We carry the trunk down the fire stairs to Professor Scribner's car in the complex's rear parking lot.

We can't close the car's trunk lid when we ease the steamer job into the rear well, but the professor solves that by tying the lid half shut with a length of rope.

Altogether, it takes us about fifteen minutes.

"Let me say again how much I appreciate your help, Joseph," he tells me. He also gives me a ten-dollar bill.

"That isn't necessary, sir," I say and really mean it.

The professor shakes his head. "I insist," he says. "And don't concern yourself with my informing your employers that I utilized your muscles away from the lobby for a quarter hour."

I laugh, tell the professor that's something *I* appreciate, thank him for the money and go back to finish my shift.

After dinner that night, I am watching Agnes make out a shopping list, which gets longer and longer. I swear softly.

Agnes looks up and suddenly it crosses my mind that somehow she's not as attractive as she was two years ago when we married. Her figure is fleshier and her face seems pinched rather than piquant. Maybe, I think, I'm looking at her through different eyes

because she's constantly putting me down.

"Now what?" she asks.

"That list."

"What about it?"

I say, "Do you have to buy out the market? I got a ten-dollar tip today. I thought it would help toward some of our bills, but it looks as though I might as well've thrown it away."

Agnes' mouth quirks. "Everything on this list is something we need," she informs me. "Any man with an ounce of intelligence would appreciate that—" She breaks off, green eyes narrowing. "Ten dollars? What did you do to get a ten-dollar tip?"

"I helped a man load a trunk into his car."

"And for just that he gave you ten dollars?"

I sigh. "It was a little more than 'just that.' We had to carry it down two flights of stairs."

"Where? At the apartments?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you required to remain on duty in the lobby at all times?"

"For Pete's sake, Agnes," I protest, "it is nothing. I only helped out one of the tenants. I wasn't gone more than fifteen minutes."

She puts down her pencil. "For a grown man, you can be very stupid. Your 'helping out' could've gotten you fired. I'd still like to hear all the details, *all* of them."

What can I do? I go through the whole bit.

Agnes says nothing as I finish; she simply sits there, fingertips drumming the table. Her eyes are reflective, half-closed. Finally, she makes a pronouncement: "Joe, it could just be that you were very gullible."

I flush. "Look—"

Agnes cuts me off. "Didn't it occur to you that you might have been used? That it's hardly conceivable to be paid ten dollars simply for helping carry a trunk down two flights of stairs—unless that money was a bribe to insure your saying nothing about the affair?"

I am getting a little worked up. "I don't call ten dollars a bribe," I tell her. "Besides, I never told the professor I wouldn't mention helping him. The point never came up."

"But it did," Agnes says. "*He* brought it up when he assured you he wouldn't tell your employers about your leaving the lobby unattended. That was his subtle way of suggesting you not talk about it either." She gets up, takes a turn about the kitchen. "The ten dollars was subtle too," she adds. "Any more and even you might've begun to be suspicious."

Boy-oh-boy! "All right," I say wearily, "just what are you getting at?"

"I still am not sure," she says. "I am almost afraid to think about it. How heavy was that trunk?"

"I told you: fairly heavy. Those books made for weight."

Agnes' gaze gets reflective again. "Suppose there weren't any books?" she asks. "Suppose there was a body?"

"A body! Whose body?"

"Mrs. Scribner's."

I goggle at her; she ignores my stupefaction.

"You've mentioned how their relationship is," she goes on firmly. "Suppose your professor finally gets fed up, kills his wife, stuffs her into that trunk. Then he gets you to help him carry it down to his car so that after dark he can drive off to heaven-knows-where in the country and bury the body."

Those TV murder stories are really getting to her! "That's ridiculous," I say. "How could he account for her absence?"

Agnes is ready for that. "Didn't you tell me once that he told you his wife has a sister on the Coast? She could be 'visiting' out there, 'die' unexpectedly. That's a nice safe distance away."

"You're out of your mind," I blurt. "There's no proof of any of that stuff. Agnes, you're ridiculous."

She ignores me. "The entire affair is too suspicious to pass over," she declares. "We're going to the police."

My head is spinning now. "This's crazy," I protest. "The professor will sue us for defamation of character. We can't tell the police a story like that!"

Agnes tosses her head. "Maybe you can't, but I can," she says. "And *I'll* do the talking . . ."

A lean man with shrewd gray eyes somehow out of place in placid features, Lieutenant Houseman is courteous and attentive. He listens to Agnes' story without comment, frequently glancing at me for a nod of corroboration.

Agnes pulls out all the stops, stresses all the offbeat bits she's latched onto: Professor Scribner getting me away from the lobby, contrary to rule; his generous gratuity for what on the surface was no great service; his "subtle" inference that I make no mention of the incident; the considerable weight of the trunk itself, plus the fact that the professor had it carried down the rear fire stairs rather than use the normal elevator; and, of course, the fact that the man and his wife are not exactly lovebirds.

When Agnes finishes, Houseman asks simply, "Is that all, ma'am?"

"That's all!" Agnes says. "Isn't it enough?"

The lieutenant shakes his head. "I'm afraid not. All those inconsistencies you point out are only conjecture. There's no actual proof on any count."

She bridles. "You're not very perceptive, Lieutenant."

Houseman is a patient man. "The word is prudent, Mrs. Jennings. With known criminals or suspects we take a certain liberty, yes. But we don't invade ordinary citizens' privacy on mere speculation—"

"Mere speculation!"

"That's correct."

"Meaning you won't initiate an investigation?"

"On what you've just cited, no, ma'am."

Agnes gives him a withering look. "No wonder there's so much crime!" she snaps scornfully. "Well—we're on record." With that, she flounces out of the office.

The lieutenant stops me briefly as I move to follow her. "Your wife watches those crime shows on TV, Mr. Jennings?"

I tell him she does.

His smile is a little sad. "It figures," he says.

All of which sums up this account except for two last points.

Point one occurs the following day, with just about the first person I see crossing the lobby when I go on duty: *Mrs.* Scribner.

Of course I phone Agnes right away. There's a big silence on the line. Then she hangs up on me.

Point two isn't as immediate. That night and in the days that follow, Agnes isn't the least contrite or chagrined or taken down by her speculative faux pas. Rather, she swings things around so that *I'm* to blame for her going off half-cocked, looking foolish with the police lieutenant. If I hadn't stupidly left my post in the lobby, *I* wouldn't have gotten involved, and then *she* wouldn't have gotten involved, etc., etc., etc.

On general accounts, too, I'm still gullible and not very smart . . . or intelligent . . . or understanding.

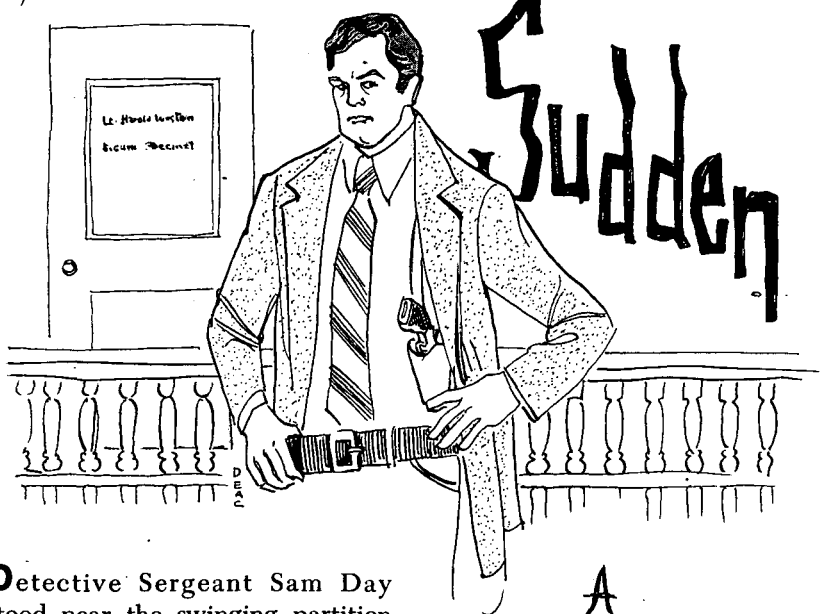
I tell you, a constant attitude like that can get a fellow down.

There is one ultimate benefit to the affair. It helps me resolve a decision that's been nibbling at me for some time and on which I've finally made up my mind.

Tonight I am going to borrow Professor Scribner's trunk.

It really takes only one big killing to fix one's pension plan.

All of a Sudden



A Novelette by John Lutz

Detective Sergeant Sam Day stood near the swinging partition that gave access to the area behind the long, scarred wooden counter. The faint odor of sweat and varnish rose from the counter, a familiar odor to Day. He shifted his weight to his other leg and felt a trickle of perspiration down his back. It was hot outside, almost ninety, and the old Eighth Precinct air-conditioner just wasn't doing it. Off to one side the

switchboard operator sat, marking his chart to keep track of the Eighth Precinct cars, his ears alert to calls for those cars and those cars only, picking them out almost automatically from the constant stream of static-filled chatter that blared from the metal speaker near him.

Day saw that the door to the lieutenant's office was open about quarter way, and he heard voices from inside. Laughter, loud talking, silence, then "Oh, sure, sure, Harry," somebody said with emphasis, and there was another laugh.

Sighing with impatience, Day leaned against the counter. The desk sergeant, old Hap Kramer, continued bringing his records up to date, hunched over the long counter as if he were oblivious to anyone else's presence. Near the other end of the room several younger, uniformed officers lounged, talking while one of them finished a report to give to the clerk to type. Behind them was the door to the holdover, about half full now, because the night had barely begun.

The Eighth Precinct house was a crummy place, Day reflected. It was really an old converted four-family flat, in a crummy neighborhood among crummy people. Some of the people he had to work with were crummy too.

Day caught himself and made his mind take some other tack. It was no good thinking that way. He'd chosen this for his career, and he was a thirty-four-year-old detective now, doing well enough . . . under the circumstances.

Still, it got to a man every so often: the squalor of the job, the unappreciative, misunderstanding, even despising public. There was the hopelessness of trying to get convictions, of long hours of hard work going for nothing—hours he knew he should be spending at home with Audrey and his boy Greg. Sam Day had risen fast enough in the department, but only to a point, it seemed. Suddenly, men with less ability, even less time on the force, began to pass him, were given more responsibility, chances to prove themselves. He adjusted the chafing shoulder strap of his holster and silently cursed the heat, and despite himself he looked around him again and wondered if it were worthwhile.

The lieutenant's door opened all the way as there was another loud laugh, and a short man with a yellow face and thin wisps of black hair walked out, smiling to himself: Jack Vectin, Twelfth Precinct alderman. Idly, Day wondered what he'd been talking about with

the lieutenant. Not that it mattered.

"*Boston Eight,*" Day heard the speaker near the switchboard operator blare, "*go to 538 Chambers Street and investigate a reported cutting.*"

Nothing for me, Day thought to himself as he half listened to the patrol car's laconic reply. For the present he'd been assigned to the burglary detail.

Then Lieutenant Harold Weston appeared in the doorway to his office. A man of medium height with a deceptive smoothness to his round face, a deceptive blandness to his eyes, he was acting captain in charge of the Eighth Precinct. He placed his cigar in his mouth and waved for Day to enter.

"How you been making it?" he asked Day, as he settled himself behind his desk and motioned for Day to sit in a nearby small wooden chair.

"Good enough, I suppose, Lieutenant." Day wondered why he'd been summoned, wished the man would get to the point.

"Don't get the idea I asked you in here to chew you out," Lieutenant Weston said. "Nothing like that. More just a word of caution."

"Caution?" Day began to feel uneasy. He knew he was talking to a much smarter man than appeared on the surface to anyone.

The lieutenant looked thoughtful, chewed on his cigar. "Maybe more like advice. I learned a few hours ago that Fred Brent left town and nobody knows where he went."

Day was silent; he knew what that meant. Brent had committed a large-scale burglary at Hollman's Department Store. The police were sure he did it, and in time they would have gathered enough evidence to bring him in. Gathering that evidence was Day's job, and the fact that Brent had cut and run meant that Day had not been quite careful enough and had somehow alerted him.

"A month down the drain," Day said to the lieutenant, "unless he comes back."

"He won't be back," Lieutenant Weston said, "not Brent. Somebody tipped him you were investigating him. You asked somebody the wrong questions."

Day didn't answer. He didn't feel like saying he was sorry. He felt like telling this good cop, Lieutenant Weston, just what he could do with the Brent case.

"You've been moving in on them too soon and too fast," the lieutenant said. "Hard as it is to get convictions these days, we've got to be sure."

"You and I both know he's

guilty," Day said, and he knew as soon as he'd spoken that it was an inexcusably dumb thing to say.

Lieutenant Weston stared at him. "Sure, *we* know it, Day. But the judge doesn't, and the jury doesn't, and it doesn't matter a damn to them what we think we know. Our job isn't to decide guilt or innocence. You know that. We gather evidence we can hand to the prosecutor. We don't let personal feelings enter into what we do."

"I don't need a police academy refresher course, sir."

Lieutenant Weston laid his cigar in a brass ash tray and looked hard at Day, anger darkening his round face. "I told you, Day, this is no chewing-out. No need to get so damn upset. Just don't do it again."

Day nodded.

The lieutenant picked up his cigar, then leaned back and seemed to study Day. "I know it's hard," he said. "It's always been hard."

"I suppose it has, sir." Day really didn't want to argue with Lieutenant Weston. Like most of the other officers, he had respect for the man's professionalism and candor. A direct, almost crude man despite his shrewdness, Lieutenant Weston had a way of always letting you know where you stood with him.

"You've blown a few lately, Day," the lieutenant said. "You're expected to be more careful."

Again Day nodded.

"I want you to take the office upstairs for the next two weeks. Handle the incoming calls while Rogers is on court duty."

"All right, sir." Day tried to keep the disappointment from his voice. The desk job he was being told to man was an empty, monotonous sort of job, with little real responsibility. It was always looked at as something of a put-down when a detective was assigned to it when Rogers was away.

The lieutenant was bent over his desk now, shuffling through some papers and ignoring Day. Day got up to leave.

"Remember," the lieutenant said as Day reached the door, "more careful, huh?"

Day walked from the precinct house, drove the unmarked car to the police garage and left it. Then he drove his own car home to his apartment on Grant Road.

He parked behind the apartment building and got out of the car to go upstairs. A tall, dark-haired man with blue eyes and a boyish face, he looked like anything but a detective, and right now he was wondering if he were a detective. More and more lately,

the dream of police work was conflicting sharply with the reality.

At least he'd work fairly regular hours on Rogers' job, he figured, as he opened his front door. Audrey would be glad to hear that.

Day's four-year-old son Greg ran to him when he came in. Grinning, Day turned the small boy away and slapped his rear with mock viciousness. After wrestling for a few minutes, Greg playfully ran off to his room.

Audrey was in the kitchen, setting the timer on the oven. "I heard you come in," she said.

Day smiled. "I guess you couldn't help but hear it."

He looked at her, slim and beautiful in slacks and a sleeveless white blouse; but the lines about her eyes and about the corners of her mouth were new and didn't look as if they belonged. Day blamed himself for those lines.

"I'll have a desk job for a few weeks," he said, hoping to make her smile. "Daytime hours for sure. I was lucky to get it."

She didn't smile, only nodded and gave whatever she'd placed in the oven a final check.

"I thought maybe we'd eat out tonight," Day said.

"Too late for that. You should have called."

"Too busy," Day lied.

"Anyway," Audrey said, "I've got a roast in. That's your favorite."

"Have a decent day today?"

"Good enough," she said.

"Greg behave?"

"Good enough."

Day turned away in discomfort. This was the kind of conversation they were having lately: trivial, circling conversations.

After supper that evening Day played with Greg, then watched TV for a while—news, followed by a program about some kids who solved crimes—but he couldn't keep his eyes away from Audrey, from the deepening lines in the smooth flesh of her face. She was only thirty-one. He wondered what she'd look like at thirty-five. At forty.

Things seemed to go better at home during the first week of the desk job, but work was a dull stretch of time that caused a backache. Nothing seemed to break the monotony, and Day wondered how it would be to have a steady desk job. Probably Lieutenant Weston wanted him to wonder that.

Then one clear morning, as he was driving away from the apartment on his way to work, something registered in Day's mind.

The small, tan foreign car behind him had been behind him

yesterday morning, and there were other times he'd seen it in his rear-view mirror during the past week or so. His memory was jarred by the slightly bent aerial on the car's fender, the dented grille.

Without moving his head, Day kept an eye on the car in his mirror as he drove. The driver of the car was alone, but he never drew near enough for Day to make out his features. When Day was a block from the entrance to the precinct parking lot, he saw the little tan sedan turn a corner behind him, so that it was impossible for him to glimpse the license number.

During the rest of that week Day noticed the tan car only once more, one day as he was driving to a restaurant for lunch. He didn't waste time thinking too much about the tan car because he really didn't have enough information to think about, but in the back of Day's mind was the knowledge that the car turning up so often behind him was more than the coincidence of someone happening to drive the same routes as he did, and at about the same times.

That Saturday afternoon he was at the Quick Foods supermarket down the street from his apartment, looking for barbecue sauce, when he happened to glance through the wide windows past the checkout counters. The tan car was parked next to a line of empty grocery carts.

The driver was almost certainly in the store, but Day wasn't going to bother searching for him. He knew he wouldn't have to.

"Detective Sergeant Sam Day?"

The voice behind him was low and even, with a sarcasm in it that never quite surfaced.

Day turned around. The man who'd spoken was of average height and build, wearing expensive slacks and a sport shirt. He had a face to match his voice, regular features, rather long nose, and a mouth that was almost curved in a sarcastic smile. Sam knew the face but couldn't match it with a name or place.

The man took care of that for him. "Bill Grindle's my name," he said. "And you've probably seen me around."

Now Day remembered where he'd seen the face. "The only place I can remember seeing you is in your mug shots," he said. "Burglary, isn't it?"

Grindle nodded. "Three arrests, one conviction."

"I have noticed your car, though," Day said. "You've been following me for about a week.

I would now like to know why."

Now Grindle did smile, but his eyes never blinked. "That's why I came here, to let you know. It so happens I've got something to tell you."

That surprised Day. Grindle had never been known to be a police informer.

"I've been watching you, Sergeant Day. You haven't been doing too well at your job, work's getting you down, like it gets a lot of them. A smart man eventually realizes what's going on."

"Going on?"

"In the department, I mean. The way most of the higher-ups got to where they are."

Day felt the anger come alive in his stomach and stepped forward. "Are you making me a proposition, Grindle?"

Grindle showed not the slightest sign of fear. "Now, Sergeant, I know you're a dedicated man, an idealist, but it's time to combine idealism with practicality. I wouldn't suggest anything to you that your superiors on the force hadn't done to get where they are. They realized earlier than

you what they needed to do to be more efficient police officers. They knew they had to have their contacts on the other side to find out things for them."

Day still hadn't made out Grindle's game. It sounded now as if the man might want to sell some information, but that didn't quite add up.

A woman pushing a loaded cart came down the aisle, stopping to pick out a jar of pickles, and the two men waited until she'd gone.

"How would you like to solve a burglary next week, Sergeant?" Grindle asked in his soft voice.

"You know the answer to that," Day said irritably. "Keep talking."

"There's an estate out in the south end that's going to be burglarized sometime next week by two men, both old pros. Arresting either one of them would mean solving a lot of burglaries that have happened in the past year or so, a real cleanup that makes for better statistics."

"And you want money for telling me when and where," Day said.

"Not exactly, Sergeant. I plan to do more than just tell you when and where. I plan to tell you everything."

"In exchange for?"

"There's an expression, Sergeant, *'quid pro quo.'* Something for something. You've heard of it?"

"I didn't realize you were so well-educated. Stop talking around it and get to the point."

Grindle fixed cold eyes on Day for a moment, then nodded. "The point is, if I don't say any more to you, that burglary's going to happen and I'm going to be richer."

Day frowned and sighed. He didn't like the direction the conversation was taking. He didn't like this habitual crook keeping him on a string, keeping him wondering.

"Right, Sergeant," Grindle said, "I'll be one of the two burglars. And I'm willing to tell you how you can arrest my partner. You'll have him red-handed enough for a sure conviction."

"And what about you?"

"Why, I get away."

"With the loot?"

Grindle nodded. "All of it instead of half. And you get a feather in your blue cap."

Day clenched and unclenched his right fist. "How would you like me to take you in for attempting to bribe an officer?"

The sarcastic smile spread on Grindle's lean face. "How would you like to try to prove that? There's no need to get angry, Sergeant. I'm doing you and myself a favor. In a way, it's your duty to take me up on the deal—either it's

one of us or simply neither of us."

"Then you'll be holding the whole thing over my head, Grindle. No thanks."

Grindle spread his hands. "Holding *what* over your head? How could I tell on you without putting myself in jail? And who'd believe me, anyway?"

He had a point, Day had to admit. Maybe the best thing was to pretend to go along with him, tell the department and nab both of them.

"Who's your partner going to be?" Day asked.

"Ned Davis."

Day's interest sharpened. Ned Davis would be quite a catch, one of the top burglars in the city.

"You have some score to settle with him?" Day asked.

"I've got my reasons," Grindle said blandly. "He'll be tucked neatly away and he'll never suspect me."

"I'll think about it. All right?"

"Sure, Sergeant."

"Get in touch with me in a few days. And I don't want to see that damn car of yours behind me again."

"Sure, Sergeant. Anything else?"

"Yeah," Day said, "where's the barbecue sauce?"

All that next week Day thought about Grindle's offer. He knew it wasn't meant to be a one-shot proposition. Grindle was willing to hand over a lot of ex-friends and a lot of information for safety and virtual immunity for himself.

Why shouldn't Day take him up on it? Ethics? He had found in the past several years that the whole world was unethical. Also, what was in it for Day? No profit of any kind. Promotions maybe; satisfaction in his job.

With a start he realized that dealing with Grindle *would* give him satisfaction; and it would rid society of some of its most proficient malefactors, while one would go free.

What really made up Day's mind was that he waited too long. He'd put Grindle off twice, trying to decide. Then he realized that after this long the department would know he'd been vacillating. They'd ask him why he hadn't said something sooner, and he'd have no good answer for that question. All the whole thing would amount to would be another gray mark on his record.

The next time Grindle contacted him, Day told him it was a deal. They arranged to meet later and talk over the details, and after Day hung up the phone he sat quietly for a long time. He didn't feel the same as he had before the telephone call, and he knew he

never would feel the same again.

It didn't matter how he felt, he told himself. There was Audrey to think about now; Audrey and Greg. He didn't want to retire on a sergeant's pension twenty years from now, and that was the way things were heading.

Day and Grindle met at the Bangkok Inn, a little lounge with an Oriental motif. Over drinks they worked out the details, and it was agreed that Grindle would telephone Day a few days before the burglary so he could devise a plausible reason for being at the scene.

The details of the plan were simple enough to have that "can't fail" sureness about them. The residence to be burgled was the Kray estate on Farnham Road. It was a large house set well off the road on three or four acres. Grindle and his partner had already cased it and decided to go in through a side window. They would leave their car parked in a secluded spot near a grove of trees on Farnham, and when they'd got what they'd come for, leave by the same way they'd entered, cutting back across the property to the car. The main item in the big house that had attracted their attention was Jackson Kray's valuable coin collection. Grindle would see that he'd be the one carrying that and whatever cash they found.

Day would be waiting near the car, surprise them when they came toward it and order them to halt. Grindle would run, Day would fire a warning shot over his head, then another shot that would miss him.

At this point in the planning Grindle informed Day with a smirk that in case one of the shots did hit him, he'd taken care to see that the police department would subsequently learn about the arrangement they'd made, from letters he'd left with his wife.

"She's the only other soul who'll know about this," Grindle said. "But we're close. I'm a family man and I trust her. She knows this is like a business with me."

"And what if Ned Davis runs, too?" Day asked.

"You *don't* miss *him*," Grindle said, draining the last of his drink.

That was something Day refused to let worry him too much. An experienced burglar like Ned Davis was not apt to run with a loaded revolver aimed at him.

Almost a week passed before Grindle called Day at home. Day moved around the corner, playing the long telephone cord out behind him, so that Audrey couldn't

possibly overhear the conversation.

"Next Thursday night at eleven," Grindle said, no trace of the sarcasm in his telephone voice. "Jackson Kray's going out of town."

"You sure you've got everything worked out?" Day asked nervously. "I mean, what about alarms? A watchdog?"

Grindle laughed, a low, confident chuckle. "You do your job, Sergeant Day, I'll do mine. Between the two of us we should rise high in our professions."

The tension in Day mounted as the time for the actual burglary and the apprehension of Ned Davis drew nearer. A few days before the action he mentioned to some of his fellow officers that an informant had told him the Kray residence was due to be hit. This caused no great alarm, and didn't even particularly attract attention. Daily, informants passed a steady flow of tips to various detectives, and many of them turned out to be untrue.

The night of the burglary Day got permission from Lieutenant Weston to take a uniformed officer on a stake-out at the Kray estate. They took Day's unmarked car and got to the Kray residence about nine o'clock. Day sent the uniformed officer, a young man whose name was Klutcher, around to watch the rear of the house, off to the opposite side from the window where Grindle and Davis would enter. Then he left the car parked down the road, walked back and settled himself in the shadows across from the closed gate to the Kray driveway.

From where he sat he could see the big house clearly. The only light was from the ornamental gaslight in front and from some lights left on in some upstairs rooms; no doubt to discourage prowlers. Day shook his head. When would people learn they weren't fooling anybody, that all they were accomplishing by leaving an inside lamp on was giving the burglars light by which to work. It was the outside lighting that did the discouraging.

Day checked the luminous dial of his watch: almost ten. He sat patiently and waited while the next hour passed, and then it was time for things to start happening.

Almost at eleven sharp Day's ears barely caught the faint rumble of an automobile engine. Headlights shone, then died down the street in the direction of the grove of trees where the car was to be concealed. Day felt the tension start in his stomach and spread throughout his body, and he tried to swallow the brassy taste in his mouth.

He waited a few minutes, then moved down toward the side of the house where he knew they'd be making their exit. For a fleeting moment he wondered if Officer Klutcher was still faithfully watching the rear side of the house. Then he reassured himself with the thought that Klutcher was the type of young policeman who followed orders to the letter, and Day had instructed him not to leave his post until he was called or heard shots.

Day crossed the dark road and stood near where the iron fence gave way to a low, ivy-colored wall, barely three feet high. He found that his throat was very dry now, so that when he swallowed it made a loud noise, and he absently reached inside his suit coat and touched the butt of his holstered Police Special.

Then he saw the movement near the side of the house, just a glimpse, brief but unmistakable, of a lithe, dark silhouette. Day vaulted the low wall and saw a second man emerge from the side window. The two men were moving side by side now, in a low, fast walk across the spacious, tree-dotted grounds toward where they'd left their car. Day followed them, broke into a jog and drew his revolver.

"Halt!"

Both figures stopped, straightened in surprise, and turned toward him.

"Stay where you are!"

As Day yelled, the figure on the left spun abruptly and began to run, clutching what looked like a small suitcase tight against his chest.

Day fired his warning shot, high into the air. The figure continued to run.

"Halt!" Day shouted again. For an uncomfortable second he had the vague desire to aim the second shot at Grindle's bent back. It would be a difficult shot, but possible. Then he elevated the barrel slightly and squeezed two shots into the air.

Grindle didn't even glance around. He disappeared into the darkness, and a moment later the roar of a car engine and the screech of tires sounded from the road beyond the small grove of trees. Day saw the flickering glare of headlights as the car accelerated past the tall iron fence.

Day had stopped near the burglar who'd chosen to stay, still holding the revolver steady to cover the man. In the brightening moonlight he could make out the bitter and disgusted look on the often-photographed features of Ned Davis.

"What happened, Sergeant

Day? One of 'em get away?" Klutcher was breathing hard as he ran up to where Day was holding the gun on Davis.

"Yeah," Day said, "there was one more. I fired at him but missed."

"I saw the vehicle," Klutcher said. "It headed south. Want me to run to the car and call in?"

"Right. Did you get a description?"

"No, sir, just saw the headlights."

"Call for the wagon, too," Day said as he handcuffed Davis and prodded him to walk in the direction Klutcher had run, toward the unmarked gray sedan up the road.

During the next six months Day apprehended three more burglars in like fashion—and Grindle's tips helped the sergeant break several other tough and well-publicized cases.

To prevent his superiors on the force from picking up a pattern in his exploits, Day varied his reports on his cases, once reporting he saw only the burglar he apprehended and suggesting the victim was turning in a false insurance claim; another time stating he'd seen three burglars (the "good citizen" victim in that burglary unknowingly cooperated by reporting as stolen more valuable bronze statuettes than one man could possibly have carried); and claiming in another burglary that he'd wounded the escaped burglar. In that case Grindle feigned a long recuperative period for the benefit of his cohorts in crime. Also, two of the burglars Grindle arranged for Day to capture were wanted on more serious charges in other states and extradited to serve long terms in distant penitentiaries where they couldn't, even by remote chance, compare notes on their respective downfalls.

Apparently, whatever precautions Grindle took to guard his "reputation" worked, for soon the nickname "Lucky Bill Grindle" was added to his list of aliases.

Then there were no more setup jobs, and Grindle contacted Day only once every few months to feed him helpful information. However, now the impetus was there. Day's superiors seemed to regard him more and more highly. Opportunity was his, and he had the skill and guts to make the most of it. Within three years he was cited for bravery and efficiency twice and promoted to sergeant first class, which meant that he was in charge of two teams of detectives.

Audrey was happier now. Sergeant first class pay was better than a sergeant's, and if a sergeant first class still worked irregular

hours, at least they were more predictable hours, and a measure less dangerous.

Day saw his wife's enthusiasm for life reborn, saw his marriage turn from something deteriorating to something growing. Only from time to time, on the edge of sleep or wakefulness, did he think of Bill Grindle, whom he hadn't seen in several years.

Day dedicated himself completely to his job, working harder and more diligently on each case, with each passing year, almost as if he were unconsciously trying to prove something.

His tireless work and dedication paid off. In early June there was a shake-up in the department. Men were demoted and promoted, assignments were shifted. Lieutenant Weston was made a full-fledged captain, in charge of the Mobile Reserve Squad, and Day was promoted to lieutenant to take his place in charge of the West Sector burglary detail. Day, Lieutenant Day, wasn't surprised.

He was surprised, though, six months later, when Bill Grindle called and wanted to see him. Distasteful as it was, Day agreed, and was instructed to be in the public library the next day at three o'clock.

At two the next afternoon Day got busy with some paper work, trying not to think about the impending meeting with Grindle. Using the knack he'd somehow acquired, he managed to lose himself completely in his tedious work.

Then the time arrived, and Day rose from his desk and left his office, nodding to the white-haired desk sergeant as he left the precinct house.

Day sat for what seemed a long time in the criminology section of the library before he sensed a presence and looked up from the open, unread book before him to see the man he'd never wanted to see again.

The same vaguely sarcastic smile, the same amused eyes—the same in every way, only slightly older and heavier—Bill Grindle stood looking down at Lieutenant Day.

"Been a long time," Grindle said, seating himself in a chair across the table.

Day nodded. "Almost five years." He wondered what Grindle had on his mind, but he tried not to let that show.

"You look worried," Grindle said with a smile. "There's no need to worry."

"Why don't you tell me what you want," Day said, "then let me decide whether or not to worry."

Grindle snorted a little laugh

and nodded. "No need to try to fool each other, Lieutenant, not old friends like us. I came here about the Bain Corporation warehouse on Palmer Road."

"Bain . . . They're drug manufacturers, aren't they?"

Grindle nodded. "And there's close to eighty thousand dollars' worth of amphetamines stored in their warehouse."

Now Day remembered the plant and warehouse. It had been robbed about three years ago. A low, spread-out, pale-brick building, it was completely isolated in an area that was just beginning to be developed. Since the robbery three years ago, they had installed bright outside lights and hired a night watchman.

"Why meet here and tell me about the Bain warehouse?" Day asked, but he knew why.

"We're partners again," Grindle said smiling. "You're going to assist me in stealing those amphetamines."

Day shook his head and said simply, "No."

"Come on, Lieutenant Day, you don't want me to tell the police board some things I know, do you? I have some very interesting old tapes. Then too, there's my wife's testimony."

"You'd be cutting your own throat."

"But it would be far from fatal, Lieutenant. It's a point of law that the statute of limitations for breaking and entering in this state is five years. Of course, you couldn't be tried for those early jobs of ours either—wouldn't be convicted on my evidence anyway. But on the other hand there's your career to think about, your family and reputation." Grindle's amused eyes were fixed on him like jewels in some sardonic mask.

Day rose from his chair in anger, but the eyes didn't blink, the mask didn't change.

"I told you before, Lieutenant Day, burglary's like a business with me. You were sort of my pension plan, and now it's time for me to make one big killing and retire."

Day sat back down slowly. The facts had arranged themselves in lightning order in his detective's logical mind, and he knew he was had. "How do I know you'll retire?" he asked Grindle.

Grindle shrugged. "At least you know you won't have to worry about me for another five years. You'll be a captain by that time."

"What about the men you set up? What will they do to you if they find out the truth?"

Grindle smiled and waved a hand. "They're either dead, in

prison, or too small for me to worry about now."

Day sighed a long, deflating sigh, knowing that Grindle was right as usual. "What's your plan?"

Grindle glanced around him, amused by the idea of planning a burglary in the library's criminology section.

"Safe and simple," he said. On the back of an envelope he expertly sketched a detailed drawing of the Bain warehouse, then drew in a basic floor plan. "We bypass the alarm here, then we go in through this loading door at five a.m."

"We?"

"Myself and Rich Costa," Grindle said.

Day nodded. Rich Costa was one of the area's well-known burglars, one of the most careful. He was stepping into something not very nice this time.

With the point of the pencil, Grindle showed Day where the amphetamines were stored. There were so many of them that after they'd hauled them across the warehouse to the loading door, Costa was going to go out again and back the car into the dock so they could hurriedly toss the drugs down into the spacious trunk.

"What about the watchman?" Day asked.

Grindle looked up at him a bit surprised. "We take care of him, don't worry."

"How?"

"We wear stocking masks so he can't identify us. He'll be here, in this little office." Grindle drew an X on his floor plan. "We hold a gun on him, bind and gag him. He's an old man and can't give us much trouble."

"And for guaranteeing your safety I suppose I'm to get Costa."

"When we're getting into the car to drive away, you shoot him."

Day looked up sharply, feeling something draw taut in his stomach. "Shoot him?"

Grindle nodded, speaking through his sarcastic half-grin. "This is a big job, my last, and I don't want to have to worry about somebody putting the finger on me for a better deal in court or for a parole later on."

"Do you know what you're doing?" Day asked in an incredulous voice. "You're asking a police lieutenant to commit murder!"

"I'm asking you to shoot a fleeing criminal. You'll probably get a citation. Some of the amphetamine is in powder form in plastic bags. I'll leave a five-pound bag next to the body to make everything look genuine. You put a

couple of bullets in the trunk too, for them to see when they find the car. It won't hurt the narcotics. Just make sure you don't hit a tire or the gas tank."

Day got up and began to walk. He had to walk, had to work some of the nervousness out of his body. "This is crazy!"

Grindle shook his head, glancing about to make sure they were still alone before speaking in a raised whisper. "It's not crazy and it will work, and we're going to do it."

"I'm not a killer!"

"I know you're not, Lieutenant, you're a police officer doing his duty. And you might look at it this way: there is no statute of limitations on murder. I'll be absolutely sure of your discretion, and you'll be free of me."

That was true enough, Day reasoned with some relief, and he felt soiled that the idea of murder for personal gain should actually appeal to him. Day went back to the table and sat down. As he rested his bare, perspiring forearm on the tabletop the faint odor rose to his nostrils. Sweat and varnish, the same as the smell of a police station; sweat and varnish, and sometimes fear.

"Is there a patrol car cruising that area around five a.m.?" Grindle asked.

"I don't know," Day answered slowly. "I can find out."

"Do that," Grindle said, "then phone me and let me know where we can create a diversion to get the car out of the area before we go in."

Day nodded. It was as if the years hadn't passed and he and Grindle were plotting their earlier burglaries. Grindle scribbled a phone number on a torn-off corner of the envelope and handed it to Day.

"It'll be Friday morning unless you hear different," Grindle said.

Day didn't look at him as Grindle pushed back his chair with a scraping sound and left through a side door.

Thursday evening Day went to bed at ten o'clock, telling Audrey that he didn't feel well. He was telling her the truth. All that night after supper he couldn't stop thinking about what he was hiding from her, and for the first time he began wondering if *she* would think the price of her contentment were worth it. It occurred to Day that up until that time he'd only considered the deals he'd made with Grindle from a basically selfish point of view.

He didn't sleep much that night, tossing on the soft mattress and glancing from time to time at

the glowing hands of the clock radio. The only thing that comforted him somewhat was that Grindle was right about the murder charge. It would free Day forever from him.

At four-fifteen, as he knew it would, the telephone rang. Day snatched up the receiver instantly, cutting off the first ring, but he sensed that Audrey was awake beside him anyway.

"*This is you-know-who,*" the voice said loosely, "*and I'll meet you you-know-where.*"

"All right," Day said too casually.

"*Remember,*" the voice said, "*last time.*"

"I'll remember," Day said, and hung up the phone.

He was worried. Grindle had sounded as if he were high on something. There had been an electric undercurrent of excitement in the burglar's voice that Day hadn't heard before. As he climbed out of bed and flicked on the soft reading lamp he told himself not to worry. If nothing else, Grindle was a pro.

"What is it?" Audrey asked behind him. "Where are you going?"

"Some work to do," Day said, turning and smiling down at her. She was still sleepy and her face looked peaceful in the soft yellow light. "Duty to perform," he added.

"Again?" she said with drowsy irritation. Summoning phone calls in the middle of the night for Day were nothing new, but they never failed to annoy Audrey.

"You go to sleep and I'll be back in the morning," Day said gently, bending and kissing her forehead.

He went into the bathroom and got dressed quickly, mercilessly splashing ice-cold tap water over his face.

The low, rambling Bain Corporation warehouse was like an island of light in the dark night. The beige brick looked almost white and very clean in the harsh glare from the overhead dusk to dawn lights and the beams of the ground-level spots. Day parked his car off Palmer Road and walked back toward the light, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. To his right the skeletal beams of a half-finished building rose against the starless sky. He was approaching the Bain warehouse from behind and to one side, and when he saw the lighted loading and receiving dock, with its few trailers backed into some of the overhead doors, he grew more cautious.

Day saw that one of the trailers had been backed into a door next

to the one Grindle and Costa would use. That would shield them almost completely from the street, and only darkness stretched in the other direction, dotted in the distance by some tiny pinpoints of light.

It was quarter to five. They wouldn't be here for fifteen minutes, and probably just about now were calling in and reporting a prowler at the electric company plant two miles away. Day worked his way closer, concealing himself in a deep shadow near a portable trash container right next to the side of the building. The trash had a sweet, nauseating odor, and Day didn't want to have to stay there long.

Grindle and Costa walked silently past, within thirty feet of Day, but they didn't see him. Day stayed in the deep shadows and drew his revolver from his holster.

He heard a slight metallic clanking and then the low rolling sound of the overhead loading door going up. He got between the building and the trash container, worked himself to the corner and peered around, but there was nothing to be seen. Grindle and Costa had silently lowered the door behind them so their way of access couldn't be spotted from the outside. They'd also extinguished the outside lights near that door for added concealment.

Day waited, watching. When Costa left to get the car he would work in behind a nearby parked trailer where he could get off a clear shot.

As he waited, the brassy taste of excitement rose in Day's throat. Nervousness, he decided, as he inched forward. He took a deep breath, then smiled confidently to himself, and that's when he realized the guilt, the shame. For the first time he admitted it to himself. He was enjoying this. He was actually enjoying himself!

The shot from inside the building wasn't very loud, like the single, flat blow of a hammer.

Day straightened and caught the sweet stench of the trash. "No . . ." he whispered to himself. "No!" Then he was running, away from the loading area and toward the front of the building. Within a minute he'd broken the thick glass of a front door with the butt of his revolver and was inside.

He ran through the offices, through a door into the warehouse area.

Everything was dark except for a feeble glow about a hundred feet off to the left. Day remembered the sketch Grindle had made of the building's floor plan and cautiously made his way toward the light. As he got closer

he could hear a radio playing, tuned to some all-night-chatter and soft-music station.

Grindle and Costa had decided to eliminate every possible risk. The old watchman was lying on his stomach in a puddle of blood in the center of the tiny office's floor. His leather holster was empty, and his cap was half-on, half-off his head to reveal a slow trickle of blood through matted gray hair.

With a shaking hand Day picked up the telephone on the desk and dialed Headquarters. He asked to be put through to the Eighth Precinct and heard desk sergeant Hap Kramer's pleasant voice.

"This is Lieutenant Day, Hap. The Bain warehouse on Palmer Road is being hit right now. Get somebody over here."

"Yes, sir."

"There are two men in on it, Bill Grindle and Rich Costa. When they leave they'll be heading east on Palmer in a stolen car with a trunkload of amphetamines. Set up roadblocks around the area."

"Narcotics in trunk, heading east . . . How do you know east, sir?"

"Because I helped them set up the job."

"Yes . . . You *what*?"

"I'll try to stop them here. They've already killed the watchman, and they'll try to kill anybody who gets in their way. Put out an 'armed and dangerous' on them. Now get busy!"

"Yes, sir . . ." The sergeant's voice was unsteady, puzzled.

Day hung up the telephone with a quick, silent motion and stared down once again at the old watchman.

Then cursing, near sobbing, Day ran from the office into the darkened warehouse. Staying low, he felt his way silently toward the other end of the building, toward the loading dock.

They were working by moonlight. Grindle and Costa were just about to close the overhead door and leap from the dock when they turned and saw Day.

"Hold it where you are!" Day shouted, leveling his revolver at them. "Both of you, Grindle!"

Grindle screamed something Day didn't understand, then the slug struck Day in the right side, slapping him to the cement floor. He shook his head and saw that only the gray nighttime sky was visible through the open loading door. Both men had dropped from the dock. Day struggled awkwardly to his feet, fell, dragged himself to the doorway.

They'd closed the trunk. Costa

was already inside the car, on the passenger's side, and Grindle was just opening the door to get behind the wheel. Day aimed carefully and squeezed off two shots. Grindle fell without a sound, into the limp posture of a dead man.

Day saw Costa scooting frantically across the seat to get behind the wheel of the idling car and tried to aim the revolver again, but the gun was too heavy. The barrel wavered and dropped, and a reddish darkness enveloped Day as the car sped away and turned east. In the instant before his death Day saw that the left rear wheel had passed over the gun in Grindle's lifeless hand.

"It doesn't make sense," Captain Harold Weston said, looking down at Day's body.

The detective standing next to him nodded in agreement.

Captain Weston continued to look down at Day, a puzzled concern in his dark eyes. "He was a good, honest cop, one of the best, and with a future in the department. Then, bang, he goes bad all of a sudden!" Captain Weston shook his head slowly, like a man who has bet and lost. "I just don't understand it . . ."

"Probably nobody could explain it to you but Lieutenant Day," the detective said.

"Probably not," the captain agreed. "But what I can't understand is how he went bad in so short a time. All these years, not a black mark on his record . . . then all of a sudden, this. They fool you sometimes, I guess . . . and fool themselves."

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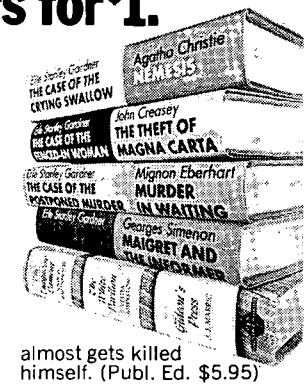

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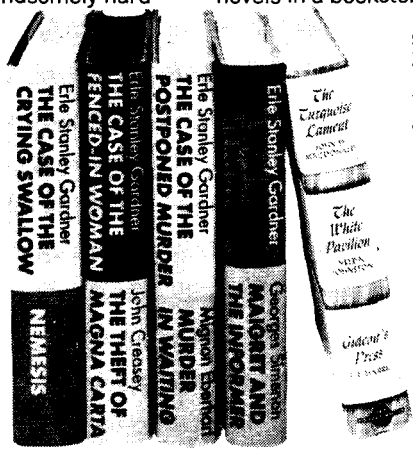

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