ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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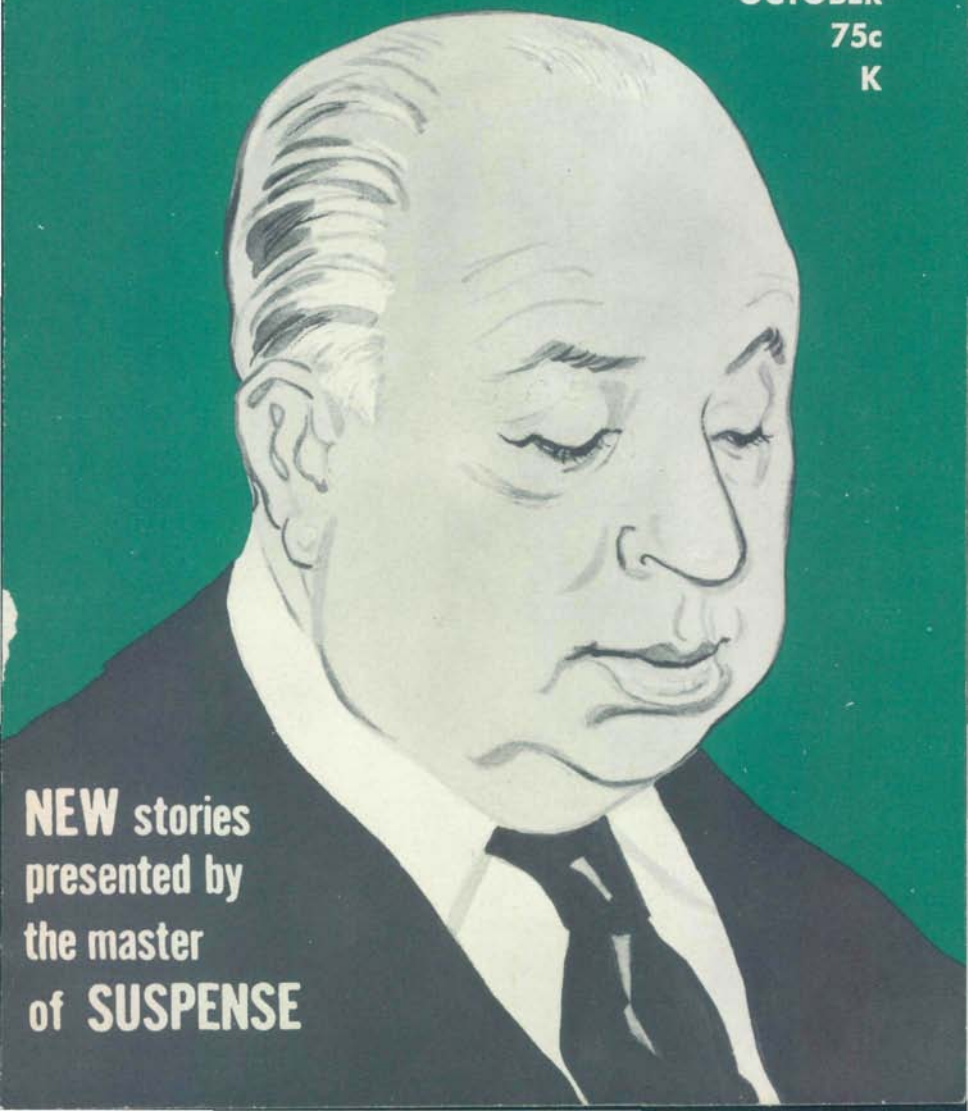

NEW stories presented by the master of **SUSPENSE**

October 1974

Dear Reader:

With red being a traditional fall color, this should be my favorite season, but I must confess I never have given it much thought. After all, any monthly issue of this magazine may figuratively drip red, no matter the time of year. If you hesitate to believe that, you simply haven't been a regular reader—an omission I intend to rectify.

After a *Trip to Esperanza* courtesy of Patrick O'Keeffe, all the way through a meeting with the fascinating *M. G. Baker* by Pauline C. Smith, you should see just what my intentions are: honorable, but with no chilling holds barred.

I am neither a mechanic nor a doctor, as you may have suspected, but I can safely say that if you have pulled in for a fall checkup, you will find this issue a cure for the boredom that ails you.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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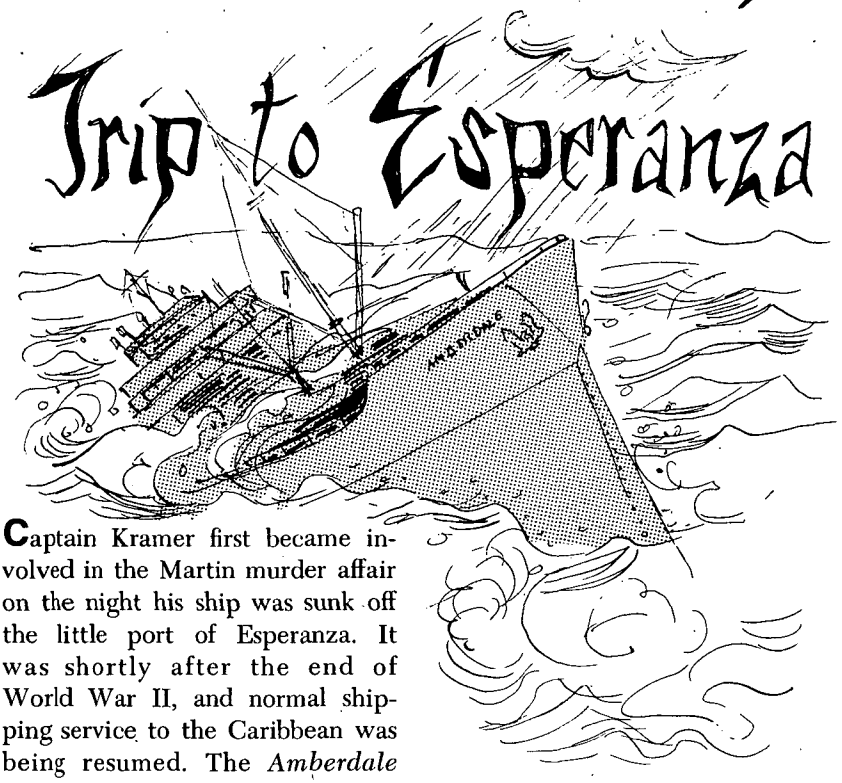
One could well be in accord with the premise of extreme remedies being appropriate for extreme diseases.

Trip to Esperanza



Captain Kramer first became involved in the Martin murder affair on the night his ship was sunk off the little port of Esperanza. It was shortly after the end of World War II, and normal shipping service to the Caribbean was being resumed. The *Amberdale* had called at Progreso for fuel; and for the overnight run to Puerto Bello, she had taken on a large gasoline storage tank and other deck cargo consigned to that port, where she was to load coffee for Baltimore. The radio weather report forecast smooth seas with heavy rain squalls throughout the night.

The ship was enveloped by the first of the squalls around nine o'clock. It lasted well over half an hour, howling and lashing the ship with torrential rain, her steam

whistle booming out at two-minute intervals. When Captain Kramer returned to his room from the bridge, it was to find the radio officer entering it grave-faced with a radiogram from the general manager in charge of steamship operations. Captain Kramer became equally grave as he read the text:

Second Assistant Engineer Edward Martin is to be charged with the murder of his wife stop Pending further instructions take steps you judge necessary ensure apprehension—Bristow

As the radio officer withdrew, Captain Kramer pondered what action to take. He was a short man, with a broad face and stern gray eyes, known among crews as a hard shipmaster, ambitious to become the Dale Line's next port captain, and here was a fine chance to show that he was the man for the job, a man of sound

by Patrick O'Keeffe

judgment and strong decisions, no half-measures.

He cranked the telephone mounted on the bulkhead beside his desk and summoned the chief engineer. The chief came up from his room at once. Mr. Eckart was taller and older than the middle-aged captain, bespectacled with thick, horn-rimmed lenses. He shook his head in concern as he read the radiogram.

"In a way, I'm not surprised."

"You mean you expected it?" said the captain, staring.

"Not exactly, but—well, Martin opened up to me now and then during the six months he's been here. You know, during a quiet

night watch or so in the engine room. He knew he was envied, married to Bristow's daughter and all that, but he told me he'd swap with any of them. He sounded pretty bitter at times."

"Did he give any reason?"

"He called her a spoiled brat, useless as a housewife, couldn't cook; and so on. She liked the gay life—parties, nightclubs. He thought she'd settle down and make a home for him after they were married. He's got no folks on his side." The chief hesitated, then added, "He confided in me last trip that he suspected she'd taken up with a boyfriend. He was quite worked up about it. He's pretty cool-headed in an emergency, but he's emotional, and once or twice I've seen him close to going off in a blind rage."

"It looks as if he really flew into one this time. Wake him and let's hear what he has to say."

"He's still awake. His light was on when I went past his door. I'll only tell him you want to see him about something special."

The second assistant came up in slippers and khaki trousers pulled over pajamas. To be summoned to the captain's room at such an hour implied something more than special, but Martin betrayed no sign of concern as he entered behind the chief. He was lean and of medium height, in the mid-twenties, his good-looking face with bold brown eyes somewhat marred by a deep white scar above the right eye, caused by glass and scalding vapor from a burst steam gauge. Captain Kramer handed him the radiogram in silence.

Martin read it without change of expression. Handing it back, he said evenly, "I was kind of expecting something like that."

"Then you did murder your wife?"

"If you want to call it that."

"What else could I call it?"

"I didn't plan it. It—well, it just came about. The ship, you'll remember, sailed twelve hours late because of the break in the steam line. I left my apartment around eleven o'clock the day before, to be in plenty of time to relieve the third assistant at noon. Every sailing day I always phoned Carol a last good-bye from the pier before the ship pulled out at six o'clock. This last time, I phoned her as usual, but didn't tell her the sailing had been delayed until six in the morning. I had a notion she'd got a boyfriend, and it was a good chance to find out."

Martin glanced at the chief, as if reminding him of having confided in him, and his tone became bitter. "I found out, all right. The

boyfriend was there, all set for the night. He got out fast. I didn't try to stop him. I only had eyes for Carol. She soon got over the fright it gave her when I unlocked the door and walked in on them. She wanted to know why I wasn't out at sea like I was supposed to be, and it was a dirty trick to come home without phoning her as I always did."

The second assistant gave a derisive laugh. "A dirty trick! I just went berserk, I suppose—grabbed her by the neck. Maybe I broke it, for all I know. I left her lying on the livingroom carpet."

"Then what?"

"I came right back to the ship. I guess other tenants in the building missed her after a day or two, or maybe the boyfriend phoned the police after not hearing from her, or something like that."

Captain Kramer tossed the radiogram onto his desk. "Mr. Martin," he said grimly, "I'm locking you up in the supercargo's room until I receive further instructions. These will probably mean you're to be arrested in Puerto Bello for extradition, or else kept in the ship until we arrive back at an American port."

"Cap'n," suggested the second assistant, "why not let me stay on the job? I don't want one of the other engineers to have to do my work because of something I did. I can't get away." He glanced at the chief, who, not wishing to be short-staffed, nodded his assent.

"You could tomorrow in Puerto Bello. We're docking at daybreak," the captain said.

"I'll give you my word," Martin said earnestly.

"You ran once, the night you murdered your wife," the captain reminded him harshly. "I don't intend you to have another chance."

"I wasn't in my right mind. I acted from force of habit, getting back to the ship to relieve the third assistant at midnight. If I'd wanted to run for it, I sure wouldn't have come back to the ship."

The captain frowned. "I've been instructed to take steps necessary to make sure you don't escape. I'm going to lock you up now in the supercargo's room instead of in your own. That way, there won't be any complaints from the rest of the ship about a wife-killer being allowed to work and sleep among them. Pack whatever you might need—shaving gear and so on. I'll be waiting for you down there."

For a moment Martin looked as if he were about to make some biting remark. Instead, he turned abruptly and went out.

Kramer glanced at Eckart, who

had remained silent throughout. "It would have been weak of me to have taken him at his word," grunted the captain.

"I think he meant it, though," the chief said mildly. "I don't think he wanted the chance to escape in Puerto Bello. Also, I don't think the rest of the men would have complained if you'd let him stay on the job. He's well-liked. You wouldn't have needed to tell them about the radiogram anyway."

"Your thinking, Chief," the captain said sarcastically, "is influenced by the fact you'll be a man short. I don't think Bristow would consider it good judgment to give him a chance to escape."

Taking a key from the board beside his desk, Kramer nodded to the chief, who followed him out and down to the supercargo's room, which was on the starboard side of the after-well deck, beneath the boat deck. It was occupied only when the ship covered several discharging ports during a single voyage and an extra deck officer, or supercargo, was needed to supervise the discharging of cargo. It had a single door and porthole, both opening onto the well deck. Most of the deck cargo had been stowed on this deck, the biggest piece being the gasoline tank, with sufficient clearance to allow access to the supercargo's room.

Captain Kramer had the door unlocked, with porthole open, lights on, and fan running by the time Martin came down, carrying a small handbag. As the engineer laid it on the bunk, the captain said, "I'll speak to the chief steward in the morning about getting meals to you. Also," he added, "I'll send the chief mate down to put the irons on you before we dock, as an extra precaution against escaping ashore."

Martin was silent, as if disdaining to reply.

The captain then went out with the chief, locking the door while reflecting that Bristow would have no cause to fault him on steps taken to ensure apprehension.

The *Amberdale* was sunk in the early hours of the morning. About three o'clock she ran into another howling rainstorm. With a blinding stream of water running down the wheelhouse windows, she groped ahead at reduced speed, her steam whistle blasting out warnings of her presence. She came to a dead stop at the sound of another vessel bearing off the port bow. The stranger continued under way, her whistle growing alarmingly louder in response to the *Amberdale's* double blasts, and suddenly she burst out of the

grayish mist and crashed into the *Amberdale's* port quarter.

In the next tense fifteen minutes or so, the chief engineer telephoned the bridge that the engine room was flooding and he was shutting down the boilers. The chief mate, swathed in oilskins, hastily surveyed the damage and reported that the hull had been smashed open at the junction with the watertight bulkhead separating engine room and after hold. With these two compartments filling, the old *Amberdale,* a prewar-designed vessel, was slowly but surely sinking by the stern.

The general-alarm bells had brought all hands running to their lifeboat stations in the rain, which was beginning to ease. Captain Kramer now ordered the ship abandoned. He told the young third mate to get the key of the supercargo's room and let Martin out, and tell him to go to his boat station. The captain was about to start gathering up the ship's papers in his room when the third mate suddenly appeared in the doorway, his face dismayed.

"Cap'n, he's trapped. The collision threw the tank clean up against the supercargo's door and blocked it. He yelled at me to give him the key. He's trying to shove the tank away from the door. It's hopeless. I told him I was just going up to get you."

"What about the porthole?"

"That's partly blocked too—just enough room for me to pass the key through to him."

The ship was now in darkness except for scattered lights powered by an emergency generator above decks. Grabbing a flashlight, Captain Kramer ran out to the boat deck. It was crowded on both sides with men feverishly working in semidarkness to lower the lifeboats, fearful that the ship might suddenly founder. He took the inside stairway down to the starboard passageway and out to the well deck. The flashlight beam revealed that the tank was indeed hard up against the supercargo's cabin door. The tank, consigned to a new filling station, had been mounted on wood blocks and wedged tight against rolling with dunnage timber, ready for prompt discharge on arrival. The force of the collision had loosened the wedges and slammed the tank up against the door.

The third mate wasn't mistaken; Martin was hopelessly trapped. It had taken a five-ton ship's derrick to hoist that tank on board. There was no steam available now for the derrick winches, and the cabin was of thick steel on all sides, including the one along the passageway.

Martin had given up trying to force the tank clear of the door which, like all doors giving onto a weather deck, opened outward. Captain Kramer shone the light on the porthole, partly blocked by an upper corner of the tank.

"Mr. Martin," he said dismally, "there isn't a thing I can do to get you out in time."

"This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't locked me in here," came the second assistant's voice from the porthole. He sounded calm, as if resigned to his fate, but intensely bitter.

"I was under orders."

"Only to take necessary steps. It wasn't necessary to take me off the job last night, or even put me down here. You could have left me in my own room and put the irons on me there before we docked. I'm pretty sure none of the others would have complained about it."

"I did what I judged best under the circumstances. I couldn't foresee this."

"What you did see was a chance to make a good impression on Bristow. It's pretty well known around the ship you want to be the next port captain."

The jibe, especially coming from a junior engineer, stung. "Don't blame me for what's happened, Martin. You brought this upon yourself," Kramer replied. "That should help you to sleep nights."

The shouting and barking of orders on the deck above had almost died away. The captain, without oilskins, was soaked through from the drizzle. The last boat would be anxiously waiting for him to appear.

"I must go now, Martin," the captain said in desperation. "Do you want me to take a message to anyone?"

"Tell my father-in-law I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too, for this, Martin," Kramer said, his voice lacking the sincere note of the second assistant's. "Good-bye!"

There was a long moment of silence and then, bitterly, "Good-bye!"

The other vessel was standing by to take on the survivors. She was a big empty tanker, just out of Puerto Bello, bound for Port Arthur. Her bows had been crushed and her forepeak flooded, but she was in no immediate danger. When she got under way again, Captain Kramer went to her bridge and, looking back along the searchlight beam, he saw that the sea was slowly creeping up the *Amberdale's* after-well deck. Another rain squall blotted from sight the end of his ship, but

it far from ended his involvement in the Martin murder case.

On arrival in Port Arthur, Captain Kramer was questioned by FBI agents for details of the manner in which his second assistant engineer had been trapped in the sinking ship. His next interview was held in the walnut-paneled office of the general manager in charge of steamship operations.

"He was lying," fumed James Bristow, after listening to the captain's account of his son-in-law's response to his radiogram. "He didn't catch Carol with a boyfriend. The so-called boyfriend was an old acquaintance, a married man, in town for a few days. He phoned Carol that evening, and she invited him over for a chat. That murdering husband of hers barged in on them like some cheap divorce detective."

Captain Kramer mused that to him Martin's version was the more believable, but he refrained from disputing with the man who appointed port captains. "Martin would naturally put himself in a good light."

Bristow leaned forward, his hands clasped tensely on the polished desk. He was tall and fifty, graying hair swept back from a ridged forehead. "I never did approve of the marriage. Carol met him at some cocktail party or other, fell for his good looks. She got married without telling me. I never had much control over her, especially after her mother died. Martin was an opportunist, with visions of becoming the line's port engineer."

"I feel pretty bad over being the cause of his death, particularly as he was your son-in-law," Kramer said unctuously.

"You've no reason to have it on your conscience, Kramer. You carried out my order. I sent that radiogram while the authorities were making up their minds on how to go about getting him back. I didn't want him to have a chance to escape in Puerto Bello. You used sound judgment in not being fooled by his promise. Get it off your mind, Kramer. He'd have died in the electric chair anyway."

At the inquiry into the loss of the *Amberdale*, Captain Kramer was cleared of all blame; his ship had been stopped at the time of the collision, sounding the regulation two blasts; the tanker was found to have been using speed judged excessive under the prevailing visibility conditions; Captain Kramer was also exonerated in the death of the second assistant engineer, having been ordered to place him under detention.

Kramer was given command of the *Lakedale*, and Chief Engineer Eckart was assigned to another of the Dale Line ships. Almost three years later, they separately became involved in events growing out of the murder of Bristow's daughter.

Shortly after docking early one morning, Captain Kramer was urgently summoned to the general manager's office. "Kramer," said James Bristow, telling the captain in the same breath to be seated, "that murdering son-in-law of mine is alive and free."

Captain Kramer stared at him, incredulous. "Impossible!"

"Eckart saw him down in Esperanza, in the hotel bar. Martin was sitting alone at the table. He skipped out through a side door when he saw Eckart, leaving his beer."

"It must have been a look-alike, a double."

"A double with a scar above his right eye. The chief didn't get a good look at it, but he's sure it was just like Martin's. He's grown a moustache, too, but the chief said he wasn't taken in by it."

Captain Kramer thought for a moment. "Did Eckart ask about him?"

"Of course," Bristow said impatiently. "He went to the bartender. The bartender didn't speak English and the chief doesn't know Spanish, but he did manage to make the bartender understand he was asking about the man who'd just slipped out in a hurry. All he got was that he was an American named Senor Martinez. Martinez! That sounds like Martin's name made into Spanish."

"It could only be a coincidence, and it occurred to you only because it was mentioned in connection with Martin." Kramer, remembering the heavy gasoline tank, was still unconvinced, sure that the chief was mistaken; he decided, however, that it might be tactless to make Bristow feel he was being foolish by believing that his son-in-law could be alive. "What took the chief to Esperanza anyway?"

"His ship had more than the usual amount of cargo for Esperanza, so instead of transshipping it in Puerto Bello, she anchored off Esperanza and discharged it into lighters. He went ashore in the afternoon to look around the place. That's when he saw Martin."

"If it was Martin," Kramer said in a conceding tone, "then there must have been a miracle. Did you report it to the police?"

James Bristow gestured with impatience. "I phoned the district attorney. He wants stronger evi-

dence than a man believing he saw Martin in some out-of-the-way place down in Central America." Bristow glared at Kramer. "He's probably skipped out of the place by now. It infuriates me to think that my daughter's murderer is roaming around free somewhere and getting away with it. Kramer, if you'd put him in irons right away, that wouldn't have happened."

On his way back to the ship from the interview, Captain Kramer both worried and smarted under the sting of that last remark. It implied a loss of faith in his good judgment, and it could have a disastrous effect on his hopes of becoming the next port captain, due to be appointed within the next three months. In considering him for the post, Bristow would almost certainly be influenced in making his decision by the fury of believing that his daughter's murderer was roaming around loose.

By the time he had returned on board, Captain Kramer had formulated a plan of possibly working back into Bristow's good graces. The *Lakedale* would lie in Puerto Bello three days on her next voyage, giving him time to make a trip to Esperanza and check into the chief engineer's story. If the Senor Martinez was really Martin and he hadn't skipped out, then he'd get enough information on him to take to the American consul in Puerto Bello, who could act on it through the local authorities and bring about Martin's arrest and return to the United States.

Captain Kramer arrived in Puerto Bello late one afternoon, and at ten o'clock next morning he boarded the *Esmeralda*, an auxiliary schooner in daily service to Esperanza with small pieces of general cargo and deck passengers. Boarding her with Kramer were several Indians in colorful dress. Her captain was a sunburned man in his thirties, with a black moustache and searching eyes, a white-topped visored cap his mark of authority.

Captain Kramer decided the schooner might be a good place to begin his inquiries. Being in civilian dress of sport jacket and white trousers, and having booked through the shore agent, he made himself known to the captain, standing beside the little wheelhouse.

"Captain Kramer, of the *Lakedale*. You probably saw my ship lying alongside in Puerto Bello."

The other eyed him curiously for a moment, then smiled. "I am Jorge Perez. You take trips in small craft in your siesta time, Capitan, no?"

Captain Kramer chuckled. "It's not a busman's holiday, if that's what you mean. The fact is, I've never been to Esperanza. One of our ships anchored there recently, so I thought I'd get acquainted with the place in case my ship does the same sometime."

"Bueno! You will like our little puerto, Capitan."

"I'm sure I will, from what little I've seen of it through the glasses when steaming past. I heard that a man who sailed with me a few years ago is living there. I'm hoping to run across him. Martinez is his name."

"There are a few hombres of that name."

"This one is an Americano. He's got a scar above his right eye."

Jorge Perez gazed long at the captain with his searching eyes before answering. "There are no Americanos, no foreigners, in Esperanza. In Puerto Bello—si! There is little in Esperanza to attract them."

"Then someone must have given me a wrong steer."

Captain Kramer reflected that the chief engineer must have misunderstood the bartender about Senor Martinez being an American, but he'd soon find out in Esperanza. On arriving, he asked Jorge Perez for directions to the hotel, the Casa Grande, which was the only one in Esperanza. There was also only one taxi, which was engaged elsewhere at the moment. Kramer started on foot up the wide dusty road leading from the little wharf. There had been a stiff head breeze aboard the schooner, but he came ashore into the still heat of the midday sun, not a rustle in the palms lining the road, nor movement in any of the wooden bungalows scattered along it, quiet in the siesta hour.

By the time Captain Kramer reached the junction with the side road to the hotel, he was gasping for a cool beer. Just as he came in sight of the Casa Grande, a wooden two-story structure with a wide porch and veranda, he was overtaken by a dark teen-age boy in brown shorts. The captain had seen him aboard the schooner on the trip over, probably a cabin boy.

"The capitan of the *Esmeralda* sent me to tell you that the *Americano Senor* Martinez is coming aboard the schooner soon," the boy panted.

Captain Kramer turned back at once. The cool beer could wait. As they started along the road, he asked, "Did your capitan say why Senor Martinez was coming to the schooner?"

"No, Capitan. All he said was

to tell you he was coming aboard."

Captain Kramer was puzzled. It seemed strange that Jorge Perez appeared to know nothing about an American named Martinez, would say there were no Americans in Esperanza, and then suddenly rush word to him that the *Americano Senor* Martinez was on his way to the schooner. Well, whatever the explanation, the man had certainly gone out of his way to do him a favor. It had cut his search short right at the outset.

The schooner had already begun discharging, and Captain Kramer and the boy had to weave a path through lines of men shouldering packages and cartons. Jorge Perez met them at the gangway.

"Senor Martinez is down in the cabin."

Jorge Perez led the way to the companion, but remained at the top while Captain Kramer went below. At the bottom of the steps, the captain stood rigid with disbelief. Senor Martinez was seated on the edge of the bunk. He was still slim, but heavily sunburned under a straw sombrero, wearing a thick black moustache, the same unmistakable deep white scar above the right eye.

"Martin! You're really alive!"

"You didn't seem to have any doubts about it on the way over from Puerto Bello," Martin said dryly.

He remained seated and didn't offer his hand. Captain Kramer sank tiredly into a wicker armchair, perspiring from the long walk. The small cabin was hot, despite a little electric fan. "I didn't quite believe it when your old chief told Mr. Bristow he'd seen you here."

"Then what brought you this way?"

"Well, your father-in-law didn't stomach the thought of you perhaps wandering around free. So I decided to take a trip over to check on *Senor* Martinez and put his mind at rest."

"And what now?"

Captain Kramer shrugged. "I'll have to tell him you're for real."

"Captain Kramer," Martin said, "when you left me trapped on the old *Amberdale*, you told me you were sorry. Yet not sorry enough now to keep from helping to send me to another kind of death."

Kramer shifted discomfitedly. "I was sorry, Martin, but a man has to do the right thing."

"Like still keeping in well with the general manager?" jibed Martin.

Kramer scowled. "If that's how you look at it, then why did you show up here? Jorge Perez is apparently a friend of yours and sent

word to you about me, and you told him to get me back on board so you could talk to me. Why did you show up instead of ducking out of sight, as with the chief? To help me keep in good with Bristow?"

Martin hesitated, as if uncertain how to respond to the captain's sarcasm. His expression turned grave. "All right, I'll tell you. I'll show why you should never have come to Esperanza. I'll begin with the *Amberdale,* as you're probably wondering how I managed to get out. When the sea started flooding the room, things started floating around, including an empty tin biscuit box left by the supercargo. That gave me the idea. As the water rose, it was forcing the air out through the ventilation grille in the upper corner of the room. I kept under it, treading water, and before the last of the air was driven out, I took a long breath

and dived to the porthole. I'd figured it right. By that time, the gas tank was afloat too, just like the biscuit tin, and had drifted clear of the porthole. With the water pressure equal inside and out, I was able to squirm through. As you should know, the suction of a ship sinking slowly by the stern isn't apt to be much, if any; just the same, it was a struggle to make it to the surface before my breath gave out. I supported myself with a long plank till some Indian fishermen picked me up at daylight. What attracted them was the gas tank. It had come to the surface with other flotsam and was bobbing around like a buoy broken adrift."

"The chief was right when he said you were a cool number in an emergency," said the captain grudgingly. "You can thank me for not having put you in irons, handcuffed to something."

A look of contempt crossed Martin's face. "The Indians," he went on, "turned me over to the comandante of police here. Neither he nor the Indians could speak English, but one of the comandante's sons could. I told him a ship was sunk nearby during the night, and said I'd jumped overboard and missed being picked up in the dark by the lifeboats. The comandante was going to get in touch with the American consul in Puerto Bello. I told him I'd like to stay in Esperanza. He wanted to know what I did aboard ship.

"I was in luck. The comandante is the big man in Esperanza, interested in building it up as a port. One of his ideas was to start a machine shop and foundry. He put me in charge of the project. I went on to learn Spanish, and also marry the comandante's youngest daughter."

Captain Kramer wiped his forehead and sniggered. "Without telling her about Carol, I'll bet."

"I told her everything," Martin said coldly. "The comandante couldn't understand why I was holding back from marrying her. I finally told him. He was sympathetic, and so was Rosita. I'm happy here—got one baby and another coming. I changed my name to Martinez—Eduardo Martinez—so any Americans knowing of me and coming this way wouldn't be likely to connect it with the Ed Martin who went down trapped inside the *Amberdale.*"

Martin glanced wistfully through one of the little portholes opposite him. "Everything was going nicely until a few weeks ago. I didn't know a Dale Line ship was anchored outside that day until my old chief walked into the

Casa Grande. I ducked out fast, but I knew he'd spotted me, from his inquiries with the bartender. We've been expecting someone to come nosing this way, and then this morning when you questioned my brother-in-law—"

"Your brother-in-law?"

"Jorge Perez. The boy, Chico, is my nephew. After you'd gone to the hotel, Jorge got word to the comandante who told him to get you back to the schooner, in case you talked around town; only the comandante and the rest of the Perez family know of my past. I came aboard to find out how much is known about me as a result of the chief spotting me. What will happen now is that the comandante will report to the American consul that you inquired at his office about a certain Senor Martinez. He had the man brought before you, and you said he wasn't the one you were looking for."

Captain Kramer was about to scoff, "But when I tell the consul—" A sudden thrust of fear dried his throat. He shuddered.

"When I go on deck," Martin continued, "Jorge and Chico will come down and tie and gag you at gunpoint. During the trip back to Puerto Bello tonight, they'll pick an opportune time to drop you over the side, and Jorge will report that you accidentally fell overboard in the dark."

Captain Kramer came to his feet, his voice hoarse with terror. "Martin, don't let them. I'll promise not to give you away. I swear I—"

Martin slipped off the bunk. "Captain Kramer," he said somberly, "I'm as powerless to help you as once you were to help me. The comandante is a very determined father-in-law, determined not to see his daughter made a widow and his grandchildren fatherless."

Turning toward the companionway, Senor Martinez added a remark that was reminiscent of that other occasion. "You have only yourself to blame for coming to Esperanza."

It has been said, and perhaps truly, that one man's wickedness may easily become all men's curse.

Jettatrica

by Lois T. and David Henderson

It was nearly dark on the narrow side street in Naples. There were few pedestrians and even fewer cars, and Betty Troxell walked briskly toward the center of town. From the things she had heard of Naples, she felt that this was no time to be out alone, and she was anxious for the safety of the hotel lobby and the company of the friends who were taking this short European tour with her. A warm shower and early to bed would be a good way to end this long day of walking, then tomorrow they would head for Paris and in less than a week she would be back in New York. If it were not for the

knowledge that Dan Jordan would be waiting for her, her thought of leaving Europe would be really depressing. She had dreamed of coming to Europe for years, and only Dan's absence marred what had been a dream-come-true.

Most of the little stores along this street were closed for the night, so Betty was surprised to see lights streaming from the door of a tiny shop. She was even more surprised to see the display of jewels in the window. She thought she had visited most of the jewelry stores in Naples—and in other cities, for that matter. Dan had given her money to buy a diamond—the diamond he would have set for her engagement ring. Jewels were his hobby, and he had taught her to be a competent judge. He wanted the stone to come from Europe for the sake of sentimentality.

"To remind you that dreams *do* come true," he had said to her when she left on her longed-for trip.

Although she had looked everywhere, she had not found a diamond which delighted her enough to warrant buying it. Now, in the dusk of the narrow Naples street, the lights of the little jewelry shop seemed to call her with insistence. Without asking herself whether or not she really wanted to go into the small shop, she opened the door and entered.

"Hey, you buy, no?" asked an old man who stood behind the counter. He was getting on in years, if one were to judge from the wrinkles in his face, but he still possessed the knack of making a woman feel beautiful, with no more than a glance from his twinkling eyes.

"I'd like to look at diamonds," she admitted. "Unset."

He showed her several, but they were like all the others she had seen; pretty but ordinary, or so large that she could not possibly afford them. She shook her head, and the little man's eyes narrowed.

"Aha!" he said, and Betty wasn't sure whether shrewdness or mischief had come into his face. "I t'ink you like deesa di'mon'." He took a stone from a drawer in the counter. "She'sa gotta bigga story. I tell you, no?"

He laid the stone on the square of dark velvet in front of Betty, and she stared at it, entranced. The stone was not large, but it was exquisitely cut and had been polished to an almost unnatural luster. It had been worked in a way which Betty did not understand but which gave the optical illusion that she was being pulled toward it. It seemed to snatch at

her dress with glowing, ethereal fingers. A feeling, almost of fear, touched her. The stone was too alive to be inanimate.

Then her common sense came to her rescue and she dismissed the fear and let her eyes dwell with delight on the glowing beauty of the diamond.

"It's beautiful," she said breathlessly.

"Deesa di'mon', she'sa belong to de Contessa Maria del Monti," the shopkeeper began in his Neapolitan singsong. The lilt of his voice drew her eyes away from the diamond, and she watched the animation of his face. His eyes were filled with gaiety and were so vivid that she could not convince herself that the words he was saying could possibly be serious.

"De contessa," he continued, "she was a jettatrice. You know jettatrice, no?"

He paused, and she shook her head.

He groped for words, trying to make it clear to her. "Jettatrice—il malocchio—how you say? The eye is bad, wicked?"

For a second the words did not register, and then she understood. "Oh, the evil eye," she cried.

"Ah, si, si," he said animatedly, relieved that she understood him at last. "Deesa jettatrice—evil eye—she'sa keep her power in deesa di'mon'. T'ree people—long, long ago—die because of di'mon'. No?"

He was grinning, his teeth gleaming in the light, so it was impossible to attach truth to the ridiculous words he was saying—and the diamond was very beautiful. The longer she looked at it, the more she wanted it for her own. He was just telling her this crazy story to attract her attention. Tourist bait.

"How much?" she asked.

"De contessa, she lika *you,* I bet. Is only mans she hates. You no gotta worry."

"How much?" Her voice was a little sharp. Enough foolishness was enough.

He named a figure just slightly in excess of the amount that Dan had given her, but she had some of her own money; and it might be worth it. Still she hesitated. Should she get an appraisal? No, that was unnecessary. Dan had taught her a great deal, and she had looked at many stones. She knew this was a good stone, marvelously cut, undeniably beautiful.

"I'll take it," she said impulsively.

She paid for the diamond in traveler's checks and put the stone, in its small leather pouch, in her purse. Then she was suddenly afraid to go out on the dark

streets where night had fallen.

The little man nodded. "I call you a taxi, no?" He had no more talk about jettatrices or evil eyes. If anything, he seemed eager to have her leave his shop. She was equally relieved to step into a cab and later into the brilliantly-lighted hotel lobby.

She was tempted to show the diamond and to tell her little story to the girl rooming with her but finally decided that the stone should be saved for Dan's eyes first—and the story, in the sane, electric light of her hotel room, did seem melodramatic and silly.

A week later, she sat in a jetliner high above the waters of the Atlantic, heading for home and Dan. The grief of leaving Paris was still heavy in her heart, but the anticipation of seeing Dan was beginning to dissipate the sadness. Deliberately, she tore her mind from memories of pastel twilights on the Place de la Concorde and pushed her thoughts ahead to New York, to the feeling of Dan's arms about her. To sharpen the sensation, she put her hand into her purse to touch the leather pouch containing the diamond. She had kept the stone in a locked suitcase during the past week, but was carrying it in her purse for safety and to make duty declarations simpler. As she touched the pouch, instead of the reassurance she had expected, she was filled with fear. A cold certainty that this trip would end in disaster shook her.

She tried to push aside the premonition, to tell herself that what she was feeling was only the result of fatigue or due to the sedative she had taken to prevent airsickness; but the terror held her mercilessly, and her body trembled with a brief chill.

"Are you cold?" her seatmate asked her.

"No, I—" There were, of course, no words to explain this thing. "I think I'm just very tired."

"Why don't you try to sleep?"

"Maybe I will." She tilted back her chair and, turning her cheek into the small pillow which had been brought to her, she discovered that she was really very sleepy. It *was* the sedative, then, which had let the dark wave of fear come through. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that she had touched the diamond.

The hum of voices and the plane's vibration diminished, and she was just in that world suspended between waking and sleeping when the fear struck again. Sleep, the enemy of all false bravery, the brutal destroyer

of all facades, had seduced her, had torn away attempt at rationalization and planted in her a fear more terrible than anything she could imagine when she was totally awake. She struggled to be free, but the sedation held her prisoner. She began to feel more and more that disaster was imminent. She prayed, as a child would, to fall into the forgetfulness of deep sleep so that whatever happened would happen quickly.

She was not aware of slipping over the edge of consciousness, but she was sharply aware of the noise which jerked her upright to stare out of the window. There were clouds above and streaks of lightning seemed to come from them straight toward her. She felt the lurch and sickening dive of the plane toward the earth, and she heard the engines screaming as if in pain. Then there was the jolt of impact, her head snapped—and she woke to find herself sitting rigidly erect, her heart hammering in her throat.

A stewardess was standing beside her, holding a calming hand on Betty's shoulder. "You've had a bad dream," the stewardess said. "You jerked so hard your purse fell off your lap."

"Are we all right?" Betty asked, her voice thick with the thudding of her heart and the effects of the sedation.

"Yes, we're fine. We've come through quite a bad storm, but everything's fine, and we'll be in New York in about half an hour."

Betty endured the remaining time in the air, but her hands, clenched in her lap, were damp and cold, so she knew that the dream—if a dream it was—had shaken her cruelly. It was only when the plane began its descent at New York that she was able to relax. When the wheels touched the runway, and the earth, dear and familiar, was close again, she was almost overwhelmed with a mixed feeling of gratitude and embarrassment that she had been so foolish as to think there could actually be any connection between the Italian's reference to the evil eye and the terror that had created the dream. She had never been the type to fall prey to superstition or witch tales and this was hardly the time to begin.

She saw Dan before he saw her. His back was toward her, but she had no difficulty recognizing him. What other man stood so tall and straight or had such beautiful shoulders? What other man carried his hands loosely linked behind his back, the two middle fingers caught under a restraining thumb so that only the index and

little finger showed? It was a curious habit he had, and she had even teased him about it, but his mother said he had held his hands that way ever since he was a baby.

He turned then and saw her, and his face was a glad reflection of the surge of joy in her heart.

"I've been walking the floor for an hour and a half," he said. "I got here far too early, but I couldn't stay away."

"Silly!" she said, thinking how lovely that he felt this way.

"Come on, let's get out of here. We've got so much to say."

"I got the diamond," she said. "Oh, wait till I tell you."

When she actually started to tell him about it in the dimness of his car, she hesitated before revealing the words of the Italian shopkeeper, afraid that the absurd conversation might upset Dan—but she needn't have worried. He only hooted with laughter, assuring her that the mad tale was simply to attract a tourist, and adding that he hoped she hadn't been so taken in that she had bought a poor stone.

In her apartment, she put the diamond in front of him, and his reaction was immediate and gratifying.

"Gorgeous," he said, a breathless sound to his voice. "You outdid yourself, darling. It's unbelievable for that money. The little guy didn't need his crazy story to sell *this*."

She nodded, wanting terribly to feel the same excitement which she had felt in the store, but there was an uneasiness in her, a feeling of chill foreboding. It took several minutes of Dan's joking tenderness before she could relax and smile and see again the glowing, beckoning loveliness of the small diamond.

Dan wanted to have the stone set at once, but she felt oddly reluctant about letting him take it.

"I still feel strange about it," she confessed. "As though something might happen to you if you walked out of here with it."

"You're being silly," he said, "but you're tired, and you've had quite an experience, so you have a right to be silly if you want to."

He left almost at once, insisting that she needed her rest. His good-night kiss was more exciting, she discovered, than the lavender twilights of Paris or the golden noons of Rome. In a few weeks, she mused, she would have the diamond set, their marriage would follow soon after, and the future would be too full and rich to allow any remembrance of tales of fantasy that had been told her in the dark street of Naples. She

stood by the window after Dan left and watched him walk away, his hands linked loosely behind his back, his thumb holding his two middle fingers, and she felt, for that moment at least, oddly secure.

It was almost two months, however, before Betty could give the diamond to Dan. Although she tried to laugh herself out of the uneasy feeling which held her, she could not banish the sensation. Finally, Dan was so persistent, so confident that she put the little leather pouch into his hands one evening early in December.

"I'll take it to Martino's," he told her. "They do good work, and I'm sure they can have the ring ready for Christmas. You'll see, darling. All your silly fears are for nothing."

"If anything happened to you," she said slowly, "I'd die."

"Nothing can happen to me," he said gently, teasingly. "The only thing that could ever really hurt me would be something happening to you."

Gradually her fear was pushed away by his love, his touch, and when he left with the stone she felt happy and contented.

The winter night was very dark when she awoke from a nightmare of flame and terror and anguish. In her dream, Dan struggled, coughing and choking, down a long hall clogged with smoke and flame. The memory was so vivid that she felt the sting of smoke in her nostrils and her eyes smarted as though with unshed tears. For a bewildered minute, she wondered if there were actually a fire in her building, and the smell of smoke had caused her dream, but when she opened her door, the halls were quiet and there was no smell of smoke.

Yet she couldn't relax; the dream had been too real. With trembling fingers, she dialed Dan's number.

He answered immediately, and she knew that his telephone was not by his bed but in the livingroom.

"Are you all right?" she asked shakily.

"Darling! It's four a.m."

"I had a dream. I was so scared. Are you all right?"

His voice sounded a little puzzled, a little uncertain. "I'm fine. I was up because there was a small fire in the basement, and the super woke us all, just in case. It's out now but the place stinks of smoke."

"I dreamed about fire. It's the diamond, Dan."

"Darling, slow down. It's nothing of the sort. This is a coinci-

dental thing because we're so close and I've been thinking of you so intensely these past few minutes, wishing I could be with you. That's all."

His voice went on quietly soothing her. He led the conversation into talk of little things, inconsequential things. "On the way home, I went past one of those crazy little places that stay open all hours," he said. "I went in just for kicks and got a couple of things."

His trick worked and her interest was roused in spite of herself.

"What?" she asked. "What things?"

"I won't tell you what I got for you. It's a surprise. But I got a key ring for myself—an odd sort of thing with a garnet set in it. You'll like it."

His voice gradually calmed her and at last she hung up, convinced again that she had been foolish, childish, the victim of a gnarled little man in a Naples shop.

A week later, however, when she heard of the near fatal heart attack suffered by a jewel setter at Martino's, the fear rushed back full force. She called the firm and learned that the man had been working on her ring when he collapsed. Here was a coincidence, she decided, that even Dan could not explain away—but he did. He held her cold and shaking hands and talked the way a father talks to soothe a child bedeviled by nightmare.

"You're wrong, Betty. This guy had two previous heart attacks. I even—knowing how you'd feel—went to Martino's and inquired. They said he'd been feeling rotten for two weeks and they'd sort of expected this to happen sooner than it did. It had absolutely nothing to do with your diamond."

She shuddered. "You're not being realistic, Dan. There can't be this many coincidences. There's something wrong. I just know it."

"Listen," he said. "I'm going to tell you what I've done. I got the address of your little jeweler from the pouch the diamond was in, and I've written to him. I've told him he scared you out of your senses and please to write and tell you it was all a hoax just to arouse your interest in the diamond."

"He probably can't read English," she said weakly.

"I got my friend, Leo, to make a copy in Italian. I sent both copies. We'll be hearing from him any day now. I asked him to write to your address, so you'd know I wasn't just making up a story."

She tried to smile. "I'm sorry, Dan. It's just—oh, I don't know. Sometimes I think we ought to forget about the diamond. I'd be satisfied with a plain wedding band."

"Don't be weird." He kissed her lightly and then not so lightly. "My wife will wear a beautiful diamond—one almost as beautiful as she is. And when the letter comes, you won't ever have to be afraid again. I'm going to get your ring on Friday; another setter is finishing it. We won't wait for Christmas."

Friday morning was heavy and dark, the air filled with the begin-

ning of what promised to be a heavy snowfall. Betty woke with a sick foreboding which she could not shake off. She tried to call Dan to tell him not to pick up the diamond on such a day, but he had already left his apartment and she couldn't reach him. She dressed for work and went out into the gray, windy morning, trying to tell herself that she was acting like a hysterical child, but her sense of oppression would not leave her.

Late in the afternoon, she had a sudden inspiration. She got permission to leave work early, and she hurried through the thickly falling snow toward the public library. The sidewalks had become treacherously slippery, and she felt blinded and bewildered by the heavy snow. It was a great relief to reach the warmth and light of the library.

She went quickly to the reference books and looked for information on the evil eye. It was not difficult to find, and when she went to the table to read, she had several books in her arms. She read feverishly, learning, to her consternation, that there were many people in modern as well as ancient times who honestly believed that the eyes could, in certain cases, throw off malevolence or death. In some instances, the book informed her, it was believed that this power could live on in an inanimate object after the death of the owner of the evil eye.

There were, she read, certain things believed to be able to ward off the evil eye. The most common was to make the sign of "the horns" with the fingers—spreading out the index and little fingers while hooking the two middle fingers behind the thumb. Another accepted method was to carry semiprecious stones, such as the garnet.

Betty sat in frozen, stunned shock. The sight of Dan's hands loosely linked behind his back, the two middle fingers caught behind his thumb, the sound of his voice saying, "'I've been walking the floor for an hour and a half," were suddenly vividly clear in her mind. Had his walking the floor, unconsciously holding his fingers in the shape of the horn, kept her plane from crashing in the violent storm that split the sky above the ocean? Had the newly-purchased garnet key ring kept a potentially disastrous fire confined to the basement?

Was it coincidence? Was it madness? Was it witchcraft? Whatever it was, it filled her with a cold, clutching fear that wrenched her from her seat, leav-

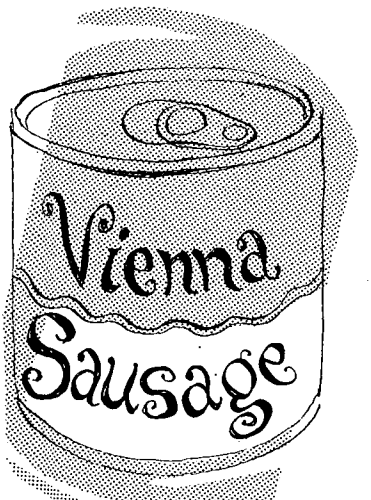
ing the books scattered on the table, and pulled her swiftly from the warm, lighted room into the dark swirling snow. Her feet slid and seemed almost to dance grotesquely on the icy walks as she leaned against the bitter wind. Several times, at crossings, she would have stumbled in front of cars if she had not had the protecting warning of the red signal lights shining through the murkiness. Her mind, frozen and chaotic, would not function with any normalcy. She knew only a terrible compulsion to get home to where Dan would be waiting for her, to tell him to sell the diamond or give it away or throw it away. She *had* to make him see that it was evil and filled with danger for both of them. She fought savagely against the slickness of the walks and the smothering swirl of the snow. She had to get home quickly; she could not waste another minute.

The last corner had no signal light. She waited for what seemed an agonizingly long time on the curb, trying to listen, trying to see—but she was deafened and blinded by the snow and her own panic. Finally, with a sobbing breath, she ran into the icy street, into moving gray shadows, aware too late of the blaring horn of the heavy bus that skidded wildly toward her . . .

A block away, in front of Betty's apartment house, Dan waited. He had seen the corner of an envelope in her mailbox and had recognized the Italian stamps. He felt happily certain that it would contain the news he sought and he would be able to give Betty the gift of peace of mind at the same moment that he put the beautiful diamond ring on her finger.

His hands, curved, the fingers spread, shaped a few snowballs with which he could pelt her in youthful joy. He was so happy that he even forgot that last night the little garnet key ring had slipped from his pocket into the dark street where it slid into a sewer. It wasn't important anyhow.

The power of suggestion may be hard to ignore—eventually.



I was in the supermarket on Thursday and I saw the old man put a can of Vienna sausage in his pocket.

I didn't mean to see him. I wouldn't see a thing like that if I could help it. Would you? But there I was, coming around the corner from pickles and relishes and there he was, a little old man in a big old coat with the can in his hand. Then the hand was in his pocket. I guess I must have looked surprised, because that's how I felt. If I hadn't been so surprised I would never have looked at him. I just didn't have time to get my sights adjusted and pretend that I was looking for a good buy in tuna.

He looked back at me—sly and frightened and angry all at the same time. He was dirty too. His clothes were filthy and there was ground-in grime on his neck, and he didn't smell too great. I registered all this in the split second I stood there. I thought, *Don't worry, old man, I won't tell anybody*—but I couldn't very well say that to him, could I?

I glanced at his shopping cart as I pushed my own up the aisle. He had a loaf of marked-down, day-old bread and a container of

by Joyce Harrington

skim milk; too big to put in his pockets. I thought, *Rip off a cake of soap while you're at it, old man.* Then I lost myself in consideration of whether the weekly spaghetti feed could be varied by the substitution of rigatoni or maybe even lasagna. When you're cooking for a family of seven, five of whom are under the age of twelve, the only thing you can be sure of is that spaghetti once a week will make everybody happy—especially my pocketbook.

I saw him again at the meat case where I was debating the merits of the bargain sack of three whole chickens against the special of the week, eye round roast beef at a price that ought to buy a whole cow—hooves, tail and all. He was leaning over the lamb chops, all red and white and shiny in their clear plastic wrappings as if they were a stack of Hope diamonds set out for the likes of him (and me) to gawk at and desire. I think he was drooling, but I didn't stick around to find out if he were planning a big heist of the crown jewels of the meat department. I grabbed a sack of chickens and headed down the homestretch into frozen foods and fresh produce. Pretty risky, I thought, trying to lift something from the meat counter. For all I—or he—knew, there were Brink's guards lined up every three feet behind that one-way glass with machine pistols trained on larcenous-hearted shoppers.

After loading up on bananas and orange juice, I headed for the check-out. It was getting close to dinnertime and the Thursday-special crowds were thinning out a little. I always did my shopping on Thursdays, right after I got off work. The office of the plumbing contractor, where I kept the books and sent out the bills, was two blocks away from the supermarket, and home was three blocks and around the corner in the other direction. I walked to work, and on Thursday mornings I towed my creaky old shopping cart with me. Jimmy would be home from the docks before I brought home the bacon, and the kids would be helping him throw together our traditional Thursday night pancake supper. It all worked out pretty well, with Jimmy and the kids pitching in and Mrs. McIntyre next door taking care of little Kevin who was only three and too young for school. However, even with both of us working, it was getting harder and harder to fill that old shopping cart.

When I got to the front of the store there were only two check-out lanes working. One was the

express lane, so I had to get into the other one, right behind a "park-and-shop" lady. You know the kind I mean. They park their carts in the check-out line and then dash off up and down the aisles filling their arms with cans and boxes, dumping them in the cart and then dashing off again on another raid. They think they're putting something over on somebody, but all they're doing is wasting energy and holding up the line. Sometimes they get into fights. They always seem to be fat ladies with their hair in rollers, and this one was no exception. She scurried up with a ten-pound sack of potatoes under one arm and a six-pack of evaporated milk in the other and hissed at me, "I'm almost finished. Don't get ahead of me," and off she went.

I decided it wasn't worth getting angry about and settled down to wait for my turn. The checker was ringing up a big order and I was third in line after that, so I figured I'd have to wait about fifteen or twenty minutes. I started reading the *Daily News* I'd saved from the morning so Jimmy could read it too. The old man hitched himself to the express line, and I noticed that he'd added a sack of dog meal to the milk and bread in his cart. I wondered what else he'd added to the Vienna sausage in the pocket of his bulky coat.

The "Letters to the Editor" column was pretty kooky, as usual, and I was reading one from a guy in Staten Island who wanted to ship all drug addicts to Alaska and make them work on the pipeline so we could get oil from there and outwit the Arabs. So I didn't notice when the four kids came in the door and spread out across the front of the store. I mean, none of us knew they were just kids right then, because they were all wearing ski masks, and three of them had guns. Even a kid looks pretty grown-up with a gun in his mitten.

The first clue I had that anything was wrong was when the two cash registers stopped zinging and the store got very quiet. One ski mask was at the door, and another was loping across to the manager's cubicle. They both had guns. A third one was standing at the end of the check-out counters, waving his gun around so we each had a chance to see that it was real. The fourth picked up a shopping bag and snapped it open. He said, loud and clear, "All the money goes in the bag, dig?"

We dug. The checkers started fumbling bills out of the cash register drawers and stuffing them into the shopping bag. The manager stumbled out of his cubicle,

where he'd been sleeping or dreaming about next week's price increases, and ran right into a ski mask who shoved a gun into his paunch and backed him in his tracks toward the steel safe inside the cubicle.

"Wallets and purses, too, ladies and gentlemen. Spill out your pockets. Everything goes in the bag."

I opened my purse and got out my old wallet with the forty dollars inside that would just barely cover the week's groceries in my shopping cart. The "park-and-shop" lady skidded up with a head of lettuce and a net sackful of onions just in time to get in on the fun and games. She tried to tiptoe backward to the safety of the vegetable bins, but the ski mask at the door barked, "Hold it right there, lady." She squeaked a little, but stayed put.

The old man, who had just unloaded his milk and bread and dog food at the check-out, was shaking like he had palsy. I was feeling pretty rocky myself, but I felt sorry for the old guy who'd had enough guts to fill his pockets with food and now was going to lose what little money he had. I watched his trembling hand head for his pocket, expecting him to drag out a wrinkled, hoarded couple of bucks. What came out was the can of sausage and the old geezer didn't shake a bit when he let fly. The can hit the ski mask at the end of the counter right between the eyes, and he staggered back into the pile of empty cartons lining the window. The old guy didn't let up; he must have had pockets the size of shopping bags. A can of beans went flying at the ski mask who was manhandling the manager and hit him behind the ear. Then we all got into the act. The one with the shopping bag went down on one knee when the express checker bopped him at close range with a can of pineapple juice. Soda bottles sailed through the air and some of them exploded on contact, shooting up fizzy geysers of pop. I slung a couple of quarts of beer—Jimmy should only see me, I thought—and followed through with a five-pound sack of sugar. We were all so high on the kick of battle, I guess we forgot these jokers had guns.

The ski mask at the door didn't forget. He let off one potshot into the hail of flying groceries and then beat it out the door. It was enough. Whether the guy was a supermarksman or it was just a lucky shot, the old man went down between the check-out counters like he'd been sand-

bagged. The other three ski masks were groaning on the floor in the rubble of dented cans and broken glass. One of them had blood seeping out of the nose hole of his mask. The manager was holding the two remaining guns, one in each hand, and he looked like he could have used a pot holder for each one. The old man lay crumpled and pale under his grime, with his big old coat fanned out around him so we could all see the pockets that he'd added to the inside. One of the checkers went into the manager's cubicle and set off the alarm.

When Patrolman Kenny Regan marched into the store a couple of minutes later, we were all feeling pretty glum. The old man was still lying on the floor looking very dead. We couldn't see any blood, but for all we knew he'd been hit in the back and was bleeding all over the floor underneath his overcoat.

Kenny walked over to the three huddled on the floor, his big heavy shoes crunching broken glass and sugar and spilled soda pop into a sticky mess. "Okay, you guys," he roared, "let's see your ugly mugs."

One by one the ski masks peeled off their disguises and that's when we saw that they were only kids. The oldest one couldn't have been more than fifteen and the two remaining looked enough alike to be brothers. Three pairs of frightened eyes flitted around the circle of watching faces.

"How do you like that?" Kenny said. "It's a pack of baby desperadoes."

The manager squawked, "What am I supposed to do with these?" and held out the two guns as if they were two dozen rotten eggs.

The express checker piped up, "Officer, what are you gonna do about the old man? Can you tell if he's dead, or what?"

I could see that Kenny was getting rattled by all the questions. I was very relieved, and so was he, when the two squad cars pulled up in front, followed by a city ambulance.

In minutes the store was swarming with hard-faced men in blue, and we were all giving our versions of the attempted holdup. More squad cars arrived and the three kids were handcuffed and hustled away. Kenny Regan found himself a congenial post, out of the thick of the questioning. Stalwart and silent he guarded the door, preventing busybodies from coming in and witnesses from going out.

Over the din, I heard the shrill excited voice of the manager. "I

knew the old guy was shoplifting. But I swear, if it would bring him back to life, I'd let him rip off everything in the store."

"Do you really mean that, Jack?"

It got almost as quiet in the store as it was when the three guns were making conversation difficult. The ambulance attendants, who were trying to maneuver a wheeled stretcher into the cramped space at the end of the check-out counters, stopped what they were doing to watch their customer scramble to his feet.

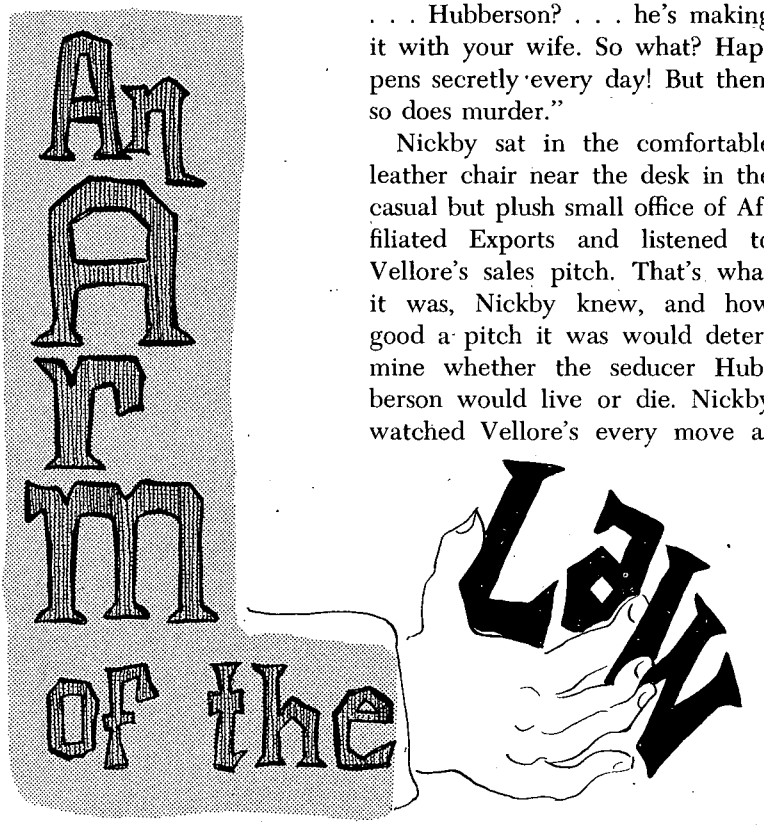
"Do you really mean that?" the old voice croaked. He was standing up, leaning against the counter, patting himself all over with shaky, dirty hands.

"I thought you were shot! I thought you were dead!" the manager jabbered indignantly.

"Does it make any difference?" the old man cackled. "I'm shot but I'm not dead," and he groped in the breast pocket of his moth-eaten jacket and pulled out a can of Spam. The can had a hole in it, and pink shreds of meat oozed like baby fingers out of the hole. He held it aloft and did a little shuffle-footed victory jig. "From now on," he shouted, "from now on, I always carry a can of Spam next to me heart. Now, tell me, Jack, does your offer still hold?"

Half an hour later, I was bumping my way home with a load of groceries and quite a story to tell Jimmy and the kids. The old man was on his way home to whatever dingy social security room he lived in with a shopping cart full of free food. I'm afraid we all ganged up on the manager and shamed him into keeping his word, while Kenny Regan and the rest of the boys in blue smiled and looked the other way. My own cash register tape fluttered out of the top of one of the sacks I was towing behind me. Forty dollars and thirty-nine cents. I'd had to give the checker a subway token and four pennies I scrounged out of the bottom of my purse. If things get any worse, I may have to do something about enlarging the pockets of my coat.

Guilt, even twice removed, may not be far enough for the nonprofessional.



. . . Hubberson? . . . he's making it with your wife. So what? Happens secretly every day! But then, so does murder."

Nickby sat in the comfortable leather chair near the desk in the casual but plush small office of Affiliated Exports and listened to Vellore's sales pitch. That's what it was, Nickby knew, and how good a pitch it was would determine whether the seducer Hubberson would live or die. Nickby watched Vellore's every move as

So you want this guy killed, hey? That's not unusual, Mr. Nickby. Can I call you Ted? And your motive's not unusual either, Ted. This guy . . . what's his name the man leaned back expansively in his desk chair, dark, birdlike eyes twinkling and rapacious in the narrow face. Moustached, unshorn, attired in a baggy red

sweater and tieless, Vellore was one of the new breed of super-casual yet efficient young businessmen. He moved with an informal ease, but somehow he moved with a precision that inspired confidence.

"Hey, I'll tell you," Vellore was saying, "this guy Hubberson has got it coming, from what Platt tells me in his report. I mean, no doubt he just pretended to be your friend so he could get next to your wife Madge."

Platt was the private detective Nickby had originally hired to follow Madge. When Platt had returned the information of her infidelity with Hubberson, Nickby had become enraged, offered Platt money to kill Hubberson or find someone who would. Platt pretended disinterest, but two days later, after Nickby had sufficient time to cool down, the detective phoned Nickby and asked if he were still interested in Hubber-

by John Lutz

son's demise. Nickby was. Platt then referred him to Affiliated Exports, and here Nickby was discussing the exportation of Hubberson's immortal soul to hell.

Vellore raked spread fingers through his dark tousled hair, changing nothing, and smiled. "Platt tells me you still love your wife, want her back all the way."

Nickby shrugged. "If I didn't love her I wouldn't be here."

"I wanted to hear you say it, Ted, because as much as you love your wife, that's how much you hate Hubberson. Wouldn't want you to rush into anything you'd regret later."

"No worry there," Nickby said.

"OK! So, let me tell you a bit about our unique method—perfectly safe for everybody except Hubberson and the victim."

"Victim?" Nickby thought he might have heard wrong.

"In a manner of speaking, Ted. Secondary victim, I should have said. Hubberson's the real victim."

"How about explaining that?"

"I will, and you'll love it!" Vellore smiled a beautiful white smile beneath his bushy dark moustache. "Want me to tell you what's led the police to practically every convicted murderer, Ted? Motive! I mean, who's got a good reason to kill this Hubberson skunk? The police ask themselves that right off, before anything else, and after they dig a while they come up with you for an answer."

"Wouldn't they anyway?" Nickby asked. "I'll have a motive

whether I kill Hubberson or not. Wouldn't it be safe for me just to establish an alibi?"

"Oh, alibi, sure! But they'd still figure you might have hired someone to do the job. The police are methodical, but they're not stupid. And believe me, Ted, they're more interested in explanations than solutions, so they're not any more methodical than they have to be."

"But they're methodical enough to uncover Hubberson's affair with my wife."

"Only if they start with Hubberson's murder and work back to you via searching for a motive. But what if they start with *somebody else's* murder and work back to Hubberson? Let me remind you, Ted, that capital punishment has just been reestablished in this state. That's why we have an office here."

"You mean—"

"Hey! You've got it! We research Hubberson, figure out who his enemies are, who he'd have reason to kill, then we settle on one and arrange this person's death by violence so that Hubberson is the big it!" Vellore pressed his open palms together, pointed his fingertips at Nickby. "One: our company arranges the whole thing. Two: someone you have no connection with is the secondary victim, and Hubberson takes the fall! You're twice removed from the crime, Ted, untouchable! Only you're the guy that made it all happen!"

Nickby felt a sliver of ice in his stomach. "But somebody innocent . . . somebody who doesn't deserve—"

"Hey, Ted!" Vellore interrupted him incredulously. "This guy we pick would probably kill Hubberson if he had the guts—would probably use you to do it if he had the choice. Anyway, he'll be somebody you don't even know, a name in the newspaper, like a fatality in some traffic accident. Believe me, if the roles were reversed, you'd be the name in the paper. You understand human nature. You think you're any different from the next guy just because you're willing to pay for somebody's removal?"

"No, but—"

"So! This name in the paper is a necessary step in the procedure to guarantee your safety. Once removed isn't far enough away . . ."

Nickby knew Vellore was right, nodded. The sliver of ice had melted. Both men had known from the start that Nickby would use anything or anybody to destroy Hubberson.

"What about cost?" Nickby

asked quietly in a level voice.

"Hey! Cost!" Vellore slapped his left hand with his right. "I get so enthused I even forget to bring up the subject. But you're thinking about it, and I don't blame you. Ten thousand is our usual fee, more if we run into any unforeseen difficulties. And I think it's a testimony to our business know-how that we very, very seldom run into anything we haven't foreseen." He touched a gold pen to his chin and smiled confidently. "I think I can assure you that the job will be done for ten thousand."

"Fair price," Nickby said. He'd expected to pay more. "Half before and half after?"

"If you'd like," Vellore said. "Or, if you prefer, we have a completely safe financing plan at the lowest current interest rates. We have a loan department that handles all that."

"Die now, pay later," Nickby said.

"Hey, Ted! You should have resisted that one!"

Nickby had to smile agreement. "Half now, half after is the way I'd rather go."

Vellore nodded. "You bring the money by the office sometime next week and we'll set the wheels in motion, hey?"

"Good enough," Nickby said. He stood and shook hands with Vellore. "Anything you need to know . . . I mean, about Hubberson?"

"No, no! Listen, we take care of all that with our research department. You don't have a part or a worry in it, Ted. That's the crux of our service."

"Fine," Nickby said, and walked to the door. "See you next week."

"Okay, buddy. Be good."

After the money had been delivered that next week, Nickby found that he experienced a feeling of profound satisfaction. Hubberson would pay the high price for what he'd done with Madge, and Madge would be completely Nickby's again. Gigantic, inexorable wheels had been set in motion under Nickby's direction, wheels that controlled destinies. Let Madge play her game of female deception. Now it amused rather than infuriated Nickby. It was a temporary thing.

Nickby found that he loved Madge more than ever, despite her infidelity. Not that she was without blame, but hadn't Hubberson stalked her with the relentless cunning of the practiced seducer? Probably her conscience was tearing apart her soul.

"Going shopping again tonight?" Nickby asked, admiring

her trim figure and flowing auburn hair as she slipped into her raincoat.

Her brown eyes smiled at him. "It's just impossible to find what I want, Ted."

"Somebody mentioned they saw you Tuesday night at Shoe City."

Madge paused at the door. "I did go by there to look at some shoes I thought I might buy to match a brown dress at Laster's I wanted but didn't buy when it didn't fit."

Nickby smiled at her intentional vagueness. No one had mentioned seeing her at Shoe City. "I hope you find what you want tonight," he said as she walked out the door, flipping her long hair in the way he found so desirable. He listened to the tattoo of her high heels as she ran through the light drizzle to the car.

Nickby propped up his feet and resumed drinking his vodka gimlet. He was middle-aged and balding, thickening a bit around the middle. Hubberson was eight years younger, trim and had a hairline down around his eyebrows; but there were things more important than appearance, like what went on inside a man's head. Hubberson was going to die soon, and right now Nickby was . . . well, he had to admit it, he was having fun!

Though some of the fun did go out of it when he saw the morning newspaper two weeks later. Nickby glanced across the breakfast table at Madge, who was cheerfully concentrating on spreading grape jelly evenly on a

burned piece of toast. She hadn't seen the paper, seldom read inside the front page anyway. Nickby had looked forward to this moment when he could show her the news of Hubberson's arrest, but now something stopped him from turning the newspaper and pointing out the article to her with mock astonishment. It was Arthur Billingsly who robbed him of his pleasure.

Not that Nickby had ever met or even heard of Billingsly, the man whose brutal and obviously premeditated murder he'd helped bring about. Still, for a few minutes after he'd read the paper, Billingsly was more than just a name on page three, more than some unfamiliar name in a routine news item. Until Nickby managed to blot him out in his mind, Billingsly was the slaughtered remains of a living, breathing appliance salesman and husband. Did they *have* to mention his widow in the news story?

"Hey! It was a beautiful operation," Vellore said to Nickby in his office at Affiliated Exports, when Nickby went there to pay the other five thousand dollars. "What'd your wife think when you showed her Hubberson had been arrested for Billingsly's murder?"

"She was surprised."

"I guess! When we found out Hubberson's sister had committed suicide last year when Billingsly married his present wife instead of her, we knew we had our man."

"But Hubberson wasn't directly involved," Nickby said. "Do you think that's motive enough?"

"Combined with the police finding Hubberson's hunting rifle hidden in the woods behind Billingsly's house, finding that it had fired the murder bullet, and that it had only Hubberson's fingerprints all over it, yes. And of course we were sure Hubberson was in no position to account for his time during the hour of the murder. The beauty of our method, Ted, is that we utilize police efficiency and procedure. The police are our unwitting cohorts. Simple, once you know their modus operandi!"

"So now it's over. All I have to do is wait for the law to finish the job."

Vellore leaned back in his desk chair, smiling as he receded in perspective. "Exactly, Ted. As with the unsuccessful criminal type, it's not so much lack of aptitude but enslavement to a predictable routine that can be used to undo the law. Hey! It's been a pleasure." Vellore stood abruptly and extended his hand in a like-to-talk-to-you-but-work-to-do gesture.

Nickby thought he should deny

that what he'd done had been a pleasure, but he couldn't. Except for Billingsly, it *had* been a pleasure. He thanked Vellore, shook hands with him and left.

It was interesting to watch Madge over the next eight months. Nickby would sit quietly, ostensibly occupied with the paper or TV, and observe her increasing agitation as the date, the hour and minute of Hubberson's execution drew nearer. At first she had doubted Hubberson's guilt, but a jury of her peers had taken care of that after only an hour's deliberation. Next stop: electric chair.

Madge became thinner, almost gaunt, as slowly passing time turned the thumbscrews. Of course she had to pretend that none of this greatly concerned her, and she hardly mentioned the matter. Nickby would watch her pace or dig her fingernails into her palms, and sometimes he'd fold the newspaper in his lap and rest his head on the soft armchair back. What was Hubberson thinking at that moment? Not about Madge, Nickby was sure. A macabre smile would play about Nickby's stern mouth, and just as quickly disappear. Was there something wrong with him, that he was enjoying this?

When the hour, minute and second came, Nickby and Madge were spending a "usual" evening at home, Nickby watching a TV special on primitive man and Madge sitting across the room from him pretending to read a woman's magazine. Nickby watched how tense her hands were, how her jaw muscles rhythmically flexed. Hubberson was due to end at the same time as the TV program.

Nickby almost expected the lights to dim dramatically, but they didn't. A denture-adhesive commercial came on and Madge tore a magazine page as she turned it.

That was all.

Then the telephone rang.

Madge practically ran to lift the receiver, as if she expected "B"-movie news of a last-minute pardon.

"Yes," she said. "Yes!" in a higher voice, and Nickby saw her hand tighten on the receiver. "Yes, I suppose I can. I'm not busy anyway." After a pause she said good-bye and hung up the phone.

"Who was that?" Nickby asked, pretending to concentrate on TV.

"Linda Cummings," Madge answered as she walked to the closet for her coat. "She wants me to meet her, says it's important. You know how she is."

Nickby did. Linda Cummings was a superneurotic, excitable female who was always seeking help or companionship from Madge, but Nickby was sure that hadn't been Linda on the phone. Madge had never carried on a phone conversation with her for less than forty-five minutes.

"Be back soon," Madge said.

Nickby feigned indifference, nodded to her as she left. He sat still for a while after he heard the car pull away, trying to think.

The ring of the telephone almost jolted him out of the chair.

Nickby crossed the room, picked up the receiver and said hello to a familiar voice.

"Hey! Ted! Thought I'd give you a call to let you know there's been a little trouble."

A tremor of surprise, then anger, moved through Nickby's body. "Trouble? The state was doing the executing! How the hell could there be any trouble?"

"Sweat not, Ted! Hubberson's departed on schedule, and nothing's come up we can't handle."

"My wife got a mysterious phone call a few minutes ago and went flying out of here on some phony excuse to go somewhere. I want to know what's happening!"

"We know where she's going and we're following her, Ted. Just do me a favor, sit tight for about an hour and we'll be able to explain how things stand. Believe me, it's the best thing you can do."

"My wife took the car. It's the only thing I can do unless I want to take a cab, and then I wouldn't know where to take it. Now—"

Nickby suddenly realized he was talking into a dead line. He stared at the receiver as if it were something that had inexplicably changed in his hand, then he hung up with a curse.

It was Nickby's turn to endure the intransigence of time, to keep his nerve and a tortured patience as time flowed by ever so painfully and slowly.

Over an hour had passed—an hour and three minutes—since he'd talked to Vellore on the phone. Nothing could go wrong! *What could be happening?*

It was the front door opening that caused Nickby to jump this time and spill part of his drink onto his sleeve. He stood dumbly by his chair, watching Madge enter followed by a smiling Vellore and a man with a neatly-trimmed beard and heavy-lidded, bored eyes.

Vellore guided Madge by the arm and seated her on the sofa. "Ted, buddy! Everything's under control." He motioned toward the bored-eyed man, who was stand-

ing perfectly still near the back of the sofa. "This is Henry Van Mimer, one of our field agents who was assigned to your case."

Absently, still in numb surprise, Nickby nodded to Van Mimer and, looking closely at Madge, noticed that her eyes were strangely unblinking and lifeless, the dark pupils dilated.

"Nothing permanently wrong with your wife, Ted. She'll be herself within fifteen minutes. It was us that phoned her."

"You . . . ?"

Vellore glanced at his watch, as if cautioning himself against being late for an appointment. "You see, good buddy, there's a factor in our business I forgot to mention to you. That's guilt. It makes men do unreasonable things sometimes, nonprofessionals like yourself. In business terms, our ex-clients become perpetual risk variables. So we have to take simple precautions."

Nickby was staring at Madge, who was staring back and not seeing him.

"Now don't say the guilt could never get to you, Ted. It gets to every amateur to some extent. Don't think you're not just like the next guy in that respect."

"But I hated—"

Vellore raised a silencing hand and smiled. "Hated Billingsly? Not hardly, Ted. Hey! Just bear with me and I know you'll understand! They say murder creates ripples, like a pebble thrown into a pond, and that's true in more ways than one. Every murder inspires motives for other murders, motives that would be clear to the police if the evidence happened to be planted directly before them. Take your case, Ted. Obviously your pretty wife here was unhappy or she wouldn't have been having a heavy affair with Hubberson. Now, think of the strain on her all these months waiting for Hubberson's execution date, pretending to be unconcerned about it. No wonder that on the precise night of his death she'd crack mentally and do something rash."

Understanding was clawing its way through the disbelief in Nickby's mind, dragging with it a paralyzing fear. "You'll never—"

"Get away with it? Hey! It's our business, Ted! We phoned your wife and got her to meet us by saying we could produce a letter to her from Hubberson that he wanted delivered the night of his execution. Then, without her knowing about it, we drugged her up a bit and got her to write this note explaining why she killed you and then took her own life." He drew a folded piece of paper

from the pocket of his sweater. "Of course we won't really kill Madge, too. We'll make it look like she lost her nerve on that account. Things can't be too pat, you know."

"You're out of your mind!" Nickby was aware of his white shirt front vibrating with the hammering of his heart and his quick, uneven breathing.

"Sure, it's not plausible, Ted. But that's why it will succeed as long as we present our unwitting silent partners, the police, with an alternate route of logic that *is* plausible. Like this note. And that gun."

Nickby turned to see Van Mimer, the bored-eyed man, holding the chrome-plated revolver purchased for Madge for self-protection five years ago.

"That's our research department, Ted!" Vellore said with a note of pride. "You even had the gun registered in your wife's name. Her gun, her prints, her note, her motive, and along with our drug-induced post-hypnotic suggestion, *she'll* even think she did the deed when the anonymous phone call brings the police here about the time she's just awakened. Tight, hey, Ted?"

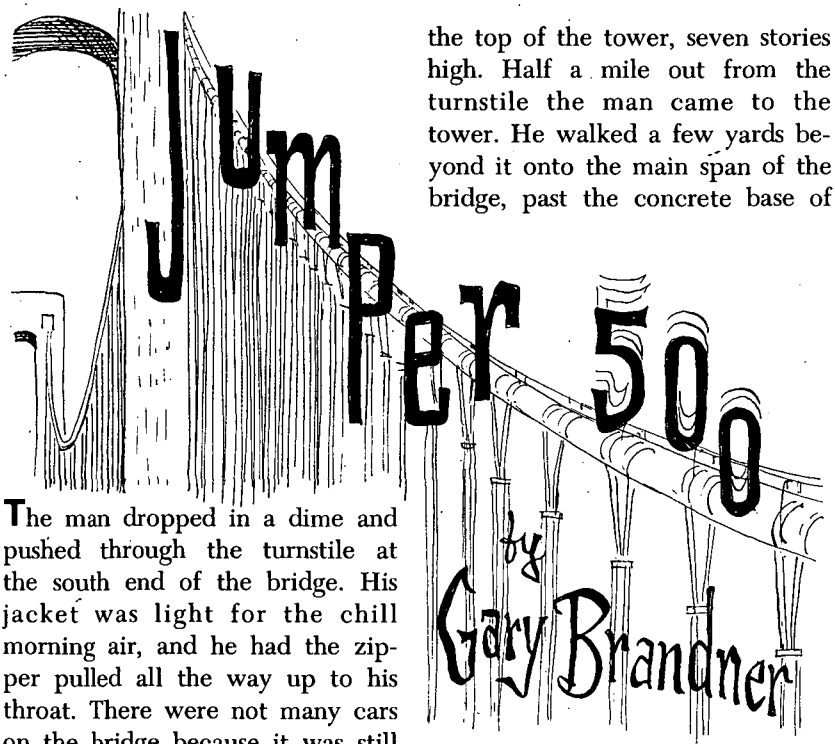
Nickby started to answer when the pain ripped through his chest, buckling him to the floor as the small caliber bullets tore into him. He lay awkwardly on his back with one leg twisted beneath him, unable to move, his mind dulled by agony and terror.

Vaguely Nickby was aware of Henry Van Mimer wiping off the revolver with a pink handkerchief and placing the gun in the slumping Madge's hand. Vellore was laying the folded note on the desk near the door when the bored-eyed man walked over to Nickby while tucking the handkerchief back into his pocket, crouched down and stared closely at him. "Five minutes at the most," he said in a confident, distant voice.

Nickby's heart began to pound irregularly, violently, an ensnared animal in a frenzy to escape.

"Hey! Ted!" Vellore said as he stepped over him on the way to the door. "It's been a pleasure!"

A composite picture may prove to be frighteningly accurate.



Jumper 500

by Gary Brandner

The man dropped in a dime and pushed through the turnstile at the south end of the bridge. His jacket was light for the chill morning air, and he had the zipper pulled all the way up to his throat. There were not many cars on the bridge because it was still an hour before the going-to-work traffic would get heavy.

The man walked along the pedestrian lane, ignoring the view of the city where lights still burned in the morning mist. One of the big cables, thicker than a man's body, began its graceful swoop to the top of the tower, seven stories high. Half a mile out from the turnstile the man came to the tower. He walked a few yards beyond it onto the main span of the bridge, past the concrete base of the tower that anchored it to the bottom of the bay. There he stopped.

For a moment the man rested his hands on the waist-high guardrail. He swung first one leg over the rail, then the other. He sat like that for no longer than a

heartbeat, then he braced both hands on the rail and pushed himself forward into space.

It was two hundred and fifty feet from the bridge down to the water, and it took him four seconds to fall that far. He hit the water feet first at eighty-five miles an hour. The impact drove both legs upward, shattering his pelvis. Numbed by the icy water, he drowned in three minutes.

The man's name would be in the afternoon paper, but nobody would remember it. He was number 499.

Richard Hartnell sat uncomfortably in one of the folding wooden chairs in the office of Captain Kenneth McEvoy, head of Bridge Security. Yesterday Hartnell had felt pleasure in trying on his old uniform after three years, but today the pleasure was gone. The uniform just felt tight. His head hurt.

"Most of you men haven't walked bridge patrol for a while," Captain McEvoy was saying, "and I appreciate your help during this exercise. I hope giving you the day off from your regular jobs yesterday made it a little easier for you to get up this morning." The captain gave the seated men a thin smile before he went on. "I know I don't have to go into the reason for bringing you back on patrol temporarily. You've all heard that the 499th suicide jumped off the bridge yesterday. Whoever makes it an even 500 will be, in a sick way, famous. As we all know, this city has its share of weirdos who would find that pretty appealing. There's no use kidding ourselves—we can't prevent it forever—but with the newspapers and television on our backs we have to do something. The best we can hope for, with you men added to the regular patrol, is that maybe we can postpone the inevitable 500th jump.

"Now, let me introduce Dr. David Gerstein. He's a professor of behavioral science at the university. Dr. Gerstein."

A slim, well-tailored man with fashionably long hair stepped forward to face the seated men.

"I understand most of you have patrolled the bridge before," he said. "All I will do this morning is give you a quick review on what makes a jumper. In studying the 499 suicides to go off the bridge since it was completed in 1937, we've come up with a composite picture. The jumper is a white male in his forties, or possibly in his thirties, since suicides have tended to be younger in recent years. He lives in this area. The problems that bring him to the

bridge will concern his health, his personal life, his finances. Most likely it will be some combination of the three. He will walk out to the main span, hesitate very little at the rail, and go over. He will leave no note. He may remove his coat before jumping, but not his shoes. The time he selects for jumping will probably be early morning. Next most likely time is sunset, then late at night. Serious jumpers hardly ever go over in the middle of the day.

"As I said, this is a composite, and it is not supposed to be a prediction of what number 500 will look like. However, it wouldn't hurt to be watching for this type. Good luck."

With a scraping of chairs and muttered conversation, the patrolmen stood up and left the office for their assignments on the bridge.

What a waste, Hartnell mused, all this activity trying to stop something as inevitable as nightfall.

Hartnell began his walk across the bridge. The air was biting cold and the fog heavier than the day before. It was a dismal day; a suicide kind of a day.

As the thick suspension cable rose slowly beside him, Hartnell thought about jumper 500. He probably would not be one of those who crawled up the cable toward the tower, then stopped when they could go no higher and waited to be seen. Cable climbers could almost always be talked back down. Hartnell stopped to swallow a pill to ease the growing headache.

He passed the first tower and looked down into the fog that lay over the dark water. It was about here that 499 had jumped the morning before. Usually they walk out a little farther, trying to get as close to the middle of the channel as possible.

An occasional car hummed by on the bridge, windows up, headlights on low beam. Hartnell ignored the automobiles. Jumper 500 would be walking.

He will be about my age, Hartnell reasoned. He won't be rich, because rich people don't kill themselves by jumping. Usually they take pills. Number 500 will be a jumper all the way. Probably, even though he came here to kill himself, he's a little surprised now to find he's actually about to do it.

Hartnell rubbed his hand along the rail. It was cold and wet. The Suicide Prevention people were always demanding a barrier like the one New York put up to stop leaps from the Empire State Building. The trouble was that a

barrier would spoil the looks of the bridge. Anyway, a man set on killing himself would find another place to do it if not off the bridge, wouldn't he?

He looked at his watch and was surprised to see how fast the time had gone. It felt good to be on the bridge again. If it had been up to him, Hartnell would have stayed on the patrol. The office job he had now cramped him and gave him headaches, but the decision had not been up to him.

He walked on along the bridge, letting the thoughts of Christine into his head now, after keeping them out since yesterday.

After he had been sent home from the office the day before, she had come into the bedroom and found him trying on his patrol uniform. "You don't have to wear it now, do you?" she asked.

"I was just seeing if it still fit."

"Well, take it off. It makes you look fat."

Hartnell had changed into slacks and a soft sport shirt. He went out to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee, then carried it to the livingroom where Christine was busily writing in her appointment book.

"Anything new on your promotion?" she asked.

"No. I'll tell you as soon as I hear anything."

"It might help if you went in and reminded them once in a while."

"These things take time."

"I don't want to sound like a nag," Christine said, "but if we're going to get out of this neighborhood while the house is still worth something, we need that promotion and the raise that goes with it."

"With the raise we'll just be able to afford *this* house," he said. "You liked the neighborhood well enough when we moved in."

"That was before it started going to pot," she said.

Hartnell pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Headache."

"Not another of those so-called migraines of yours?"

"I hope not."

"Every time we talk about something important you get one of your *migraines*."

"It'll go away," he said. "Look, why don't we do something together today? I'll take you out to lunch. Then we could go to the zoo. We haven't done anything like that for years."

"That sounds nice," she said, "and I'd really like to, but I've had this lunch date with Julie Farrel for a week, then we planned

to do some shopping this afternoon."

"Couldn't you call Julie and make it another day?"

"She had some appointments this morning and I wouldn't know where to reach her. I'm meeting her at the restaurant."

"Oh, well, go on, then."

She stepped closer and brushed his lips with hers. "I'm sorry, darling, but I couldn't know you would be home today. You rest and I'll see you later."

She changed into a dark-blue suit that fitted close to her body and contrasted with her pale-blonde hair. Christine had been a pretty girl fifteen years earlier when they were married, but Hartnell thought she was more beautiful now than ever. She waved him a fingertip good-bye and drove away in their year-old station wagon.

Hartnell paced around the small empty house, waiting for the sun to come out and take some of the chill off the day. He read the afternoon paper. There was a story headlined: *Who Will Be Number 500?* They were treating a dying man like a lottery winner, Hartnell reflected. Down at the bottom of the column was the name of number 499.

For a while he tried to watch television. He could find only game shows, reruns of ancient series, and bottom-of-the-barrel movies. The flickering screen hurt his eyes and kept the headache alive, so he turned it off.

He walked out onto the small front lawn and looked up and down the street. Christine was right, the neighborhood was getting shabby.

About one o'clock, Hartnell opened a can of vegetable soup and heated it. The telephone rang.

Christine, he thought. *Maybe she got out of her lunch date.* He hurried into the livingroom and picked up the phone.

"Hi, is Christine there?"

Hartnell recognized the voice, and suddenly he felt sick.

"No," he said. "What's the matter, Julie, didn't she meet you?"

"Meet me? Why should she?"

"For your lunch date."

"Lunch date? We didn't . . . have . . ." Her voice trailed off, then she spoke again in hasty confusion. "Oh, sure, that's right. I almost forgot. I'd better run. 'Bye, Richard."

The line had gone dead in his ear, and Hartnell had stood holding the receiver for several seconds before dropping it back on the cradle.

The fog lay over the surface of the water like a thick gray blan-

ket. Soft footfalls sounded in the mist, but Hartnell saw no one. Yet the certainty grew in Hartnell that number 500 was on the bridge. He could feel the nearness of the doomed man.

Hartnell peered down over the rail toward the black water, invisible below. A bell buoy gave its hollow clank and a seabird cried.

What thoughts, Hartnell wondered, would flash through the mind of the jumper during the short seconds of his plunge? Would he think at all, or would the rushing wind fill his mind with sound? What if he were to know the sudden terror of death, once the final step was taken? Or maybe he would feel a vast relief knowing there were no more decisions to make.

The migraine squeezed Hartnell's temples like a white-hot vise. Staring hard down into the mists he saw the face of jumper 500. It was not a bad face, but pulled taut with worry lines. Pain showed clearly in the eyes. Recognition brought no surprise. Deep down, he had known all along.

A shout from out of the fog; running feet; and more shouts . . .

Hartnell snapped to his senses and was horrified to find he had one leg over the guardrail. He quickly pulled it back and ran toward the commotion. A small knot of patrolmen leaned over the rail looking down.

"What is it?" Hartnell called.

"Jumper 500. He just went over."

One of the men turned and spoke excitedly as Hartnell pounded to a stop. "I could just barely see him through the fog. I yelled and started toward him, but it was too late. Very calm, he just lifted one leg over the rail, then the other, and dropped. He never made a sound. I was just ten feet away when he went over, but I couldn't reach him."

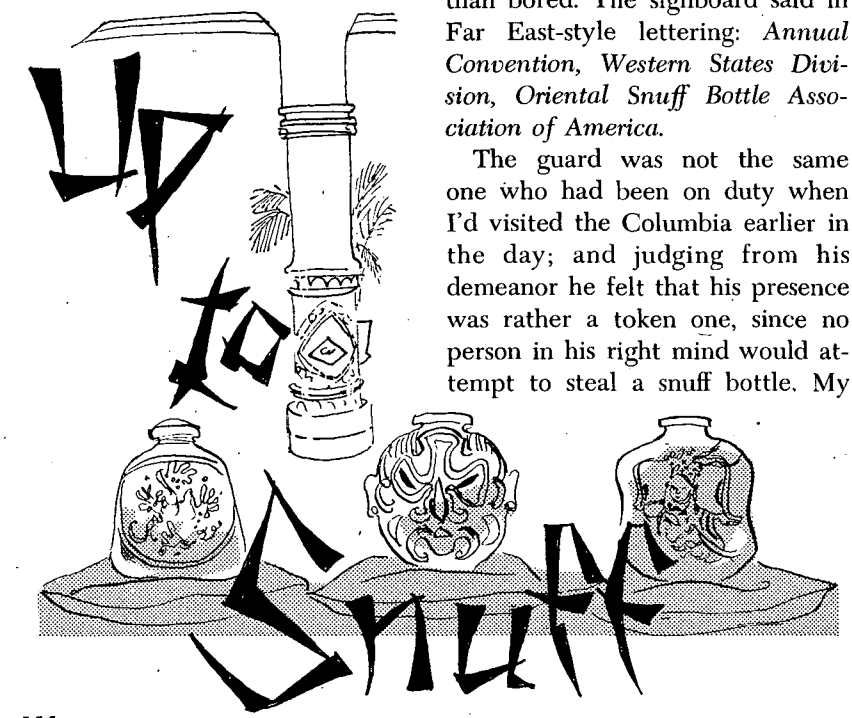
"You did your best," Hartnell told the man.

"But you know what really scared me? When I could just see the guy's outline in the fog . . . his size and the way he walked . . ."

"Yes?" Hartnell said.

"What really scared me was I thought it was you."

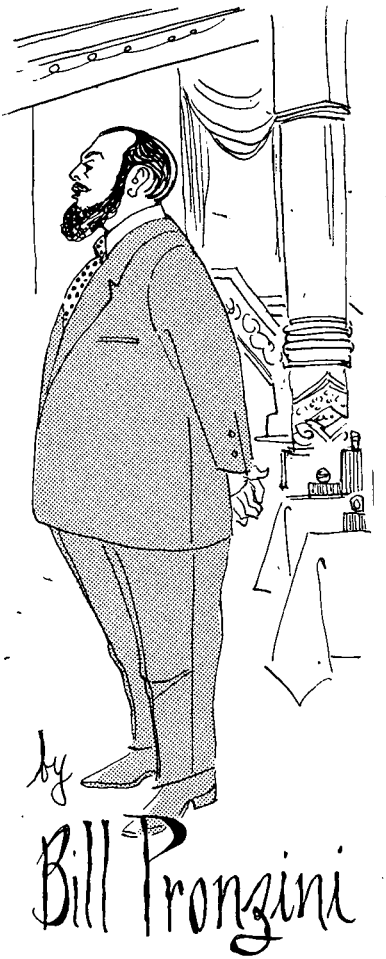
Not every man achieves success solely via an inordinate preoccupation with viands.



When I stepped off the elevator and approached the double-doored entrance to the Columbia Room, the uniformed security guard stationed outside straightened from the signboard on which he had been leaning and tried without success to look something less than bored. The signboard said in Far East-style lettering: *Annual Convention, Western States Division, Oriental Snuff Bottle Association of America.*

The guard was not the same one who had been on duty when I'd visited the Columbia earlier in the day; and judging from his demeanor he felt that his presence was rather a token one, since no person in his right mind would attempt to steal a snuff bottle. My expensively-dressed and imposing appearance, which might well be likened to a somewhat more thickly-bearded Sebastian Cabot, commanded from him a grudgingly deferential smile. I nodded pleasantly in return, and entered the Columbia Room.

As before, two additional private security officers were on post within—one to the right of the door and the other near the velvet-draped windows directly opposite. There were some thirty other people present, all wearing evening clothes; it was shortly past 7:00 p.m. In the center of the room, arranged lengthwise, were four long display tables. The guest buffet reposed on my left—plates of hors d'oeuvres ringing a huge crystal punch bowl—and placed around the room were several pieces of gold brocade furniture. The Columbia was one of the Hotel Beverly Fontaine's smaller private meeting rooms, but no less opulent than its larger counterparts; there was even an ornate crystal chandelier suspended from the high ceiling.



I paused to adjust the knot in my silk tie, and then I crossed to the second display table to have another look at the three "eglomise"-type snuff bottles I was here to steal.

Being a skilled and quality-oriented professional thief is an educational as well as lucrative vocation. In my thirty-odd years in the profession I have learned a great many fascinating things about the wide variety of items which I've successfully stolen. Snuff bottles are no exception; the collector who had hired me for this particular job had gone into explicit detail about them, so that I could sound knowledgeable if approached and so that I would, of course, be absolutely certain to appropriate the proper pieces.

In Old China, snuff bottles were

something of a status symbol; the more elaborately constructed they were, the greater the supposed stature of those who carried them. No more than two and a half inches high, they were worn at the belt with a matching fob known as a *netsuke* and tiny spades for scooping out pinches of the powdered tobacco. The finer ones were hand-carved from such valuable materials as jade and ivory, and were adorned with ancient calligraphy or Buddhist emblems or scenes of many types. Others of worth were fashioned of cloisonné, tortoiseshell, porcelain, or milk glass, and embellished with lacquer, malachite, coral, amethyst, and lapis lazuli. The present-day value of each piece is contingent upon the reputation of the artist and the types of material used in construction.

Perhaps the most sought-after artist, it seems, was one Yip Chung San, who plied his trade during the Manchu dynasty. Curiously enough, his specialty involved painting miniature scenes on the *inside* of the bottles, somewhat like mirror writing; he had accomplished this by using a type of fine-haired brush on a curved handle. The art is a lost one, hence the value of his particular eglomise creations.

The three Yip Chung San pieces my client wanted were worth, in aggregate, approximately twenty thousand dollars.

People who collect snuff bottles are a small but passionately dedicated lot, most of whom—like all collectors of rare art—are quite wealthy. My client could have afforded several times twenty thousand dollars; but he claimed that the present owner of the bottles had, through unscrupulous means, cheated *him* out of their legitimate purchase in Singapore some time previously, and would not now sell them to anyone at any price—which was why he had determined to engage someone such as myself.

The present owner, Philip Raimont, kept his collection in a vault in his Arizona home, a place my client termed "a veritable fortress, impossible to penetrate." I reconnoitered it personally, and was forced to agree. The only times Raimont removed his collection from the vault was to show it at the Oriental Snuff Bottle Association's annual western states and national conventions. If a theft was to be effected at all, it would therefore have to be done during one such convention; this one, since there would not be another for six months.

The job, once I had been apprised of pertinent details in-

volving location and security, had presented a number of problems. The three uniformed guards were one; another was the fact that the pieces were removed to the hotel safe upon closing of the Columbia Room each evening; a third was that the Columbia Room itself was situated on the mezzanine, and had but a single entrance, as well as windows which could be and were locked from the inside. Ingenuity, however, happens to be *my* specialty—at my age and weight, I can no longer rely on physical dexterity—and I had finally devised what I thought was a rather adroit plan. It entailed a bit more risk than I usually like to take, plus the assistance of a trustworthy friend and confederate, Larry Connaught; but then, I was charging my client accordingly.

The three Yip Chung San bottles were laid side by side on cushions of black velvet, a quarter of the table's left-hand length. They were really quite beautiful: one depicting a floral motif, the second a ceremonial mask, and the third a delicate-featured mandarin girl. I lingered over them for a moment, and then I moved along the display, looking at other types of bottles with an interest I did not have to feign. I had some twenty minutes before Connaught would put Phase One of my plan into the prearranged operation.

I was studying a scrolled piece when the elderly Chinese appeared at my elbow. Smiling, he asked, "Do you like it, sir?"

"An exquisite example of the eighteenth century reign of Ch'ien Lung," I answered. "Does it belong to you?"

"Yes, but it is not for sale." He indicated a flattened amber piece, quite rare, which had been fashioned from the resin of an extinct pine tree. "Also mine—and also, I fear, not for sale."

"Pity," I said. "I might have made an offer on the amber."

He introduced himself as Mr. C.F. Wing, from here in Beverly Hills. I told him I was James Vernon of Denver.

"Have you any pieces on display, Mr. Vernon?" he asked.

"Actually, no. I'm afraid my own collection is rather insignificant at the moment, although I hope to add to it considerably in the near future."

We discussed various pieces for a time. Then Wing suggested we sample the buffet. As we were doing so—the caviar and iced jumbo prawns were excellent, though the sparkling punch was a patent waste of quality champagne—a toady little man in a white dinner jacket joined us. Wing introduced him as Philip

Raimont, and we shook hands.

Raimont was a thoroughly dislikable sort: loud, crude, egomaniacal and, if his patronizingly superior attitude toward Wing was any indication, something of a racist. I happened to know, courtesy of my client, that he had made a goodly percentage of his money from enterprises which were at best quasi-legitimate; to hear him talk, however, he genuinely considered himself a paragon of honesty and resourcefulness. I am a professional thief, yes, but I freely admit this to myself. I detest hypocrites and bigots, and so it was, I thought, going to be a distinct pleasure parting Raimont from his prize snuff bottles.

"You look like a man who enjoys good food, Vernon," Raimont said to me. "If you're ever down in Arizona, look me up. I know a restaurant that serves the biggest, finest steaks in the world."

I allowed my lip to curl faintly. "I prefer Chinese cuisine," I said.

Raimont gave me an odd look, started to say something, thought better of it, and moved off abruptly to impose on others. Wing suppressed a smile.

At 7:20 I excused myself from Wing's company and repaired briefly to a stall in the men's room, where I made an advance preparation necessary to my plan. Then I returned to the Columbia Room and circulated leisurely among the display tables. Timing was all important, and the initial factors of that timing were that I be positioned in close but not direct proximity to the three Yip Chung San pieces, and that I be by myself. I glanced casually at my watch from time to time, otherwise focusing my attention on the various snuff bottles so as to discourage anyone from attempting to begin a conversation. When the sweep hand on my watch showed that twenty seconds remained before 7:30, I placed myself in a location I had earlier decided upon and began a silent countdown.

Larry Connaught performed on schedule the task I had given him, having successfully gained access to the Beverly Fontaine's basement on the pretext of being a maintenance man from the electric company.

Precisely at 7:30, the lights went out.

Questioning voices rose immediately, some in exasperation and some in alarm. While other guests milled toward the entrance, I moved by memory to the eglomise bottles. Someone—presumably one of the security officers—called out, "It's nothing but a minor power failure, folks, please stay where you are." A match

flared then, and a lighter, but by that time I had stepped back away from the display table with the three pieces under my coat. In the random flickers of light no one could see clearly, and in any case no one would be looking at the actions of an individual removed from the displays.

Connaught had previously learned that a full minute was required for the hotel's auxiliary generator to return electrical power, so I had approximately forty seconds in which to complete the final phase of my plan. I had practiced the maneuver dozens of times, in total darkness, until I could accomplish it with optimum speed; as a result, I was finished some ten seconds before the lights came on again.

I noted first, with satisfaction, that a few of the guests, as happens in what might conceivably be a crisis of unknown proportions, had gravitated out into the hallway; others were grouped near the entrance. Wing, however, was moving to the display table containing his snuff bottles—as was Raimont. When Raimont discovered that the Yip Chung San pieces were missing, he emitted an enraged bellow and began waving his arms in the direction of one of the security officers. That one, and the second in the room, converged on him. The guests followed en masse, including returnees from the hall, all speaking at once and thereby creating a babble of sound.

The security officers were well trained. They managed to calm everyone except Raimont, whose color approximated that of an eggplant and whose language was repetitiously plebeian. Not having seen anything themselves, they proceeded to ask questions; no one else knew, of course, what had happened to the eglomise bottles.

Raimont demanded that the police be summoned, and at length the security guards concurred. They asked all of us, their authority being limited to requests rather than commands in a situation such as this, to remain in the Columbia Room. One was then dispatched to call the authorities, while the other two continued to make inquiries.

Four people confessed to having entered the hallway during the blackout, but insisted they had returned immediately after the restoration of light. They did not know if anyone had left the mezzanine entirely, by way of the stairs at the opposite end of the corridor. Everyone who had been present prior to the blackout seemed still to be in attendance,

although again no one was quite sure. The guard who had been stationed outside could not determine how many people had come out past him, or in which direction those who had come out had gone; he had no legal authority to detain anyone attempting to leave under the circumstances, and could not have done so even if he had tried.

As we waited for the police, Wing approached me and asked gravely, "Do you suppose, Mr. Vernon, the thief escaped during the time the lights were off?"

"Most likely," I said, with the proper touch of righteous indignation. "If so, I marvel at his agility and unerring navigation in total darkness, since both of those attributes are necessary for him to have located the pieces, lifted them, and then made his way rapidly to the entrance through this obstacle course of tables and furniture and people." This was, in effect, the reason why I had long ago ruled out that particular method of operation; I possess neither attribute. "But the possibility *does* exist that the culprit failed to make good his escape, and thus is still among us."

Wing nodded thoughtfully. "In that event, he will be apprehended in short order."

"Not if he cleverly hid the pieces somewhere, instead of keeping them on his person."

"He would have had little time to locate a suitable hiding place," Wing said. "And while there *are* places in this room where the bottles could be secreted, none would escape a thorough search."

I decided to agree. "Perhaps you're right."

"Does the power failure strike you as happenstance, Mr. Vernon?"

"Hardly. As you just mentioned, there is the time element: sixty seconds or so is insufficient for someone both to conceive and execute a theft such as this. I expect that whoever and wherever the thief is, he doubtless arranged for the lights to go off when they did."

"And therefore his choice of the Yip Chung Sans was not a random one."

"Quite so." I shook my head sadly. "Poor Raimont."

"Yes," Wing said. "Poor Raimont," but there was a perverse little gleam in his eyes, certainly not unwarranted, which belied his words.

A contingent of police arrived presently, in the person of two uniformed patrolmen and two sober-faced plainclothes officers named, amusingly enough to an aficionado of old films such as my-

self, Olsen and Johnson. They were accompanied by a tall, white-haired gentleman who I subsequently learned was the Oriental Snuff Bottle Association's western states vice-president, one Arthur Jerome.

As soon as Messrs. Olsen and Johnson had been informed of all the facts, plus a bit of salient background as to snuff bottles and the convention itself, they proceeded to ask the same questions as the security guards—and were given the same negative answers. Speculation encompassed the points Wing and I had discussed, and the tentative consensus was, predictably, that the culprit had effected his escape during the blackout. Johnson then departed to interview members of the hotel staff, other guests, and the basement maintenance people, taking one of the patrolmen with him. When he returned sometime later, following more questions and more speculation, he naturally had nothing whatsoever to report. Connaught, by this time, was well on his way back home to San Francisco.

Wing stepped forward. "How much longer will we be detained, Officers?" he asked, putting voice to the question in the minds of most everyone present.

The plainclothesmen held a brief conference, after which Olsen said, apologetically, that before allowing us to leave he would prefer to conduct a routine search of our persons (a matron, of course, to be summoned for the ladies). We were to understand, he said, that they could not force any of us to submit to a personal search unless an arrest were first made. Theoretically they could arrest the entire assemblage on suspicion, but that was a drastic step they preferred not to take, particularly when it did seem probable the thief was not among us. If each of us consented, and was subsequently cleared, they could then release us and fully concentrate their investigation elsewhere.

"What type of search are you talking about?" Jerome asked. "Do you mean to say you expect respectable people such as these to take off their *clothes*?"

A rather lumpy dowager flushed with outrage. "I will not suffer the humiliation of disrobing in front of a stranger!"

"Damned police harrassment," a man wearing a bow tie said.

Owing to the fact that he worked in Beverly Hills, Olsen was used to handling members of the gentry. He held up a placating hand, and his voice became even more palliative. "I doubt if disrobement will be necessary,

considering the size of the missing objects. A simple frisk procedure, in addition to an examination of purses and such, should be sufficient."

There was some further discussion, but eventually everyone agreed to allow himself or herself to be searched. While the women waited for the arrival of a matron, the males were marched off one by one to the men's room. When it was my turn, my identification—forged, naturally—was checked and a note made of the name and address; then I was patted down briskly by Olsen, and the contents of my pockets were checked. Pronounced "clean," I was escorted, as the others had been, to a room similar to the Columbia at the opposite end of the mezzanine, designated the Magenta Room.

Once everyone had been searched without result, and reassembled in the Magenta Room, an examination of the Columbia was undertaken. Nothing at all was found.

Raimont, who had been making something of a vocal ass of himself since the arrival of the police, was apoplectic. He demanded that the authorities stop wasting precious time and do the job for which taxpayers such as himself were paying them. Olsen told him that everything possible would be done to apprehend the thief and bring about the safe return of the eglomise bottles. Darkly, Raimont said that everything possible had damned well *better* be done, and stalked off to one side.

A moment later I heard him lamenting to Jerome, "How could he have done it in less than a minute and gotten away with it? That's what I can't understand. *How*?"

I smiled inwardly. *How indeed, Raimont?* I thought. *How indeed?*

It was some four hours later, just past 3:00 a.m., when I entered my apartment high atop San Francisco's Telegraph Hill.

In the lobby of the Beverly Fontaine, following our release, Wing had asked me if I would care to join him for a drink. I had demurred, saying that I was quite tired, and we each allowed as how it had been a pleasure meeting the other. Whereupon he had gone into the lounge for his drink, and I had gone out and into a taxi for Los Angeles International Airport. I had gotten a late San Francisco flight immediately.

I crossed my sunken livingroom and stepped into the master bath. Therein, my first order of business was to remove the theatrical beard and the cotton wadding

which fattened my cheeks. Then I took off my coat, my tie, my vest, my shirt—and my stomach.

I am a rather portly man, quite a bit overweight, but not nearly so large as I had appeared to be at the convention. Most of my substantial paunch was manufactured of glabrous plastic and thick rubber padding. Larry Connaught—truly a man of many talents—had designed it so ingeniously that, with the aid of an elastic corset arrangement, it fitted my torso as if it were a part of me.

The three Yip Chung San bottles were nestled snugly in the trio of slender pockets affixed to the stomach's inner surface.

While in the men's room just prior to the blackout, I had unfastened the top buttons of my shirt and vest and then buttoned my coat and arranged my tie over them. Once I had taken the bottles away from the table, I had simply turned my back and pulled the top of the false stomach away from my body just enough to enable me to slip the pieces into the inner pockets.

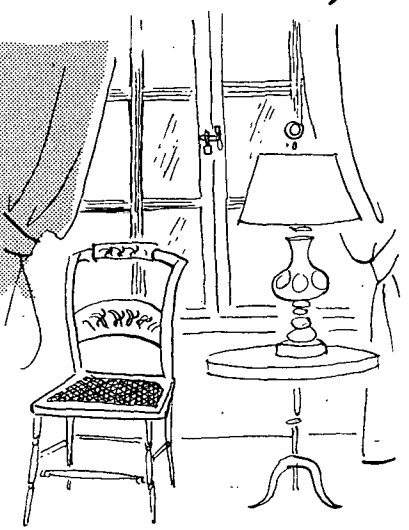
Small and relatively flat, they had made no telltale bulges. In order for Olsen to have detected them when he frisked me, he would have had to apply no small amount of pressure to what feels remarkably like the real thing through clothing; and a Beverly Hills cop does not search an upright citizen by manhandling him. Of course, if I had been made to strip, the game would have been up; but I calculatedly gambled that the police would not go that far, and they hadn't.

All in all, things had worked out beautifully—quite up to snuff, as it were.

Carrying the ersatz paunch, I went into the livingroom to call first my client and then Connaught. It may well be true, I was thinking with high good humor, that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach; but in this particular case, and quite literally, a man's "stomach" was also the way to his bank account . . .

Happily, one may not have to prove his theory to make his point.

Blood Relatives



It's a waste of time, sir. She won't come."

"You're very sure of that, Peters?"

"They say she hasn't left that house once since the trial."

Treviss sealed the envelope and handed it to the younger man. "She'll come, Peters, when she reads what I've written here. Make sure you give it to Miss Frayle herself, and wait for an answer."

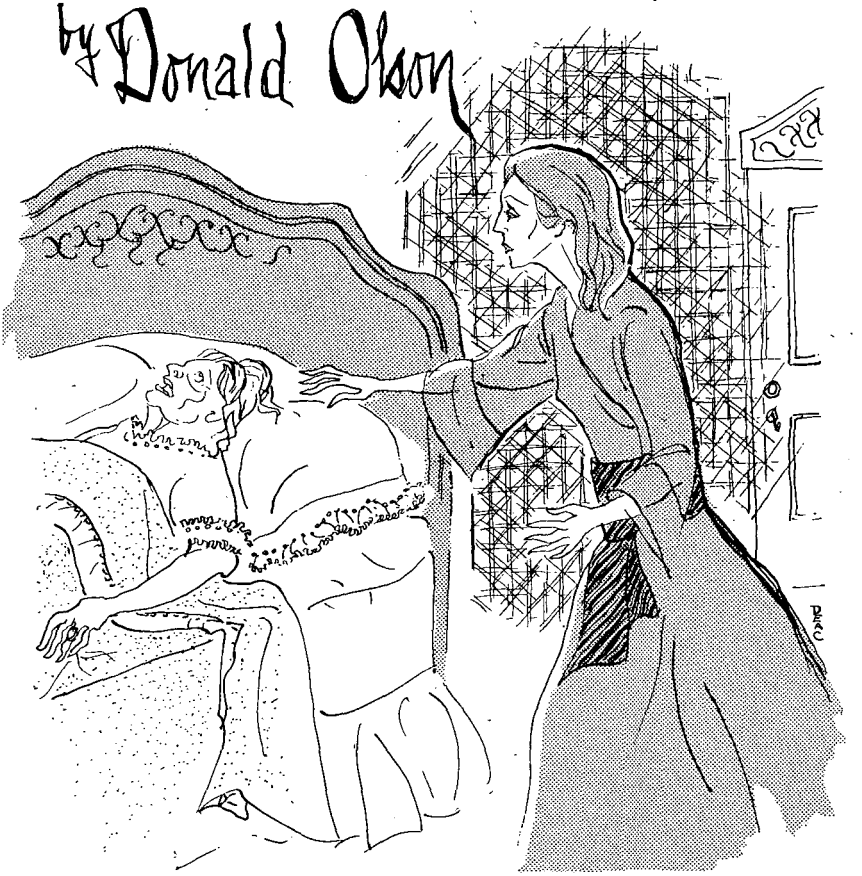
Treviss did not tell his young friend and assistant what he had written on the invitation and when Peters returned, obviously astounded, to report that Miss Frayle would be pleased to come to lunch on Thursday, Treviss still refused to satisfy his friend's curiosity. All he would say was, "You know my methods, Peters. Apply them." Further emulating his literary idol, he proceeded to light a pipeful of his favorite tobacco and settled back to reflect upon the less sensational but more puzzling aspects of the Cheverton murder.

For a man whose hobby was solving presumably unsolvable crimes, Treviss had a singular aversion to the plodding mechanics of criminal jurisprudence. He

enjoyed reading trial transcripts and newspaper accounts of trials but took no pleasure in attending them personally, impatient with the endless questionings and cross-questionings of witnesses and bored with those irrelevancies which lawyers and prosecutors took such delight in tracing to their purposeless ends. Consequently, he hadn't seen Lizzie Frayle in person until Peters went to fetch her on the appointed Thursday, and when she stepped from the car he found very little in her appearance that resembled those wretched pictures gracing the front pages during the course of her trial.

Although she had chosen to

by Donald Olson



wear as drab a summer frock as she had worn in the courtroom—it might even have been the same one—she had made a concession to freedom and victory with a silly frothy pink hat replete with white daisies.

Treviss was waiting for her in the garden and as Peters escorted her halfway up the path she suddenly stopped and gave a little cry of joy. "What a heavenly fragrance! I adore roses."

Treviss went forward to greet her, introducing himself and leading her to a stone bench beside a a cluster of wallflowers and hollyhocks.

"When I was terribly young I used to write reams of the most awful verse," she confessed, lifting her face to the sun. "Luckily, I can only remember a single line. Something about lilies, which I love. 'Are they of earth or heaven-scent?' S-*c*-e-n-t. Very clever, I thought. Maybe I cribbed it from Christina Rossetti, I don't know. Sounds a bit like Christina Rossetti, don't you think?"

" 'When I am dead, my dearest, sing no sad songs for me.' That's all I remember of Christina Rossetti," Treviss admitted.

"That's really all one has to remember."

Peters had disappeared into the house to put the final touches on lunch while Treviss chatted with Lizzie Frayle as idly as any two strangers might have chatted, gradually but surely regretting the impulse that had led him to invite her to lunch. It seemed nothing but the most shameless egotism to inflict upon her the pain that would surely accompany his accusations, if he were actually to voice them. For a while he seriously considered abandoning the whole plan, simply giving her lunch instead, and a bunch of prize roses, and sending her back to that rambling, gloomy mansion where she had lived until her arrest and to which she had returned after being acquitted. In fact, he did go so far as to avoid mentioning the reason for his invitation, deciding to leave the course of events in her hands. If she chose to pretend the invitation had no ulterior motive behind it, so let it be.

All the same, it was a relief when she presently turned her face toward him and said, "Your invitation was so curiously worded, Mr. Treviss, I had to accept it. This is the first time I've been out."

"I must confess I have a fondness for puzzles. Though I suppose I haven't any right to inflict them on others."

Behind dark glasses her face re-

vealed nothing but the purest serenity. Treviss assumed she must be close to fifty, although she looked much younger. " 'Please read *Genesis* IV, 15,' " she quoted from his note, " 'and come to lunch on the 17th.' Intriguing, to say the least."

"I assume you looked up the reference."

"Of course."

"And it meant nothing to you?"

"Only the obvious meaning. Mrs. Potts read it. It meant nothing to her."

"She's the housekeeper, I believe?"

"And my friend. She said I must expect to receive such communications. That just because the jury acquitted me doesn't mean I'm innocent in the eyes of the public. She told me to ignore it."

"Why didn't you?"

"I told you. I was intrigued. And, oh yes, I'd heard of you."

"My reputation, such as it is, for liking puzzles?"

"Murder puzzles," she said frankly. "And I'm risking nothing, coming here. I know all about double jeopardy."

Treviss accepted the unavoidable, the necessity of going through with it. "Tell me about Mrs. Cheverton."

"Do I have to? She was a public institution."

"I don't mean the public Mrs. Cheverton."

Lizzie Frayle had a pleasant laugh, girlish and musical. "*My* Mrs. Cheverton? Oh, but really, a poor relation's opinion of her benefactress is bound to be prejudiced."

"From what transpired at the trial she was hardly your benefactress. Tell me, did you hate her?"

"Not at first. At the beginning I merely disliked her. I disliked her because of what she was, because she was vain and shallow and stupid and heartless. You can't hate a person like that. You can only despise them."

"Was Mr. Cheverton like that?"

"Oh, no. Uncle Charles was thoughtless, but that was only because he was too busy to think much about other people. He was all business. His wealth wasn't really important to him. Acquiring it was all that mattered. He had a rudimentary sense of family responsibility. He took me into the household when I was a child because I was family, not because he felt anything for me. She cared even less about me. She could be very cruel and spiteful. Yes, I could have told some pretty harrowing things in that courtroom, but my lawyer wouldn't let me. He didn't want the jury to get the

idea I harbored any murderous grudge against the old lady."

"Why did she dislike you?"

"I didn't say she disliked me. She resented me. She was a stupid, ineffectual human being, and she knew it. With all her wealth and advantages she was a useless woman. If she were to have lost all her money she'd have been helpless. I wasn't. I forced myself to learn self-reliance. She couldn't abide the thought that I didn't *need* her. I decided to leave after Uncle Charles died. She wouldn't *hear* of it. Begged me not to go. Cried a lot, in her spoiled, selfish way—and then she had the first heart attack. All this came out at the trial. Doesn't it bore you to hear it again?"

"I'm hearing it from you. There's a big difference."

He didn't ask her to describe the years that passed in that expensive, stodgy household; he could imagine them: the old woman growing older, testier, more resentful, more demanding, slipping all too selfishly into the role of semi-invalid.

"She made a will, I understand, leaving everything to you, with bequests for the two servants."

"Yes. Of course, the prosecution made all they could of that. Tried to make it sound as if I'd practically blackmailed her into making a will in my favor, on threat of deserting her. It was quite the opposite, as I explained. She made that will to try to tempt me into staying. When I still insisted I wanted to leave she said that I could take Potts and Bensen with me, that she would close the house and go into a nursing home. Mrs. Potts and Bensen are both dears and they're no longer young. Well, I stayed."

"And when did Mrs. Cheverton employ Gerald Hopkins?"

"Shortly after her second attack. She knew she hadn't much longer to live. Her temper became positively malignant. That's when she began all the talk about blood relatives. It became an obsession. She declared over and over again that it wasn't right to leave all her property to anyone but blood relatives."

"Only she hadn't any blood relatives."

"None that she knew of. That didn't satisfy her. She had her lawyer hire Mr. Hopkins, a Boston genealogist, to shake the family tree in hopes a blood relative would fall out."

Treviss was amused by the way she put it. He liked little Miss Lizzie and hoped that he could still avoid any final confrontation. To hell with his vanity and his curiosity. Let the poor creature keep

her secrets, if that was her wish.

"And one did," he prompted.

"A pretty rotten one, and that's being charitable. Mr. Hopkins claimed to find a black sheep in the family fold, a deserter from the Continental Army who'd changed his name, but whose descendants would be distant blood relatives of Aunt Thelma. Mr. Hopkins produced this Sherwood character from New Orleans and claimed he was just such a relative."

Treviss found all this exceedingly interesting. "At the trial you didn't question the authenticity of these claims. Or did I miss something?"

"No, I didn't. I had no grounds to dispute them; only instinct. People like me rely very strongly on instinct, Mr. Treviss. From the very beginning I suspected collusion between Mr. Hopkins and this Sherwood person. It doesn't matter now, of course. He went back to wherever he came from."

"Mrs. Cheverton didn't share your doubts, apparently."

"I'm not so sure about that. I don't think it would have mattered whether she did or not. It gave her such fiendish pleasure to flaunt him under our noses."

"But before she could actually change her will in his favor she was murdered."

By now Treviss had decided that Lizzie Frayle was a very remarkable woman indeed. He had expected her to be sly and defensive; she was neither. He had expected her to play upon his sympathies and thereby earn his contempt; by not doing so she had won his admiration. She seemed to have all the advantages on her side, even to the extent of deriving a keener delight from their surroundings than did Treviss himself, as if the mingled fragrances of the garden were somehow sweeter to her and the warmth of the sun on her pale cheeks far more exquisite than anything Treviss could appreciate, or even imagine.

"Yes," she answered. "And that, you see, was what was so screamingly ironical about it."

"You mean her extraordinary security precautions."

Miss Frayle nodded. "She'd always been a terrible baby. Scared of her own shadow. But after Uncle Charles died she became quite paranoid on the subject. There were two locks on all the doors, inside and outside. Whoever occupied a room kept one key, Bensen was entrusted with the other. If there had ever been a fire I suppose we'd have been burned in our beds. Of course the intercom system was very sophis-

ticated. If anything happened in the night one could always call Bensen. There was the same ritual every night at eleven o'clock. She would lock herself in her suite from the inside. Bensen would lock her in from the outside. Two separate locks."

"And you occupied the same suite as Mrs. Cheverton."

"For the past year, yes. If she needed something in the night she could always wake me up in the other room. And don't think she didn't!"

"As I understand it, she occupied the large bedroom, which had an adjoining bath and small dressing room. Your room adjoined the dressing room. And the suite was locked by both Bensen and Mrs. Cheverton the night she died."

"Exactly. *I* was the only person who had access to her after eleven o'clock that night." She gave him this self-incriminating information, not defiantly, but as if it were a good-humored challenge to his deductive powers.

"All those locks. Wasn't it rather like living in a prison?"

She sighed and nodded. "Indeed it was. That's why it wasn't really such a traumatic experience for me to go to jail. Bad enough, but not intolerable."

Treviss could imagine Lizzie Frayle reacting to any crisis in her life with those selfsame words: bad enough, but not intolerable.

"Now, please tell me about the morning when—the morning she was found dead."

She leaned back, still with the sun full upon her face. "I woke at my usual time that morning—or a bit later, actually, because I was ordinarily awakened by Aunt Thelma. She hated the nights and was always glad to see the sun come up. That morning she didn't waken me. I lay there, wondering if something could be wrong, expecting any minute to hear her voice whining, demanding. It was uncanny, the silence, and after a while, scary. I called to her, as if I had a hunch something wasn't right. There was no answer. I went into the bedroom. I listened, trying to believe I could hear her breathing. I couldn't. I walked to the edge of the bed. I could hear nothing. Not a sound. I put my hand on her. Her heart wasn't beating."

This was a nearly verbatim recapitulation of her courtroom testimony, which had gripped the spectators in a spell of silence.

"Then I went to the intercom and called Bensen. I told him I thought there was something wrong with Aunt Thelma. He and Potts came up immediately. Poor

Mrs. Potts screamed when she spotted the marks around Aunt Thelma's neck. Bensen called the police."

Treviss saw no point in asking her to repeat the rest of the story, which he knew all too well. The police had determined from the circular marks thrice ringing the victim's throat that she had been strangled—garroted, actually, with some sort of cord or wire at least thirty-six inches long and about an eighth of an inch wide, no trace of which could be found. Bensen had sworn that he had locked the door to the suite at the accustomed time the night before and had not unlocked it until Miss Frayle had called him on the intercom at ten the following morning. The windows were all latched and it would have been virtually impossible for anyone to have climbed the outside wall.

The case against Lizzie Frayle had been a formidable one, and yet that one essential piece of evidence, the murder instrument, was lacking. The most exhaustive search failed to locate anything in the suite that could have served as a garrote. Miss Frayle's person was searched and on the chance she might have opened a window and flung the weapon out, the grounds in the immediate vicinity were scrupulously combed. Even the drainpipes in the bathroom were examined and the septic tank drained on the assumption the murder weapon might have been flushed down the toilet. It was never found.

That fact, plus the prosecutor's failure to prove categorically that an intruder could *not* somehow have managed to scale that wall and enter one of the windows, left the jury with a reasonable enough doubt to acquit Lizzie Frayle of the charge of murder.

Treviss looked up to see Peters signaling from the doorway and he offered Miss Frayle his arm as they went in to lunch. Continuing their discussion at the table, he told his guest that he had spent a great deal of time contemplating the catalog of assorted items found in the suite.

"Certain items, particularly, caught my attention. A clamp clothespin, for instance. A bottle of glycerin. And a knitting needle."

Miss Frayle chuckled. "Why on earth would you find those items remarkable?"

"Oh, individually, I suppose they're not. It's the combination, you see. Glycerin might have been used cosmetically, of course."

"It was, Mr. Treviss. I always use glycerin and rose water on my hands and face."

"And the clamp clothespin?"

"That's obvious, isn't it? Even though you're a bachelor you're surely aware that women have occasion to rinse things out and hang them up to dry in their bathrooms."

"The knitting needle?"

"Oh, dear. You're not going to suggest that Aunt Thelma wasn't strangled after all, but was stabbed to death with a knitting needle?"

"Not at all. But it struck me as curious that only *one* knitting needle was found."

"That's easily explained. There isn't a single type of fancywork I can't do, Mr. Treviss. I used to knit rather a lot of things. But I haven't lately. Not in years, in fact. The other needle was simply lost, I suppose."

Treviss did not argue the point and did not allude to the matter again until they were through eating, when he told Miss Frayle that he had a couple of things he thought might interest her. "I was at the auction, you know. Your Cheverton Estate Sale was quite an event."

She agreed it had been a success. "Everyone said Aunt Thelma had abominable taste. I suppose it's true. But all the notoriety added value to even the worst pieces of junk."

"Come into the livingroom. I'll show you what I bought."

She put her hand lightly on his arm. "I hope you weren't swindled."

"Ah, by no means. Here's one of the items I bought. A very old bronze letter knife." He placed it in her hand.

She held it a few moments and handed it back to him. "Yes. It's an antique. It came from Uncle Charles' study."

"And over here's a pretty little piece. Early Victorian, I'd say."

She ran her hand over the simple maple side chair. Her expression did not change.

"I approve of both your purchases," she said. "There was a set of these chairs once, but Aunt Thelma always confused simplicity with crudeness. She was blind to their charm, if you'll pardon the expression. She got rid of all but this one, which she relegated to my room."

"I must keep my eye out. Maybe I can reassemble the set. The seat's been recaned but if I can believe the auctioneer, this chair's at least a hundred and thirty-five years old."

Miss Frayle nodded vaguely. "I believe it is, yes."

Treviss waited, hoping she might be moved to reveal voluntarily what she must know he was

hinting; but she remained silent.

He reached out and took her hand. "Miss Frayle, I really must tell you that you're without a doubt one of the most extraordinary women I've ever met."

She took the compliment in stride. "And you're an extraordinary man, Mr. Treviss. I expected everything from you except flattery."

"If it's not impertinent, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Of course."

"Have you always been blind?"

"Yes. From birth."

"Then you're even more extraordinary than I thought."

"Thank you, dear Mr. Treviss. But you must not allow yourself to be awed to the point of losing your nerve. I've a feeling you're about to."

"You're right. I am."

"That would be most unkind of you. You lured me here with a most provocative puzzle. You must not send me away without the solution."

He knew she was playing with him now, taunting him into doing the very thing that he wanted now to avoid. Well, he would not deprive her of her sport. She had earned it.

"Caning chairs is a craft practiced by a great many sightless people, isn't that so?"

"Yes, it is," she said quietly.

"As proficient as you are at everything else I can't believe you're not adept at cane weaving."

"I don't deny it."

"And you did cane the seat of this little side chair?"

"I did."

"When?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "A month or so before Aunt Thelma died."

"All of it?"

"I don't understand."

"I'm sure you do," he said with a smile in his voice. "But let me hypothesize. Let's say, for argument's sake, that you wished to murder Mrs. Cheverton, but didn't really know how to go about it. Then one day she gives you a little side chair, which you decide to cane. You make certain that you have in your room exactly the number of strands from a hank of cane that will be needed to weave a seat for the chair. From experience you know how many strands this will be. Suppose you proceed to weave the seat using the seven-step method—I've done my homework, you see—but purposely omitting the sixth step—the second diagonal—and the seventh—the binder around the edge. Once the seat was woven would one person in a hundred be observant enough to notice that the pattern of the

weave was not complete? Suppose you concealed the final strand in your room for a month or so, until the night you decided to murder Mrs. Cheverton. When the suite door was locked for the night and the old lady asleep, suppose you were to roll that strand of cane to fit into the washbowl, fastening the ends with the usual clamp clothespin, and to soak it in a solution of warm water and glycerin to make it pliable. That's the way it's done, is it not? When it was nice and pliable, suppose you were to steal into Mrs. Cheverton's bedroom, carefully wind the wire-strong cane around her throat, and throttle her to death. Suppose you were then to unwind the cane and calmly proceed to weave it into the chair seat exactly where it belonged, finishing the job with the usual binder. For which, of course, you would use the usual implement, a single knitting needle. I'm sure that no one, not even Mrs. Potts, would notice any difference between the way that chair seat looked on the morning of the murder and the way it had looked the day before. Nor would it likely occur to even the most imaginative police officer that the garrote he was looking for was part of a chair seat right there in plain sight."

No tremor of a smile, no shadow of distress, passed across Lizzie Frayle's face as he spoke, and when he was finished she did no more than utter a small, thoughtful sigh.

Then she said, "If that were true you'd be perfectly right, of course, about people not noticing any difference in the pattern of the seat. Most people with normal sight don't bother to use their eyes at all. Isn't that sad? They really don't know what they're missing."

He knew then that she was going to admit nothing, and he was glad.

Outside, he handed her a huge bouquet of red roses just before Peters helped her into the car.

"Thank you, Mr. Treviss. You couldn't have given me a nicer gift. And thank you for a delicious lunch—and a most intriguing theory."

He couldn't avoid asking, "That's all it is, my dear? A theory?"

She merely laughed. "Unless something can be proven, it's doomed to remain a theory. Isn't that so?"

He said no more about it. "You'll be going away soon, I suppose?"

"Yes. I've given the house to a foundation that helps the blind. It's to be a school and training

center to teach them new trades."

"And what's to become of Mrs. Potts and Bensen?"

"Oh, I've made sure they'll be amply provided for."

"That's very generous of you."

"Not at all. Potts and Bensen and I, we've been together more than a quarter of a century. We've shared a great deal. You might say we're even closer than blood relatives."

Treviss watched the car drive off, then returned to his bench in the garden to reflect upon the visit. He was still there when Peters returned.

"So she admitted nothing," the young man remarked.

"Nothing."

"You didn't tell her you *could* prove your theory."

"I was going to, but I changed my mind."

The proof to which Peters alluded was a minute speck of human blood Treviss had discovered on the underside of that strand of cane in the second diagonal. Had the police discovered it the case against Lizzie Frayle might have taken quite a different turn; only in this instance the police had been as blind as the murderess.

Or *was* she a murderess?

That remark about her and Potts and Bensen being closer than blood relatives—could it have had any special significance?

Peters faced him with a rather grim smile. "*Now* will you please tell me what you wrote on that invitation that made you so sure she would accept it?"

"I told her to read *Genesis*, chapter four, verse fifteen. 'And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.' "

Treviss smiled, stroking the furry-skirted blossom of a pink hollyhock. "Now tell me, Peters. If you had strangled someone the way I'm sure Mrs. Cheverton was strangled, wouldn't it shake you up a bit if someone made a reference to the *mark of Cain*?"

When a man dabbles in witchcraft, perhaps he should know what he is about.

Felix Palmer was lunching with Helsey at the Overseas Press Club one afternoon in May when the subject of the October issue came up. "I'm in a spot, Felix," the little editor admitted over coffee. "A spread on underwater archaeology didn't come through and I've got a big hole right in the middle of the issue."

"Want a short story?" Felix asked. He was never one to miss an opportunity.

Helsey thought about it. "Sure, why not?" he decided. "If I have 5,000 words of something with an October theme, and have it by the end of this week, I'll use it."

"October theme," Felix mused. "I'll see what I can do for you."

The two men parted and Felix Palmer walked quickly to Fifth Avenue, hailing a taxi to his apartment in lower Manhattan. On most afternoons he would have made the trip by subway,

but he was anxious to start work. Felix was not a fast writer, and 5,000 words in four days was going to take a major effort on his part. Still, Helsey paid good money and right now good money was what Felix needed most.

The need for money had increased since Judy—his long, slim brunette wife—sold her first juvenile novel some months back and began mentioning this fact at parties, not quite boasting that she was now the breadwinner of the family, bringing in more money through her literary efforts than the great Felix Palmer did.

Judy had been a joy for the first three years of their stormy marriage, and even their frequent arguments had carried about them an aura of good-natured bickering. Now all that was threatened by change. Perhaps it was the Manhattan atmosphere, with its pervading mystique of women's liberation. Or perhaps it was simply that Felix Palmer was slowing down. After three wives and a

by Edward D. Hoch

dozen unsuccessful novels, he was simply wearing out.

"Home so soon?" Judy greeted him as he entered the converted brownstone that was home. She was wearing white slacks and a blouse, as if in celebration of the warmest day of spring.

"I've got an assignment from Helsey. A short story for his October issue. Last-minute thing—needs it by Friday."

"An actual assignment, or spec?"

"He said if he had a story with an October theme by Friday he'd buy it. That's good enough for me."

She strolled ahead of him into the kitchen. "I'm having a drink. Want one?"

"I'd better get started. How's your book coming?"

"Good." She sipped the tall gin and tonic. "So what's your October story?"

"Halloween—what else?"

"You know how you get with those weird ones, Felix."

"If it's about Halloween it has to be weird, doesn't it?"

He went into his little book-lined office, sat down at the typewriter and inserted paper, carbon, second sheet. He flipped the switch of the electric machine and listened to it purr. No title, but the title could come later. He started to type—slowly at first.

The old dar house stood

The old dark house stood alone

He ripped the page from his typewriter and started again. Upstairs, he could hear Judy's machine spring into life. She typed well over sixty words a minute and rarely made an error. Now, listening to the steady patter of her keys on the paper, he felt the frustration growing within him. Judy and her damned juveniles!

Halloween . . .

He went to the file and dug out a ghost story he'd tried to write a few years back. It didn't read well, but perhaps something could be salvaged. Today was Tuesday. Friday would be here too soon.

He sat down and started to type again.

The hand, when he first saw it, was covered with purple slime.

Judy came down at dinner time to interrupt him. "How you coming with the Halloween thing?"

"Terrible." He ripped another page from the typewriter.

"Why don't you take a break, Felix? It's almost time to eat. We can have a cocktail and relax."

And you can read to me from the manuscript of your damned children's book, he thought. *No thanks!* "I think I'll keep on for a bit," he told her.

"As you like." She went out and shut the door.

Witches . . .

Witches were Halloween. He would write a story about witches for Helsey. And witchcraft. And Satanism. Human sacrifices.

There was a man who lived by a churchyard.

Carr had once called it a good beginning. So he had that much, at least. Churchyard. Witchcraft in the churchyard.

After another ten minutes he gave up and went out to eat.

In the morning he was back at it. Only two more days remained, and he had just three pages down on paper. He needed close to twenty for a story of the proper length. Yet all morning while he struggled to make the words come, typing a sentence or merely a phrase at a time, the typewriter above his head rattled on like some unleashed monster until its vibrations threatened to bring down the ceiling.

He could have told her to stop, of course, to go out to a movie and leave him alone to write, but that would be an admission of failure, an admission that her success was getting to him. He tried to ignore it and wrote two more pages.

Judy came to the door that evening and uttered an exclamation of astonishment. "What have you done to the floor?"

Felix straightened up. "Don't get upset. It's only chalk. I drew a pentagram, like witches do."

"Do you expect the devil to appear in a puff of smoke?"

"Don't bother me, please, Judy. I have to get this story finished."

"All right. I'll bring you a sandwich and some coffee."

The chalked pentagram didn't help, however. He spent the evening looking through books on witchcraft and vampires and other likely topics, but the exact horror he needed continued to elude him. What was an October story without a horror?

Thursday was more of the same. Judy was upstairs typing like a fury while Felix stayed in his office pounding out an occasional hard-won sentence. She went out around noon for some shopping and finally, blessing the silence, he was able to finish a first draft.

The story was flawed, he knew, and still lacked the story of final horror Helsey would like, but perhaps it would work. Perhaps he could strengthen it with a rewrite.

Then Judy returned, and the typing started again upstairs.

This time he could not remain silent. His time was running out. He climbed the stairs and entered

her little workroom. "Could you cut out the typing for today, Judy? I can't think when the house is vibrating like that."

She turned from the typewriter, staring up at him with something like malevolence in her deep brown eyes. "I earn the money in this house now, Felix. And your typing doesn't annoy me a bit. Even your pentagrams don't annoy me." She resumed her typing.

"Damn it, I told you to stop that!"

"Go back to your chalk, Felix."

He grabbed at her in a blind fury as the typing started again, pulling her backward off the chair, tightening his fingers around her throat before he quite realized what he was doing.

When he saw what he had done he released her, letting her head fall limply to the floor. She did not stir. The only sound in the little room was the gentle hum of her electric typewriter.

He reached over and turned it off.

Just before noon on Friday he entered Helsey's office and unzipped his briefcase. "I've got it for you," he said. "It took a lot out of me, but I've got your October story."

Helsey looked up, preoccupied with the page layout on the desk before him. "What? What is it, Felix? I didn't catch what you said."

"I've got the story you need to fill that hole in the October issue. Here it is: a great little Halloween horror story about a man who strangles his wife because she's a witch."

Helsey frowned down at the manuscript. "But . . . but I already have a story for October, Felix. I thought you knew. Your wife brought one in yesterday and I liked it so much I bought it on the spot."

"Judy? Judy wrote a story for you?"

Helsey was studying him intently. "What's the matter with you, man? Didn't she tell you? A great little October story it was, too—all about some children on Columbus Day."

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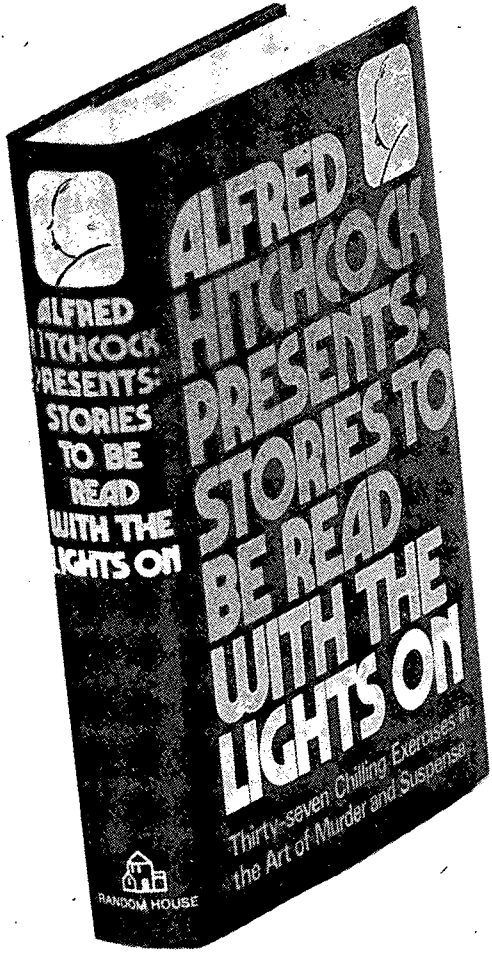

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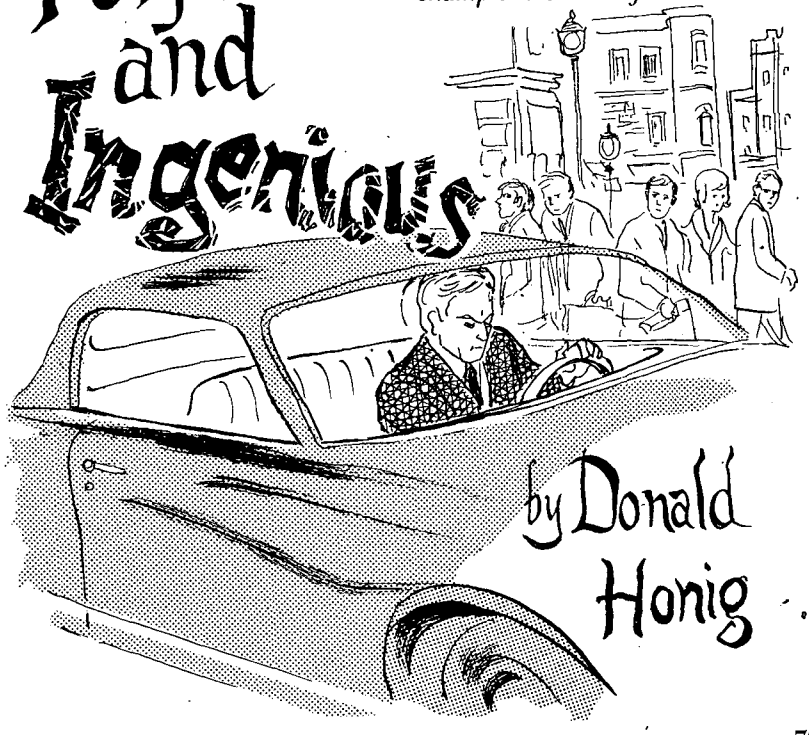
A Plan Perfect and Ingenious

by Donald Honig



Preitler could feel the cold permeating his bones even as he lay in bed. He had heard on the radio last night that this was the coldest, dampest winter in East Berlin since the end of the war. He thought churlishly, *As if that is supposed to make us feel like champions or martyrs.*

It wasn't only the mean-souled winter that was making him bitter. When one is short of money the cold seems colder, the wind sharper. He thought he deserved to have money. He was fifty years old now and had never been disloyal or unfaithful to any of his masters. During the war he had served the Third Reich (as an explosives expert) with mute and unquestioning fidelity; after the war, with the Russian occupation, he had elected to let them become his masters, which had not been easy for him, since he looked upon them as social and cultural inferiors.

Preitler had begun by doing menial jobs for the police and then gradually been eased into counterintelligence work by the Russians. He had a clever and cynical mind, he was cold and absolutely unscrupulous when he had to be, all of which the Party looked upon as virtues, and gradually had through the years moved into a position of trust. Colonel Verov, chief of Soviet counterintelligence in East Berlin, to whom Preitler reported directly, trusted him—but even Verov was a cynic about it.

"I trust your sad and dreary German face, Preitler," the colonel told him one day, "because I know no one else will."

Lately, Preitler found himself enjoying his work less. It was constantly cheerless, sordid, less interesting, and insecure. Since he was not motivated by ideological considerations, he worked solely for the money, which was anything but generous. He felt he was shockingly underpaid as well as under-appreciated.

He got out of bed, viewed his damp, chilly, two-room bachelor apartment with distaste, washed and dressed, then made himself breakfast.

Still feeling cantankerous, ill-used, unappreciated, he set out for work. The cold wind nipped keenly at his face as he headed for his car. As he approached his battered old Ford he set a baleful gaze upon it. Would it start? That was always the question on these wintry mornings. The old pile of metal seemed resentful about having to stand out all night in the cold, its engine striking back against its owner by refusing to turn over with grace.

When he put the key in the ignition and turned it, all Preitler got was a cranky muttering. He cursed and tried again—and again and again. As he sat there trying to urge the car into motion the cranky unmistakable noises drew glances from hurrying passersby. He was receiving, Preitler knew,

sympathy from no one. No one ever sympathized with a man whose car would not start. So he sat there, cursing his car and damning all who noticed him and his predicament.

I am a man who can order people to death, he thought, *but who can't get his car started.*

Finally the engine, having tortured him enough, deigned to turn over and the car lurched forward, leaving behind a cloud of white smoke. If only one could kill a car, Preitler wished, and not wait for it to die. Better still: if only one had enough money to buy a new one.

Arriving at work, he parked in his usual place, in the alley next to the cafe across the street. Then he walked across to the grim pile of bricks that housed the offices of Soviet counterintelligence, East Berlin branch.

It was a bad day all around. Colonel Verov was in a foul mood; certain information from agents in West Berlin had proved unsatisfactory. The colonel was storming around, shouting about inefficiency and disloyalty. Preitler stuck to his small, seedy office, buried his head in his work and tried to ignore the fireworks.

Midway through the morning a man named Pascow came into the office and closed the door. A small man, with bushy black hair, he wore a pince-nez and seemed to own but a single, three-piece pinstriped dark suit, which he wore every day. He looked prewar to Preitler, like one of those abstracted university professors who used to mope around the city in clouds of thought. Preitler, as always, felt instant impatience at the sight of the man. Pascow was strictly small potatoes, a clerk sitting at the same desk for twenty years.

"It's terror out there today," he whispered to Preitler.

"So what do you want me to do about it?" Preitler asked.

"He thinks we're all responsible for someone else's mistakes. It isn't right."

"Pascow, I'm busy."

"You're all right; he favors you," Pascow said morosely.

"He doesn't know I'm alive," Preitler muttered. "Now go away and leave me alone."

Pascow sighed, looking around the small, untidy office. There were no windows.

"You can hide behind your door," he said. "Me, I sit at a desk out in the open. He always sees me."

"Well, if he's looking this minute, he's not seeing you," Preitler said irritatedly. "So you'd better get back."

"You're right." Pascow sighed again. "Will I see you for lunch?"

"Where are you lunching?" Preitler asked.

"Across the street."

"I have another engagement," Preitler said.

So at lunch time he began cursing again. Normally he ate in the cafe across the street, but because he knew the bore Pascow would be there he had to go elsewhere. After coaxing his car into motion again, he drove to a cafe about a mile away where he was not known and could enjoy a quiet, solitary lunch—but Preitler had no sooner seated himself than he was joined by a pleasant-looking man wearing a fur hat and fur-trimmed overcoat.

"What do you want?" Preitler asked. "I shouldn't be seen talking to you."

The man smiled. He seemed quite at his ease, and this sense of ease made Preitler look even more tense.

"Go away," Preitler said.

The man smiled again, seeming to take pleasure in Preitler's discomfort. He removed his cap, uncovering a head of close-cropped brown hair. He was in his mid-thirties. Though his smile appeared friendly, it didn't quite reach into his eyes, which kept a steady gaze upon Preitler.

"Will you buy me lunch, Hans?" the man asked. His name was MacReady, ostensibly representing an American industrial firm in West Berlin, with a visa entitling him to enter the East sector, but Preitler knew him as an American intelligence operative. They had met several times in the West sector and each had been experienced enough to see through the other's cover.

"I'll buy you poison," Preitler grumbled. "Go away."

"Still unhappy, eh?" MacReady asked.

"I am deliriously happy," Preitler said, scowling.

"Your problem is, you're unhappy in your work."

"I am very happy in my work," Preitler said caustically. "I love my work. My work is my whole life."

MacReady sat back, folded his arms and grinned at Preitler. "We've decided," he said, "that you're a man of great common sense."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Preitler asked with a suspicious frown.

The conversation was suspended a moment while a waiter laid down two dog-eared, food-stained menus and walked away.

"That you would never turn down an excellent business propo-

sition such as one I now offer."

Preitler leaned forward and in a furious whisper said, "MacReady, you are trying to get me shot."

MacReady picked up his menu and looked at it. "How is the schnitzel in this place?" he asked.

"Don't order," Preitler said. "I'm not having lunch with you."

"What are you afraid of? Are you afraid of Colonel Verov?"

"I don't know him."

"He's your boss," MacReady said. "And a nasty fellow, you'll agree. Preitler, how would you like to make some money? I mean a *lot* of money."

In spite of himself, there was a sudden flicker of interest in Preitler's eyes as they rose for a moment from their study of the menu. Finding his companion's silence encouraging, MacReady went on.

"One of our men died in Vienna recently, under very mysterious circumstances."

"My condolences," Preitler said dryly.

"We would like to even the score."

"That sort of thing isn't done anymore. This isn't 1946."

"I know it isn't done," MacReady said. "But it *was* done."

"How do you know there was outside responsibility for it?"

"This fellow just wasn't the sort to shoot himself in the back of the head and dive into a lake."

"So you've come here to ask me to commit a murder. You must be insane. Why don't you pick on somebody in your own sector, or in Paris, or in Vienna? Why do you bother me with your problems?"

MacReady wasn't smiling now. "We have reason to believe Verov ordered it. We want him."

Preitler closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. "I'm sitting with a maniac," he said.

"You can arrange it. We have every confidence in you."

"Why shouldn't you?" Preitler muttered. "You have nothing to lose by it. It's my neck."

MacReady named a sum of money. Preitler's heart sank when he heard it. A man whose scruples had already been worn paper-thin from a lifetime's neglect, this sum of money was enough to rub out their last lingering vestiges; this sum of money was enough to haunt forever the man who rejected it.

"You're asking for the impossible," he said, but even as he talked, the sound of the money was reverberating in his mind; he could hear it, feel it, taste it. A decent apartment. New clothes. A new car: above all, a new car. He personally would park the old one

on a railroad crossing and leave it there. Yet he couldn't spend too lavishly, too quickly; that would be foolish.

To his astonishment, he found himself giving the outrageous proposition serious consideration.

"For a man of your skills," MacReady said, "this is child's play."

Preitler gave him a cynical look. "Flattery," he said with a grunt. "Listen," his tone suddenly aggressive, "what gave you the idea I would do this?"

"Do you care whether Verov lives or dies?"

"No, but I care whether *I* live or die."

"Then be careful, Hans, be *very* careful."

"For the record," Preitler said, "I'm telling you no."

"And for the record," MacReady said, getting up, "meet me here one week to the day after the deed is done. Enjoy your lunch, Hans."

Preitler ordered a bottle of wine with his lunch. He couldn't afford it, but already he was beginning to feel like a rich man.

That night Preitler lay on his bed smoking a cigarette. *How?* he was thinking. He knew his employers only too well. In their minds suspicion was the same as fact. He had known apparently loyal men to disappear suddenly for no good reason. If he were going to carry this thing off it would have to be done without the least shadow of suspicion falling on him.

Verov was no easy prey. The man spent most of his time in his office, and he went to and from the office in a car with two bodyguards, by a different route each day. He lived in a house behind brick walls, with two soldiers posted outside around the clock. Verov took no chances. *Neither would I,* Preitler thought mordantly, *if I had his conscience.*

A challenge, Preitler decided. This was certainly a challenge—but he found himself enjoying thinking about it; he could not remember the last time he had done any independent thinking.

Several days later he was sitting with Verov in the colonel's office, going over some reports. Preitler seemed unresponsive, preoccupied.

Finally the colonel asked, "What's troubling you today, Preitler?"

"I don't like to mention it, Colonel."

"Well, you'd better mention it. I want to know what you're thinking about."

"I think one of our people is going to defect."

Verov's stolid Slavic face fixed

into a stern stare. "Who?" he asked.

"Do you know the little clerk outside—Pascow?"

"Him?" Verov seemed incredulous.

"He's been complaining too frequently about his lot. Says things are better on the other side. I think someone's been filling his head with nonsense. Then last week an American agent was in the city, a man named MacReady."

"I know that," Verov said.

"You do?"

"Of course."

"Did you have him watched carefully?" Preitler asked.

"Why? Out with it, Preitler."

"Because," Preitler said, knowing he was taking a chance now, "he had lunch with Pascow one day, in a little cafe about a mile from here."

"How do you know?" Verov asked.

"I was leaving as they were entering. They didn't see me, but I saw them."

Preitler waited. He was certain MacReady had not been under surveillance that day; MacReady was too good an agent to allow himself to be followed when he was going to make a proposition like the one he made.

"Have you spoken to Pascow?" Verov asked.

"No, sir."

The colonel swung around in his swivel chair and gazed thoughtfully for some moments at the brick wall outside of his window, then asked, "Has Pascow reported his conversation with the American?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"That in itself is unforgivable," Verov muttered. He struck the armrest of his chair. "These fools," he said heatedly. "These stupid, petty fools. All right. You had better see to his elimination."

"Must I?"

Verov swung around in his chair. "Yes, of course you must,"

he said, annoyed. "What else?"

"With your permission, Colonel," Preitler said, "might I, before such a drastic step is taken, arrange for a demonstration of the man's loyalty? After all, I would hate to see a man condemned merely by my suspicions."

"All right," Verov said. "Handle it as you see fit. And I hope," he added menacingly, "you won't be making any errors of judgment."

"I can assure you I won't."

On his way back to his own office, Preitler paused to whisper to Pascow, "You'd better keep your nose clean."

The little clerk gave him a startled look, turning around and watching Preitler stride away along the corridor.

Two days later Pascow entered Preitler's office and closed the door behind him. "Preitler," the little clerk said, "I'm concerned."

"What about?" Preitler asked.

Pascow was quite agitated. He sat down on a folding chair, breathless panic in his face. "Look," he said, handing Preitler a piece of paper.

"What is it?" Preitler asked, not moving.

Pascow withdrew the paper. "It's an order signed by Colonel Verov. He wants me to go to a park outside of the city, pick up something there and deliver it to him."

"So?"

"I don't like it. I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"I think they're going to eliminate me," Pascow said.

Preitler laughed. "Melodramatic nonsense," he said. "Why should you think such a thing? Do you have a guilty conscience?"

"My conscience is clear," Pascow said. "But why did you say that to me the other day? About keeping my nose clean. What's going on around here? You've got to tell me, Preitler."

"Nothing is going on, I assure you."

"Then why did you tell me to keep my nose clean?"

"Just as a general thing; it's always a good idea."

Pascow stared mistrustfully at him. "I can tell you something," he said. "The colonel has been cutting me dead these past few days. He glares at me something awful. I tell you, Preitler, something is going on and I'm afraid."

"The colonel has been a bit tense lately, that's all."

"I've been loyal; you know that, Preitler. No one has been more loyal than I. I've given my whole life to the Party. My whole life. And for what? I'm still a clerk."

"You see, Pascow," Preitler said

waving his finger, "it's talk like that which can get you into trouble."

"Am I in trouble? Tell me, Preitler. A man has a right to know."

"Just take it easy. As far as I know, there's no problem with you."

"Has the colonel ever mentioned my name to you? Tell me."

"The colonel mentions everyone's name, but it doesn't mean anything . . . necessarily."

"Necessarily? What do you mean by that?"

"Look, Pascow, tell me what this assignment is and maybe I can help you," Preitler said, knowing full well what the man was going to tell him.

Pascow took a deep breath and adjusted his pince-nez. "I am to take a car and drive out to Siegfried Park. There, at a secluded place described on this piece of paper, I'm to pick up a suitcase containing important materials and bring it directly to the colonel at eleven a.m."

"So? What's so unusual?"

"Preitler, these assignments are never given to me. You know that. Why me, all of a sudden? I don't like it. That's a very lonely place out there."

"Pascow, I can assure you, if they were planning to eliminate you it wouldn't be so elaborate. They would simply walk up to you and say they wanted to talk to you. And then–" Preitler snapped his fingers "–you become a memory. This is all very routine, believe me."

"For someone else maybe, but not for me. Why should I be getting such an assignment?"

"I'm sure the colonel has his reasons. In any event, I advise you carefully: follow your instructions to the letter. If it says deliver the suitcase to the colonel at eleven, then you be in his office at eleven, not a moment later. Who knows?" Preitler said jovially. "You might be in line for a promotion."

"Do you think so?" Pascow asked eagerly.

"All I know is that it doesn't go unnoticed when one carries out his instructions to the letter."

It had been years since he had rigged an explosive charge, but Preitler's hand was ever skillful. He bought a suitcase, had no problem obtaining the dynamite and appropriate mechanism, and in fact rather enjoyed preparing the lethal load on his kitchen table that night.

In the morning he drove out to the park, concealed the suitcase in the place where Pascow would find it, activated the timer and then drove to work. When he arrived at the office he inquired about Pascow and was told that the little clerk was off on an "important assignment."

At ten-thirty he carried some reports to Colonel Verov. "Today is the day I'm putting the clerk Pascow's loyalty to the test," he said to the colonel.

"Good, good," the colonel murmured abstractedly, reading the reports.

"He's supposed to be reporting to you at eleven sharp," Preitler said. "If not, then we'll have him picked up."

Engrossed in his papers, Verov impatiently waved Preitler out of the office. Preitler departed with a grim smile.

At ten minutes to eleven Preitler slipped away to the cafe across the street. The explosion would definitely be audible from here. He sat near a window and sipped from a stein of beer, glancing every few seconds at his watch. If he had worked with his old-time skill, the charge would go off precisely at eleven. He smiled, as befitted a man who had just taken a pleasant glimpse into the future. One week from today he would meet with MacReady and be handed the money.

He smiled again when at five minutes to the hour he saw Pascow pull up in front of the building, get out of his car and, suitcase in hand, pass through the armor-plated doors. Good man, Preitler said to himself. You could always trust someone of Pascow's character to be punctual—which was probably why the fellow had remained a clerk all his life; absolutely nothing on his mind but to

do things on time, to be rewarded for banality. Well, he would receive his reward today.

Preitler waited. He frowned when the sweep hand on his watch edged past eleven. Now, it might not be so good if Pascow had got in and out of the colonel's office before the explosion. Most likely, he was being made to cool his heels in the outer office. But that was all right, too; there was enough power in that charge to take the colonel, even from the outer office; the colonel and a few majors and captains and secretaries and clerks, and whoever else. MacReady was going to get his money's worth.

Preitler had been gazing down at his watch, tense with expectancy—it was now seven minutes after the hour—when he looked up and to his astonishment saw Pascow entering the cafe, suitcase in hand.

"Oh, no!" Preitler uttered, springing to his feet.

"Preitler! There you are," Pascow said, heading for him.

Preitler spun around and ran for the back of the cafe. He could hear Pascow shouting to him as he ran through the kitchen, past a startled chef and into the alley, where his car was parked.

"He wouldn't see me, Preitler!" Pascow said, running into the alley after him.

Preitler jumped into the car, shoved the key into the ignition and turned it just as Pascow ran up to the window.

The car wouldn't start.

"Oh, not now!" he cried. He turned to Pascow and through the closed window shouted, "Go away, go away!"

"He wouldn't see me," Pascow said. "Preitler, what does it mean?"

Again Preitler turned the key. The car coughed wretchedly.

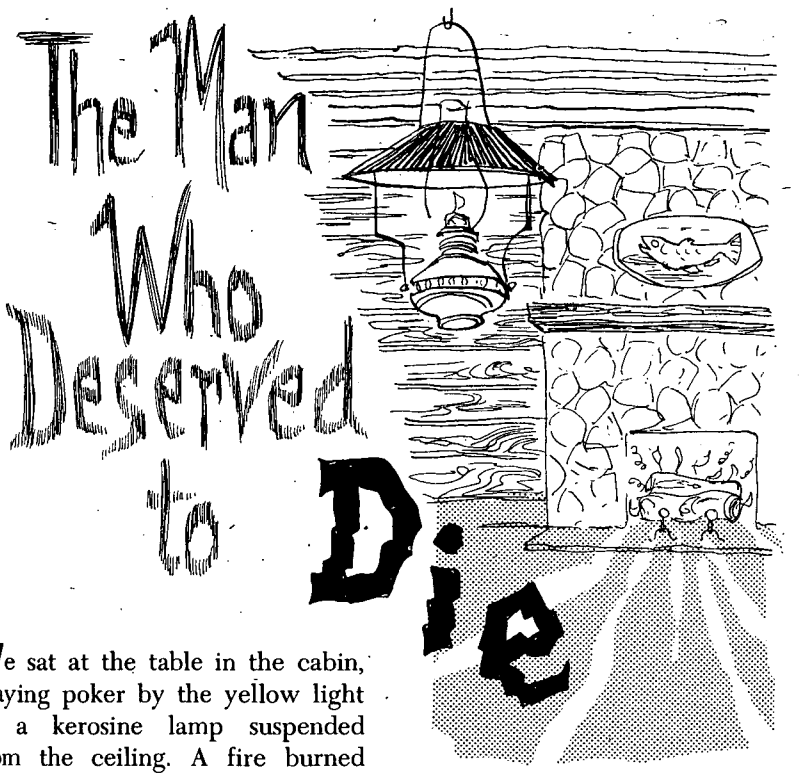
"Preitler!"

"Go away, you maniac!" he screamed.

The last thing he saw was Pascow's frightened, yelling face; and then he and the little clerk and the stubborn old automobile all disappeared with a spectacular bang.

Justice was once defined by Diogenes as "a virtue of the soul distributing that which each person deserved."

The Man Who Deserved to Die



We sat at the table in the cabin, playing poker by the yellow light of a kerosine lamp suspended from the ceiling. A fire burned down dully in the open fireplace, still throwing a heat that was welcome in the cold Montana night.

The cabin wasn't elaborate, just one room containing four bunk beds, a big wood-burning stove for cooking and a primitive sink. It had been designed as merely a shelter from the weather and a place to sleep. If one wanted greater comforts, there were other fishing resorts.

Across from me was small, thin-faced Perk Hatfield, a successful

attorney, almost studious in his heavy-rimmed glasses, his sparse dark hair combed back and curling over his collar. I had met him only two days before.

To my left was Orville Lord, heavy from too many good meals and fine wines, his round face smooth-skinned, his eyes pouched, his heavy lips pursed around a long, black cigar.

To my right was Gebo Cody, no older than the two of them but far more fit, his skin stretched tight and dry over a bony face, twenty years as a guide here at the lake giving him the most healthful occupation of us all and his body showed it.

"Your bet, Franco," Hatfield said to me.

I gave my cards a last look—three queens. More than enough to take the pot but there was a little more involved than money. Antagonizing Lord, who was in a position to give me the best job of my career as his advertising manager and eventual vice-president, wasn't my style; not for a couple of bucks. I turned my cards face-down. "I'm out."

Lord pushed a couple of five dollar bills forward. "I'm in for ten."

The attorney smiled. "I'll see that and raise you ten."

Cody shook his head. "Too rich for me."

I wondered why the guide had agreed to sit in the game. He was certainly not in our financial league but then he could have figured he could take the rich dudes for a few dollars, not knowing that where money was concerned, Hatfield and Lord came equipped with shark's teeth; especially Lord.

The float plane had dropped us off at the lake on Friday afternoon for a long weekend of fishing that was almost over, the plane due to pick us up in the morning. I was along, not so much for the fishing, as to give Lord an opportunity to get to know me better, something that was his idea, not mine. He had said as much when he asked me along. "I like to know the people I'll be working with," he had said. "Give us a chance to get acquainted. The job is important, you know. Can't hire just any old boy to take over."

It really hadn't been an in-

by Stephen Wasylyk

vitation as much as a command, so I dug out the fishing gear I hadn't used in years, kissed my wife good-bye and joined him and Hatfield.

Lord pushed another ten to the center of the table. "I'll call."

Hatfield spread his cards. "Two pair. Deuces and nines."

Lord chuckled and fanned his hand. "Three fours."

As I had thought, my three queens would have won.

Cody leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. The eyes, light blue in contrast with the weathered face, had gradually grown narrower and meaner. I wondered if it were because he had lost or because of the bourbon we had passed around from time to time.

Hatfield picked up the cards to deal another hand.

I stood up. "No more for me tonight."

"Hell," Hatfield said, "three-handed is no good."

"Two-handed," Cody said. "I've had enough, too."

Hatfield threw down the cards. "It's a little early for bed. What do we do now? Gather before the fireplace and tell stories?"

"I have a story," Cody said quietly.

We all looked at him. He stood up and moved to the hearth, lighting his pipe. Above his head, an old 30-40 Krag, well-oiled and polished, hung on two pegs. Cody didn't impress me as the talkative type, having had little to say since we had arrived. Volunteering now to be the center of attention somehow didn't fit.

"What kind of story?" Hatfield asked.

"About a man who deserves to die."

Lord chuckled, the sound bubbly and oily. "That could take in a lot of people."

Cody ignored him. "It happened about twenty years ago when I was young and a little wild. I became involved with a man named Max who had planned a bank robbery and wanted me to help. I also brought a friend of mine named Cameron and a girl named Delia into it. We all had our jobs laid out for us and the deal was supposed to net us fifty thousand each."

"That is worth going after," Lord said. "Plenty of people turn crooked for less."

"I thought so at the time," Cody continued. "I was no criminal but I thought that once wouldn't hurt, especially since I could use the money, and the idea seemed foolproof. I won't bother you with the details. What's important is that the plan worked,

better than Max had hoped. We drove away from that bank with more than two hundred thousand."

Hatfield and Lord had turned their chairs to face Cody at the fireplace. I had moved mine somewhat to the rear and straddled it, my arms crossed on the high back, trying to keep my skepticism from showing. These evening bull sessions were often a matter of who could tell the biggest lie. Maybe Cody considered a tall tale part of his duties. As far as I knew, Lord and Hatfield were as much strangers to the place as I was. If Cody kept us entertained we might come back.

"We were to meet afterward at Max's apartment to split the loot and go our separate ways," Cody said. "Delia was supposed to go with me."

I didn't have to guess what had happened. "Max took it all."

"That would have been bad enough," Cody said, "but Max went a little further than that. He figured that if he took the money and left us, there was a chance we would turn him in to get even. This was the big score he had been looking for and he was taking no chances on losing it. He drew a gun and shot Cameron before we knew what was going on. Then he shot me, luckily high in the chest, missing anything important. I wasn't dumb enough not to play dead so I lay there not breathing until he and Delia took off."

"So he took the girl, too," I said. I would have been disappointed if he hadn't.

"Max was a smooth talker and Delia liked money. I got out of there before the police came. I had friends in that town and the bullet wound was clean. They took care of me until I could travel. I came across an ad for this job, got it and came up here, intending to stay for only a short time. I liked it so much that I stayed for twenty years but I never forgot Max."

I had no reason not to believe him but I was still not sure. The question in my mind was why he had told us the story at all.

"So Max is the man who deserves to die," Hatfield said. "I don't quite see it that way. You took your chances and lost. It's like drawing a bad poker hand. You stayed when you should have folded. Max took the pot and that's it."

"No," Cody said. "If he had taken the money and left us, I might agree. There was no call for him to kill Cameron and me. I owe him for that."

"The way you talk, you never

saw him again," I said to him.

"Not until recently," Cody said. "I saw his picture in the newspaper. He's a big man today. Legitimate. I guess he used that two hundred thousand right."

"Are you going after him?" Hatfield asked. "The statute of limitations expired years ago on the robbery, but you could have him held for murder."

Cody shook his head. "I couldn't win. Not against his money. I thought of a better way. The clipping said he was a great fisherman so I sent him a letter, inviting him here, offering him a special deal that I figured he couldn't turn down. He took the bait."

"He's coming here?"

Cody reached over his head and took down the 30-40 Krag, holding it loosely on his hip. "He's here now," he said calmly.

There it is, I thought. I believed him now, understood why he had stood there and recited what had happened to him twenty years before. His face had been in the shadow of the firelight behind him when he had been talking and I really hadn't been paying too much attention to it. Now I saw what I should have noticed before. The eyes had a gleam that I didn't like and the jaw was clamped hard around the stem of the pipe, his mouth a thin line.

I didn't have time to wonder what he intended to do because suddenly the whole thing took on a dreamlike atmosphere. Lord rose, hands outstretched, appearing to move in slow motion, his mouth opening and closing without sound. Cody fired the heavy rifle and Lord smashed backward, overturning the chair, the roar of the rifle immense in the small cabin.

Hatfield still sat, his mouth open, his eyes fixed on Cody. He rose shakily to his feet. "Damn you! Do you know what you've done?"

"I know," Cody said.

"You'll spend the rest of your life in jail!"

"No," Cody said softly. "That's not how I planned it." He swung the rifle toward Hatfield. "There will be no witnesses." He worked the bolt easily and fired. Hatfield spun and went down heavily in almost a clumsy caricature of a man who had been shot. The rifle began to move toward me.

I went off the chair backward, hitting the floor and rolling toward the door, clawing at the latch and stumbling through just as Cody fired again, and then I was outside in the darkness, sprinting toward the trees, wanting only to get away from that

cabin as quickly as possible.

I ran headlong into a tree and bounced back, stunned. I crawled frantically, not knowing where I was going and not caring, feeling only that Cody would kill me just as he'd killed the others, until I realized that he'd have no trouble following the noise I was making and I stopped, my mouth and throat dry, my chest heaving.

The woods were silent. I dared to look back at the cabin, an oasis of yellow light in the darkness, the door open. Cody wasn't following.

I knelt, fear causing the perspiration to run down my back and chill my face, thinking of how skeptical I had been when Cody had been talking. If I hadn't believed him before, I had no choice now.

Lord was dead. No one could take a slug from the Krag at that range and live. Either he had been the Max that Cody had spoken about or Cody thought he was. It made no difference now. It was possible that Cody was right. No one knew much about Lord's early days. He had started with a small discount outlet and built it into an eighty-store operation. Two hundred thousand dollars would have given him a good basis but it had been his marketing genius that had taken him the rest of the way. From what I'd seen of him, he was ruthless enough to have been Max, to kill one man and try to kill another to get his start. When you came right down to it, I really didn't like him very much but then he wouldn't have been the first man I'd worked for that I didn't like. What had been important was that I had thought I could handle him, get along with him. For the kind of money he was paying, I would have put up with the Devil himself and then walked out when I'd had my fill, using the job as a springboard to something else.

Hatfield was probably dead too, for no other reason than Lord had invited him on the fishing trip, and I wasn't exactly an excellent candidate for life insurance at the moment, for the same reason.

Cody was slightly mad, obviously warped by twenty years of hate. When he found that Max was Lord, all he had to do was come up with some sort of plot to kill him. He had. Just what kind of story he would have for the pilot of the float plane when it arrived in the morning, I didn't know, but one thing was certain—I had to find some way to stay alive until that plane arrived.

I knelt there, my mind almost blank from shock, unsure of what to do next. I thought of my wife,

comfortably at home in our apartment, assuming I was having a wonderful time, not knowing she had come close to being a beautiful young widow and that she just might play that role yet.

A shadow darkened the yellow frame of light of the cabin doorway. Cody stepped through and stood, the Krag cradled in his arm.

"Franco!" His voice echoed in the night. "You can't get away, Franco! We're fifty miles from anywhere and there is nowhere for you to go! As soon as it's light, I'm coming after you! You'll leave a nice trail for me to follow if you try to run!"

He was right in that, I knew.

"If you're thinking about that plane in the morning, forget it! I'll tell you what will happen: I will kill the pilot and put the bodies inside and tow the plane to the middle of the lake; I'll set it on fire there and tell everybody you crashed on take-off. Do you think they'll look for anything else?"

My blood ran colder than the night air justified. Mad Cody might be, but he had an excellent chance of killing four men and getting away with it.

I was in trouble but at least I knew it. The pilot of the plane would have no idea that anything was wrong until Cody turned that Krag on him. Even if Cody didn't kill me before he got there, he could still shoot the pilot, place the bodies in the plane and follow through on his plan. He could take care of me any time. If my body wasn't found in the lake, no one would think anything of it. The lake was wide and deep.

Cody went back into the cabin.

I shivered. The night air was beginning to get to me. When I had dashed out of the cabin, all I'd been wearing was high-laced mid-calf boots, light wool trousers and shirt and a light sweater. That kind of clothing wasn't enough at night during this season. No wonder Cody wasn't in any particular hurry to track me down. By morning I'd be sluggish with cold.

I had to keep warm.

I inventoried my pockets in the dark: some change, my lighter, wallet, key case, a length of line I had been using to tie leaders that afternoon, and two cigars in my shirt pocket. I had one weapon, if you could call it that—a short-bladed combination knife, fish scraper and hook remover my wife had bought me for Christmas some years back that I had never really used. Against that Krag, it was useless.

If I could get out of sight of the cabin I could start a small

fire, keep my blood circulating normally so that I could think of some way to get out of this situation.

I was sure Cody wouldn't come after me in the dark. It would be too easy for me to ambush him. In daylight it would be different. He'd be able to use that rifle long before I could get close to him.

The night air made me shiver again. I began to move away from the cabin, my arms shielding my face, making my way through the trees.

Behind the cabin, the forest sloped upward to a small ridge. If I could top that ridge, I could build a fire that wouldn't be seen.

I knew I was leaving a well-marked trail of disturbed earth and broken underbrush for Cody to follow in the morning but the morning could take care of itself. Right now I wanted warmth and a chance to think.

I slipped and fell several times, scratched myself on the brush continually and rested often. The shock of seeing Lord and Hatfield killed was still with me in my tight throat and clammy hands, in the occasional convulsive shudder that wasn't entirely due to the chill night.

I felt the ground slope down beneath my feet. I moved downward carefully until I calculated I was well out of sight of the cabin, found my lighter and flicked it on. It gave enough light for me to find several small dry twigs and turn them into a miniature torch. I gradually added thicker pieces until I had enough light to scrape a hollow in the forest floor where I built a small fire. As the flames grew and threw light, I could see where a large tree had been uprooted and fallen during some unknown storm and now formed a natural reflector for my small fire, throwing back welcome heat. I built up a supply of small broken branches, then relaxed, holding my palms out to the warmth.

As I basked in the sensual pleasure of the heat, Cody and the danger he represented gradually took on a new and softer perspective.

I was sure of one thing. Even in his madness, Cody was no more clever than I. I had spent my life in a creative business, continually forced to come up with fresh ideas and new approaches to problems and I had the income to prove I was successful at it.

Getting to Cody was just another problem. The problem had two dimensions. One was to try to get the Krag from him. The other was to try to kill him. The possibility of putting him out of action long enough to get that Krag was

remote and extremely dangerous; far more dangerous than trying to kill him.

Did I really have a choice? I wondered.

I squatted on my heels before the fire, feeding it with dead branches, taking inventory of the things I had at hand that I could use.

Dawn was graying the eastern sky when I stood up, did a few quick exercises to ease some stiffened muscles, kicked the fire dead and studied my surroundings. I was in a small hollow, but if I had continued I would have started uphill again and run into a rock outcropping that would have barred me from going any farther in the dark.

I made my way around it and right then I knew that was where I would confront Cody, because all of a sudden the ground dropped away into a miniature gully that countless rains had carved into the forest floor and the bottom of the gully was overgrown with waist-high, fernlike underbrush.

What made the gully so important was that you come upon it as a complete surprise and the underbrush makes it impossible to look down into it until you reach the rim. If I were in the gully, Cody wouldn't know I was there until the last possible moment. Hidden in the greenery at the bottom, I would see him long before he saw me.

The sky was brighter now. Cody would be starting out as soon as he could track me, which wouldn't be too much longer. I had to move fast.

I searched until I found what I wanted, a springy sapling slightly thicker than my thumb. I hacked it loose with my knife and notched the ends, bending it into a bow and stringing it with the laces from my boots. It stood a good six feet high and, crude as it was, seemed quite functional.

In the same cluster of saplings, I found one the thickness of my small finger that by some miracle of forest growth had shot upward toward the sun clear and straight. I cut a length free, notched one end and split the other back a few inches. I extracted two plastic credit cards from my wallet, trimming them and fitting them into slits I cut into the end of my makeshift arrow, using a piece of fishing line wrapped around the shaft to keep them tight. Finally, I took my knife, held the blade under my heel and snapped it off.

The blade then went into the split at the head of the arrow, held in place by the rest of the fishing line.

I hefted the arrow in my hand. Like the bow, it was serviceable. It might work.

I sat down in the ferns, held the bow against the arches of my boots, nocked the arrow into the bowstring and cradled backward onto my spine, choosing a thick pine about ten yards away as a target. I drew back the arrow slowly and held it, not really wanting to let it go because I was afraid that my primitive weapon wouldn't work, but then I thought of the pilot of the plane coming in, the man Cody would kill whether he caught up to me first or not. The pilot was young, pleasant and smiling, everything he owned tied up in his plane and looking forward to getting married soon. Cody would kill him before he knew what was happening and he didn't deserve that.

I held my breath and released the arrow.

It yawed slightly but hit the pine solidly, driving into the bark, less powerfully than I had anticipated. I pulled it free, found it still intact, but I would have to make it work better. I unstrung the bow, shortened it by about a foot, restrung it and tried again. This time the arrow flew straighter and hit harder. The damage it would do to a human body would be considerable—if I could possibly hit a human body.

Shooting at a tree was not the same as shooting at Cody with that Krag swinging my way, and even if I hit him I had no guarantee I would kill him.

The sun was just beginning to thrust upward over the eastern mountains, throwing no heat as yet, but my hands were wet and my clothing clung to my body.

All I could do now was wait for Cody, whose appearance was as inevitable as the sun.

I went back to the edge of the small hollow and peered down the slope beneath the trees. The trail I had left the night before was clear. He would have no difficulty in following me. I waited.

The sun was a round disk through the morning mist when I heard the faint rustle of shrubbery from below. I went back to the rock outcropping, making sure my trail was plain, moving around the rocks and down into the gully.

I picked my spot and lowered myself into the ferns. I knew Cody would have difficulty spotting me immediately and he would certainly not be looking for me at his feet.

I rolled back on my spine, my feet pointing upward, and sighted the arrow between my toes at the spot where he would appear above the rim of the gully.

Overhead, the sky was a brilliant blue. I wondered if it would be the last morning sky I would ever enjoy, if I would ever see my wife again. I felt no fear, only a great curiosity as to what would happen when Cody's head appeared.

I heard him cough and then his head rose above the rim and he climbed slowly. He was wearing a heavy tan jacket and canvas cap, the Krag held high.

He was looking upward, scanning the forest ahead, as if he were expecting me to leap out at him. He paused and half turned.

I let the arrow go.

Just as I released the arrow, I realized there was someone with him and he had turned to say something. I sensed rather than saw the top of a man's head just below the rim of the gully as the arrow yawed, glanced off the stock of the rifle and shot downward sharply.

A man screamed.

Cody stood, seemingly stupefied, watching.

The man with him took a few staggering steps upward, the arrow imbedded at an awkward angle in his chest, his hands wrapped around the shaft as if he were trying to pull it out before sinking to his knees and plunging facedown over the rim of the gully, falling almost into my lap.

I lay there frozen.

The man was Hatfield—but Hatfield had died the night before!

"It was a game, a gag," Lord said, after Cody and I had deposited the hoarsely-breathing Hatfield in the bunk bed in the cabin, where Cody went to work to stop the bleeding. "Complete with blank cartridges and some excellent acting on all our parts. It wasn't supposed to end like this."

A game! At least that was what I thought he had said. I looked down at the pale, softly-moaning attorney, something screaming in my head. *A game?* What kind of game was it that could get a man almost killed?

Damn Lord. Damn Lord and Cody and Hatfield for dreaming up this macabre joke that had made me come close to killing a man.

No. Not damn Hatfield. He might have laughed hard and long the night before but it would be some time before he laughed again.

Cody hadn't talked much on the way down, his face grim, anxious to get Hatfield to the cabin where he could take care of him. Hatfield was in pain and bleeding badly but with the plane due in shortly, the chances were excellent

he would survive—luckily for me.

I swallowed hard, trying to get rid of the sick lump somewhere in my chest. "What was the purpose of this so-called game?"

"A test. It was my way of testing a man with whom I expected to be closely associated. I wanted to know if I could depend on you when the unexpected happened and the going got tough."

"You went through all this just for my benefit?"

His shoulders moved. "It wasn't the first time. It worked before with no harm done."

Before. They had actually gone through this charade before, which explained why they had been so good at it.

"You're the sixth man," Lord said. "Two of the others got down on their knees and begged Cody for mercy. Another broke down and cried like a baby. Do you think I wanted men like that working for me?"

No harm done, he had said. Except that it would take a long time for the scars to heal for those three men. They would hate Lord as much as a man could hate. The way I hated him.

"You were the only one who thought of diving out the door. We didn't know what to do about that. Finally we decided it would do you no harm to spend the night in the woods. You wouldn't freeze to death and you couldn't get far. Sending Cody out to tell you he'd be coming after you in the morning was just to keep you from feeling too confident and to shake you up a little. Cody and Hatfield went after you this morning to explain."

"You must have had a good laugh last night," I said.

His shoulders moved again. "There was some humor in it."

"Humor, hell!" I exploded. "There's nothing funny about frightening a man half to death. All you had to do last night was walk out and call to me. All Hatfield had to do this morning was to keep calling my name."

"We thought of that but, after all, the idea was to see what you were made of. I think we found out."

Anger burned so deeply I knew it would be a long time before it passed. I looked at the round face and the fleshy lips and wondered why I had ever wanted to work for him, why I thought the job he'd offered was the chance of a lifetime. Lord and I never would have gotten along. I had been kidding myself to think otherwise, blinded by ambition and the thought of a healthy salary. I would never make the same mistake again.

"All right," I said savagely, "we'll see what the sheriff has to say. He probably won't appreciate your sense of humor any more than I do."

"We've committed no crime. Basically all we did was to fire some blank cartridges and take advantage of your gullibility. A man believes what he chooses to believe. It was not our fault that you turned out not only to have a vivid imagination but the ability to do something about it. However, you need not worry. I will explain to the authorities that it was not your responsibility."

The float plane passed over, circled the lake and straightened out in a long glide, touching down with a gentle splash.

I felt a touch of nausea. He had made a fool of me and forced me almost to kill a man because I had thought it was the only way to survive, and I would have to live with years of wishing I had held that arrow just a second longer.

His insane test had triggered it all. Still he spoke as if things were normal. There had to be something missing in a man like that but it had to be missing for him to come up with the idea in the first place.

"Listen," Lord said, "I want you to know that what you did to Hatfield doesn't make any difference. What counts is the way you handled yourself. The job is yours."

His voice held a note of disappointment and I had the feeling that he wanted no man to pass his test, that he preferred to see them crack, that he enjoyed seeing a man degrade himself in the face of death.

Cody had pretended to shoot Lord for being a man who deserved to die.

A man who deserved to die.

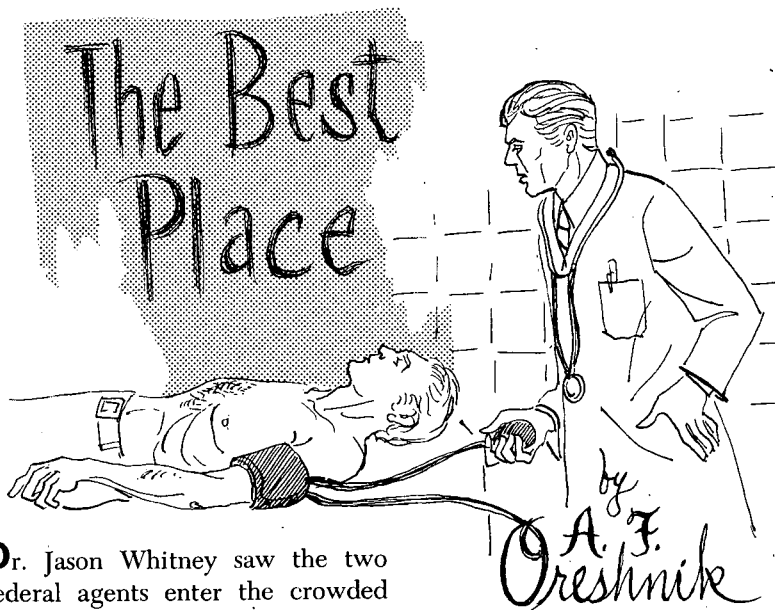
As far as I was concerned Lord certainly qualified. There was nothing I could do about that, but he deserved something from me, not only on my account but also for the men he had broken.

With anger, disgust and frustration behind the blow, I smashed my right fist into his face as hard as I could. He went down and lay stunned.

I let him recover to the point where he sat up and I was sure he could understand me, and then very slowly and distinctly I said: "I just withdrew my application."

I turned abruptly and walked out of the cabin toward the float plane taxiing toward the long dock.

What's-his-name's penchant for anonymity can be most rewarding.



Dr. Jason Whitney saw the two federal agents enter the crowded restaurant. Their rumpled suits and stubble-covered cheeks betrayed the fact that they had been too busy to think of appearances for some time. They moved wearily toward him along the line of booths against the wall, looking for an empty one. When they reached the booth where the young doctor was sitting alone, he spoke to the agent he recognized, a deceptively soft-looking man in his forties.

"Hello, Tom. Have a seat." He indicated the place opposite him with a sweep of his hand. "There probably aren't any empty booths at this hour. A lot of people stop here for breakfast on their way to work."

Tom Campbell slid heavily into the booth and was followed by his look-alike companion. "I'd like you to meet my partner, Joe Mof-

fet, Dr. . . . Dr. . . ." Campbell snapped his fingers, trying to dislodge the name from his memory.

"Whitney. Jason Whitney," the doctor offered with a smile, not the least offended at not being remembered.

"Yeah, that's right," Campbell acknowledged with a nod as Joe Moffet and the young doctor clasped hands briefly.

"You men look like you've had a hard night," the doctor said.

"You can say that again," Campbell answered. "We haven't been out of our clothes in two days. Just brought a man back from Spain."

"Extradition?"

Campbell gave a wry smile. "You could call it that. Our man was staying in Andorra, that little postage-stamp country on the border between Spain and France. They'd have let him stay there until his money ran out, which would've taken a couple of thousand years or so. We have no treaty with them."

"So what happened?"

"The usual. We pretended we'd lost interest in him and waited for him to get careless. When he made the mistake of taking a walk too close to the Spanish border, we were ready. Next thing he knew, Joe and I each had one of his arms and were marching him past the Spanish customhouse. We tossed him into a car and rushed him to a plane we had waiting at one of our bases. The Spanish authorities pretended they didn't see a thing."

"Seems like a lot of trouble and expense over just one man," Dr. Whitney said.

"It was Henry Hammond." Campbell had a touch of pride in his tone.

A waitress came to take their breakfast orders. As soon as she was gone, the doctor repeated the name. "Henry Hammond . . . It *does* sound a bit familiar. Should I know the name?"

"He's the big-shot financier who jumped bail and skipped the country a couple of years ago. He'd built himself an empire, using phony balance sheets and illegal manipulations. He got away with just about every nickel from his companies' treasuries."

"Oh, yes, now I remember. It made quite a splash in the papers at the time. What did you do with him?"

"Dropped him off at your place ten minutes ago," Campbell said.

The second agent, Joe Moffet, had been sitting quietly, but now he twisted his face into a puzzled expression and said, "Huh?"

Campbell turned to him. "The doctor is in charge of the in-

firmary at the Federal House of Detention on West Street," he explained. "He'll probably be giving our friend a physical examination today."

"I check all new prisoners," Dr. Whitney agreed.

The waitress returned with their orders. They didn't say much until they had settled back to enjoy their coffee. Then the conversation returned to Henry Hammond.

"Do you think he'll return the money he stole?" the doctor asked.

"That's something you'll have to ask Hammond. We couldn't get a word out of him all the way across the Atlantic. He probably has it safely stashed away in a couple of dozen Swiss banks. One thing's sure—no one will ever see it again unless he wants them to."

"I wonder what makes a man decide to be a criminal?" the doctor mused.

Campbell shrugged. "Who knows? People don't always do the things you'd expect, or fit into patterns the way you think they should. Take yourself, for instance. What's a bright young guy like you doing in the Public Health Service? There's no military draft anymore, so you didn't choose it as an alternative service the way doctors and dentists have in the past. I'll bet you could have had your pick of the private hospitals."

"Yes, I probably could have, but I'm happy where I am. I think it's the best place for me. If I didn't, I'd go somewhere else or do something else. That's the way you feel about your job, isn't it, Tom? That active police work is the best occupation for you?"

"You certainly have Tom figured out," Joe Moffet said. "And you put it into words better than he does, too. He's turned down two promotions in the last year. He could have a comfortable desk job in D.C., but he prefers to transport fugitives. Everyone thinks he's crazy, but he says he's happy where he is."

They exchanged small talk for a few more minutes, then left the restaurant together. They paused to say good-bye on the sidewalk outside, and Tom Campbell's face clouded with confusion and embarrassment. "I'm terribly sorry, Doctor, but I—uh—I've forgotten your name again."

Jason Whitney smiled. "That's all right. You'd be surprised how many people have trouble remembering me. The next time you're at the House of Detention stop by my office to say hello. I always have a pot of coffee on the hot plate." He turned to the other agent. "That goes for you, too,

Mr. Moffet. Stop in any time. It's been nice meeting you."

Jason Whitney waited until ten that morning before having Henry Hammond called to the infirmary. He chose that time because the morning sick call had been taken care of by then, and his assistants were enjoying a coffee break.

"Good morning, Mr. Hammond. I'm Dr. Whitney, the Chief Medical Officer here. I'm in charge of the health and physical well-being of you and the other prisoners. It's my job to examine each new arrival and determine whether or not he'll require treatment of any kind."

Hammond nodded his understanding. He had dark circles under his eyes and stood nervously in the doorway of the infirmary. He clenched and unclenched his right fist in an uneven rhythm, and his eyes swept back and forth, taking in all the cabinets and equipment. It was obvious his sudden arrest and transportation to the United States had been a severe shock.

"Step this way, please," Whitney said, leading the way to a side room.

Here there were bare white walls and the only furniture was an examination table for the patient. There was nothing that might prove distracting.

"Lie down, please. I'm going to take your blood pressure. I'm sure you've had it done before."

The doctor wrapped the instrument around Hammond's arm, and squeezed the bulb to pump air into it.

"Be as quiet as you can. I want the lowest reading possible. Relax as much as you can and try not to think of anything in particular."

Whitney busied himself with the instrument.

"Your reading is a bit high, Mr. Hammond. I think you're a little too tense. If you don't mind, I'll show you how to relax. Just close your eyes. That's right, close your eyes and relax the eyelids. I think you can get the feeling of complete relaxation if you'll follow my suggestions. Relax your eyelids completely. Now turn your attention to your arms. Let them become completely limp. Think of them as a pair of limp rags and when I lift them let them fall back to the table just as a couple of limp rags would. That's very good. Now we'll do the same with your legs. See, you're much more relaxed and at ease now.

"I'll just take your blood pressure again and see how well you've done. Oh, that's very good. That's very, very good. You're far more relaxed than before. Let's try it again, Mr. Hammond, and

this time keep your eyes closed all the while. That will aid the relaxation process.

"Okay, now, relax your eyes. Now your arms. Let them become as limp as rags. Now your legs. Relax them. Just relax your whole body. Let your whole body go limp. Let your whole body become heavy. Get completely comfortable. Now, if you are truly relaxed, you will find that your eyelids won't open. Relax your eyelids and body completely. When you feel you're completely relaxed you may try to open your eyes. If you are completely relaxed, they won't open. If you cannot open your eyes, you will be completely relaxed. That's fine. Now try to open your eyes. See—you cannot open them. You are completely, deeply relaxed and you cannot open your eyes. Your arms and legs are heavy and limp and you cannot lift or move them."

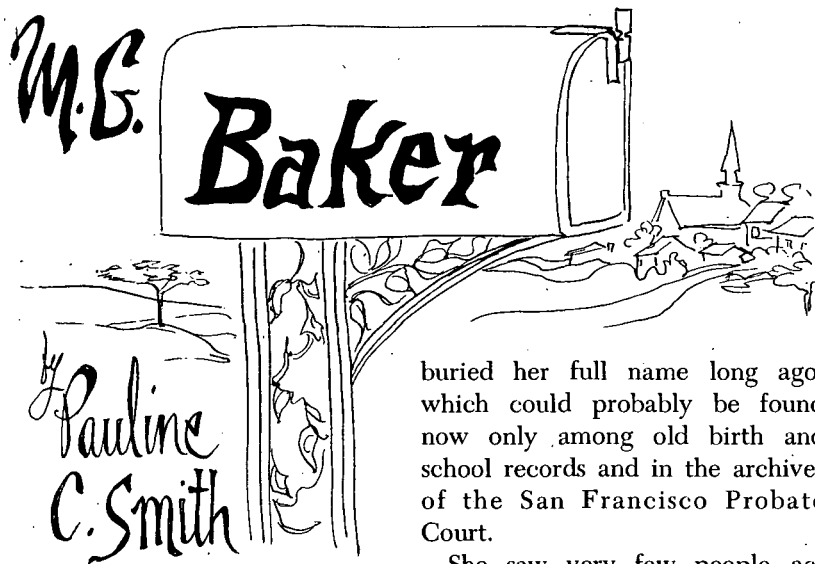
As quickly and easily as that, without once using the words sleep or hypnosis, Dr. Jason Whitney placed Henry Hammond into a deep trance.

In the next half hour he deepened the trance still further, then extracted from Hammond the code numbers and balances of ten secret bank accounts. Immediately before allowing the man to wake up, he directed Hammond to forget forever that the secret accounts had ever existed. "And you will never be able to remember my name," he told him.

That reminded Whitney of Agent Tom Campbell. When he had hypnotized Campbell a year before and instructed the man to keep him informed about criminals with hidden money, he had neglected to order him always to come to the restaurant alone. He would have to rectify that oversight at the first opportunity.

As Hammond left the infirmary to return to his cell, Dr. Whitney watched him walk away and felt a wave of satisfaction. This *was* the best place for him. He didn't have to work the long hours a hospital might have demanded, and he was collecting far, far more money in a single year than his professional hypnotist parents had earned in their lifetimes.

As time passes, one's recurrent images may have to be modified.



M. G. Baker

by Pauline C. Smith

The name printed on the mailbox by the wall at the foot of the driveway was that of BAKER, nothing more. The small amount of mail placed, now and then, in the box was addressed to an M. G. Baker.

The unlisted phone number, known solely to the telephone company, carried the name of Baker, with only the initials.

Melva Georgianna Baker had buried her full name long ago, which could probably be found now only among old birth and school records and in the archives of the San Francisco Probate Court.

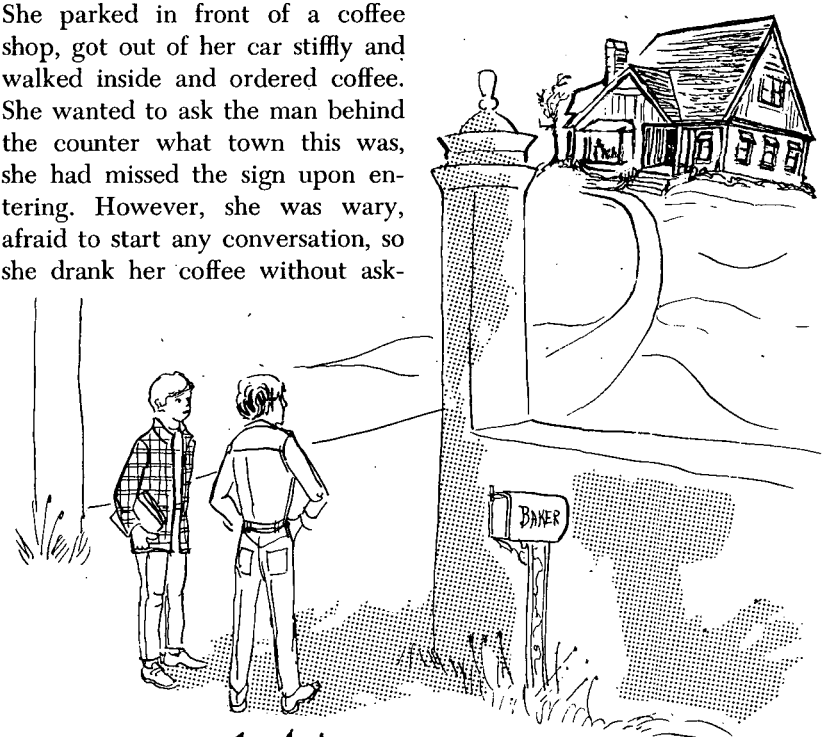
She saw very few people—actually, just her once-a-week gardener with whom she exchanged few words, the check-out girl at the supermarket, a seasonal Avon Lady whom she politely turned away at the door, girl scouts selling cookies and boy scouts selling raffle tickets, both of which she always bought.

For twenty years her life had been almost completely enclosed within the walls of the anonymous white house set on rolling lawns

beyond the noncommittal mailbox—ever since that awful time, that awful, awful time when she had found it after hours of hard driving down the California coastal highway which, before the freeway bypassed it, entered and passed through the town.

She turned off the highway that early morning and drove along closed-up business streets. The town had not yet fully awakened. She parked in front of a coffee shop, got out of her car stiffly and walked inside and ordered coffee. She wanted to ask the man behind the counter what town this was, she had missed the sign upon entering. However, she was wary, afraid to start any conversation, so she drank her coffee without asking anything, and went out and got into her car.

She had meant to turn left at the next intersection and then make another left to get back on the highway and continue south . . . to Los Angeles perhaps, where she could hide herself under the protection of one of its vast arms. Another two hours and she would be there and could find



a novelette

a place to sleep—not a motel, and she shuddered—no, not a motel, but someplace, not knowing where.

The light at the intersection turned green just as she approached it and she shot through, forgetting her left turn, and drove up a street that divided and circled a statue, following its right branch. She was driving now in a daze, ambling, noting the pleasant little houses and the well-kept lawns with the part of her brain that was not shuddering over a body at the foot of a ravine.

Cars were beginning to come down from the hills and pass her, heading for the downtown section. She turned up into curving streets with their more impressive properties, and the minute she saw the house, set on rolling lawns, a FOR SALE sign against the wall, she knew that she would stay in the town and hide in this house.

She parked at the curb and studied the house, noting its widely-alert and farseeing windows, browed by an overhanging roof so that they surveyed the street and the town below with aloof suspicion. The foundation planting rambled thickly, with trees like sentinels, so placed on the rolling lawn as to offer security without obstructing the view.

The wide driveway, between stone pillars, offered revealing access yet with a steep deterrent . . . this was the house, this was the place. She started the engine and coasted down curved streets to the town where she found a service station, had her gas tank filled, bathed her face and combed her hair in the rest room, and received a city map and directions to the listed real estate office.

She parked before the office until the doors were opened, then she went inside.

The real estate agent still talked about his sale that morning twenty years ago . . . "Damnedest thing that ever happened," he told over and over again. "She was young. Twenty-five she wrote down on her Statement of Identity. Unmarried. Plain, but well-dressed and drove a Cadillac. She wanted the house, and she wanted it *then*. That day! Wanted to move in right away. Wouldn't hear of a 30-day escrow. Well, the house had been on the market for a hell of a long time. It was a valuable piece of property and overpriced. But she didn't blink an eye. Said she'd pay cash. Cash! Imagine! Without even being inside it! Didn't want to look it over, she said. Didn't care. Just wanted it. Well, she phoned her banker in San Francisco. Had me talk to him. He said sure she was

good for it and he'd wire the money that day. So that's the way it was done, papers all made out, full cash payment. She established her credit, got the lights, gas and water turned on and a telephone installed and moved in. And I've never talked to her since!"

M. G. Baker bought a folding canvas cot that day, and a pillow, sheets and blankets, and slept in the house that night.

The next day she started her new life; not the life she had planned for herself after her father's death, but one that had been thrust upon her.

The house was too big for a single woman alone, but smaller than the family home she had sold in San Francisco, so the furniture she immediately ordered out of storage and trucked down the coast filled the rooms and overflowed into the basement.

From the very beginning, she wrapped the house around her, leaving it only to drive down the hill into the town to buy washing powder and scrubbing brushes and window cleaner and wiping cloths. She bought black paint and a small brush in order to inscribe the name BAKER on the mailbox, and extra chain locks for the front and back doors as well as a hammer and screws and a screwdriver. She stocked the refrigerator and freezer as soon as they arrived. She washed, scrubbed and polished, she who had never done any manual labor, and installed the chain locks, she who didn't know how. She prepared her meals long before she had learned how to cook, and periodically each day she scanned the view from her large windows, not for the purpose of reflecting upon the town laid out below her in miniature, nor to contemplate the ocean beyond with its white ruffled waves, but to make sure that no car hesitated and stopped before the BAKER mailbox and that no one entered her driveway.

She wore herself out with her scrubbing, her polishing, hammering and cooking and, each night, went to bed (those first few nights on her camp cot, then later in her four-poster) exhausted and ready to sleep. Yet each night, as soon as she laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes, the picture appeared on the dark screen of her lids, the picture of the body at the foot of the rocky ravine, still in the shadows, looking like a broken doll. For twenty years she had viewed this same ravine in the night, with the body on the rocks, and each night for twenty years her palms grew clammy with the guilt of memory and her fingers closed down into

her palms, forming regretful fists under the blanket at the recurring thought that actually he might not have been dead in the deep rock twilight and, should she have gone for immediate help, she could have saved him.

Instead, she had run away.

After one horrified look, she turned to stumble through underbrush, dark with evening and the redwoods, toward the lodge.

The lodge was a cluster of separate deluxe log cabins tucked among the trees, each with its green screen of privacy, so she could leave with no one knowing that she had gone. She packed rapidly—all the new things she had bought in San Francisco—ran a comb through her undistinguished beige-colored hair, placed a ten-dollar bill on the table for the maid, weighting it down with the key to the cabin, and was in her Cadillac and on her way.

She offered herself no excuses through the years of nighttime memory, for she had, if not with malice aforethought, certainly with the hurt of a scorned woman, pushed the young man over the rim of the ravine to his death. She had murdered him and her dream, the dream of a plain woman free at last from a powerful and autocratic father, free to live a life of her own at twenty-five—too free, for she snatched at the freedom with a naïve and unpracticed hand.

At the rim of the ravine, after only a week of knowing and loving him, she had spoken of marriage and he looked at her with the startled eyes of a lover who loves lightly and briefly whatever is free and available. She clutched at him, using her father's defensive warning as a lure. "I have money," she pleaded, "lots and lots of money. You would have a good life . . ." and at his expression of amused rejection, her clutching hands stiffened and flattened against his chest and she pushed him over the rim, watching aghast as he toppled to the rocks below and lay still.

Every night, once her work was over for the day, all those busy tasks and meticulous chores she set herself to, she remembered the long-ago spring evening and her miraculous escape, never once considering the obvious possibility that no one was looking for or ever had looked for the killer of a young man whose death, when his body was found at the bottom of a treacherous ravine, had been judged to be the result of an accidental fall.

She had killed him, so she must hide.

During her years of hiding, she learned how to live without being waited upon and to become totally self-sufficient. She ordered books on cooking, sewing, home decoration and wallpapering. She ordered books on upholstery, plumbing, wiring—then she ordered one on carpentry so she could learn how to build shelves for her ever-expanding library.

Her house was an exquisite jewel with no one but herself to enjoy it, and operated like a finely-precisioned watch with no help but her own.

She spent the years cleaning, scrubbing, building, repairing, with vigilant attention to nice detail; drawing a tight formal line around her life for candlelighted gourmet dinners prepared by herself in hostess gowns she had fashioned, without guests, and with memories in the dark.

The first thing each morning she stood back, well away from the big front windows, and surveyed the grounds, the driveway and the street. Each night, once the lights were turned off, she stood at one of the windows and checked the shrub shadows and any headlight beams rising from the hill, standing there until the lights were gone and she had assured herself that the shadows were indeed from shrubs. Then and only then was she ready to go to bed, hopeful that she would not remember—but she always did.

She was certain that she, the killer, would be discovered sometime, somehow, so she suffered the guilt of her bed at night and cherished the Puritan of her ethic by day.

During her twenty years in the house she had met not one single neighbor. The cookie-selling girl scouts and the ticket-selling boy scouts grew and were replaced by new sales children, and she never recognized the substitutions. A few of the families on the street moved away and new families arrived without her knowing who had moved and who had arrived.

During the last year, a hill just above and beyond had been bitten into and chewed level to provide a broad shelf for a new tract of houses so that she was forced into a more alert morning and afternoon vigilance with the sharp increase of schoolchildren.

The boy from the new tract, feeling inferior to the one who had grown up and belonged in this prestigious hill district, was making an awkward attempt to bridge the gap and emerge triumphant. "The high school I went to before I came here was neat," he offered sullenly as a defensive ac-

cusation. "You should've seen it."

"Well, I think this one's okay," answered the other in mild protest. Then, because the new boy caused within him a quiver of shamed inexperience, he added, "But then, this high school's the only one I ever went to."

The two had reached the mailbox with its cautious surname and the new boy, eager to find a target for his insecurity, glanced up at the anonymous dignity of the white house in seclusive serenity on its rolling velvet grounds and sneered. "What's Baker mean?" he asked. The single word, without initial or personality, affronted him as an affectation. "A pie baker? Cake baker?" He flipped the mailbox open onto emptiness and snapped it shut.

The other, embarrassed, and given neither to imagination nor neurotic humor, replied with literal explanation that Miss Baker was not a baker to his knowledge, but a woman who lived alone, one with whom he'd had no contact since his boy scout days when she bought every raffle ticket he had to sell.

Melva Georgianna Baker watched, well back from her big window, and once the boys had passed her driveway, returned to her silver polishing.

Then it was late spring, and the boys, undergoing their sophomore year final examinations, spoke not of school but of the forthcoming vacation and the specter of freedom . . . "What you gonna do this summer?" asked the new boy.

The other, reluctant to outline an ordinary plethora of lawn-mowing and hedge-clipping, spoke of far places such as the beach two miles away.

"How you gonna get there?" which forced the one who belonged to confess to a ten-speed bike as being his only means of transportation, with his family reluctant to trust the second car into his new-driver hands.

"Well, maybe I can get my old man's car sometimes," spoke the new boy without conviction just as the anonymous Baker mailbox assailed his deprived eyes. He flipped it open and banged it shut. "This Baker," he said, suddenly focusing his anger, "do you ever see her?" and stepped back to look up at the house.

The boy who belonged shook his head.

"How come?"

The boy who belonged didn't know, having never given it any thought.

Melva Georgianna Baker, deep in the recesses of her livingroom, looked down upon the boys in the street and felt tenderness . . . *Just*

young boys, she thought, *loitering home from school, playing on the way* . . . without knowing how dangerously some boys can play and never catching the one at his regular routine of flipping open the mailbox by the wall to peer inside.

"Hey," said the new boy, finding mail in the box at last. "Hey, Baker's got some initials." He snapped the box shut. "You know what her initials are?"

The other shook his head.

"M.G. That's the way her mail comes. Just M. G. Baker. What do you suppose the M.G. stands for? My God?" and the new boy laughed, feeling an elated superiority, as if the initials were the chink he had discovered in the armor of his invisible foe.

The boy who belonged joined the laughter, but hesitantly, unable to understand his companion's interest in a woman no one knew and no one cared to know.

"Let's call her up," said the new boy.

"What do you mean, call her up?" asked the other.

"On the phone, just for kicks."

The boy who had lived on the street most of his life and had never indulged in phone games, said with wonder, "For kicks?" forgetting the idea until the new boy informed him, a few days later, that M. G. Baker wasn't in the phone book, and how about that? Everybody had phones, but not Baker, M.G.

"Oh, she probably has," said the other. "It's probably unlisted. Lots of people's are," and at the answering expression of blank regard, pointed out the vagaries of certain telephone subscribers who wished not to be bothered with prankish calls.

"Where can we get the number, then?" asked the new boy.

"No place except from the dial on her phone."

As soon as Melva Georgianna Baker heard the car on the street down in front that spring night, she rose, placed her book face-down on the seat of her chair, moved back into the center of the room where she couldn't be seen, and looked through the big window, on down over the lawns, shadowed by trees and shrubs, at the car's headlights shining across the entrance of her driveway. The car itself, parked at the curb, was hidden by her wall. The engine roared and stopped, roared and stopped.

She clenched her hands, her eyes wide and staring as she watched the headlights blank out—and in the faint light of the moon, she saw a man-shadow

emerge onto her driveway and proceed up the incline, losing itself in oblique tree-shadows to emerge again on its way to the house.

With clenched hands, clammy now, she moved to the far side of her livingroom and toward the window, edging forward as the shadow approached up the driveway until she lost it and then heard the footsteps on the porch stairs. Her breath caught in her throat as she waited for the door chime and was expelled when the four notes rang out clearly.

She stood stiffly still through three more quadruple notes before her legs moved her rigidly across the room to the hall. She switched on the hall light and the porch light, unlocked the door and opened it the four inches against the chain.

With the post lantern on the corner of the porch shining against him and the wall lights of the hall softly shaded, she couldn't make out the features of the young man on the porch as he made his impossible request.

"May I come in and use your phone? My car stalled out in front."

"What?" she asked.

He elaborated on the trouble with his car and repeated that all he wanted was a chance to get inside and use the phone for one call.

"No," she said.

"No? Lady," he protested, "I just want to use your phone."

"No," she said again. "I won't let you in the house. Go to some other house and use their phone," and started to close the door.

"Well, look—" The door stayed reluctantly open two inches against the sagging chain. "I can see the phone from here. If you won't let me in, why can't you drag it over here to the crack of the door and let me use it out here?"

She thought for a cautious moment, then closed the door before picking up the phone and judging its length of wire. She brought it to the door, opened the door against the chain and, with one hand holding the chain bolt firmly, she handed him the phone. He had to reach through. She was so nervous, standing there clutching the door, as she watched his hands twist the phone and tilt it before he dialed, that she didn't hear too much of what he said until he cradled it and set it on the floor with a, "Thank you. Thank you, ma'am . . ." She pushed the door closed, almost catching his hands, upon his effusively grateful, "*Thank* you, ma'am."

She scurried back to the far

side of the livingroom to follow his shadow down the driveway, stepping backward and toward the center of the room to keep him in view until he melted behind the wall and the car lights again flooded the driveway entrance. She heard the sound of the car engine. It caught, roared once, twice, and blasted off.

Well, she thought, *there wasn't much wrong with his car after all, or maybe whoever he called told him what to do,* and breathed a sigh of deliverance for an empty street filled with quiet and the shadows that were trees and shrubs.

"Got it," the new boy said as he jumped in the car. "Told you I would."

The other remained speechless in wary admiration.

"You think she'd let me in the house? No way." He turned the ignition key, started the engine and switched on the lights. "But the phone was in plain sight, right there in the hall, so I said, 'You just trot it over to me and I'll do the callin' from this here old porch . . .' She's got her door chained—I had to reach inside through the crack and twist the thing around until I could get the porch light on it and there it was, as plain as if it was in the phone book. That was really something."

He gunned the motor and took off, then continued. "To make it look good, I dialed a bunch of numbers—no regular prefix—and as soon as I heard the screechin' sound that meant I had nothin', I gave out with some smart dialogue about the car not workin' and what should I do? Didn't make any difference. She wasn't listenin'—she was too busy keepin' her hands on the door, ready to slam it the minute I made a false move. Know what? I bet I'm the only dude's got that old girl's number . . ."

Melva Georgianna Baker's phone, that had never rung during her twenty years of living in the house on the hill, rang for the first time that June, shortly after the start of the summer vacation when the boys were at loose ends.

The one who had called at the aloof white house with a fistful of raffle tickets back when he was a scout never did enjoy the phone game, nor did he become adept at it, his method being to dial the conned number and choke forth a stupid salutation, such as, "How are you, Miss Baker?" and hang up, choking with embarrassed laughter.

His companion, more experienced, more subtle and more

nerve-racking, was apt to make an allusion to an innominate mailbox and cause Miss Baker to stand in startled confusion and tremble in fright, the handset frozen to her ear before replacing it on the cradle . . . until the day she heard the terrible words: "I know a secret about you, M. G. Baker. You're hidin' something, Baker. You're hidin' inside your house . . ." This time she broke the connection to dial the phone company and, in a voice that shook, demand a new unlisted number.

"What secret do you know about her?" asked the boy who belonged.

"Nothin'. But everybody's got secrets," said the new boy. "So she's probably got one too."

"See?" he exclaimed in dubious triumph when next he tried to call, and a recording informed him that the number had been changed. "She was probably scared I really did know her secret. I scared her off. How about that? I really scared her off," and he slapped his thigh, doubling over with surprised mirth at his own intuitive perspicacity.

"Well, we sure can't call her anymore," said the other with relief. "No way to get her telephone number now," and felt freely expansive within the safety of an insoluble problem. "No way at all."

"So we'll scare her some other way," said the new boy, his eyes shining with a suddenly recalled memory. "There was this old idiot woman down the street from where I used to live . . . She had these scraggly flowers out by her front porch that she used to leap out and protect every time us dudes went by. It was funny as hell, but we got to thinkin' that nobody protects a bunch of old weeds like that, so she's protectin' somethin' else, like a lot of cash under a floorboard or maybe jewels and stuff buried in a hole under those flowers, and we got to scarin' her. We'd go around at night and trample her scroungy old flowers and make noises like hoot owls . . . she'd fly out and chase us with a cane and we'd run off laughin' . . ."

By day, Melva Georgianna Baker, her phone now ominously quiet, shined her silver to blinding brilliance and dusted every book on her shelves. She went downstairs to determine that the basement door was securely locked and the casement window latches, set in the cement block wall, were rusted into tight position. At night, exhausted, she crawled into bed, closed her eyes and saw against the lids the happening of twenty years before, while hearing

the recent telephone voice veiled with threat.

"It was funny as hell," the new boy reminisced for the other. "There was that old coot flyin' all over the yard with her cane, chasin' us away from the weedy old flowers . . . One night, though, when she was chasin' us, she fell flat and never got up. Just conked out there on the dirt, deader than an old board and they never did find anythin' buried under those flowers or in the house either because they knocked the house down right after that and the old woman didn't have a thing to protect. But I bet Baker's got somethin' and I'm gonna find out what it is."

The other wasn't sure, at first, that the new boy was serious, so he listened and added to plans so unrealistically colorful that he thought of them as playful imaginings, having nothing at all to do with that pleasant but remote lady in the white house.

"So," said the new boy, "the best way to do it is to skin along the wall in the shadow, around back of the garage and through the back yard and see if we can get in through the basement. We'll do it tomorrow night. Nine o'clock sharp. Wear dark clothes and rubber soles . . . We'll carry a flash and a glass cutter . . ."

"Sure," smiled the boy who belonged. "I'll have my trusty thirty-two on my hip," and the new boy looked at him with such cold contempt, he realized that their planning hadn't been just for fun after all and trembled at this thing that had grown and threatened to overpower him . . . "Oh, hey," he said in tardy alarm, "we can't do that."

"Why can't we?" asked the new boy, and the other knew he would have to go along.

Melva Georgianna Baker turned off her livingroom lights at nine o'clock and stood for almost five minutes at the large front windows. She determined that each shrub and tree cast its own shadow and nothing more before she turned to walk down the hall to the bathroom . . .

At five minutes after nine the two boys, pressed close to the pillar, moved noiselessly in its shadow and around it onto the narrow grassy far side of the driveway. They crept the thin wedge of darkness cast by the wall up alongside the steep driveway and reached the opening between the side of the garage and the wall, a slot of dark safety, where the boy who belonged whimpered, "I don't want to do this."

"Shut up," whispered his companion.

Melva Georgianna took the pins from her long hair and let it fall. It had turned, through the years, from an undistinguished beige to the rich, ripe color of her well-polished mahogany, with wings of gray as bright as her shining silver.

The light from the frosted glass of the corner bathroom windows shone out at an angle to form a fan-shaped glow over the bricked pathway and a part of the back lawn. The boys had reached the rear of the garage, and the one who belonged clutched out with nervous fingers from his hiding place in the shadowed slot and held the new boy's sleeve. "Look," he whimpered hoarsely, "we can't go through all that light. Let's go home."

"Shut up," answered the new boy through his teeth. "She'll turn it off in a minute."

Melva Georgianna brushed her long hair without a glance at her reflection. She carefully placed her hairpins on a china tray so that they lay there in beautiful precision. Then she scrubbed the already shining basin, saw that the towels hung perfectly straight and turned off the bathroom lights.

"There," whispered the new boy. "Now, run."

Melva Georgianna left the bathroom, walked down the hall, reached around the kitchen door and flicked on the kitchen lights. They blazed through back windows, catching the boys as they ran across the back lawn. They dropped flat, like soldiers under fire, and the boy who belonged uttered a distressed exclamation.

Melva Georgianna, whose ears had sharpened with years of listening, halted in quick alarm, her hand at her breast. She reached back and flicked off the lights, standing still in the dark to listen.

The new boy reached out from his prostrate position and tugged the other's shoulder, then inched along on his stomach in guidance until both had reached the protection of the shrubs planted close against the rear of the house.

Melva Georgianna moved slowly across the dark kitchen and felt for the switches at the back door. She flipped one and flooded the back yard with light.

The boys felt rather than saw the flash, one now stretched out, facedown, under a bougainvillea whose thorns were digging through his dark jacket and piercing his back, the other lying curled in a fetal position under the broad hands of a philodendron.

Melva Georgianna peered

through closed dark kitchen windows out upon the bright yard beyond. She saw the rose garden, the trees, the lacy arbor and decided that the exclamation of sound she heard must have been the sound of a night creature or the sigh of the breeze just springing into life to rustle the leaves and move sleeping birds into vocal protest. She stood at the window for minutes—listening, watching—then she turned off the floodlights to listen and watch in the dark until she was sure that the sound was one of those she had often heard in her imagination or a natural night sound of the outdoors.

Satisfied at last, she turned on the kitchen light and walked to the service porch at the far end of the kitchen; this was her laundry room, pantry and wine closet. A closed inner door concealed the basement stairs. From the wine rack, she selected a bottle of sherry, took it with her to the kitchen and poured a wineglass full. Returning to the service porch, she replaced the bottle in the rack and tried the knob of the basement door from habit simply to make sure it was unlocked, a door she never locked—having a desperate need to lock herself inside the house, but unable to bear the thought of locks within locks, for that would be a trap—a cage inside another.

Back in the kitchen, she picked up her wineglass, turned out the lights and walked the hall to her bedroom. She switched on the bedside lamp and set her wineglass on a coaster. She had discovered that nighttime sips of sherry, while not erasing the thoughts that came with the dark, did take the edge off the sharpest of her memories.

"Hey," whispered the new boy from his philodendron cave, "hey, the light's off. Let's look around."

The other, impaled by bougainvillea and darkness, did not answer.

The new boy crawled forth and, crouching, made his way as close to the house and its shadows as possible, and came upon the basement door tucked between two towering hibiscus. He crept down the three steps leading to it, grasped the handle and thumbed the latch, and of course it was locked; double-locked, he supposed, remembering the triple-locked and chained front door. He peeked around the corner of the house to see the dim light from the high windows on that side.

Melva Georgianna propped herself up in bed, reached for her book and turned on an FM radio station, very softly, so that should

an alien sound occur she would not miss it. She sipped her sherry and attempted to lose herself in the book—she always tried to select one that would not excite her, but at the same time would not be so dull as to cause the back part of her mind to work on the back part of her life.

She had thought, for a while, of resorting to sleeping tablets to get her through these pre-sleep hours, but recoiled from the idea upon realizing that a pill to blank out dangerous recall would very likely blank out present dangers.

The music was a whisper in the room, very little louder than the soft hum of the air-conditioner in this sealed-tight, locked-up house, and she heard only the whisper and the hum while she read her book and sipped her sherry.

The boy who belonged wept gently and hopelessly as he untangled himself from the claws of the bougainvillea and crawled forth.

"There's basement windows along the back," the new boy informed him. "Locked tight, of course. We'll have to use the glass cutter."

The other shook his head.

"She's in some room on the other side. She won't be able to hear. Come on."

Pulled by the string of the other's strength and audacity, the boy who belonged dragged after him, trembling, thinking wistfully of home and television, wondering if he would ever get out of this situation so he could go home again and watch another television program.

"Here." The new boy pointed a pencil-line beam toward the steel casement four-paned window sunk in a cement light well. "See? This one's far enough away from where the light is. She can't hear a thing."

The boy who belonged looked with sick eyes at the shining finger on the glass.

"You hold the flash. I'll cut out one of those panes and skin through."

The boy who belonged saw a loophole at last and jumped through it. "Well," he said with happy sorrow, "you can make it through there, but I sure can't."

"Of course not. You're too fat," said the new boy. "What I'll do is skin through, then unlatch the window from the inside, open it up and you're in."

The heart of the boy who belonged plummeted. "Look," he said, "let's forget it," and felt the cold metal of the flash in his hand.

"Now train the light on the window." The new boy leaped

into the light well. "Hold the flash still." He brought out the glass cutter and examined it in the thin line of light. He placed the cutting edge so that it was close to the upper corner of the lower pane. "Don't wiggle that light so much . . ." He held the handle gently, with his forefinger pressed tight, and drew the cutter sharply, with a spine-tingling squeal, down the edge of the pane.

The boy who belonged fell back in alarm, dropping the hand that held the flash so that a button of light arced from the window to the grass. He exploded a frightened exclamation.

"She won't hear that," snapped the new boy, shaken but determined. "Get the light back here. Let's see if I got a cut . . ."

Melva Georgianna started up in her bed and glared at the small radio on her bedside table which must have been guilty of emitting the very faint but shrill string note. She listened carefully and the music again spoke softly. She sipped her sherry and returned to her book.

"Now, hold it," ordered the new boy. "Keep that light on the window . . ." The light trembled. "Hold it steady. How do you think I can cut with you shakin' that light?" He was angry. The cut on the pane was only a scratch. He had planned to make four efficiently dramatic slices and pick the pane from its frame with a flourish. He started again, this time slowly, bearing down hard. The half-melon moon in the sky cast a gentle glow, picking out night-deep shadows, and the trees chattered softly in the nervous breeze.

The new boy pressed his forefinger hard on the handle of the glass cutter and, breathing hard, drew it slowly down the path of the scratch. It ground its way ineptly and deepened the scratch but did not cut.

"Look," said the boy who belonged, "it's no good. Let's go . . ." infuriating the other to a new and disastrous decision. He pocketed the glass cutter and, with one quick motion, drew his arm out of the sleeve of his dark jacket, wound the sleeve around his hand and punched his padded fist through the pane with a crash.

The boy who belonged rocked back, his heels digging into his thighs, and offered up a strange high sound of anxiety.

Melva Georgianna started up again in her bed. Her hand darted forth to twist the dial of the radio into silence as she listened. She could not place the sound, weak from the basement through the ceiling and to her bedroom,

weaker from the window outside up through her closed bedroom windows. It was gone now, so she tried to excuse it as some sound from the hill and that tract over there . . . or one from the street down in front . . . She rose, flung on a robe and padded through the hall to the livingroom where she looked out over rolling lawns . . . She stood there for minutes, ears sharp, eyes plucking each shadow and designating it as a true shrub shadow. There was no sound. No sound at all—and no movement.

The new boy picked the shards of glass from the frame and dropped them carefully into the light well. "See. She didn't hear a thing," he was saying, "I told you. She's way over on the other side. Take me all night to cut out the pane."

"You didn't know how, that's why," accused the boy who belonged. He was on his feet now and jiggling with apprehension. "You didn't know how and now we'll have the whole neighborhood on our necks."

"Shut up," ordered the other. "For Pete's sake, stop hoppin' that flashlight up and down. Now, look, I'm gonna skin through this opening. Get down here and push."

The boy who belonged hesitated.

"Well, come on. Turn the light on it so I can see what I'm doin'."

The boy who belonged moved closer, fascinated by the sight, in the tiny beam of light, of his companion as he wriggled his way through the small open square. "Help me," he heard, muffled by the three intact panes of glass and the hips that filled the fourth space. He stepped back, snapped off the flashlight, drew in one long undulating breath, turned on his heel and ran, around the back of the garage, through the slot of darkness and down the narrow grassy path by the side of the driveway to the street.

Melva Georgianna ascertained that no shadow moved on her rolling lawns in front, that no headlights rose or dipped up or down the hill. She padded from the livingroom, through the hall to the kitchen, and thought she heard *something*—she was not sure, the house being so tightly sealed, and her imagination rampant. She followed with her head the sound she thought she heard, or sensed, following it from the back of the house on down the driveway. She turned back to the livingroom, hurried to the big window, placed her hands on the sill, and watched the rolling lawns and the street once again.

The boy who belonged was

around the curve and to the corner, out of sight and well on his way home.

The new boy, half in and half out of the open frame, muttered, demanded and begged for help in the language he had brought from his former home. He waved his arms in the dark of the basement and his hands found a purchase; a chest, a desk, something, stored beneath the window in the dark. His fingers curled around the edge and he pulled himself through.

Crouching on his small island of safety, he turned and looked through the open frame of the window, whispering to his companion, unwilling to admit that he might not be out there in that empty space of soft glow and deep shadows . . .

Melva Georgianna turned from the big front window and walked down the hallway. Without turning on any lights in the kitchen, she crossed the tile to the windows facing the back yard and twitched back a curtain so that she could see out onto the rose garden, the trees and the lacy arbor. There wasn't a flicker of movement. No sound at all.

This alarm had happened to her before—a breath of sound to catch her attention, a movement that turned to fancy . . . but since the telephone calls, she had been more aware with the awareness of new terror . . . for someone knew—knew how to talk to her, knew where to find her, and knew of her guilt. Her breath came short and gasping, as if she had been running, and she had been running, for twenty years. She looked out onto the rose garden, the trees and the lacy arbor that did not move, that made no sound.

The boy in the basement, angry with the other for his cop-out, angry with himself for ever initiating this stupid entry, hopped off the chest or desk or whatever thing he was on, into black darkness. He thought, for one chicken moment, of opening up that casement window and streaking off for home. He even reached up and tried the handle, which was rusted into place, then he brushed his hands as if they had never touched the handle of escape and, arms out, made his way through and around all the stored furniture that lined the walls of the basement until he found the stairs. His foot struck the bottom riser. He reached down and felt the tread. Then, his hands fumbling against the outside wall, his feet the treads of the steps, he climbed the stairs . . .

Melva Georgianna let the kitchen curtain drop and turned

her head toward the service porch. There, the sound was unmistakable—someone was climbing her basement stairs!

Twenty years! After twenty years!

The blood drained from her head, leaving her giddy. It had happened. It had happened at last!

She acted involuntarily, just as she had acted twenty years before. Her bare feet scurried across the tile of the kitchen to the linoleum of the service porch. She flicked on the light and flung open the door.

The boy had reached the top step. His eyes widened at the flash of light. His lip lifted in an embarrassed grin.

Melva Georgianna reached out her hands, palms flat, and pushed.

The boy who belonged spent the next day doing most of the things his mother had been asking him to do ever since summer vacation began. He mowed and edged the front lawn, pruned the hedge, clipped the ivy and noticed the truck loaded with blocks and cement as it lumbered up the hill past his house.

He cleaned the front window screens, gave the porch planters a fresh coat of paint and avoided the back yard like a plague, where the new boy might see him and communicate from the hill above. He would *not* weed those back flower gardens today . . . and the hot flush of shame suffused his face in memory of his total lack of character the night before upon leaving his companion half in and half out of Miss Baker's basement window. If he so much as stepped foot in the back yard, the new kid would rise up among the hill weeds—he knew he would—and call him the chicken he was, and taunt and deride him, and he sure wanted to put that off as long as he could.

He worked hard all that day and the next. He spray-painted the iron furniture out on the front lawn, painted the front window trim—his own idea—then he even cleaned up his room to an almost painful tidiness, and did not enter the back yard until the second evening when he was commanded to do so in order to meet the new boy's parents and answer a few questions.

"We came to you because you knew our boy," they suggested with defensive apology. "You see, he is gone and we thought—"

"Gone?" asked the boy who belonged.

"Since night before last. Were you with him then, and did he say anything about—"

The boy who belonged was quick with his denial, quick, shrill and vehement. "I don't know where he is," he cried, while wondering, with startled imagination, if the new boy might still be transfixed to Miss Baker's basement window frame. "He never said anything to me," he cried. "I didn't hardly know him, only for walking home from school and maybe a couple of times this summer . . ." hating himself for his second cowardly cop-out while realizing, unhappily, that this is the way he was and always would be.

So the parents of the new boy, a boy long in and out of trouble, departed with the conviction that their son had run away from trouble again or was running toward it once more and that they would hear someday, while rather hoping that they would never hear.

Once she had boarded up the broken basement windowpane, healed her cement-raw fingertips, and the stiffness left her muscles, Melva Georgianna Baker rearranged the stored furniture in her basement so that it edged the concrete block dais, two blocks wide by four blocks long and three blocks high—coffin-shaped. Then she mounted the basement stairs and polished all her tabletops with jeweler's rouge, using a chamois with tiny, interminable, circular motions, hoping to become so exhausted that, in the dark of the night, she would not see the young man on the rocks at the foot of the ravine and the other young one at the foot of the basement stairs.

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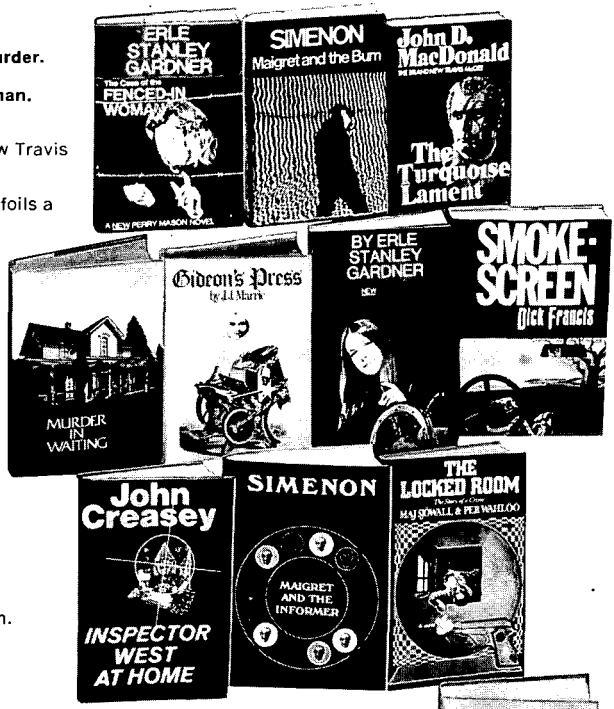

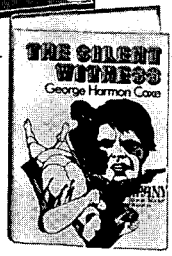

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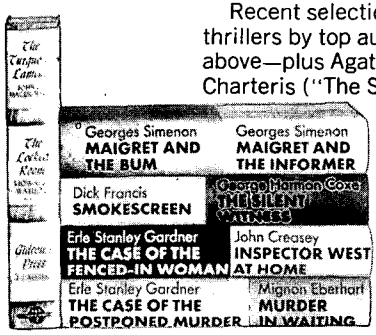

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