

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

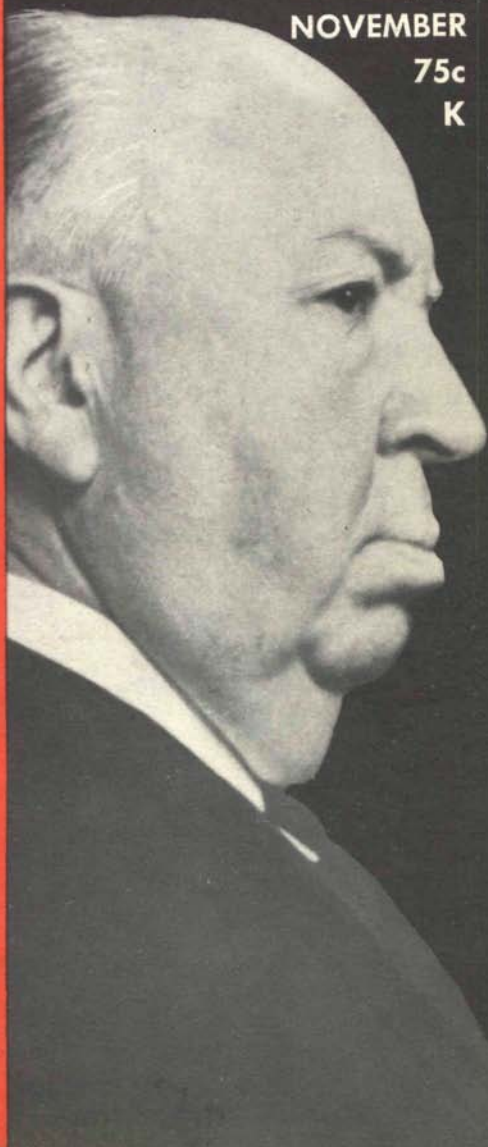
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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

November 1974



Dear Reader:

Judging by the considerable evidence in this month's new stories, it may be deduced (falsely) that no animal is a vanishing breed—not the four-legged variety, nor even a no-legged kind, and especially not the two-legged beast, which is, happily, for all of us who relish the macabre, truly nowhere near extinction.

There are those who recognize man as an animal, you see, and I happened to agree with that categorization from an early age. Hence, my fascination for mystery and suspense, along with herds of readers and flocks of writers, down through the years.

Many outstanding writers employ their best talents to mystify you anew, and more than one makes use of the animal kingdom to do the job. You will see what I mean as you move from *Captain Leopold Finds a Tiger* by Edward D. Hoch to the novelette by George C. Chesbro titled *Falling Star*.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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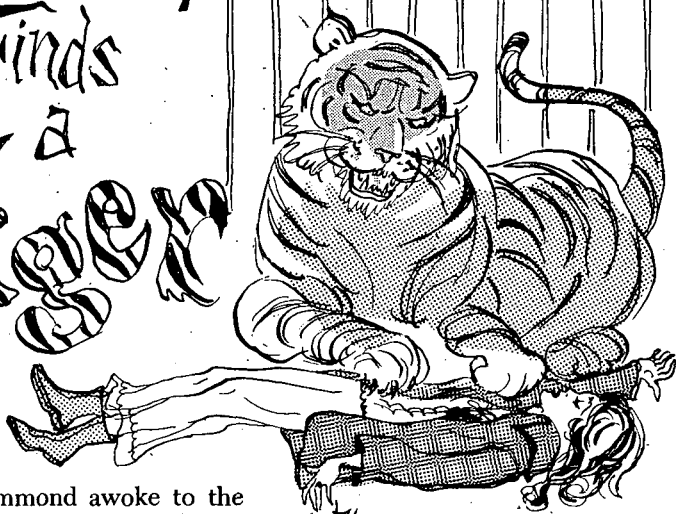
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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What one does not hear may tell the whole story.

Captain Leopold Finds a Tiger



Edward D. Hoch

Maggie Drummond awoke to the distant growling of the animals, and slipped out of the bed without disturbing her husband's slow and regular breathing. Putting on a jacket over her pajamas, she went downstairs and stood for a moment by the door, listening. Something had disturbed them. A prowler, perhaps, or another animal. No need to wake Jack; she'd

handled such things before. She slipped into a pair of muddy boots by the door, bundled the jacket about her against the chill of the May morning, and started out the door. Then, as a precaution, she went back to the desk and took

her little .22 automatic from the drawer. It was good to carry in one's pocket, and quite sufficient to scare off vandalizing teen-agers.

Leaving the door slightly ajar, she went down the hill and across the railroad tracks to the zoo, following the hard dirt path she knew so well. It was still an hour before daybreak, but the moon was bright and she had no trouble seeing. By the time she reached the outside cages and animal pits, they'd quieted somewhat, but there was still a restlessness about them. Here, beneath the full moon, she was reminded of those safari nights in Africa, when she and Jack would wait together in the darkness by a water hole or a baited trap.

There was no sign of an intruder, and she hadn't really expected to find one. Since the city had installed the high fence and the gate that they could lock at dusk, the zoo had been relatively free of the sort of thoughtless juvenile vandalism that had caused the death of three small African deer the previous summer.

Still, something had upset the animals.

She passed the tiger pit and peered inside, leaning over the safety railing. There was no sign of Rolf down below, but he could have been in his den, asleep. Us-

ally he wasn't bothered as much as the others by noises in the night. She remembered when they'd captured a tiger very much like Rolf, on a trip to India nine years earlier. She'd had the fright of her life when a second tiger came up behind her in the dusk, and only a quick shot from Jack had saved her life. She often thought that when death finally came to her, it would appear as a tiger stalking her from behind.

The tiger had been a symbol to writers as different as William Blake and Frank Stockton, and so, a symbol to her, too. Rolf was one of her favorites, and perhaps the reason was the very power she saw in his eyes.

Ahead, the polar bears were growing restless again, growling at the night. She felt a chill on her spine, as if something unknown and very dangerous were loose among the animals. Something only they could see.

Then she heard a sound behind her, and turned to face her tiger.

Lieutenant Fletcher was already on the scene when Leopold arrived, looking down over the fence while the photographers and lab men worked. "What is it?" Leopold asked, his breath visible in the morning chill. It was still cold for May.

"A bad one, Captain. Jack Drummond found his wife in the tiger pit. You knew Maggie Drummond, didn't you?"

"I'd met her," Leopold said. Everyone around town had met Maggie and Jack at one time or another. They'd been the city's newest celebrities when they accepted the zoo job three years earlier. Jack Drummond, a tall, middle-aged man with prematurely white hair, was said to be one of the finest wild animal collectors in the country. Maggie, who'd met him a decade earlier while filming a TV documentary and then stayed on to marry him, was a bright, fearless young woman as much at home on New York's Fifth Avenue as in a jungle encampment. In an era when wild animals had all but vanished from their natural habitats, the Drummonds reminded one of an earlier, better day.

"They got her body out, but it was too late to save her," Fletcher said.

"When did it all happen?" Leopold was searching the thin crowd of onlookers for the familiar white-haired Drummond, but he didn't see him.

"Just before dawn. Drummond was in bed and he thought he heard a scream. When he saw she was missing he went in search of

her. He found the tiger, Rolf, clawing at her body."

"No one could fall into that pit accidentally."

"Hardly seems likely, Captain. Hell of a way to commit suicide."

"If it was suicide," Leopold was staring up the hill at the house. "Where's the husband?"

"Up there. He called a friend of his who came right over."

Leopold started up the worn path to the house. He crossed a single set of railroad tracks, then went up the rest of the way and onto the porch of the two-story white house that went with the job of zoo director. Before he could ring the bell the front door opened and a youngish man wearing glasses greeted him.

"I'm Sam Lang, a friend of the family. Can I help you?"

"Captain Leopold of the violent crimes division. I'd like to speak with Mr. Drummond."

"Certainly." Lang led the way into the quiet house. They found Jack Drummond at the kitchen table, staring at a tumbler half full of bourbon.

Leopold introduced himself and expressed his sympathy.

Jack Drummond shifted his eyes from the bourbon long enough to say, "It was no accident. Somebody killed her."

"Naturally we're investigating

that possibility," Leopold said.

"Last summer there were some deer killed, before the city put up the fence. Kids came in the middle of the night and threw rocks at them."

Leopold cleared his throat. "Did your wife sleepwalk, Mr. Drummond?"

"No, never. And even if she'd fallen in there accidentally, Rolf would never have attacked her."

"Was the tiger destroyed?"

"I . . . No, I wouldn't let them. I put him to sleep with a tranquilizer dart."

"Very humane of you," Leopold said, "but animals have been known to do the unpredictable. This tiger, Rolf, might have—"

"No, never! I've seen Maggie playing with him sometimes while she was feeding him. He's just a big baby."

"Then what took her down there before dawn?"

"She'd often do that, if she heard the animals making a commotion. Ever since the deer were killed last summer she kept a little gun in the desk near the door. If one of us went down there during the night, we took the gun along."

"It's hardly the sort of thing a woman would do. Why didn't she wake you if the animals were restless?"

Drummond sighed and drained

his glass, set it on the table.

Sam Lang answered the question for him. "Maggie was absolutely fearless, Captain. Jack's told me plenty of stories about their travels in Africa and India. She faced a charging elephant once without turning a hair. It was nothing for her to walk down that hill to check on the animals."

"And you think someone was waiting for her there?"

"Her own personal tiger," Drummond mumbled.

"What?"

"Once in India I killed a tiger that was charging her from behind. I think it was the only time in my life I ever saw her frightened. She told me after that about a dream she had of a personal tiger—one that would come to her bearing death."

Leopold was not one for mysticism, if that was what it was. "Who had a motive to kill your wife, Mr. Drummond?"

"Kill Maggie? No one!"

"It's been my experience that a number of people have motives for killing any single individual. In the case of a married woman, her husband is always a prime suspect."

"This is hardly the time or place for such talk!" Sam Lang exploded. "The man's wife has just been killed!"

Jack Drummond held up a hand for silence. He licked his lips, ran his fingers through his white hair, and poured himself another drink. "Captain, in this age of easy divorce, there's no need to kill one's wife. I loved Maggie. I saved her life once and I would have done it again. If she was murdered, it was a gang of kids she found tormenting the animals."

"What about the fence?" Leopold asked.

"Kids can climb fences."

"But they're not likely to, at five in the morning," Sam Lang said. "I live over on the next street, and I heard the animals around that time. I thought it was unusual, but I turned over and went back to sleep."

"Did you hear a scream?"

"No. Just the animals."

"All right," Leopold said. "Thanks for your time, Mr. Drummond. Sorry about the circumstances."

He left them there and went back down the hill. Fletcher and the others were just finishing. "The doc took a look at her, Captain. He said there were only a few claw marks from the tiger—nothing deep."

"Then what killed her?"

"Looks like a stab wound to him. He thinks she was dead before she was thrown into the tiger

pit. That may be worth checking."

"Then it's murder," Leopold said quietly. He'd never really doubted it.

Policewoman Connie Trent was just bringing Leopold's afternoon coffee when his phone rang. It was the medical examiner with the official verdict. Maggie Drummond had been stabbed once in the chest, a fairly deep wound that had gone straight to the heart. "Then she saw her killer," Leopold said.

"It would seem likely, unless he grabbed her from behind."

"OK. Thanks, Doc."

"Is that the zoo killing?" Connie asked, handing him his coffee.

Leopold nodded. "What do you know about Maggie Drummond?"

"As a woman, I admired her. She was liberated before anyone thought of the word. Filming TV documentaries while still in her twenties, marrying a famous animal expert, and then joining him on trips to remote corners of the globe. Settling down at the zoo here must have been quite a change, but she took it well. She had a certain charm, a personality that came across especially well on television. She'd shown animals on daytime TV shows in Boston and New York, and was probably better known than her husband as

far as the general public was concerned."

"Would that be a reason for him to kill her?"

"Hardly, unless he's crazy."

"He seems sane enough," Leopold replied. "You might check him out, though—see what you can learn. Was he fooling around with another woman, or any other gossip things?"

"I always get the great assignments, don't I, Captain? While you and Fletcher are out checking on drug addicts and sex criminals, I can read the gossip columns."

Leopold chuckled and sipped his coffee, which was always worse in the afternoon, and today was no exception. "I know, it's probably a waste of time. Chances are she was killed by some kids she found bothering the animals. But we have to figure all the angles."

Fletcher came in then, carrying a large brown envelope from the property clerk's office. "Hi, Connie. How are you?"

"Fine. What's that?"

"Contents of Maggie Drummond's pockets."

"I thought she was wearing pajamas."

"She'd put a jacket on over them," Leopold explained. He watched while Fletcher emptied his envelope. "The .22 automatic

been fired?" Leopold asked him.

Fletcher shook his head. "Looks like she never got it out of her pocket."

She'd carried little else with her—a balled-up handkerchief, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, and a folded piece of paper.

"This looks like a note," Connie decided, pouncing on the paper. She was still young enough to be intrigued by such things.

"Probably to the milkman," Fletcher said.

"No! Listen to this: *Maggie—I must see you. Meet me at five at the usual place.*—And there's no signature."

"Men who don't sign notes like that take an awful lot for granted," Léopold observed. "All right, Connie. That's all yours. Get on it."

"Wasn't she killed around five?" The prospect of action excited Connie. "Couldn't this note have lured her to her death?"

"It might have been in the pocket for weeks," Leopold said. "If you write someone to meet you at five, without specifying today or tomorrow, morning or afternoon, you usually mean the afternoon of the present day. Assuming the note was delivered by mail or hand during a given day, the sender would have been more explicit if the meeting were

to be at five the following morning."

"Maybe," Connie admitted, not quite certain. She started to go out.

"Good luck. Find out what you can," Leopold told her.

When they were alone, Fletcher said, "She's a great gal. She won't be back till she has something." Then, as Leopold stood up, he asked, "Are you going out too?"

Leopold nodded. "Back to the zoo."

There'd been some thought of keeping the zoo closed for the day, but Jack Drummond had insisted on opening it at noon. Now, as the May afternoon warmed into a pleasantly sunny spring day, the place was full of after-school children and more than a few curiosity-seeking adults. Leopold noticed a large crowd of gawkers at the tiger pit and steered clear of there.

Drummond himself was nowhere in sight, but an older man in green denims was feeding the sea lions. "This is usually a big attraction," he commented, only half to Leopold, "but today they all want to see where she died."

"I'm Captain Leopold, investigating the case. Could I ask you a few questions?"

The man hurled another fish to

the waiting sea lions. "Sure, ask away! I'm Robby Blake. Been working here for seventeen years, long before the Drummonds took over."

"Did you get along well with them?"

He snorted and went on with the feeding. "Sure, as long as I kept my mouth shut! They had their fancy ideas—pastel-colored walls, music for the animals." For the first time Leopold became aware of gentle taped background music played softly over the zoo's public-address system. "I asked her once about it and all she said was it soothed the animals!"

"Had any trouble with vandals lately?" Leopold asked.

Robby Blake scratched his gray head. "Not much since the fence was put up."

"The fence runs around the entire zoo, including the Drummonds' house on the hill?"

"Yeah."

"What about the railroad tracks? There must be an opening for them."

"Well, sure. But this spur line is hardly ever used anymore. There's a gate across the tracks."

"Do you live on the grounds?"

"Me? Not on your life! I get enough of these animals all day! Most zoos have a caretaker, but with the Drummonds living right

here it's really not necessary."

Leopold thanked him and moved on. He walked out to the railroad tracks and followed them to the gate in the wire fence. If there had once been a padlock on the gate, it was no longer there. A chain held the gate closed, but it was not locked.

He went back to the zoo, walking past the polar bear pit to the enclosure occupied by the tiger Rolf. Most of the crowd had drifted away now, and the great beast sat quietly in the sun without moving. Perhaps it was still lousy from the effects of the tranquilizer. The whole zoo seemed strangely silent in the afternoon sun, as if the animals were waiting for something unknown. Then, all at once, a half-dozen of them set up a howl. The restlessness spread to the others and in a few moments the place was a bedlam of noise.

Leopold saw Robby Blake coming out of the zoo's office. "What's the matter with them, Blake?"

"Damned if I know," the man replied. He went back into the office and left Leopold standing by the tiger pit, staring down at Rolf's large golden eyes. The great beast growled, as if in answer to the others, and Leopold turned away. It was not this tiger he

sought, but another—one that prowled the city and had to be found.

Fletcher had some information when Leopold returned to his office. "First, Captain, I talked to some of the neighbors near the zoo. Four of them were awakened by the animals' unusual restlessness, and two who checked the time put it at around five o'clock."

"That confirms what Sam Lang told me. It seems certain there was a prowler bothering the animals. He probably entered the grounds through an unlocked gate across the railroad tracks."

"Then I picked up a kid named Mike Ragovitch," Fletcher went on. "He's 18, on probation for killing those deer last summer. Want to see him?"

Leopold followed Fletcher into the detention room. Ragovitch was a sullen, long-haired youth who stared at the floor and wouldn't look up when Leopold spoke to him. "I haven't done anything," he mumbled.

"Where were you at five this morning?"

"In bed. At my apartment."

"You live alone?"

"Yeah. Pa booted me out after the trouble last summer."

"Then you can't prove where

you were at five this morning?"

"Do I need to?"

"There was a killing at the zoo."

"I heard about it on the news."

"Did you do it, Mike?"

"Hell, no!" His head came up. "Is that why I was picked up? I want a lawyer!"

"Nobody's accusing you of anything. We just brought you in to ask a few questions. Do you own a knife, Mike?"

Ragovitch shook his head. "I'm not talking without a lawyer. You're not getting me for violation of probation!"

Leopold sighed and he and Fletcher went back to his office. "Question him for another hour, Fletcher, and then turn him loose if you don't have anything. I think he's clean."

"Where does that leave us, Captain?"

Leopold moved the papers around his desk in mild frustration. "I don't know. One of two things happened: either it was a random killing by some bum or vandal, or someone meant to kill her. If we knew which, we'd have a good chance of cracking the case."

"There was no evidence of vandalism at the zoo, Captain."

"I know. Yet something stirred up those animals. Are we to be-

lieve in evil spirits, Fletcher?"

It was the following morning before Policewoman Connie Trent landed her first real lead. She'd been interviewing the dead woman's friends, moving through the various levels of the city's social elite, from the Friends of the Zoological Society to the Yacht Club where the Drummonds had maintained a membership since coming to the city. It was only when she reached Sara Peacock, a close friend of Maggie's, that she pressed the matter of the marriage.

"Were they happy—Maggie and Jack Drummond?"

Sara Peacock was a slim, almost boyish woman in her mid-thirties. As a contemporary of Maggie Drummond's, she spoke with unusual frankness. "Were they happy! At least Jack was. He worshiped her. And apparently she adored him! I think I've heard that story of his saving her life a dozen times!"

"Then Jack isn't fooling around with anyone else?"

"Heavens, no! He's as straight as they come, unless maybe there's a llama at the zoo he has an eye for. I always kidded him and said the animals were Maggie's only competition." She grew somber. "I guess I won't be kid-

ding him about animals anymore."

"You understand we have to check all the angles. A lover could have had a motive for wanting Maggie dead. But since they were both so straight—"

"I didn't say *both*, dear."

"You mean Maggie Drummond had a lover?"

"I wouldn't put it quite that strongly," Sara Peacock said, backtracking a bit. "But she had a close friend. A close male friend."

"Would you mind giving me his name?"

The slim woman hesitated only a moment. Then, in a gesture born of some lingering malice, she said, "Sure—why not? It's Sam Lang."

Captain Leopold sat back and listened to Connie's report. When she'd finished he said, "I met Sam Lang briefly yesterday at the Drummond house. He's a friend of the family, lives nearby. That might explain the note in Maggie Drummond's pocket."

"Want me to check him out?"

Leopold was starting to reply when Fletcher poked his head into the office. "Jack Drummond's here, Captain. Says he has to see you."

"Send him in."

Drummond entered quickly,

like a man obsessed. Ignoring Connie, he thrust a crudely printed note into Leopold's hand. "That came in the morning mail!"

Leopold read it aloud: *I know you killed your wife. You can have the evidence for ten thousand dollars. Wait for a phone call at three this afternoon.* It was unsigned. "Who sent it?"

"Probably the real killer," Drummond said.

"That doesn't seem likely."

"What should I do?"

"Answer the phone at three o'clock. We'll be there too."

When he'd gone, Leopold turned to Connie: "This might be the break we need. The printing on this note doesn't match the note in Maggie Drummond's pocket, but there still is a chance Sam Lang's involved. Use some excuse to call on him at his office around three."

That afternoon, Leopold and Fletcher sat in the house on the hill, waiting for Jack Drummond's phone to ring. Fletcher had made arrangements to trace the call, though they both knew it was a virtual impossibility if the conversation were brief. At ten after three, Fletcher said, "It was a hoax, Captain. Nothing's going to happen."

"We'll see."

At three-fifteen the phone at

Drummond's elbow rang. "Hello?" he answered.

Leopold picked up the extension across the room and heard a muffled voice say, "You killed your wife, Drummond."

"I didn't! Who is this?"

"I can prove it. I have the evidence here in front of me."

Even though muffled, the voice sounded oddly familiar to Leopold, but if Drummond recognized it he gave no sign. "How much do you want?" he asked, raising his eyes to meet Leopold's.

"I told you in the note. Ten thousand."

"Where?"

"The trash barrel at the entrance to the zoo, just outside the gate. Leave it there this afternoon—"

"Wait a minute! I can't raise ten thousand this afternoon! The banks are already closed!"

"Tomorrow morning, then. Put the money in an empty popcorn box and drop it in the barrel at eleven o'clock. Then leave the area and return to your house."

"All right."

"I'll take the money and leave another popcorn box with the evidence. You can get it any time after one."

"Fine," Drummond said. Almost at once the connection was broken.

Fletcher snorted. "That guy's really an amateur! Imagine having a drop like that in a public park in broad daylight! We can have a dozen men watching that barrel."

"He's either very dumb or extremely smart," Leopold said. "We don't know which."

"Will you have people watching the barrel?" Drummond asked.

"Just one," Leopold answered after a moment's thought.

At ten-thirty the following morning, Connie Trent was stretched out on a blanket reading a book, less than a hundred feet from the entrance to the zoo. With the May temperature barely seventy, it was not the sort of day she would have chosen for lounging in the park, but the sun was bright and in her sweater and jeans she did not seem out of place.

It had been Leopold's idea, of course, after she returned with a dejected report that Sam Lang had been in conference at his law firm during the crucial three o'clock to three-thirty period. She hadn't been able to see him or to confirm the conference. She also hadn't been able to confirm Sara Peacock's story about Lang and Maggie Drummond. "I'm a failure, Captain," she said sadly.

Leopold had merely smiled.

"Maybe tomorrow you can make it all up. How'd you like a morning in the park?"

So here she was, with her blanket and her book, and a .38 Special in her purse. There was plenty of grass for lounging within sight of the trash barrel by the entrance.

At eleven o'clock she watched Jack Drummond appear with a crumpled popcorn box and drop it casually into the green barrel. She kept watching for an hour after that, but no one approached the barrel. The few people entering the zoo at that time of the morning did so without a second look at the trash receptacle.

Then, just after noon, a boy on a bike rode up. He was carrying a popcorn box very much like the one Drummond had. He paused, glanced into the barrel, and quickly exchanged boxes. Connie's hand hit the tiny walkie-talkie in her purse. "The boy on the bike picked up the money. Should I take him?"

"We'll follow him," Leopold's voice crackled. "You pick up what he left, but be careful!"

As the boy rode away on his bike, she casually stood up, stretched, and walked over to the barrel with a crumpled tissue. The popcorn box was on the very top. She took it, opened it, and a small

reel of recording tape slid out into her hand. There was nothing else in the box. Leopold had told her to be careful. Had he feared a bomb?

Then she saw a police car drive up along the zoo road. Fletcher was at the wheel. "Get in," he said. "The Captain's after the kid."

"It's a tape recording."

Fletcher scolded, "You shouldn't have opened the box till I got here."

"You *did* think it was a bomb!"

"Somebody killed Maggie Drummond. Maybe the same person's after her husband."

He speeded up the car and adjusted the two-way radio. Leopold's voice reached them from somewhere close by. "I'm losing the boy in the traffic. He's too fast on that bicycle."

"What about the motorcycles?"

"I'll tell them to move in. We'll have to take him."

Fletcher cursed softly. "We didn't figure on a long-range chase or we could have put a beeper in the package—you know, a directional transmitter."

Connie was silent until they pulled up behind Leopold's car a few blocks away. The boy was there, surrounded by Leopold and three uniformed officers, looking thoroughly frightened. "I don't

know anything," he was insisting.

"A guy paid me to do it!"

"What guy?" Leopold asked.

"I don't know."

"Where did you meet him?"

"He stopped me on the street, just down the block from here."

"And you were to bring this box to him there?"

"Yeah. He gave me five bucks and promised me another five."

Leopold turned to Connie. "Go with him. It's probably too late, but our man may be still hanging around."

There was no one at the appointed meeting place. They waited half an hour and no one came. Whoever it was had been frightened away.

Captain Leopold finished playing the tape for the second time and stared down at the reel without comprehension. "Did you hear what I heard, Fletcher?"

"Sure did, Captain. A big fat nothing. The tape is blank."

"I played both tracks, backward and forward. There's nothing on it."

"Looks like our caller was a fraud after all. Maybe it's a new kind of racket—go through the obits and phone everyone whose wife has died and say, 'I know you killed her.' I wonder how much money you'd make."

"He wouldn't have made much off this phony bundle we had for him."

Connie came in to join them. "I've gotten a description from the boy, for what it's worth, Captain. Older man, white hair, sort of seedy looking."

"That's the best he could do?"

"That's it."

Leopold picked up the phone and dialed Jack Drummond's number. When Drummond answered, he said, "Leopold here."

"I've been waiting for your call. Did you get him?"

"Afraid not. He sent a boy to pick up the money. We have a description, but it's not very good."

"Did he leave anything?"

"A tape recording."

"Is there anything on it?"

"No. Not a thing. Looks like the whole thing was a hoax."

"Then you're no closer to finding Maggie's killer?"

"We have a couple of other leads," Leopold answered vaguely. "One thing, Mr. Drummond—I'd be very careful for a while. There's still the possibility the killer's after you, too."

"Don't worry. These nights I sleep with a gun under the pillow."

Leopold said, "Good. I'll be in touch," and hung up.

While Fletcher and Connie decided who would go for coffee, Leopold stared out the window at the sun-drenched parking lot. Spring again in the city. A large black dog came bounding out of one of the cars, ignoring its owner's shouted commands, and that reminded Leopold of something. He watched the dog for a moment and then turned to Fletcher. "See that dog down there?"

"The black one? Sure, Captain."

"Go get him for me."

"Get him?" Fletcher looked blank.

"Bring him up here."

"Here? In your office?"

"That's right. Hurry—before he gets away!"

"Captain, are you feeling all right?"

"I never felt better, Fletcher. Go get that dog!"

Jack Drummond awoke to the distant growling of the animals. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was not yet two o'clock. Slipping on a jacket over his pajamas, he reached beneath the pillow for the little .32 Colt and put it into the pocket. At the front door he remembered his boots, put them on, then bundled the jacket around him and started down the hill.

There was no sign of an intruder, and he hadn't really expected to find one. Still, something was upsetting the animals.

He passed the tiger pit and peered into the darkness, searching for Rolf. There was no sign of him, but he could have been in his den. He remembered that tigers had always been something of a symbol to Maggie—a symbol of her death, she'd told him.

The night air was good as he walked along. The wolves, baying at the moon, the polar bears restless in their cage, none of it bothered him just then. He was at peace for the first time in days.

Then he heard the sound behind him, and turned to face his own special tiger.

It was Captain Leopold.

"You're under arrest, Mr. Drummond, for the murder of your wife."

Drummond simply nodded, and let the gun fall from his limp fingers. "Yes," he said. "Yes, it's over, isn't it?"

While they were booking Drummond and allowing him to call his lawyer, Leopold sat in his office with Fletcher and Connie. He was playing the tape again, and this time they were all listening.

"I still don't hear anything,"

Fletcher said, looking puzzled.

"You're not supposed to. It's too high-pitched for human ears. But that dog you brought up here this afternoon certainly heard it."

Connie smiled at the memory of it. "We all thought you'd flipped, Captain, if you'll pardon the expression. How'd you know there was something on that tape?"

"Somebody was blackmailing Drummond—or trying to—and I decided it was serious and not a hoax. After all, why blackmail an innocent man? When the blackmailer phoned, he never even warned Drummond away from the police. He must have been certain Drummond would pay up instead of talk. That meant he had to have something against him. When I telephoned Drummond, I said we had a tape recording. He immediately asked, *Is there anything on it?* Not *What's on it?* which would be the normal question, but *Is there anything on it?* He was relying on the fact that the high-pitched whistling would be inaudible to our ears."

"But," Connie asked, "if he were guilty all along, why come to the police with that blackmail note?"

"You don't become a wild animal trapper without guts and nerve. When the tiger, Rolf, didn't

mangle the body as he'd hoped, Drummond was the first to insist his wife was murdered, because he knew the autopsy would find the stab wound anyway. Likewise, he came to us with that note because he wasn't about to spend the rest of his life paying blackmail. He was hoping that even if the tape turned up, we wouldn't realize there was anything on it."

Fletcher scratched his head. "He played the tape over the zoo's public address system?"

Leopold nodded. "He used a timer to switch it on a little before five in the morning. The high-pitched whistle was enough to awaken some of the animals and make them restless. That in turn stirred up the others. He knew his wife would go down to investigate, as she had in the past. He could kill her there, drop her body in the tiger pit, and make it look like some horrible accident or the work of a murderous vandal. And the noise of the animals would disturb the neighbors, offering further evidence of a prowler at the zoo. When I confirmed the tape's purpose with that dog in my office, all we had to do was sneak into the zoo through the unlocked railroad gate and play it over the public address system. I wanted to see if the sound would really disturb the animals, and it

did. I wanted to see if the animals would awaken Drummond, and they did. They must have awakened him the other night too, but he pretended to be asleep so his wife would go down the hill to investigate. Then he followed her and killed her."

"How do you know Drummond used the tape?" Connie asked. "Couldn't it have been another zoo employee?"

"Only Drummond could be certain Maggie would go to investigate the disturbance. And remember, though she was facing her killer, she never drew the gun from her pocket. It had to be someone she trusted, someone she wasn't surprised to see there."

"And the blackmailer?"

"The boy's description fits Robby Blake, and he had no love for the Drummonds. I'm having him picked up. I think he found the tape on the machine in the zoo office and was suspicious of it. I think he actually played it the morning after the killing, before Drummond had a chance to remove it. I was at the zoo at the

time, aware of the music playing through the public address system. Then after a time there was silence, and the animals grew restless. At just that time Blake came out of the zoo office to see what was up, and then went back in again. He realized what the tape was, and the next morning the blackmail note arrived."

"And the note in the dead woman's pocket?"

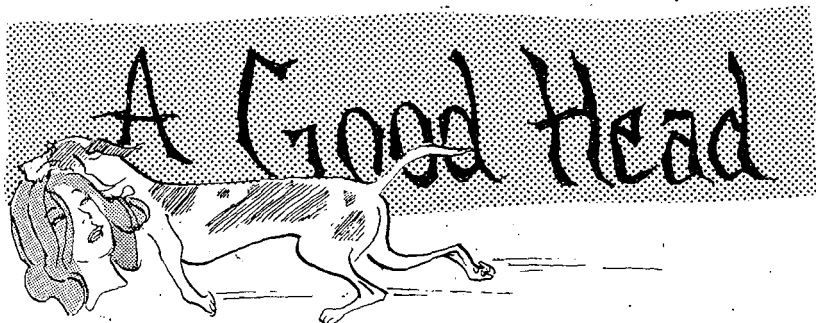
"From a prior meeting with Sam Lang. I suppose Drummond found it, and that set him off. He would have recognized the handwriting of his friend."

Later, as he was going home, Leopold stopped to listen to Jack Drummond's statement. He was dictating it to a police stenographer while his lawyer and Fletcher stood by. "I saved her life once, back in India," he was saying. "It belonged to me, not to Sam Lang nor any other man. It belonged to me, as surely as those animals I brought back!"

It was a melancholy confession of murder, and Leopold did not linger to hear the rest.



It is possible to lose one's head in an emergency, but there are other possibilities as well.



She drove down the twisting Mexican road, while he dozed beside her and listened to the music from Uruapan. She struck the brake suddenly, throwing him forward against the dash. He saw the animal leave the glow of the headlights and slink into the thorny brush at the side of the road.

She gasped. "Did you see that dog? It couldn't possibly have been carrying—"

"It was," said Gordon Phelps, lighting his pipe. "A human head. I wonder whose it could've been?"

"Gordon! How can you just . . . just . . ."

"Sit here? I don't know what

else to do. What does one do in a situation like this?"

"Well—follow it!"

Her shrill voice trembled on the edge of panic. Gordon felt an icy calm, weighting him down in his seat. Had he been alone he might have given way to the sharp teeth of hysteria which nibbled at his mind—but he always reacted contrary to Ann.

"Through a trackless waste of mesquite? Ann, they don't call this 'Little Hell' for nothing. It's totally uninhabited."

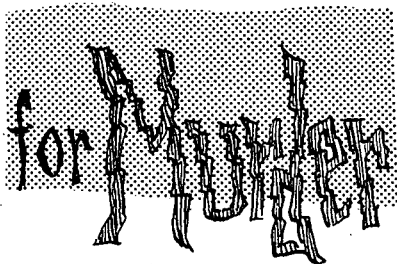
"Somebody lives here . . . or did."

"Yes, I suppose you could call the head evidence of human habitation. And where you find one

person you might find another. Which is sort of what I'm afraid of."

"What do you mean?"

"The person who, uh, severed the head could be . . ." he waved his hand at the dust-covered



by Charles
W. Runyon

bushes which bulged out into the graveled track, "lurking, you know . . ."

"Oh!" She tromped the accelerator. The car threw up its nose and jumped forward, paused, made another jackrabbit leap—and died.

"You forgot to shift into low," said Gordon.

"Oh! This darned . . . old . . . heap." Keys jingled as she turned the switch. The starter groaned. The car inched forward in a series of tiny lurches.

"The clutch," Gordon said.

"You didn't push your clutch in. This rental car doesn't have an automatic shift, you know."

"I know. Please don't talk while I'm driving."

Gordon opened his mouth, then closed it as the engine caught. Tires grated on loose gravel, the rear end skewed leftward as the car moved forward with agonizing slowness. A thorny branch clawed at the front fender, smacked the windshield, and scree-eee-eeched along the side of the car. Gordon shuddered as the sound blazed a track of fire up his spinal ganglia. After eight years of teaching he'd never gotten used to fingernails on a blackboard.

The front wheels found the packed tracks and the vehicle picked up speed, pumping fine gray dust up through the floorboards. Gordon leaned forward in the seat, his spine rigid as a steel rod. The headlights swept along the bank of thorns as the car swiveled around a right-angle turn. Shattered twigs tickety-ticked against metal as she raced up the steep slope, skewed around another curve, then dipped down into a valley.

"If we hadn't had that flat back there . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"We'd have been to the coast. I know. But we had it, and we aren't . . . and if you don't stop

taking those curves so fast, we never will be."

"If they'd just put up little warning signs . . ."

"They'd bankrupt the country. This road is nothing but curves. Look out for that rock!"

He held his breath as she swerved to straddle a rubber-streaked gray boulder. A metallic thump sounded from below and rumbled the length of the car. He let his eyes drift to the oil gauge. The needle held steady. At least the oil pan had survived.

But now something dragged behind, clattering against the gravel.

"Tail pipe," he muttered.

"What?"

The clatter ceased. He decided not to look back to see what had fallen off. The car still moved, so it hadn't been a vital part.

"Why don't you let me drive?"

"You said your eyes were tired."

"That was before—watch it!"

He hunched his shoulders as a stubby tree limb loomed out of the dusty foliage. It passed over the roof of the car with less than an inch to spare. With the heel of his palm he wiped the dust off the side window and looked out. The aerial bent backward at a 45-degree angle.

"Slow down. Nobody's after us."

The car slowed slightly. "But good heavens, Gordon, a human head . . . a dog carries a human head across the road in front of us and we don't even . . . I mean, I'm beginning to feel awfully wrong about this."

"You want to go back?"

She paused. "Do you?"

"There's no place to turn around."

"You're so good at rationalizing, Gordon."

He leaned back and fingered a kitchen match out of his watch pocket, scraped his thumbnail across the head and held the flame to his pipe. In the rear-view mirror he saw nothing but a billowing fog of dust, tinted red by the taillights. It had trailed them for the last two hundred miles.

The taste of the fragrant smoke relaxed him slightly. "Call it rationalizing, if you will. The local people, I understand, are rather primitive. Used to settling quarrels in the quickest way, with machetes. This may be one of those cases. Best for the local authorities to handle, if there are any."

"And if there aren't?"

He forced down a rising annoyance. "All right, let's say we went back, and I managed to find the head. What would we do, carry it all the way to the beach? Turn it in at the hotel and say, Here's a

little item we picked up along the road? We'd be hung up with the authorities for the entire vacation—maybe longer."

"I wasn't thinking about the head. I meant . . . the rest of the body."

Gordon muttered, "Wouldn't do him much good without his head."

"I don't think it was a 'him,' Gordon."

"Come now. It was all coated with dust. You couldn't have gotten any impression of gender."

"It had long hair . . ."

"That's an indication of nothing these days."

". . . And an earring, one of those jade pendants, with a loop of copper wire running through it."

"You're fantasizing, my dear."

"I *know* what I saw. I think it was a white woman."

"With how many freckles across the bridge of her nose?"

"I don't feel particularly humorous, Gordon."

"I don't either—but are we going back? We aren't, because we can't turn around, and we'd never find the spot anyway. We've crossed fifty valleys, and they're all exactly alike. Anyway, I'm not sure we've got enough gas for it. I don't know what kind of mileage we're getting in this car."

"You told me once that if I had

more than one excuse I didn't have any."

"Okay, I don't have any excuse. But we're not going back!" He bit down hard on the stem of his pipe, and fumbled another match out of his pocket. "When we get to the hotel, we'll make discreet inquiries. If any disappearances have been reported, we'll tell about the head. Otherwise, silence is golden. Agreed?"

"What if it just happened? There won't be any report, will there?"

"Just let me do the talking when we get to the hotel. Will you do that?"

"I don't see how I could do otherwise, since I don't speak the language."

Gordon knew it was the best he could expect. She liked to keep her options open, so that if he were proved wrong, she could always say she had reservations.

What the hell do we look like, a couple of Indians? Part of an old joke, burlesque-vintage, a man and a woman go into the hotel and ask for a room, and the clerk asks if they have reservations . . .

Thinking too much . . . Too hard . . . Trying to keep his mind off the horror in the road. He now wished he'd stopped—gone back and picked up the bloody thing, looked into its eyes and

said, *Cynthia, who did this to you, my dear?*

Ann would never have understood. She would not even have *wanted* to understand. New to the hard line of reality, home-school-church-and-family, all life as constricted as a baseball diamond, touch all the bases and when you cross home plate God is there to shake your hand . . .

Then he had to admit that he had chosen *her*, out of a vast pool of available females (so it seemed in retrospect) because she'd always turned in neat papers and was never late to class. Whereas he was sloppy and dilatory. Contrasts always hooked him. Black-white. Antonym-synonym. She was tall, willowy, ash-blonde; he was stocky and black-haired. He'd visualized a balanced marriage, or at worst a seesaw of authority, but his aimless hedonism stood no chance against her patient logic. In all life's choices he saw a high road and a low road, but she always picked the one closest to earth. Take his degree in education: "*You'll have the summers for your beachcombing and there's the sabbatical every seven years . . .*"

But summers had been occupied in fixing up the house, and the first sabbatical was spent building the cabin on the lake. He began to wonder if he hadn't let the

wine stand too long in the glass . . .

A new rattle had developed somewhere in the left rear. He listened to it a moment, decided it was one of the fender mountings and not something which would collapse and leave them stranded in this godforsaken country. It was hot, stuffy inside the car, but he could not open the windows because of the dust. Still it sifted in, fine as talc, around the windows and door. He could feel it coating the inside of his nostrils, crusting his lips with the dry burning taste of alkali. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize the hotel on the beach which Norval had described, the green lawns, the spacious swimming pool, the sun-drenched balconies, and the low, low rates. But he kept thinking of the head and how clean the cut had been, right below the Adam's apple . . .

The car jolted, bounced, came down with a crunch that jarred his teeth. Dust billowed up from the floor. Looking out, he saw that they were crossing a dry wash, one of dozens they'd negotiated during the last seven hours.

"Gordon . . ."

He turned and saw her round glasses reflecting the glow of the headlights. Behind them her eyes were wide and staring.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I saw a foot sticking out from under a bush back there."

His heart lurched, then went on beating faster. "Where?"

"When we crossed that creek bed."

"Why didn't you stop?"

"I don't know."

"You probably saw a tree root."

"I saw a *foot*!"

"Oh, hell! What's the point of arguing? Stop the car and back up."

"I *can't*! I can't even back up our own car, let alone this dilapidated wreck."

"You want me to do it?"

"I just want to get to the end of this trip, Gordon. I don't want to back up or turn around or anything. I just want to get *off . . . this . . . road!*"

Then why did you tell me about the foot? he thought, but he said nothing. She'd sounded like a little girl on the brink of a tantrum, refusing to go into the dark spooky bedroom. He wasn't too calm himself. The foliage pressed in toward the center of the road, making him feel hemmed in. Forward visibility was less than twenty yards. He held his breath as they rounded a curve, half-expecting to see an Aztec priest with a stained obsidian knife, ripping the pulsing heart out of a

naked torso . . . an eerie thought . . .

He stiffened as the engine coughed, sputtered, then settled into a strained growl as it carried them up the steep ridge. His eyes slid to the gas gauge. The needle sat on empty. That settled the question of backing up. It might even settle the question of going forward, though he had a feeling there was more in the tank than the gauge showed. The steep pitch of the hill would drain everything to the rear . . .

He breathed a sigh of relief as the car topped the ridge and tipped down into another ravine. The gas gauge edged off the peg and stopped at one-eighth full.

After a minute she spoke. "You were probably right. That was only a gnarled tree root back there."

Immediately he felt wary. "I see. And the head?"

"Oh . . . a coconut."

"Why not a pumpkin? Ichabod Crane thought he saw a head, but it was only a pumpkin."

She said nothing for several heartbeats. "Pumpkins don't grow here."

"Neither do coconuts."

"Well, they have trucks, you know. It could have fallen off a truck."

"And where did it get that hair?"

"Coconuts have hair—sort of."

"And jade earrings?"

"Oh, Gordon, for heaven's sake. Are we going to spend our whole vacation chewing over this thing?"

"It might be the lesser of two evils."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing." He stuck his pipe in his mouth and clamped his teeth on the bit. Her protest that she had *not* seen a foot was proof to Gordon that she had seen it—and was now so shaken that she wanted to back out of the whole reality sequence.

As for his comment about the lesser evil—he meant that he'd be only too happy to sit in a safe, comfortable hotel and mull over this intriguing mystery. The thing he dreaded most was a sudden *denouement*. He had a feeling that the head had been only a preliminary, like the first rumble of thunder which presages the downpour . . .

Coming to another one of those miserable gullies. Beyond the scoured basalt bedrock he saw what looked like a crooked branch, off one of those slick white-barked eucalyptus trees that grew in the arroyos. He *hoped* it was that. Even as the car bounded across the wash, he ground his pipe between his teeth and silently prayed that the sharp

bend in the middle was only an accident of growth and not an articulated elbow . . . that those curved appendages were only blunt-ended rootlets which happened to total five in number . . .

She had to swerve to miss the object, and in that moment he saw it clearly, coated with a white film of road dust.

Gordon drew a deep breath, then let it out slowly. He felt an odd relaxation of tension; he identified it as the end of self-deception, the closure of doubt, the presence of a certainty which could be . . . *must* be dealt with. No more speculation, no more games with reality . . .

"Stop the car, Ann."

Instead she speeded up. He glanced over and saw her sitting rigid behind the wheel, looking neither right nor left, the mouth set in a tight, downcurving line . . .

"Ann . . ." He touched her forearm lightly, felt the hard rigidity of muscle. He reached down and turned off the switch. The engine died, but she didn't seem aware of it. She pumped the accelerator until the car shuddered to a halt in the middle of the roadway.

"Ann, we've got to go back."

"No!" She made a grab for the keys; he caught her wrist and took

her hand in his, stroking it until the tight hard knot of her fist unclenched, and her hand lay trembling in his . . .

"Ann, that was definitely a human arm. You saw it too, didn't you?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded small and weak.

"Well, then . . . ?"

"You were right the first time, Gordon. I think we'd better not get involved."

"I was *wrong* the first time. We *are* involved. I don't like it, but we are. Now, wait—before you argue, think. How many cars pass along this road? One, two, three per night? Those people back at the station, the ones who patched our tire, *they* know we came this way. There's no turning off this road. It leads straight from the crossroads to the hotel on the beach. So what if somebody comes along behind us and picks up that arm? Assuming the most elementary investigation, they'll find out we were the last ones along this road. And they'll ask us, Did you see an arm lying beside the road? Why didn't you pick it up? Why didn't you report it?"

He spoke with calm emphasis, as if he were lecturing to his class. In fact, he felt utterly detached, as if he were standing on a cool, windy mountaintop and looking

down upon a roiling, writhing mass of humanity.

"You could go back and kick it into the brush," she said.

"Then we'd be concealing evidence of a crime."

"How do you know it was a crime?"

"I doubt that it's legal to go around dismembering corpses in Mexico."

"So? Who would know?"

"We would know."

"My conscience can handle it."

"It's not a matter of conscience. It's . . ." His mind groped for words to explain his feeling that this was one of life's watersheds, where one stream opens into a broad green valley, and the other narrows to a canyon filled with thorns and venomous reptiles. He was determined that this time she would not force him into the low road, no matter how logical and self-preservative it might be.

"It's a question of responsibility," he said finally.

"Is it *our* responsibility?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"I don't agree. It's not our country, these aren't our people, we don't even speak the lang—"

He reached across her and punched in the light button. She gasped as sudden darkness pressed in upon them.

"Gordon, what are you doing?"

"Trust me, Ann." He opened the glove compartment and took out the flashlight. He opened the door and stepped out, pausing to let his eyes acclimate to the darkness. Above him on the ridge, a gnarled tree lifted its tufted fingers against the faint blue glow of the skyline. The stars were incredibly bright, as though a white-hot furnace leaked light through a velvet curtain. He walked to the back of the car and looked down the pale strip of gravel. Nothing moved. He listened until his body ached with the effort, but heard nothing. Was that normal? Hadn't he read somewhere that the absence of night-sounds signified a lurking predator?

He lifted the trunk lid, careful to make no sound. The dim yellow beam of his flashlight revealed a dusty burlap bag and a lug wrench. He closed the trunk gently and walked around to her window. She rolled down the glass and he handed her the lug wrench.

"Keep this in your hand, just in case."

Her cold damp fingers touched his. He took her hand and squeezed it, waited until the answering squeeze came, faint at first, then a tight, desperate clutch.

"Let's go on, Gordon."

Gently he disengaged her hand. "Roll up the window and lock the doors. I'll be right back."

His footsteps on the gravel sounded loud—obscene, like someone eating potato chips at a funeral. Strange to retrace on foot the distance covered in a car. He seemed to have walked a long time. Had he passed the arm? No, the road still sloped downward; he hadn't yet reached the dry wash. He thought of returning to the car and backing it down the road. He didn't like all this space separating him from Ann. She was already terrified, here in the midst of desolation, in a foreign land, in total darkness . . .

You're not yodeling for joy yourself, Phelps.

The arm had a curious sheen in the red-yellow light. The hand—frozen in a grasping reflex—tripped his brain into visions of a grunting, gasping death-struggle. Could there be blood and tissue under the fingernails, a shred of fabric which would lead to the murderer?

Let the police worry about that.

He reached down to pick it up, then straightened and listened. From beyond the ridge came the growl of a laboring engine. Headlight beams fanned across the sky—and his car sat blocking the

road. Something had to be done.

For a second he stood wavering. Run back and leave the arm lying there? No, have to pick it up . . .

He threw the burlap over the arm and grasped it gingerly between his fingers. He shut off his flashlight and started at a fast trot back to the car. He felt a vague surprise at how heavy the arm felt, but then he'd never carried an unattached human arm before.

The truck crested the ridge. Twin lights dipped down and shone through the car, silhouetting Ann's head behind the wheel. He broke into a run, jerked open the car door, and tossed the burlap bundle onto the floor behind the seat.

"Scoot over, quick!"

She slid over and he thrust himself behind the wheel. The approaching headlights dazzled him. He groped, found the switch. The engine coughed and died. Damn rental car. Why couldn't he have driven his own? Couldn't be sure of finding gas, better fly to Guadalajara and hire a car, that's what Norval had said . . .

Curse you, Norval.

The engine caught, and he jerked on the lights. The oncoming lights neither dimmed nor swerved, but came on like a pair of blinding suns. They stopped so close he could feel the heat

against his face, burning his eyes.

"They've got the road blocked," said Ann. Her tone was the same one she used to tell him there was a raveling on his sleeve.

He shifted into reverse and twisted his head to look out the back window. He saw nothing but two spinning green discs on a sheet of coruscating purple. He was blind as a mole. Without backup lights he'd surely blunder into the brush . . .

The truck was red and riding high on heavy-duty shocks. A square chrome grille glittered above a baby-blue bumper which carried the words: EL TORO DEL CAMINO. Bull-of-the-road. A symbol of aggression which seemed borne out by the man who stepped down from the cab. He looked . . . not tall, but thick and broad as an oak stump. He wore grease-stained khaki pants and a once-white undershirt which now bore finger paintings of oil on dust. A dusty red bandanna hung around his thick neck. His stubbled cheeks spread in a wide grin, and Gordon thought of the Mexican bandit in *Treasure of Sierra Madre* . . .

"Hand me that lug wrench," he said, holding out his hand. He felt the bar smack his palm and reflected that his best defense would be a savage merciless attack. Yet

he knew his civilized reflexes would make him hesitant and clumsy . . .

"He's got a gun," said Ann, in the same flat tone she'd used before.

Gordon saw it as the driver turned to speak to someone up in the cab—ugly blue-steel death-dealer clipped to his belt above the rear pocket.

The man hitched up his pants and started toward their car.

Gordon said, "Don't talk. I'll try to bluff our way past him."

The driver stood grinning outside the window, his face only inches from the glass. Waving his hands and dipping his shoulders, he ripped off twenty seconds of rapid Spanish.

"Did you understand him?" asked Ann.

"Too fast. He's using some local dialect." Gordon pushed out the side-vent and spoke through the narrow gap: "*No entiendo.*"

"*Muñeca?*" The man waited, his brows lifted in question. "*Muñeca?*"

Gordon shook his head. "No understand. *Americano.*"

"Ah . . . *Americano!*" The man bent down and pressed his nose against the window. "*Sí, Americano.*" He stepped back, lifted his hand and waggled his fingers, then trotted around behind the truck.

"Was he waving good-bye?" asked Ann.

"I think he wants us to wait."

"He isn't giving us any choice."

Gordon watched the driver come out from behind the truck with a grotesquely truncated object under his arm. Ann gasped as he held it up in front of the headlights. Gordon saw the naked, headless, limbless female torso and thought: *This can't be real, we've driven off the world and dropped into a nightmare . . .*

The smooth breasts had no nipples, the round tummy lacked a navel, and the space between the truncated thighs was only a smooth mound of plastic . . .

"Gordon, is that a . . . *mannequin?*"

He couldn't speak, but let his breath out in a long sigh. Only then did he realize how tense he'd been. His muscles went limp, his spine wilted into its normal curvature.

He felt utterly ludicrous. The driver stood in the headlights' glare, demonstrating by signs how the dummy had shaken apart in his truck, and how the parts had tumbled out one by one. Gordon reached behind the seat and seized the arm wrapped in burlap . . .

He froze as the driver came back to his window.

"*Ha visto alguna parte? La cabeza? Cabeza?*" He held his hands to his temples and rocked his head from side to side.

"*Cabeza*—he wants to know about the head," said Ann.

"I know. Keep quiet." Gordon put his mouth to the vent. "A dog got it. Dog. What's the word for dog? Perro. Perro."

The driver tilted his head and looked puzzled.

"Rowf! Rowf!" barked Gordon.

"*Ah . . . perro, si. Gracias. Muchisimas gracias!*"

The driver grinned and saluted, then ran back and climbed into his truck. A minute later the engine roared, and the big vehicle backed into the crackling brush. The driver waved his hand as Gordon drove past.

Neither spoke until they crested the ridge. The road stretched straight ahead, with neither hill nor curve breaking its slow descent to the coastal plain. Moonlight glittered on the crinkled sea. Off to the right he saw splotches of light which marked the hotel complex. He heard a choking sound beside him and turned to Ann.

"Are you laughing or crying?"

"Both," she said.

"You think I was silly?"

"No. You were awfully brave—

even if the danger wasn't real. And you were right about stopping. Can you imagine what would have happened if we'd just kept driving? All our lives we'd have been haunted . . ." She talked without stopping for breath—her way of releasing tension. ". . . And what paranoid assumptions we made! That all unexplained deaths are a result of murder, that all foreigners are hostile. There's only one thing I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"Why didn't you give the nice man back his arm?"

Gordon reached behind the seat and groped for the burlap-wrapped bundle.

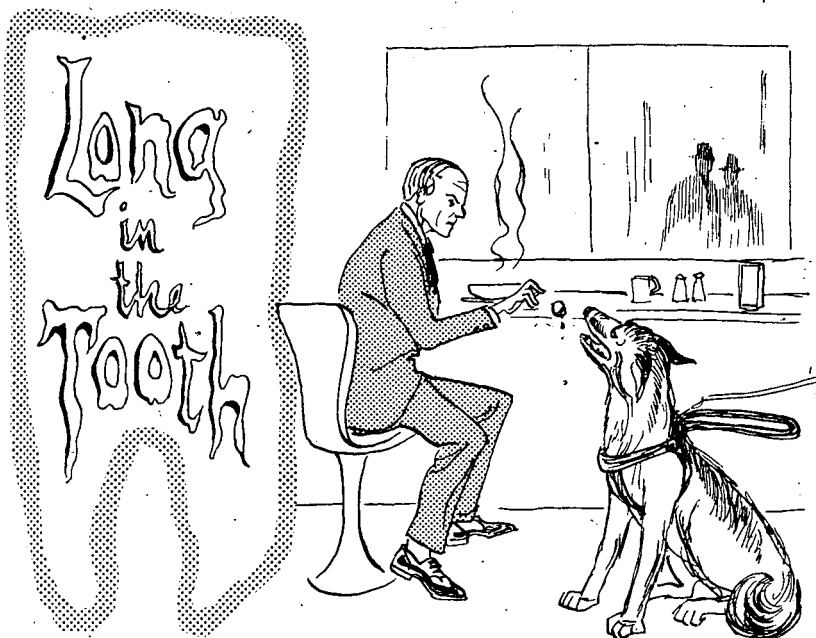
"There's another assumption we make about foreigners," he said. "That even though they're shrewd, they haven't the intelligence to pull off a really cool subterfuge. Like carrying around a dummy in order to recover a lost corpse."

He gripped the arm just below the elbow, avoiding the cold sticky end which had shocked him so much the last time.

"This one's real," he said.

Later he realized he shouldn't have laid it in her lap—but he wasn't thinking straight at the time.

It has been said that the surrender of life is nothing to sinking down into acknowledgment of inferiority.



Conrad Stefanik carried the secret list openly. He used the slip of paper bearing the names of his side's agents in America to keep his place in the book whenever he closed his eyes. He pretended to read and pretended to nap to discourage the talkative old lady who had drawn the plane seat next to his. When he absolutely

had to, he answered only with a tight-mouthed smile and a nod and a hum of assent till she finally gave him up as a hopeless foreigner.

He kept the list in the book and the book in his hand as he cleared customs. The danger would not be yet.

The embarrassment was now,

though. His face burned when the customs inspector told him to speak up, but he held his temper and his tongue and enunciated as best he could his false purpose in visiting. The customs inspector chalked his bag and he was through customs.

Now the danger would come. He spotted it in the form of two men who were too obviously not looking at him. He knew they were hoping to follow him to his contact. Then they would move in and seize him and his contact—and the list.

Not the list. He had his orders what to do with it: "Chew the list and swallow it."

His belly rumbled and for a flash he thought of the lovely steak he had passed up on the plane. The stewardess had first frowned and then shrugged and made sure his paper emergency bag was handy.

Now, without glancing again at the men, he headed for the airport cafeteria.

Ah! There were many seats free



but he chose one beside a man wearing dark glasses. A beautiful intelligent-looking Seeing Eye dog sat at the man's feet. Only such guide dogs are permitted in eating places.

Stefanik shut out the sadistic temptations of the menu on the wall and plumped for tomato soup. He kept the book with the slip in it close at hand on the counter. Buttered toast came with the soup. He broke the toast into the soup.

On his last spy mission here he had noticed how spoiled the pigeons were. Americans threw them whole slices of white bread and the birds pecked away the soft centers and left rings of crust. He smiled at the Seeing Eye dog. She was a really beautiful creature. The dog watched his hands break the bread into the soup and drown them with the spoon. The dog did not look spoiled. It would not hurt to spoil her this once.

Stefanik tossed a dripping bit of toast to the dog, which caught it in a snap and swallowed it. The dog's tongue licked her mouth clean and her eyes watched his. One paw lifted.

The blind man's face turned quickly toward Stefanik and the dark glasses fixed on him. "I wish you wouldn't feed her. You see, I'm so dependent on her that she

must remain dependent on me. I must be the one to feed her and pet her and house her. We have to depend on each other."

Stefanik bowed a bit though he knew the man could not see. "I understand completely. I am sorry."

The man smiled. "Quite all right. You didn't realize."

It was not all right. Stefanik started and hair stiffened on the dog. The mirror on the wall showed him the men closing in. The fools thought the blind man was his contact!

Stefanik stole his hands toward the slip keeping his place in the book. He cursed his superiors. For some stupid reason they had decided that the uncoded list of names should be on a slip of paper. One did not question bureaucrats if one was not oneself top drawer. Perhaps if he had been a lovely young woman they would have shrunk the list to a microdot of film and turned the microdot into a beauty spot pasted to the lovely young woman's smooth cheek. That would have made more sense.

However, he was not young and he was not lovely and he was not a woman. He was an ugly old man, and they had not given him a beauty spot. They had given him the slip of paper with strict

orders to chew the list and swallow it the moment he saw himself in imminent danger of capture.

"Do you think, Comrade Stefanik, you can carry out the assignment?" This had been asked in a tone of doubt and with a look of concern.

He had not opened his mouth once but had nodded his reassurance that he could do his job. He had not dared let them think he had outlived his usefulness. The service did not pension off its old employees. It pretended it did, but all the former employees he knew of who had left the service with their superiors' expression of profoundest gratitude had died or disappeared soon after.

Accident, heart attack, pneumonia—pneumonia in this day and age! He had run through a mental list of former colleagues and did not believe there remained one walking memory of past victories and defeats, one living record of the service's personnel and procedures. He was the last of the old lot.

He knew his superiors would have shown no pity when the time came for him. Yet now, as the enemy closed in, Stefanik felt guilt and shame that he could not carry out word for word the strict orders he had: "Chew the list and swallow it."

Stefanik quickly pulled the slip of paper from the book, dipped it in the soup, wrapped it around a soggy piece of toast and reached it to the dog. The dog snapped it from his hand and shook her head getting it down.

The blind man trembled with rage and brandished the cane in his hand at Stefanik. "I asked you not to—"

The dog stood up and pawed the air, twisting in pain. Her nails hammered the floor as she sought a hold on life. She let out a moan and stiffened and fell and lay still.

The blind man dropped his cane and bent to her, spoke to her, petted her unresponsive head. Then he looked up at Stefanik and asked, "Why?"

Stefanik's mouth opened, baring his toothless gums—but he remained mute. He could not answer the blind man's tears. He could not tell the grieving man that his superiors had already decided Comrade Stefanik had grown too old and would be no more use and only a threat. They

must have known about his new dentures, his feeble attempts to hide his creeping decrepitude. They had set him up.

They had not known that his new upper plate had broken, but the mission—his last mission—had come up while the repair job on the new plate was still in the works. "Chew the list and swallow it."

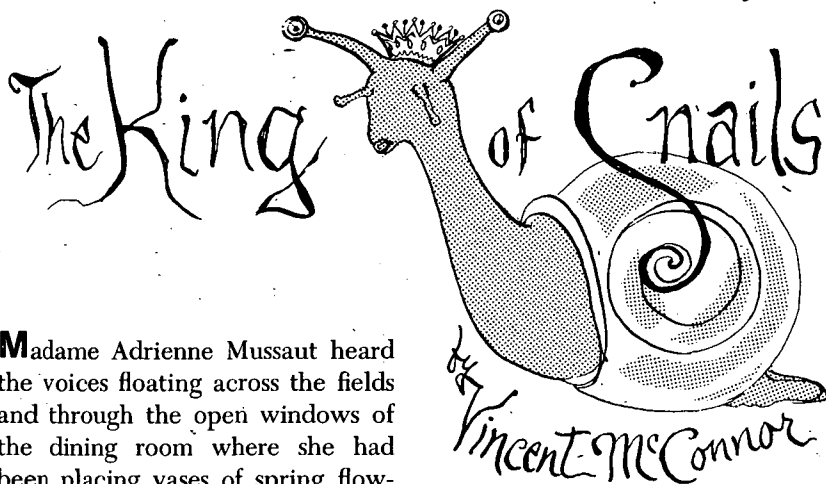
The list had probably been a harmless random selection of names from the phone directory. The paper was the message—and the message was: *Die*. Die like the faithful old dog you are, Comrade Stefanik. They had impregnated the paper with poison.

No doubt they had tipped off the Americans he was coming, knowing Comrade Stefanik would follow orders to the letter when he saw the Americans close in.

He stood up and faced the two men. He sighed for the dead dog. He sighed for the blind man. He did not sigh for himself. He was a walking memory, a living record, and he even smiled toothlessly at the two men who took his arms.



The true gourmet rarely lets anything interfere with the pleasures of his palate.



Madame Adrienne Mussaut heard the voices floating across the fields and through the open windows of the dining room where she had been placing vases of spring flowers on each table. She pushed a curtain aside and saw six or seven children bringing their woven baskets toward the inn.

"Jules!" she called. "The children are coming." She hurried toward the kitchen. "Jules! Do you hear me?"

He would be preparing one of his specialties for dinner, oblivious to all that happened around him; except, of course, that girl. He was always aware of Yvette—wherever she was, whatever she was doing.

As Madame entered the sunny

kitchen she saw that her husband was alone; not working, but seated at the small table he used as a desk, his white chef's hat nodding as he wrote.

No sign of Yvette. She must still be upstairs, cleaning the room that had been occupied last night by a mustard salesman from Dijon. Stupid girl! Took her time at anything she had to do and became sulky if you told her to hurry.

Madame Adrienne tapped her husband's shoulder and realized, as he looked up from his scribbling,

that she had startled him. "Jules! Those children are here."

He frowned. "What children?"

"Bringing your snails."

"Take what they've found and pay them."

"Don't you have enough snails? Eating their heads off day and night!" She glanced back as she headed for the garden. "What are you writing there?"

"Planning new recipes. What would you think of a snail paté? And what about Brioche aux Escargots?" He studied his notes, without hearing the door close, checking each ingredient again.

Perhaps, tonight, he would try the first brioche on Inspector Guernier when he drove out from the city for dinner. Tomorrow he would experiment with the paté. What should he call it? Paté escargot? Paté Mussaut! Why not use his own name for this new dish? He had created it.

He glanced toward the open window when he heard the children squealing. As he observed the scene, scowling at the noise, his wife turned toward the kitchen windows and beckoned.

"Jules!" she called. "Come out here! Quickly!"

He got to his feet reluctantly and went outside.

Madame Mussaut was waving frantically for him to hurry. "See

what the little ones have found! You won't believe your eyes!"

As he approached her, he saw that one of the small girls was holding up a shallow basket for his wife's inspection. Probably some curious lizard or insect she had found while searching for snails. Coming closer, he discovered that there was only one enormous snail in the basket. "Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu . . ."

It was, without question, the largest snail he had ever seen. A giant of a snail! Like some monstrous creature from Rabelais . . .

"The king of snails!" he whispered, reaching for the basket.

That evening Inspector Guernier was the first to sample the new creation, Brioche aux Escargots. After he finished a purée of artichoke soup, he was surprised to see a small procession emerge from the kitchen and make its way toward his table.

The other two diners turned to watch, and Madame Adrienne left the cashier's desk to witness the proceedings.

First came the maid, Yvette, blonde and buxom, clutching a hot serving plate in a folded napkin, followed by Monsieur Jules Mussaut, in immaculate white uniform and chef's hat, with a covered platter. Last came the

waiter, Paul, bearing a round tray decorated with green leaves.

Guernier watched with growing anticipation as the maid set the serving plate in front of him and darted out of the way.

The chef deposited his platter and removed the silver lid. In the center of the platter was a large brioche which he transferred to the serving plate on a silver spatula. "Brioche aux Escargots! A new dish I created today. Also, today, I have found the king of snails!" He turned to the waiter, who lowered his tray for the detective's inspection.

A tremendous snail rested in a ring of fresh parsley. Its huge shell was marked with a magnificent swirling spiral. Delicate pinkish-gray feelers were stroking the air.

"I have never seen such a snail!" Guernier exclaimed.

"The children found it today," Madame Adrienne explained.

"The king of snails!" Mussaut dismissed the waiter, motioning him toward the kitchen with his tray, the maid following at his heels. "Perhaps, when it becomes known that we have this unique specimen, people will come to see him!"

"When they taste your cooking, mon ami, they will return," Guernier responded. "Many times."

"Eat the brioche before it cools!

Bon appétit." Mussaut bowed and headed back to the kitchen as Madame returned to her desk.

Guernier poked at the brioche with his fork. As the golden crust broke apart there was a tantalizing aroma of truffles. He saw them in the center, black jewels around the plump curled snails.

He ate slowly, savoring each morsel, indulging in his favorite form of investigation: separating and identifying each ingredient. Thinly sliced mushrooms. Garlic, barely a whisper. Chopped parsley and a soupçon of tarragon—blended with white wine and butter, then added to the snails at the heart of the brioche. Guernier smiled with the knowledge that he had deduced each ingredient. He was a detective but he was also a gourmet.

These dinners were putting weight on him but he couldn't stay away from the Auberge Escargot. The food was as good as any he had ever eaten in Paris and, at the same time, he was amused to observe a fascinating personal drama developing on the premises. One day soon it would explode into violence. Madame Adrienne would surely discover some proof of her husband's passion for the maid, Yvette, and would send the girl back to her family. He wondered if the Mus-

sauts knew of her unsavory reputation in the village. Probably no one had bothered to tell them.

Just as they, very likely, had no suspicion that the waiter, Paul, had a record in Paris. He had worked in several Left Bank cafés—with his dark good looks he had no difficulty finding jobs—and had been under suspicion in cases where tourists had been robbed. Always female, they never pressed charges, but the Paris police had been watching him. That was probably why he had returned to his native village and was living with his parents when Mussaut advertised for a waiter and kitchen maid. He had hired them both—Yvette and Paul—from those local ads.

Guernier wondered if Paul told Yvette about the maid's job after he was hired. Or had it been the other way around? Certainly there was something going on between the teen-age maid and the waiter. He was aware of their glances when they thought he wasn't observing them. They both knew, of course, that he was a detective.

He was aware, also, that Paul had an obvious attraction for Madame Adrienne. Perched on a stool at the cashier's desk, her plump figure encased in black and her gray hair in iron waves, she eyed the young waiter whenever

her husband was occupied in the kitchen. Mussaut apparently suspected nothing, but the maid certainly knew what was going on. That little baggage knew everything!

A crisis was developing between these four people. Unfortunately it would probably explode when he wasn't present. Guernier just hoped the food would continue to be perfection.

In her cramped bedroom above the restaurant, Yvette was wide-awake. Huddled on the edge of her narrow bed, gazing through the open window toward the small house at the rear, she could see the windows of the sitting room and Madame's bedroom. All were dark. She wondered who would come sneaking through the shadows tonight and creep up the steps to her room. Maybe thatascal Paul. Old Mussaut should be too tired . . .

Madame Adrienne was sound asleep in the largest of the three bedrooms in the small house and, as usual, she was snoring . . .

The waiter, Paul, was stretched out on his bed, across the hall from Madame, smoking a cigarette and listening for the sound of Mussaut's door opening. If Monsieur didn't stir in another half hour he would go up to

Yvette himself; and if the old man did stumble across the garden, he would slip into Madame's room. She would be asleep, as usual, but he would wake her. The old dame was always grateful . . .

Jules Mussaut turned over in bed and squinted at the moonlight on the rose bushes beyond his open windows. His new creation had been a success. Brioche aux Escargots! Inspector Guernier ate every crumb. First thing in the morning he would start on his next creation; Paté Mussaut . . .

Guernier had been impressed by the giant snail. They would have that little procession every night, whenever anyone ordered a snail dish, like those Russian restaurants in Paris, with their brochettes on flaming swords. Lovely Yvette would walk ahead of him with the serving plate; Paul, behind him, bearing the king of snails.

Maybe he should change the name of his restaurant. Instead of Auberge Escargot, which was quite ordinary, he would call it Le Roi Escargot. The Snail King!

He thought about his wife, sleeping across the hall. She had become so demanding since she began to supervise the dining room. Ordering people about . . .

Then he thought of delicious Yvette in that cupboard of a room above the restaurant. If only there

was a spare room here in the house, but Paul had been hired first and Adrienne had given him the extra bedroom. Perhaps if the restaurant prospered, with its new name, he would add another room . . . for Yvette.

When he retired as head chef of the famous hôtel near the Place Vendôme, he had searched through Burgundy for a small restaurant in which to invest his savings. He and Adrienne had found their dream on a highway near Charolles. In the early twilight the Auberge Escargot, with its faded sign and softly lighted windows, had seemed an impossible mirage.

The bedroom they were given was sparsely but comfortably furnished and their dinner, including the predictable escargots Bourgoigne, was adequate, although the snails were tough and there was too much garlic in their sauce. After dinner, over a cognac, the proprietor confided that business was poor and the inn was for sale.

When they drove back to Paris they were the new owners of the Auberge Escargot. The Inn of the Snail . . .

Soon they returned to their new property with elaborate plans for its improvement and, in the following weeks, carried them out with the help of carpenters and

painters from the nearest village.

When the inn reopened the dining room was charming in its elegant simplicity, kitchen gleaming with new equipment, guest rooms redecorated; but even with a master chef in the kitchen, there continued to be few customers. Traffic rushed past on the highway, but few cars pulled into the courtyard.

He realized that something must be done to bring more customers, so he began to create new dishes featuring the snails he raised in the small cellar under the house.

One night a stout man with a neatly trimmed beard arrived for dinner. He ate everything, from soup to poire maison, with obvious appetite and appreciation of Mussaut's efforts.

Jules was surprised, when he joined the stranger for a cognac, to learn that he was a detective from the commissariat in the nearest city.

Yes, he would make the Paté Mussaut tomorrow, and Inspector Guernier must be the first to taste his latest creation.

Jules began to check the ingredients again. Start with thirty snails . . . one pound of ground ham . . . two minced onions and one . . .

He was smiling as he fell

asleep anticipating tomorrow.

The paté was presented to Guernier with the same ceremony he had observed two nights earlier.

Yvette brought a serving plate—cold this time—followed by Monsieur Mussaut with an oblong terrine. Paul again bore the giant snail on its throne of parsley.

The maid set her plate in front of the detective as Madame left her cashier's desk to observe what was happening.

Guernier was aware that the other diners were staring. Five of them tonight—more than usual.

"Another new creation, mon ami!" Mussaut rested his terrine on the table. "Paté Mussaut!" He proceeded to cut the first slice.

Guernier reached out to stroke one of the snail's swaying feelers with a fingertip. Unlike most, it did not pull into its shell but turned from side to side as though observing the scene.

"He is the king of snails!" Mussaut exclaimed, lifting the thick slice of paté to the serving plate. "I will not use him for any of my recipes. Alive he will bring us much publicity!"

"We are changing the name of our restaurant," Madame whispered confidentially. "The painter is going to make a new sign."

"Le Roi Escargot!" Mussaut exclaimed. "No other restaurant in all of France can boast of such a snail!"

"The other snails seem to realize he is their king," Madame continued. "When we put him into the pen with them they crawled around in a circle without getting close. We have now moved him to his own private pen which Paul, here, calls the palace."

"Bon appétit, Monsieur Inspecteur!" Mussaut motioned for the others to return to their duties. "I hope that you will enjoy my new creation. I have christened it Paté Mussaut . . ." He bowed and followed Paul, still bearing the king of snails, into his kitchen.

Guernier began to salivate as he studied the slice of paté on his plate—broke a piece of fresh bread and carefully spread it with the dark paté. He slipped it into his mouth and closed his eyes as the delicious flavors suffused his palate.

Now came the moment when he tried to detect each separate flavor. The basic component, of course, was chopped snails. Truffles again. He quickly ferreted out the ground ham and onions. Trace of brandy . . .

When he finished the last bite,

on the final piece of crust, he had detected nine ingredients. There remained one elusive taste that he was unable to identify. He drank some wine to clear his palate, then asked Paul to convey his compliments to Monsieur Mussaut.

The chef appeared from the kitchen immediately, smiling with anticipation. "Monsieur Inspecteur?"

"A masterpiece!" Guernier exclaimed. "The finest paté I have ever tasted. There is, however, one ingredient that escapes me."

"You can name all the others?"

Guernier enumerated them, one by one.

"Rabbit. That's the only thing you've left out."

"Of course . . ."

In addition to the newly painted sign, a large snail, carved and gilded, was hung above the entrance.

Each night, when Inspector Guernier drove into the courtyard, it became more difficult to find a parking space. Fortunately, Madame Adrienne knew which evenings he dined with them and reserved his table.

The success of the restaurant had little to do with the food. It came from the giant snail. People talked about the curious procession which appeared from the

kitchen whenever a dish featuring snails was served.

Guernier observed what was happening, from his usual table, at least three nights each week. These were the most satisfying and relaxing hours of his day. He found himself looking forward, during the day, wondering what Mussaut would prepare for his dinner.

One night he noticed that Yvette was wearing a new black uniform with a white apron that attempted, with no success, to hide her ample figure. He was not surprised when Madame whispered that she had personally selected the uniform.

Another maid was found to take care of the guest rooms upstairs, freeing Yvette to help Monsieur in the kitchen. An assistant chef was brought from Paris. Four additional tables were added in the dining room. Two more waiters were hired, none as good-looking as Paul, and smart new uniforms were bought for all. Prices were raised; and the king of snails, from week to week, grew visibly larger.

Only Madame remained unchanged, although her tongue seemed to sharpen. She snapped her fingers at the waiters—except Paul—and sent a constant stream of directives to her husband in the kitchen.

One night after dinner, Mussaut paused at Guernier's table to say that business was so good he had enlarged his house at the rear of the property—expanding the snail cellar and adding an extra bedroom.

Guernier watched everything with growing interest. When he learned that Yvette had moved into the new bedroom he was certain that something was about to happen.

What did happen was completely unexpected.

When Guernier arrived for dinner one evening, the parking lot was deserted and the restaurant only dimly lighted.

Madame Adrienne, erect with fury, sat at the cashier's desk. "The king is gone!"

"Dead?"

"No, Monsieur Inspecteur. Vanished!"

He saw that all the tables were empty. "No one here tonight?"

"I have turned everybody away. Jules is much too upset to do any cooking. He's in the garden with the others, searching for the king."

"Perhaps I can help." Guernier continued on through the kitchen and out the rear door, with Madame at his heels.

"It's the fault of that stupid

girl," Madame complained loudly. "Yvette left the cellar door open and he escaped."

Guernier found himself facing an attractive small house in the center of a vegetable garden. Lights were darting like huge fireflies.

"I've told Jules time and again," Madame complained, "something like this was certain to happen. That girl should have been sent away long ago, but he never listens to me . . ."

As Guernier's eyes adjusted to the darkness he saw that Mussaut and his staff were holding flashlights, sweeping pale beams across the vegetables. "Monsieur Mussaut?"

"Inspecteur! The king has disappeared! Someone neglected to close the cellar door."

"It was that stupid girl!" Madame rasped from the darkness.

"No!" Mussaut exclaimed. "Perhaps I was the one who left it open when I fed him last night. Yvette discovered he was missing when she went to fetch him, as always, before dinner. The gate to his pen stood open."

"She left it open!" Madame screeched.

Mussaut lowered his voice as he clutched Guernier's arm. "Our restaurant will never be the same without its king! You are a detec-

tive. You must help us find him."

"Eh bien! First I must see where you kept him."

"Come . . ." Mussaut led the way, between rows of young lettuce, around to the rear of the house. "We gave him a new pen when the cellar was enlarged."

The detective glanced back and saw that Madame was being escorted into the kitchen by Paul who was supporting her with his arm. He also noticed that Yvette was watching them.

"... temperature-controlled at all times," Mussaut was saying, "so that in summer the cellar will remain cool but in winter it should never get too cold." He reached a low door which stood open and, flashlight in hand, ducked inside.

Guernier followed down three shallow steps into a dim cellar with a sloping cement floor. The only light came from an unshaded bulb in the ceiling. He became aware of a faint sound like softly rustling silk. "What's that noise?"

"The snails. There are hundreds here. One alone makes no sound, but this many together whisper like distant rain . . ."

Guernier saw low pens fenced with wire, in which a mass of snails seemed to be in constant motion, as though a light breeze was passing across them. Each pen

was layered with lettuce leaves and he realized that the snails were eating. That was what made the curious sound: hundreds of tiny mouths chewing.

"This is where our king lived." Mussaut paused in front of a small pen, apart from the others.

Guernier saw that it was empty and the wooden gate hung open. The detective peered around, considering the problem. He studied the cement floor sloping toward the three stone steps that led to the open door. "Perhaps he was stolen."

"One of my rivals! From another restaurant . . ."

"I wonder . . ." As Guernier's eyes darted from side to side he had another thought. Could Paul or Yvette have taken the snail? Sold it to a rival restaurant? Anything was possible. "Snails always leave a trail . . ."

"There have been so many people here they would have destroyed it."

"No! Look there! Shining on the steps." Guernier hurried across the sloping floor. "Bring your torch."

Mussaut followed, flashing his light on the first stone step.

"See this?" A vertical silver line extended from the floor up to the tread of the step. Another on the second riser and the third. "He

climbed here. All those people, up and down, eliminated his track on the treads but not on the risers." Guernier went up the three steps and through the door ahead of the chef. "Let me have your torch."

"Certainly." Mussaut handed it over.

Guernier swung the beam in a circle. "Too many feet have walked here. We must go farther . . ." He moved on, swinging the light back and forth. "There's where he went!"

Mussaut saw a silver thread stretching across the grass. "He can't be far!"

Guernier held the beam of light on the shiny trail that led between some rose bushes. "There he is!"

The king sat at the foot of a lemon tree.

Mussaut picked up the great snail delicately, by his shell. "I shall forever be in your debt, Monsieur Inspecteur!"

"Nonsense! You'd have discovered him later."

"He would have vanished into the fields . . ." The chef turned back to the others, holding the snail high in both hands. "Monsieur Guernier has found him!"

The detective's reward was a magnificent dinner.

Madame Mussaut was unable to

sleep that night. Her mind was occupied with the mystery of the snail. That stupid girl, Yvette, was the one who had left the pen open—and the cellar door . . .

Yvette, in her new bedroom at the end of the hall, waited for some sound from the other rooms. Maybe nobody would bother her tonight. Monsieur Jules should be too tired after all that business with the snail and, hopefully, Paul would leave her alone. As for Madame! If only there was some way to get rid of her. Without her constant bickering and complaining this job wouldn't be too bad. Perhaps the old woman would die! She giggled at the thought. With Madame Adrienne out of the way she would marry Monsieur Jules and, when he died, she and Paul would own the restaurant. It would be easy to find another chef . . .

Paul was considering whether or not to go across the hall to Madame's room. He was getting bored with the old girl. The way she treated Yvette was impossible—always accusing her of things she hadn't done. Like that snail tonight. There ought to be some way to put an end to Madame . . .

Jules realized that he had drunk too much, celebrating the return of their king. If only Adrienne

hadn't been so disagreeable, blaming Yvette for the king's escape and, for that matter, everything else. Life would be so much happier without his wife. The restaurant was a success now. If Adrienne should die he would train Yvette to take her place. She would certainly look more attractive at the cashier's desk . . .

When Guernier returned for dinner two nights later the restaurant was crowded, but Madame Adrienne had kept his regular table for him.

Monsieur Jules prepared a new dish in his honor—Soufflé aux escargots—accompanied by the usual procession, with Paul bearing the snail king on his silver tray.

The detective gave his approval to the new creation and enjoyed the exceptional dinner.

As he ate, he observed the affectionate glances which passed from Madame Adrienne to Paul, and the glares she darted toward the kitchen where Yvette was visible, from time to time, assisting Monsieur Jules.

An electric current of suspicion and hatred seemed to flow between dining room and kitchen.

Once again, Guernier sensed the approaching explosion.

Madame Adrienne roused from

a deep sleep. Was someone in her room?

She sat up in bed but, of course, there was nobody. Must have been a sound from the distant highway that had wakened her.

Sinking back into the pillows, she fell asleep at once . . . dreamed of Yvette, weeping, denying she had stolen the snail . . . Paul looking so handsome, accusing Yvette. He had seen her running across the fields with the snail in her hands. Jules, as usual, defending the stupid girl . . .

She felt something soft against her face, cold and wet on her cheeks, pressing against her nose and mouth. She couldn't breathe!

Madame awoke, gasping and choking. The snail! It was smothering her!

She tried to scream, but her mouth was filled with soft wet horror! She tried to push the thing away.

The snail was like a suction cup across her face.

Her strength was failing . . . the weight of the snail pushing her down . . . down . . . down . . . down . . .

When Guernier drove into the parking lot several nights later he saw that it was empty again. This time there was a hand-lettered

CLOSED sign on the entrance to the restaurant. There were no lights in the dining room.

He walked around to the rear and saw that the kitchen was lighted. The detective went inside.

Mussaut was seated at the small table he used for a desk. Yvette, perched on a stool, was talking to Paul who leaned against a worktable, smoking a cigarette. They all looked toward the door as Guernier entered.

"Monsieur Inspecteur!" Mussaut got to his feet. "I was hoping you would visit us tonight. You have heard the sad news?"

"What news?"

"My wife! She is dead. Killed by the king of snails."

"The king?"

"He escaped from his pen again. Got into her bedroom two nights ago, through an open window. You could see his trail across the carpet. When we found them he was sitting on the pillow. He had smothered her. My poor wife!"

"Will there be an investigation?" Guernier asked, aware that the other two were listening to every word.

"The local gendarme and Doctor Ferrand, our good customers from the village, say that will not be necessary. Anyone could see what happened. Adrienne will be

buried in the village cemetery tomorrow. You've not had dinner, mon ami! Bien! We will dine together. Sit here! Paul will serve us."

Guernier sat at the kitchen table as Paul quickly set places, and Yvette scurried about helping Monsieur Jules with the food.

So Madame was dead. The explosion had happened—and the local police were doing nothing about it . . .

The detective became aware of delicious aromas seeping from the ovens and rising from several covered pots.

Someone must have gotten the idea for murder when the snail escaped from its pen, opened the gate again, urged the snail up those cellar steps and across the grass to Madame's window, and guided it inside, over the carpet, leaving an obvious trail to her bed. However, the weight of a snail—even that monster—would not be enough to smother anyone. Somebody had pressed the snail against her face . . . held it there until Madame stopped breathing . . . then left it on her pillow and went back to his—or her—own bed.

He inhaled the fragrance of the soup Paul set in front of him. On-

ion soup under a golden crust of cheese.

Which one was the murderer? The husband? The little maid? Or the waiter?

Monsieur Jules sat across from him and opened his napkin with a flourish. "There is a new dish for you tonight, mon ami! I worked in my kitchen today. To keep my mind away from unpleasant matters . . ."

Guernier looked around the pleasant kitchen and saw that Yvette had joined Paul, behind Mussaut's back, and the waiter was giving her a fast kiss.

The giant snail rested on its silver tray, away from the light, on a worktable.

"We will reopen the restaurant next week," Mussaut was saying. "Meanwhile, mon ami, I would be happy to prepare dinner for you, any night. We will dine together!"

"That's very kind." Guernier smiled as he ate, in anticipation of the other dishes that would follow the soup.

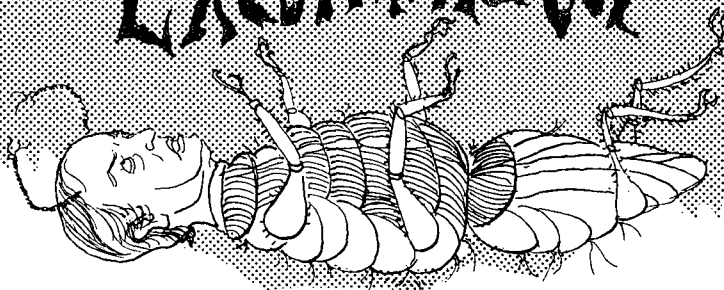
The local police were not investigating Madame's death . . .

Nobody in the village could guess what had happened . . .

He would never report his suspicions to anyone.

Ingenious one must be, to say the least, to explore and certify the occurrence of the improbable.

The Scientist and the Exterminator



El Supremo, Luis Alvarez. Ybarra, was dead, and Lieutenant Trask, who bore little of the onus for the general's sudden demise, mourned him not as a fellow human—few would be that compassionate—but purely as symbolic of an embarrassing blunder. The deceased was also known as “The Butcher of Corona Del Norte,” which accounts for many dry eyes in his native land.

by
Arthur Porges

Most of the black marks in the unfortunate matter went to the FBI, with a few demerits left for the State Department, since it was mainly the business of these two well-funded organizations to protect foreign dignitaries.

"Don't quote me," the detective said blandly. "A good cop isn't supposed to condone homicide, and I've never done it before. Or hardly ever," he added, being an honest man. "But the extermination of Ybarra hardly strikes me as a terrible crime. He was a mass-murderer himself, and worse, a torturer who loved his work. But I do hate not knowing just how it was done, which is why I'm here bothering you again."

Cyriack Skinner Grey, settling deeper into his wheelchair, smiled. "I can understand your feelings," he said, cocking his massive head in a typically quizzical way. "An exceptionally intriguing case; judging from the newspaper accounts."

Trask hesitated, then said rather diffidently, "What picture did you get from their stories over the last few days? Mind telling me?"

"Not at all—why should I? It'll save you from rehashing the whole thing." He pressed a button on the arm of the chair, obtained a small mug of coffee, and handed it to his guest. It was a special blend of Kona, dark and heavy. For himself, he pushed something the detective couldn't see, and came up with a small, greenish apple. "Like 'em tart," he said, taking a bite. "I'd better do it chronologically, so I can organize

my thoughts and remember all the significant points. To begin with, Ybarra was supposed to stay for a week, and came for an operation, not at all dangerous, but very tricky. His hearing was failing, and we have a surgeon who specializes in correcting the calcification of the tiny bones involved. It's such delicate work he uses a microscope and minuscule implements.

"He was given a room in the Grant Hotel with top security. That meant the rooms above, below, and on all sides were kept vacant. There were guards in the corridors watching his door and the others, too—the ones for empty rooms.

"Outside, the hotel was also closely guarded on four sides, day and night. Finally, there was a man on the roof at all times.

"Nevertheless, on the night before his move to the hospital, somebody managed to introduce a large amount of cyanide gas into the room. Ybarra was in bed, asleep apparently, and didn't know what killed him. Some would say," Grey added in a hard voice, "he got off too easy. But there it is: a room nine floors up, with six more over it, maximum security in every conceivable way, yet he was killed."

"You have the facts right,"

Trask said. "But there's just a bit more. We even have the empty gas cylinder; it was found in a trash can two blocks from the hotel. And to top that, we know where the killer operated from—a room in another hotel across the street—but it's almost fifty feet away, although at about the same height as Ybarra's. But how he got a cylinder weighing ten pounds across from his window to the Hotel Grant one . . .". Here the lieutenant shook his head in wonder.

"Did you also find out where he got the gas?"

"That was easy. A pest-control outfit was burglarized some days ago. Good choice; maybe the only one. Not many places keep cyanide around. 'Bug-Out Exterminators'—there's a name for you!"

"How did you identify the killer's room?" Grey asked, dropping his apple core into a slot.

"Routine matter. We checked everybody who rented a room there since Ybarra came. Of several possibles, only one looked like a Latin American, and in his room, which he took by the way, as 'James Carillo'—not his real name, of course—we found clippings about Ybarra, left there, I think, just to taunt us. Why he didn't leave the gas container, too, I don't know; but neither did he

try very hard to dispose of it effectively; wanted us to find that as well. One of your political, radical-idealist types, no doubt; proud of the murder."

"How was the gas introduced?"

"Nobody knows," Trask admitted. "I didn't get to see the room right away. You know the FBI; they look down on cops. Well, they think it was either the ventilator or the air-conditioner—what the hell else could it be, with a guard at the door?—but don't really know which, if either. I forgot to mention that to prevent a sniper from the hotel across the street, there were not only heavy draperies inside Ybarra's window, but a chicken-wire cover outside, just in case somebody tried to toss a grenade or bomb in—on the ninth floor, mind you! What from, a helicopter? To install it they had to use a sort of window-cleaner's scaffold setup."

"Did it also cover the air-conditioner you mentioned? It was a window type, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Tricky business. Had to have a bulge to go over the intake part, which sticks out about eight inches."

"In a way," the scientist said, "security helped do Ybarra in. I understand that the guard at his door smelled bitter almonds and knocked, but naturally the locks

were all set and he couldn't get in until much too late."

"That's true, but if he had got in we might have two bodies; the room was loaded, we're told. The FBI people backed well off to let the air clear. Bad stuff, cyanide gas."

"Well," Grey said, "the facts so far are simply not adequate for a highly probable inference. I need more data."

"Like what?" Trask asked eagerly.

"Did you check the air-conditioner thoroughly?"

"The FBI did, and found nothing of interest. They had hoped to find some kind of time-delay canister inside, I suspect; that would have cleared up the matter—to a point. Anyhow, I looked it over when they finally condescended to permit it. Didn't find anything."

"It doesn't take much," the scientist said. "Suppose you could bring me the filter?"

"Probably. Although it was pretty dirty; should have been changed long ago. But the Grant Hotel is starting to cut corners; maybe too much modern competition. Newer places, for example, have central air-conditioning. Do you have an idea?" he added wistfully.

"Not really, but something in the filter might suggest one."

"Then I'll bring it, even if the room's rented now. As I said, a change is in order, anyhow."

"While you're at it," Grey said, "take a good look at the outside screen."

Trask blinked. "What for?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe a dent; but it could be just a spot where the paint, if any, is chipped." He raised an admonitory hand, smiling. "No use asking questions; I'm just 'hunting,' as they say, about a feedback setup trying to stabilize. I'll say this much: I suspect the gas came in by the air-conditioner, but it's only a hunch or quasi-reasonable guess based on the Holmes axiom—you know the one—other possibilities too impossible, so the highly-improbable is favored!"

The detective looked at him wordlessly. "I can't even comment sensibly on that," he said in a plaintive voice. "I'll be back with the filter and a reconditioned brain, obviously needed around here!" and he stalked out.

Moments later, rather sheepishly, he returned. "Forgot to give you the file—what there is. Not very much, and little you don't already know; but the photos may help."

"Good," Grey said. "I'll go through it."

The scientist studied the mate-

rial in a way oddly desultory for him; his mind seemed to be elsewhere. Actually, he was convinced circumstances were so limiting that a solution ought to suggest itself even at this point, assuming one had enough imagination. From one room to another, fifty feet away, both about ninety feet high—that was the crux of the puzzle, even with no additional data. But a heavy cylinder—ten pounds Trask had said—across such a gap and without elaborate or massive equipment, no way . . .

He examined the photos. Only one seemed to interest him; it showed that the area between the two hotels was actually a small park; that could be significant. Late at night, when the murder was accomplished, few, if any, people would be around. It also implied a degree of darkness; the killer could do—well, whatever he did—those nine stories up with little chance of being observed; in fact, his entire operation might be totally invisible from so far below in such circumstances. Noise, of course, was another matter. How could he get the gas cylinder across in relative silence?

Dead stop. He pressed a button in the arm of his chair, and when the little crystal goblet of old brandy proffered itself, raised it to

his lips even as they twitched briefly. Cure your delusions of infallibility! he admonished himself. James Carillo is too clever for yours truly. Smiling, he sipped, savoring the excellent liquor. Then it was back to the dossier, and the baffling puzzle that had produced it . . . But after two more hours he was still without answers. Sighing, he gave up the riddle for that day.

The filter, once Grey had a chance to examine it, proved a familiar type, consisting of glass wool supported by a rectangular frame. It was quite dirty, but not clogged, so on that warm night—Ybarra's last—the general would have had no reason to fiddle with the cooler.

The wool was mostly dark gray, but city air can do that in hours. There were, however, scattered patches of black. It was in one of these that Grey found something of interest. He picked at it with tweezers; a shred of black, shiny stuff, nearly invisible in the soiled fibers of the filter. The scientist studied it with growing excitement. The theater of his mind, with imagination as the seasoned producer, came to life. Damn the gas tank; its weight was no longer an obstacle to a convincing theory; now it was only a matter of

journeyman work, mere implementation of the basic concept, a brilliant one, Grey thought, with admiration.

When Trask came back for a briefing, the scientist made no attempt to conceal his elation. He held up the scrap of material, and said, "Here's what fooled us. It's polyethylene, the stuff they make weather balloons from. Carillo didn't need to transport a heavy cylinder across to Ybarra's room—just a balloon full of gas!"

The lieutenant blinked, then smiled approval, but his reaction seemed subdued.

"That makes a difference," he admitted, "but still, getting anything across there is more than I can figure out."

"I won't say it was done this way," Grey said, "but here's how it could be accomplished—how I'd do it.

"Start with a small, powerful magnet, alnico type; weight about an ounce. Fasten a short wire around it with the free end having a loop, to serve as a pulley. Now take a hundred feet of fishing line, monofilament, light and strong, say two-pound test weight, and pass one end through the wire loop. With the two free ends at his window, Carillo projects the magnet against the wire mesh

near—just above, he'd hope—the air-conditioner."

"Wait a minute," Trask interrupted. "What do you mean 'project'? How?"

"Can't say for sure. One way would be a good modern slingshot. Or with a dowel fastened to the magnet, you could use an air rifle. There are many ways. Probably we'll never know which was used. But, to go on, Carillo now has a sort of endless clothesline running to Ybarra's window, once he ties his two ends together. All right; he fills the balloon with cyanide gas from the cylinder—very carefully, I'd assume!—ties it to the filament, and by pulling on the line moves the balloon over to the general's window. There he pops it; the released gas is sucked into the cooler's grille, and that's the end of Ybarra."

"Slow down," the lieutenant pleaded. "How does he pop the balloon?"

"Same answer," was the airy reply. "He could have used the slingshot, firing a ball bearing. Or the air gun with a BB or .22 pellet. Easy, compared to sending the magnet and line across. I suggest," he added, "a search, probably futile, for the evidence."

"Which will be?" Trask asked in a dry voice.

"After the balloon collapses,

Carillo would naturally pull on the fishing line. But the chunk of polyethylene, minus the fragment I found in the filter, was bound to jam at the magnet; too bulky for any loop. So that end would fall down to the park. He could easily reel the magnet and empty balloon up to his window, but that might attract somebody's notice, and why should he bother? If he didn't, they should be still somewhere in the brush. By the way, did you check the wire mesh?"

"Yes," the detective said, eyes twinkling. "There was a mark or slight dent, all right. Made by the magnet, I suppose."

"I'd say so. Must have made quite a thump to go all that way carrying a double line; but with Ybarra asleep and not hearing well to begin with . . . Otherwise, he might have investigated and still be alive."

"It's a wonder nobody saw anything, what with a big balloon moving across from one window to another."

"Little chance of that. It was the middle of the night, dark, an

empty park, other guests probably sleeping; and ninety feet up, remember. Besides, the balloon was black; he used some kind of paint or dye; didn't miss a trick, Mr. Carillo!"

"I'll have the park area searched," Trask said.

So it was that some hours later he returned with a crumpled mass of polyethylene to which was still attached a magnet and six inches of monofilament line.

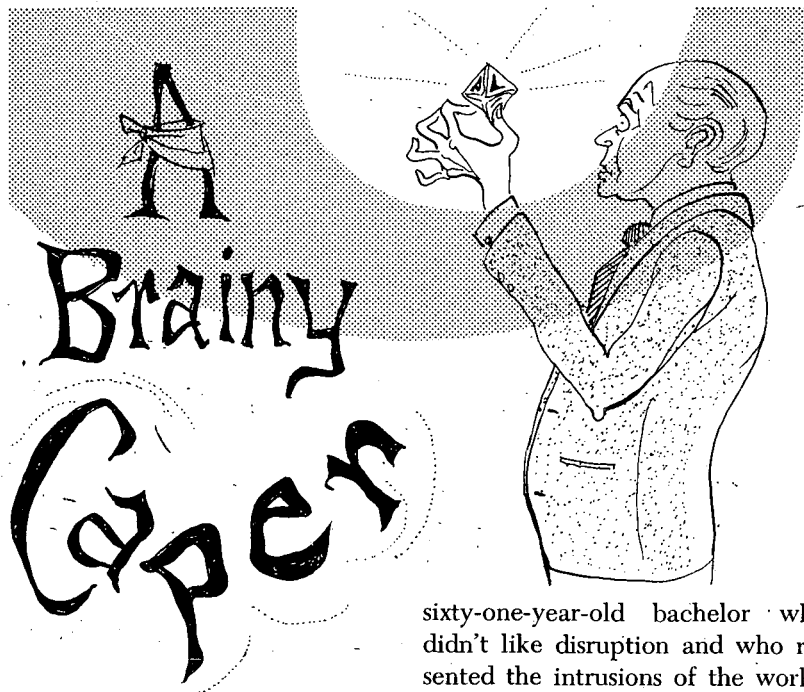
"Evidently got snagged in the shrubbery," the detective said. "Carillo either couldn't find it in the dark or didn't bother, as you suggested. Hauled in what broke loose, I suppose, and took off like a big-bottomed bird. Our hope of identifying him, much less finding him, is nil."

"I'm not too sad about that, are you?" Grey asked, smiling. "Considering his means—cyanide gas—and the character of Ybarra, you might think of it as a kind of amateur, free-lance job of pest extermination."

"Unofficially," Trask said, "I agree. Officially, no comment."



As Mark Twain so aptly wrote: Thunder is good, thunder is impressive; but it is lightning that does the work.



Sidney Bitteman, expert diamond-cutter, was marching with the 5:00 p.m. mobs on 31st Street after work, heading toward the subway and home in Brooklyn, expecting nothing unusual. A good supper, a relaxed evening with his sister who kept house for him, this was his fixed routine—enough for a

sixty-one-year-old bachelor who didn't like disruption and who resented the intrusions of the world. Bitteman had no suspicion that, from the instant he'd stepped out of the office building, two men had been following his scrawny, potbellied form.

Neither did Bitteman know that a certain olive-green sedan of high horsepower, which had been repeatedly and purposefully circling the block, was now coming

around again, moving slowly with the traffic, bearing down on him.

Somebody in the crowd jostled Bitteman. Instantly he swung his bony hips and jostled back, exchanging bitter glares with the burly woman. In a dog-eat-dog world you always have to watch the next guy. Well, Sidney Bitteman was awake; he never bothered anybody, but nobody was going to get away with abusing *him*.

Bitteman saw the thin form of the blind man with the cup and the pencils in his usual place, shrunk against the building. Bitteman reached in his pocket for change. The man was really blind, not a faker, Bitteman knew, all right; he'd been there himself. He would never forget that period in his life, many years ago, when he'd lost his sight after an accident. He hadn't known that it wasn't to be permanent; he'd been blind for fourteen months, then his vision had gradually returned all the way. He would never forget the hopeless, black depression; then, like a miracle, the ac-

ceptance, the discovery of new powers beyond sight, the opening of the world to him through touch and hearing and smell and feeling, a new perception in his head, not of the senses. It was an experience that had marked him for life. Even his expertness at gem-cutting came from the sensitivity he'd developed then; when he touched a diamond he could feel its soul and identity, the diamond flowed into him, he learned and understood that diamond, he knew what it needed.

Mostly, he would rather communicate with diamonds than with people. He always found some rottenness in people, somewhere. Diamonds were only beautiful.

Bitteman dropped three pennies into the blind man's cup. He always gave something.

He resumed his march with the throng. The olive-green sedan now swung to the curb, some yards ahead. The two men who had been tracking him came up rapidly. One of them blocked Bitteman, the other crowded him toward the car, jamming a snub-nosed automatic into his ribs, the gun skillfully palmed so it was visible only to Bitteman. It was smooth and quick; the abstracted throng flowed on around them, unnoticing, uncaring.

"Get in," the gunman ordered,

by Michael
Zuroy

pushing, smiling as though he were an acquaintance offering a lift.

Bitteman resisted like a muscular chicken. His eyes widened at the gun. His mouth opened. Outraged, he yelled, "What? A gun you're pointing at me?"

"Shut up!" the gunman said in a subdued snarl, suddenly looking nervous. He had a football-type head, seeming inflated, tight-skinned, with teeth that bared easily. "In, or you're dead." He shoved hard. The other man, squat and long-armed, also grabbed Bitteman and shoved.

Bitteman managed to twist partly free. "Bums!" he shouted. "What's the idea pointing a gun at a person who is only minding his own business? You would like it if I did it to you? Is this right? Is this nice? You think you're scaring me? You bums, bring a machine gun, it won't scare me. Bring a cannon, bring bombs. Get your hands off me and go away. If I want a taxi, I'll call for it."

"Get in, damn you," the man with the gun said desperately. They renewed their holds on Bitteman, who struggled and kicked. The squat one yelped as Bitteman's toe caught his ankle.

"Help!" Bitteman's yell turned muffled as the gunman clapped him hard on the back, like a

hearty friend, knocking the breath out of him. The squat one sank his fist into his belly at the same time. Several passersby glanced their way, then quickly forwards, as though blanking out the scene, minding their own business in the way of city people not wanting to get involved.

His struggles now enfeebled, Bitteman made himself into a deadweight. They picked him up and threw him into the car, settling themselves on either side of him. The car took off. Not a policeman was in sight.

The man next to the driver turned in his seat. His face had a queerly noble cast, with deep-seated dark eyes. He was wearing a black pinstriped suit, lavender shirt and black tie. His eyes were now critical.

"You almost flubbed it," he said. His voice was soft, but there seemed to be a blade in it.

"On account of this is such a character," the squat man said aggrievedly.

"I'm a character?" Bitteman, partly recovered, snapped back. "So what are you? Hoodlums, bums, trash from the dump, jumping on innocent people with guns and big hands, and for what reason I still don't know. For my part, you can drop dead right now."

The squat man brought up a backhand that rocked Bitteman's head. "Big mouth," he snarled.

Bitteman crashed his shoe down on the man's foot, raising an agonized squawk from him. The man twisted in his seat and drew back his fist.

"That will do, Santa," the one with the lavender shirt said. "I don't want him injured. We need him."

The fist lowered reluctantly. "Okay, but he's asking for it, Duke."

"You need me," Bitteman said. "For what, may I ask? What am I, a Vanderbilt, a John D. Rockefeller, a J.P. Morgan that you should kidnap me? You expect cash out of this? Ha-ha, the joke is on you. I am very far from rich, and even if I was I would not allow one dollar to be paid for my ransom; not a dollar, not a quarter, not a dime, not a penny, not even a broken diaper pin. You have got the wrong man, you're wasting your time and mine. Go kidnap somebody else. Stop the car and let me out at once, you bums. On account of you, my dinner will be getting cold and my sister will worry. She's a worrying type anyway, without you. The poor woman, she doesn't need gangsters also."

"Man, what a mouth on him,"

the bat-eared driver marveled, swinging the car skillfully into a stream of eastbound traffic.

"You are Sidney Bitteman, are you not?" Duke asked.

"For a long time," Bitteman said. "And you are who?"

Duke ignored the question. "Bitteman, the diamond-cutter?" he pursued.

"That's right."

"One of the top diamond-cutters in the entire profession?"

"This is entirely correct," Bitteman said.

"We have the right man, you see."

"What do you want from me?"

"You'll soon find out."

"Write me a letter about it," Bitteman said. "Now, just let me out."

"It's time to put the blindfold on him, Horace," Duke said to the gunman with the football head. Outside, street lights and car headlights now gleamed; darkness had come.

"You don't put no blindfold on me," Bitteman said.

"I advise you to cooperate," Duke said silkily.

"Look out! He's going to bite!" Santa yelled as Horace tried to maneuver the heavy, padded blindfold over Bitteman's eyes. Horace hastily pulled back.

"How would you like a knock

on the head instead?" Horace inquired.

"Bitteman," Duke said, "if you find out where we're taking you, we'll have to shoot you."

Bitteman thought this over. "So put on the blindfold," he said.

When it was on, he leaned back. It was like he was blind again; the darkness was total. It was an efficient blindfold but these people didn't realize, Bitteman knew, how sharply receptive and sensitive he was in other ways since his former blindness.

He'd known exactly where the car was when they'd shut off his vision: on East 23rd, between Second and First Avenues. Now, his ears began to pick up acutely every sound, his mind classifying and recording the varied and changing street noises, the shifting nuances from the tires and engine of the car that carried him. His nostrils drew in the differences in the neighborhood smells they passed through. Somewhere in his brain every change in direction was sensed, the precise passage of time between changes was marked.

Conversation had stopped in the car. Very good; he could concentrate better. He still knew exactly where they were, heading south on Avenue D now.

After a while, another turn, a couple of stops; a change in the

tire noises and outside sounds—the Williamsburg Bridge; they were crossing into Brooklyn now.

Tire noise changing again; Brooklyn, the East River behind them; straight on still, must be the plaza section, a turn off the Expressway, so Grand Street here, east on Grand, feel the time going, count the intersections where the noises changed, opened up.

A turn off Grand; Bitteman concentrated. More turns, short and long periods of time, more turns, the car was twisting through Brooklyn's innumerable side streets. Very hard now, Bitteman tried to concentrate with all his power. Chunks of time and space, zigging, zagging, stopping, going, it could drive a man crazy. Desperately, Bitteman tried to hold on. The car kept going, as though it would never stop. Bitteman's head was bursting, and still they drove . . .

At last, arrived somewhere; Bitteman felt the car swing into a driveway and park. They removed him from the car and guided him to a door, then up one flight of stairs, another door, into an apartment. Since there was a driveway, must be a private house, probably duplex, like there was all over Brooklyn, Bitteman reasoned. They removed the blindfold.

Bitteman blinked. The room

was spacious, with mixed furnishings. Heavy draperies covered the windows. Some chairs, two massive chests of drawers of different styles, a radio on top of a TV set, end tables with whiskey bottles, and a telephone on one of them, it was not exactly a decorator's dream.

"So now what?" Bitteman said.

"We've brought you here to do a job for us," Duke told him.

"I refuse," Bitteman said.

"Look, wise guy," Santa said, "I've had just about enough out of you. You do what we say, or it's curtains."

"This is a threat to murder me, I take it?"

"We'll blast you, that's what, you give us trouble. We'll plug you full of holes."

"Try it, just try it," Bitteman said, growing excited. "I'll curse you while I'm dying. I'll put a curse on you, you'll never know another good day. I'll send my ghost back to haunt you, you'll wake up screaming every night, you'll be shaking all the time. I'll hound you wherever you run, I'll make out of you a nervous wreck. You'll be glad when you're dead, only I'll be waiting for you. Believe me—"

Duke raised a hand. "Calm yourself, Bitteman. We prefer not to harm you. Santa just has a

rough way of speaking. Keep your stupid mouth shut, Santa, understand? Actually, Bitteman, I think you'd find this job very interesting indeed. Interesting, challenging and—ah—rewarding."

"So what's the job?" Bitteman, curious, said more quietly.

Duke went to one of the chests, unlocked a drawer and removed a white cardboard box. He placed the box on the table and removed the cover. "Just look at this, Bitteman."

Bitteman stalked over and looked.

He almost fainted.

Hardly ever did anything impress Bitteman. Now, he was impressed. He was stunned. He was speechless.

It lay there, shimmering. Inside, on fire; outside, sparking off colors, blazing with beauty—a great, pure star from outer space captured in a box.

He knew them all, the great ones. It was his trade, his interest. He'd studied the pictures, he'd absorbed every smallest detail of the descriptions, the histories. He'd seen some of them in rare displays. Yes, he knew all the other great diamonds.

Here was the *Bhaji-Thari*, 267 carats, flawless blue-white perfection, once the possession of royalty, lately acquired by Ameri-

can billionaire Sampson Jaggars. Slowly, reverently, Bitteman touched the diamond, picked it up, sensed it. It was the *Bhaji-Thari* itself, not a reproduction, Bitteman knew that at once, without doubt, knew it without need of testing, knew it from his learning and experience and instinct and feelings. He stared into a facet, trying to enter the diamond's inner chamber with the light rays that recoiled from facet to facet and broke into the colors of the spectrum. Bitteman's fingers trembled a little.

He looked at Duke. "How did you get this?"

"We stole it," Duke said.

"You stole it. How did you steal it? It wasn't just lying around. I saw this diamond once on display, in a gallery. There were armed guards all over the place. So how did you steal it?"

"It's our profession to steal. We know our profession, Bitteman, we all have our specialities. Mine is brains, if I may say so. I planned and prepared for this caper down to the smallest detail. Yes, the diamond was in a basement vault in Jaggars' Manhattan mansion. Yes, it was strongly protected. But there's no protection that can't be circumvented by intelligence, skill and audacity. They may not even know it's gone yet. You can read

about it when it finally comes out in the newspapers; right now, we have business with you."

"Excuse me, I don't do business with crooks," Bitteman said loftily.

"Excuse me, you have no choice," Duke said coldly. "Understand this, Bitteman, unless you cooperate fully, you will die. Here. Now. Ghost or no ghost."

"You're scaring me terrible," Bitteman said. "But I suppose it don't hurt to listen. Go on."

"First, I want you to call home and explain that you have to work late," Duke said. "I overlook no details. I don't want the police out looking for you. I don't want to chance any future connection either."

Bitteman hesitated. At least this way, Elsie wouldn't worry. If he refused to call, it would do him no good anyway.

"I'll dial, you talk," Duke said. "What's the phone number?"

Bitteman gave it to him.

"One word out of the way; one false note and you're dead," Duke warned. "Make it natural."

"Hello, Elsie, it's me," Bitteman said, when he heard her voice. "I got to work late, a special job, got to be ready for tomorrow morning. What? Yes, I know it's getting cold, can't help it. Warm it up later, I'll have a bite around

here meanwhile. When? I couldn't say, maybe hours. I'll be finished whenever I finish. All right; all right, I'll try." He hung up.

"Good," Duke said. "Now, here's what we want. We want you to cut this diamond into two pieces for us."

Bitteman stared. "What? Split the *Bhaji-Thari*?"

"That's right. As it is, it's too well-known. The whole world will soon know it's been stolen. We couldn't dispose of it. I realize we'll sacrifice some value this way, but we'll still have two fabulous stones, worth a fortune—and unidentifiable. The details are already arranged. We have papers prepared, we have an expert working for us who can regrind and repolish the stones; it's only the splitting he says he can't do. That, he says, requires a top specialist, a master of the art. That, Bitteman, is you."

"And if I don't do this you'll kill me?"

"We'll kill you, yes. If you do it, and keep your mouth shut afterward, you'll not only stay alive, you'll be well compensated. You'll get one thousand dollars cash, in small bills. Tonight, as soon as the job's done."

"Even if I said yes, how could I do it? With my bare hands?"

"We have all the tools here.

Horace, get the stuff from the other room and lay it out on the table."

"A thousand dollars, huh?" Bitteman said meditatively. "I don't know about that."

"We won't quibble," Duke said. "Two thousand."

"No, no, you don't understand—"

"Three thousand. That's it."

"I couldn't do it for more than two hundred."

"What?"

"That's enough for my time; that's a fair fee. Over that, it's like I'm sharing the robbery money with you, like I am an accessory."

"Why sure, that's the idea."

"No, sir!" Bitteman said emphatically. "I'm an honest man. I don't want no part of that diamond, stolen like it is. If I did it you could pay me for my time, no more. I wouldn't accept a cent over two hundred."

"Come, come, Bitteman, don't be foolish. That's a lot of money to turn down. We want you in; it makes us more secure, of course. We'll go four thousand. You can't resist that."

"On second thought, one hundred and fifty would be plenty," Bitteman said.

"Five thousand," Duke said. "That's the top."

"Actually, I'd feel better with a hundred and a quarter," Bitteman said.

They stared at each other.

"Five-five," Duke said.

"At a hundred, I'd consider it," Bitteman said.

Duke surrendered. "Very well, one hundred. But understand this, Bitteman, you're still a dead man if you talk about this afterward. We'd get you, wherever you are, so wipe this out of your mind when we're done with you."

"Wait a minute," Bitteman said. "I just realized something. I couldn't take a hundred either."

"Now what?"

"It would still be stolen money. You're crooks, so whatever money you got is crooked money. I couldn't even take one cent from you."

Duke's face began to turn stony. "There's a limit to my patience, Bitteman. Is this a definite refusal?"

"Wait, wait," Bitteman said. "I am still considering."

He looked down at the diamond. He wouldn't admit it to them, but the opportunity to cut the *Bhaji-Thari* was an unbearable temptation. Of course, it was wrong, but if he had no choice, if they would kill him otherwise? Why not, then? After all, to cut diamonds, to divine the soul and

hidden beauty of diamonds and to bring them to the most perfect fulfillment, this was his work and his passion. He had cut many fine, big diamonds over the years, but a *Bhaji-Thari*? Never yet. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Almost, he was grateful to these crooks.

"I'll do it for nothing," Bitteman said. "Those are my best terms."

Duke's face relaxed. "You're a queer one, Bitteman, but agreed."

"Of course sometimes it takes days, even weeks of study to figure the best way to cut such a diamond."

Duke's face darkened again. "It better not. Try to stall us, you'll be sorry."

"Oh, me it doesn't take so long; I could do it tonight. I got a particular feel for this."

"Good. Get started."

"Not so quick," Bitteman said. "I can't work on an empty stomach; I couldn't guarantee the results. On account of you, I missed a good supper my sister worked hard on, now it's sitting there cold. You jump on a man, you beat him, you kidnap him, you disturb him with threats, you don't even let him have a bite to eat after working all day, you think he could do a satisfactory job? My whole system is upset, I don't feel right, I'm weak. I

would like something to eat, please."

"He would like something to eat," Santa said blackly. "Anything else this character wants? Shoes shined? Pants pressed? A kick in the teeth?"

Duke was looking fixedly at Bitteman. Then he shook his head and said in a very quiet voice, "See what's in the kitchen, Santa."

After a moment, Santa moved. He went into the kitchen. Presently he bawled, "Got some salami and roast beef."

"I'll have a roast beef sandwich," Bitteman said. "With mustard. And a cup of coffee."

"Roast beef sandwich with mustard. Cup of coffee," Duke shouted.

"Light coffee," Bitteman said. "Two sugars."

Duke's eyes took on a faint glaze. "Light coffee, two sugars," he called. "Got that, Santa?"

The answer was an inarticulate snarl.

The food was brought in. Bitteman picked up the sandwich with relish, then frowned. He opened the sandwich and tested with his little finger. "The meat is *cold*," he said. "I can't eat it. I got to have it *hot*."

"Let's kill him and get somebody else," Santa said. He pulled his gun. "Why don't I just plug

the creep and get it over with?"

"He's making me nervous," Bitteman said. "How can I work when I'm nervous?"

"Stop making him nervous," Duke said. "Go back and heat up the roast beef, Santa. And keep your mouth shut."

Santa took the sandwich back, muttering.

When Bitteman was finished eating, Duke inquired, "Everything satisfactory? Are you ready now?"

"Ready," Bitteman said. "Everybody kindly stand back; I can't operate in a crowd. That's better."

Bitteman picked up the *Bhaji-Thari*. Slowly, the beautiful thing began to communicate with him. He held it up to the light and studied it for long minutes, feeling the happiness of its purity and loveliness mounting within him, the understanding of its secrets growing . . .

Bitteman turned his head. "Who's breathing like that?" he snapped. They stared at him. "So loud." Bitteman jabbed an accusing finger at the bat-eared man. "You, do you got to breathe like that when I'm concentrating?"

"Mugsy, out!" Duke ordered.

Bitteman turned back to the diamond. He closed his eyes. His fingers caressed and sensed the

diamond. Since his blindness, he'd had this power to receive and know through different avenues. He put the diamond to his ear, listened to its soundless message. He put it to his lips, feeling the faint thrilling of its inner vibrations . . .

He opened his eyes. He knew how it should be divided. He knew the precise location of the only perfect line of cleavage. Swiftly and surely, he fixed it in the clutch and with the notching tool scored it in exactly the right place. He set it on the table in its holder. He raised the cleaving blade and, without the need of adjustment, set it at once precisely in position. He lifted the weight of the striker, poised . . .

The room had grown utterly silent, breaths held, nerves tensed, waiting for the vital blow.

Bitteman did not deliver the blow. Slowly he turned his head again. "I thought of something else," he said.

"Oh, no," Horace moaned.

"How do I know you won't kill me anyway after I finish the cut?" he demanded. "Dead men tell no tales, isn't that it? What's to stop you? How can I trust you?"

"Bitteman," Duke said, "listen. If we wanted to knock you off, would we have bothered to blindfold you bringing you here? If we

were going to kill you anyway, would it matter if you knew our location?"

"Logical, I got to admit," Bitteman said.

"We don't *want* to knock you off, unless you give us trouble. It would not be intelligent to leave ourselves open for a murder rap too, if we should ever get caught. In such an event, once the loot is hidden, we could still make a deal, we could negotiate with the insurance company and the D.A.'s office, if need be. Murder is not negotiable; it is not to our advantage. Do you follow?"

"Absolutely," Bitteman said, nodding. He turned and struck swiftly. The diamond divided cleanly. Breaths sighed out.

"Fine," Duke said. "Horace, blindfold him again. We'll take him back."

"The quicker, the better," Santa growled.

"Remember what I told you, Bitteman," Duke warned. "You'll be all right now if you keep your mouth shut. But if you spill a word about this to the police or anybody, you're a dead man; we'd never let you live to witness against us. Clear?"

"Precisely," Bitteman said.

Back home with his sister, Bitteman was sitting at the table,

eating the warmed-over meal. It was past midnight. He was tired and hungry; he had spent a long time making his statement to the police and answering their questions after Duke and his gang had been captured by them and the split *Bhaji-Thari* recovered.

"In a way, Elsie, I didn't like to lead the cops to them," Bitteman said. "I appreciated the chance to cut such a stone; the experience of a lifetime, believe me. But I couldn't let them get away with grabbing me and knocking me around like they did. And they had committed a big crime, right?"

"But how did you have the nerve after the way they threatened you?"

"So what guarantee did I have that sometime they might not change their minds and get me, anyway? As long as they were free, how safe could I feel? No, I thought it over and decided the best thing was to have them put away immediately. They will be locked up in the penitentiary at least twenty years for this."

"Well, it's marvelous you were able to give the police their location, after the way you say they blindfolded you and drove through

so many streets. Nobody else but you could have done it, Sidney. Such a sense of direction without even seeing—miraculous."

"Oh, that!" Bitteman said. "It wasn't that at all. I mean, I tried, but eventually they lost me. Even for me, this was impossible."

"Then how on earth did you know where that house was, Sidney?"

"Specialists, they call themselves," Bitteman said. "Hah! To be a specialist, you control every detail, every little thing. I am a specialist. Sure, they were very careful, very thorough. But, Elsie, one little detail they missed, just one."

"What, Sidney?"

"When they made me talk to you on the telephone."

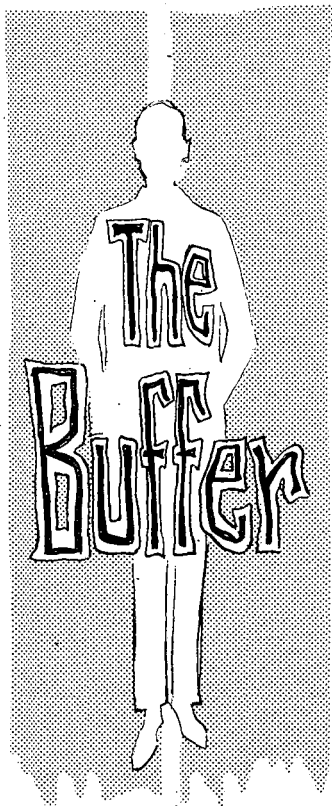
"So? I didn't realize you were in trouble."

"No, you didn't. But they should have paid more attention to the telephone itself. It never occurred to them what was on that phone, like most phones—a detail the police could use to find them. All I had to do was remember it."

"You mean—"

"That's right. Their telephone number."

The desire for full credit may strain one's family relations.



Bledso had been Vince CarPELLi's buffer for five years and was more than satisfied with his position.

Vince was not. "You have to make your bones, you have to be-

come a member of the Family, if only a made member," he said for the umpteenth time.

"I've told you, Vince. I'm happy just as I am."

Bledso was a tall man in his early fifties, with thick graying hair and aristocratic features. He looked as distinguished as a supreme court justice and had the morals of a mugger. He was, in fact, a graduate of Harvard Law School and had practiced law until he discovered he could make more money, and easier, working for Vince CarPELLi. The only violent act he had ever committed was a hit-and-run episode with a cat, and he was sick for weeks afterward every time he thought of the cat on the pavement.

Always before, Vince had been content with Bledso's rejoinder. This time he wasn't. "That ain't good enough, your being happy. Some of the boys been at me. They ain't so happy. They tell me, 'Vince, that buffer of yours, he ain't a Family member and he knows a lot of things goes on.'"

"What do they think? That I'm

going to snitch to the cops?" Bledso demanded indignantly. "Why would I do that? I've got a good thing with you, Vince! Why should I risk that?"

Vince CarPELLi, squat, swarthy, with the face of a dark angel, spread his hands. "It's not me saying that, it's the boys. Just because I'm Family Boss, don't mean I don't have to listen. This ain't what you call a dictatorship we got here, it's a demoncracy."

Bledso kept a straight face. "What would you have me do?"

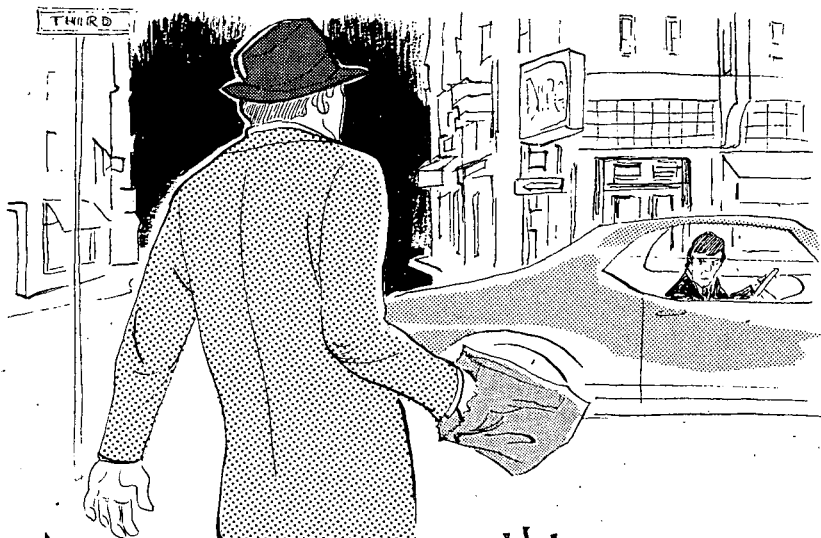
"Make your bones, like I been telling you. Then you'll be a made member of the Family. I got a hit in mind for you—Joey Lamont.

He's into me for fifteen big ones. Twice, I sent the boys around. The last time they worked him over good. Still no dough. We've got to whack him out. He's gotta be made an example of."

Vince CarPELLi ran the Mob's drug operation in the city, supplying the dealers with their weekly quota. Bledso stared at him, a shiver of apprehension dancing along his spine. So far, he had taken Vince's jibes as good-natured kidding. This time the man was serious.

Bledso said, "I'm not a hit man, Vince. I wouldn't even know how to go about it."

"It's a pie. No sweat. I'll even



by Clayton Matthews

lay it all out for you. I'll slip you a piece that can't be traced. All you have to do is stick it against his head and pull the trigger. Bang! No more Joey, and the rest of 'em will think twice before welshing on me!" He beamed. "It's like they say, two birds with one rock. Good-bye, Joey, and you make your notches!"

"Why don't you put out a contract like always?" Bledso asked.

Vince's smile vanished. "No contract!" He slammed a fist down on his desk. "You do it. Or else!"

In Mob terminology a buffer is a guy who passes the orders of the Boss down the line. He also handles minor complaints, makes sure that an underling has an urgent reason for an audience with the Boss. He is, in effect, a barrier between the Boss and members of the Mob.

Bledso figured he had done a good job of it—how many times had Vince told him so?—but he was not a hit man. The very thought of killing anyone made him sick.

Yet he had little choice. If he didn't kill Joey Lamont, Vince would kill *him*. There was no doubt of that in Bledso's mind.

Oh, there was one alternative—he could cut and run—but give up all that easy loot? Plus the fact

that he would be running for the rest of his natural life, always looking back over his shoulder.

He, who had never fired a gun in his life, had to hit Joey Lamont. He didn't even have to plan it. Vince had it all laid out for him, the target date two nights away.

For one night and a day Bledso racked his brain for a solution. Then an answer came to him: why didn't he simply hire a hit man to whack Joey out? Then Bledso would take the credit for it, at least so far as Vince was concerned. If he went about it the right way, Vince would never know. Certainly Joey, dead, would never tell.

Bledso knew just the right man for the job. As a buffer, he usually passed on the contracts, so the hit man would never connect Vince Carpelli with the job.

Crazy Jake. Nobody knew his last name, and he was crazy like a fox. Twice during his career he had been arrested on suspicion, but both times he had been able to convince the cops that he didn't have sense enough to push a wheelbarrow in a straight line, much less plan and carry out a hit.

Crazy Jake was past his prime now. The last time Bledso had given him a contract, the killer

had complained that he was getting too old for the work. He had squirreled away quite a bit of money, but he wanted one more good job. Then he would retire, drop completely out of sight where neither the Mob nor the cops would ever be able to locate him.

It would cost. Crazy Jake didn't come cheap, and he wanted his last job to be for a good chunk of loot. To be on the safe side, probably fifteen big ones, but it would be worth the price, and Bledso could afford it. After the hit was made, Crazy Jake would disappear, Joey Lamont would be eliminated, and Bledso would be in strong with Vince, a made member of the Mob.

Not that the last was important to him. He'd just as soon not become a member, but it was what Vince wanted.

Bledso called the contact number he had for Crazy Jake from a phone booth and left the payphone number with the impersonal voice on the other end. "Tell Jake to call me here in one hour."

Bledso got back to the phone booth a good fifteen minutes before the hour. The booth was empty, and Bledso occupied it immediately, chain-smoking. Since there were five other booths, no

one bothered him to leave it.

On the nose of sixty minutes the phone rang. Bledso snatched it up. "Jake?"

"Yeah."

"I have a contract for you. A good one. You said you wanted a good one before you retire." Bledso laughed uncertainly. "You are still retiring?"

"Yeah. How much?"

"Fifteen."

"Give me the details."

"The guy is Joey Lamont. Not that you'll need his name. It's all laid out for you. One thing, for reasons I won't go into, it has to be done at a certain time and place and with a piece I'll supply."

"I always use my own piece!"

"Not this time. That's why the money is heavier than usual. Don't worry, the piece is safe. It'll never be traced to you."

There was a brief silence on the other end. Bledso waited with bated breath. It had to be done with the gun Vince was supplying, the piece left on the scene, so there would be no doubt in Vince's mind that Bledso had personally made the hit.

"Okay," Jake finally said. "Fill me in on the rest."

"Tonight at nine sharp Joey Lamont will be waiting at the northeast corner of Lotus and Third.

He'll be alone, in a blue 1972 two-door." Bledso gave Crazy Jake the license number of Joey's car. "He'll be expecting a delivery. Take along a brown paper bag. Have the piece in it. Lotus and Third is a lonely spot, little foot traffic. Wait until you see no one around, approach the car, he'll roll down the window to accept the package. You shoot him through the sack, drop the piece on the seat and walk away. Got all that?"

"Yeah."

"You still have that locker, the one I have the key for?"

"Still got it."

"I'll leave the piece there this afternoon, along with the fifteen grand. All of it, not half as usual. You see how much we trust you on this one?"

"Yeah, I see."

"That's it then, Jake. And . . . good luck on your retirement."

Bledso was sweating when he hung up, but he was also jubilant. It was working like a charm.

He fumbled a dime out of his pocket and dialed another number. There would be no trouble on this one. The number was Joey Lamont's apartment, and Joey was expecting the call.

When Joey answered on the first ring, Bledso said without preamble, "Joey, this is Bledso. Vince

has decided to trust you one more time . . ."

"Damn, you guys sure took your own sweet time! I've been out of stuff for three whole days and the junkies are all over my back!"

Bledso said coldly, "Do you want to make a buy or not?"

"Of course I want to make a buy! I'm out of business if I don't!"

"Then shut up and listen. First, Vince wants me to pass on the word that this is absolutely the last buy you'll make unless you pay up. Can you get that through your thick skull?"

"I'm trying to catch up," Joey said in a whining voice. "It's just that I had a bad run of luck with the nags and—"

"That's your problem," Bledso cut in. "Vince says if you don't cough up, no more buys."

"All right, all right, I'll pay," Joey said quickly. "Just let me make this buy. All the junkies are in a snit for a fix. I should clean up. I'll turn every nickel over to Vince."

"Then be at Lotus and Third, northeast corner, tonight at nine sharp. The delivery will be made by a man on foot. He'll have it in a brown paper bag."

Joey agreed eagerly, and Bledso hung up. He felt weak now,

sweating even more heavily, but it was in the works, and he couldn't see anything going wrong. Joey had never seen Crazy Jake, so he would suspect nothing.

Now, when Joey was whacked out according to Vince's plan, Vince would be convinced it was Bledso's doing. Even the piece being left beside the body was part of the plan. Vince had a pipeline into Homicide, and his man there would tell him about the gun that had been used to kill Joey Lamont.

Bledso didn't even have to establish an alibi. In fact, just the opposite. If he tried for any reason to set up an alibi for his whereabouts, Vince might catch on. After all, there was no reason in the world for the cops to suspect Bledso of killing Joey. As far as they were concerned, he had no motive. Sure, they knew he worked for Vince Carpelli, but he had no past record of violence, and his function with the mob had nothing to do with violence.

He had but one more chore to perform, then he would stay home tonight with a bottle of good Scotch, not answering the door or the phone until after the time he could reasonably have completed the hit and returned home. He wouldn't even dare risk a light, in case Vince might take it into his

head to send somebody around to check on him.

Bledso stowed the gun in his attaché case, along with the fifteen grand in used bills, and went down to Crazy Jake's locker. He even left Jake's key inside with the money and the gun. Jake had given Bledso a key to the locker he rented the year around because Carpelli was his biggest source of contracts in the city. Now, with Jake's retirement, he wouldn't be needing the key again.

At ten-thirty that night Bledso was sitting in his darkened apartment in robe and slippers when the doorbell rang. Bledso jumped, almost spilling his drink. For a moment he considered not answering it, but if it were someone Vince had sent around to check, his not answering might arouse suspicion.

It wasn't one of Vince's minions. It was, according to the identification card, a cop: Lieutenant Pine, Homicide.

Bledso fell back a step in astonishment, and saw the second man behind the first.

"Your name Bledso?" Lt. Pine asked.

"That's right, Officer. What can I do for you?"

"We have a few questions, sir."

Bledso hesitated only briefly, then stepped back inside. "Of

course, Officer. Come in." He switched on a light.

"Do you know a Joey Lamont, Mr. Bledso?"

"Why, I . . . I know of Joey, yes."

"Joey was killed tonight around nine o'clock."

Bledso hoped his gasp sounded authentic. "I'm sorry to hear that, of course. But what does that have to do with me?"

"The Department has had a tap on his phone for some time. Oh, it's legal, we have a court order. Narcotics has been trying to get him on a drug-dealing charge . . ."

Bledso's thoughts were racing, trying to recall exactly what he had said to Joey on the phone.

"You made an appointment to meet him at Lotus and Third. At least you set up the meet on the phone. Our man on the tap was slow about calling in and we didn't get a car out there to cover until too late. Joey was already dead. But we did get there in time to catch the guy who hit him. A hit-man named Crazy Jake. Him, I've been trying to nail

for years. This time the crazy act won't work. Two detectives got there in time to see him gun down Joey Lamont." The lieutenant's voice was rich with satisfaction. Then his gaze focused again on Bledso. "Do you know Crazy Jake, Mr. Bledso?"

"I'm afraid not, Officer."

"Well now, that's not the way Crazy Jake tells it. Now that he's really nailed, he's not playing by the no-snitch rule. He's talking his head off, trying to work a deal. He tells us that *you* gave him the contract on Joey, Mr. Bledso. Which could lead to a conspiracy to murder charge . . ."

Bledso choked back an impulse to antic laughter. His beautiful plan to make his bones and satisfy Vince had backfired. If he alone had killed Joey, Vince would come hurrying to his defense, providing expensive legal assistance and everything else. But hiring someone else to make the hit . . . !

In a droning voice the homicide officer was saying, "Mr. Bledso, before we proceed further, perhaps I should inform you of your rights . . ."



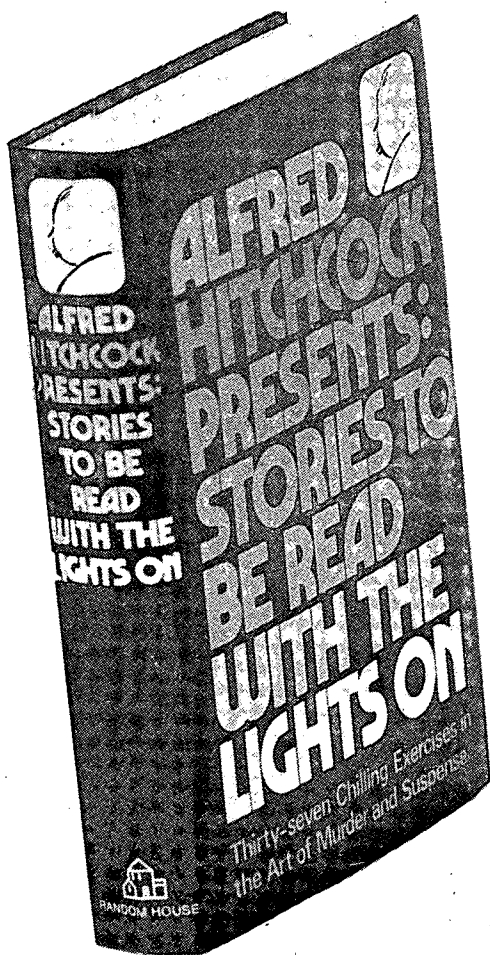
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The obvious situation, one may find, could be but a blind for the obscure.

The Impossible



Footprint

by William Brittain

Matt Kehoe leaned his hunting rifle against one of the small pine trees that encircled his hiding place in the still woods and beat his mittened hands together to get some circulation stirring in his fingers. Even through the two sweat-

ers and the thick parka he was wearing the icy cold crept up his spine and made him shiver uncontrollably. His snowshoes creaked

loudly as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Mister Kehoe, will ye hold still, if ye please? Oi'm a guide, sor, not a worker of miracles. If ye expect a deer to pass this way so's ye kin get a shot at it, ye've got to stop soundin' like a boiler factory at full production."

The whispered voice with its rich Irish brogue conjured up visions of the morning sun rising over the green fields of County Cork and the smoke of peat fires issuing from the chimneys of sod huts in Galway. Kehoe looked at his companion and shook his head in amazement.

For the man who had spoken, crouched down on his snowshoes in a position Kehoe would have sworn it was impossible to achieve, had the swarthy skin, high cheekbones and thin, hawk-like nose of a full-blooded Indian. His blue denim jacket could provide little in the way of warmth, while his wide-brimmed hat was perforated with several bullet holes as well as a few larger openings which looked suspiciously as if they had been made by human teeth. Yet the cold didn't seem to affect him at all. The look of repose on his face might have been graven from stone.

"Joshua, I'm going to freeze to death if we don't start moving

around," Kehoe said through chattering teeth. "Wouldn't it be better to go looking for deer instead of just waiting for them to come to us?"

Joshua Red Wing shook his head slowly and looked up at Kehoe with reproachful eyes. "Yesterday when I agreed to guide ye in yer huntin'," he said, "I understood ye wuz one o' them detective chaps like oi've read about in the penny-dreadful magazines. Oi thought ye'd be used to a bit uv hardship, what with runnin' down alleys an' climbin' fire escapes like I see on the telly-vision. It's a sad disappointment to discover yer as soft as the rest uv the hunters from the city. Next oi'll be findin' out ye can't shoot worth a damn, neither."

Joshua reached into a pocket and drew out a dented tin flask. "Here," he said, passing it to Kehoe, "this'll warm yer blood a bit."

Kehoe grasped the flask, removed the top and took a single long swallow, then suddenly jerked the flask from his lips. Strange gasping sounds came from his throat, and his face turned bright red as the liquid, which felt as if it had been produced from sulfuric acid liberally laced with ground glass and old razor blades, streaked down his gullet.

"Luscious, ain't it?" asked Joshua, retrieving the flask. "It's from an old family recipe me sainted mother gave to me at the time of—"

"Joshua," Kehoe said, tears streaming from his eyes, "I'd pull you in right now for attempted poisoning if I hadn't seen you drink that stuff yourself. Is it that brew that makes you sound like an Irish Geronimo?"

"No," replied Joshua with a twinkle in his eye. "Fact is, oi spoke nothin' but Injun up to the age uv four. At that point oi began workin' at a church in the village in exchange fer an eddication. Me English wuz learned from a Father McGrath and a cook named Bridget O'Toole. They wuz both first-generation Irish, which accounts fer me way uv speakin'. If it offends ye, why oi kin do 'ugh' and 'how' ez good ez any Injun ye'll see in the movies."

Before Kehoe could reply, Joshua stood up, gripping his rifle in one hand and motioning for silence with the other. "Oi heard somethin' off in the woods," he whispered to Kehoe. "Comin' this way, it wuz. Now ye sees the wisdom uv me ways. Let the other hunters drive the game ahead uv 'em. We'll be here to greet it when it arrives."

Kehoe nodded, pumping a cartridge into the chamber of his own gun.

"Wait fer a good shot, an' try to drop the animal in its tracks," Joshua breathed. "Old Karl Spearing's land begins about two hundred yards over to the left. If a wounded deer makes it that far, no sense chasin' it. Spearing's a mean one an' won't have anybody comin' on his land to hunt. The few who tried hev wound up with a rump full uv buckshot."

"I think I see something off there in the woods," Kehoe said, pointing. "I'll just—"

"Don't be too hasty," Joshua warned. "It could be anything. Mebbe a black bear that got up too early from its winter nap."

A loud shout established the inaccuracy of the bear theory. "Help! Is anybody around? Help!"

Through the trees Kehoe caught sight of a man headed toward them at a dead run. He envied the man's ability to handle snowshoes without tripping over them.

"It's Tip Spearing, Karl's lad," Joshua said. "Over this way, young fella."

Joshua stepped out of the grove of pines. As the running man approached he tripped and would have fallen if the Indian hadn't caught him in his arms.

"Take it easy, lad," Joshua said

to the gasping man. "Now then, Tip, what's the trouble?"

"Josh, I-I—" Tip Spearing was in his mid-twenties, at the peak of his manhood, but judging from the ghastly expression on his face, he had looked into the deepest pit of hell itself.

"It's terrible," Tip went on. "I can't believe—"

"Calm down," whispered Joshua soothingly. "What is it now?"

"It's Dad. He didn't come back home last night. I've been out looking for him and—" He gulped convulsively. "I'll take you to where he is."

Beckoning to them, Tip turned and retraced his tracks. Joshua followed at an easy trot, while Kehoe stumbly brought up the rear. They passed through a large clearing where the ground had been blown free of snow, and Kehoe almost tripped as twigs and leaves caught at the webbing of his snowshoes.

Reentering the forest, the men finally reached a vertical mass of shale that jutted upward like some monstrous grave marker. Tip signaled for Joshua and Kehoe to stop. "Over . . . over there."

Leaning their rifles against a tree, the two men left Tip and moved off in the direction that he had indicated. The white snow on the ground caught the sunlight

that filtered through the branches and threw it back into their eyes so they squinted from the glare. They burst out onto what appeared to be a game trail amid the trees—and suddenly the snow wasn't white anymore.

It was red. The bloody, frozen circle was almost six feet in diameter.

Kehoe had seen dead men before, but he clamped his teeth together and swallowed loudly as he beheld the body of Karl Spearing spread-eagled in the snow, its lower part across the bloody stain. The body's left foot was shod in a caked boot with the letter "S" worked into the sole—but all that was left of its right leg was a stump, ending in a raw, open wound.

"Cut clean through the leg bones, just below the knee," Kehoe said to Joshua. "Knife's missing from the sheath at his hip, too. What do you suppose happened?"

"Oi've got a fair idea," replied the Indian. "Not too pretty, either. Oi've heard about such things often enough in this country, but this is the first time oi've seen it. Would ye mind followin' me? An' hev a care where ye step, if ye please, so's not to destroy tracks. Eventually we'll hev to call in the local law. No sense

ruinin' all such things fer 'em."

They moved off down the trail, keeping well clear of the wide swath in the snow where Karl Spearing had evidently dragged his tortured body in a desperate attempt to seek help. The trail led past a thick stand of willow shoots. Joshua pulled aside the leafless branches.

"Yonder's the trap, Mr. Kehoe. Hev a look."

Kehoe gaped at the shiny-toothed jaws of the bear trap in the midst of the white snow of the willows. They were clamped inexorably together on a bloody booted leg.

His eyes riveted on the leg, Kehoe spoke to Joshua. "You said you knew what happened here. What was it?"

Quickly the Indian sketched in the story. A lone man in midwinter, the chance misstep, and the heavy jaws of the trap, chained to a thick tree, leaping up out of the snow to grip the leg. In such a fix there was only one desperate chance, to be taken before cold seeped too deeply into the bones and blood.

A tight tourniquet was applied, after which the imprisoned limb was packed with snow to numb it as much as possible. Then, in a grinding hell of shock and pain, the pinioned man performed an

amputation—on himself. Finally, if cold and loss of blood did not take their toll, it might be possible to make one's way to where help was available. A slim chance at best, but Karl Spearing knew what must be done. He had tried—and he had lost.

"Spearing's house is but a short ways beyond the trees there," Joshua said, pointing. "Great big stone buildin' it is, with a telephone line down to the village. If he'd been able to get to it, he might be alive now."

"Rotten business," added Kehoe. He pointed to a bone-handled hunting knife lying on the flattened snow. "Must be what he did the operation with. The poor devil hardly had a chance, did he? Well, what now?"

"We'd best get back to Tip and take him to the house. Oi'll call Vern Lefner from there."

"Lefner? Who's that?"

"He's our sheriff. When he's done makin' out his reports on this—that'll take several hours, ez Vern loves to scribble on official papers—the two of ye kin talk about police work fer the rest uv the day. What with all our shoutin' and hollerin', oi doubt there's a deer left in the whole county."

"Do you think it'll be okay to leave the body unguarded? I

mean, couldn't it be mutilated by wild animals?"

"O'd doubt it. There's some bears ez travels this game trail during the summer, but they're all hibernatin' now. Besides, they're not too partial to human flesh. And the body's too cold and stiff to attract wolves."

The two men flanked the wide trail in the snow that led back to Karl Spearing's body. Kehoe gave the corpse a wide berth, but Joshua seemed intent on examining it at close range. Suddenly he paused, peering quizzically at a spot on the ground.

"There's a queer thing," he breathed softly.

"What's the matter?" called Kehoe, who had moved a few paces ahead.

"O've found a bit uv an oddity here. Yer the detective. Come and tell me what you make uv it."

Kehoe padded closer on his snowshoes.

"Hev a care," Joshua said. "Ye'd not want to destroy evidence, would ye?"

"Evidence? What evidence?"

Joshua pointed to a spot near the toe of the left snowshoe. "What hev ye to say about that?"

"Karl Spearing's footprint, that's all. There's no mistaking that 'S' from the bottom of his boot. He probably tried to stand before he

became too weak to do so, and—"

"Mister Kehoe, would ye take note uv the fact that the print wuz made by the right foot? An' the leg to which that foot's attached is now caught fifty yards back down the trail in a bear trap."

"Why yes, that's true, but—"

"Then tell me, sor, how did the print get up here next to the body?"

"Well, it . . . that is . . . Oh, there's got to be some simple answer."

"Then would ye care to offer an explanation? Is it yer contention that the severed leg, takin' on a life uv its own, somehow got out uv the trap an' then hippety-hopped down here to the body like a Pogo stick? An' then later returned and put itself back into the trap?"

"No, of course not. But . . . well, maybe Karl Spearing left the print several days earlier. If there was no new snow since then . . ."

"He just happened to be in the area, I suppose? An' how would you suggest he arrived here that first time? There's no second set of footprints. Just the ones that lead to the thicket where the trap is."

"Oh. Then perhaps Spearing walked ahead on the trail a little way and came to this spot. He

went back for some reason, and that's when he got himself caught. Dragging his body along, he'd have covered up the other tracks he made."

"Oi see." Joshua's voice dripped sarcasm. "He walks up to here. 'Oh my!' he sez, 'oi've forgotten somethin'.' So he turns about, walks back down the trail and thrusts his foot into a trap he'd set hisself. After cuttin' off his own leg he crawls back, destroyin' all tracks except this one by the body, which he leaves to confound us. No, Mr. Kehoe. There's more to Karl Spearing's death than meets the eye."

"Josh, according to what you told me yourself, this whole thing is open and shut. Karl Spearing cut off his leg and then bled—or froze—to death. Stop trying to make such a big deal out of it. Why, if you hadn't seen that footprint—"

"Ah, but I did see it, Mr. Kehoe. An' so did you."

"Yes, and I'll bet when this Lefner fellow gets here, he'll have a dozen logical explanations for how it got there. Better leave detective work to the police, Josh."

"Very well. But oi'll hev no part uv any explanation uv Karl Spearing's death that doesn't take that footprint—that damned impossible footprint—into account."

The two men returned to where the weeping Tip Spearing was waiting and half-led, half-carried him through the woods to his house. While Kehoe looked for the telephone to put in a call to the village, Joshua laid logs in the huge fireplace and soon had a roaring blaze going. From the liquor cabinet he took a bottle and administered a healthy tot of whiskey to Tip as well as taking a mammoth swig for himself. Then he laid Tip on the couch and repeated the dosage. Within half an hour the bottle was nearly empty, Tip was asleep, and Joshua was honoring Kehoe with a nasal rendition of "The Rose of Tralee."

It was almost noon when Sheriff Vernon Lefner's jeep stopped at the edge of the dirt road that ran past the house. Matt Kehoe met him at the door.

"Glad to know you," Lefner said when Kehoe had introduced himself. "Always good to meet another cop. How's the hunting been going?"

"Got me a new guide this time," Kehoe said. "His name's Joshua Red Wing. He looks Indian but talks like he was mayor of Dublin. Do you know him?"

"Know him?" was the reply. "I've run him in for hunting and fishing out of season more times than I can remember. He's a good

guide though, at least when he's sober. By the way, what's that sound? Is somebody using a chain-saw out back?"

In reply Kehoe opened the door to the livingroom. In front of the embers of a dying fire Joshua was sprawled out in a leather easy chair. His eyes were closed, but his open mouth resembled the entrance to a mine shaft. The gargantuan snores coming from his throat reverberated from the room's beamed ceiling.

Lefner, considering the empty bottle on the floor near the Indian's right hand, said, "He'll be out for quite a while, but it's just as well. It'll give the two of us a chance to examine Karl Spearing's body."

"Fine." Kehoe hauled his parka from the closet. "By the way, Josh found a footprint down there. A little strange, its being where it is, I guess. But he's trying to make a big thing of it."

"Between his police magazines and what he sees on TV, Josh considers himself another Sherlock Holmes," Lefner commented. "C'mon. Maybe we can get back before he wakes up and decides he's being attacked by a herd of pink elephants."

It was almost sundown when Joshua woke. He got up from his chair, holding his head as if it

were about to burst, and gingerly walked to the kitchen.

"Cold lamb," he groaned, looking from the two men at the table to the platter in front of them through bloodshot eyes. Within the Indian's head a gang of tiny miners seemed to be excavating his brain with pickaxes and dynamite.

"We found it in Karl's refrigerator," Lefner said. "I had some men come up and take the body to Dr. Fanchion's in town for a medical examination, but I wanted to be here to ask Tip a couple of questions when he wakes up. I thought we might as well eat while we're waiting. Slice some off, Josh, and dig in."

"No sense me even tryin' to eat," moaned Joshua softly. "With a bit o' luck, oi'll be dead within the hour anyway."

He shuffled to the door, threw it open, and took several deep breaths of the cold, clear air. Slowly his eyes focused, and the mining operations within his head closed down. "An' what, Vernon, is yer conclusion ez to Karl Spearing's death?"

"An accident, no question about it, Josh. Spearing did everything he could to save himself. If he hadn't cut off his leg he'd have frozen to death right there in the trap. As it was, well, at least he

went a lot more quickly his way."

"An' the footprint? Ye did see it, didn't ye?"

Lefner nodded. "I saw it, Josh. It's gone now, of course. When the men came for the body they scuffed up the area pretty badly."

"So it's gone, eh? An' with it, any embarrassin' explanations ye'd hev to make about it."

Lefner gestured toward Kehoe. "We both saw it, Josh. We admit it was there. It's just that we don't think it's that important."

"Oh." Joshua slumped into a chair. "Oi see. Then how d'ye explain its presence by the body?"

"I don't know, Josh, but . . ." Lefner shook his head in annoyance. "Kehoe, talk to this knot-head, will you? Tell him what police work is really like."

Joshua turned to Kehoe, a look of intense interest on his face.

"Do that, Mr. Kehoe," he said. "Talk to me about how the police ignore clues that's right in front of their noses."

Kehoe cut himself another slice of lamb, the knife grating on the bone of the roast. "What Lefner is trying to say," he began, "is that real police cases aren't like the shows on TV. On the crime shows everything's neatly wrapped up at the finish. But in real-life criminal cases there are a lot of loose ends—"

"Ez the police," interrupted Joshua, "oi merely want yez to explain how that one footprint got up by the body, when the foot that made it wuz fifty yards away, caught tight in a bear trap. Is that too much fer a tax-payin', law-abidin' citizen to ask?"

Lefner was taken with a sudden fit of coughing. "Josh, we've got to be getting back to town," he said finally, getting control of himself. "Now we're going to have to wake Tip, and when we do, I don't want to hear anything more about that footprint. The boy's been through enough for one day."

"Then ye wouldn't be interested in me theory."

Kehoe and Lefner looked at one another and then both stared at Joshua. "What theory?" asked Kehoe.

"About the footprint, uv course. But if you two detective gentlemen are too busy, why . . ."

Lefner, red-faced, began rising from his chair. Kehoe restrained him. "Just a minute, Vern. How long will this take, Josh?"

"P'rhaps thirty minutes. Oi'm sure Tip'll sleep that much longer. He drank almost ez much ez oi did from that bottle, an' he ain't had near the practice."

"Okay!" Lefner pounded the table. "Okay, Josh. We'll hear you

out. But it had better make sense. And after this, no more talk about that blasted footprint. Agreed?"

"Yer charmin' manner puts me completely in yer power," Joshua said. "Agreed."

The Indian stood up and dug a hand deep into a trousers pocket. Then he held the hand over the table and allowed three scraps of grimy paper to fall lightly in front of Lefner. "Oi'd ask yez to look at these," he said. "Meanwhile oi'll be outside, lookin' about a bit."

As Joshua left the room, Lefner took one of the bits of paper and passed another to Kehoe. "Looks like an IOU," Lefner said. "From Tip Spearing to Joshua. Seven dollars and eighteen cents."

"Mine's the same," Kehoe said. "But the amount's different. A dollar and a quarter."

"Less than a week old, both of them. The third's for five dollars even. Josh probably got 'em in one of those poker games they hold at the hotel. Everybody in town knows Tip gives IOU's. But he always makes good on them."

"But what's this got to do with the footprint?" Kehoe asked. "I still don't see—"

He was interrupted by the thump of something being deposited on the back porch. Then the outside door burst open, and amid a blast of frigid air, Joshua en-

tered, smiling broadly at the two.

"We saw the IOU's, Josh," Lefner said. "What's the matter, don't you think Tip will make good, now that his father's dead?"

"Oi'll disregard yer remark ez unworthy uv ye," Joshua said, grinning expansively. "Fer while yez two were sittin' here stuffin' yerselves, oi've been solvin' the murder of Karl Spearing."

"Murder!" Lefner's face turned a beet-red. "Josh, I've heard enough already. Nothing's been said at all about Karl Spearing's being murdered."

"Yes there has. Oi just said it meself. Now if ye'll calm down a bit, oi'll elucidate fer ye."

Lefner turned to Kehoe, shaking his head.

"Ye see, Vernon," Joshua began, "there wuz somethin' about Karl Spearing lyin' there in the snow that disturbed me from the first. In addition to the footprint, oi mean. A couple of things, in fact. In the first place, while the snow around the body itself wuz drenched with blood, there wuz none to speak uv back at the trap. What oi mean to say is, the leg wuz covered with it, but none at all on the snow. Even if Karl had wrapped his tourniquet to the tightest, seems ez if there'd be a drop or two, don't it?"

Kehoe was seeing the Indian

through new eyes. "You know, you're right," he said. "But that's still not conclusive, Josh."

"P'rhaps not. But try this. Karl Spearing had a sheath knife to do his cuttin' with. The blade wuz mebbe six inches long. Oh, t'was sharp enough, and he could hev performed the amputation with it. But only if he'd cut off his leg at the knee where the joints come together. But no. The bones wuz sheared through cleanly, a few inches below the joint. An' ye just can't cut a bone like that with a knife without doin' a good bit o' hagglin' at it. Ye kin experiment on the lamb roast right now, if ye'd like."

Both Kehoe and Lefner let their confusion show in their faces. Their preconceived notions were trickling out of their minds like sand through an hourglass.

"Karl Spearing's leg," Joshua went on, "wuz cut off with the one weapon an outdoorsman might carry that could slice through bone with a single cut—a finely-honed ax."

"Wait a minute," protested Lefner. "Karl Spearing didn't have an ax with him."

"Ah." Joshua held up a finger triumphantly. "So finally yer comin' around to me way o' thinkin', eh? Ye'll admit, then, the presence uv a second party?"

"Well . . . yeah, I suppose so," Lefner said. "But I still don't see how the other person got there. I mean, there were no tracks around except Karl's."

"But there wuz other tracks, don't ye see? Don't forget the trail Tip Spearing, Mr. Kehoe an' me made when we went to view the body."

"Why, sure we did," Kehoe said. "But neither of us killed—" He stopped abruptly.

"Yer beginnin' to see what oi'm drivin' at, ain't ye?" Joshua said, smiling.

Kehoe jerked a thumb in the direction of the livingroom. "Are you saying you think Tip killed his own father and then retraced his trail back to where we were?"

"Somethin' like that. O' course the killin' wuz probably done a day or so ago. But ez long ez Tip walked in the tracks he'd first made, there'd be just the single trail. When Tip located us in the woods an' took us to the body, we figured the tracks had been made when he discovered his father. But they could just ez easy uv been put there a day or two before, when the killin' wuz done."

"Josh," Lefner said, "I don't care when the trail to the body was made. I still can't see that Tip's guilty of murder. I mean, what motive did he have?"

"Karl Spearing owns this house and a good deal uv the land around here. A man uv considerable means. An' yet Tip, his own son, wasn't allowed to have enough pocket money even to play a few hands uv penny-ante poker. He had to use IOU's an' then account to his father for every cent he lost. A most degradin' situation fer Tip. Might it be that he went searchin' fer his father to ask fer money to pay his debts? Tempers flared, an' there wuz a fight, with Karl comin' out the loser. Oi tried to point out this possible motive by presentin' yez with them IOU's uv mine, but I suspect ye wuz hard put to divine their true meanin'."

"So you think Tip killed his father, eh?" asked Lefner. "Well what about the foot in the trap? And that footprint by the body?"

"All right; let's sum up the whole operation. At some time yesterday—or p'rhaps the day before, I dunno, what with the body bein' froze the way it wuz—Tip is out in the woods, carryin' an ax. He sees his father on the game trail an' decides to ask fer money. There's an argument, ez I said, an' a brief struggle. Tip loses his temper an' swings the ax, takin' off Karl's leg. Karl falls to the ground, fast bleedin' to death, right at the spot where we seen

his body. Out there in the woods, who wuz to hear his cries of pain?

"But Tip's mind is on other things. He knows if the body is found in its present condition, he'll be the number-one suspect.

"Then, an inspiration. Tip's heard stories, ez oi hev, about men bein' caught in a trap an' what they had to do to save themselves. He knows the bear trap's nearby. So he picks up the bloody leg, and off he goes down the trail. Once in the willow thicket, he jabs around with that grisly member 'til he hits the pan uv the bear trap under the snow. The jaws crunch together on the leg. Then Tip drops Karl's sheath knife by the trap to complete his alibi and muckles up the trail between the trap an' the body so it'll look like a man's dragged himself along it. All the footprints are destroyed, or so Tip thinks. But there's still one uv Karl's near the body that he overlooked an' oi found."

Joshua leaned back in his chair and spread his hands expansively. "An' that's the way it wuz, ez they say on the tellyvision. This mornin' Tip went lookin' fer someone to be witness to Karl bein' dead with one leg cut off an' caught in the trap. He found Mr. Kehoe an' me. If we didn't

immediately assume what Tip wanted us to, oi'm sure he stood ready to point out what he wished us to believe. Ye must, uv course, give Tip credit fer his actin' ability. He'd uv succeeded, too, if me sharp Injun eyes hadn't spotted that footprint in the snow by the body."

"He could beat the rap yet," Kehoe said. "You've got an interesting theory there, Josh, but no real proof."

"Would the murder weapon do?" Joshua asked. "Oi found an ax out in the shed. Somebody did a hurry-up job uv tryin' to wipe it clean, but there's still some reddish stains on the handle an' blade. Oi dropped it off on the steps on me way in from outside. Could yer police chemists make somethin' uv them stains, Vern?"

"Yeah." Lefner got up and peered into the livingroom to check on Tip Spearing. "If the stains are human blood, we'll have a pretty tight case."

"Well," Joshua said, "at least ye'll hev it easy apprehendin' yer suspect. Oh my, the hangover he'll

have when he wakes. Oi hope, Vern, that ye won't be too severe with him."

"Hell, Josh, he killed a man—his own father."

"True. But what kind uv a man wuz the father? Seems to me the milk uv human kindness might uv turned to gall in the man's veins."

"Look, just because he didn't give Tip any money—"

"No, oi wuz thinkin' about how that bear trap wuz placed. It's winter. No need fer a trap with the bears all hibernatin'. Besides, no bear's about to hide in a thicket. That'd be the place where the hunters would lurk, waitin' fer game to pass by on the trail. Like we wuz doin' this mornin', Mr. Kehoe."

Kehoe stared wide-eyed at Joshua. "You mean . . ."

Joshua nodded. "Karl Spearing couldn't stand to hev people huntin' his land. He'd do anythin' to keep 'em away, even shoot at 'em. So I don't believe he wuz after bear when he set that trap."

"It wuz put there to catch a man."



Blind devotion may alter one's perspective considerably.



A Change of Clients



I got to bed at two in the morning, too exhausted to resist the nightmare: a cliff lashed by wind-shattered sea spray, Dana Point glittering below, Jack walking into a trap . . .

The telephone jerked me awake, shaking and sweating.

"Wake up, Deliah," Rita chirped. "Got a live one for you."

After three days spent tracking a runaway through the L.A. jungles, I was in no mood for cheerfulness. I squinted against bright sunlight and muttered mild obscenities.

"Now, now," Rita reproved,

"you want to be a successful female private eye, you gotta grab the clients when they come along. Write this down. Craig Zarath." She added an address and directions. "Be there at one o'clock and he says to bring a suitcase. It might take a few days."

"Rita, you know I like to see clients in my office."

She laughed. "Honeychile, you really are asleep. Zarath, I said—as in Zarath Construction. You have time to brush your teeth if you get moving."

"Here I thought I was on my own," I said nastily, "but actually

"I'm working for my answering service."

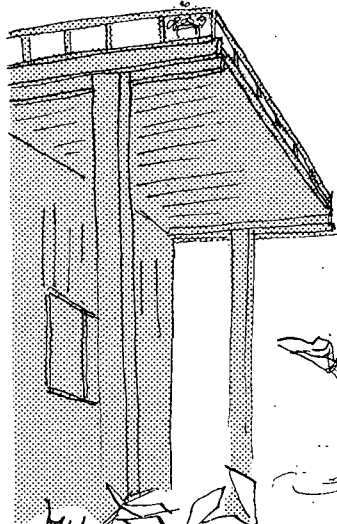
"I have to keep you on your toes or I don't get paid, speaking of which—"

"I'm going, I'm going."

I hung up the phone and rubbed aching temples. Every mo-

packed, dressed and checked the contents of the leather bag that serves as briefcase and purse. Jack had given me the bag when we opened the agency.

Quickly, I suppressed memory and drank the stomach-jarring coffee. It helped. My head cleared a little as I drove west on the Newport Freeway and thought about Zarath Construction. I knew the company specialized in pseudo-Spanish subdivisions. From their proliferation in southern Orange County I guessed the company



by
Maxine
O'Callaghan



notonous, ear-splitting hour of the previous night still throbbed, but at least the dream was gone. I showered, swallowed aspirin and plugged in the percolator while I

was big and probably growing bigger.

Leaving the freeway, I followed Rita's directions toward the coastal hills to Zarath's house. The

best California modern with angular lines that looked all glass, it blended into a wild hillside. The Pacific gleamed on the horizon. It was a safe bet that Zarath owned a chunk of surrounding land as a buffer against the urban sprawl he helped to create.

The driveway circled and offered parking beneath a second-story deck, mounted on massive concrete posts, that jutted over a deep ravine.

Taking a deep breath, I ordered myself to concentrate on the job. I sure wasn't adjusting to widowhood. West & West Detective Agency was just me now—regardless of what it said in faded gold leaf on the office door in Santa Ana.

A heavyset maid let me in, took me to the den and asked me to wait. I blinked and sat down. Against a wallpaper suggestive of tawny African velds, big cats stalked the room in poster-size photographs: leopards snarled and unsheathed razor-sharp claws; a lion devoured the broken body of a gazelle.

My empty stomach quivered. I was grateful when Craig Zarath finally arrived, looking right at home with the rest of the predators. He had a hard body, sleek hair, a face dominated by a bony nose and black eyes that blended

pupil with iris. I imagined him mainlining Essence of Chauvinism every day before breakfast.

He stood an inch too close and pressed my fingers while he said, "Deliah West."

Females usually dropped left and right, I presume, but I just sat down and waited politely.

Without wasting any more charm he said succinctly, "I want you to watch my wife."

"I don't take divorce cases—"

"It's not that. During the next week, I need somebody competent around because I'm afraid she may try to harm herself."

"Suicide? Why me? Sounds as if a good nurse—"

"She'd spot one a mile away, and don't suggest commitment. Margaret's not insane."

"You have household help."

"Just Consuelo and she's only here half days. Well?"

At least it would be a change from unwashed bodies and acid rock, and considering the condition of my bank account I really couldn't afford to be choosy. Still, I stalled by asking, "Why are you particularly concerned about this week?"

"Two years ago my wife was involved in an automobile accident. She was driving; our infant son was killed. Naturally she blamed herself. She had a rough

year and then when I thought she was pulling out of it she tried to drown herself. That was right around the anniversary of Jimmy's death. I simply don't want to chance another episode like last year. There's not a lot I can do but I would feel better if you were here to keep an eye on her."

"You seem to have a lot of confidence in me."

"I checked out your background. Swim team and gymnastics in college; policewoman; well-trained." His eyes did a complete job of assessment. "You look perfectly capable to me—among other things. Half your fee now as a retainer, Mrs. West."

His idea of a retainer did a lot to blunt my curiosity. I took it and let him press my fingers again before he finished his briefing.

Ostensibly I was helping him at home with an overload of office work. He had form letters and reports as a cover. His assumption that I typed raised a few Lib-type hackles, but I bit my tongue.

"Margaret doesn't go out much these days," he told me. "If she does, follow her. Lord knows what she'll try."

"Any relatives? Friends?"

"No relatives except a few distant cousins. Since the accident, she's cut herself off from her friends."

Prickles of uneasiness had sprouted on the back of my neck. I didn't like any of this. Somehow Zarath impressed me as the type who didn't give a damn about anybody except himself. He looked past my left ear and said, "Margaret." I knew then that I was right. He didn't love his wife.

Tiny and gaunt, she had an unfocused look in her bruised eyes and dull brown hair curling around a thin face that remained sallow beneath a suntan.

"Margaret, you promised to take a nap." His voice was even but edged with ice.

"I can't sleep."

She was strung out on something; her unsteady beeline for the bar told me what. After a slug of vodka, she noticed me sitting there and horror twisted her face. "You brought her here," she whispered. "No, Craig—"

"Mrs. West is from the temporary agency," Zarath cut in smoothly.

Another jolt of vodka steadied her slightly. She tried to rearrange her face into a smile.

"Since my hours are going to be irregular," Zarath went on, "Mrs. West will stay here for a few days. Show her the guest room, will you? I have to go to the construction site." His nod included both of us as he left.

Margaret took a pair of sunglasses from the pocket of her terry robe; it was a relief when her eyes were covered. "I didn't mean to be rude," she said shakily.

I said something reassuring but she wasn't listening. Her eyes fastened on the photograph of the lion and she seemed cold sober as she said, "I hate this room."

"The pictures are a bit scary," I agreed, "but good. Who's the photographer?"

"Craig. I suppose if he'd lived when big game hunting was fashionable he'd have mounted heads. Instead of that he hunts with a camera. Or else a tranquilizer gun. A friend of his works for the zoo and Craig goes collecting specimens with him. He talked me into going along once." She shivered at the memory and turned away. "Please excuse me, Mrs. West."

Any further attempt to get close to her was ended for the moment. I sighed and found Consuelo to ask about my room. It was next to Margaret's, sharing the deck that projected over the ravine.

I noted the drop down the boulder-strewn hillside and my apprehension grew. Obviously I couldn't be with Margaret every minute. She could slash her wrists,

gulp a bottle of pills or blow her brains out—all with me in the next room. It was senseless for Zarath to hire me as a watchdog. I told myself it was his money.

Still the doubt nagged all afternoon as I did the feigned work and answered a few calls on Zarath's business line in the den. Once I managed to slip into Margaret's room. It confirmed my pessimism—bottles of sleeping pills, razor blades—the only thing missing was a gun and I guessed there was one in the house somewhere.

I finally ran out of lame excuses to check on Margaret, and I paced the den feeling right at home with the feline menagerie.

Not for the first time did I ask myself what I was doing cooped up in a place I didn't want to be, worrying about people I didn't know. It was fun when Jack and I were a team, but now . . . I could go back on the police force, I suppose. I hear they even let women do something besides hand out parking tickets. Maybe . . .

While I brooded, Consuelo worked like a grim whirlwind and left after preparing dinner. Margaret paced her room—I assumed it was definitely *her* room; there was no sign of male occupation—otherwise she lay on the deck with her sunglasses pushed up across the

top of her head and her face bared to the sun. Once I heard muffled crying through the door that stayed closed despite my efforts.

Dinner was something less than sparkling. Zarath made polite conversation, nothing more. Margaret drank steadily and her pale eyes watched him with despair.

I'd made up my mind by then that she needed a doctor more than a bodyguard and to hell with the fee. I told him so.

"I hired you to watch Margaret, not to give me advice," he said coldly. He was on his way out and I'd caught him with his hand on the doorknob. "Anyway, we've spent a fortune on psychiatrists. It didn't help."

I tried again. "Maybe if you took her away—"

"Impossible. Oh, look here, I'm not heartless but I've watched my wife degenerate from a lovely woman to the verge of alcoholism and suicide. Maybe you're right. It didn't work before, but as soon as I can manage it I'll take Margaret on a trip."

I ought to have been reassured but, as the kids say, the vibes were bad. I wandered restlessly around the house until a crash from Margaret's room sent me flying upstairs. She had tripped and fallen—not surprising considering

her intake of alcohol that evening.

She mumbled her thanks as I helped her to the bed. "You're good to me, Deliah. I thought at first you and Craig—but I was wrong—that was somebody else. I *was* wrong?"

"Yes," I said firmly. "It's strictly business."

Tears slipped down her cheeks. "It was wonderful once; Craig loved me. We had a baby, did you know? But he died and Craig—Craig never forgives."

"Mrs. Zarath, if you're unhappy maybe you should go away."

"Where would I go?"

"Mexico. Hawaii. Float around the world. Get back your health." Forget Craig Zarath, I wanted to add.

"I can't do that. I won't make it easy for him. I'm not going to give him up."

"What if he makes the break himself?" I asked brutally.

"Craig will never leave me."

"Won't he?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "He wouldn't. He can't. Go 'way now, leave me alone. I want to—go sleep . . ."

With her words feeding my apprehension, I left her and went downstairs to call Rita. She said she thought she knew somebody—which didn't surprise me. Rita has more sources of information than

the CIA—I can depend on her.

She called back an hour later. "When Zarath Construction incorporated, Craig and Margaret kept the majority of the stock in equal amounts. The rest was sold publicly to various investors."

"So Craig Zarath has the controlling interest as long as he votes his wife's share."

"Yep. It was Margaret's money originally, it seems. One interesting fact, Deliah. Somebody's buying up stock. I don't know who, just that it isn't your boy. Help any?"

"Yeah, Rita, thanks."

It didn't though. It explained why Zarath put up with a wife who lived like a zombi—he wouldn't risk a divorce—but it didn't explain his concern for her survival. The fact was, he'd be better off with his wife dead.

I slept in snatches until Zarath slunk in about 1:00 a.m. The rest of the night I prowled the hall, stopped again and again to listen to Margaret's ragged breathing, and knew my vigil wasn't to protect Margaret from herself.

When sunrise clotted the fog and chased it out to sea, the primitive sense of danger quieted. I relaxed. It's instinctive to lower your guard once the terrors of night are over.

That's my excuse, but it doesn't

help much. Warm, sunny mornings will haunt me for a long time.

The day began with Margaret stumbling down to make breakfast. Her hands shook and her eyes were hollow and sick. I drank coffee, chewed toast and studied Zarath. He ate, as he did everything, with controlled savagery. There was tension too; a pulse jumped in his temple and he kept looking at his watch. Still, when he caught my interest, his eyes gleamed with a speculation that made my skin crawl. I got up abruptly and began clearing the table before Margaret noticed.

"I didn't hear you come in last night, Craig." Her tentative words were soft. I wanted to shout: speak up, woman!

"The meeting ran late," Zarath said.

"Could we have a talk this morning? Please?"

"It will have to wait, darling. I'm meeting somebody. I have a few things to go over with Mrs. West and then I'll be off." With a sudden show of tenderness he cupped Margaret's chin and kissed her. I felt cold. "Leave all this stuff for the maid, Maggie; go up and sit in the sun. It's a lovely day."

Her face lit and she nodded blindly. "Will you be home for

dinner, Craig?" she asked hopefully.

He smiled, promising.

As soon as she went upstairs he motioned me into the den. "Watch her, Deliah." His face was grim. "The accident happened two years ago today."

"She seemed happy this morning."

"Perhaps. I hope you're right." He shuffled papers and stuffed some into his briefcase. Over his shoulder, the lion devoured his kill. "I'll come home as soon as I can. Stick close to her." He slapped his coat in annoyance. "I left my pen someplace. No, don't bother, I'll find it."

He was back quickly with Margaret's sunglasses in his hand. "She left these in the kitchen. Take them up, will you?"

He sounded almost as though he loved his wife, unless you remembered the sound of love in a man's voice. I remembered.

I decided to have another talk with Margaret. On the deck, she relaxed on a redwood chaise. Mexican pots of yellow daisies splashed sun colors even in the shade.

"Did Craig go? My sunglasses, I wonder where—"

"You left them in the kitchen." Absently she put them across her hair like a bandeau. "I brought coffee for us. Do you mind?" It

seemed like a pretty good excuse.

"Oh, thanks. I'd like that." The glow was still on her face; all it had taken was a few kind words from Zarath. His return to cold indifference could quickly snuff it out.

As I picked up the coffeepot, the telephone rang distantly.

"It's Craig's business line downstairs," Margaret said. "You'd better answer it."

One of Zarath's secretaries had a long message full of figures. "Can't this wait?" I asked irritably. Although Margaret was in good spirits, I still felt uneasy. I cut off the girl's indignant reply and her voice buzzed on and on. Only part of me wrote down her words. Inside I waited, straining to hear something other than silence, and then Margaret screamed.

As I threw down the phone and raced upstairs, her scream choked off. I pounded across the empty deck to the railing just as Zarath ran from the parking area under the deck and slid down the slope yelling her name.

Doctor, ambulance—my mind offered the frantic hope, but I already knew it was too late. I *knew* it as I ran from the house and skittered toward the blue blotch in the ravine. She lay with her head at a horrible angle.

Blood formed a pool under the broken glasses beside her, face and sunlight glittered in a mixture of redness and glass shards. Zarath crouched over her body.

"Is she—" I couldn't bear to touch the skinny wrist.

"Dead. She's dead. I decided to check through my briefcase and I saw her—where the hell were you? I told you to stay close."

"There was a phone call. She seemed all right—"

"Seemed." He swore and started to pick her up.

"You'd better leave her there, Mr. Zarath." Despite my numbness, training clicked off a prescribed routine. "I'll call the police."

After that I lost track of time. Official cars arrived; Zarath answered questions; I corroborated his answers. Yes, Mrs. Zarath was despondent. She drank too much. I knew she'd attempted suicide before. Zarath carefully made no remark about my dereliction of duty. Margaret's body was taken away and the police left with words of condolence to Craig Zarath.

He waited only long enough to speak to me. "I apologize for the things I said, Deliah. The shock, I suppose. I really shouldn't blame you. Margaret had made up her mind, so . . ." He got into his car

and started the engine. "I'll send you a check for the balance of your fee."

I must have nodded. He drove away and left me with all that blasted sunlight pouring over the golden hills. Averting my eyes from the ravine where Margaret's blood was soaking into the rocky earth, I headed for the bar in Zarath's den, gulped down brandy and stared at the pictures lining the walls.

For the first time I truly understood Margaret's aversion to the photographs. I looked at the lion ravaging the broken body of the gazelle and recognition raised an icy braille of hackles on my neck. Out there in the ravine when Zarath lifted his head—for a split second that same feral victory blazed in his eyes.

He killed her.

I stood there, with his presence filling the room like animal scent, and knew it. What's more, he used me. Brought me here and lied to me and set me up as a witness. He killed her and he was going to get away with it unless I stopped him.

Gut-deep anger burned away the sickness that had paralyzed my judgment ever since I'd heard Margaret Zarath's dying scream. Zarath didn't know it but sometime during the night I'd stopped

working for him and taken his wife for my client.

I poured more brandy and thought about Zarath's actions just before Margaret's death. He'd been in a hurry to leave but once outside he'd dithered around checking papers in his briefcase. So—why? If he'd heard the telephone and knew I was busy in the den, did he slip back inside and push his wife off the deck?

Well, he hadn't come in the front door—I had a view of it from the den—and even if he entered through the kitchen I was out of this room as soon as Margaret screamed. Which put him on the deck with only seconds to get down to the parking area.

I knew it was impossible, but I went up to the deck anyway. Given time and a rope he could have gone down the concrete pillars, I suppose. I'd bet money he hadn't. So, figure he was down there beneath the deck. After that touching moment at breakfast, if he'd call to her she'd have rushed over to the railing. I gripped the solid barrier and looked down—as Margaret must have looked. If he called from the shadows beneath the deck, she'd lean over, far over. My hands grew slimy with sweat as I tried to crawl back in time. Had he counted on her simply falling?

Would a lion expect the gazelle to trip and break its neck? Neither would Zarath. A weapon, then. Not a gun meant to kill; this was to be suicide. A tranquilizer gun.

It fit.

I had a hazy idea from television that a gun like that makes a minimum of noise. At any rate, the only thing I'd heard was Margaret's scream. I'd never forget it. I remembered exactly: it was not drawn out, not wavering and falling in the peculiar echo of a cry going away down through space, but choking off. In the silence there were other sounds: a sliding hiss of fabric over wood and the final thump of a body striking rock. The pattern made sense if she'd been unconscious when she fell.

If Zarath planned a hiding place for the gun close by, he could figure on getting to the body and removing the dart before I saw it. His car was the logical place; but by now the gun, along with the dart, would be somewhere below salt water.

It made sense except for one thing. Why did Zarath take it for granted that Margaret would freeze and give him a clear shot? If she'd seen him standing there aiming a gun at her, wouldn't she jump back instinctively? If *she'd*

seen him. That was the question.

For the second time that day I ran out of the house and down the slope. The sunglasses marked the spot where Margaret had fallen. Both lenses were cracked. One was intact; the other partially knocked out. I remembered Zarath handing them to me to take to her and Margaret absently slipping them across her hair. When Zarath called, she would have slid them down on her nose. I'd seen her do it yesterday.

My hands shook as I picked them up. The cracked lens stayed in place. My stomach lurched as my beautiful theory fell to pieces like the shards of glass littering the ground.

I felt like banging my head against the rock with frustration. Would the autopsy turn up the drug? Instinctively, I knew he'd plan for that and use something untraceable. There would be a mark where the dart entered her body. Enough evidence . . . maybe. But Zarath had laid his groundwork carefully. I could hear his attorney asking: "Why would Margaret Zarath stand there and let her husband shoot her?" The whole thing was sufficiently bizarre to plant doubt in a jury's mind.

Although I was stymied, I went inside for an envelope and picked

up the pieces of glass with their rusty coating of dried blood. In the den I spread them out on Zarath's desk like a dark jigsaw puzzle.

The answer was there as I suspected.

I made two phone calls. One confirmed the only thing left to nag me. My voice still retained enough official bluster to find out that Zarath's secretary had been instructed to call at precisely ten o'clock.

Drained, I stood up to go pack my bag, but outside wheels crunched on gravel. I sat back down and waited for Zarath.

He must have read my face but he chose to bluff it out and contemptuously ignored the litter of glass:

"I thought you'd gone, Deliah. Margaret's dead. You lost your job when you let her jump and break her neck."

"I'm not buying it anymore. I know you killed her."

He came across the room, cat-like, and leaned over me. "Be very careful, Deliah. The police don't want guesses. They want proof."

"It was clever," I admitted, "and all carefully timed. That phone call, for instance. It kept me far enough away so I couldn't be sure of what I heard. The only

variable was the weather. I suppose you'd simply have postponed things if it hadn't been sunny enough for her to be on the deck. But she was and—tell me, Mr. Zarath, was she really dead when you got to her or did you have to finish the job?"

"She was dead all right; you saw for yourself."

"I imagine it simplified things for you. As it was, you were very busy. You had to hide the gun, get to her before I did and remove the tranquilizer dart. And then there were the glasses."

"You really are reaching, Deliah."

"Margaret was nearsighted, but vain enough to wear only prescription *sunglasses*. I should have realized yesterday, when she thought I was somebody else, that you had switched the glasses. When she looked down at you from the deck you were a myopic blur. She didn't know you had a gun in your hands. After she fell, you simply switched them back with a quick crack against a rock to make the prescription pair look

realistic. I admit it threw me off—until I realized there were too many pieces of glass. The other pair shattered badly in the fall, didn't they? You put the frames in your pocket but you couldn't hide the broken glass just then; it was a bloody mess. I suspect you'd have gone down later to tidy up."

He moved fast, slid open the right-hand drawer of the desk and came up with a gun, not a tranquilizer gun but a very efficient-looking revolver.

"It sounds weak, Deliah. Very weak. But I can't take the chance of your babbling it, can I?"

"Oh, don't be an ass," I said wearily. "I've already called the police."

I'd talked long enough. We both heard the car outside and then the authoritative knocking. I stood up deliberately and walked to the door. My insides quivered but when I turned he stood there with the gun dangling uselessly. Behind him, the lion stared at me with arrogant fierceness.

The cat didn't remind me of Craig Zarath anymore.



Some people will swallow just about anything to make their point:



by Frank Sisk

The doctor and the nurse emerged from George Painter's room just after 4 p.m. They conferred for a long minute in the upper hallway, voices low, before moving to the head of the circular staircase. At the foot, fretfully waiting, Coral hadn't been able to make out a word that was said.

Why, she wondered, are members of the medical profession always whispering to each other? Why must they treat death and adenoids with similar secrecy? Even orderlies conceal the result of a thermometer reading as if it were privileged information. Charlatans, most of them. They certainly weren't fooling George Painter with their mysterious muttering, always a bit out of earshot. That old crock has known for at least a month that he's on the last

lap. What's more, the idea of death doesn't seem to faze him at all. Lately his rare smile has grown sly. As his strength ebbs he looks each day more like a wily old gambler with an ace up his sleeve, a final card with which he plans to trump, for a moment at least, death itself.

Dr. Wolff and Miss Suratt were descending the stairs, he a stocky figure in gray tweed, she a slender figure in white nylon, their downward progress soundless on the thick gold carpet.

Coral slipped a dolorous mask over her tanned face. This morning she had played tennis with

Otis and a little before lunch they had made love. She was still feeling keenly alive, almost youthful—not a bit like a prospective widow—but she wore the sad mask well.

"How is he doing, Doctor?" Into her own whisper she wove the correct amount of tension. "Is he still alert?"

"Very much so," Wolff whispered back. "He's a remarkable man. Remarkable."

"Is he able to speak?"

"Yes, indeed. Not with any of his erstwhile vigor, of course, but his mind is quite clear. Quite clear."

"Excuse me if you will," Miss Suratt whispered. "I simply must go to the kitchen for my cup of tea."

"Phone me at once if there's a critical change," Wolff said.

"And have Glenda fix you something to eat," Coral said.

"Yes, thanks," Miss Suratt said, on her way.

"Please be frank with me, Doctor," Coral said. "How long does George really have?"

Wolff expelled a tiny hiss of air through crooked teeth. "My dear lady, I try not to prophesy in these terminal cases. A patient with a will of iron may battle a long time after that last faint spark of life should have flickered

out. Your husband is that kind of person. A man of very strong will, very strong indeed."

"I'm only asking for an educated guess, Doctor."

"I hesitate to give it."

"You're an experienced physician. I understand you've been treating my husband for at least ten years. You must know what to expect. Roughly."

"I do. Very roughly."

"Will he last through the night?"

"I believe that's safe to say. Yes, through the night."

"Through the week?"

"Ah now, my dear lady," Wolff raised a defensive hand.

"Well, may I see him now? Is he well enough for that?"

"Certainly. As a matter of fact, he asked me to send you up. But I do advise you to keep the visit brief. He's already had a rather busy afternoon. Yes, rather busy."

You can say that again, Coral thought.

First, at 1:30, the densely be-whiskered priest from the Greek Orthodox Church had appeared for the third time in as many days. His name was Mikos Gavros. He arrived as usual in a dusty old limousine, his black-garbed bulk occupying most of the tonneau. The chauffeur was his seventeen-year-old son Teddy, the eldest of

what Coral understood to be a big brood. Father Gavros' patriarchy wasn't confined to the spirit alone.

Teddy, a runner-up in the hirsute category to his old man, hurried his own bearded face around the car to open the rear door. Father Gavros squeezed out. They entered the foyer together. Coral was there to receive the priest's greeting, one of oily unction that parted his peppery whiskers in the middle, exposing lips of liverish hue.

Was he seeking a new convert? Coral wondered.

While he was closeted upstairs with the dying man, whose name had been legally changed long ago from Pantopoulous to Painter, Coral was left with Teddy, who seemed to have a rather salacious eye. She led him to the library, where she'd twice before abandoned him, and abandoned him again.

Norman Yard arrived an hour later, a few minutes after the departure of Gavros and son. The habitual smile of semiamusement lurked beneath his clipped gray moustache, the slender brown attaché case grew from his left arm like a prosthetic device. Coral's opinion of lawyers, never worshipful at best, had been dropping steadily with each of Yard's frequent visits this last month. She

detested that know-it-all smirk of his. Smirking once more, Yard hastily ascended the stairs to consult with his richest client.

Yes, old George Painter had indeed had a busy afternoon.

She entered the enormous bedroom for the first time in a week. The windows were closed against the late October chill, the great brocaded drapes were drawn. The air was heavy with an odor which she would always associate with George—Turkish cigarette smoke; and there was an odor of something else now, something repugnantly dry and stale. The room was a place of silent dusk except for a nimbus of light centered around a lamp on a bedside table. George sat propped up like a bloodless puppet, so thin that his body hardly raised the thermal blanket covering him, and he was smoking a cigarette; the gray tendrils curling slowly round the lampshade were the only signs of life.

"Hello, George," Coral said nervously as she approached the foot of the king-size bed.

The dying man's face was skeletal but the dark eyes imbedded in that face burned like coals of fire. Coral felt almost literally scorched by his gaze.

"I just left Dr. Wolff. He says you're doing fine."

With brown, bony fingers the man removed the cigarette from his dry lips. "You are a natural liar," he said in a thin, hoarse voice.

"He told me you wanted to see me," Coral said.

"I said I wanted to see—" A thin hacking cough dimmed his eyes for a moment. "Yes, I said I wanted to see that slut without conscience who calls herself my wife. And here you are."

"George, this is hardly the time—"

"Time? It is the only time. It is the last time. Isn't it the time you've been waiting for? For nearly three years?"

"George, I really think—"

"Hold your tongue, Coral. Listen." Again that throat-scraping cough. "Pour me a glass of water."

Concealing the disgust that this man aroused in her, she went to the bedside and reached for the pitcher. How had she ever managed to endure these sickening years? Money. Was the money really worth it? It had better be.

"I nurtured no illusions when we married," he was saying. "A tennis bum, your first husband. You outgrew him. Understandable. I outgrew a few previous wives when I was young. You wanted a little luxury for a change. I

wanted somebody—" the cough was like a rasp across cartilage—"—somebody to keep me warm the last years of my life. Not love—the gesture of affection. A fair trade."

"Do you think you should be talking so much?" She held out the glass of water.

"I should talk. You should listen." He took a sip of water and set the glass on the table. "So listen."

"I'll try."

"It will open your deceitful eyes, what I have to say."

"Please. No more of that."

"Almost from the beginning you broke our personal deal."

"What did you expect?"

"Just that. It was no surprise. A healthy young trollop tied to a sick old goat. The horns were inevitable. As long as you were discreet I was tolerant. My pride was not touched. But then you finally threw discretion to the winds. Your gross infidelities became common knowledge. You made me the butt of sad dirty jokes. Even then . . . yes, even then I—" The cough was phlegmy this time and he gave it thoughtful concentration. "Even then I rationalized the situation. But when you seduced my nephew Otis under this roof and flaunted the affair, that was just too much.

I decided to take drastic steps."

"I don't know what you can do about it now."

"At this moment Otis is on a plane to Athens where his father, my brother, will welcome him. Already I have done that."

"Impossible. We had lunch together and—"

"He failed to mention the journey. In Greek the name Otis means keen-eared. A few days ago my nephew listened well to Norman Yard, who outlined certain financial arrangements that could improve his future."

"Why, you interfering old buzzard!"

"Wait till you hear what I have in store for you, Coral."

"Well, you can't disinherit me, George. I'm your legal wife. You have no children. Even if you die intestate I'm entitled to half of what you leave."

That rare, sly smile tightened his dry lips. "You know the state law well. So you may as well see what you will inherit half of." From his bathrobe pocket he took a thin sheaf of greenbacks. "A hundred thousand, ten bills of ten thousand each. My entire estate as of today."

"You're not kidding me,

George," Coral said nonchalantly.

"You'll see soon enough. All my other assets have become part of the ecological Painter Foundation. What I have here is all that's left of my personal wealth."

Stunned, Coral watched the disgusting old man take one of the bills and tear it into a dozen small pieces.

"What in hell are you doing?"

Reaching for the glass of water, he crammed the shredded paper into his mouth and washed it down with a gulping swallow. "I'm taking it with me," he said as he began tearing up another bill.

"Why, you crazy old bugger," she screamed, grasping his scrawny throat in her strong tennis-playing hands. He died so quickly that she couldn't believe it. She looked at the greenback clutched in his hand. It was transparently bogus. Of course. The government hadn't printed \$10,000 bills in years.

"What have you done to him?" asked a voice at her shoulder. It was Miss Suratt.

"What have I done to him?" She raised the murdering hands to her eyes. "What has he done to me? What has *he* done to *me*?"

Abracadabra—and even the most derisive scoffer may be “screed” into a “circle of light.” So mote it be!



I don't usually get clients walking into my university office, but I wasn't complaining. That's the kind of attitude you develop when you're a criminology professor moonlighting as a private detec-

tive—and just happen to be a dwarf.

My visitor was a big man with a swarthy complexion, wearing expensive shoes and suit, diamond pinkie rings, and show biz written all over him. He had red hair and milky blue eyes that did a double take between me and the nameplate on my desk.

"I'm looking for Dr. Frederickson."

"I'm Frederickson."

"You're a dwarf."

"You've got something against dwarfs?" I must have sounded nasty.

He flushed and extended his hand. "Sorry," he said. "My name is Sandor Peth. I need a private detective. Your brother suggested I come and talk to you."

That raised a mental eyebrow. I wondered what business Peth had

a novelette by
George
C. Chesbro

had with Garth. I shook Peth's hand and motioned him to a chair.

Peth reached into his suit jacket and took out a neatly folded piece of paper. He unfolded it, handed it across the desk to me, and said, "I brought this along for what it's worth. I think it could be important."

I studied the paper. There were two concentric circles divided into twelve sections by intersecting lines. The sections were filled with symbols and notes that were meaningless to me.

I placed the paper to one side. "What is it?"

"A horoscope."

I didn't say anything. The thought crossed my mind that Garth might be having a little fun with me.

Peth cleared his throat. "Have you ever heard of Harley Davidson?"

"Sure. He's a famous motorcycle."

Peth smiled. "He's a rock star. At least he used to be."

"Used to be?"

The smile faded. "Harley's in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

Peth lighted a cigar and stared at me through the smoke. His milky eyes fascinated me; they were like mirrors, reflecting all

and revealing nothing. "I want you to know that I don't believe in none of this stuff, but Harley does. That's the point."

"What does Harley believe in, and what's the point?"

"Astrology, witchcraft, all sorts of occult nonsense. Harley's no different from lots of people in the business who won't get out of bed in the morning unless their astrologer tells them it's okay. But Harley got into it a lot deeper. He got mixed up with a bad-news astrologer by the name of Borrn. Borrn's the one who cast that horoscope. Whatever's in it scared the hell out of Harley, messed his mind. So far, he's missed two recording dates and one concert. No promoter's going to put up with that stuff for long. Harley's on his way out."

"What's your interest in Harley?" I asked.

"I was Harley's manager up to a week ago," Peth said evenly. "He fired me."

"On Borrn's advice?"

"Probably."

"A neutral observer might call your interest sour grapes."

"I don't need Harley. If you don't believe me, check with my accountants. I've got a whole stable of rock stars. I like Harley and I hate to see him get messed up like this. He's made me a

bundle, and I figure maybe I owe him some."

I nodded. It seemed a sincere enough statement. "How do you think I can help, Mr. Peth?"

"I want to nail Borrn. It may be the only way to save Harley from himself."

"Harley may not want to be saved."

"I just want to make sure he has all the facts. I don't think he does now."

"I'm not in the business of 'nailing' people. I just investigate. If you think Borrn's into something illegal, you should go to the police."

"I did. That's how I met your brother. He said that as far as he knew Borrn was clean. He told me he couldn't do anything unless there was a complaint, which there hasn't been. I want to find out if there's a basis for a complaint. I can afford to tilt at a few windmills. How about it? Will you take the job?"

I took another look at the expensive shoes and diamond pinkie rings. "I get \$150 a day, plus expenses. You don't get charged for the time I'm teaching."

Peth took out a wad of bills and lightened it enough to keep me busy for a few days. "Borrn operates out of a store-front down on the lower East Side," Peth

said, handing me the money. "That's about all I know, except for what I've already told you." He rose and started to leave.

"Just a minute," I said. Peth turned and looked at me inquiringly. "You said Garth told you he thought Borrn was clean. Did he say how he knew that? Astrologers aren't his usual meat and potatoes."

Something that might have been amusement glinted in Peth's eyes. "They are now," he said. "Didn't you know? He's been assigned to a special unit keeping tabs on the New York occult underground."

I hadn't known. For some reason I found the notion enormously funny, but I waited for Peth to leave before I laughed out loud.

Peth had left the horoscope behind. I picked it up and stuffed it into my pocket along with my newfound wealth.

At the precinct station house I found Garth torturing a typewriter in the cubicle he called an office. He looked tired. Garth always looks tired. He is a cop who takes his work seriously.

"Abracadabra!" I cried, jumping out from behind one of the partitions and flinging my arms wide.

Garth managed to hide his amusement very well. He stopped

typing and looked up at me. "I see Peth found you."

"Yeah. Thanks for the business."

"Why don't you say it a little louder? Maybe you can get me brought up on departmental charges."

I sat down on the edge of his desk and grinned. "I understand you're using the taxpayers' money to chase witches."

"Witches, warlocks, Satanists and sacrificial murderers," Garth said evenly. "As a matter of fact, the man Peth wants you to investigate is a witch as well as an astrologer."

I'd been kidding. Garth wasn't. "You mean 'warlock,' don't you?"

"No, I mean a witch. A witch is a witch, male or female. The term 'warlock' has a bad connotation among the knowledgeable. A warlock is a traitor, or a loner. Like a *magus* or ceremonial magician."

"A who?"

"Never mind. You don't want to hear about it."

What Garth meant was that he didn't want to talk about it. I asked him why.

"I'm not prepared to talk about it," Garth said quietly, staring at the backs of his hands. "At least not yet. I'll tell you, Mongo, you and I come from our background with a certain set of preconceptions that we call 'reality.'

It's hard giving up those notions."

"Hey, brother, you sound like you're starting to take this stuff pretty seriously. Are the practitioners of the Black Arts getting to you?"

"What do you know about magic?"

"I'm allergic to rabbits."

"It isn't all black," Garth said, ignoring my crack. "Witchcraft is recognized as an organized religion in New York State. The parent organization is called Friends of the Craft."

"I'm not sure I get the point."

Garth pressed his hands flat on the desk in front of him. He continued to stare at them. "I'm not sure there is a point."

I was growing a little impatient. "What can you tell me about this Born character?"

"He's supposed to be a good astrologer, and there aren't that many good ones around. I don't know anything else, except that he's never been involved in any of our investigations. That's why I sent Peth to you."

"What about a bunko angle? It's possible that Born could be milking Davidson. If he's using scare tactics, that's extortion."

Garth threw up his hands. "Then Davidson will just have to file a complaint. We're not running a baby-sitting service." He

thought about what I'd said for a few moments, then added: "It's true that some of these guys are bunko artists, con men. They get an impressionable type, come up with a few shrewd insights, scare the hell out of him with a lot of mumbo jumbo, then start giving bad advice."

"Do any of them give good advice?"

Garth looked at me strangely. "I've seen some things that are hard to explain, and I've *heard* of things that are impossible to explain. I know very little because I get told very little. The occult underground is a very secret society. Secrecy is part of the Witch's Pyramid."

"There you go again."

"Never mind again. If you want to know more you should talk to one of your colleagues at the university."

I tried to think of one of my colleagues who might know something about the occult. I came up zero. "Who would that be?"

"Dr. Jones."

"*Uranus* Jones?"

"That's the one."

Uranus was more than a colleague; she was a friend. She was also one of the most levelheaded, *together* people I'd ever met. I shook my head. "You must have your signals crossed. Uranus isn't

an astrologer, she's an astronomer. And one of the best in the business."

Garth grunted. "You may know her as an astronomer. In the circles I travel in lately, she's a living legend. She's cut an awful lot of corners for me, helping to track lost kids who get involved in the occult, that kind of thing. She's opened doors I wouldn't even be able to find on my own. Or wouldn't know existed. You wouldn't believe her reputation." He stared off into space for a few moments, as though considering his next words. "She's supposed to be psychic, and a materializing medium."

"There you go—"

"You know what a psychic is. A materializing medium is a person who can make objects appear in another person's hand—by willing it."

I found Uranus in her offices in the university's Hall of Sciences. The rooms were cluttered with charts, telescope parts, and other astronomical paraphernalia. Uranus was bent over a blowup of a new star cluster she had discovered. Her hair, strawberry blonde in old photographs she had shared with me, was now a burnished silver. I knew she was fifty, but she had the face and body of a

woman in her early thirties, and the eyes of a teen-ager.

She glanced up and smiled when I entered. "Mongol! How nice to see you!"

"Hello, darlin'." I went over to her desk and looked at the photograph. "How do you think those stars are going to affect my behavior this year?"

Uranus casually pushed the photo to one side, leaned back in her chair, folded her hands in her lap and stared at me. "Who have you been talking to?"

"A certain cop who's a little in awe of you. Didn't you know Garth is my brother?"

"I did."

"Well, how come you never talked to *me* about any of these hidden talents of yours? Heaven knows we've sat through enough boring faculty parties together."

"What would have been your reaction?"

I envisioned myself choking on a Scotch sour. She had a point, and I decided not to pursue it. "Uranus, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"As a criminologist or private detective?"

"Private detective. I need some help."

"All right. What do you want to know?"

"For openers, darlin', what's a

nice astrologer like you doing in a place like this?"

That caught her off guard and she laughed. "Astronomy evolved from astrology," she said, pointing to the charts and photographs strewn around her office. "The one is much older than the other."

"I'm not sure what that means."

"It may mean," Uranus said easily, "that any man who rejects out-of-hand the tools that other men have found useful for thousands of years is a fool." She paused, then slowly drew a circle in the air with her index finger. "We live in a circle of light that we call Science. Obviously, I believe in science. But I also know that that circle of light expands slowly, illuminating things that are in the surrounding darkness. The atom, the force of gravity, the fact that the earth is round—all were very 'unscientific' concepts at one time. There are still unbelievably powerful forces out in that darkness we temporarily call the Occult, Mongol. The ancients knew about and used these forces instinctively. Most modern men—at least in the West—are not so wise. Science can be thought of as a means of *getting things done*. But there are other ways. For example, taking an airplane is a perfectly reasonable and efficient means of getting to, say, Europe.

There are men and women alive today who can make the same journey—and report their observations—without ever leaving their livingrooms. It's called Astral Projection."

"Are you one of those people?"

Uranus ignored the question. "The Magi mentioned in the Bible were astrologers," she said. "Our word 'magician' comes from *magi*. The 'star' they saw in the east was actually an astrological configuration that they knew how to interpret. And look where it led them. Jesus may have been the greatest ceremonial magician who's ever lived. He—with his disciples—numbered thirteen, the classic number of the witch's coven. Each of the disciples displays the characteristics of one of the twelve signs of the Zodiac. The sign of the early Christians was the fish. Pisces is symbolized by the fish, and Jesus lived in the age of Pisces."

I meant to laugh; it came out a nervous chuckle. I remembered Garth's comment on preconceptions. "You'd better not let your friendly neighborhood clergy hear you talking like that."

Uranus smiled. "Everything I've said is common knowledge to anyone who's done his theological homework. It's a matter of difference of opinion over interpretation." She paused and

touched my hand. "In any case, you can no longer claim that I don't discuss these things with you. What did you want to see me about, Mongo?"

I took out the horoscope Peth had given me and handed it to her. "I'd like you to read this for me."

Uranus smoothed the paper flat on the desk and studied it. After a few moments she looked up at me. "Is this yours, Mongo?"

I shook my head.

"I'm glad. I don't have time to do a thorough reading, but at a glance I'd say this person is in trouble."

"How do you know that?"

Uranus motioned me closer to the desk and pointed to the two circles. "The inner circle is the natal horoscope," she said, "the position of the sun, moon and planets in the sky at this person's birth. There are no severe afflictions—bad signs—in it. He or she probably has a marked talent in art or music, although that talent is used rather superficially, in a popular vein. But the chart indicates considerable success."

I swallowed hard and found that my mouth was dry. "Where does the trouble come in?"

"The outer circle is a synthesis—the horoscope projected up to the present time. Saturn—an

evil, constricting influence—is in very bad conjunction with the other planets. There is a bad grouping in Scorpio, the sign of the occult. There are a number of other afflictions indicated, including a bad conjunction in the house of the secret enemy. I would say that whoever this is has reached a most important crossroad in his life, and the situation is fraught with danger. May I ask whose horoscope this is?”

I felt light-headed. I wrenched my brain back into gear. “A rock star by the name of Harley Davidson.”

Uranus choked off a cry as her hand flew to her mouth.

“You know him?”

Uranus shuddered. “His real name is Bob Greenfield. Bob was one of my students a few years back. Tall, likable boy. Black hair, angular features. Maybe you remember him.”

I didn’t, which wasn’t unusual. The university is a big place. I briefly told Uranus the story Peth had given me.

Uranus’ eyes clouded and her face aged perceptibly. “Borrn is an evil man,” she said quietly. “Bob would be no match for him.”

“His ex-manager seems to think the same thing. He hired me to try to get something on Borrn.”

Uranus shook her head. “You’ll fail. And you’ll be running a great personal risk if you try. Borrn is exceedingly dangerous.”

“If he’s criminal, maybe I can prove it.”

“No. Evil is not necessarily criminal. There’s a difference.”

I didn’t argue the point. I understood it all too well.

“Borrn is a gifted astrologer and palmist,” Uranus continued. “There’s also a rumor to the effect that he’s a member of a supersecret coven of witches.”

“Garth mentioned that.”

“Garth must be developing some other good contacts; or someone is deliberately trying to mislead him. I’m not sure if the rumor is true, but it probably is. If so, it could explain a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

“The influence you claim Borrn has over Bob. It could be the coven’s cone of power acting on him.”

“Cone of power?”

“An influence coming from a powerful collective will. That’s the purpose of a coven: to form a collective will. There’s no telling what they want with Bob. It could be a homosexual angle—Bob’s a handsome boy—or it could be simply money.”

I cleared my throat. “I’m sorry,

Uranus, but I don't believe that 'cone of power' number."

Uranus seemed distracted, and I couldn't tell whether she hadn't heard or was merely ignoring my comment. "We should go and talk to Bob," she said at last.

"We?"

"He wouldn't talk to you. He would to me. I know the language."

I considered it for a moment, then reached for the phone, intending to call Peth. "I'll find out where he lives."

Uranus was already halfway to the door. "I know where he lives; we kept in touch up till a few months ago." She paused and stared at me. I was still standing by her desk, trying to sort things out. The urgency in her eyes hummed in her voice. "I really think we should hurry, Mongo."

The place where Harley Davidson had once lived was a three-story brownstone in a fashionable section of Greenwich Village. Nobody answered the bell, and it took me half an hour to work my way through the double lock on the door.

Harley Davidson was out, and he wouldn't be back. He'd left his body behind on the floor of his bedroom, filled with sleeping pills.

I picked my way through the

empty, plastic vials on the floor and called Garth. Uranus sat down on the edge of Davidson's bed and began to cry softly. I began to poke around. The first thing that caught my attention was what appeared to be a notebook on a night stand. It had metal covers and was inscribed with strange symbols. I used a handkerchief to pick it up and carry it over to where Uranus was sitting. Her sobbing had subsided and she was staring off into space, beyond a young man's corpse, at what was and what might have been.

I touched her gently on the shoulder and showed her the notebook. "Darlin', do you know what this is?"

She glanced at the notebook. "It's a book of shadows," she said distantly.

"You'll have to explain that to me."

Uranus' voice had the quality of an echo. "A book of shadows is a witch's diary. All initiates start one, and fill it the rest of their lives. It usually contains personal experiences, spells, and coven secrets."

I grunted, opened the book and started to leaf through it. There wasn't much in it that made any sense to me; I decided the obfuscation was probably intentional, designed to preserve its contents

from prying eyes like my own. Borrn's name was mentioned a number of times, along with a list of various ceremonies in which Davidson had participated.

"Borrn seems to be the coven

"Who is at that point, really?"

I must have made a face, or the tone of my voice wasn't right.

Uranus suddenly snapped, "Don't mock what you don't understand! I do it all the time!" She punc-



leader, judging by all this," I said.

Uranus said nothing, nor did she exhibit any interest in the notebook. I didn't press her on it. I asked a question instead. "What's 'scrying'?"

"Is that mentioned in there?"

"A number of times."

"Scrying is a method of divination," Uranus said hollowly, "of looking into the future or discovering secrets. It usually involves crystal gazing, but flame or water can also be used. Bob would have been nowhere near the point where he could scry."

tuated the outburst with a long sigh; it was an apology, unasked for and unneeded. "With the locked door and empty pill bottles, it's an obvious suicide. It's finished, Mongo. What's your interest now?"

It was a good question, one I'd been asking myself. Maybe it was the fact that a lot of Sandor Peth's money was still rustling around in my pocket. It seemed a shame to give it back, and if I were going to keep it I had to work for it.

"There's a point of law called

psychological coercion," I said. "If it can be shown that Borrn or any other member of his coven influenced Davidson to take his own life, it's a criminal offense. Probably impossible to prove, but worth looking into."

"Leave it, Mongo. Please. No good will come out of your investigating Borrn. I know you don't believe this, but you can't imagine the misery he could cause you."

I didn't say anything. I was tired of warnings, tired of unwanted glimpses into the dark attics of men's minds. There was the body of the boy on the floor, shot out of the tree of life by invisible bullets of what had to be superstition. Those bullets had found their mark in a bright, talented and rich boy who had exploded under their impact, plunging from the rarefied atmosphere of celebrity to end as a cold, graying hulk, like a falling star.

Uranus suddenly gripped my arm. "Bob shouldn't have had a book of shadows."

I looked at her. The grief in her eyes had been replaced by something else. She looked as if she had just waked from sleep, passing from a nightmare into something worse.

"Why not? You told me Borrn was a witch. Under the circumstances, wouldn't it have been nat-

ural for Davidson to become a member of Borrn's coven?"

"No. It would have been virtually impossible. I told you that a coven is made up of thirteen members. Thirteen is a magic number of sorts. No coven would take in a fourteenth member."

"Maybe somebody died or decided to join the Elks instead."

Uranus shook her head. "Not at the level at which this coven operated. You don't just 'leave' a coven like that. And, even if a member had died, they would never choose a boy like Bob to take his place. Borrn's coven is highly skilled. They would never accept an initiate."

"Maybe the book belongs to somebody else."

"I doubt it. A witch's book of shadows is his most precious possession. He almost never lets it out of his sight."

I put the book back in its place and started for the door. "Garth should be here in a few minutes," I said. "You fill him in. I'll talk to him later."

"Where will I tell him you've gone?"

"Tell him I've gone to have my fortune told."

It took a bit of looking, but I finally found Borrn's store-front operation. It was the only open

door in a narrow alley bounded on both sides by crumbling warehouses with boarded-up windows. I went through it.

The room was small and cramped, permeated by the smell of incense. Born sat in the middle of it like a spider in the middle of an invisible web that was no less deadly for the fact that I couldn't see it. In front of him was a plain wooden table on which was a crystal ball. It was the only *exotica* in the room; the rest consisted of bookshelves filled with books, most of which looked well-worn. I wondered whether he actually read them, or had picked them up in a secondhand bookstore. Born himself was dressed in a very unmystical outfit consisting of faded denims and dungaree jacket. I felt vaguely disappointed, like a boy who'd peeked into a clown's dressing room.

Born rose as I entered. He was not a big man, but he had presence, the kind of self-assurance that comes from being able to make a living doing what you like and being good at it. He was short and stocky, with brown hair and piercing black eyes.

"Can I help you?" His voice was soft, almost lilting, like the swish of a garrote before it bites into flesh.

I gave him a phony name. Busi-

ness or no, I didn't want my name popping up at a later date on some astrologer's list of clients. "I hear you tell fortunes."

I'd offended him. Born sat back down and crossed his arms over his chest. "I do not 'tell fortunes,' as you put it. I advise you to look on 42nd Street."

"What do you do?"

"If you are serious, I will read your palm. I charge twenty-five dollars for a one-hour consultation. However, I do not think you are serious. You would have known that I am not a fortune-teller."

"What do you call palm reading?"

"The palm is a map of your past and an indication of what your future may hold. It does not tell your destiny; *you* decide your destiny."

"It still sounds like the same thing."

"It is not. If I tell you there is a red light two blocks from here, that does not affect your freedom to decide to stop for it or to run it."

"It sounds a little complicated to me. How about doing my horoscope?"

He motioned me to sit down. I did.

"I believe your horoscope would be useless to you," he said

in the tone of a doctor criticizing a medication. "I'm sure it will come as no surprise to you to be told that you're a dwarf. Your horoscope would probably show a great affliction in the physical area, but the rest might not necessarily hold true. A horoscope is like an insurance company's actuary tables. You differ markedly from the norm; your dwarfism—the immediacy of it—would consistently influence your life far more than the planets."

"All right," I said, holding out my hand, "see what you can do with that."

"Are you right-handed?"

"Yes."

"Then this hand is the record of what you have done with your natural talents. The left is your subconscious, your potential. Later we will compare the two."

He took my right hand and began to manipulate it, bending the fingers back and forth, pressing the mounds of flesh at the base of the palm and fingers. He had a soft, delicate touch. To this point he had been rather pleasant, a natural psychologist; I had to remind myself that the worst evil often comes in the nicest packages.

"Were you once in the circus?"

The question startled me, until I reflected on the logic of it.

"Sure," I said evenly. "We call it 'Dwarfs' Heaven.'"

Born shook his head. He seemed puzzled. "But you weren't there in the capacity of a clown, or a freak. You were important, had a wonderful reputation and considerable publicity. I . . . see great coordination and drive. I would have to say that you were an acrobat. Or a tumbler." He looked up at me. "Is that right?"

I decided Born had one hell of an act. I resisted the impulse to look at my own hand. "What else does it say?"

Born turned his attention back to my hand. "The head line is very long and complex. I would say that you have—or once had—multiple careers. You have a great deal of intelligence, and may be a teacher, probably at an advanced level, as your hand shows that you are impatient with stupidity. Also, you are dying."

The last went through me like a jolt of electricity. I yanked my hand away. "It comes with the package," I said tightly. "That's why you don't see many dwarfs in old-age homes. Did Harley Davidson's hand say the same thing?"

That gave Born a little jolt of his own, but he had remarkable control. Something flashed in his eyes, then went out, leaving his eyes looking like two cold lumps

of coal. The effect was startling, as though he had suddenly contracted and was watching me from somewhere deep inside himself, far behind the dull eyes I was watching. "Who are you?" he asked. "What do you want?"

"Davidson was one of your clients. Did you know that he's dead?"

"I do not discuss my clients," Born said in a voice that was so low it was barely audible. "Get out."

"You may have to discuss Davidson with the police. I think you may have had something to do with his death. What did you tell him that would make him want to take his own life?"

I expected some kind of reaction and got none. I knew instinctively that Born was not going to say more. He sat very still, like some kind of statue executed in perfect detail, but still without life. Again, I had the impression that he had retreated to somewhere deep within himself to a trancelike state where, as far as I was concerned, he had left the room and would not be coming back. I swallowed hard. His eyes were blank, looking at and beyond me. I suddenly knew that he could stay that way for hours if he chose to do so. Nothing I could say or do would have the slightest

impact on him. I grew lonesome.

It was the most effective brush-off I'd ever seen. I got up and left.

I didn't go far. It had been a long day and I'd covered a lot of territory, geographic and emotional; but there was still a way to go and I was anxious to get to the end of whatever road it was on which I was traveling. Born had gotten to me in a way he probably hadn't anticipated. He'd known too much about me. That meant one of two things: he had actually seen them in my palm, or he had a dossier. To me it was no contest. I wanted to find the dossier, then find out who had given it to him, and why.

I killed what remained of the afternoon in a local bar over beer and a steak sandwich. Then I went out and bought a penlight and a dark sheet. Finally I went back to the alley. It was dark.

It took me all of thirty seconds to burgle my way into the storefront. I shrouded myself with the sheet to hide the light from the penlight and began to go through Born's rather extensive library. I wasn't sure what I was looking for; whatever it was I didn't find it. Most of the books were highly technical treatises on astrology, replete with countless charts and tables that made my eyes water.

That was it, except for a crumbling copy of something called the *Kabala* and other books on mysticism. There were no personal papers or records of any kind.

I sat down in Borrn's chair and tried to think. I'd apparently struck out in Borrn's office, and I doubted strongly that I would find any "Borrn" listed in the telephone directory. Besides, judging from what Uranus and Garth had said, I wasn't going to get any information from people in the neighborhood who might have any.

I raised a good dwarf chuckle by reflecting on the fact that I might just have to "scurry" up some answers. I reached out and touched the crystal ball in front of me. It was heavy leaded crystal. I absently pushed at it and heard a soft click behind me. I turned and whistled softly.

A section of one of the bookcases had slid open to reveal a short corridor leading to what appeared to be a large chamber. Light from the secret chamber was pouring out into the storefront and splashing onto the street. I quickly rose from the chair and went through the opening.

I'd been worried about getting the door shut, and I realized too late that I'd confused my prior-

ities. The heavy steel door sighed shut as I passed through the opening. It came up flush against the wall with a very solid and ominous click. I looked for some way to get the door open and couldn't find it. It was a double-security system, primarily designed to keep intruders out but, failing that, designed to insure that they stayed in. Since there seemed to be no way out, I went in.

The setup inside was impressive. The interior of the warehouse behind Borrn's store-front had been gutted and reconstructed to form a huge, circular chamber. The walls and ceiling were solid and soundproofed; the floor was concrete. I estimated the construction costs to be in excess of a half million dollars. Borrn didn't get that kind of money from doing mystical manicures.

The job wasn't completed yet. There was a gaping hole high on the north wall, with ropes and scaffolding hanging down from it. That would be the conduit for the building supplies.

There was a large crater in the middle of the floor, about twenty feet in diameter. I walked over and looked in. It was perhaps six feet deep; covered at the bottom with large gas jets. The ceiling above was blackened; and there were air vents placed at strategic

points around the chamber to allow for circulation. The whole thing reminded me of a crematorium.

There were twelve cubicles built around the perimeter of the chamber, and I could see from where I was standing that they were living quarters of sorts, complete with cots, small libraries and black-draped, candle-covered altars; but it was the thirteenth cubicle built into the north wall in which I was interested. It was at least twice as large as the others, and was draped in red: that would be Born's. I walked in.

I was a slow learner. The cubicle was rigged in the same manner as the store-front; I had no sooner stepped over the threshold than a steel door dropped from a hidden receptacle in the ceiling. Obviously, arrangements for walking out had to be made before walking in. I decided that didn't bode well for my immediate future.

I began a systematic search of the room. It didn't take me long to strike pay dirt. This time there were personal notes and correspondence written in a language I could understand.

Two things became very clear: Born was not the leader of the coven, and Harley Davidson had, indeed, had a "secret enemy."

The door sighed open an hour or so later. Sandor Peth stood in the doorway, staring down at me where I sat on the bed. Born and the rest of the coven stood slightly behind him. All were dressed in crimson, hooded robes adorned with mystic symbols. The lights had been turned out in the large chamber, and there was a loud hissing sound; firelight flickered and danced like heat lightning.

I looked at Peth. "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

Peth's milky blue eyes didn't change. "You are a very persistent man, Dr. Frederickson," he said evenly. "And fast. I'm afraid I seriously underestimated you."

I motioned to the firelight behind him. "Rather newfangled, isn't it?"

"One of the exigencies of living in New York City."

"You want to tell me what this is all about?"

"Like in the movies?"

"Like in the movies."

Peth motioned to Born, who came forward and searched me. I didn't put up any resistance. It wasn't the time. I wanted to find out what Peth had to say—if anything. Also, I thought resistance might be offensive to the thirteen of them.

"All right," Peth said when Born had finished with me and

stepped back into the group. He entered the room and sat down in a chair across from me. "First, why don't you tell me what you've surmised so far?"

"You killed Davidson, and you were trying to cover your tracks."

"The second part of your statement is correct. But I—or we—did not kill Davidson; we caused him to die."

"An interesting legal point."

"Yes. I suppose it is."

"How'd you do it?"

Peth motioned to himself and the others, as though the answer were obvious. There was a faint ringing in my ears.

"You're telling me you put a spell on him?" I'd decided he was crazy, and I told him so.

Peth shrugged. "You asked me what this was all about, and I am trying to tell you. Of course, the fact that we caused Harley to take his own life is unprovable. However, the papers in this room, which I'm sure you've seen, do prove intent to do harm, and could prove embarrassing in a courtroom. I'm truly sorry you proved to be so conscientious."

"Why did Davidson have to die?"

"We depend on people—you would probably call them 'victims'—for our financial resources. All of us, in one way or another,

are involved with people, and these people unwittingly provide financial support for our activities."

"What activities?"

"Simply put, the accumulation of witch power which will enable us to control even more people. As you know, fame and fortune in the rock-music business is ephemeral. Harley was at the peak of his earning powers. The power which you scoff at had enabled me to secure Harley's power of attorney and convince him to sign a will leaving all of his rather large list of investments to me. Also, I had managed to buy a million dollars' worth of insurance, without a suicide clause, on Harley's life. Very expensive, but I knew I wouldn't have that many premiums to pay. At that point Harley became more valuable to us dead than alive."

"And that's when Born went to work on his head?"

"We all participated in the process. We knew that Harley would eventually kill himself, but we did not know when or how. If I had known he would do it the way he did—by swallowing pills inside a locked house, as reported on the radio—I would not have proceeded the way I did. However, I knew that I, as the beneficiary of very large sums of money, would

come under a great deal of suspicion. That's why I went to your brother. I anticipated his reaction and thought that would be the end of it, with my innocence established in his mind. However, when he suggested that I come to you I felt I had to take the suggestion."

"You did some pretty thorough research on me first."

Peth looked surprised. "No. As a matter of fact, I didn't. I should have. If I had, Borrn would have been prepared for your visit and you would not be in the position you find yourself. As it was, Borrn did not know you were a dwarf—I hadn't had a chance to tell him—and you gave him a false name."

"You're lying. Why? It's a small point."

Again, Peth looked surprised. Suddenly he laughed. "Borrn gave you a reading, didn't he?"

Something was stirring deep inside my mind; it was blind, soft and furry, with sharp teeth. I ran away from it. "You took Davidson into your coven, right?"

"Borrn made Davidson think he was a part of the coven—in which I, obviously, was the missing member. Of course he was never really a part. All of the ceremonies he took part in were actually part of a magical attack on his deep mind."

I'd heard enough to convince me that some kind of legal case could be made against Peth, Borrn and the others, and the papers I'd hidden inside my shirt would give me a shot at proving it. At the least, New York City would be rid of one particular supercoven composed of thirteen megalomaniac cranks. There remained only the slight difficulty of finding a way to get past thirteen men, and out of a sealed room. I tried not to let that depress me.

"What happens now?"

"Must I state the obvious?"

"You'd be a fool to kill me."

"Really? Why is that? I think we would be fools not to kill you. The fire is very hot. It will leave no trace of you. You will simply have disappeared."

"My brother knows I'm investigating Borrn. He'll find this place."

"Oh, I don't think so."

"Somebody's building it."

"Haitians, who appreciate our powers. They are afraid of voodoo spells. They would tear their own tongues out before they told anybody about this place. It's true that Borrn will be investigated, but I have no doubt that he will come out of it clean."

"People know he's a witch."

That shook him. "How is that?"

I decided against mentioning

Garth or Uranus. "It's in his book of shadows. Davidson's."

Peth was silent for a long time. Whatever he'd finally decided wasn't going to be shared with me. He rose from his chair and gave a slight nod of his head. As one, the twelve figures outside the door entered the room and began to fan out around me. Their movements were slow, almost mechanical; it was like seeing a guillotine blade descend in slow motion.

I smiled in what I hoped was a disarming, dwarfish manner, and gathered my legs beneath me. I focused my gaze on Peth's solar plexus. I couldn't fight thirteen men, but a few of them were going to discover that I was one deadly dwarf. Peth would be my first candidate for instruction.

"O Pentacle of Might

*Be thou fortress and defense to
Robert Frederickson against all
enemies, seen and unseen, in
every magical work!"*

Uranus' voice drifted down from the darkness in the outer chamber. Before all the lights went out I caught the looks of utter astonishment on the faces of the coven members. I was a little surprised myself, but not so much that I forgot the way out of the room. I lunged forward in the darkness, caromed off a few

sheeted bodies and landed on my face on the concrete outside. I got back up on my feet and raced off to my left, taking cover in the darkness, beyond the firelight. I'd traded in one trap for a new, slightly larger one; as long as the lights remained out, a few people were going to pay a heavy price for trying to find me.

That left me to meditate on the question of what Uranus was doing in the building.

Peth and the others seemed to be preoccupied by the same question. I watched as they slowly emerged from the darkness to spread out in a circle around the raging fire. Peth stood at their head, gazing up toward the spot where the hole in the north wall would be.

"Who are you?" Peth asked in a whisper that carried throughout the chamber.

"All wise Great One, Great Ruler of storms, Master of the Heavenly Chamber, Great King of the Powers of the sky, be here, we pray thee, and guard this place from all dangers approaching from the west!"

Peth and the others knew a few rhymes of their own. There was no visible signal of any kind, but their voices rose in a chorus that made chills ripple through my body:

"Amodeus, Calamitor, Usor! You who sow confusion, where are you? You who infuse fear and hate and enmity, I command you by the power of Disalone and Her Horned Consort to go!

So mote it be!

So mote it be!"

There was a pause, then Uranus' voice again, soft, drifting like a sonic feather:

"Four corners in this house for Holy Angels. Christ Jesus be in our midst. God be in this place and keep us safe."

The response was a blast of psychic hate:

"It is not our hands which do this deed, but that of Amodeus the Horned One!

The trespasser must die!

So mote it be!

So mote it be!"

I was watching a duel of sorcerers, and I felt thrown back in time a thousand years, thrown to the ground at the mouth of a cave in which moved dark, strange shapes.

There was a long silence. Peth made a motion with his hand and the other members of the coven turned and started to fan out. It was dwarf-hunting time.

"Stop!" Uranus' voice was weaker, ragged, as though she were short of breath. The movement of the coven members

stopped. "I am Uranus Jones, and Dr. Frederickson is under my protection. You have heard of me and know of my powers."

Peth's voice drifted softly through the room, waxing and waning like some invisible moon. "I have heard of you, Uranus Jones. You are a member of our family, a unit of the Universal Mind. Respect our wishes. This is not your concern. Leave us. So mote it be."

Again, the faint, muted tones: "I repeat that Dr. Frederickson is under my protection. You harm him at your own peril."

Her voice drifted off strangely. The muscles in my stomach began to flutter uncontrollably. There was movement to my left.

"Mongo! Shoot the leader if anyone moves again!"

Uranus' voice seemed stronger now, as though she had successfully passed through some great ordeal. I liked her suggestion, except that I didn't have a gun, and Peth knew it.

"He doesn't have a gun," Peth said, underlining my thoughts. I wondered why he sounded so uncertain.

"He does now," Uranus said. "Open the doors and let him pass."

It was the beginning of an argument between two other parties

that I was going to lose. It seemed a good time to excuse myself from the debate.

I remembered the scaffolding hanging from the hole in the north wall, and tried to picture in my mind exactly where it would be. I knew it was about ten feet off the ground, and I would need tremendous momentum if I hoped to reach it.

Circus time. I shoved off the wall and sprinted across the floor, getting up a good head of steam. Somebody reached for me and missed. Twenty feet from where I judged the wall to be I launched into a series of cartwheels, then, on the last turn, planted my feet on the floor and hurled myself up into the air.

At the apogee of my leap my hands touched wood. I gripped the edge of the scaffold; I scrambled up onto the platform, shinnied up the rope and dropped over the concrete cornice onto a pile of building supplies.

The entire escape had taken less than fifteen seconds.

I could see Uranus now in the glow of the firelight reflected off the walls. She was slumped against a girder, next to a large circuit breaker; her appearance frightened me more than anything that had happened previously. She appeared to have aged into an old

woman, devoid of energy; her beautiful, silver hair hung in wisps from her head.

I ran over to her and grabbed her around the waist.

"Fire exit," she gasped. "Off to the left."

I started to my left, pulling Uranus after me. I'd expected to hear a furor from below or, at the least, a few well-chosen curses. There was silence.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me about this place?" I whispered through clenched teeth. "It would have saved everybody a lot of trouble."

"Scry," Uranus sighed in the same broken voice that had so frightened me before. "Knew . . . felt . . . you in trouble. Called Garth but afraid . . . there wasn't . . . time."

She seemed to be regaining her strength. I released her and she scrambled along beside me. I found the window she had come through. We both went out, then started down the fire escape.

"The gun," Uranus said. "Do you have it? They may try to come after us."

"I don't have a gun."

Uranus said nothing. I could hear the sirens of Garth's cavalry coming to the rescue. Judging from the sound, they were closing fast.

"Let's go watch the show," I said, starting down the alley leading to the front of the building.

Uranus grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the darkness beside the building. She looked herself again, though still pale; it was as though she had passed through a near-fatal illness in a matter of only a few minutes.

"I can't go with you," she said.

"Why the hell not? Knowing Garth, he'll have an army of cops with him."

"That's not the point. I don't want to answer questions. I don't want anyone to know exactly what happened in that building tonight."

"Peth will tell them."

"No, he won't. And none of the others will either. I must beg you not to speak, Mongo, for the sake of our friendship: When I called Garth I told him simply that I had a hunch about you and the warehouse. Garth has learned to trust my hunches."

"This is no time for games," I said impatiently. "How did you know where I was?"

She ignored my question. "There will be reporters out there, questions that I'm not prepared to answer. I would no longer be able to carry on my work at the university, and you know how important that is to

me. It's my link with the . . . rest of the world. Please, Mongo. Don't take that away from me."

She turned and ran off into the darkness without waiting for an answer. I walked slowly toward the flashing lights at the front of the building.

The proverbial mop-up of Peth and his crew was decidedly anticlimactic. When Garth and the other policemen broke down the secret door the members of the coven were waiting calmly. Their robes and, presumably, all of the records had been consigned to the gas-fed bonfire still roaring from the pit in the center of the floor. They offered no resistance.

As Uranus had predicted, no one mentioned her presence in the building earlier. For some reason I didn't fully understand, I didn't either.

I was exhausted, and my head felt as though it had been stuffed with rotting cotton. Still, I managed to drag myself down to the police station, where I turned over the papers I had taken and made some kind of statement. Then I went home and poured myself half a tumbler of Scotch. I wanted desperately to sleep, but there were still a lot of things on my mind.

There was nothing that had happened which could not be ex-

plained by a few good guesses and a lot of abnormal psychology emanating from some very sick minds. I needed the Scotch because I realized that Uranus possessed one of those sick minds. A woman I loved was, in my opinion, desperately ill, and I had to find the courage to confront her with this opinion, to suggest that she see a psychiatrist.

Having resolved this, I slipped off my jacket and threw it toward the bed. Only at the last moment did I realize that it somehow seemed heavier than it should. The jacket slid across the smooth bedspread and fell to the floor on the opposite side with a heavy, metallic clunk. The sound shrieked in my ears, echoing down to the very roots of my soul.

Whatever was in the jacket, I

didn't want to know about it. I raced around the bed, picked up the jacket and in the same motion sent it hurtling toward the window. The weighted cloth shattered the glass and dropped from sight.

I stood, shaking uncontrollably and breathing hard as the shards of glass fell to the floor. Even as a tremendous surge of relief flowed through me, I knew that throwing away the jacket was no answer. If, indeed, there were the forces outside the "circle of light" Uranus had mentioned, it would do no good for me to deny it: I would merely remain ignorant of their existence. If the jacket was lost, I'd spend the rest of my life wondering what had been in the pocket—and how it had gotten there.

I drained off the Scotch, then went back into the night.



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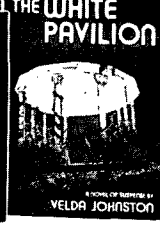
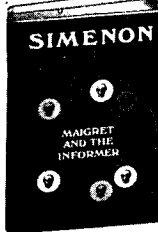
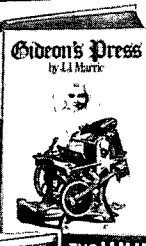
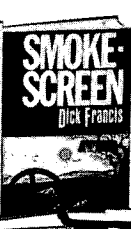
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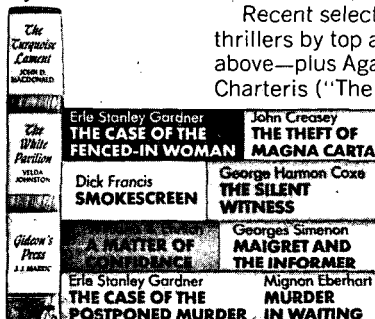
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