ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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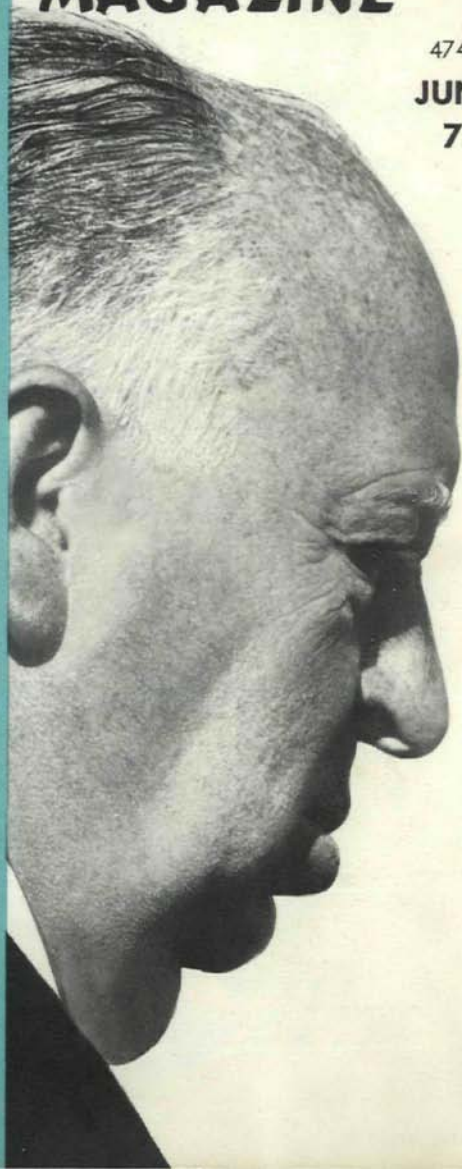

NEW stories presented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE

June 1975

Dear Reader:

If you are perplexed about where to vacation this summer, there is no reason why you cannot conserve energy (and funds) and reside within these pages, now and in the months ahead. Enough locales are covered in just this one issue to satisfy the most jaded traveler among you. The writers herein take you away from it all and then some in their new excursions into the world of suspense.

The residents of that particular world are of special interest. Settings never infringe on the principal matters involved, such as where Anita has gone (*Double Zero* by Robert Colby) and through a veritable gauntlet of assorted other titillating terrors to a novelette about what a little digging will turn up (*Losers' Town* by Gary Brandner).

The places set forth for you to visit are peopled by a horde of enchanting undesirables who all do their part to discourage you from leaving the safety of your own hearth.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 20, NO. 6 JUNE 1975

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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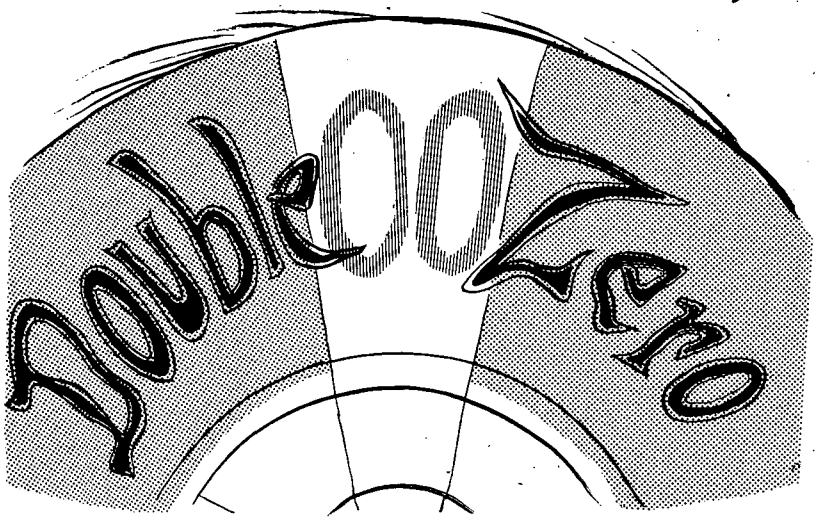
SHORT STORIES

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 20, No. 6, June 1975. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions $9.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere $10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408.

Hope to one may be naught but despair to another.



At breakfast that Friday in June, Anita Waldron merely toyed with her food and waited with growing impatience for her husband to complete some notes he was jotting down between sips of coffee. These were notes for one of the eternal staff meetings Mark now held since he had been elevated from program director to manager of a television station in San Diego. Although he loved Anita more than all else, at 34 Mark was a dedicated career man with a feverish sense of responsibility.

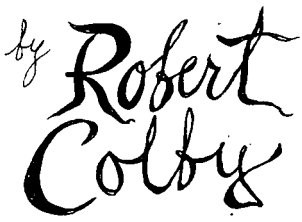
Anita was six years younger. Small and trim with black hair and dark eyes, she had the intense, exotic attraction of the most elegant Latin women, a quality inherited from her Mexican mother. Although her English was flawless, so was her Spanish, spoken with the accents of a native.

The couple had met at a broadcasters' convention in Los Angeles little more than a year ago. At the time Anita was giving Spanish lessons on TV over a PBS station. They had commuted back and

forth to spend alternate weekends with each other. A few such weekends and they were married.

They were still passionately in love. Mark told Anita that their present life together seemed no less ecstatic than their honeymoon, though of course they had minor disagreements and a few stormy arguments. The latter usually ended when Anita would laugh suddenly and inappropriately at the peak of one of Mark's executive-type lectures.

As Mark tucked his notebook into a pocket and looked up, Anita said, "Darling, Iris Landry just



called me from L.A. You were in conference with your notes and I suppose you didn't even hear the phone. But I've been trying to get in touch with you ever since."

He smiled. "Sorry about that, honey. I've got an early meeting and I'm a bit fogged under. Who's Iris—what's her name?"

"Landry. I used to consider her my best friend. Remember?"

He nodded. "You spoke of her, yes. But I never got to meet her."

Anita nibbled her English muffin. "That's because Iris moved to Las Vegas and got married."

Mark puffed his cigarette and made a face. "I always thought people went to Vegas for a divorce."

"Iris did both. She got married *and* divorced in Vegas. Now she's back."

"I feel sorry for people who don't have what we have to make it stick," Mark said earnestly.

"Yes, well, Iris was simply crushed by the divorce. She's very down right now. Terribly lonely and depressed. Almost—"

"Suicidal?"

Anita chewed her lip, shrugged. "Who knows what people will do under deep stress? Anyway, she needs me desperately. And—and impulsively I agreed to fly there for the weekend, to see if I can help her put the pieces together again. It would be rough for both of us and I'd miss you. But would you mind, darling, under the circumstances?"

His uneven, homely-handsome features darkened, the gloomy prospect of her absence hollowing inside of him. Then, abruptly, to hide his dismay, he smiled. "Under the circumstances, I think you should go," he said. "And I only mind losing you for a while."

"How sweet," she said with a flash of brilliant teeth against café

au lait skin. "There's a plane I could take at eleven-thirty."

Mark rejected the thought of fixing a lonely meal at their suburban home that evening. He had dinner in town, then drove home to watch the Box, faithfully dialing in his own channel. At ten o'clock, when Anita had not yet called him from L.A. as promised, he lost his concentration, cut the set and went to the kitchen for a beer. He carried it out to the patio at the edge of a spacious back yard adorned by towering old trees, shrubs and flowers. He set the extension phone on a table beside him and gazed at it with annoyance as a symbol of rejection.

His irritation was replaced by a small current of anxiety when by eleven the indifferent phone still remained silent. Anita was not casual about keeping in touch. She would usually be eager to exchange a few intimate words to bridge the distance. At midnight, his imagination constructing any number of possible calamities and intrigues, he fought the urge to call her for assurance.

It seemed a childish indulgence, an alarmist reaction. Further, it might appear that he was checking on her. On occasion she had put him down hard for being unreasonably jealous, finding cause for jealousy where none existed. Nothing provoked her quite so much as a display of mistrust.

He went to their bedroom and tried to sleep. Without Anita nestled beside him, the king-sized expanse seemed a vast, chilly wasteland. Through the night he merely dozed, often waking to reach for the bed lamp and squint at the time.

Saturday dawned with a sense of unreality, a depressing malaise. He got up and dressed unnecessarily—top management had weekends off—made a careless breakfast and read the paper from front to back.

At nine o'clock, congratulating himself upon a masterpiece of self-control, he snatched up the phone, got the number from L.A. information, and dialed Iris Landry.

The signal pulsed on and on, sounding as distant and lonely as Mars. As he was about to hang up, a female voice, wrapped in the fuzz of sleep, finally tiptoed across the line.

"Is this Iris—Iris Landry?" He was almost shouting.

"Yes. Yes, it is." She sounded more alert, but wary.

"May I speak with Anita?"

"Anita?"

"That's right, Anita!" he said acidly. "This is Mark Waldron,

her husband—Anita's husband."

An unbelievable silence threatened his sanity. Then Iris said, "Anita isn't here just now. Could you call back?"

"Whatta you mean she's not there! It's nine in the morning. All last night I waited for a call from her. So where in hell is she?"

"It won't help to scream at me, Mark. Iris went out and she hasn't come in yet."

"She hasn't been there all night?"

"Well, uh—I've been asleep, so I couldn't say just when she—"

"Now—now wait a minute. Please don't bull me, Iris. This has the stink of trouble and I want it right on the line. Just tell me the truth. Otherwise—"

There was a pause. "Very well, then, Mark. Anita is out with a friend—an old friend of sorts. She left with him yesterday afternoon."

"What friend? A man! I thought she went there to see you, desperate situation and all that. Now you tell me she took off with some guy. What've we got here—an arrangement?"

"I had nothing to do with it, believe me, Mark."

"You didn't, huh? Does this character she's with have a name?"

"Yes, and not a very good one. You may not remember because it was some time back, but Anita said she told you about this creep. She used to go with him. She had a very big thing for him before he was sent to prison for smuggling hard dope across the Mexican border by the bushel. His name is Rick Conway."

He remembered at once. "Iris, are you saying that Conway is out? I thought he had years more to serve."

"He did, oh, he did! But his shyster lawyer got him a new trial on a technicality."

"I see. Yeah, I get the picture, but I just can't believe it." His voice faded. He was stunned, felt as if he were falling in a runaway elevator. "So yesterday this Conway met Anita at your place. Then they simply picked up the pieces and buzzed off together. Is that it?"

"No. That's not the way it was at all. She went with him under some rather peculiar circumstances."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Well, for one thing there was some heavy cash involved, money he'd left with Anita. You know about that?"

"Yes, but Anita said she turned his money over to you a long time ago."

"Uh, that's true, she did. But—

listen, I don't want to talk about it on the phone. Maybe it would be best for you to get up here, soon as you can."

"That's exactly what I had in mind. I'll be on my way in a few minutes. Iris—do you have an idea in the world where I can find them?"

"Not one. I can't even guess."

"Think about it. Try to come up with a lead."

"I'll do that, Mark. Now let me give you the address . . ."

He decided not to wait for a plane, for he could drive it in a couple of hours. On the way out he crossed to a desk in the livingroom and lifted his .38 from a drawer. He examined the load, hesitated. If he caught up with Conway in his present frame of mind the gun would be a dangerous temptation. If needed, he had over six feet and just under two hundred pounds of solid beef to deal with Conway. It wouldn't be the first time he had flattened some joker who was asking for trouble—and Rick Conway was just begging for it.

Mark returned the gun to the drawer and hustled out to his car. He drove briskly, the heavy traffic of the hour taking his attention until he left the city behind. Then he began to prod his memory for those details Anita had volunteered concerning her involvement with Conway.

She had related the story briefly and reluctantly, as if it were a happening she felt obligated to confess. She had met Conway while browsing through a Mexican import shop he owned in L.A. She believed him to be precisely what he appeared to be—an importer who sold odd pieces of furniture, native art, leather goods and other items he bought during frequent trips to Mexico. He was young and friendly and nice-looking. When she learned that he spoke Spanish almost as fluently as she did, they became friends. No doubt they became a lot more than friends, but Anita was careful not to arouse Mark's excessive jealousy with explicit details.

In any case, Anita went to work for Conway in his store and was soon such an asset that he put her in charge while he was on buying trips in Mexico. Returning from one of these trips, Rick and a confederate were arrested on the American side for smuggling a large quantity of hard drugs concealed with the imports they were hauling.

Out on bail and sure of his impending conviction, Rick told Anita that he would need a stake when he was released. For some such emergency he had a cache of

$140,000 that he wanted her to hold for him.

At first Anita refused. The money would tie her to Rick, and at this point she was ready to break with him permanently. Conway pleaded that she was the only person in the world he could trust, and more, he was positive that he was being tailed by detectives and he was afraid that they would confiscate his loot.

Anita believed him. Out of sympathy and a mistaken sense of loyalty she took the money and placed it in a safe-deposit box at an L.A. bank, but when she and Mark began to talk marriage, Anita had a change of heart. She wanted to be rid of the money so that one day Rick would not be coming to collect it, perhaps upsetting her life with Mark in the bargain. So Anita turned the money over to Iris Landry, and Iris promised to visit Conway at the prison to inform him that his money was safe in her hands. The two girls had dreamed up a remarkable reason for the switch: that Anita had married a Latin gentleman who had taken her to his home somewhere in Mexico.

That was the way the matter stood, complicated by Conway's unexpected freedom years ahead of schedule, as Mark sped toward Los Angeles and Iris Landry.

Iris lived on the 12th floor of a high-rise building near Griffith Park. Overlooking tree-lined, flower-decked walks, a tennis court and swimming pool, it had the lush flavor of casual elegance. If Iris suffered, it apparently was not from the sting of poverty.

Mark left his car in one of the visitors' parking slots and rode the elevator aloft. In the discreet silence of the corridor outside Iris Landry's door, he poked the button. Waiting tensely, absently punching a fist into his palm, he was caught up now in the torment of anger and frustration. In the orderly, self-governing pattern of his life he could not bear to be confronted by any crucial situation over which he had no control.

A stealthy flutter behind the door was followed by another wait and he knew that Iris must be peering at him through the spy window. When the door opened cautiously he announced his name and she let him in quickly, almost as if there might be someone at his heels.

Iris was a petite beauty-parlor blonde who looked to be at the gateway of thirty. Her features were so tiny that her wide, startled green eyes seemed to overwhelm her face. She wore a tailored beige linen suit with brass buttons—and a hectic smile.

"Any news?" he said. "Have you heard from—"

"I'm sorry, nothing yet," with a nervous shake of her head.

He charged past her into the livingroom—woodsy-rustic with beam ceilings, a Swedish-modern fireplace. A picture window overlooked the azure oval of the swimming pool where bright clusters of umbrella tables blossomed in the sun between redwood lounges decorated by indolent girls in bikinis, hardly a man in sight.

"Would you like a drink?" Iris was saying, her words laboring to reach him through frantic rapids of thought.

"A drink? No, no thanks," he answered with a wave of dismissal as he dropped to the edge of a chair and bent toward her. "Now listen, Iris, what's this all about? As you can imagine, I'm wound tight. So give it to me fast, right from the top."

Perched on the arm of a chair, Iris studied her nails, flicked her eyes up at him. "Conway came here early yesterday morning," she began. "He was fresh from prison and wild because he didn't know where to find Anita. Said she hadn't written or been to see him in going on two years and it looked to him like he'd been crossed. When he couldn't locate Anita, he went on the hunt for me because he figured I'd know the answers. Like where was she, and what did she do with his hundred forty grand?

"I snowed him with the story we once cooked up—that she married some guy from Mexico, went there to live with him. Then I said I didn't have an inkling about his money. Maybe Anita took it along with her to Mexico and was keeping it there for him. Sure, because how could she know he was gonna be set free so soon? But I was fumbling around, coming on scared, and he wasn't buying it. Then he—"

"Wait a minute—hold it right there!" Mark snapped. "Why didn't you tell Conway that Anita turned his money over to you? I thought you were supposed to get word to him at the prison."

Iris lowered her head. "That's the rub," she said in a woeful voice. "Anita did give me his money to hold and I had every intention to. But then I married this fellow—Damon Kimbrell, same one I divorced in Vegas. Damon is a big gambler, he's won and lost a couple of small fortunes. So when I mentioned the business about Conway's money, well, Damon—"

"Now you're gonna tell me he lost the whole bundle at the tables

in Las Vegas." Mark made a hopeless gesture.

She nodded. "All but five thousand that I kept. For expenses, you know. He had this system, Damon. He wanted to just *borrow* the money and double it. He double *zeroed* it, that's what he did! He was a gem. Oh, he was a prize, all right."

"Incredible!" Mark said with a face of disgust. "And being a friend to end all friends, you finally told Conway that Anita was actually in San Diego, and agreed to phone her with a sad tale that would get her here on the run."

Iris flamed a cigarette and puffed furiously. "No, no," she denied. "I stuck to my story. But then he went crashing around the apartment searching through everything, and he came up with a letter that Anita had written me—with her return address. I only called her with that sob story because Rick had a knife at my throat—my own carving knife. Can you believe it?

"I lied about the money, though, said she still had it in that safe-deposit box in L.A. That's why he wanted to get Anita here, I guess. When she arrived I was out of my mind because I hadn't gotten around to breaking the news that Rick's bread was gone—the whole loaf. Then I lucked out. Anita hadn't been here two minutes when the boy who delivers my newspapers came to collect what I owed him from way back. Rick didn't trust me, he went to the door himself and paid the bill when the kid kept insisting. Just to be rid of him, you know.

"That gave me a chance to whisper the score to Anita—like a telegram. Her chin fell a yard, but then she said she would stall Conway on the money bit until she could get away from him, make a run for it. Anyhow, when he got an eyeful of her after those years in a cage, he had more on his mind than money. And by the time he got around to pressing her for it, I imagine the banks were closed. Until Monday. Sharp gal like Anita, she'd use that excuse to stop him from going ape, long enough to escape."

There was a silence as Mark considered the implications of Conway keeping Anita prisoner somewhere over an entire weekend. "Anita just went along quietly?" he said. "She didn't put up any resistance?"

"At first she made a loud noise about being married, wanting nothing more to do with Rick. But when she saw it was useless, that he was gonna get physical, she played it cozy by pretending to give in." Iris sighed heavily.

"Oh, it was a nightmare. I'm so afraid that Rick will learn the truth about what happened to his money that I'm getting ready to skip town, get lost permanently. Because he'd kill me. I mean it, he would."

"Yeah?" said Mark. "Well, you haven't earned any sympathy from me. I blame you for most of this." He got up and began to pace. "I should go to the police, but by the time they did anything— Where would a punk like that take Anita?"

"I've been pondering that one for hours off and on," Iris said. "For what it's worth, I could give you a long-shot possibility. Just this minute while we were talking, it hit me that Rick used to own a cottage. Really just a spooky shack off Topanga Canyon Road in the hills. He bought it so his brother would have a place to flop other than wino alley. The brother, one of those terminal alcoholics, died there. That was just before Rick went to prison and there's a chance that he didn't get around to selling it."

"That's a chance I'll take!" said Mark. "You've been there?"

"Just once. To help Rick and Anita clean it up after the brother died. What a mess! You never saw such—"

"Never mind that, can you tell me how to get there?" he asked.

Iris pursed her lips, nodded. "Better still, I'll draw you a map."

Mark wound his car over the narrow, twisting canyon road at reckless speed. He had been climbing steadily but now the road leveled off and continued through a rugged terrain of steep, rocky cliffs and stands of tall, ragged trees. Though it was yet early afternoon he encountered less than half a dozen cars. If there were houses, they were so remotely placed that he had noticed none at all. It seemed a parched and forbidding territory, an enclave between sea and valley where none but the most confirmed aliens of society would care to exist.

Indeed, Iris had told him that it had been a kind of retreat for the most lawless among the hippie elements, cycle gangs and outcasts of all kinds; though a few merely eccentric citizens in love with isolation had also braved the place. From time to time there had been a murder in the area, and most people who were not just passing through, en route to the ocean or valley, did not linger long, especially after dark.

In a couple of miles he began to glimpse an occasional battered wood-frame house poking for-

lornly through distant trees. Then there was a sagging barnlike structure topped by a faded sign that identified it as Wendy's Tavern. Wendy's had long since become a mortality, its windows boarded up, paint peeling, beer cans and bottles littering the grounds.

On the map given him by Iris, Wendy's was a landmark, and now Mark slowed somewhat to search for an access road off to the right. He found it in half a mile, a rutted dirt trail slicing through open land for a space, then vanishing into a dense tangle of trees.

Braking beside a rural mailbox, Mark squinted at the dusty face of it until he caught the dim block printing of a name: G. CONWAY. That would be Rick Conway's brother Gilbert, the one who had followed a long chain of bottles to his oblivion.

Mark turned and thumped over the trail, then nosed into the trees. He eased down a gradual incline for perhaps a hundred yards, entered a clearing and saw the house just ahead. It was a weathered and dejected cottage of wood frame, only a few patches of scabby white paint still clinging to it here and there. Dying shrubs and withered flowers hemmed the place. Wild grass and weeds overran the tree-ringed grounds.

Left of the cottage an ancient, rusting station wagon squatted on bald, flat tires. No doubt it had once belonged to "G. Conway," and toward the end had slowly died apace with its owner.

Mark cut the engine and sat listening. There was the leaden torpid silence of desertion. He got out and waded through the high grass and weeds to the door. A rusty knob resisted entry. The windows were curtained with a shabby material that looked as if it had been made from red-checkered tablecloths.

He circled the cottage and tried the back door. It too was locked. He pounded the door with his fist, then listened with an ear against it for a sound of movement inside.

There was a rusted rake and shovel leaning against the rear of the house beneath an old-fashioned window of four small panes. He got the rake and tapped one of the panes with the handle to shatter it. The center pieces fell inside with a minor tinkle. Using a handkerchief, he carefully removed the remaining shards and reached in, turned the lock and tried to hoist the window. It refused to budge but he applied muscle until it slowly gave upward.

He climbed in awkwardly, squeezing his massive bulk

through the small opening. Then he closed the window, put the curtains back in place, and moved from a tired kitchen of relic appliances to the livingroom. Made dusty-dim by the drawn curtains, it was furnished with sagging junk in pitiful disrepair. There was about it a faint odor of decay.

He crossed to a door and entered the bedroom. The lumpy double bed, with twin pillows and rumpled, graying sheets, had a look of recent use. There was a bureau, a table supporting an unshaded lamp, and a closet, door slightly ajar.

He yanked the door open. A man's zipper jacket hung from a rack, a terrycloth robe dangled from a hook. A pair of new slippers were on the floor. In a corner of the closet there was one other item—a powder-blue suitcase. Knowing instantly that the case belonged to Anita, Mark felt a pang of despair, then a rush of anger and the excitement of discovery.

He snatched up the case, brought it to the table and thumbed the lamp switch as he opened it. The contents were familiar. There was the green dress with the burnt-orange design, a sweater, underwear, robe and slippers, and cosmetics, all typically arranged in fussy order.

Gently fingering the green dress with a feeling that in a moment he was going to weep, he made instead a bellowing sound of rage and slammed the case closed. With it he thundered to the front door and, bursting outside, locked the case in the trunk of his car. Then he drove the car around to the rear of the cottage, out of view.

Returning, he pulled a chair up to a window by the door and sat to wait. As the hours passed his mood darkened, violence gathering in him as a storm builds for destruction. Night came and another sluggish span of waiting was filled with the lonely orchestration of insects. Then a dancing feeble glow of light fell upon the curtains of the front window. With it came the murmur of engine sound. Folding back an edge of curtain, Mark peered out cautiously.

A deep-green sedan braked near the front door. A tall man, wiry and dark-haired, climbed out. Moving through a shaft of moonlight, he had the brooding, heavy-featured good looks described by Iris Landry. Mark saw at once that Conway was alone, and had a moment to wonder if Anita had escaped.

Conway keyed the door open and entered. He reached for a wall switch and the room was

then somewhat wanly illuminated.

"Conway," Mark said softly from just behind him, and when Conway turned abruptly, Mark belted his jaw, then planted a fist in his gut. Conway doubled up and Mark gave him a giant shove with his foot that sent him sprawling precipitately to the floor.

Conway recovered quickly and sprang up, but when he saw that Mark was merely standing stonily with his arms folded across his chest, he wiped blood from his chin and said, "Even if you got a warrant, that's no excuse to maul

me, pig." He shook his fist.

"My name is Waldron," Mark announced, "and I came for my wife."

Conway sent him a look that was more relief than surprise. "Is that all?" he said with a mocking twist of smile. "Well, you came too late, buddy. I drove her to the airport and put her on a plane to San Diego tonight."

Mark shook his head. "Your luck ran out, Conway. I found her suitcase in your closet. Lie to me again and I'll cripple you."

Conway shrugged. "All right, I got her locked away somewhere. You want her, it'll cost you a hundred and forty grand that she stole from me."

Mark advanced, a crouched animal stalking with savage eyes and terrible purpose. Conway turned and bolted for the bedroom.

Mark caught up with him as he scooped a sawed-off shotgun from behind the bureau. By that time Mark was on top of him, pounding his face, hammering it with heavy, methodical blows until Conway sagged and went to the floor.

Even then, his eyes peering up from the crimson mash of his face, he was trying to raise the hand that still held the gun. Mark easily twisted the weapon from his grasp and sent it flying across the room. Then he set his big foot firmly upon Conway's windpipe. Pressing down with the force of his weight, he asked the question, then eased the pressure to allow for an answer.

"You—you bring the cash—" Conway choked, "and I'll tell you where she—"

Mark repeated the process, his foot grinding brutally. "One more time," he said. "Where is she?"

Conway made a sound in his throat but couldn't speak until Mark lifted his foot. Then he said hoarsely, "You don't scare *me*, big man." He winked slyly. "You want her, she's for sale."

That was when the long-tormented, raging thing inside him broke loose. That was when his big body-weighted, fury-driven foot came crashing down, smashing fragile bones, crushing windpipe—again—and again; and then again—the mindless overkill of hate unchained.

In the trance of aftershock, Mark sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the body. Then, swept by the enormity of what he had done, with the desperate question still unanswered, he lowered his head to his hands. Overcome by an oppressive, morbid sense of guilt and remorse, he told himself that he had been pushed too long and too far, beyond hu-

man endurance to withstand.

Yet another voice, the one that never lied, argued that he was seething with jealousy, that he had wanted to kill the man almost from the beginning, to punish him for the intimacy he must have shared with Anita. When he saw the unmade bed and the suitcase, wasn't that the moment he decided? Didn't he wonder then if, in the need to play the game to the limit, she had found it not too difficult to rationalize giving herself for the sake of disarming her captor?

Yes, in that very moment, he had known he would kill the man.

Now there was only the will to survive and the need to cope. So he gathered the body into his arms and carried it into the woods behind the cottage. He used the rusted shovel to bury it, the rake to comb the surface of the ground, then rested a thick branch over the spot.

He wiped his prints from the tool handles and everything he had touched in the house, at the same time restoring it to order. With the keys taken from Conway's pocket he started Conway's green sedan and burrowed it deeply into a screen of trees. He remembered to erase his prints from the steering wheel and door handle.

Driving into town he paused at a gas station to phone Iris. He wanted to feed her the lie that he had given up on the cottage as a hideaway after finding it locked and deserted. He would then beg her to pound her memory until it gave up some other hideout where Conway might be holding Anita.

Iris did not answer, and it occurred to him that perhaps she had already skipped town in fear of Conway. If so, with her went about the only chance of uncovering the place where Anita was being kept a prisoner.

For a foolish moment as he approached the house in San Diego, Mark allowed himself the feeble hope that Anita had escaped after all and was waiting there to greet him; but the house was dark from without, mournfully silent and empty when he entered it.

He was undressing for bed when he observed for the first time that his tan suit was dirt-caked and stained with dried blood. His shoes were also covered with dirt and dried blood. If the body were found and despite all precautions he were to become a suspect, his suit and shoes would accuse him. Dry-cleaning clerks had memories and trash collectors had been known to turn bloody clothes over to the cops. He de-

cided to bury everything, even his shoes, but certainly there was plenty of time. He'd let it go until tomorrow after dark.

In the morning he phoned Iris again: no answer. So then he went to the police station and reported Anita missing. He gave an accurate account of the circumstances, but for his trip to the cottage and the killing of Conway. The cops had ways beyond knowing. If they poked around long enough questioning the hoods, the dope peddlers who knew Conway's haunts and habits, they could quite conceivably locate that unthinkable, unimaginable place where Anita was imprisoned, perhaps with an accomplice to guard her. In the process they might also stumble upon Conway's grave site, but that did not mean the murder could be tied to him, and it was well worth the risk.

A couple of weeks crawled by in which the police of both San Diego and Los Angeles came up with not a single clue. Meanwhile, Mark was in such a dreadful state of mind that once he even got the .38 from his desk and sat for a long time, holding it in his lap, but it was only a passing temptation. Life was like a tragic and pointless novel, which nevertheless one was compelled to read to the end, just to see how it all turned out. One could not shorten it.

Then late one afternoon as he was leaving the studio, a couple of homicide detectives approached and placed him under arrest.

"On what charge?" he asked, though he knew well enough.

"Suspicion of murder," said one of the cops.

"What murder?" he bluffed.

"The murder of your wife, Anita Waldron. Her body was removed today from a grave in your back yard, along with your blood-stained suit and shoes." The cop studied Mark with wry amusement as his partner searched and cuffed him. "You want another clincher, pal? The slug that killed her matches the .38 we took from your desk. The gun is registered in your name and the only print our boys could lift is yours.

"Now, before you make any statement, sir, let me inform you of your rights . . ."

Waiting in a holding cell for his lawyer, Mark tried to put it together the way it could have happened. Obviously, Anita had lured Conway to the house. Perhaps she had told him that her safe-deposit box key had been left at home in a drawer of the desk, something like that. Conway drove her to San Diego, and after he checked to be sure that Mark was absent, they entered the house. Whatever

her excuse, Anita had probably gone to the desk and reached in for the gun she knew was there.

Then, before she could fire it, Conway grabbed the gun and shot her—or the gun went off as they struggled for it. No matter; she was dead. Then Conway buried her with the same shovel Mark had used to bury his suit and shoes beneath the garden off the patio. Mark had concluded that it was better to plant guilty evidence where it was least apt to be unearthed by strangers who came upon it by accident.

What a bitter joke that was! When the cops could not locate Iris Landry to back up his story, they began to wonder if Mark were covering the murder of his wife with a missing persons report. They figured he could have killed her in a jealous rage as she was about to leave him in favor of her ex-con lover, Rick Conway. So while Mark was at work they swarmed in and hunted for signs of digging. They uncovered his clothes first and then naturally they pulled the whole yard apart in further search . . .

In the conference room of the jail, Mark's lawyer said, "I must tell you frankly from the outset that on the face of the unshakable evidence against you, your conviction appears certain." The lawyer sighed, his expression a pronouncement of doom. "But despite the odds against proving it, Mark, do you still insist that Rick Conway killed your wife and planted the evidence?"

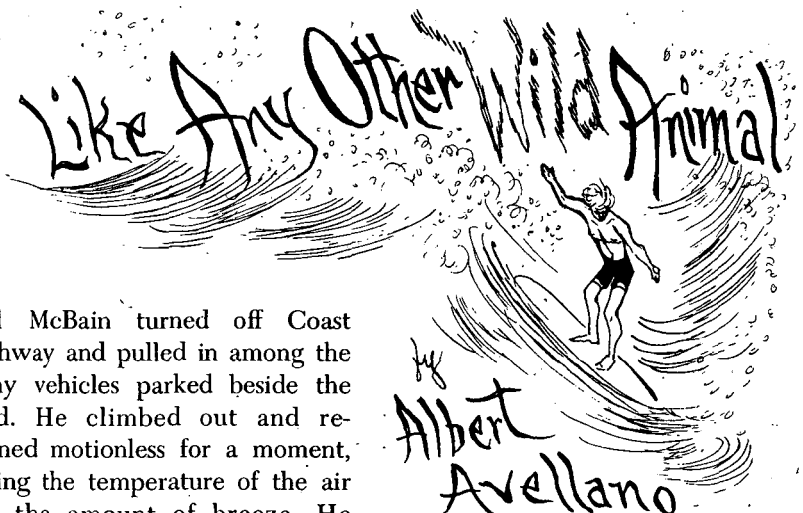
Mark nodded vigorously. "Yes, yes, absolutely! Since I know that *I* didn't do it, that's the only possible solution."

"Well, then," said the attorney with a smile of encouragement, "we've got to run him down, no matter what it takes. Once the police have him in custody, I'm sure they'll be able to get him to talk. Don't you think?"

"Yes," Mark said carefully, "perhaps. But first they have to find him."

"Oh, they will, they will!" said the lawyer. "They never give up. In any case, it's the only hope I can offer you."

In taking up a challenge, one may meet a most unexpected and formidable adversary.



Bill McBain turned off Coast Highway and pulled in among the many vehicles parked beside the road. He climbed out and remained motionless for a moment, testing the temperature of the air and the amount of breeze. He stood over 6 feet and had 175 pounds distributed over his broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped frame. His evenly tanned features, surrounded by a mop of sun-bleached, yellow hair, were more pretty than handsome. He pursed his lips. The air might be a bit too cool and calm for good surfing, he mused.

A 7-foot yellow speed board was strapped to the roof of his old car. Its stabilizer was sticking up like the dorsal fin of a shark. He didn't take the board down immediately. First, he opened the car's luggage compartment, then removed his outer clothing and shoes and placed them in the compartment.

He was left with a pair of brief white swim trunks and a tight-fitting, flame-red T-shirt. He slammed the luggage compartment lid closed, locked it, then put his keys into the small pocket in his trunks and carefully buttoned the flap. Only then did McBain turn his attention to his custom-made surfboard. He un-

buckled the web straps that held it and hoisted it to his right shoulder.

There was a well-worn path along the road shoulder and he followed it. From time to time he glanced at his reflection on the windows and polished surfaces of the cars he passed. He was proud of his lean athletic body and liked to look at himself.

The path turned sharply, cutting through the roadside foliage, and made a steep descent to the narrow beach far below. He could see the sand and water now, and as he had suspected, there weren't many surfers. The spectators on the beach were quite comfortable where the high sandstone walls of the cliff captured and reflected back the waning heat of the sun, but the surfers were probably wishing they had wetsuits. None of them had paddled out very far. They were settling for a lot of inferior waves and the constant, warming activity, instead of going farther out and waiting for a giant. As a result, the people on the beach weren't getting much of a show.

McBain was spotted even before he reached the beach. Heads turned and a few people, mostly female, waved a greeting. The women on the beach always made him think of the cars in a dealer's lot—young or old, he knew he could have anyone he wanted.

The exception was Linda Farris. He wasn't completely sure of anything where she was concerned, and the doubt piqued his interest. The girl never went anywhere without a pair of bodyguards and a matronly female chaperone. McBain was at a disadvantage. If he were going to get close to her, he knew he'd have to be crafty, but he also knew that subtlety wasn't one of his strong points.

He had noticed her for the first time ten days before. After paddling in from a near-perfect run, he saw the pretty dark-haired girl watching him with unconcealed admiration. She was a new face, and he hadn't known about the bodyguards and chaperone. He'd simply stuck his board into the sand and walked toward her, taking the direct approach. He smiled, she smiled in return, and he walked faster. Then a mountain of flesh rose up from the sand between them, and one of her hairy-chested bodyguards was blocking the way. He moved to step around the man and found himself facing another broad chest.

"Beat it, Buster," one of the men said, not unkindly. "Go find someplace else to play."

McBain grinned, threw them a

mock-salute, then turned on his heel. If she was taken, she was taken. There were too many girls around for him to fight over any particular one, but he did wonder who she was. He asked one of the beach regulars that he knew. The reply he received made him even more curious than before.

"That's Linda Farris," the other surfer said. "Her ol' man used t'be governor o' this state an' they say he wants t'be president. The family is very, *very* rich. If they had a pet dog that went blind, they'd get it a Seeing-Eye person."

McBain grinned appreciatively at the joke. "That's rich, all right. But why all the muscle she has with her? One look at that bikini and you know she isn't concealing any money or anything else."

"Yeah," the guy said, sobering noticeably. "I'm so used to seeing her with her little army, I almost forgot the reason. It's a real nasty story."

"Well, tell it to me," McBain said.

"She used to have a sister. One night a couple o' years ago, some crazy, or maybe it was a burglar, crept into their house and killed her sister while she slept. Stabbed her a couple o' hundred times, they say. It was in all the papers. Anyhow, Linda was seventeen then, and she's never gone anywhere alone since. People figure her ol' man isn't gonna take any chances with his last kid. Till the police find out who killed her sister and why, he's gonna keep strangers away from Linda."

McBain looked over to where Linda Farris was sunning herself. Her chaperones weren't paying any attention to him, but she was. He winked and she smiled.

McBain turned back to the other surfer. "He may find that harder to do than he thinks," he said.

McBain began to watch for the girl and he found that she appeared on the beach almost every day. However, she was never alone. Even when the group used the dressing rooms half a mile down the beach, they followed a ritual designed to insure that the girl would always have someone with her. The older woman would go inside with Linda, and one of the bodyguards would remain outside while the other entered the men's section to dress. As soon as the one was in his street clothes, he'd change places with the man standing guard outside. Invariably, both men were dressed and waiting before the women emerged.

The more unattainable the girl proved to be, the more attractive she seemed. McBain followed the group up and down the beach un-

til he knew their habitual movements, then he anticipated them and stationed himself in places where they would pass close to him. He felt like a love-sick twelve-year-old, but Linda always rewarded him with a smile.

Then one afternoon she did more than that. As she sat on the large red blanket that had been spread for her, she held her right hand so that only he could see the white square of paper that was concealed there. As he watched, she shoved her hand into the sand. When she withdrew it, the square of paper was gone. Next, she built a small mound to mark the spot.

This time when the girl and her escorts left, McBain didn't follow. He went directly to the pile of sand and retrieved the girl's note: *Dear Golden Surfer: I am being held prisoner. Please help me!*

There followed directions to the Farris estate and a crude map of the grounds, showing the location of the girl's third-floor window and of the utility shed where a long ladder could be found.

McBain didn't have to read that note more than once to know he'd hit the jackpot. Here was a millionaire's daughter begging him to help her. If he couldn't parlay that into enough dough to last him the rest of his beach-bumming life, no one could.

While waiting for darkness, he gave it a lot of thought. All he had to do was drive out to the Farris estate, get the ladder from the utility shed, and help the girl escape from her room. He'd seen that glint in her eyes when she looked at him. She'd be so grateful she'd do anything he said, and he'd turn her every way but loose. The two of them would pile into his car and head right for Las Vegas.

He knew how to handle women. She could twist and turn all she wanted, but if he were clever enough, and McBain figured he was, he could make her think it was he who'd been captured, not she.

In any case, by the time old man Farris found out where his daughter was, she'd be Mrs. Bill McBain. When she went home, it'd be on the arm of her husband—and if McBain had it figured right so far, his belief that the old man would take it all gracefully would be correct, too. The old man didn't want a scandal. He was a politician with his eye on the presidency. After one look at the string of petty convictions on McBain's arrest record, he'd offer McBain a healthy cash settlement to climb back into his car and disappear.

The more McBain thought

about it, the more pleased he became. It looked like his run of bad luck was coming to an end. He'd be able to trade in the bucket of bolts he drove and get a sleek new sports car. He wouldn't have to take boring and humiliating jobs in the cold months just so he could lie around in the summer.

He studied the map the girl had drawn and then put his car in motion. There was a long private road leading to the house. When he reached it, he decided to take the private road until he was about 200 yards from the house, then walk the rest of the way. That way he thought he'd be able to arrive and depart unseen. He turned off the highway and slowed to a cautious 20 miles per hour.

He hadn't gone very far when a car pulled out of the bordering trees and cut directly in front of him, blocking the road. He slammed on his brakes and stopped only inches from it. At the same time another car pulled across the road behind him, preventing him from backing up. The next thing he knew, he was blinded by half a dozen powerful lights, someone had pulled open his door, and he was staring down the barrel of a 12-gauge shotgun. It looked like a tunnel.

"Climb outa there, mister," a gruff voice ordered, "and be quick about it! Where d'ya think you're goin'?"

"The . . . uh . . . the Farris house."

"That's right," the voice agreed, "but they weren't expectin' ya."

Rough hands grabbed his arms and propelled him to the blocking vehicle and shoved him inside. Seconds later they had pulled up in front of a huge, four-story mansion that looked more like a resort hotel than a private home. Without ceremony, he was dragged from the car and taken inside.

After a short wait in a room that had apparently been designed for that purpose—there were a few chairs, but no other furnishings—a stout man in his early fifties appeared.

"You were stopped on the road leading here and said you were on the way to the house, is that correct?"

McBain decided to tell no more of the truth than necessary. For the first question he didn't have to say anything; he nodded his head.

"Why?"

"I . . . uh . . . I saw this pretty girl at the beach and—"

"You spoke to her?" the man broke in.

"N-no, I just saw her. From a distance, you know? I asked some-

one who she was and where she lived, you know, and I thought I'd drive over. Uh . . . to sorta say hello."

"She didn't invite you? She didn't know you planned to come out here?"

"No. Like I said, I just thought I'd drive over here." He looked around with an expression of awe that wasn't feigned. The waiting room was almost as large as his whole apartment. "I didn't know you folks were so rich."

"That's not the half of it," one of the guards put in. "This's Mr. Ian Farris you're talking to. He's going to be the next President of the United States."

"Never mind that," Farris said with an impatient wave of the hand. "We have no need to impress this—this person." Then to McBain, "Stay away from here and stay away from my daughter. You were lucky tonight, but you might have been very badly hurt. Think about it. If you know what's good for you, you'll turn your attentions elsewhere. Come here again and you'll be taking your life in your hands."

He didn't wait for a reply but gestured toward the door and McBain was ushered out of the house, taken to his car, and escorted from the grounds.

McBain had been lucky in a couple of respects: first, neither of the girl's regular guards had been present. If one of them had been, he could have told old man Farris that they had already tried to discourage McBain without result. Second, he hadn't been searched. If the girl's note had been discovered, he'd have been in trouble.

The next morning McBain was back at the beach with his board balanced on his shoulder. He patrolled the area where Linda Farris usually sat, but she wasn't there. Perhaps after what happened, her father decided not to let her go to the beach anymore.

McBain waited half an hour, then waded out into the water. When it reached his thighs, he floated his board, stretched out on it, and began to paddle.

The water was about the same temperature as it had been all week, but the air was noticeably colder out past the shelter of the cliffs. When he was hit by spray, it felt like he was covered with chips of ice until it evaporated. The few other surfers were going out only as far as the point where most waves were peaking, preferring to ride a lot of poor waves rather than freeze while waiting for a challenge.

McBain had never refused a challenge in his life. He kept going until he was 200 yards past

the nearest surfer. Then he settled down to wait.

Except for the chill he wouldn't have minded the wait because he knew the longer he waited, the more eyes there would be riveted to his red T-shirt. There was nothing like a brightly-colored shirt to insure that he would have a large audience for his rides.

He watched the doll-like figures on the beach to see if Linda Farris would appear. She didn't. A couple of large waves originated near him, but they didn't feel exactly right, so he let them pass. Then, just as he saw Linda and her escorts come into view strolling along the beach, he felt the water swell beneath him and he knew he had a giant forming.

He got to his knees and began paddling swiftly to keep up with its forward motion. He stayed right on the crest until the wave peaked and began to spill a torrent of white water in front of its point. Then he stood, taking full possession of the wave, and sped down the almost vertical wall of water.

He cut in front of the falling torrent, beating the wave, and began to climb the steep wall on the other side of it. He changed direction by shifting his weight and made a tube ride by going through the tunnel between the cascading water and the wave wall behind it. The tunnel grew progressively smaller and he had to bend far over to get out the far end without being swamped. As he emerged, he turned back up the wall of the wave to gain speed, then cut back and beat the wave one last time.

McBain figured that was about as good a show as he could give. He had beaten the wave twice and made a tube ride. That and his near-perfect form would have added up to a fistful of points in any competition. The girls on the beach must have thought so, too, because there were half a dozen waiting for him when he waded in, dragging his board.

McBain brushed off the girls and carried his board to a spot not far from Linda Farris. As soon as she got a chance, she shot him a questioning look.

He shrugged.

She mouthed the word "when," and he shrugged again.

The girl looked at him for a long moment, then the corners of her mouth began to turn down in disdain.

He quickly took up the challenge and formed the word "tonight," tilting his head to one side in what he hoped would be a sign of query.

She flashed a quick smile and

nodded once with a nearly imperceptible bob of her head.

That night he decided to do things differently. He got a map of the area around the Farris estate and studied it carefully. He looked for the nearest public road—he'd learned his lesson about private ones—and found that one ran along the rear boundary of the property. He parked there, climbed the low wall, and moved stealthily through the trees and shrubs.

He lay in the darkness and watched the house for a long time before making his move. Waiting for waves had given him patience. When he was certain there was only one man patrolling the grounds, and that it took him half an hour to make a complete circuit, McBain got the ladder from the utility shed and waited some more. As soon as the man passed, he gave him some time to get out of sight, then carried the ladder to the spot under the girl's window and put it in position.

The top of the ladder hit the sill with a slight bump. The window opened immediately, and Linda Farris leaned out. She motioned excitedly for him to come up, then pulled back inside.

McBain scampered up the ladder, figuring she had a suitcase or something else she wanted him to carry. When he reached the open window the smiling girl lunged forward and plunged a pair of eight-inch scissors into the center of his chest. He screamed once, a shrill shriek like a witch in a child's nightmare, and fell backward into the darkness.

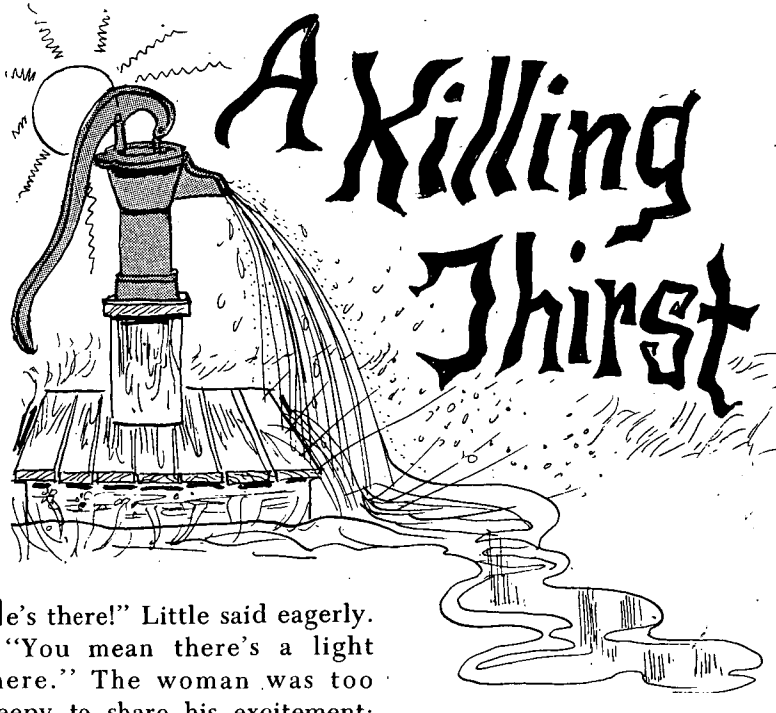
Later, after the police had been called, statements had been taken, and the burglar's body had been carried away, Ian Farris and his wife were alone in his study.

"She slipped him a note somehow," Farris said. "Luckily, I found it before the police arrived. We didn't think of that. From now on, those guards and the psychiatric nurse are going to have to be more careful."

"She should be in a hospital," his wife said accusingly. "I told you that when she killed her sister. She may be our daughter, but she *is* homicidal and very cunning. If you had listened to me, that young man would still be alive."

"All right, we can have her committed after the election. It can't hurt me then. In the meantime, we'll carry on as always. Linda will continue to be seen in public. I don't want any rumors to start. As for that surfer, don't shed any tears for him. He was warned."

In taking all possible precautions, one may find he has overlooked some unforeseen intruders.



A Killing Thirst

"He's there!" Little said eagerly.

"You mean there's a light there." The woman was too sleepy to share his excitement; they had been driving most of the night across the state of Pennsylvania.

"How'd you *know*?" he demanded in his habitual nagging tone of jealous suspicion. Little had no illusions about himself, about his nondescript appearance, his puny build, his general colorlessness, which suggested some chronic contamination by those squalid activities that had shaped his life from a very early age, or about the exact degree of his masculinity, which had been often tested but never defined even to his own satisfaction—or Doll-Baby's.

She heard the question and ignored it. Ignoring him was her favorite means of punishment, of emphasizing his smallness and insignificance, as if even his voice were sometimes too inaudible to be heard, and she had been punishing him ever since Slammer had betrayed them. Anybody in his right mind, she had taunted him, would have known better than to trust a hopped-up muscleman like Slammer with sole possession of two hundred grand and a set of hot wheels.

Their individual reactions to Slammer's treachery were as different as their natures; Doll-Baby venting her rage in an eruption of spleen as tumultuous as it was short-lived, while Little had displayed the greediness of the born loser to seize and nourish each additional grudge against life and fellowman. Slammer's treachery was simply the current label on that thick shell of resentment the man wore like muddied armor in his never-ending battle against society.

"Damn you, Doll-Baby, you answer me when I talk to you."

"What'd you say?"

by Donald Olson

"I said how'd you *know* Slammer'd be here?"

"I didn't know. I guessed."

"When'd he tell you about this place?"

Doll-Baby's weariness took the form of a long exasperated sigh. "When we were alone together, dumb-dumb. All those hours when you left us in that dump to watch little Miss Moneybags while you were out buggin' Big Daddy and Weepy Mama."

He had killed the engine and lights and now studied the lonesome farmhouse with brooding satisfaction. "But he told you he was comin' here."

"He didn't *tell* me anythin'. He was talkin' about his share of the loot and how none of us could blow any of it for at least six months. And he talked about growin' up here in this jumpin'-off place. Anyone with half a brain could make the connection. What better place to lie low in?"

Again the thought crossed Little's mind that she could be lying, that she and Slammer had planned this whole bit, luring him up here to get rid of him so he could never rat on them, never track them down. Slammer was a big, tough, good-looking brute with a certain coarse but effective savvy with the broads. Maybe he should have dumped her in Pitts-

burgh while he checked out the farm, only he had to have her near him—she was the only stimulant to which he'd ever become addicted and he'd rather assume the risk than the loneliness.

Now he leaned across her to remove the gun from the glove compartment, then grabbed her chin and squeezed it in the vise of his palm. "This turns out to be a setup, Doll-Baby, there's a slug in here marked with your name."

"Can't you remember I'm your *wife*? I'm not interested in Slammer. I'm interested in the bread he stole from us. So what are you sittin' here for? Go get it."

"Come on, then."

"What do I have to do, hold your hand?"

He didn't trust leaving her behind in the car. She trailed along beside him as they followed the long weed-snarled lane rising from the dirt side road to the farmhouse. The single light was just as dim now, obviously an oil lamp. The place was really isolated out here among the Allegheny foothills.

He slipped around to the lighted window and peered in. Slammer, in pants and undershirt, sprawled asleep in a rickety morris chair, newspapers scattered about his feet.

This particular night was even hotter than it had been for weeks, yet now Little felt bathed in a wave of cool gratification as he led Doll-Baby to the screen door, deftly dislodged the hook and crept into the room where Slammer dozed.

He leaned down and placed the gun barrel against Slammer's cheek.

Little was much too excited to sleep that night, nor was the muggy atmosphere conducive to peaceful slumber, although Doll-Baby as usual slept as if she were in the fanciest air-conditioned motel.

In morning light the farm looked poorer than ever, paintless barn and dilapidated outbuildings sagging against the hillside, the house itself as juiceless and haggard as a woman who had borne too many children and weathered too many crises to care any longer how she looked.

The sight of Slammer as they had left him last night, bound to the back-porch railing, gave Little's spirits a cheerful jolt.

"Ready to talk now, you big ape?"

Slammer's rugged face wore a totally unsubmissive smirk, his toughness core-deep and life-hardened. "Go to hell."

Little's mouth tightened. "I

ain't in the mood for games, Slammer. *Where's the dough?*"

"Find it, creep."

Doll-Baby whisked a fly off her forehead, which was already pimpled with sweat. "Stop playin' cat-'n-mouse, Little. Just beat it out of him, can't you?"

Little had spent enough time in various penal institutions to write a book on con psychology, so he knew Slammer was not the sort to be cracked open with brute force. Furthermore, the intense heat had reminded him of a certain punitive method employed on a Georgia work farm where he'd had the misfortune to spend several unpleasant months, a method he felt sure might work on Slammer, from whose pores the morning sun was already sucking the sweat.

"Doll-Baby, you don't know guys like Slammer. You could beat him to a bloody pulp and he wouldn't give you the satisfaction of bleeding on you."

Grinning wickedly, Little strolled from the porch to the box pump standing midway between house and barn, worked the pump handle until he'd raised a strong steady flow of water, cupped his hands under the iron lip and took a deep draft. Though cold, it tasted of chlorine, yet he pretended to find it delicious and he continued to pump furiously, letting the water gush through the overflow trough onto the patched ground.

"None for you, big man. Not till you tell me where the money's hid. Not if we have to hang around here till you croak from thirst. And you will, sooner'n you think. Wait till that filthy tongue of yours starts swellin' up like a balloon." He gave the handle a final push. "We're bound to find that dough sooner or later. You might's well save yourself a lotta misery."

"Go to hell!"

Little turned his back on the prisoner and studied the layout of the property, discovering in a single glance countless places Slammer might have hidden the ransom money—he might even have buried it; but now Little was in no hurry, relishing as he did the prospect of witnessing Slammer's agony; the longer it lasted the more fun it would be. He wanted Doll-Baby to watch it, too, wanted her to see the big guy weaken and crumple and plead for water.

Doll-Baby didn't like the scene. "It's crazy. Stupid. We could be stuck here for weeks."

"Yeah. And you know what he'll look like by then?"

"You're sick, Little. You're really sick."

Little quickly organized their search of the property, sending Doll-Baby into the upper rooms and attic while he ransacked the lower floor and cellar, displaying no shade of reverence as he ripped and slashed his way through a century's accumulation of furniture and household goods, finding in the end no trace of the money. Yet he seemed undisappointed at his failure, thinking always of big, handsome, supervirile Slammer tied to the porch rail in the blistering noonday sun, the starch draining out of his carcass,

a groveling, whimpering animal mad with thirst. Yes, it would come to that, it had to; Slammer was no more than human.

Rummaging among crocks and barrels and spider-infested cupboards in the cellar, he found several bottles of elderberry wine, a discovery that helped cheer Doll-Baby's glum spirits, and he also found a number of paper-wrapped cartons which turned out to be full of an arsenic-based rodenticide. He insisted they dump all the packages out in sap buckets just in case Slammer had hidden the money inside them, a task that proved equally fruitless.

Slammer had stocked enough canned goods to last till winter, so they would search in comfort at least, and they would search slowly, Little made sure of that, interrupting the process every few minutes to stand gloating over Slammer after pumping gallons of water onto the ground before the big man's eyes. Then he would seize Slammer by the hair and jerk his head back and demand to know where the money was, always getting the same response: "Go to hell!"

"It just ain't doin' no good," Doll-Baby would complain. "He ain't gonna tell us."

"He ain't? You wait, Doll-Baby. You just wait—and watch."

Doll-Baby was tired of waiting and sick of watching. Maybe the money wasn't even *on* the farm.

Little scoffed. "Where the hell would it be, then?"

"Maybe Slammer figured we'd track him down. Maybe he left it someplace else. Maybe we're just wastin' our time." Her blue eyes narrowed to a slit. "Know somethin', Little? Sometimes I don't know what you want most—to find the money or to see Slammer suffer."

"Both, Doll-Baby, both."

"You really hate Slammer, don't you?"

"And I suppose your little heart is bleedin' for him. Because he's big and tough and has a good-lookin' mug. That's all you see, ain't it, Doll-Baby?" His voice rose to a querulous squeak. "Well, you listen to me, little lady. More'n your heart's gonna be bleedin' if I catch you cozyin' up to him, you hear?"

"You scare me," she said coldly.

Doll-Baby was a full-figured, pink-cheeked blonde with a trashy sort of sex appeal that gave her more self-confidence where men were concerned than she had any right to enjoy, and she would have taken a shot at enticing the information out of Slammer if Little had been less jealous and not quite so alert. However, on

the fourth day, while Little was searching the barn, she decided to take the risk, speaking to Slammer from inside the kitchen where neither man would be able to see her.

"You're as dumb as Little says you are, Slammer."

No answer.

"I mean it. He hates your guts. He'd rather see you die of thirst than find that dough. And I guess you'd rather die than tell him."

"Go to hell, Doll-Baby."

"I'd rather go to Rio."

"You'll go to hell first."

"Big dumb baboon. But I dig you. Ever since the day Little first brought you to the flat."

"You like me so much, gimme a drink of water."

"Oh, sure. And buy a slug in the tummy."

"Tonight. When he's asleep."

"He sleeps like a cat."

"You can still do it."

"And what'll you do for me?"

"Hell of a lot more than that little creep could do."

"Where? In Rio?"

"You name it, Doll-Baby."

She sighed. "I can't trust you, Slammer."

"He ain't gonna find the bread. Not if he searches till hell freezes over."

"He will. If he has to dig up every inch of ground."

"He'll die of thirst before then."

"Little? He don't mind that stinking well water."

Slammer almost laughed. "That water don't come from no well, Doll-Baby."

"It don't?"

"Hell, no." His voice betrayed a certain boastful pride. "It's a cistern. Had a well once. Went dry. So Daddy and me, we built ourselves a cistern."

"Hey! That's what that little concrete box is round the side of the house?"

"That's just the filter. Sand and charcoal in there. Water comes down off the roof into the downspout, through the filter and into the underground cistern. Eight foot square. Holds about three thousand gallons but it's only about a quarter full now, I reckon, 'cause of the drought. And if that crazy keeps pumpin' it out like he's been doin' it ain't gonna last much longer. Course by then the sheriff'll be along."

"What?"

"Surprised he ain't been here yet. Checks out all these empty farms. He'll spot those wheels of yours and that'll be that."

She had no choice but to report this news to Little.

"You dizzy broad!" he exploded. "What'd I say I'd do to you if—"

"He said the sheriff checks this place reg'lar. If he comes nosin' around and finds Slammer tied to the porch and that car—"

"We'll hide the car down there in the gully below the sugar bush. He won't go down there. And from now on you gotta keep watch of the road while I do the searchin'. You can see a car in plenty of time if it turns off the highway."

He found her information about the cistern of even greater interest.

"How big is it, he say?"

"Eight foot square. Big jerk acts like he'd built the Taj Mahal."

"Come on. Let's check it out."

Little had noticed the concrete box at the end of the downspout, but in his limited knowledge of country conveniences had assumed it had something to do with a primitive plumbing system. Exploring the area more carefully now, he found the manhole cover, which had been hidden by an overgrown lilac bush, leading down into the cistern itself. Pushing the branches and long grass aside, he exposed the cover and lifted it off, squatted to peer into the black hole of the cistern, then picked up a small rock and dropped it in. It splashed almost immediately.

"Big ape lied. Thing's almost full." A cunning look overspread his monkey face. "But he's even dumber than I thought. He knew we'd find this thing sooner or later, so he tells you about it—like it don't mean nothin' to him. That way we don't get suspicious. Doll-Baby, can you think of a better place to hide that dough?"

"Down *there*?"

"You bet down there."

She dropped to her knees beside him. "But it's eight feet deep almost."

"So what? You can swim."

She leaped up. "Not on your life. You're not gettin' *me* down in there. You can shoot me first."

"Doll-Baby, you know I can't swim." Even if he could he wouldn't plunge into a water-filled cistern and leave her behind with his gun. "All you gotta do is feel around inside there till you find it."

Doll-Baby shied farther away. "Forget it. No way. Might be snakes and rats and all kinds of nasty things in there."

"Oh, for cryin' out loud. Cisterns are sealed tight. Ain't nothin' in there but water."

"Right. Just water. No money."

"Doll-Baby, I *know* it's in there."

"Then all you gotta do is pump it out. *Then* I'll be glad to oblige you."

He snapped his fingers. "Little lady, you're not as dumb as you look. I shoulda thought of that myself."

He dragged her around the house to confront Slammer.

"We know the money's in that there cistern, Slammer. It's gotta be. Now, do you wanta tell me it's so and earn yourself a nice cold drink, or do you wanta watch while I pump the thing dry?"

Slammer raised his head and spoke between cracked, parched lips. "Why bother? There's a drain plug at the bottom."

"Yeah, but I wanta watch you suffer. I want you to watch all those gallons of water spillin' out before your eyes. And I'm gonna do it slow-like, you know what I mean? A little each day."

Laughing, he manned the pump handle and started working it, rewarded by the sight of Slammer's thickened tongue licking dryly at his lips. Little wondered how long a man could last without water. Whatever the record was, a stubborn ape like Slammer would probably double it.

Indeed, it became increasingly apparent that Slammer was not going to cooperate. If the money was in the cistern and he knew it was only a matter of time before it was discovered, why didn't he break? Also, there was that possible sheriff's patrol to worry about. That and Doll-Baby. Doll-Baby worried Little more than anything else, because there was only one vantage point from which she could watch the turn-off, and that was within easy talking distance of Slammer. Little wouldn't put it past either of them to hatch something up together while he was out searching for the money, and though he could think of no foolproof method of preventing this, he did take one or two precautions which he thought might possibly

solve the problem. Meanwhile, he kept searching.

Then late one afternoon while Doll-Baby was watching the road, she heard a crash followed by a weak cry from inside the barn. Rushing across the yard she found Little lying on the barn floor behind the hay wagon, both his legs twisted under him at odd angles, his face livid with pain.

"Fell through that damned rotten loft floor," he moaned as she knelt beside him.

"Can you move?"

"With two busted legs? What do you think?"

For an instant she was truly terrified, desperate. "Oh, Little! What'll we do *now*?"

"*I* can't do a damn thing. You gotta drive to the nearest town and get a doctor."

"Oh, but Little, honey—"

"Get one and don't tell him nothin', just that it's an emergency. When he gets here and fixes me up I'll take care of him." His fingers held tightly to the revolver.

"But he'll see Slammer."

"Not at night he won't, and not if you bring him in the back way."

A fresh wave of panic rolled over her. "It'll never work, Little. You gotta get to a hospital."

"When we're this close to the money? Don't be a sap. Now fetch me those bottles of wine and then go for that sawbones before I croak."

She got as far as the farmyard and then stopped, aware that she was at a major crossroads in her life. Little was her husband and that counted for something, that she was Little's *wife,* not just his moll or his broad but his legal till-death-us-do-part wife. Yet she simply couldn't force herself to walk in the right direction and instead found herself heading straight toward Slammer.

"Little fell from the loft," she told him. "Both legs are broken."

Slammer managed a painful grimace. "Too bad it wasn't his neck."

"I gotta go for the doctor."

"So what's keepin' you?"

"I mean, I do. I gotta. He's my husband."

"Big deal."

She admired Slammer's toughness, his massive strength, his vast powers of endurance. She knew now that he wouldn't crack. Not if he were tied there till he died. Then suddenly, as if appalled at what was creeping into her mind, she turned and started toward the sugar bush, even forgetting what Little had said about the wine.

"Big deal," he called after her, with an even more derisive sound.

Once more she stopped, waiting. When he didn't say anything she looked around at him. "I gotta go."

"You might's well go straight to the pokey, Doll-Baby. Same difference."

"Little can handle things."

"Like hell. Little's had it, Doll-Baby. And you know it. Come 'ere."

Reluctantly, head drooping, she sauntered back to him.

"Listen to me, Doll-Baby. The bread's here."

"Here?"

"On the property. Ain't no good to Little no more. Little's had it. Ain't no good to us either, not like things are. Untie me. We'll grab the dough and split. We'll make a fine team, you an' me, Doll-Baby."

"I don't trust you, Slammer."

"Hell, gal, you gotta trust me, or you ain't ever gonna set eyes on that bread."

Again she started to turn away.

He laughed brutally. "Wise up, Doll-Baby. Who you kiddin'? You ain't gonna go sashayin' into town and talk no sawbones into comin' out here to patch up Little. What if you did? He don't come home there'll be lawmen all over these parts. And you ain't ever gonna find that money."

Little had been good to her in his way. She owed him something.

Slammer seemed to read her thoughts. "We'll tell someone in town about Little. They'll take care of him."

"You really mean that?"

"Doll-Baby, I don't want you frettin' from no guilty conscience when we're livin' it up down in Rio."

She knew that he made sense about the doctor and what would happen if she succeeded in luring one out here; and there would be a murder rap hanging over her head if Little shot the doctor. Still, she was afraid of Slammer. Her fear was as strong as her attraction.

"I'll sleep on it," she promised him. "In the morning I'll decide."

In a way, the decision was made *for* her that night, for once having delayed a full ten hours she knew that Little would never forgive her, would make her pay for what she had done.

"Tell me where the money is," she demanded of Slammer.

"Untie me, Doll-Baby. I'll take you to it."

"No way. You tell me where it is first. Then I'll untie you."

"Doll-Baby, two hundred grand's a powerful temptation—I oughta know. I wouldn't wanta expose you to it. So you just untie

me and I'll take you to the money. I sure as hell ain't in no condition to hurt you, if that's what's on your pretty little mind."

She wasn't so sure of that, and before doing anything so rash as untying him she knew she had to provide herself with some sort of protection—like Little's gun.

"At least gimme a drink of water, Doll-Baby, while you're studyin' on it. Please."

No, she couldn't even do that, not yet, because if she couldn't get Little's gun, then the weaker Slammer would be when she untied him and the safer she'd feel.

The silence from the barn was disconcerting, eerie, and though it seemed implausible, she couldn't escape the feeling that Little might somehow have dragged himself to the barn door and was right at this moment lying there watching her, his revolver aimed straight at her heart.

"Ain't no use, Slammer," she declared loudly enough for anyone within a hundred feet to hear. "I ain't lettin' you loose, so stop pesterin' me. Little's my lawful husband and him and me, we're gonna find us that money and get outa here."

Holding her blonde head high she strode resolutely across the yard straight toward that barn door, her courage not deserting her until she was right outside.

"Little? Little, honey? Listen, love, I couldn't get that blamed car to start and I tried to walk into town and got myself lost and I came back . . . Little? You hear what I'm sayin'? You all right, hon?"

She stepped across the threshold, stooped to peer beneath the hay wagon, seeing him lying there just the way she had left him the day before. As she watched she thought she saw him move but couldn't be certain, yet she didn't dare go closer, didn't dare expose herself to view in case he was playing possum, waiting to get a clear shot at her.

Oh, it was impossible to know what to do. She was between two dangerous men and she knew neither one of them would think twice about murdering her if she stood in their way—but she had to do something, she couldn't just wait.

Finally, she made up her mind to act. Little *had* to be out cold. He would have said something otherwise; pleaded, threatened, cajoled. It wasn't like Little to keep quiet . . . unless he was dead.

She hurried back to the kitchen, not glancing at Slammer, picked up a paring knife and went back to the porch, trembling now that she'd decided what had to be done.

"Slammer, I'm gonna put this parin' knife in your right hand. That's all I'm gonna do, hear? It'll take you a while but you can cut those ropes if you try hard enough. And while you're doin' that I'm gonna take that gun off'n Little. He's dead or unconscious in there and I'm gonna get his gun and I'm gonna be pointin' it right at you. Understand, Slammer? I'm gonna aim that ole barrel right at you so when you get loose you better come stand right there by the pump and then you an' me we're gonna get that money and we're gonna light outa here. So no tricks, see?"

Slammer forced his parched lips into a dim smile. "Doll-Baby, you sure are the most suspicious gal I ever met up with. And you ain't got no cause. You and me, hell, we're gonna be richer than you ever dreamed."

Doll-Baby fingered the knife as she slowly approached him the way she would have approached a caged tiger who hadn't been fed in a month. He laughed. "Don't be so damned skittish, gal. I couldn't come to hurt you even if I wanted to."

She moved behind him, slipped the knife into his puffy fist and quickly drew back. Then she turned and ran lightly to the barn.

She slipped inside, glanced back once at Slammer who was methodically working with the knife blade, then stole forward around the hay wagon to a few feet from where Little lay crumpled up, dead-looking.

"Little?"

He didn't stir.

"Little, I'm gonna help us get outa here now." She felt sure she was addressing a corpse. "I need your gun, lamb."

She glanced once more behind her. Heavens, Slammer already had one arm free. She crept closer. "Little, honey, I had to set Slammer free. I'll make him behave . . . with your gun. Then I'll make him carry you to the car. We'll get away from here, money and all. We'll—"

She saw Slammer stumble free of the leg bonds and then he was half crawling to the pump. She heard the handle working and she turned back toward Little just in time to see his right arm move, rise, the revolver pointed straight at her belly.

"Little!" She sprang toward him but the shot ripped into her arm. She spun around and would have tried to run away, but a second shot hit her low in the spine and she stumbled and fell heavily almost upon him.

She was conscious of Little's labored breathing and of the churn-

ing of the pump handle, which seemed to go on forever, and then there was silence as she waited for Slammer to come into the barn and finish the job. She tried to move, but although her head was strangely clear she couldn't feel a thing below her neck.

When he didn't come she listened hopefully for the sound of the car engine, but the silence was uninterrupted as she drifted off into unconsciousness.

From a distance she seemed to hear Little's voice, oddly tender, caressive. "You still with me, Doll-Baby?"

Her eyes were wide open and she thought it must be night because everything was dark, and growing darker. "Little? You hear the car, Little? You hear Slammer take off?"

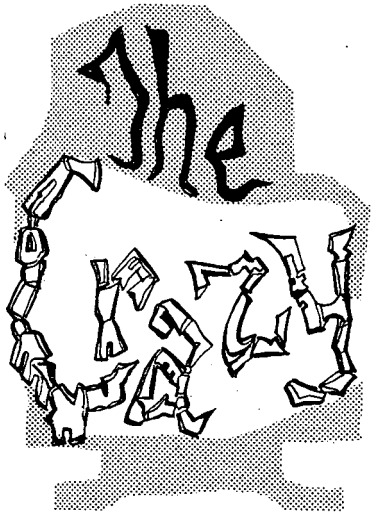
A dry, malicious chuckle. "Slammer ain't goin' noplace, Doll-Baby."

He was thinking of that fellow con in Georgia, the way he'd crawled to that bucket of water the second he was set free, the way he'd crawled to it on his belly and gulped it all down. No, Slammer wasn't going noplace. He'd outsmarted the big ape, the big virile male ape. He'd outsmarted them both, Slammer and Doll-Baby.

It wasn't so bad now while Doll-Baby was alive, while he could hear her shallow breath beside him, but it was when her breath stopped that the horror began, when he had to lie beside her dead body through the long pain-ridden, sweltering hours, and in the night when he would awake from a tortured feverish sleep to see their red eyes shining curiously, ravenously, in the darkness of the barn. Their burning red eyes, their fiery rat eyes circling, gathering, and the awful smell and the treble screech and the feel of their furry bodies brushing his hands and face as they scurried over him to get at Doll-Baby.

It was almost as if the rats sensed what he had done. Sensed that he had dumped all that poison in the cistern, just to take care of Slammer in case Doll-Baby set him free.

With enough creative imagination, one may accomplish his purpose with little personal risk.



Mrs. Sedonia Naughton, his stepmother, did not introduce him to her guest. She simply threw open his door and the two women stood there observing him as if he were a disturbingly unique but harmless animal in a zoo.

He seemed to be constructing something on a long, bare, wooden table placed in the center of the many-windowed room. The room, while crowded, still gave the appearance of studied organization. Exquisitely executed sailboats floated within narrow-necked bottles, precision model automobiles rode the shelves; oil paintings, watercolors, grotesquely beautiful masks climbed the walls between windows, and book-lined cases rose to the ceiling; a restive room, at rest only upon the corner bedstead, pristine and smooth, but with two bed pillows alertly vigilant at its head.

He acknowledged the presence of the women by raising smoky eyes for only an instant, then he returned to his work. With a probing forefinger, he rolled invisible tools on the bare table. Selecting one, he picked it up delicately, scrutinized it attentively; then, bending with absorption over the table, he used it with finical exaction upon a nonexistent object.

The women stood there for some minutes watching this extraordinary pantomime which was conducted with such scrupulous authenticity that the guest leaned forward, slanted from the hips, squinting tiny eyes in an endeavor to see that which could not be seen. She caught herself in the act

and straightened indignantly when he looked up for a moment, his eyes filled with derisive amusement.

Sedonia tapped her shoulder, drew her back into the hall, closed the door to his room and the two went on downstairs.

"Well, I never," gasped the visitor, safe once more in the livingroom. She sank to a chair, breathed heavily, and fanning herself with a limp hand, gasped again, "In all my born days, I never!"

Sedonia was satisfied. She smoothed her armored hips with small, soft, well-manicured hands, sat down and poured.

The visitor took a sip of coffee, which seemed to revive her. Patting her lips daintily, she asked politely, "What is he making?"

"What is he *making*?" cried Sedonia. "Well, for heaven's sake, he's not making anything. I mean, not anything except a fool of himself." Sedonia was annoyed because her guest had not stated an obvious fact. So she stated it her-

self. "He's crazy, of course. He's been fiddling around with nothing on that bare table of his ever since his father died. Six months now!"

"My goodness. Maybe he *thinks* there's something there," observed her guest.

"Of course he thinks there's something there. He's crazy."

The guest leaned forward and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Have you ever looked?"

"*Looked?*"

"I mean, gone in and felt around . . ."

"On the *table*? Oh, for heaven's sake, of course not. Anyway, I never go in there. I don't clean in there or make the bed or anything. He does that. He wants it that way. His father told me so. Well, that's all right." She shrugged. "That's fine with me."

"Maybe it was his father's death that—"

"That made him crazy? No, it just changed his craziness. Before that, he used to break out of his shell once in a while. Oh, not much and not with me, but with his father. His father'd go in his room and they'd talk up a storm, all about what he was making on that table, and he really made things then. He made all those models and painted the pictures and stuff."

"Well, my stars!" said the guest.

"When I used to tell his father I thought he was crazy, he'd say no he wasn't, he was a warped genius, or an unconventional artisan, or if he was crazy, he was an idiot savant, whatever that is, and laugh."

The visitor clucked a sympathetic tongue. Then she said, "He certainly doesn't look crazy."

"No, I suppose he doesn't. He looks like his mother. There's a picture of her around here somewhere. She died when he was twelve or thirteen, that's ten—eleven years ago . . ."

"Maybe it was her dying that made him—"

"All I know is he never went to school. From the very first, he never went to school, and you know they make kids go to school unless they're either dumb or crazy. You know that."

Her guest nodded.

"Well, he's not dumb because he reads all those heavy books in there, and besides, he keeps getting new ones. And his father said he wasn't crazy because he had tutors for him all those years—teachers that came to the house—and he said he learned more than the tutors could teach him. But I still say he's crazy because he acts crazy."

Sedonia retreated into a short

brooding silence, during which her guest tried not to clink her coffee cup nor to become obtrusive as she surreptitiously slid curious eyes about the room.

"I thought somebody ought to see him," Sedonia said, startling her guest. "I just thought somebody ought to see how crazy he acts, somebody who wasn't hand-in-glove with him and his father and the will. Somebody who'd say, 'he's crazy,'—somebody like you."

The guest, on cue, eager to please, answered, "He certainly *seems* to be crazy, working like that on something that isn't even there. He certainly does seem to be *some* kind of crazy, anyway," she repeated thoughtfully, remembering the mathematical precision of the busily skillful fingers, the frowningly intelligent face so keenly intent upon an invention that only he could touch and see.

"Well, sure he is," announced Sedonia. "I told his father he was crazy . . . that was a while after we were married, of course, and I came to this house. Oh, this house!" With a crimson-tipped gesture of contempt, she waved away not only the lush Victorian elegance, but her guest's timid interjection as to its grandeur.

"After three years in it, I can't breathe anymore. I thought, when we got married, with him retired and all, he'd take me places—to Mexico, Canada, England, France. Around the world, even. Wouldn't you think . . . ?" She withdrew once more into sullen refuge to dwell upon a cosmopolitan future she had been sure would be hers . . . "Well, he wouldn't budge. He was older than I. Oh, much older," she said, fluffing unbelievably golden hair, "set in his ways, I suppose. And all hung up on his crazy son. Wouldn't leave him for a minute. 'So you won't leave him,' I yelled, 'that proves he's crazy and you're scared to go away.' Then he died and went away after all."

"What did he die of?" asked her guest.

"He fell down the steps." Sedonia pointed toward the steep open stairway in the hall. "Right down those steps. I was watching from the top, and he hit each post and didn't move a muscle after he landed. So he died right away. The doctor said it was a heart attack."

"Tch tch," observed her guest.

"I never saw *him*," she said as she pointed at the ceiling, "move so fast. He was out of his room in nothing flat, pushed me away and leaped down the steps three at a time. But did he call the doctor or do any of the things a sane person

would do, like see if his heart was beating or feel his pulse? No way. He just sat there on the floor in the hall by his father's body and looked up at *me* at the top of the stairs! At me, not his father! So I went and called the doctor from the upstairs phone. And I didn't go down until the doctor got here. Then I *had* to go down to let him in because *he,*" again pointing at the ceiling, "wouldn't budge. Just sat there on the floor, not moving except for his head, his eyes on me every second, as I went around the body and walked to the door to let the doctor in the house. Even when he helped carry the body in to the sofa and all the while the doctor examined him, those eyes were on me, not on his father, the doctor or anything else . . . and it was like that all during the funeral too . . ."

The guest shuddered.

"Well, I was scared enough to tell the doctor about it, and the doctor said oh, pooh, pooh, that he'd known him all his life and, being a pundit, whatever that is, he'd probably react that way during shock and didn't even know what his eyes were looking at."

"My, my," breathed the guest.

"Then, after the funeral, he kept his eyes on me all the time the lawyer read the will. And as soon as the will was read, he got up and went upstairs and closed his door, and that's when I told the lawyer how he watched me all the time and how crazy he was and that I was afraid he'd go violent any minute. The lawyer said something about ah, no, he wasn't crazy or violent or any of those things, he was a sophist, whatever a sophist is. Then he patted me on the shoulder and told me not to worry, that I was now comfortably well-off as long as I sat tight and let *him*—" pointing at the ceiling "—do his own thing."

"Well!" said the guest.

"At least one thing. Right after that, he got all wrapped up in that nothing on his table and he hasn't looked at me since."

"That's one thing," agreed the guest.

"But the will won't be probated for a year—well, six months now."

"What's probated?" asked the guest.

"It means everything will be legally mine. The money, house and *him,*" nudging her shoulder ceilingward. "That's the way the will goes. Like I'm kind of his keeper. So I said to the lawyer, 'If I'm his keeper, it means he's crazy. Right?' 'Wrong,' said the lawyer, 'it means you're a mentor,' whatever that is."

"Goodness!" said the guest.

"And it means I'm stuck in this house, with enough money to travel anywhere . . ."

"That's wonderful!" cried the guest.

"But I can't go. Not, at least, until the will is probated."

Sedonia leaned forward and poured a fresh cup of coffee for her guest, who gulped it down in one swallow, and asked, "Yes?" with a gasp.

"Well, you see," said Sedonia in a tone of confidence, "once that will is probated, it means I can *do* something."

"What?" asked the guest.

"It means I can get somebody in here—a doctor who is not hung up on pundits and a lawyer who hasn't got a sophist routine, and have these new ones, who aren't hand-in-glove with the family, look over that crazy you-know-who," as she pointed on high, "and I bet I can get him committed in nothing flat."

The guest clapped her hands.

"Because he's crazy. You saw how he is."

"My goodness, yes," affirmed the guest, remembering the derisive smile and smiling now in happy retaliation.

Sedonia sat back in her chair and folded her arms across stiffly ample breasts. "Then," she said, "once I get him put away, maybe I can sell this house and live a little."

Sedonia moved into her slim and golden, youthfully exciting, cosmopolitan world of fancy, and the guest sensed the visit to be over.

She rose with a vague murmur as to duties involving grandchildren home from school and thought, momentarily, as she rose, of the crazy young man upstairs; entertaining a flash of comprehension that he might be—he just might be—working on something with true substance, something real . . . "Well," she said, and moved across the flowers of the carpet.

Sedonia ushered her out the door, promising brightly, "We'll see each other again . . . On the park bench sometime?"

"Oh my, yes," agreed the guest. She started down the broad cement steps, then turned as the door began to close. "You know," she offered timidly, "maybe you ought to feel around on that table—just feel around, you know . . ." but the door was now shut and she walked across the park toward the reality of a cramped apartment, swarming with hungry, disrespectful grandchildren whom she must feed and suffer, and wished she lived back there in the old house on this side of the park

with a crazy stepson bent studiously over a bare table . . . One thing, though, if she did, she most certainly would feel around on that table to learn, to really learn, if there was something there.

Sedonia felt the vindication of proof. Someone else, a stranger, an unbiased outsider, one without ties or guilt, had attested to the craziness of her stepson.

After pouring herself a half cup of fresh coffee, she walked to the kitchen and filled the cup with brandy. Then she climbed the stairs, unconsciously avoiding the banister side down which her late husband had toppled, striking every post of each tread along the way.

She reached the hall above, turned and opened the door of her stepson's room. She stood there, sipping her coffee-and-brandy, watching him.

He appeared to pick up something from the table and wind it around something else.

Sedonia shook her head, smiled and took a drink of coffee.

He crouched, squinted through a nothing-object along the top of the table, then he drew back his arm, inserted what he thought he had into what he thought he was looking through and rammed it back and forth, with vigor yet with delicacy and a certain grace.

Sedonia continued to sip her coffee.

He was in no hurry. He withdrew what he was using, unwound whatever had been around it, and laid the two on the bare table. Then he bent over, snapped his thumb, picked up something from the apparently bare table with his left hand and plucked, with his right thumb and forefinger, from the palm of his left hand, six small nonexistent objects, dropping them, one by one, into a nonexistent receptacle.

Sedonia drooped skeptical lips, leaned against the side of the doorway and sipped her coffee.

He pressed something shut with his thumb and cocked another open with his forefinger. He picked up an object in empty arms. He swung around then, looking at and through Sedonia.

She lounged against the doorframe, languidly sipping coffee, whispering, "Crazy," through the liquid.

He raised his cradled arms and seemed to adjust a featherweight. His left hand curved emptily before him, his right grasped air alongside his hunched shoulder, and the right forefinger, stiffly outright, curled slowly and with purpose.

He moved his head an in-

finitesimal distance, closed his left eye, squinted his right, and the forefinger closed in.

Sedonia jerked, the cup and saucer sounding a velvet clatter against the carpet, her fool's-gold hair blowing gently. She crumpled in slow motion, sliding softly down the doorjamb while she faced the forefinger that stiffened and closed five more times before she reached the flowers of the floor.

He laid the cradled object down on the bare table. Then he watched, but did not move toward Sedonia's body that showed no mark of violence and finally settled peacefully.

He bent over the table and, with quick flicks of his fingers, pushed unobservable and no longer needed tools aside into a small invisible pile. He walked to a window and opened it wide, returned to the table, bent his knees and swept them all into his arms. He took them to the window, heaved them forth onto the shrubbery below.

He closed the window, glanced impassively at Sedonia on his doorsill, crossed the room, stepped over her body and to the phone in the upper hallway.

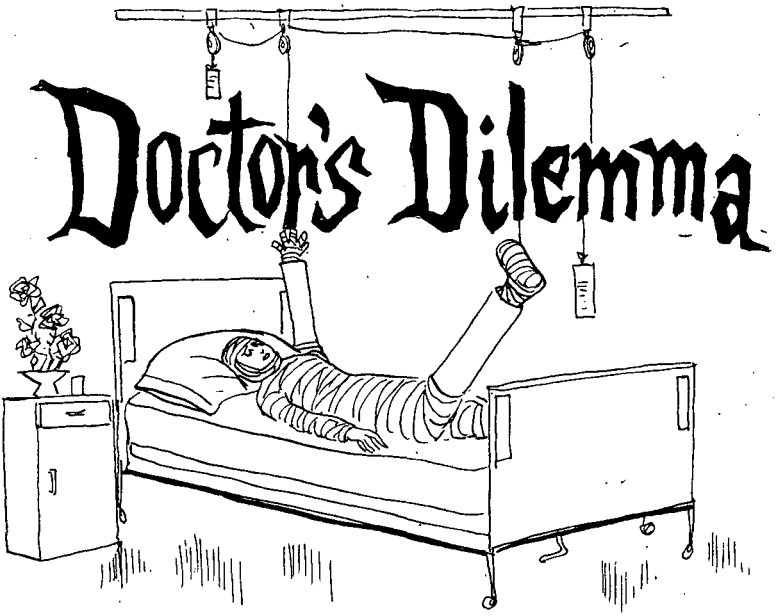
He dialed the doctor, and then the lawyer, explaining in his pundit voice, with sophist phraseology, that his erstwhile stepmother, wife of his murdered father, was now dead of a heart attack, probably caused by virulent imagination.

He hung up the phone, crossed the hall, stepped over dead Sedonia and deliberated at his bare table before lifting something from it. He held the object lightly in a curved hand and walked with it toward his bed in the corner.

There, he lifted the top bed pillow and laid the object gently on the other where one might imagine a vaguely outlined indentation of a shotgun, stock and barrel hazily defined on the soft, white surface.

He placed the top bed pillow over the hiding place and smoothed it with care.

If confronted with a choice between equally unsatisfactory alternatives, one must be optimistic, indeed, to anticipate a favorable outcome.



Doctor's Dilemma

As soon as we reached the courthouse corridor Papa's face convulsed like a baby's in torment. "I'm dying," he moaned. "I'm bleeding to death."

"You're fine, Papa," I said. "You'll outlive us all."

"Ten grand." A sob caught in his throat. "I posted bail for that lunatic client on your say-so, Counselor. 'Don't worry,' you told me. 'There's no risk.' So where is he? Why didn't he show up in court?"

Papa was Nick Papadopolous, bald, swarthy, barrel-shaped, with capillaries tracing a ruby pattern across his ample nose. "You're a bail bondsman," I said. "There are risks in every business. You win some, you lose some."

It wrung a groan of anguish

from his throat. "You have to find him, Counselor. You owe it to me. I trusted you. You heard what the judge said. Have him in court by ten o'clock tomorrow morning or forfeit bail. If he took off, so help me, Jordan, I'll finish you with every bondsman in town. You'll never be able to raise another nickel."

"He'll be here, Papa. I'll have him in court tomorrow morning if I have to carry him. Jaffee is not a bail jumper. He has too much at stake."

I believed it. Would a trained physician, a hospital intern, risk his career and his future by jumping bail and holing up somewhere because he's charged with felonious assault? Not likely. Dr. Allan

Jaffee, a splendid physical specimen, young, handsome, studious, ambitious, seemed to have everything—except willpower. He was an obsessive gambler; poker, craps, roulette, sporting events, anything. He had already run through a sizable inheritance and now, with no liquid assets, he was in the hole to his bookie for four thousand dollars. So he stalled. So the bookie had dispatched some muscle to pressure the doctor, which turned out to be a mistake. Young Jaffee, a former collegiate welterweight champ, had inflicted upon the collector a bent nose, the need for extensive dental work, and various multiple abrasions, contusions, and traumas.

Because it was a noisy affair, someone had called the law. The cops shipped the collector off in an ambulance and promptly processed Jaffee into the slammer.

At the preliminary hearing, despite my plea of self-defense, the judge agreed with the assistant D.A. that high bail was appropriate under the circumstances. He sternly labeled the fists of a trained boxer as dangerous weapons, and set the trial date.

So at 10:00 this morning, the clerk had bawled: "The People of the State of New York versus Allan Jaffee." The judge was on the bench, the jury was in the box, the prosecutor was ready, defense counsel was ready, everybody on tap—except the defendant. He hadn't shown.

"Your Honor," I said, "the accused is a medical doctor training at Manhattan General. It is possible that he was detained by an emergency. So it seems we have a problem—"

"No, Counselor. *We* have no

problem. *You* have a problem. And you have twenty minutes to solve it." He called a recess.

So I had sprinted out of the courtroom, down the corridor to a booth, and got on the horn to the hospital, but they had no knowledge of Jaffee's whereabouts. I tried his apartment. The line was busy. Apparently he hadn't even left yet.

When the twenty minutes were gone, I approached the bench and I said to the glaring judge, "If it please your Honor, I would beg the Court's indulgence for—"

He cut me off. "The Court's indulgence is exhausted, Mr. Jordan. This is intolerable, a blatant disregard of the State's time and money. A warrant will be issued forthwith for immediate execution by the marshal. If the accused has left the jurisdiction of this Court, bail will be forfeit. Your deadline is tomorrow morning, sir. Ten o'clock." He rapped his gavel and called the next case.

Papa's agitation was understandable. With a worldwide liquidity crisis, ten grand was important money. I disengaged his fingers from my sleeve and went back to the telephone. Still a busy signal; I tried twice more—no change. So I said the hell with it and went out and flagged a cab and rode up to East 79th Street.

Jaffee lived on the second floor of an aging brownstone. He did not answer the bell. The door was open and I walked into utter chaos. The place had been ransacked and pillaged. I headed for the bedroom, expecting the worst.

He was on the floor, propped

up against the bed. This time he had been hopelessly overmatched. Somebody, more likely several somebodies, had worked him over good. His face was hamburger. He tried to talk, but it was an incoherent guttural croak. The doctor needed a doctor, but soon.

I looked for the telephone and saw the handset hanging off the hook, which explained the busy signal. I hung up, jiggled, finally got a dial tone, and put a call through to Manhattan General. I told them that one of their interns had been injured, that he was in critical condition, and I gave them his name and address, adding, "This is an emergency. Better step on it if you don't want to lose him."

I turned back and found him out cold, unconscious—probably a blessing.

When the ambulance arrived, I was allowed to ride along, and sat beside the driver while first aid was being administered in the back. We careened through traffic with the siren wailing, running a few signals and frightening a lot of pedestrians.

"Who clobbered him?" the driver asked.

"I don't know. I found him like that."

"You a friend of Doc Jaffee's?"

"I'm his lawyer."

"Hey, now! He was supposed to be in court this morning, wasn't he?"

"You know about that?"

"Sure. He was on ambulance duty this week and he told me about it. Said he owed a bundle to his bookie but couldn't raise a dime. Said he banged up a guy who came to collect, strictly self-defense, but his lawyer told him you never know what a jury might do. So he was pretty jumpy yesterday morning. Man, Jaffee was one sorry character, and that's why I couldn't understand the change."

"What change?"

"The change in his mood. All morning he's got a long jaw, his face at half past six, and then suddenly he's walking on air, laughing and full of jokes."

"When did it happen?"

"Right after we got that stewardess."

"What stewardess?"

"The one from Global Airlines." He made a face. "Poor kid. She had taken one of those airport limousines from Kennedy and it dropped her off at Grand Central. She was crossing Lexington when the taxi clipped her. Boy, he must've been moving. She was a mess. Jaffee didn't think she'd make it. I don't know what he did back there, but he was working

on her, oxygen, needles, everything, until we got her to Emergency. It was after he came out and hopped aboard for another call that I noticed the change. It was weird. Nothing chewing at him anymore. Smiling from ear to ear."

"Do you remember the girl's name?"

"Korth, Alison Korth. I remember because Doc Jaffee was so busy helping the Emergency team that I had to fill out the forms."

He swung the ambulance east one block, cut the siren, turned up a ramp, and ran back to help wheel the patient through a pair of swinging doors, where people were waiting to take over. A formidable-looking nurse blocked my path and ordered me to wait in the reception lounge.

I sat among gloomy-faced people, thinking about young Jaffee. The obvious assumption was that his bookie, a man named Big Sam Tarloff, could not sit back idly and do nothing after one of his collectors had been so injudiciously handled by a deadbeat. People would laugh. Under the circumstances, how could he keep potential welshers in line? So he would have to make an example of Jaffee.

I was restless and fidgety. Curiosity precluded inactivity. So I got up and wandered over to the reception desk and asked the girl for Miss Alison Korth. She consulted her chart.

"Room 625."

I took the elevator up and marched past the nurse's station, found the number and poked my head through a partially open door. The girl on the bed was swathed in bandages, eyes closed, heavily sedated, left arm and right leg in traction, her face pitifully dwindled and gray.

A voice startled me. "Are you one of the doctors?"

I blinked and then saw the speaker, seated primly on a chair against the wall. She looked drawn and woebegone.

"No, ma'am," I said.

"Well, if you're another insurance man from the taxi company, go away. We're going to retain a lawyer and you can talk to him."

"That's the way to handle it," I said. "Are you a friend of Alison's?"

"I'm her sister."

"Stick to your guns. Don't let any of those clowns try to pressure you into a hasty settlement."

She stood up and came close, her eyes dark and intense. "Did you know Alison?"

"No, ma'am."

"Who *are* you?" I gave her one of my cards and she looked at it,

frowning. "Scott Jordan. The name sounds vaguely familiar. But we haven't asked anyone for a lawyer. Are you an ambulance chaser?"

"Hardly, Miss Korth. I don't handle automobile liability cases."

"Then who do you represent?"

"Dr. Allan Jaffee."

"The intern who treated Alison in the ambulance?"

"Yes."

"He's very nice. He looked in on Alison several times yesterday while I was here." Her frown deepened. "I don't understand. Why does Dr. Jaffee need a lawyer?"

"It's a long story, Miss Korth. I'd like to tell you about it over a cup of coffee. There's a rather decent cafeteria in the building." She looked dubious and I added, "There's nothing you can do for your sister at the moment, and the hall nurse can page you if anything develops."

She thought for a moment, then nodded and accompanied me along the corridor to the elevator, stopping briefly to confer at the nurse's station. The elevator door opened and a man stepped out. He stopped short.

"Hello, Vicky."

"Hello, Ben," she said, without warmth.

"How is Alison?"

"About the same," she replied.

"Has she regained consciousness?"

"Just for a moment, but they gave her some shots and she's sleeping now. She shouldn't be disturbed."

He lifted an eyebrow in my direction, a tall, blunt-featured man with dark curly hair, wearing sports clothes. Vicky introduced us.

"This is Captain Ben Cowan, the copilot on Alison's last flight. Scott Jordan."

He nodded fractionally. "Were you just leaving?"

"We're on our way to the cafeteria," I said.

"May I join you?"

"I think not," Vicky said. "Mr. Jordon and I have some business to discuss."

He registered no reaction to the rebuff. "I see. Well, would you tell Alison that I was here and that I'll look in again?"

"Of course."

Going down in the elevator there was no further dialogue between them. Captain Cowan left us on the lobby floor and we descended to the lower level. I brought coffee to a small corner table.

"You don't seem overly fond of the captain," I said.

"I detest him."

"Is he a close friend of Ali-

son's?" I pursued the thought.

She made a face. "Alison's infatuated, crazy about him. And I don't like it one tiny bit. I think Ben Cowan is bad medicine."

"In what way?"

"Call it instinct, feminine intuition. Alison and I have always been very close. She shares my apartment whenever her flight lays over in New York. She started going with Cowan about a year ago and she's been moonstruck ever since, sort of in a daze. She used to confide in me. But now, since Ben, she's become

withdrawn, even secretive. Alison's not very practical. She was always naive and trusting and I worry about her. And now this—this—" Her chin began to quiver, but she got it under control and blinked back tears.

I sipped coffee and gave her time to recover. After a while, in a small rusty voice, she asked me about Allan Jaffee. So I told her about the gambling debt, the fight and the assault charge, and his failure to appear in court. I told her about going to his apartment and finding him half dead from a merciless beating. Vicky was shocked, but it took her mind off Alison only briefly. She grew fidgety, so I took her back to the sixth floor and then went down to find someone who could brief me on Jaffee's condition.

I spoke to a resident who looked stumbling tired and furiously angry; tired because he'd been working a ten-hour tour and angry because they kept him repairing damages inflicted by people on people. "I'm sorry, sir," he told me. "Dr. Jaffee can talk to no one."

"Not even his lawyer?"

"Not even his Maker. For one thing, his jaw is wired. For another, we've got him under enough sedation to keep him fuzzy for twenty-four hours."

"Will he be able to write?"

"Yes. After a couple of fractured fingers knit properly. Try again in a couple of days."

A couple of days might be too late and I was in no mood to wait. So I went out and was waving for a cab when a hand fell on my shoulder. It was Captain Ben Cowan of Global Airlines.

"I'm sorry if I seem persistent, Mr. Jordan," he said. "But I'm terribly worried about Alison and I can't seem to get any information at the hospital. Everything is one big fat secret with those people. I thought, since you're a friend of Vicky's, you might know something."

"Why don't you ask her yourself?"

He looked rueful. "Vicky and I are not on the same wavelength. I don't think she likes me."

"Well, the fact is, Captain, I don't have any information myself."

"Haven't the doctors told Vicky anything?"

"We didn't discuss it. I don't know either of the girls very well, Captain. I met Vicky only today."

"Oh?" A deep frown scored his forehead. "Vicky gave me an entirely different impression. I thought you'd gone to the hospital to see her."

"Not her. A client of mine."

"A client?" he said, puzzled.

"I'm an attorney. I represent the intern who treated Alison at the accident."

"Jaffee?"

"Right. Dr. Allan Jaffee."

"Well, then, I guess you can't be much help."

"Afraid not," I agreed as a cab pulled up in answer to my signal.

Tarloff's was a secondhand bookstore on lower Fourth Avenue, a large and profitable establishment stocking a few splendid first editions and managed by the owner's brother-in-law. On the second floor Sam Tarloff operated a frenetically busy horse parlor with half a dozen constantly ringing telephones manned by larcenous-eyed employees. Big Sam, a heavy, bear-shaped man with an incongruously seraphic smile, sat on a platform watching everything and everybody.

He recognized me and said cordially, "Well, Counselor, good to see you. Let's use my private office." I followed him into a small room. He beamed at me. "And what is your pleasure, Mr. Jordan?"

"Nubile young cheerleaders," I told him. "Right now, however, I would like to see your hands."

"What for?"

"Come off it, Samuel. You know as well as I do that Dr. Jaffee is in the hospital."

"Where else should he be? He works there."

"Not as an employee at the moment. As a patient."

"What happened to him?"

"Somebody clubbed him half to death. I want to see if you have any bruised knuckles."

"Me? You think I did it?"

"You, or one of your men. It's a logical conclusion."

"Because he hurt one of my employees?"

"That, yes, and because he still owes you money."

"You're wrong, Counselor. He does not owe me money. He paid off last night, every cent, in cash, including interest."

"Samuel, I'm an old hand. Where would Jaffee get that kind of money on an intern's salary?"

"Not my business, Counselor. I gave him a receipt. Ask him."

"He can't talk. His jaw is wired."

"So look in his pockets. He's got it somewhere."

After countless hours of grilling people on the witness stand, you develop an instinct for the perjurer. Tarloff was not lying. I believed him. "You have lines out, Sam. Tell me, who do you think worked him over?"

He turned up a palm. "I don't

know. But it was in the cards, Counselor, it had to happen sooner or later. Jaffee is a very reckless young man. He gambles without capital. Who knows, maybe he was into the Shylocks for a bundle too. I'll ask around if you want."

"I'd appreciate that."

"How about a little tip, Counselor, a filly in the third at Belmont? Only please take your business to an off-track betting window."

"Not today, Samuel. May I use one of your phones?"

"Be my guest."

I rang Manhattan General and got through to Vicky Korth in her sister's room, still keeping the vigil. I asked her if Alison was close to anyone else at Global. She gave me a name, Ann Leslie, another stewardess, who generally stayed at the Barbizon, a hostelry for single females. Vicky offered to phone and tell her to expect me.

I found Ann Leslie waiting in the lobby, a slender girl, radiating concern, wanting to know when she could visit Alison.

"In a couple of days," I said.

"Darn!" She made a tragic face. "We're flying out again on Wednesday."

"Where to?"

"Same destination. Amsterdam. Same crew too, except for Alison. I'll miss her."

"I imagine Captain Ben Cowan will miss her too."

She squinted appraisingly. "You know about him?"

"Vicky told me. And she's not happy about it."

Ann Leslie tightened her mouth. "Neither am I. That Cowan—he's a chaser, a womanizer. He uses people. He made passes at me too, before Alison joined the crew, but I wouldn't have any part of him. I just don't trust him. Have you met Ben?"

"Yes. He seems genuinely fond of Alison."

"It's an act, believe me."

"Is he openly attentive to her?"

"They're not keeping it a secret, if that's what you mean."

"Would you know why he didn't accompany her into Manhattan yesterday when you put down at Kennedy?"

"Yes. Because he was held up at Customs. They wanted to talk to him in one of those private rooms. I was there and I heard him tell Alison to go ahead without him and that he'd meet her later."

"Are members of the crew usually held up at Customs?"

"Not as a rule. They never bothered me. But it couldn't have been much because I know he's flying out with us again on

Wednesday, on our next flight."

We talked for a while longer and I thanked her and promised to tell Alison that Ann would be in to see her as soon as the doctors permitted it. I left and cabbed over to Jaffee's apartment. The super recognized me and let me in.

I stood and surveyed the chaos. Nothing had been left untouched. Even the upholstery had been razored open and kapok strewed over the floor. Desk drawers were pulled out and overturned. I hunkered down, sifting through papers. I did not find any receipt from Sam Tarloff, but after about an hour I did find something even more interesting: a duplicate deposit slip from the Gotham Trust, bearing yesterday's date, and showing a deposit of $34,000.

I straightened and took it to a chair and stared at it, wondering how Jaffee, presumably broke, without credit, could manage a deposit of that magnitude. I saw that it was not a cash deposit. The $34,000 was entered in the column allotted to checks.

But a check from whom? And for what? As I studied it, I felt a sudden surge of excitement, of anticipation, because the Gotham Trust was my own bank, an institution in which I had certain connections. Bank records are not quite as inviolate as most people believe.

Twenty minutes later, I marched through the bank's revolving doors and approached the desk of Mr. Henry Wharton, an assistant vice-president for whom I had performed a ticklish chore only four months before. He rose to shake my hand. Then he sat back and listened to my request. He frowned at Jaffee's deposit slip and rubbed his forehead and looked up at me with a pained expression.

"Well, now, Mr. Jordan, this is highly irregular."

"I know."

"It is not the policy of this bank to make disclosures about our depositors."

"I know."

"You're making it very difficult for me."

"I know."

He sighed and levered himself erect and disappeared into some hidden recess of the bank. I waited patiently. He was perspiring slightly when he returned. He cleared an obstruction from his throat. "You understand this is strictly confidential."

"Absolutely."

He lowered his voice. "Well, then, according to our microfilm records the deposit was made by a check drawn to the order of Dr.

Allan Jaffee by the firm of Jacques Sutro, Ltd. I assume you recognize the name."

"I do, indeed. And I'm deeply indebted, Harry."

"For what? I haven't told you a thing."

"That's right. Now, would it be possible for me to get a blowup of that microfilm?" He turned pale and a convulsive shudder almost lifted him out of the chair, and I added quickly, "All right, Harry, forget it. I'm leaving."

He was not sorry to see me go.

Mr. Jacques Sutro is a dealer in precious gems, operating out of the elegant second floor of a Fifth Avenue town house. Sutro, a portly specimen with silver hair and a manner as smooth as polished opal, folded his beautifully-manicured hands and listened to me with a beautiful smile that displayed some of the finest porcelain dentures in captivity.

"And so," I concluded, "as Dr. Jaffee's attorney, I would appreciate a few details about any transaction you had with him."

"Why not discuss it with your client?"

"I would if I could, Mr. Sutro. Unfortunately, Dr. Jaffee had an accident and he's a patient at Manhattan General under very heavy sedation. It may be days before he can talk. In the meantime I'm handling his legal affairs and it's imperative for me to fill out the picture."

Sutro pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Would you mind if I called the hospital?"

"Not at all. Please do."

He got the number, spoke into the mouthpiece, listened intently, then nodded and hung up. He spread his fingers. "You must understand that I knew young Jaffee's father before the old man died."

"So did I, Mr. Sutro. As a matter of fact, he took me into his office when I first got out of law school. That's why I'm interested in the son's welfare."

"I see. Well, the old gentleman was a valued customer of mine. He purchased some very fine pieces for his wife when she was alive. And later he even acquired some unset stones as a hedge against inflation. Young Allan liquidated them through my firm after his father died. Then yesterday afternoon, he came here and offered to sell some additional stones he had inherited."

"Merchandise you recognized?"

"No. But young Jaffee assured me that his father had bought gems from various other dealers too. I examined the pieces and offered him a very fair price."

"How much did you offer?"

"Forty thousand dollars. He said he needed some cash right away, an emergency in fact, and that he couldn't wait for my check to clear the bank. He said if I let him have four thousand in cash, he would knock two thousand off the total price. So I gave him the cash and a check for the balance, thirty-four thousand." Sutro looked mildly anxious. "Nothing wrong in that, is there, Counselor?"

I shrugged noncommittally. Within a very short time, Mr. Sutro, I suspected, was due for a severe shock, but I was going to let someone else give it to him. He was chewing the inside of his cheek when I left.

What I needed now was Vicky Korth's cooperation. I went looking for her at the hospital but she was not in Alison's room and neither was Alison. The room had been cleaned out, the bed freshly made; there was no sign of any occupancy. I felt a cold, sinking sensation and headed for the nurse's station.

Two girls in white were on duty. My inquiry seemed to upset them both. Their response was neither typical nor brisk. Alison Korth had suddenly developed serious respiratory problems and despite all efforts they had lost her.

I had no way of knowing whether Vicky wanted to be alone or would welcome company. My own experience led me to believe that most mourners crave the solace of visitors. I checked her address in the telephone directory and rode uptown.

Vicky answered my ring and opened the door. The shock of Alison's death had not yet fully registered. She looked dazed and numb and she needed a sympathetic ear.

"Oh, Scott," she said in a small trembly voice, "it didn't really have to happen. They were careless . . ."

"Who?" I asked.

"The nurses, the doctors, somebody . . ."

We sat down and I held her hand. "Tell me about it."

"She—she was having trouble breathing and they put her in oxygen. It's my fault. I left her alone. I went down for a sandwich and when I came back I saw that something was wrong. Her face was dark and I saw that the equipment had come loose, the tube from the oxygen tank, and Alison was—was . . ." Her eyes filled and she hid her face against my chest.

I said quietly, "You couldn't have anticipated anything like that, Vicky. You must not con-

demn yourself for lack of omniscience."

After a while, she sat back and wanted to reminisce, to talk about their childhood. She was touched by nostalgia and bittersweet memories. It was good therapy. She even smiled once or twice.

When she finally ran out of words, I began to talk. I put her completely into the picture. I told her about my interviews, about my deductions and my conclusions. I told her that Alison had been used, and that I needed her help, and told her what I wanted her to do.

She sat quietly and brooded at me for a long moment, then she got up and went to the telephone. She dialed a number and said in a wooden voice, "This is Vicky. I thought you ought to know, Alison died this afternoon. I'm calling you because she'd want me to. The funeral is Thursday. Services at Lambert's Mortuary . . . Oh, I see. Well, if you wish, you can see her in the reposing room this evening. I made arrangements at the hospital when they gave me a package with Alison's things. I'll be there myself at six. Please let her friends know."

It was almost seven o'clock. I sat alone in Vicky's apartment and waited. My pupils had expanded to the growing darkness. A large brown parcel lay on the coffee table. Behind me, a closet door was open and waiting. Traffic sounds were muted. I kept my head cocked, concentrating, an ear bent in the direction of the hall door.

I was not quite sure how I would play it if he came. I was not even sure that he would come, but then, without warning, the doorbell rang. It seemed abnormally loud. I did not move. There was a pause and it rang again. Standard operating procedure: ring first to make sure no one is at home. I held my breath. Then it came, a metallic fumbling at the lock. I glided quickly into the closet, leaving the door slightly ajar, giving me an adequate angle of vision.

Hinges creaked and a pencil beam probed the darkness. A voice called softly, "Vicky, are you home?" Silence. Overhead lights clicked on. He came into view and I saw his eyes encompass the room in a quick circular sweep. He walked to the coffee table, picked up the parcel, and tore open the wrapping. He spread out the contents, staring at Alison's clothes.

"It's no use, Cowan," I said, showing myself. "You won't find them here."

His head pitched sideways and he stood impaled, jaws rigid.

I said, "You are one miserable, gold-plated, card-carrying, full-time rat. Conning a naive and trusting little cupcake like Alison Korth into doing your dirty work."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"That's a dry hole, Cowan. Step out of it. You know what I'm talking about. Diamonds. Unset stones from Amsterdam. Your moonlighting sideline as a copilot on Global. You suspected you were under surveillance and you got Alison to smuggle a shipment off the plane and into the country for you. Concealed on her person. That's why you were clean when they fanned you at Kennedy yesterday."

His mouth was pinched. "You've got bats loose, Mr. Lawyer."

"Save it, Cowan. The deal was blown when Alison had an accident and was taken to the hospital. You thought the stones were discovered when she was undressed and you sweated that one out. But when nothing happened you began to wonder and reached a conclusion. The ambulance intern would have to loosen her uniform to use his stethoscope, so he must have found the stuff taped to her body. You checked him out and that's why you knew his name when I told you that the intern who'd treated Alison at the accident was a client of mine.

"You asked me what happened to him. Why did anything have to have happened to him? I'd go to the hospital if I wanted to see him because he worked there, wouldn't I? But you already knew what happened because you made it happen. You broke into his apartment to search for the loot and you heard him come back and you ambushed him. You hit him from behind, but Jaffee is not an easy man to cool, and even wounded he fought back. I don't know, maybe you even had help. Maybe you tried to make him talk."

Cowan stood like a statue carved out of stone.

"You got nothing from Jaffee," I said, "and nothing from his apartment. So maybe you were wrong about him. Maybe Alison had concealed the stones somewhere in her clothes and nobody had found them. That's why you came here tonight after Vicky told you she'd brought Alison's belongings back here to the apartment. You had to find out, and you knew Vicky would be at the mortuary."

He took a step toward me.

"Careful," I said. "You don't think I'd tackle a murderer by myself."

"Murderer?"

"Yes, Cowan. I'd make book on it. You're a shrewd specimen. You had to cover all contingencies. Suppose the hospital *had* found the diamonds and *had* notified the cops and they were keeping a lid on it until they could question Alison. A girl like her, she'd melt under heat. They could turn her inside out. She'd make a clean breast of it, and you'd be blown. So she had to go. She had to be eliminated. So you loitered and waited until you saw Vicky leave, and then you managed to slip into Alison's room and tamper with the equipment. You cut off her oxygen and watched her die. The cops know what to look for now and they're checking the hospital equipment thoroughly for your prints."

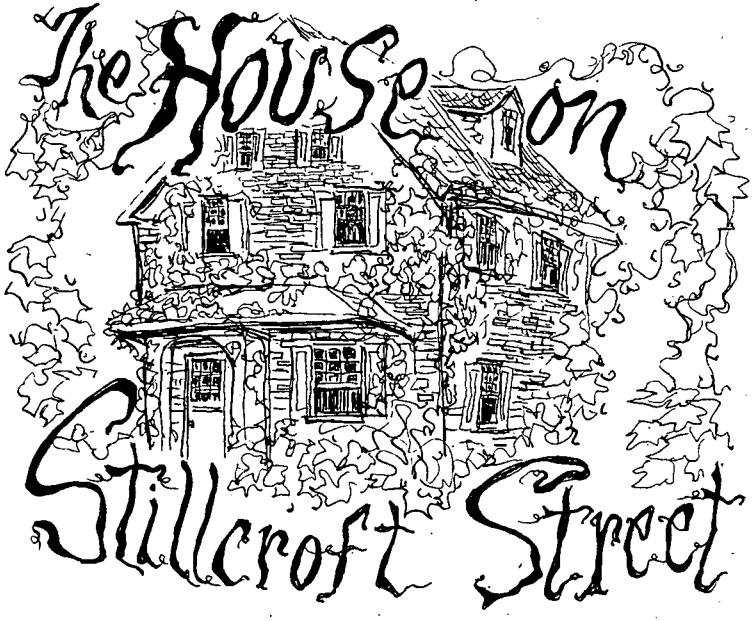
That tore it. He thought he could cut his losses by splitting, so he whirled and slammed through the door, but I hadn't been kidding. The cops were all set for him outside in the corridor.

It seldom comes up roses for all. Vicky lost her sister, but gained a suitor—me. U.S. Customs descended on Jacques Sutro and seized the smuggled diamonds. Sutro's lawyers attached Jaffee's bank account and recovered the $34,000 check he had deposited. Mr. Sutro still wanted his four grand cash and I referred him to Big Sam Tarloff. Fat chance.

Allan Jaffee healed nicely. The episode may even have cured his gambling addiction. He copped a plea on the gem charge and turned State's evidence against Ben Cowan. Cowan was going to be out of circulation until he was a rickety old man. For me, representing Jaffee was an act of charity. I never got paid.

Only Nick Papadopolous emerged unscathed. The judge canceled forfeiture of Jaffee's bail bond and Papa got his money back. He was delirious. He invited Vicky and me out to dinner. That was two weeks ago. We're still trying to digest the stuff.

Perhaps one should be wary of his green thumb getting out of hand.



Amley is one of those out-of-the-way villages which the average traveler never hears about. Years ago a main road passed perilously close to it, but this route has since been superseded by a high-speed, four-lane parkway. The old route is often nearly deserted and almost nobody turns off at the tilted sign bearing the weathered letters, *Amley.*

I was introduced to Amley years ago by my friend Hugh Corvington, a wealthy member of my club who had stormed Wall Street successfully and retired early. Although I was a largely unrecognized writer who would have had difficulty in scraping up a penny for every hundred dollars possessed by Corvington, for some reason he liked me and sought out my company.

Occasionally we had long lei-

surely dinners together; now and then we spent an evening over the chessboard and a bottle of good port.

One June, when I was fretting about where to go for a vacation, Corvington mentioned Amley.

by Joseph Payne Brennan

He was casual, even diffident, about it. "Not much of a place. Dull, you know. And not right if you want travel. Only forty-odd miles from here, but quiet and peaceful. Pleasant place, really. No trouble getting lodgings. In fact, you could bunk in with me while you looked around. I've got a small house up there. A bit cramped, I'm afraid, but there's the usual guest room. We could manage while you poked about and made up your mind."

Two weeks later I drove up the old route, turned at the tilted sign reading *Amley* and after a few miles found myself in a charming, somnolent New England village which had somehow escaped the annual invasion of the acquisitive "summer people."

Corvington's "cramped" small house turned out to be a compact Georgian gem, complete with Doric entrance columns.

Less than an hour later, after a shower and a change of clothes, I was sitting with my affable host on a screened rear porch which overlooked an English-type walled garden.

As I settled back in my chair and sipped my whiskey and soda, I lost all desire to travel, to seek out lodgings—and to carry through the writing chores which I had assigned myself.

Corvington seemed to sense my mood. "Thought occurs to me, y'know. If you can put up with this place, no real reason to muck about after rooms somewhere else. Stay here. I have a woman come in to fix breakfast and lunch. Dinner usually at the Black Lion Inn; Amley's only hostelry. Quite good, really."

I thanked him sincerely but insisted that I wouldn't dream of imposing on him to such an extent.

He would have none of it. "No imposition at all. Quite the opposite. You'd be doing me a favor. Now that I have nothing pressing me, I get bored on occasion. We might have some splendid games of chess without having to watch the clock!"

He refreshed my drink. "Of course you'd be free to write

whenever you wanted to. No intrusions there. I respect your craft."

So it was settled. I understood that he would be offended if I even suggested remuneration for my accommodations. I decided that I would try to pay for most of our dinners at the Black Lion Inn and let it go at that.

The summer settled in smoothly. I usually wrote for a few hours in the morning and after lunch strolled around the village. Often I walked right through into the surrounding countryside. I would return in time for a shower, cocktails and a relaxed chat before I walked with my host to the Black Lion Inn.

Not infrequently I spent most of the afternoon sauntering about Amley's leafy streets. The peace and quiet of the place, the relatively unpolluted air and the sense of stability surrounding the quaint old houses acted as a tonic and—I might as well admit it—a soporific.

My writing proceeded more or less on schedule; some color came back to my pale face and I beat Corvington at chess more often than formerly. Fortunately, he was a good loser. My improving game acted as a challenge and I think we both played better than we ever had before. I can recall many long-drawn, remorseless battles.

One sun-drenched afternoon while I was strolling Amley's shaded walks, I noticed a sign reading: *Stillcroft Street*. The name intrigued me. Quite naturally I decided to turn at the sign. The street was little different from others in Amley; quiet old houses, gardens, immense trees—and scarcely a soul in sight. As I neared the end of it, I saw that it was a dead-end thoroughfare and that I would have to go back the way I had come.

Sauntering to the extreme far end, I crossed the road, intending to return on the other side. It was then that I first noticed the opposite house, the last one on the street. The house itself was ordinary enough—a two-story brick square with very few embellishments—but it was surrounded by a thick growth of exotic-looking trees, shrubs and plants which appeared to have run wild over the premises. There was no evidence of any recent pruning, trimming or shaping.

I was particularly struck by a glossy, luxurious growth of heavy climbing ivy which virtually covered the entire front of the house, including the windows. Only the door itself seemed to have escaped the clutch of this remarkable plant.

I supposed the ivy was the common climbing variety but I had never seen ivy leaves so large. Their rich deep-green color, shining in bars of sunlight which slanted through the trees, appeared to possess a purplish sheen.

As I remained staring at the unusual growth, I caught a glimpse of a white-haired man's face peering out of one of the upper windows. The window itself was almost entirely screened by ivy leaves, and as I looked up, the face abruptly disappeared.

Turning away, I continued back up Stillcroft Street toward the center of Amley.

Over cocktails that afternoon I mentioned the house to Corvington.

He nodded. "That's Millward Frander's house. Noted botanist, y'know. Used to travel all over the world and bring back rare plants. Had a showplace garden. But he's been ill for some years. Recluse now. Scarcely anybody sees him. Stays shut in there and the garden's run riot. Too bad."

He sipped his martini and for some minutes was silent. Finally he added, as an afterthought of little importance, "Second cousin of mine, actually. I've a key to the house even. Never dream of using it, of course. I like privacy and I respect it."

"You're right," I agreed, "but don't you think he's got carried away a bit? The place is going to disappear in that jungle!"

Corvington shrugged. "I've a sort of philosophy. Every man has a right to his own kind of madness—providing, of course, it doesn't impinge on the rights of others. If Millward wants to live in a miniature jungle—well, so be it!"

I dropped the subject and did not bring it up again, but every day or two I found myself sauntering down Stillcroft Street. I presumed poor old Millward Frander was cursing me out as an infernal spy and busybody, but that strange ivy-shrouded house drew me like a magnet.

During the hot, brilliant summer the ivy seemed to grow almost visibly. Ivy, of course, is not a sun-lover, but the house itself was well-shaded by a row of huge old elms which grew along the front walk. The ivy received very little direct sunlight.

Almost as I watched, it seemed, the broad five-lobed leaves, glimmering purple-green, extended their domain. Only once or twice more after my first glimpse of that white-haired old man's face at the window, did I see it again. The ivy leaves sent their fluttering legions over the glass and the win-

dow just disappeared completely.

I marveled at the thing's growth—and marveled more at the occupant who willingly, I presumed, permitted his house to be swallowed up, as it were.

As the summer wore on, Corvington became a bit edgy. I could see that something was beginning to bother him. I caught him frowning on occasion and I noticed that his chess game fell off considerably.

Finally, one afternoon as we sipped our iced martinis on the screened porch, he brought up the matter.

"Infernal nuisance, y'know," he began, "but I'm getting a little worried about Millward. Tradesmen haven't heard from him in weeks. Mail piled up." He turned toward me. "Have you walked down Stillcroft lately?"

I was perfectly aware that he knew I had. "Every few days. The windows are completely covered with that climbing ivy and I haven't seen a sign of life." I set down my drink. "Of course nobody *could* see a sign of life. You could have a banquet or a ball in there with nobody the wiser. The windows are simply blanked out by that greedy growth."

"Odd you'd use that word."

"What word?" I asked.

"Greedy."

He was silent for some time. At length he reached over and refilled my glass. "I suppose," he said, "that I ought to do something."

"I think so," I agreed. "I know the idea of—intrusion—is distasteful to you, but it would do no harm to look in on the old boy."

He settled back with a sigh. "Well, tomorrow's time enough. We'll go down, and if there's no answer at the door, I'll use my key, much as I hate meddling."

The next day, like most of its predecessors, was hot and sunny. After a light lunch, we started out for Millward Frander's house on Stillcroft Street.

Overnight, it appeared to me, the shining, purple-green ivy leaves had grown larger and more luxurious. They were everywhere. They had climbed over the eaves and started across the roof. Their tiny claspers clung to the drains, the bricks themselves, the windowpanes. The house looked as if it had been draped in a thick cloak of shimmering ivy.

Corvington rang the bell in vain. After a ten-minute wait, he sighed with resignation and took out his key. "Hate doing this, y'know."

The door opened grudgingly. We saw then that the minute clasper-rootlets of the ivy had begun

to pry into the almost invisible slit of space between the door and its frame.

The entrance hall exuded a peculiar smell—a mixture of decay and growth, damp, sweet and sickish.

Corvington shouted up the stairs. "Millward!"

He called again and we waited, but there was no reply.

Closing the door behind us, he slipped the key into his pocket. "Might as well go up, I guess."

As I trudged up the stairs behind him, I noticed that the unpleasant odor became more intense.

In the upstairs hall, Corvington looked about in some confusion. "Been years since I was in here. Forgotten which was his favorite room."

At length he settled on the last door to the right, toward the front of the house.

He knocked and there was no reply. Finally he pounded on the door. "Millward! It's Corvington!" Silence.

He tried the door and found it locked. "Hang it all! I don't have keys for all the rooms!"

After a moment's hesitation, he shrugged and swung his big shoulder against the door. It crashed inward with a splintering rasp of broken wood and metal.

We stepped into the semi-darkened room—and stood stricken speechless.

In the green, glimmering half-darkness, a thing which had once been human slumped in an armchair a few feet from the front window. It was covered with a great fluttering, waving mass of the huge, five-lobed ivy leaves. Only its outline was visible. For a minute or so, as we remained rooted with horror, the shape itself stayed motionless. *Then it moved.* It lifted itself from the chair and a thin, half-stifled scream came out of its mouth.

The purplish, fleshy-looking ivy leaves immediately veered in our direction, as if we had been some kind of magnet.

The thing fell back in the chair but the inhuman, high-pitched scream of protest and agony went on and on.

The ivy leaves waved frantically. Possibly it was my imagination, but I had the distinct impression that their claspers had descended to the floor in front of the chair and were starting across toward us.

At last Corvington recovered himself. He shoved me toward the door. "Get out at once! Out of the house!"

As I hurried down the stairs, he was right behind me. Even under

the circumstances, I felt that this—well, it wasn't like the Corvington I knew, or thought I knew.

Once outside, I turned to him. "My God, Corvington, what are you going to do?"

"You'll see," he replied grimly.

I followed him around the side of the house, fighting through an almost impenetrable mass of vegetation. Swearing, he tore his way toward a sort of shed or garage which was situated in the rear of the house. The building bore such a weight of massed vines, limbs and leaves, it appeared about to cave in.

Somehow Corvington reached it, got one of the doors open and groped inside. I waited, nearly suffocated in the dense tangle of growth, and presently he pushed his way out. I saw that he was carrying a heavy ax. The blade was rusty but the handle looked solid.

As we struggled back toward the front of the house, I felt certain that the huge tangle had closed in behind us.

As soon as we emerged near the entrance door, I understood Corvington's purpose. Pushing his way to the front of the house, he located the main root, or trunk, of the ivy.

I know it may sound absurd, but the infernal thing seemed to sense his plan. The heavy ivy leaves fluttered against his face. I am positive I saw one or more of the claspers fasten on the shoulder of his jacket—but Corvington, once aroused, was formidable. He was not to be stopped.

Swinging the ax in a wide arc, he buried the rusty blade in the knotty root.

Gasping, he stepped back. I saw that he was staring at the half-severed root. Wiping the perspiration from my eyes, I looked more closely at it. A thin trickle of liquid was seeping out of the ivy trunk. It looked like blood.

Corvington swung the ax again—and again.

Things are handled quietly in Amley—if you know the right people. Corvington knew them.

There was no publicity—aside from the stark announcement of Millward Frander's death "from circulatory problems associated with a failing heart."

The funeral was private and the casket was closed.

Corvington, who inherited his cousin's house, had all its surrounding vegetation chopped, cut and sheared away—down to the last blade of grass.

One evening at the club, long afterward, he brought up the subject.

"Y'know," he said, "specimens

of that monstrous ivy were sent to some of the best botanists in the country and they couldn't identify it! Millward must have rooted it out in some remote, unexplored jungle area. It *resembles* the common ivy—*Hedera canariensis*—which is native to North Africa and the Canary Islands—but there are horrible differences.

"Rootlets of the damned thing had infiltrated a tiny fissure along the window frame where Millward usually sat.

"We don't know the exact sequence of events. He may have suffered a stroke and been unable to move out of the chair. At any rate, once inside, the ivy headed right for him. Its claspers fastened on him while he was still alive and the hairlike root filaments penetrated into his tissues. It must have been agony beyond our comprehension."

Corvington refilled his glass. "Actually, however, it may not have lasted long. Even—what we saw—may have been deceptive. Millward may have been already dead when we entered."

"But he tried to get out of that chair!" I objected.

Corvington frowned. "Yes, I know. But . . . well . . . you see, it may have been a sort of—symbiosis. In other words, Millward may have been clinically dead when we saw him. The ivy root filaments may simply have acted on his nerve endings, galvanized them, so to speak. In other words, he was little more than a sort of zombi, physically animated by outside sources."

I shook my head. "Hard to believe. That scream . . ."

Corvington nodded. "I know. But even that might be explained. The autopsy disclosed that the hideous thing had sent its hairlike rootlets right into his brain. The stimulation may have acted on his speech centers, even though he was medically dead."

"And that red—fluid—in the root?"

Corvington grimaced. "Thought you'd bring that up. We had it analyzed. It was—part of it, anyway—human blood."

I had to let it go at that. Corvington, I observed, had closed the subject.

Today, whenever I see a friend's house wearing ivy, I immediately urge him to get rid of the growth. I suppose I'm a bit too vehement about it.

Some of my acquaintances have begun to consider me a trifle eccentric.

If one is of a mind, no obstacle may be too difficult to overcome.

Fat Jow and the Watchmaker

"And what will it be today?" Fat Jow asked the children ringed about his park bench.

The Saturday afternoon air shrilled with their cries: "The golden pagoda! The dragon! The nightingale! The demon!"

"I think it is time for the nightingale," said Fat Jow when quiet had returned.

The children offered no protest, but contentedly settled themselves to listen.

Three generations of Chinatown children had made a ritual of this Saturday visit to St. Mary's Square, to hear Uncle Jow relate one from among the many old stories his mother had brought from China.

As the old emperor regained health and strength through the singing of the genuine nightingale after the mechanical substitute had fallen to pieces, Fat Jow had his reward in the rapt faces and shining eyes of his audience.

He failed to notice the leathery little Occidental on the next bench until the children were scattering to return to their play. The stranger arose and came toward him.

"Good day, sir," he said in fluid Cantonese. "May I sit down?"

Fat Jow's astonishment delayed his reply only briefly. "Please do."

The other seated himself. "I could not help overhearing. A delightful story. My compliments."

"Thank you. It was their weekly lesson, although they do not recognize it as such. Truth is more palatable when candy-coated with parable."

"You are the one called Fat Jow?"

by Robert Alan Blair

"You have the advantage over me, sir. Not only do you know my name, but you are fluent in Cantonese."

"For thirty years I had my watch-repair shop in the Street of the Lame Ox in Canton."

Fat Jow nodded in sympathy. "I have heard of the White Russians who fled China ahead of the forces of Chairman Mao."

"Now I am here, too old to do more than make a beginning. It is difficult to make one's way in a strange land—doubly so, if one is my age. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Fyodr Skarin."

Immediately to Fat Jow's mind came the image of the beautiful Eurasian woman whom he knew as an agent of the mainland Chinese. "I seem to have heard the name."

"Dunya's father."

That Dunya's father lived in San Francisco he knew; but always before, Fyodr Skarin had been a name, a figure out of Dunya's past, partaking of no reality. Yet here he was, sharing a bench in St. Mary's Square. "I am honored to know you, sir. Despite the identity of her employers, I hold only the highest regard for Miss Skarin. You brought her here and educated her in American schools—why then did she choose to go back to her Chinese mother, and espouse the cause of the People's Republic?"

"Who knows the minds of one's children these days? Her mother's arguments were more effective than mine. And her mother, as you may know, has risen steadily in the ranks of the Party. She had more prestige to offer Dunya than I, a struggling watchmaker." Fyodr clasped his hands in his lap. "I have not heard from Dunya for some time, and I am more worried with the passing of the months. Have you seen her?"

"Not for nearly a year. Surely you understand that she fears, not only for herself, but also for the trouble she would bring upon you

as the father of a subversive operative?"

"Do you have a means of communication?"

"Nothing direct. I may leave a message with a certain local importer, but he must wait for her to call him."

"Will you leave a message for me?"

"It would please me, sir, but I cannot guarantee results."

"Only say that her father wishes to see her. And there is another reason that I come to you. Without going into meticulous detail, I invite you to visit my shop on Divisadero Street, at your convenience. If you are able to come back with me now, so much the better."

"My herb shop is closed for the weekend; I am at your service, sir."

The two men rode the bus to Fyodr's shop on lower Divisadero near Haight, a semicommercial neighborhood boasting on shop fronts proud old names like Naremkin, Solovieff, Goronsky, Saharoff.

Originally the shop had been one square enclosure with an entrance at the middle. A partition had been installed dividing the one into two, the entryway recessed to permit two angled doors adjoining one another. The next shop window bore an arching legend in large block letters of gilt: "A. Gum, Jewelry, Loans," and in smaller letters on the lower right corner, "Fine engraving done here."

Fyodr went into the rear room and reappeared with a chair. "Please sit down and wait, and I shall fetch my friend." He stepped into the next shop.

Within a few minutes he returned with a tall Chinese of commanding appearance. A shock of thick black hair barely touched with gray capped a broad brow and keen black eyes. Fyodr said, "I shall not compromise you by speaking my friend's actual name. He avoids Chinatown because he would be subject to pressures by agents of both Peking and Taipei, both of whom would like to recruit his talents for their governments. But politics is not the reason I have brought you here, Master Fat."

A. Gum said after a slight bow, "Allow me to explain, sir. While I do not choose to live in Chinatown, I am saddened that my children do not attend Chinese language classes after school. Mr. Skarin has heard of you through his daughter, and he has suggested that you may be willing to recommend someone of discretion to tutor them."

Fat Jow stroked his wisp of silky beard. "Anyone I recommend would himself be in Chinatown, and I presume that if you do not visit the area, neither do you wish your children to go. How many are there, and what are their ages?"

"A boy twelve, and girls nine and fourteen."

"I had not looked upon myself as a schoolmaster," said Fat Jow, smiling, "but I have found certain reward in giving my young grandnephew lessons in calligraphy at home. Since I live not in Chinatown but in an apartment west of Van Ness, you could offer no objection to sending your children to me."

A. Gum took his hand. "This is beyond all my hopes," he said sincerely. "Please state your conditions."

"I impose no conditions," Fat Jow said in some surprise. "I am happy to serve. My life is renewed by continuing communication with the young." He wrote on a piece of paper. "Here is my address and telephone number. Please call before you bring them. After a few visits, I am sure you will allow them to travel the bus by themselves."

As Fat Jow was leaving the shop with the thanks of both these new friends, Fyodr Skarin said, "You will not forget Dunya?"

"I plan to visit the importer before I return home this afternoon," said Fat Jow. "This is all that I may promise."

The shop of the importer was a few doors below the herb shop on the steep street two blocks above Grant Avenue, the red and gilt pagoda facade of Chinatown. The shopwindow had long since been replaced, and the priceless Sung Tusk, exquisite ivory carving, restored to its place of honor in a glass display case. The politically-motivated theft of the Sung Tusk and its subsequent recovery by Fat Jow had been the last occasion of his seeing Dunya Skarin.

The importer was waiting upon an Occidental couple whose camera straps and gay summer-weight clothing marked them as tourists. Fat Jow stood patiently before a counter of costume jewelry until the customers had made a purchase and departed. The importer remained behind the cash register. "I am fairly sure," he said dryly, "that you are not here to buy."

Fat Jow did not like the man, who acted occasionally for the mainland Chinese for no personal motive except money. He dispensed with the customary niceties of social exchange. "Has the *Celestial III* been returned to you as yet?" He referred to the import-

er's cabin cruiser which Dunya had used in the abortive attempt to accomplish the defection of the nuclear physicist On Leong-Sa.

"Not as yet," replied the importer. "She required it for further assignments."

"When did you last hear from her?"

"Perhaps six or seven months ago."

"Do you have means of direct communication?"

"The *Celestial III* has a radio, of course, but she forbids its use. She communicates when it is *her* wish—not mine."

"When she does," said Fat Jow, "please inform her that her father wishes to see her."

"Is he ill?"

"He is a father who is concerned for his daughter—I ask no more than that."

The importer nodded coldly. "I shall convey your message, when it becomes possible."

"Thank you." Fat Jow gave him a stiff bow and left the shop.

He heard no more from Fyodr, A. Gum, or the importer during the following week. On Saturday afternoon, after he had finished his storytelling session with the children and was relaxing on the bench with head tilted back to allow the welcome spring sun to warm his face, he saw a frail old man with a stack of round wicker baskets on his shoulder shuffling into the park. He passed in front of Fat Jow, stumbled, and the baskets clattered to the ground. One rolled beneath the bench, and Fat Jow bent to retrieve it.

When their heads came close in rebuilding the stack, the old man said without looking at him, "Once again my disguise is effective. Do you not know me?"

It was the voice of a woman, and a familiar voice. Dunya Skarin had returned to San Francisco.

Fat Jow covered his surprise by leaning back once more upon the bench. "Are you being watched?" he asked.

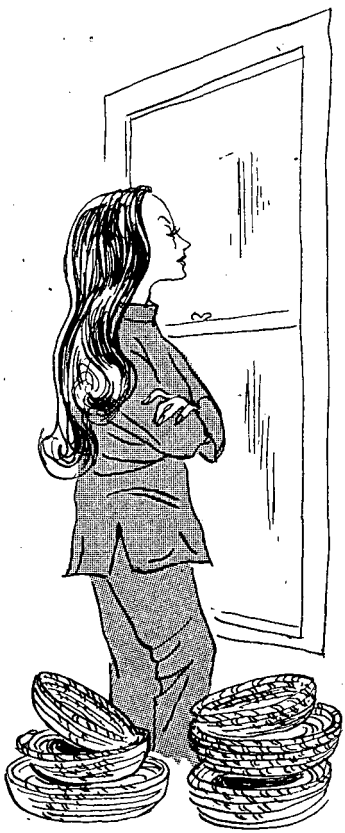
"I do not err by underestimating the skill of your authorities. Therefore I must assume that I am under surveillance at every moment. Where may we meet secretly? Make haste—I must be seen to leave here."

Fat Jow pondered briefly. "The fowl market of Ng Har. He may be trusted."

Dunya shouldered the baskets and hurried away, head down. She was soon lost to sight among the Saturday crowds. For some minutes longer Fat Jow sat under the benevolent steel gaze of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, then took himself up the hill to Grant Avenue.

The fowl market was normally

crowded. Fat Jow lingered near the window, ostensibly studying the rows of naked chickens and ducks hanging from stretched wires, until Ng Har came to him and said, "I believe I have what you wish, Master, if you will come with me." He led Fat Jow to the rear of the store and into the freezer, then to a small door opening into a storage room that gave upon a narrow alley beside the building. Ng Har did not enter with him, but returned to his customers.



Her stack of baskets set aside, Dunya Skarin was standing slim and straight beside them, looking out the dusty window, through which a fragment of Grant Avenue traffic might be seen, if only obliquely. She had removed the soiled felt hat, and her black lustrous hair fell richly to her shoulders.

She turned to meet him. "My friend," she said simply, taking both his hands.

"You received my message sooner than I had anticipated," said Fat Jow.

"I received no message; I am here on an assignment."

"I left a message with the importer. Have you talked to him?"

"The importer is stupid and dangerous—I do not tell him of my comings and goings. What message was it?"

"That your father wishes to see you. Will you go to him?"

She turned away to look out the window again. "It is unwise that I go to him. Will you bring him aboard the *Celestial III*? Be sure you are not followed or observed. If you suspect watchers, do not come to the boat, but take your ease on the green until you

may leave again without your visit's appearing anything other than a casual stroll." With a few deft moves of her hands she put up her hair and concealed it beneath the old hat. "I cannot remain here longer."

Once more Fat Jow helped her with the wicker baskets. "I receive an impression that your assignment here pertains to your father. I was seen in his company, and I am being pressed into service."

"I am not permitted to discuss it," she said gravely, almost with reluctance.

"You are not alone on this mission?"

She looked at him without answering immediately. "Will you come?" she asked, making of the question a gentle plea.

"Was there ever any doubt?"

"Come as soon as you can. If I know my father, he will want to come at once. It will be better to wait for dark." She pulled open the outer door, looked up and down the alley, and shuffled toward Grant Avenue, where she turned right and vanished.

Fat Jow went back through the freezer to the market. To delay his departure, and to lend credence to his visit, he purchased a small dressed pullet to take home to Hsiang Yuen.

Shortly before sunset and the swift dusk of the coastal country, Fat Jow arrived alone at the marina green and strolled lazily along the water's edge, pausing once to activate coin-operated binoculars. After scanning the usual sights of the Golden Gate Bridge, Alcatraz and Angel Islands, and the Marin hills beyond, he swung the binoculars full circle to study the traffic along Marina Boulevard. Nothing that he saw, moving or parked, suggested a police car; but it would not be only the police for whom to watch.

He sat down on a bench and stretched his arms along the back. He had been lounging thus for the better part of an hour, and the dusk had given way to night brightened by the myriad lights around the Bay when Fyodr Skarin came.

Fyodr said, "I did as you recommended: changed buses twice, and watched following traffic. I am reasonably sure that I have led no one here. I must express my gratitude that you take such precautions to prevent the arrest of my daughter."

"I like Miss Skarin," said Fat Jow, rising. "I can still hope that she will decide to become an American once more, and not under duress. You must try to exert more of an influence than her

Chinese mother has ever done."

"I do not know how."

"Be a loving father, ask no questions, and do not demand more of her than she is ready to give. Accept her as the person she is, without seeking to change her."

Fyodr nodded. "I *have* been guilty of that." He looked around. "Where is it that we are to meet her?"

"Come," Fat Jow said, and he set off toward the St. Francis Yacht Harbor and the filled causeway leading to the breakwater.

The *Celestial III* rode quietly at her mooring between two narrow floating docks. Her portholes were brightly lighted, but no one was on deck when they came aboard.

As if the new rocking of the boat with their added weight had been a signal, light streamed up the companionway where the hatch slid back, and footsteps sounded on the ladder. A shadow blocked out the light from below. A strongly-coupled Chinese in blue dungarees and white T-shirt stepped upon the deck. He wore his hair cropped close, and something in his bearing suggested the military man, even before he spoke. "Good evening, gentlemen," he said with a smart salute. "Song Ja at your service."

"Rather," said Fat Jow, "at the service of the armed forces of the People's Republic, is that not so?"

Song Ja smiled thinly. "My congratulations. If I can judge you from what Miss Skarin has told me, you are not about to attempt anything heroic and foolish."

"First I would know why I should be expected to act so," Fat Jow replied.

Fyodr Skarin spoke up. "I am here to see my daughter. Where is she?"

Song Ja planted his hands upon his hips. "So you are the father. I have a small errand for you before you may see her."

"I do nothing," insisted Fyodr, "until I know she is safe. If you have harmed her, you will have to kill me."

"Nothing so dramatic." Song Ja turned and called down the open companionway. "Come on deck for a moment."

Dunya appeared, but had no time for more than a fleeting embrace before Song Ja ordered her below again. She went without protest. Song Ja slid the hatch cover closed with a bang, and secured it with a small combination padlock. "Now we may talk business, gentlemen." He sauntered astern to the padded benches lining the cockpit. "Sit down—we may as well be comfortable." When neither man moved, he laughed and sat down. "Father

and friend. The one responsible for the person she is, the other for the person she thinks that she wishes to become. My superiors have been most curious about this Fat Jow, who has so seriously curtailed the efficiency of our valued agent Miss Skarin. You are here because you both can be of service to us. We are reasonably confident of your cooperation because of certain personal ties: Mr. Skarin with his daughter, and Fat Jow with his little grandnephew. First order of business is Mr. Skarin. Have you heard the name Chen Woei?" He looked sharply at Fyodr, watching his reaction.

"I was a merchant resident of Canton many years," said Fyodr. "It is obvious that I should know this person high in the ranks of the Kuomintang. At one time he was talked of as one of the five men closest to the generalissimo,"

"Chen Woei did not flee to Taiwan with the forces of Chiang. Our agents in Taiwan have established that the Chiang government also would like to find him. His acumen in political science is a coveted asset for either side. Our people throughout the world have been supplied with his picture and dossier for years, with the hope that someone somewhere would recognize him. An exhaustive study of his history revealed that in Canton he had an acquaintance with whom he took tea almost weekly, a watchmaker in the Street of the Lame Ox. Because the watchmaker was the husband of a minor party official in Canton, we were able to identify him as Fyodr Skarin, who had settled in San Francisco. Last year we assigned an agent to watch Mr. Skarin, but the agent was inefficient, and it was not until our agent watching Fat Jow saw Mr. Skarin's colleague on Divisadero Street that the jeweler A. Gum was recognized as Chen Woei. We need his familiarity with the intimate details of the Chiang regime, and are prepared to offer him an enviable responsibility with our own. You are to bring him to me before midnight, on one pretext or other."

"While you hold my daughter hostage," said Fyodr.

"While I hold both your daughter and Fat Jow. You continue to be watched and any attempt on your part to communicate with the local authorities will be transmitted immediately to me. I shall then speed out of the harbor to international waters, to rendezvous with one of our nuclear submarines. Pending the outcome of this mission, we have deferred your daughter's trial for treason. If I am obliged to depart in haste,

the trial will be deferred no longer."

"And Fat Jow?" Fyodr asked.

"He is scheduled for a conference with my superior. He has a potential of becoming our most valued operative, through his knowledge of Chinatown and the respect he commands among its people." Song Ja stood, his lazy air vanished. "As you see, I am not armed, although arms are readily available. But I trust that you will not make violence necessary." He unlocked the padlock and slid the hatch cover back. "Fat Jow, you are to go below and wait for Mr. Skarin to return."

Fat Jow exchanged glances with Fyodr, then with a shrug descended the ladder. He heard the cover slide shut behind him, the lock click, voices conversing quietly as Song Ja gave Fyodr final instructions, and Fyodr's footsteps receding along the floating dock.

Dunya Skarin was seated on one of four tiered bunks built into the bow, elbows on knees, chin resting in her cupped hands. "I am sorry," she said. "This has come as a shock to me, too. I did not dream that I was to be as much of a pawn as you."

"You heard?" he asked gently.

"I heard enough."

"And you are disillusioned? When last we talked aboard this craft, you were undecided. Are we to wait meekly until your father returns, or are we to employ the time to mutual advantage?"

"I am willing to help you," she said dully. "If I am to be charged in any court, I prefer that it be in America. But what may we do against Song Ja? He is still my superior, and I am long conditioned to obey orders."

Fat Jow heard her only partially, as he was inspecting the quarters closely. The only exit was up the ladder, and the portholes were screened by heavy wire mesh locked in place. He rapped with his knuckles on the deck end of the wall. "Mahogany," he said. "Of what material is the hull constructed?"

"Fiber glass."

"And can it be worked with common hand tools?"

"Yes . . ." She raised her head, and her eyes brightened. "The tool locker!" She hurried to the galley area abaft the ladder, pulled open a drawer, and beckoned him.

Fat Jow looked among the contents of the drawer, came up with a brace and bit and a keyhole saw. "I must remember to reimburse the importer for whatever damage I do," he said. Experimen-

tally he drilled a hole in the mahogany paneling close beneath the deck, in a shadowed spot well aft, where a casual glance from the ladder would not discover it. He followed this with a second hole no more than a quarter inch away, and a third, until he had a row two feet long. He continued his row downward another two feet. When he joined the rows, he had outlined a square two feet on each side. "My inspiration," he said, "is a postage stamp." With the saw, working very slowly and cautiously, he began joining the holes.

A rattling of the padlock on the hatch cover then paralyzed him, and they stood shoulder to shoulder, backs against the marks he had made, hands behind them holding the tools.

However, Song Ja did not come down. He called through the open hatch, "Fat Jow, come on deck. I want to talk to you."

With a meaningful glance at Dunya, Fat Jow slipped her the keyhole saw and hurried up the ladder. The moment that he stood on deck, Song Ja locked the hatch again. He waved Fat Jow to a stern bench, and this time the herbalist did not decline. He felt suddenly weak.

Song Ja stood with one foot on the bench, looking out over the stern toward the brilliance of the city. "Waiting can be a wearying time," he said.

"You allow yourself the debilitating luxury of loneliness?" Fat Jow taunted.

Song Ja looked long at him, but with no change of expression. "The strongest and most dedicated of us have moments when the Party seems far away. Secret agents in imperialist strongholds are subject to them. Here, for example, Miss Skarin goes ashore with far more equanimity than I. She knows the city and its customs, while I must be ever on my guard. I retain my sanity by continually reminding myself that in effect this craft is a vessel of the People's Navy, and I as its captain have a fragment of China beneath my feet."

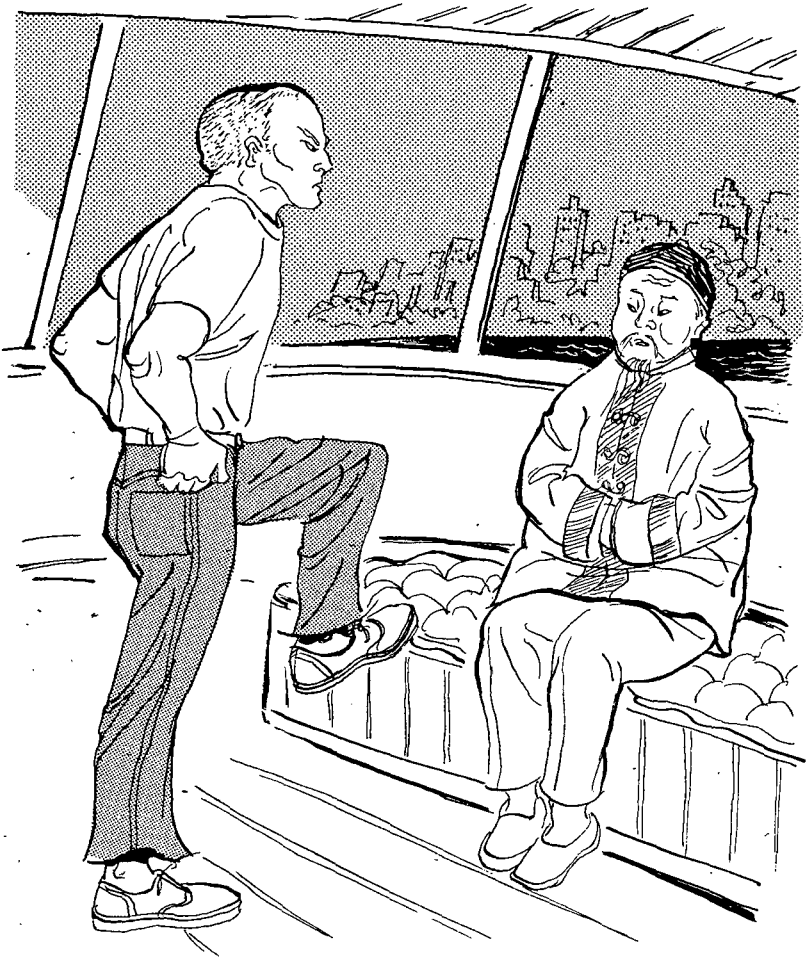
"It is my understanding," said Fat Jow, "that the importer owns the *Celestial III.*"

"A technicality. He is one of our agents, therefore the craft is ours." Song Ja smiled faintly. "I have been warned to choose well my words with you."

"Why am I so important to you? You must know I am not in sympathy with your cause."

"Yet you are proud of the achievements of China. This much you have told Miss Skarin."

Fat Jow nodded. "No matter



what their political affiliation, Chinese everywhere in the world must look with pride at China's strides toward an independent position among the family of nations. Yet I had hoped that my last task for you had been performed, for the sake of keeping my grandnephew."

"I must inform you, sir, that in releasing the boy to you before we had utilized your potential,

Miss Skarin acted impulsively. Her mother has certain influence, and was able to ameliorate the charges. But when she failed in her mission to effect the defection of the nuclear scientist back to China, largely through your efforts, the charges against her were too grievous to ignore. We have elected to give her the opportunity of succeeding at this mission, through her father, and through you. Mr. Skarin is at this moment fulfilling his designed function. Now we turn to you. We know that you can be a valuable man in Chinatown."

"So the San Francisco police have been saying for years—but they have learned that I cooperate only within limits."

Song Ja laughed warmly. "You will do! Whatever Miss Skarin has said of you is true. To be brief: the importer has long been our principal permanent contact in Chinatown, but he is stupid, stupid! While the People's Republic was young, he was adequate for our purposes, but we are becoming more sophisticated, and so our representation must become the same."

"You must know that *I* cannot be your representative. What little I did, I did under coercion."

"Look upon it another way," Song Ja pursued patiently. "Your government has been seeking lines of communication with China. What better level than people like you, the merchant citizen?"

"Communication—and that is all?"

"You are suspicious—that is good. I shall be honest with you. Your choice is simple: either accept the terms I offer tonight, and become our man in Chinatown, or accompany me to my later rendezvous at sea, where more influential persons than I are waiting to speak with you." He waved his dismissal. "You may go below again—you have a few hours yet to make your decision, and I do not wish to distract you." He unlocked the hatch and slid it back only long enough for Fat Jow to descend the ladder. The padlock clicked once more.

Fat Jow told Dunya, "I too am scheduled for a sea voyage. I trust that we may cancel the reservation."

"I have been working while you were on deck," she told him, showing him a panel of mahogany two feet square that she had removed from the paneling at the deck line, exposing the rough inner surface of the fiber glass hull.

"Excellent," he said, running his hands along the serrated edges of the wood. "It promises to be a tight squeeze for someone like me.

We have no wish to drill beneath the waterline. Do you know where it is?"

Dunya traced a line with a lipstick. "About there. Allow a few inches on either side."

"Even tighter." Fat Jow took up the drill again. "Hide the panel of wood, and try to devise something to seal this opening if Song Ja should come below."

"Be sure he will watch on deck until my father returns. He slept most of the day in preparation for this night."

Cutting of the fiber glass was even slower, not because of the material, but of the increased need for quiet on this outer surface, where sound might carry more readily to Song Ja on deck.

As he reached the last three drilled holes, Fat Jow stopped sawing. "We cannot permit this panel to fall outward," he said. "Perhaps some small hooks to insert in the holes and hold it in place?"

"I have hairpins." Dunya fashioned hooks of two hairpins, inserted them in holes at the top and bottom of the cut section, and held the ends.

Fat Jow turned out the lights, and then worked the saw through the last holding snags, stopped again. "It is free," he told her. "Pull—very gently."

The fiber glass panel stirred in its frame, and a tiny edge came under his fingers. Fat Jow pressed first with one hand, then the other. The edge came free, and he lowered the panel to the deck. Before them opened a square black aperture through which they saw the shadowy form of a yacht in the next slip. The slapping of water against the hull sounded quite clearly.

"Do you swim?" whispered Fat Jow.

"Yes."

"It will not be wise to use the floating dock to go ashore. Slip into the water, dive under the next boat if you can, and do not come up until you are away from here. If we are separated, go at once to my home, and ask Miss Baxter to let you wait there for me."

"And you?"

"I shall be not far behind you. Go now, and good luck. I am happy to have your help."

"You are helping me far more than I you."

"Miss Skarin, you help only by confirming your faith in me. Please go."

He helped her to crawl through the opening he had made. She hung by her hands on the edge of the hole for a moment, then slipped with hardly a ripple into

the black water between the hull and the next floating dock. Fat Jow strained his eyes, but could not detect her.

He waited until he thought she had time to clear the next boat, and inched himself through, feet first. Being stouter than Dunya, he stuck at the middle, his legs protruding into the night, his head and shoulders inside the cabin. He struggled, but made no progress. He dared not make a sound lest he attract the attention of Song Ja.

Bracing his hands flat upon the mahogany on either side, he succeeded in pushing himself back into the cabin, where he crouched on the deck, regaining his breath and thinking. With the keyhole saw he worked some more on the lower edge of the hole, but it was not far enough above the waterline to offer much space for widening.

When he stopped sawing, he looked about the cabin. The proximity of the water to the hole suggested a means of keeping the *Celestial III,* and with it Song Ja, in the harbor. Fat Jow did not wish to subject himself to drowning while squeezing through an opening slightly smaller than his girth. He took up the drill again, squatted and drilled a hole in the paneling below the waterline. The bit broke through, and he pushed on to find the fiber glass hull. He drilled more, again broke through, and when he withdrew the bit it was wet to the touch.

The leak was small, and would be long in revealing itself. The space between hull and mahogany paneling would have to fill before water reached the hole in the mahogany.

Again he tried the opening, and beyond a small restraint at the middle, encountered no difficulty. As he hung suspended by both hands, his legs and feet were already in the water, cold at any time of the year, and he trusted himself to the Bay. He took a deep breath and allowed himself to sink. He called upon what little he knew about swimming, and after a fashion made his way beneath the hull of the adjoining yacht.

He found Dunya waiting on the steep rock slope of the breakwater. "If we try to walk out," she said, "he will see."

"Then," said Fat Jow, unperturbed, "we must swim again, across the slip. It is not far."

They returned to the water, and swimming with a slow dog paddle to avoid splashing, moved across the strip of water between the ranks of boats.

From a public telephone Fat

Jow called the police. He told them only, "There has been an attempted kidnapping aboard the *Celestial III* at the St. Francis Yacht Harbor," and he hung up. His next call requested a taxicab.

It was not long before he heard a siren, and saw a police car swing from Fillmore into Marina Boulevard. When the car slowed at the lane leading to the yacht harbor, he heard also a sudden rumble of marine engines behind him, and looking, saw the *Celestial III,* backing out of its berth. Even as the police car skidded to a stop at the telephone booth, the cruiser nosed around the end of the breakwater and into the open waters of the Bay. Once clear of the breakwater, it increased power, the bow went up and the stern down, upsetting the level of water which had been filling the bilges through the little hole he had drilled, and lowering the edge of the square aperture to the waterline.

The *Celestial III,* instead of gaining speed, simply upended itself at a steeper angle, until the engines died and the bow was pointing straight up to the night sky. A Coast Guard cutter summoned by the police was drawing near to rescue the unfortunate yachtsman. His identity would be a matter of interest to the authorities.

Fat Jow and Dunya Skarin gradually worked free of the crowd that had gathered and climbed, still dripping, into the waiting taxicab. Fat Jow gestured her in ahead of him, and gave the driver the address of the Baxter mansion. "Miss Baxter will have some dry clothes for you," he said, "although I fear they may be somewhat out of date. Then we shall attempt to telephone your father or A. Gum, and allay their fears. And in the morning, if you are still of a mind, you and I shall pay a visit to Lieutenant Cogswell of the San Francisco police."

Dunya did not answer, but sat silently during most of the ride. As they were turning the corner of Van Ness into the street of the Baxter mansion, she said only, "I am of a mind."

A woman's touch may be all that is needed to ensure instant success.

The surf booms with a certain rhythm, and as I drew nearer the cottage the deep, booming bass speakers of Natalie's expensive stereo setup seemed to become an extension of the roaring surf. Anyway, that's how I remember it.

My bare feet felt comfortable in the still-warm sand as I walked up the beach at sundown toward the front door of the cottage. It wasn't much of a cottage, really—one of those angled, small, unpainted structures that seemed to be trying to outwait the sea. I didn't make much as a junior accountant, and almost everything I did make went into Natalie's music hobby—or, more accurately, music obsession.

Not that I minded her spending the money on tapes and stereo equipment; I knew when we were married a year ago how important music was to her. "Life is really music, if you just listen," she often told me. I suppose she's right. The surf has its rhythm; hearts beat in rhythm; and the deep, vibrant chords of Natalie's music have rhythm. Maybe it is all really the same rhythm, and maybe death is a part of it; and maybe only certain people can tune in.

I wonder if you'll be able to tune in on what you're about to read. I doubt it. It's too true to be believed, and that's why I can tell you. Of course the names have been changed to protect me. (Would I pull a switch now and use real names?) It all happened because what I felt for the dark-eyed, dark-haired, music-souled

Natalie was genuine love, and you know what that can change into. Now I'm horrified sometimes that it might change back.

Oh, she was a sound freak! I recognized that more strongly than ever as I glanced into the front window of the cottage and saw Natalie dancing almost unconsciously to the deep, driving rhythms that seemed now to run in currents through the formless sand beneath my feet. She was listening to *Blood and Love,* a recent Doug Hall tape, a mixture of violent orchestration and throaty screaming, a sound that you'll never hear on the Top Ten but, according to Natalie, a sound of genius nonetheless. Hall was still simply "undiscovered."

I opened the front door of the throbbing cottage and stepped inside. The artist in person was slouched on the worn sofa. Doug Hall (whose performing name was Mad Dog Howl) was drawing languidly on a suspicious-looking cigarette and observing Natalie through slitted eyes. He'd been a friend of Natalie's for years, and now had become by degrees one of those ever-present family friends.

"How was your swim, Benton?" he asked as I closed the door behind me. He had to shout to be heard above the blasting music. His hoarse voice had a way of always blending with the music, as if it were accompaniment to whatever he had to say. Talent, I suppose.

"Cold and wet," I shouted in answer. I watched Natalie's lithe, bikini-unclad figure lurch and sway with the music. She was too deeply entranced to notice me at present.

The music ended with a high, wavering, mournful note and, as if drained and vowing subservience to a god, Natalie bowed until her long dark hair swayed gently to touch the floor. For once, the rest of her body was still.

The tape went into a more subdued, simple, repetitive rhythm, and Natalie suddenly jerked upright, smiling. "It's terrific, Doug—it really is! I mean, how can it miss? Oh, hi, Benton."

I nodded, then stepped over and kissed her forehead which was cool and moist.

"Question is," Mad Dog answered hoarsely, "will the damn geeks out there have sense enough to understand it?" He waved a

long, braceleted arm to indicate the general public.

"They'll have to!" Natalie said with great conviction. She aimed her perfect, encouraging smile at him. "Someday you'll have a hit! I just know it!"

That was all they talked about, this will-o'-the-wisp future hit. Sometimes it was all for which either of them seemed to live. Long into the night, while the three of us sat over a bottle of red wine, I would lapse into silence while they talked reverently of gold records, Grammy awards, Hall's picture in various hard rock publications, all of the various monetary and spiritual rewards that "the hit" would bring. Both of them took for granted that it was simply a matter of time before his genius was recognized. After almost a year of this, it became hard for me to share in their constant enthusiasm, and sometimes I became irritable. I never actually wanted to become a part of that kind of world.

The tempo of the music, pulsating from the speakers set at strategic points about the cottage, began to pick up, grow in intensity, and Natalie began to sway again.

"There's sandwich stuff in the kitchen, Benton," she said loudly. "We ate while you were gone."

Before walking to the kitchen I looked to see if Hall was going to join me, as he usually did for any kind of meal, but his pink suede boots were propped up on the scarred coffee table, his head thrown back and his eyes closed. I noticed that his hair, wildly curly and probably longer than Natalie's, cascaded halfway down the back of the sofa. When he performed, the hair was strung with a hundred tiny blinking lights.

Even in the kitchen, there was no escaping the booming music. I made a ham salad sandwich, sat down and watched the beer can I'd gotten from the refrigerator dance wetly on the slick tabletop. I felt like stomping into the other room and switching off the stereo—but I didn't. One of my troubles was that I never quite did what I felt like doing.

Still dancing, Natalie appeared in the doorway. "Doug's flying to Memphis tomorrow to push his new sound," she said. "One of the big record companies is all twisty about it!"

I knew better. Hall was always on the verge of success. He'd flown to Memphis, or hitchhiked or rode a bus, more times than I could recall with the music beating in my ears. I felt like telling this to Natalie, but I didn't, quite.

A number of times recently I'd

almost, but hadn't quite, told her that we'd have to use some of my salary to finance a better car if I could expect to keep my job. I'd been warned several times about absenteeism. I thought about how things might have been changed if I had told her, and if (small chance) she'd listened. When it happens, it's hard to tell good luck from bad, but I do know our ten-year-old convertible wouldn't have broken down half a mile from the cottage when I was on my way home from work that next evening.

It was Friday, so I wasn't too upset. I'd have all weekend to get the car running again; and it was a pleasant—though a bit warm—evening for a walk.

Long before I reached the desolate cottage I could hear the boom of the music, and I wondered idly how far out to sea it could be heard on a calm night.

When I opened the cottage door I was surprised to find that the front room was empty but for the throbbing, dizzying music. Curious, I looked into the kitchen. It, too, was empty. Then I checked the one bedroom, and it wasn't empty. Mad Dog Howl hadn't flown to Memphis at all.

They hadn't seen me, and the deafening music had prevented them from hearing me. I backed away through the hallway, through the cottage's front door, through the raucous rhythm into the suddenly furious heat of the sun's orange, slanting rays.

I ran then, back toward the car, the frantic music still pounding in my brain. Finally, exhausted, I stopped and leaned on a rough wooden railing and stared out to sea, at the now visible tiny lights of the distant ships whose oil contaminated the seaweed that drifted to shore. The music had changed now to the relentless beating of the surf, but it was the same. As I stood and watched the sea in the fading light I could see slimy, reaching things washing darkly onto the beach. That's what I could see in the fading light.

I didn't go home that night. I got the car running somehow and drove to a phone, where I called and told Natalie I'd had car trouble and would be staying with friends in the city. Over the music, she expressed disappointment, and I felt like screaming what she was into the phone. That's what I felt like doing, but I didn't quite do it. Instead I told her not to worry, that I'd be home as early as possible Saturday. I slept in the car, awakening several times with the mistaken notion that the radio was blaring.

When I arrived home Saturday, the cottage was blaring as usual. The very air shimmered with deep, rhythmic sound. Natalie looked up at me from where she was seated cross-legged on a cushion in the middle of the floor and pressed her index finger to her lips in a signal for silence. Then those same lips told me in silent, exaggerated speech that she was taping Mad Dog Howl's latest song.

I could see how important that was to her, and for once I did exactly what I felt like doing.

Mad Dog came by the cottage later that evening to see Natalie, but I told him she'd had to go to New Mexico to visit her sister who was unaccountably ill. He looked at me with his slitted eyes, then shrugged, told me he'd come back later to see her and get some tapes she had, and left.

Natalie's relatives weren't put off as easily, so here I am, but unworried.

Why unworried? Because I know they'll let me out of here soon. They'll have to conclude that Natalie simply left me and disappeared. If they wait too long, I'm sure Mad Dog Howl will get me out somehow, even though they say I'm different from the way I was. Isn't everybody different from the way they were?

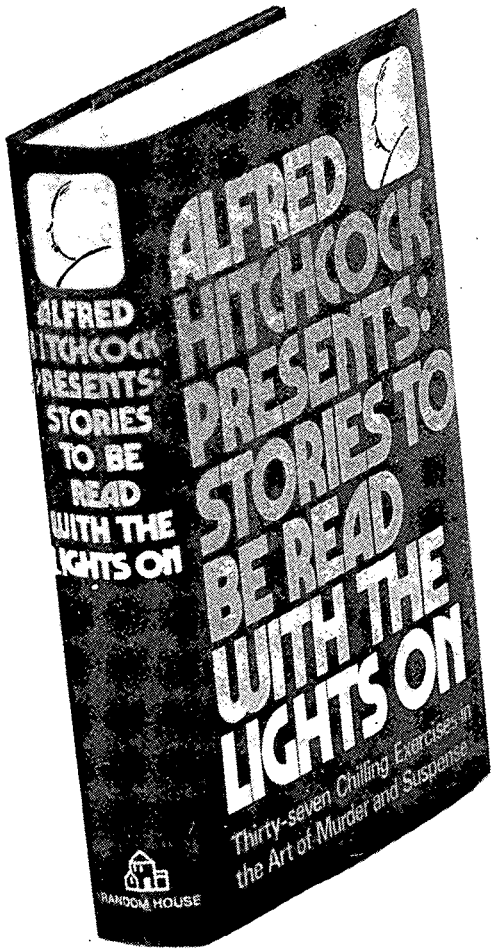
The idea of their finding Natalie doesn't worry me, either. Usually the police identify a body that's been in the sea a long time by dental work or fingerprints, but I took care of those possibilities even *before* I killed her. Not that I'm squeamish, but would you like to do that sort of thing to a corpse?

As it happened, everything worked out perfectly, because *Soul in Pain*, Mad Dog's latest, is a gigantic, ambition-fulfilling, hit that rocketed to the top on all the charts to garner praise and riches. They say it's not only the frenzied, beating music that makes the record great, but the almost inhuman screams and howls of anguish that make up the background. The public seldom really knows what goes into creating a popular recording. But the point is, this one's a hit.

WHILE THEY LAST

BIG

MONEY SAVING OFFER



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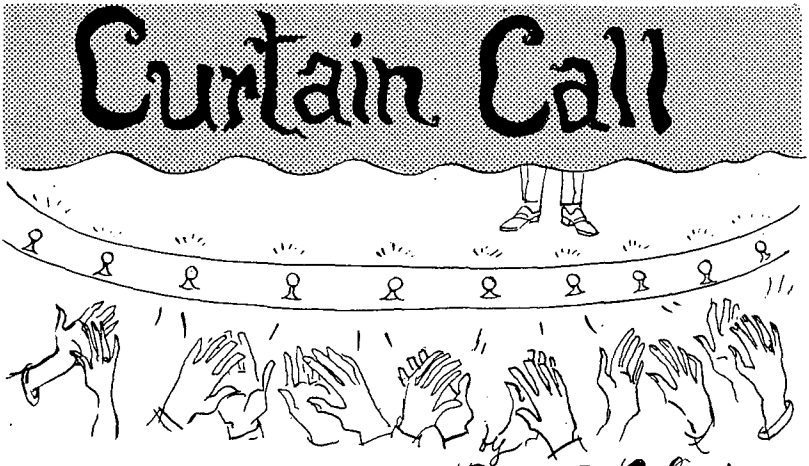
An actor always approaches curtain call with hope and confidence, but it is the final curtain which imparts success—or failure.

Curtain Call



Betty Ren Wright

If it hadn't been for the tooth—the pain that darted white-hot through his lower jaw—Cooper would have enjoyed getting ready for the trip to the dentist. For seven years he had changed himself into someone else before the astonished eyes of audiences from coast to coast, but it had always been a trick and everyone had known it. Now he was going to play a role that had to be accepted without question by all who saw him. A fortune—for him, for Manny, for all the play's backers—depended on his success.

It was Manny's idea that no one should discover that Cooper was playing the lead in the play until curtain call on opening night. The part called for an old man, in his late seventies, farm-bred, keen-witted, spry. Rehearsals had been closed to all, a seventy-year-old understudy had taken over for the out-of-town run-throughs, and as of midnight last night no one had guessed that the key figure in Manny Masters' new play would be the once-famous thirty-three-year-old mime, Cooper Jaynes. If

the secret could be kept until curtain call Tuesday night, the critics and the opening-night crowd would see to it that the theater was filled from then on with other audiences eager to be duped and delighted.

It couldn't miss; Manny had said so a hundred times. The play was a thriller in the classic mold, the dialogue was fresh and intelligent, the characters believable. As Cooper looked at himself now in the full-length mirror in his hotel room he could hear Manny marveling, the way he had repeatedly during rehearsals: "Coop, you *are* old! You've seen the world, you've *had* it! I'd swear you were old enough to be my father."

The plan had been for Cooper to stay in his hotel room until Tuesday night. No one must even guess that Cooper Jaynes was back in circulation. If any of his old friends—acquaintances, Cooper corrected, for they had stopped being his friends when he went to prison on his wife's charges of assault with intent to kill—if any of his old acquaintances saw him, they might start wondering what he was doing in the big town, might add things up and spoil that tremendous moment when Manny introduced his "aging" star to the audience at the end of the play. Nothing must spoil that. Manny was the only real friend he had, the only person who had tried to understand the desperation that had led him to try to stop Irene's vicious tongue with drunken force.

Those were the bad days, the days when everything that mattered—first Irene, then his career, his confidence and self-respect—slipped away from him; the bad days, to be lived through and left behind, so that now some good days could come.

Cooper winced as the pain cut through his memories. He and Manny had anticipated every eventuality but this one, this searing fire that made a dentist an absolute necessity. Even there, it had seemed that Fate was on their side; Dena Lawrence, who played Cooper's daughter, had once been engaged to the son of a dentist in Manhattan.

"The nicest, most discreet little man on earth," she had said as she opened the phone book. "Infinitely nicer than his son, I found out in the nick of time."

"Ask him to make it early in the morning, about seven," Manny had suggested, trying not to show his nervousness at this new development.

It was Cooper's own idea, arrived at during the lonely, anguished night, to go to the dentist in his makeup for the play, elimi-

nating any chance of being recognized on the street. It would be a kind of test; if no one gave him more than a passing glance, if no one frowned in puzzlement or giggled, he would step out on the stage Tuesday night with extra assurance. He would worry just a little less about the authenticity of his performance.

He leaned close to the mirror and looked critically at the face before him. The wrinkles, the pallor, the chicken skin, the expert shadows that gave his neck its ancient scrawniness were the work of a master. *Now,* he thought, *I am old.* He watched, satisfied, as the long lean body shrank and huddled until the suit hung loose and the shirt collar gaped at the base of his throat. *I am old,* he thought again, and the broad chest became concave, the shoulders drew in, the hands curled and arched, like rheumatic spiders, from the too-wide cuffs of his shirt.

The pain in his jaw actually helped. He didn't have to pretend the look of tired endurance or the heavy breathing as he let himself out of his room and shambled down the hall. A chambermaid passed and looked at him with sympathy; the elevator operator started to close the door, then opened it again as Cooper broke into a halting run toward the door.

"Nice day, sir," the boy said respectfully, and Cooper nodded. "Indian summer," he agreed and was pleased with the aged croaking that seemed to struggle to match the brightness of the boy's young voice.

Then he was on his way, his attention focused mostly on the pain that seemed to mount each minute, but with a part of his mind recording and evaluating each reaction: the doorman's haste to open the door, the cabby's patience as he crawled into the back seat and settled himself carefully, the careless, unquestioning glances of early-morning passersby outside the skyscraper where Dena's discreet dentist waited to stop the pain. He was fine; he was old; no one would know until it was time for them to know.

The building, an echoing arcade with stores on the main floor and offices above, was eerily empty at seven o'clock Saturday morning. Cooper's footsteps echoed as he shuffled over to the bank of automatic elevators and stepped into one of them. A woman held the door so it would not close before he got there—a middle-aged woman, well-tanned, expensive suit, diamonds on both hands, a leather bag with a sprawling monogram on it. He noted the de-

tails, recording them as he always did, because it was his business to see details and remember them.

"Don't hurry—please," she said. He recognized compassion under the slight affectation of her speech.

He took off his hat and brushed his fingers over the thin white hair and papery scalp that completely covered his own dark crew cut. "Nice Indian summer day," he murmured.

The woman smiled companionably. "My father always thought this was the best time of the year," she replied. The pattern of her thoughts was so obvious that Cooper could hardly hide a smile.

The elevator mounted slowly to 8 and the door slid open. The woman smiled at him again as she stepped out into the empty hallway, and he gave a shy half-bow, an old man caught in a courtesy he knew was outdated.

The door slid shut and Cooper pressed the button for the next floor. The elevator slid upward, and then, surprisingly, kept on going. A glance at the panel of numbers beside the door showed him that instead of 9 he had hit the button parallel to it, 18, and was in for a long ride. "Getting old," he muttered, and would have grinned, but the tooth throbbed violently as though in protest at this ridiculous delay.

He pressed the number 9 button and leaned back to wait out the wild-goose chase to the top of the building. He was staring straight ahead, all his attention on the agony in his jaw, when the automatic doors opened at the eighteenth floor to reveal a tableau, no more than ten feet away, which he would see in his dreams all the rest of his life.

The man was taller than average, with a face that would have been handsome if the expression had been less savage. He wore a trench coat, no hat. At the sound of the doors opening he turned, partly crouched, with one hand lifted as though to ward off a blow. On the little finger of the lifted hand there was a ring, a wide silver band that coiled three times around the finger.

After the first start of surprise the man seemed frozen. At his feet, equally motionless, was a girl. She lay on her side as though she were sleeping; her neat white uniform was spotless except for the circle of blood around the intricately-carved knife handle that protruded from between her shoulder blades.

Cooper had been leaning against the railing at the back of the elevator when the doors slid open on the scene. He did not

move, for he realized at once that it was only the shock of seeing him materialize so suddenly that kept the killer unmoving. It was a strange moment, ludicrous if it had not been so terrible; a wicked overplayed parody of thousands of unexpected meetings which begin with an unbelieving stare and end with a breathless, "I could have sworn there was no one around for miles."

Then the elevator mechanism clicked, and the small sound seemed to return the killer-statue to life. He leaped toward the elevator. As he plunged in, the doors started to close, but Cooper moved too, forced into action by the idea of being trapped in this little box with a murderer. Arms out straight, he caught the force of the attack with his hands and shoved hard. The killer hurtled backward and stumbled over the body of the girl but did not fall. As he started forward again the doors closed with the finality of a third-act curtain.

Cooper pressed the first-floor button and waited, breathing hard. When the elevator stopped at 9 he cursed and pressed 1 again, but the deliberate pace of the mechanism could not be hurried. The doors slid open on a hallway identical to the one he had just seen, except that there was no one in it. Then another elevator hummed, and Cooper realized that the killer must be on his way down. If the other elevator went directly to the street floor, the man could easily be waiting in the lobby when Cooper arrived.

He stepped out into the empty hallway which stretched the length of a city block without a turn, a recess, a hiding place. Behind him the elevator rattled, and he started to run. There had to be one unlocked door; Dena's friend was here somewhere waiting for his early-bird patient.

He couldn't remember the office number. *Nine—nine—nine,* he thought, but the horror he had just witnessed had emptied his mind of everything else. He was heady with terror; the old-man shuffle would have been beyond him now, even if he had been concerned with maintaining the masquerade.

Nine twenty-nine!

He flung himself at the door, recalling simultaneously the number and the name—Winderman. The little waiting room was empty, but the door to the office beyond was open, and the dentist, paunchy, white-coated, cheerful-looking, came out at once.

"Mr. Jaynes?"

"Right!" Cooper caught the dentist's look of surprise and real-

ized that his appearance must contrast absurdly with his undisguised voice. "Makeup," he explained hastily. "Sort of a trial run for the play—Dena told you the situation?"

Dr. Winderman nodded. "You can trust me. Now if you'll come right in here . . ."

Cooper listened for a moment at the open door, then closed it gently. He switched off the two table lamps.

"Can you lock this door from the inside?"

"Of course." The little doctor's expression changed to one of alarm. "Nobody else is coming in, Mr. Jaynes," he said soothingly. "I can promise you that. I never take patients on Saturday; only for Dena because she was always so kind."

Cooper saw the telephone in the inner office. "I've got to call the police," he said. "You listen and you'll understand."

He turned his back on the dentist, who clearly thought he was dealing with a madman. While the telephone buzzed in response to Cooper's rapid dialing, he went over what could possibly happen next. When he didn't appear in the lobby, the murderer would probably leave in a hurry. After all, the dead girl might be discovered at any moment. Yet, *would* he run, knowing that there was a witness in the building who could tell the police everything they wanted to know? He might risk coming back, might locate Cooper's elevator on the ninth floor, might be coming down that long, empty hall at this very moment.

"Lock the door—please!" he whispered. Dr. Winderman turned the key and sat down warily in the darkened waiting room. Then the call was completed, and when Cooper spoke again his voice was very young, very thin, very frightened.

"I'm callin' to report a m-murder," he quavered childishly. "I ain't gonna tell you who I am—I ain't gonna get it like that girl did—but I'll tell ya what I seen . . ." Carefully, stammering a little, he described the scene on the eighteenth floor—the tall, thin, dark-haired man, the trench coat, the triple-banded ring, the girl lying so still, the knife. When he was through he listened for a moment to the officer's urgings that he give his name and say where he was. Then he hung up.

Dr. Winderman came into the inner office. He leaned against the door, his round face pale, and Cooper thought with some sympathy that it must be frightening to hear such an ugly story from a

wild-eyed stranger who had an old man's face and spoke with the voice of a child.

"I'm sorry," Cooper said. "I can't get involved in this thing now. If I got my name in the papers, it would spoil everything. This way, the police have a complete description of the guy who did it, and after opening night I'll tell them the rest of the story."

Dr. Winderman shook his head unbelievingly. "You mean you really saw—what you said?"

"I really did." Cooper was beginning to relax, just knowing that the police were on their way, but with relaxation the pain returned, throbbing through his head until he thought he was going to be sick. "Look, Doctor," he said, "I know this all sounds crazy—I can hardly believe it myself—but I've still got to have something done to this tooth. If you'd look at it . . ."

Dr. Winderman made an obvious effort to regain his professional calm. While he laid out his instruments, Cooper checked the door to make sure that it was locked, then settled himself in the chair and closed his eyes. He felt only relief when the dentist told him the tooth would have to come out. Nothing less than an extraction could separate him from the pain, he believed, and he breathed deeply and gratefully when the gas cone was fitted over his face.

Outside this small, floating island of peace a woman in a white uniform lay dead, and the police were looking for her killer; but it wasn't his problem. He had done all that could be expected of him. He had no problems anymore, his bad days were all behind him and ahead was the biggest opening night of them all . . .

He thought at first that the pounding was part of the pain inside his head. Then he realized that it came from outside, and with a great effort he remembered where he was, remembered the locked waiting-room door. He forced his eyes open and saw Dr. Winderman's face hovering like a moon overhead. It was a queer expression for the Man in the Moon to wear, he reflected with amusement, and he tried to identify it. Then the face drifted away and a door was unlocked, and Cooper heard voices speaking softly and with great intensity. Only a few words carried to the inner office: "You've got to—got to help me—just one more time," and then he went to sleep thinking poetically, *the Man in the Moon wears a look of resignation.*

He awoke to a roomful of

moons, a moon ballet shifting and retreating, moving in upon him and circling away. It was interesting; he watched lazily until one of the moons became a grizzled, familiar face that banished all thought of the ballet.

"You want to run through that again, Doctor?" the grizzled face asked. "It looks as if our friend is waking up from his nap."

Cooper turned his head and saw Dr. Winderman standing beside him. "All right," the doctor said patiently. "I came down to the office early. An old friend, an actress, had asked me to take a member of her cast as a special favor—I don't usually come in on Saturdays. My nurse met me here and then went upstairs to the women's lounge to change into her uniform. She didn't come back. I was just beginning to think I'd better go up and look for her, when the door burst open and this man rushed in. He said he was the patient I was waiting for—but he was wildly upset, told me he had done something terrible and I must say he had been right here in the office since seven o'clock or he would kill me. He was almost hysterical, so I brought him into the office and had him sit down. Under the pretense of examining his tooth I gave him a sedative—and then gas—and I called you."

"About twenty to eight," the grizzled man said. "A kid called us before that; said he got a good look at the killer but was too scared to identify himself."

Cooper wondered if the grizzled man was going to recognize him through the disguise. It had been a long time. He fought the panic that would spoil everything now; he had to think only of the play and of covering up his identity. Whatever lunacy had struck Dena's discreet Dr. Winderman was secondary to the play.

"What's this young fellow spoutin' about?" he croaked. "I got here when I said I would—or pretty close. Can't move too fast at my age." There was a murmur behind him, and he sat up and looked toward the door.

People were crowded there, gaping excitedly; among them was the woman, monogrammed bag on her arm, who had ridden with him on the elevator. *Luck!* he thought; *a witness, window dressing to give a little extra touch of truth.* It all helped when you wanted to convince the audience.

He nodded. "That nice-lookin' lady there," he said. "She'll tell you—we rode up in the elevator together, the two of us."

Her gasp erased the last bit of fog from his mind. "You—you horror!" she exclaimed. "Don't you

dare say a thing like that! I rode up in the elevator with an old man, a dear old man. Don't you dare—"

Long before he figured out what had happened, he knew that the bad days were back and the good days were not going to come. He'd had his First Night ovation from one woman, riding in an elevator, and it was the last applause he would hear. He put his hand to his aching jaw and rubbed hard; there was no makeup on his fingers, no shadow of the paint he had applied so carefully that morning. He touched his head and felt his own close-cut thatch. Then he looked down and saw, without surprise, that he was wearing a trench coat, and that there was a ring, three bands of silver wound around the little finger of his left hand. He didn't investigate the coat's pockets, but he knew the knife would be there and that his fingerprints would be on it.

He struggled to his feet. "Look," he said unsteadily, "this dentist has a son. He must have waited for the nurse up there on the eighteenth floor.. I think I heard him come to the office and beg for help while I was in the chair . . . I'm almost sure he . . ."

It sounded weak even to his own ears. Dr. Winderman looked aghast.

"I do have a son, Lieutenant," he said, "but he's up at our hunting lodge in the mountains. He's been there for a couple of days!"

The grizzled man waved the explanation away. "Don't worry about what this character tries to tell us, Doctor," he said soothingly. "He's scared. He's done time in prison for beating up his ex-wife—didn't kill *her* but he sure tried. We've done business before."

The police were busy pushing back the crowd outside the door now, preparing to take him away, and for a moment the other two men were left to stare at each other.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Winderman said, and Cooper looked beyond the comic roundness of the dentist's face and saw determination that would stop at nothing to protect a loved one.

Dr. Winderman would be a difficult character to play; the best of actors would find it a challenge to seek out and expose that hidden steel—but it would have been interesting to try.

It's been said that a dream has power to poison sleep—but one's own or another's?

On the Malabar Coast the sun sets in the evening and rises at dawn, as it does throughout the world, but its heat does not go away. At night humidity oozes from solid objects as though they have come to life and are sweating out the poisons accumulated during the torrid day. Nor does the ocean beyond the festering swamp offer coolness; its heavy burden of burning salt infects the sweeping wind with strange odors that bring tears to the most accustomed eye.

McGregor squeezed the bars of his cell window and looked up at the moon-dominated night. Clouds passed all around the huge milky disk but did not obscure it. Beyond the prison wall coconut palms, brought thousands of miles across uncharted seas by random currents to be deposited on this muddy bit of earth, marked the breeze with the rustling of their dry fronds. In the direction of Malabar City a few lights shone. Now and again McGregor heard the coughing cry of a wild dog.

McGregor saw a parallel between himself and the maddening palms. He too had been blown, as it were, halfway round the globe to this spot undreamed of in his youth, when he considered the world his oyster. At twenty he was a prodigy destined, all thought, for "great things." A Rhodes scholar, he had later gone, not into industry, where he surely would've amassed a fortune in short order, but rather into government "service," thinking with his genius he might make humanity a bit more humane. Being a

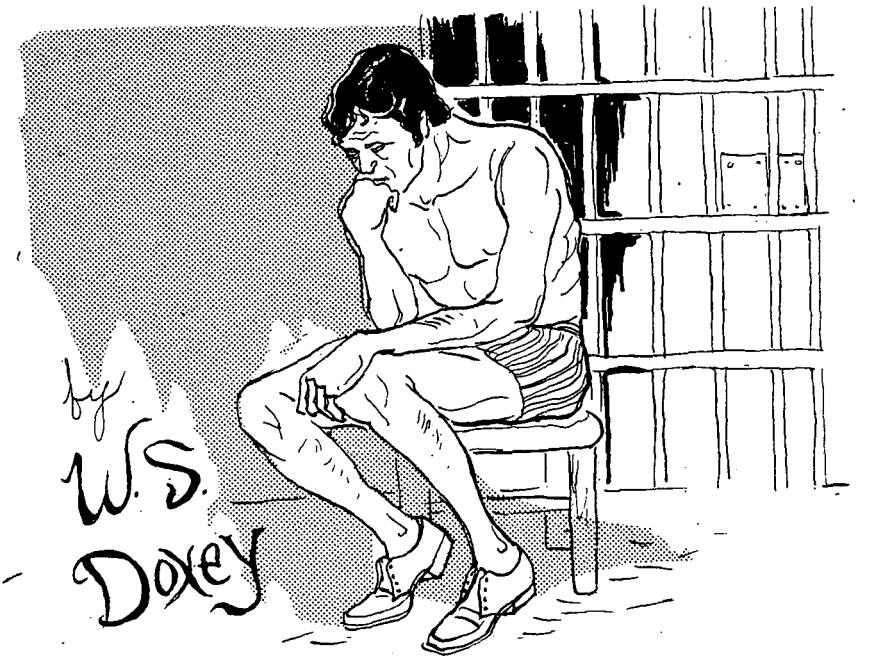
"brilliant" chap, a "universal" genius, he of course was chosen for the most difficult assignments, those which generally concerned the "vital" interests of his country. In short, he ended up a rather ruthless troubleshooter for the Establishment. His vision of twenty still remained, but he knew in his heart it was nothing more than a pipe dream.

Now he was behind bars, locked up in this primitive jail, stripped to his shorts and shoes, charged with murdering his wife.

McGregor tried to give the bars a shake, but the force shook him. The pure hell of his situation caused him to laugh. Beyond the walls, the dogs seemed to answer. "Howl on!" he cried. "There are more beasts than you!"

He came away from the window and sat on the rough wooden stool his jailers allowed him because, as a foreigner, he was not accustomed to sitting on the floor.

Assuming the attitude of Rodin's Thinker, McGregor once more considered the seriousness of his predicament. Mdega's lovely face swam into his mind and he fancied he heard the carefree laughter which was always escap-



ing her sensual lips. Wasn't enough that he, the great humanitarian, had murdered; no, he'd killed a woman, who was his wife of some few months and, to top it all, was a native of the Malabar Coast.

"Of course," he spoke aloud, "a disinterested observer would say any fellow fool enough to marry the likes of her is capable of anything."

Why, why had he taken Mdega to be his wife?

McGregor shook his head. The answer was as much a mystery as why he'd strangled her. Perhaps it was due to the loneliness brought on by twenty years of "unselfish" service to country, or the brutal, maddening heat of the region? Despair at looking back and seeing his life had come to nothing? The basic depravity, the darkness that underlies every man, no matter how thick his veneer of civilization?

As he took up each possibility in turn, McGregor slowly fell asleep. He awoke to the sound of iron doors being slammed open. Hot, brilliant sunlight fell like something tangible through the barred window. As voices neared his cell, he rose from the damp floor upon which he had sprawled and passed his fingers through his mussed hair. This futile gesture called attention to the ludicrous image he must present, standing there in soiled undershorts and dress shoes without laces. So, to show them he did not give a damn, he put on his most ironic smile.

The jailer drew the bolt and a dark, rotund young man, wearing a crisp white suit and patting his slick face with a blue cloth, stepped inside, bowed slightly, and said, "Ah, good morning, Mr. McGregor. I am relieved to see you are in good spirits."

The jailer locked the door behind him.

McGregor said, "Who the devil are you?"

The fellow drew a wallet from his coat and handed McGregor a card. The writing, English on one side, native language on the other, announced he was Gdolph Rgnala, "Attorney-at-law."

"I am to represent you in the proceedings," he said, glancing about the cell. "No doubt these surroundings are most depressing. Hopefully you will soon leave them far behind, yes?"

McGregor couldn't disagree with that, though he didn't quite approve of the embassy's choice to plead his case.

"I have looked into the matter," said Rgnala, shaking his head. "'Tis very serious indeed."

"Murder usually is, in fact."

The lawyer smiled. "Actually, life is rather cheap on the Malabar Coast. However, the fact that you are an alien complicates the issue."

"Nationalistic pride, that it?"

"Perhaps. After all, your country is extremely prideful, correct? Though small in comparison, we too have our pride." He folded the blue cloth and returned it to his breast pocket. "There is no need to make a national or international crisis of this personal matter. I believe you know something of the civil law of Malabar?"

McGregor nodded. "The punishment fits the crime. Murderers are themselves murdered, usually with a great deal of imagination—tossed to the sharks, that sort of thing."

"True," replied Rgnala, smiling. "But Malabar has a dual legal system. We have retained both the process given us by our colonial 'masters' and that originating in our tribal heritage. It seems that you, Mr. McGregor, have your choice as to which you will be tried under."

McGregor tried to comprehend the meaning behind the dark little man's smile, but he seemed inscrutable. "Well, as a practical man, I wish to choose the one most advantageous to me."

"Exactly, so you will subject yourself to tribal justice."

"Oh? Why?"

"Because of a most curious—to your way of thinking—law. It is an ancient tribal custom that a man may claim self-defense if he kills one who has been stealing his dreams."

For a moment McGregor could not respond. Then, "Dreams? How does one do that?"

"You will sign a statement that your wife, Mdega, intruded into your dream three times. Upon waking after the first occasion, you cheerfully informed her of her actions and politely asked her to cease. After the second time, you spoke more sternly. The third time, you strangled her."

McGregor had spent time in the farthest reaches of the world, but still he could not believe what Rgnala said. "You mean this statement will free me?"

"Yes. Dreams are magic. In them a man lives his true life, his life of the spirit. To tamper with them is to endanger the dreamer's eternal life. Since you are an alien you do not believe. But that is no problem, since we do believe. You must sign your name in your blood. What is absurd to you is legally binding to us."

Rgnala removed a document from his jacket. "I have prepared

the statement, both in English and in our language. You must sign here, on this line."

McGregor scanned the typed page. The statement was exactly as the lawyer said. "I sign, and then?"

"Your clothing will be returned and you will be free."

"You said blood?"

Rgnala drew a silver penknife and punctured McGregor's forefinger. McGregor signed his name with an old-fashioned dip pen, the likes of which he hadn't seen in years.

Rgnala blew upon the signature and said, "All is in order." He called out to the jailer, who unfastened the door and tossed McGregor his clothes tied in a neat bundle.

As they came down the blistering steps of the prison, McGregor gave the lawyer his thanks. The fellow stopped on the walk and, facing him, said, "I have merely given you justice in accordance with our laws. What are your plans?"

McGregor sniffed the salt air which, now that he was free, smelled not at all of the fetid swamps. "I really don't know," he replied, thinking: *I must be dreaming. This can't be true!*

"May I suggest you devote much time to enjoying yourself?" said Rgnala. "The people of Malabar Coast are rather strange." He smiled. "Can you believe that I, an obvious man of the world, have seen you in two of my dreams? Let us sincerely pray I do not see you in another." He shook McGregor's limp hand. "Goodbye."

As the lawyer walked away, McGregor felt he must cry out, must make some response, but sudden fear encased him with the same terrible pressure as the Malabar heat. His wristwatch indicated one p.m. There was a flight out at four.

McGregor hurried toward the embassy to pick up his few things and get a car to drive him to the airport. He could not waste time. One of the most cherished customs of the people of Malabar was their afternoon nap.

Not everything turns out as advertised—particularly the so-called activities.

The noisy old Convair was a far cry from the sleek jets that fly between Los Angeles and Las Vegas in a few air-conditioned minutes; but then, Saguaro, Nevada was a far cry from Vegas.

This was the Weekender Fun Flight out of Long Beach, a package deal sponsored by the Valhalla Hotel in Saguaro. *Non-Stop Action!* was promised by the ads in the travel sections. If that wasn't enough, *Swimming-Golf-Tennis* were offered in smaller print. If there was a tennis player among the threadbare gamblers on this plane I'd eat my wallet.

I blended right in with the planeload of losers. At six feet, four inches and 240 pounds, I was bigger than the rest, but my busted face and cheap suit fit the pattern. What didn't fit was the .38 under my arm and the license in my pocket issued to D. Stonebreaker, Private Investigator.

The plane veered into a banking turn and the meager lights of Saguaro swung into view over the edge of the wing. The town consisted of one neon-lit street with a few scattered dwellings on either

a novelette

side. The landing strip was left over from a World War II training field. As I said, a far cry from Vegas.

As it happened, a woman from Las Vegas was the reason I was about to land in Saguaro. When you think of a Las Vegas woman the picture you get is a six-foot honey with legs to make you cry and a chest out to here. The one who came to my low-rent L.A. office earlier in the day would never be mistaken for a chorus girl. She was a washed-out blonde with tight lines in her face and no more figure than my coat rack. Her name was Lucille Colt.

She told me that her husband Ed had been a dealer at the Cartwheel Casino on the Vegas Strip until six weeks ago, then he moved on to the Valhalla in Saguaro. Now he had disappeared.

"Something's happened to Ed," Lucille Colt said. "Something bad. I'm sure of it."

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"You know about the Cartwheel, don't you? About who owns it?"

"It's one of the syndicate joints, isn't it?"

"That's right. Naturally, there are other names registered as the owners, but everybody knows who runs it. What do you know about Saguaro, Mr. Stonebreaker?"

"Only that it's a town in the desert about two hundred miles north of Vegas."

"That's it," she said. "There isn't much there except the Valhalla Hotel, and the syndicate owns that too. They've got a special use for the Valhalla. That's why we call the place Losers' Town."

"Tell me about it."

"People who work in the syndicate casinos have to be supersharp. The tax boys and the gaming commission watch those places like vultures. And don't kid yourself, they know which ones the mob is into. Those casinos pay top dollar to their employees, but if you mess up and get fired, you're on a blacklist. For a dealer, that's as good as being dead. So if a guy makes a small mistake—not enough to fire him for, but too big to ignore—the syndicate gives him a chance to work it out in Losers' Town. They send him there for a month or six months or whatever, and if he stays clean at the Valhalla he can come back to Vegas."

"Is that what happened to your husband?"

"Yes. A big winner one night at Ed's table turned out to be an old friend of his. The management couldn't prove Ed was dealing funny, but they were suspicious

enough to ship him to Saguaro."

"You didn't go with him?"

"I couldn't. I've got two kids in school."

"You say this was six weeks ago?"

"About that. Then last week I got a letter back from the Valhalla where Ed had a room. It was marked *Moved—No Forwarding Address.* I called the Valhalla and talked to Bert Gettleman, he's the manager there. He told me Ed just packed up one night and pulled out. I don't believe it."

"Have you talked to the police?"

"Oh, sure, for about ten seconds. It seems husbands are bugging out on their wives every time you turn around, and the cops have more important things to worry about."

"Why did you come all the way to L.A. to hire a detective? There are some good men in Las Vegas."

"They may be good," she said, "but they aren't anxious to poke into the syndicate's business. One of them, a man named Wilcox, told me to try you. He said you'd take on anything and wouldn't charge an arm and a leg."

Lucille Colt wrote out a check and gave me a photograph of her missing husband. Later, after verifying that her check was good, I caught the Weekender Fun Flight to the friendly town of Saguaro.

The Valhalla's version of limousine service from the airport was an ancient school bus. We rumbled into town where my fellow passengers swarmed out of the bus and into the casino. I hung back from the rest for a stroll along the main street before going inside to seek my fortune.

Aside from the five-story Valhalla, there wasn't much—a couple of cafes, a movie house, a bowling alley, some dark store fronts and three bars with poker games and pool tables. None of the lights in Saguaro were quite bright enough, as though the people who lived there did not want to look too closely at their town or at each other.

I walked back to the Valhalla and found it not much cheerier than the rest of the town. An air-conditioner hammered away. The casino had the usual gambling layout—twenty-one, craps, roulette, keno—but the equipment looked like it had been picked up secondhand. So did the employees.

At the far end of the casino was a bar with a raised stage behind it. On the stage a pair of middle-aged women in sequined dresses played the accordion and the drums. A bald man with a glass eye pounded on a piano, and the three of them sang constantly,

their mouths stretched into smiles that never reached their eyes. Nobody at the bar or in the casino paid any attention to them.

I walked through the casino to the desk and registered for a room. The clerk gave me a single on the fifth floor. There was no bellhop in sight, so I carried my own bag up on the elevator. The room smelled of pine oil, and the window overlooked nothing but desert. I dropped the suitcase in a corner and headed back downstairs to sample the nonstop action.

From a weary-looking woman in a cage I bought a handful of dollar chips and wandered over to the crap table. I stayed about even for ten minutes, playing the pass line while I had a look around. The pit boss, a gray-haired individual with eyes like black agates, checked me out and didn't like what he saw.

When I got the dice I sevened out on my second roll and moved over to a blackjack table. There were only three players, one an obvious shill. I waited until the pale kid who was dealing broke a new deck before I said anything.

"A friend of mine is supposed to be dealing here. Ed Colt. You know him?"

The kid gave me a narrow look. "No."

"That's funny. He came to work here about six weeks ago."

"I'm new here." He moved his head half an inch toward the pit boss. "Maybe you better talk to Mr. Vetri."

At the sound of his name the pit boss slid over to our table. He had deep lines at the sides of his mouth. They were not laugh lines.

"Problem?" he asked without moving his lips.

"I was asking about one of your dealers," I said. "Ed Colt."

"Friend of yours?"

"That's right."

Vetri motioned me away from the table and out of the dealer's hearing. "Where do you know Colt from?"

"Vegas. I worked the bar at the Cartwheel for a while last year."

"If you came up here just to see Colt you wasted a trip. He's gone."

"Gone where?"

"Who knows? He lit out ten days ago and told nobody nothing. Just packed his stuff and split."

"Got any idea why he left?"

Vetri let his eyes answer that one.

I nodded thanks and walked over to the bar. I ordered a bourbon on the rocks and tried to keep from staring at the grotesque trio on the stage.

Down the bar I noticed a

sandy-haired guy in a cashmere jacket watching me. After a couple of minutes he picked up his drink and brought it over to where I was sitting.

"Having trouble with the pit boss?" he asked.

The guy had a healthy tan but tired eyes. Up close he looked older than he had at the other end of the bar.

I said, "No trouble. I was just asking about a friend of mine. You work here?"

"Not me," he said with an easy grin. "I'm the editor of what passes for a newspaper in this town, the *Weekly Gazette*. My name's Hal Fellows."

"Mine's Stonebreaker. What made you think I was having trouble with the pit boss?"

"The way he was looking at you—but then that's the way he usually looks. Are you from L.A.?"

"Yeah, does it show?"

"Only a little. I used to live there myself. Had to get out for my lungs. I'd also guess you're a policeman, or used to be one."

"Used to be," I admitted. "You're pretty good."

"It's a hobby with me, guessing where people are from and what they do. If you were with the police maybe you recognized the pit boss, Mario Vetri."

Until then I hadn't, but the full name rang a bell. Mario Vetri had been a hard-nosed enforcer for the mob in Vegas, but he got his picture in the paper too many times. Now it looked like he was serving his stretch in Losers' Town.

"Is he somebody I should know?" I asked.

The editor lowered his voice. "He's a gangster. Or at least he was a gangster. Like everybody else in this dump, from the manager down to the bellhops."

"You're not crazy about the town," I said.

"The town would be all right if this cancerous Valhalla Hotel could be rooted out. When I bought the *Gazette* five years ago I thought Saguaro was a place where I could relax and enjoy the rest of my life. It wasn't long before I found out that the syndicate uses the Valhalla as a dumping ground for its human refuse. It poisons the whole town. At first I had some idealistic notions about being a crusading editor and going up against the mob, but I soon learned I wasn't nearly tough enough. The hell of it is that they really don't seem to be doing anything against the law here."

"That's a dirty trick," I said.

Fellows grinned wryly. "I didn't mean to bend your ear with our civic problems. Who's the friend you're looking for? Maybe I know

the guy, or something about him."

"A dealer named Ed Colt."

"Thin guy in his thirties? Blond hair, aviator moustache?"

"That's him."

"I remember him, but I haven't seen him on the tables for a week or so. They come and go pretty fast here."

"I suppose so. As long as I'm here I might as well ask around a little more."

Fellows polished off his drink and stood up to leave. "Take care of yourself," he said. "If you get a chance, stop in at the *Gazette*, it's just across the street. Tell me about the smog and congestion in Los Angeles. I need a pep talk once in a while to remind me that Saguaro isn't so bad."

"Maybe I'll do that," I told him.

I swallowed the rest of my bourbon and pushed the glass across the bar for a refill. Out in the casino the losers were dipping into the rent money, and the smell of sweat was in the air.

"Hi, want some company?" The voice was sandpaper over velvet. The woman had soft dark hair and smoky eyes. She wore too much makeup and a dress that showed me her useful body. She might as well have worn a sign on her back.

"Not tonight," I told her, "unless you want to sit down for a drink."

Her eyes scanned the house professionally, and she eased onto the stool next to me. "Might as well," she said. "It looks like everybody's got their minds on gambling tonight."

I signaled the bartender and he poured her a glass of gin over the rocks—no frills like vermouth or olives.

The woman took a swallow and sighed with appreciation. "The breakfast of champions," she said. Then, looking me over, "You a cop?"

"Not anymore," I said, "but you're the second one tonight to ask me. I feel like I've got a badge tattooed on my forehead."

"You've got the look," she said, then leaned closer and added, "but not quite."

"Thanks. I think."

"You can call me Toni."

"You can call me Stonebreaker. Who sicced you on me, Toni?"

Her eyes widened. "Nobody. Why should anybody sic me on you?"

"I was asking some questions. The management didn't act happy about it."

"You've been around the block," Toni said. "You should know that some cop-looking guy asking questions in a joint like this

isn't going to win a popularity prize."

"I was asking about Ed Colt," I said. "He was a dealer here. You know him?"

Toni leaned back away from me. "Mister, you just don't get the message. Asking questions in here isn't smart, but answering them can be hazardous to your health. I'll see you around, Stonebreaker." She stood up and walked quickly into the casino.

I dropped a couple of bills on the bar and strolled out of the hotel onto the main street. It was mostly dark now, except for the front of the Valhalla. The town looked less ugly by moonlight. I moved on down the block, then stopped to light a cigarette. I used the movement to glance back at the hotel entrance, where my shadow didn't quite get out of the way in time.

If somebody was concerned enough to put a tail on me, I figured there must be something in Losers' Town worth finding. I strolled down one side of the street and back up the other without finding it. There wasn't much more I could do that night, so I went up to my room and went to bed.

In the late morning I woke up sweating from a dream of being roasted over a charcoal pit. Outside my window the desert shimmered in the heat. I staggered over and turned on the air-conditioner, then risked pneumonia by letting it blow refrigerated air on me for several minutes before I went in and took a shower.

Before leaving the room I stuck a piece of Scotch tape across the seam where my suitcase opened. Not much of a trick by James Bond standards, but then I wasn't dealing with Goldfinger.

Downstairs in the casino only one crap table and one blackjack layout were operating. A handful of diehards from the Fun Flight were still at it, unshaven and sweat-stained. The rest had either gotten a room like I did or taken advantage of the five-dollar cots provided by the management in a back room.

When I stepped out onto the street the heat hit me like a fist. I walked half a block to the first cafe and went in for scrambled eggs and ham. The street was bare of pedestrians and only one other customer was in the cafe. What life there was in Saguaro came out only at night.

After breakfast I walked back to the hotel and around to the rear to see what lay behind the building. In the center of a small patio was a swimming pool, somewhat larger than a bathtub, and

dry as yesterday's toast. A layer of windblown sand gritted under my feet and stacked into little piles in the corner of the pool.

Beyond the patio the sunbaked ground sloped gently up and away for a few yards before ending in a surprising patch of green. I am no golfer, but it looked like there was enough fairway for a short approach shot and a green for putting. Sprinklers threw spirals of water out over the grass. Very inviting, except that the whole thing was surrounded by an eight-foot steel mesh fence. There was a locked gate with a sun-faded sign that forbade trespassing.

There was a tennis court too. This had no fence around it, but it had no net either, and there were wide cracks in the asphalt surface.

So much for the advertised outdoor activities.

I went back up to my room and found that the bed was made and the ash trays were emptied. A fresh set of towels hung in the bathroom, and the tape seal on my suitcase was broken. The contents were all there, only slightly rearranged. It might have been the work of a curious maid, but I didn't believe it. I took out my one change of clothes and didn't bother to replace the tape.

Half an hour later there was a businesslike rap at my door. I opened it to find a bellhop standing outside.

"Good morning, sir," the kid said, ignoring the fact that it was midafternoon. "Mr. Gettleman would like you to drop into his suite if you have time."

I had time, so I followed him down the hallway and around two corners to the manager's suite, where Bert Gettleman opened the door. He had a big square head with flat-combed gray hair and a dusting of talcum to cover his heavy beard.

"Glad you could come," he said.

"My pleasure," I answered, getting the social chatter out of the way.

Gettleman poured a glass of bourbon for me and some mineral water for himself. I sipped at the whiskey and waited for him to say something.

"You're a private dick from L.A.," he informed me. "You're asking questions about one of my ex-dealers, Ed Colt. You're working for his wife."

Gettleman waited for me to show I was impressed with his organization. When I didn't say anything, he went on.

"I guess by now you know my people don't like to answer questions. It's sort of an unwritten rule

in this business, don't you know."

He smiled to show me there were no hard feelings. I didn't smile.

"But this time I'm going to break the rule myself and tell you what you want to know about Ed Colt. Because if I don't, you might get some very wrong ideas."

I tasted the man's bourbon and waited for him to go on.

"What happened was that Ed took off with a broad ten days ago. She was a cocktail waitress who'd only worked here about two weeks. Now, what my people do on their own time I could care less, but these two were playing kissy-face during working hours, and that doesn't go. I fired the broad and chewed Ed out real good. The next day they were both gone. When Ed's wife called me I didn't want to tell her that her husband ran off with another woman. I don't like to get involved with those domestic things."

"What was the girl's name?" I asked.

"Barbara or Betsy . . . something like that. I could look it up."

"It's not that important," I said.

Gettleman spread his hands and smiled again—just an honest, friendly businessman. "So that's it," he said. "In case you want to get started back, I know a man who's flying down to Vegas this afternoon. He'd be glad to take a passenger. Nobody knows better than me that Saguaro is not a real lively town."

"No thanks," I told him. "I've got another day left on my Weekender Fun Package."

Gettleman's smile died on his face. "Whatever you say." He opened the door for me. I set down the glass with most of his whiskey still in it and walked out.

Down in the casino action was picking up as the Weekenders got their second wind. Mario Vetri was back in the pit. His black agate eyes followed me across the room to the hotel entrance.

I left the Valhalla and crossed the street to a store-front office with *Saguaro Weekly Gazette* lettered in gilt across the window. Inside I found Hal Fellows hammering on an old typewriter. He was in shirt sleeves with a cold pipe stuck in his mouth and a pair of half-glasses on his nose. He swiveled around and grinned when I walked in.

"Stonebreaker, glad to see you. I'll be with you in a minute, as soon as I finish this hard-hitting editorial on wild flowers."

While Fellows typed I looked around the room. It was cluttered,

but in a clean way. At the rear, behind a low wooden barrier, stood a printing press. An old man was wiping it down with a rag.

After a minute Fellows yanked the sheet of copy paper out of his typewriter and dropped it into a box on his desk. He turned his chair around to face me and gestured me into another.

"How do you like our town so far?"

"About as well as your town likes me."

"Did you get what you came for?"

"Not exactly."

Fellows hitched his chair closer to mine. "Level with me, Stonebreaker, you're not in Saguaro just to look up an old friend, are you?"

"No," I admitted. "It never was much of a secret, so you might as well know too that I'm a private detective here on assignment."

"Are you after the Valhalla crowd?"

"Why do you ask that?"

He tossed a look at the old guy working on the press, then went on in a low, excited voice. "Because if you are, I can help. I've got material in my files that I once planned to use to clean up the town. That was before my fire burned out. I can see you've still got it—the fire. It's in your eyes. You and I working together could do a lot of good for Saguaro."

I held up a hand to stop him. "Hold it, Mr. Editor. I'm no town-tamer, I'm just a working man. I've got a job to do here for a client, and when it's done I'm finished with Saguaro. If the syndicate wants to use the Valhalla as a garbage dump, that's not my problem."

Fellows grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sorry. You'd think I'd be cured of playing reformer by now. Anyway, good luck to you. If there's any help I can give you . . ."

He let the sentence trail off, but I picked it up. "Do you know anything about a girl Ed Colt is supposed to have run off with? A cocktail waitress at the Valhalla?"

Fellows shook his head. "Sorry. Social news in the *Gazette* is strictly garden club meetings and rummage sales."

I told him good-bye then and left the newspaper office. All the way across the street I could feel the editor's eyes on me. It was too bad, but the man he needed was John Wayne, not a low-rent private detective. I had problems of my own.

The rest of the afternoon I spent at a pay phone talking to some contacts of mine in Las Vegas. I learned that Bert Gettle-

man had been in line to manage one of the syndicate's Strip hotels when he was indicted during a profit-skimming investigation. The case never went anywhere, but Gettleman got himself on the bad list. They shipped him off to Losers' Town to think about his mistakes.

I went back to my room in the Valhalla, and this time I found the same unmade bed and used towels I had left. My welcome was growing thin.

Back down at the casino I gambled for a while, losing steadily. Figuring I would get more for my money in the bar, I picked up the chips I had left and carried them over to the cage to cash in. From the corner of my eye I saw Mario Vetri put somebody else in charge of the pit and head for the elevator.

While I counted my money, a tall, pale woman walked across the room toward the bar. Her dark hair was pulled tightly back, and her eyes were invisible behind purple shades. Something about her was familiar, and after a minute I recognized her as Toni, my gin-drinking pal of the night before without her high-gloss paint job. I stuck the bills into my pocket and ambled over to join her.

She was at the bar with a glass of gin already in front of her when I got there.

"Hello, Toni. Want some company?"

"Sorry," she said without looking at me, "we're closed."

"For tonight or for good?"

She turned and looked at me then. Clearly, the gin in front of her was not Toni's first of the day. "Oh-ho, it's my friend Stonebreaker who looks like a cop but isn't. He says. Anymore. Hello, Stonebreaker. Since you ask, I'm out of business. Finished. Kaput."

"What happened?"

"What happened is that Mr. Gettleman decided that I am no longer welcome in his establishment. Since this is the only establishment in town, that means I am no longer welcome in Saguaro. Where is there to go, Stonebreaker, when they run you out of Losers' Town?"

"I don't know, Toni. What was Gettleman's beef?"

"Beef? Mr. Gettleman doesn't need any beef. When he says you go, you go. I have a teeny suspicion it has to do with me talking to you last night. Then again, maybe he just doesn't like the way I look. Do you like the way I look, Stonebreaker?"

She pulled off the shades and cocked her head so the light from the back bar fell on her. The

years of night-living were written on her face. Still, the tones were good and I could see she must have been a beauty once.

"Well?" she said. "You haven't told me what you think."

"Your hair was better the way you had it last night."

She reached up and pulled out a couple of pins, shaking her head to let the long dark hair float around her face. "Like this?"

"Much better."

Toni laughed. "You're not as mean as you look, Stonebreaker. Buy me a drink?"

"Sure."

"Thanks. You know, I've got until midnight when my bus leaves. Interested?"

"Never while I'm working," I told her.

She laughed again. "I don't believe you, but it's a nice gentle turndown, anyway."

I said, "Listen, Toni, as long as you don't work here anymore, is there anything you can tell me now about Ed Colt?"

"Your friend?" she said, watching my face.

"Not really. I was hired to find out what happened to him. Gettleman gave me a story, but I'm not happy with it."

Toni sucked on her lip for a moment, then made a decision. "I guess they can't do anything to me now for talking to you, can they? You'll be around until midnight?"

"I'll be around."

She stood up and crooked a finger at me. "Come on, then, and I'll show you something."

We walked through the casino, crowded now with gamblers. Vetri's replacement in the pit was having a low-key argument with a couple of the people from my Fun Flight. Toni led me to the far wall and through a door that was hidden behind heavy velvet draperies. I followed her down a dim hallway where exposed pipes ran along the concrete walls. We came to a heavy metal door and Toni leaned on the brass bar and pushed it open.

"Where are we?" I said.

She put a finger to her lips. "Sh! Back door."

Toni stepped outside. I started after her, but barely got through the door when something rapped me behind the right ear.

I went down and almost out. My strength was gone, and all around me was a blur of movement and jumbled voices.

There were at least two of them—big, tough, professional. While I struggled to let some light into my brain one of them lifted my gun and I was dragged into the back seat of a car. One of

them drove us out of town while the other sat in the back with a .45 jammed into my liver. After a while we turned off onto a dirt road.

When we had driven maybe ten miles in silence, I asked, "Am I supposed to know you?"

The one with the gun said, "Shut up. I don't really want to kill you, but if you get cute I will. Believe me."

I believed him. I also shut up.

In a barren patch of moonlit desert the car came to a stop. The driver said, "Get out."

I got out.

"Straight ahead is a town called Tucker. Back the way we came is Saguaro. It's your choice from here, but if it was me I would put all the desert I could between me and Losers' Town."

The door slammed shut and the car made a U-turn and sped away, laying out a trail of silver dust in the moonlight.

I sat down in the road and rubbed my head. The numbness was wearing off, and it was starting to hurt. It would get worse. I wondered if Toni had got her job back for delivering me to the strong-arm squad. I wondered if

she had ever lost her job. While I was wondering these things a pair of headlights came toward me from the direction of Saguaro. I ran to the side of the road and flopped behind a barrel cactus in case my playmates were coming back.

The car came on very slowly. Somebody was leaning from the window, shouting, "Stonebreaker, are you out there? It's me, Hal Fellows."

I stood up and waved. A dusty new Mercedes pulled to a stop and the editor of the *Gazette* jumped out to meet me.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yeah. A little headache is all. What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might be in trouble. I was coming into the Valhalla just as you walked through the casino with the girl and went out the hidden door. Vetri called a couple of hoods over and sent them hurrying out the front. I followed and saw them run around to the back of the building. I stayed out of sight, and in a couple of minutes the two of them dragged you out to a car and took off. I drove out of town behind them and parked where this road turns off the highway. When they came back I could see there were just the two of them in the car, so I came looking for you on the double."

"I'm glad you did, but isn't it a little out of your way?"

"I just figured it was about time I showed some guts. I was ashamed of myself for trying to drag you into our mess. You're right, it's not your problem. If the Valhalla crowd is going to be cleaned out of Saguaro, it's up to me and the other people who live there."

"I'll buy that," I said. "How about a ride back to town?"

"You're going back to Saguaro?"

"Sure. There are some things that belong to me back in Losers' Town."

Fellows' grin showed white in the moonlight. "Let's go," he said.

I settled into the seat beside him and we headed back toward Saguaro.

"Did they work you over?" Fellows asked.

"No, just a kiss with a blackjack to persuade me to come along. They sort of hinted that it might get rougher if I showed up back in town."

"Do you want to stop and report it to the sheriff?"

"You've got a sheriff?"

Fellows made a sound in the back of his throat. "Oh, yes, we have a sheriff. His name is Lou Tatto, and he does a pretty good

job as long as he doesn't have to step on any toes at the Valhalla."

"You mean he's on their payroll?"

"I couldn't prove it, but he and Gettleman eat lunch together a lot."

"Then forget the sheriff and drop me at the hotel."

"I still wish we could work together, Stonebreaker," he said.

"I work best alone," I told him.

"And you still say all you're interested in is finding out what happened to Ed Colt?"

"That's it. Like I told you, I'm no town-tamer; I'm just a private detective doing a job for a client. When my job is done I say goodbye to Losers' Town and you people can do whatever you want about the Valhalla."

Fellows didn't look like he believed me, but that was the end of the conversation. He dropped me in front of the hotel and drove on down the street.

I went inside, but only long enough to get some change from the cashier. I was getting a whole new idea about who was what in Losers' Town.

I walked back to the pay phone and called the state police in Hawthorne, about fifty miles away. They were skeptical of my story, but I told them to check me out with the head of the homicide division of the L.A.P.D. They agreed reluctantly, and said they would act on what he told them. I hoped Captain Williams would come through. We had our differences while I was with the department, but he knew that I didn't get hysterical.

I headed back for the Valhalla, planning to retrace the path Toni had led me on earlier. Now I was not so sure that she had set me up for the sap, and I was curious about what she wanted to show me.

As I started in the front door a car with flashing red lights and a sheriff's star on the door barreled past and wheeled around the corner toward the rear of the hotel. I jogged after it.

When I got there the dry swimming pool was lit up by floodlights. A tall man in tailored khakis and a roll-brim Stetson jumped out of the car and took charge. As I approached he walked down the steps into the shallow end of the pool. I moved through the small crowd of hotel employees and guests to a spot where I could see the action. The sheriff walked down the sloping bottom to the deep end of the pool where another man knelt beside the body of a woman. The woman lay on her stomach with her head twisted around to face

over her shoulder. It was Toni, and even from where I stood I could see that she was dead.

The sheriff talked briefly with the other man, then walked back to the shallow end and came up the steps.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Who are you?" The sheriff had a thin, oblong face with high Indian cheekbones.

"My name is Stonebreaker. I'm staying at the hotel."

"Do you know the dead woman?"

"Only slightly. I was with her a couple of hours ago."

"I see. Well, it looks like she got drunk and staggered off the edge of the pool. Broke her neck."

I looked over my shoulder at the rear door of the hotel where I got sapped earlier. Then I looked back at the swimming pool. "Is that the way it looks to you, Sheriff?"

"I just told you so. You think different?"

"Maybe." Sensing movement behind me, I looked around and saw Gettleman and Vetri herding people back inside the hotel. Then they turned and marched toward the sheriff and me. The pit boss carried one hand in his coat pocket in a way I didn't like at all.

The sheriff watched them come too. I wasn't at all sure of the man, but he was the only representative of law and order on the scene.

"It was no accident that killed Toni," I said, talking low and fast.

"Is that so?"

Before I could say more the other two joined us.

"Well, Stonebreaker, I see you've met Sheriff Tatto," Gettleman said.

The sheriff spoke up before I could answer. "Hello, Mr. Gettleman. This fella says he has some ideas about what happened here."

"Is that so? Let's hear them."

I took a deep breath and started talking. "If you look around you'll see there's a fine coating of sand over the bricks all around the pool. It's all scuffed up with footprints here where we are, but not down at the other end where Toni is supposed to have fallen in. Nobody walked on that edge of the pool tonight."

"So?" The sheriff looked at me with new interest. Behind me Gettleman and Vetri stirred uneasily.

"So if you ask me I'd say somebody twisted her neck down at this end, maybe over by that door, and dragged her down the steps and across the bottom of the pool to where she was found."

Gettleman said, "Why would

anyone want to kill Toni? She was just a harmless hustler."

"Maybe not so harmless," I said. "She was bringing me out here to show me something tonight, something that I wasn't supposed to see. We got as far as that door when I was rapped with a blackjack. Two hoods drove me out and dumped me in the desert. Somebody stayed behind and made sure Toni wouldn't do any more talking."

"Stonebreaker, you've got quite an imagination," the manager said. "Too bad you never got to see what Toni wanted to show you. Then the sheriff might have something to go on."

Sheriff Tatto looked from me to Gettleman and back again. I couldn't read what thoughts lay behind the Indian eyes.

"Toni never got to show me," I said, directing my answer to the sheriff, "but I think I know what it was. When I first came out here I should have wondered why the swimming pool and tennis court are falling to pieces while that one-hole golf course is kept watered and green and locked away from anybody who might want to use it for golf. And if it wasn't used for golf, what was a patch of soft earth used for in this hardpan country? And how did it fit in with the missing dealer, Ed Colt?

"I'll bet, Sheriff, that if you start digging in that so-called golf course you'll soon turn up the body of Ed Colt, and maybe a few others. If a man messes up in Losers' Town, there's no place left to send him."

Sheriff Tatto had listened to me in silence, watching my face impassively. Now he said, "And who is it that's been doing all this killing and burying?"

"Mario Vetri was a triggerman in Las Vegas," I said. "It's likely he's been doing the same job here. On orders from Bert Gettleman."

"What about that, Mr. Gettleman?" the sheriff said.

"We've heard enough, Lou. Mario, since our friend is so interested in the golf course, why don't you take him in for a closer look."

Vetri pulled his hand out of the pocket—it was wrapped around the butt of a pistol. I knew when I started that trusting the sheriff was a long shot, but it was the only play I had. Now it looked like all I had bought was a couple more minutes of being alive.

"Let's go," Vetri said, nudging me toward the gate. "Ed Colt made the mistake of trying to beat the game in Losers' Town. I thought you were smarter than that."

He didn't let me get close enough to make a try for the gun.

Professionals don't do that. Gettleman and his sheriff walked away from us toward the street.

As Vetri unlocked the gate a blaze of headlights hit the scene. The four of us froze—Tatto and Gettleman near the street, Vetri and me at the gate—as two Nevada state policemen jumped out of their car, shotguns ready.

"Which one of you is Stonebreaker?" one of them barked.

"That's me," I said, moving away from Vetri's pistol.

For a minute or so everybody talked at once, but as soon as I convinced the state policemen to poke around in the golf course the game was over.

By the next morning four bodies, including Ed Colt's, had been dug up from under the nice green sod, and it looked like there were more to come. The Valhalla was swarming with policemen and reporters. In the casino the Weekenders who still had some cash were pumping it into the slot machines, since the tables were closed.

I sat in the bar having coffee with the two state policemen who had arrived first on the scene. "I don't remember if I mentioned it," I said, "but I want to thank you guys for not showing up five minutes later."

"You can thank Captain Williams of L.A. Homicide that we showed up at all," one of them said. "He told us you were an insubordinate hard-nosed troublemaker, but if you told us the sky was falling we'd better reach for a hard hat."

Over at the hotel entrance Hal Fellows came in and talked shortly with the policeman on duty there. Then he strode over to the table where I sat with the two patrolmen.

"Stonebreaker, you son of a gun," he said with a big grin, "I just heard what happened. Gettleman and Vetri are down at the courthouse now spilling their insides to the State's attorney. You turned out to be a town-tamer after all, didn't you?"

"It wasn't on purpose," I said, "but as long as it worked out that way, I might as well clean up the last detail and name the man who killed Toni."

"But Vetri's already in custody," Fellows said.

"Vetri has killings enough to answer for, but Toni's isn't one of them. You see, he was not in the pit when I walked out with the girl last night. I saw him leave before I even talked to Toni. It was somebody else who saw Toni lead me out and guessed where she was taking me. That somebody fingered me for the two hoods,

then went out back to give them further instructions. Since Toni saw him, he couldn't let her live. He broke her neck and dragged her into the pool where he did a poor job of making it look like an accident. Then he got worried about whether I had really got the message from the strong-arm team, so he drove out to the desert to see."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Fellows asked.

"I'm saying you killed her, yes. It figured that the syndicate would want somebody here they could trust to keep an eye on the Valhalla and all the losers they had staffing the place. Nobody here, not even Gettleman, knew you were the watchdog."

The two state policemen were watching Fellows intently. The editor seemed to shrink a little as he stood there.

"Your cover here was a good one," I said. "As editor of the local paper you could go anywhere without arousing suspicion. I thought, though, that you dressed a little too rich and drove a pretty expensive car for the editor of a desert weekly. Then, when you showed up so conveniently after your hoods had dumped me, I knew your story was false and you weren't what you pretended."

"You'll have a hard time proving any of that."

"Like I told you once before, Mr. Fellows, that's not my problem."

I excused myself and went up to shower and pack. I didn't want to miss the Weekender Fun Flight back to L.A.

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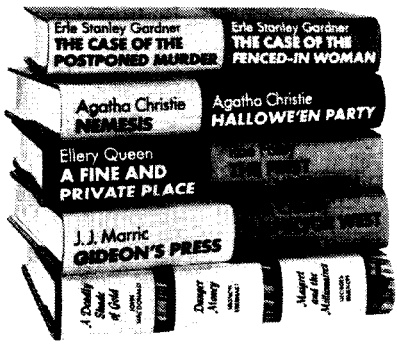

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